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Christine Poggi: Inventing Futurism

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ONE

Futurist Velocities

When the poet F. T. Marinetti founded Futurism early in 1909 by publishing an inflammatory manifesto in several Italian and foreign newspapers, most notoriously on the front page of the Parisian daily *Le Figaro*, he envisioned not just the creation of an avant-garde literary movement but also the cultural and political regeneration of Italy (fig. 1.1). Unlike most nationalists, however, Marinetti rejected traditional values and norms as prototypes for the present. For Marinetti, a truly renovated Italy could only be born out of the ashes of a destroyed past. The newly militarized and industrial nation would be led by a cadre of artist-warriors, who had been liberated from all constraints except that of patriotism. Given this effort to fuse art and social transformation, it is not surprising that the Futurists sought to overcome distinctions between high and low culture in order to address the masses more effectively. To this end they employed the mass media of their day, including publishing manifestos in daily newspapers, plastering them on walls and dropping them in leaflet form from airplanes onto Italian piazzas, staging notorious *serate*, or theatrical evenings (which involved declaiming poetry, reading manifestos, burning the Austrian flag, and generally inciting the audience to riot), publishing their own journals and books, and organizing numerous exhibitions. The movement would eventually embrace innovations in poetry, painting, sculpture, music, the decorative arts, photography, typography, architecture, dance, theater, and film, with the aim of galvanizing the public and promoting heroic forms of consciousness and political action.

Significantly, the “Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” was followed in early March 1909 by the first “Political Manifesto for Futurist Voters.”¹ Timed to coincide with the campaign for the 1909 parliamentary elections, Marinetti’s second Futurist manifesto urged voters to take a fiercely anticlerical, antisocialist, and antitraditionalist position, while advocating Italian patriotism and military expansion. The first Futurist *serata*, held in Trieste at the Politeama Rossetti on 12 January 1910, saw Marinetti and fellow poets Armando Mazza and Aldo Palazzeschi denouncing the Triple Alliance, seeking to awaken irredentist sentiment (the demand that Austria



Figure 1.1. F. T. Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," front page, *Le Figaro*, 20 February 1909.

cede Italian-language territories, including Trieste and Trent, to Italy), and proclaiming war the world's only hygiene. At the second serata, held in Milan at the Teatro Lirico on 15 February 1910, Marinetti was further joined by poets Giuseppe Carrieri, Libero Altomare, Angelo Sodini, and Michelangelo Zimolo. When the latter read a poem by Paolo Buzzi in praise of the Milanese general Vittorio Asinari di Bernezzo, who had been forced to retire for voicing anti-Austrian sentiments, the serata was transformed into an irredentist riot.² On 8 March 1910, Milanese artists Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, and Luigi Russolo appeared with Marinetti on the stage of the Politeama Chiarella in Turin. Their first meeting with the Futurist impresario had occurred only weeks before. The birth of Futurism in the visual arts was announced officially in the "Manifesto of the Futurist Painters," laboriously composed by the artists over the course of a day and an evening at a café at Porta Vittoria in Milan (with the critical intervention of Marinetti and the assistance of his secretary Decio Cinti), and first published as a leaflet dated 11 February 1910.³ This manifesto, read at the serata in Turin, denounced the cult of the past and its aesthetic laws in favor of the celebration of modern life and the triumphs of science.

On 11 October 1911, Marinetti issued a manifesto in support of the colonial war in Libya, which included the slogan "Let the tedious memory of Roman greatness be cancelled by an Italian greatness one hundred times more powerful."⁴ It is noteworthy that only Marinetti signed this manifesto. The artists who joined the movement early in 1910—Boccioni, Carrà, and Russolo, as well as Gino Severini and Giacomo Balla, who added their signatures to the painting manifesto shortly thereafter—all held anarchist and Socialist views that initially prevented their full adherence to Marinetti's goal of transforming Italy into a modern, imperialist nation. The period that followed, however, witnessed a rise in nationalist sentiment among many members of the radical Italian left, prompted in part by frustration with the Socialist Party's many compromises and failure to revolutionize the masses, by the desire to reclaim Italian-language territories from Austrian rule, and by the sense that Italy's status as a "proletarian" nation could only be overcome through violent military action, directed by a governing elite.⁵ By October 1913, when Marinetti published the "Futurist Political Program" in support of irredentism, the primacy of Italy, free trade, anticlericalism, and antisocialism, its signatories included what the document referred to as the "governing group" of Futurists, including Boccioni, Carrà, and Russolo.⁶ The program's cultural ideals were intended to promote a Futurist state of mind. It called for the cults of progress, velocity, and courage; love of danger and heroism; the suppression of academies and museums; and a rejection of the government's "monumentomania" and interference in matters of art.⁷ The Futurists' many activities in favor of Italian intervention in the First World War

on the side of France and England included organizing prowar political demonstrations and serate, burning the Austrian flag, disrupting the university lectures of antiwar professors while dressed in “antineutral suits,” and creating interventionist works of art and poetry. In 1918, Marinetti would found the Futurist Political Party, and he ran for parliament in the 1919 elections.⁸ Although Marinetti’s personal political ambitions were continuously thwarted, Futurism did succeed in playing an important role in diffusing nationalist and prowar sentiments, contributing both to Italy’s entry into the First World War on the Allied side in May 1915, and eventually to the advent of Fascism.

Marinetti later traced his desire to found an activist avant-garde movement to mid-October 1908.⁹ Having edited the international review *Poesia* since 1905, he sensed that it was no longer enough to write poetry, to promote the latest literary trends, or to participate in political debates. In order to liberate Italy from the chains of the past, “it was absolutely necessary to change method, to go into the streets, to give battle in the theaters, and to introduce the fist into artistic struggle.”¹⁰ Thus strategies inspired by anarchist and Socialist politics, including the use of the manifesto, intervention in the streets, and the instigation of riots, became the hallmarks of Futurism. Appeals to intuition and the exaltation of violence determined artistic forms and subject matter, as well as the means of political persuasion. As Marinetti explained, “lyrical violence” would function as the “prophetess of that great revolutionary cry,” rousing the masses from their lethargy and instilling in them a desire for revolt and patriotic deeds.¹¹

The first version of the Futurist manifesto, consisting of eleven enumerated points printed in blue ink on a two-page flyer, was published under the auspices of *Poesia*. Marinetti had composed the “Manifesto del Futurismo” in December 1908 and had it printed the following January.¹² He then sent it to numerous literary friends, intellectuals, artists, musicians, and politicians, asking for their adherence and promising to publish their responses in *Poesia*.¹³ He also distributed it to many journals and newspapers in Italy and abroad, some of which published it in whole or in part along with commentary. Those that published the manifesto in its entirety included: the *Gazzetta dell’Emilia* of Bologna (5 February, front page), *Il Pugnolo* (6 February) and *La Tavola Rotonda* (14 February) both of Naples, the *Gazzetta di Mantova* (9 February), and *L’Arena* of Verona (9–10 February, front page). *Il Mattino* of Naples published parts of the manifesto with an explanation (8–9 February), as did *Il Piccolo della Sera* of Trieste (10 February), while the *Gazzetta di Venezia* published an article on the front page satirizing the new literary school along with substantial citations from Marinetti’s text (13 February). The entire manifesto, translated into Romanian and accompanied by a critical analysis,

appeared in *Democratia* of Krakow (20 February). Seeking an international platform for his ideas, Marinetti also sent the manifesto to journals in Russia, Argentina, Poland, Germany, England, Spain, Greece, Japan, and elsewhere.¹⁴ As the manifesto appeared in English, Spanish, and German, Marinetti published the translations in *Poesia*, thereby further disseminating his ideas across linguistic and national borders. This mass diffusion of a polemical manifesto, and the personal request for a response (many of which were published), would continue to characterize Marinetti's publicity efforts as the movement grew and expanded its activities. The desire to promote Italian patriotism, militarism, and artistic hegemony demanded an international strategy, one that would situate Futurism on the world stage as the most audacious avant-garde movement of its time. This strategy also corresponded to Marinetti's understanding of modernity, which was at once nationalist and cosmopolitan, and which embraced the capitalist economic principles of rapid circulation (of commodities, news, and ideas), advertising, and competition through free trade.

As Giovanni Lista has shown, the "Manifesto of Futurism" had already achieved a certain renown when it appeared on the front page of the Parisian daily *Le Figaro* (20 February 1909), supplemented with its now famous narrative prologue.¹⁵ Whereas the eleven points of the manifesto proper address the reader in the present, future, and sometimes the imperative tense ("We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness"), the prologue tells the story of the manifesto's feverish composition in the past absolute, thereby casting it as a prior, mythopoetic event ("We had stayed up all night, my friends and I . . .").¹⁶ Drafted and signed by Marinetti alone, the "founding" and "manifesto" both proleptically assert the existence of a collective "we."¹⁷ The text claims to speak in the name of a group that it also calls into being through an act of performative self-constitution. Having declared a definitive rupture with tradition, the founding of Futurism is authorized only by a dramatic assertion of collective pride and will.¹⁸ Marinetti here practices the Nietzschean art of active forgetting, in order to clear a space for the new. In *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche had extolled forgetfulness as a positive, creative force: "Forgetting is no mere *vis inertiae* [inertia] as the superficial imagine; it is rather an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression, that is responsible for . . . a little *tabula rasa* of the consciousness, to make room for new things, above all for the nobler functions." Associating such forgetting with psychic health, Nietzsche further declared it to be the precursor to happiness, pride, and a strong sense of the *present*. Its counterpart was a form of memory similarly imbued with will, and therefore able to keep promises and "to ordain the future in advance."¹⁹ For Nietzsche, as for Marinetti, consciousness must be driven by desire, in which complementary acts of forgetting and remembering

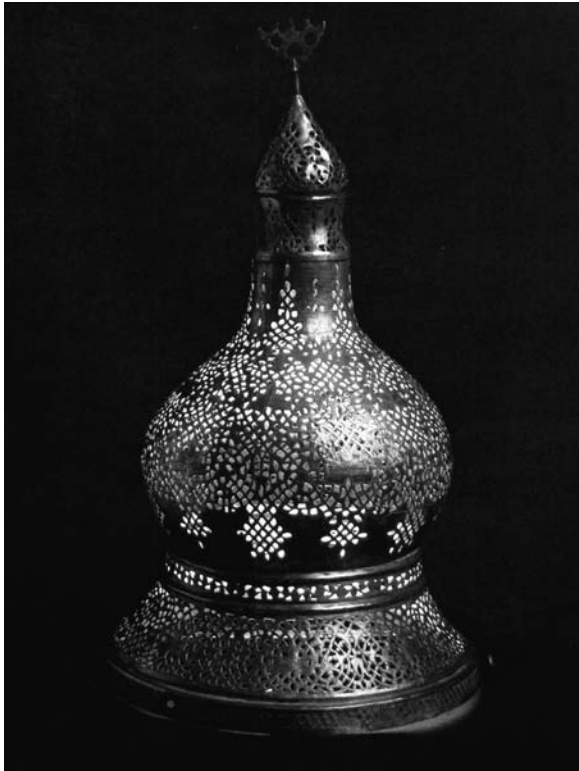


Figure 1.2. Hanging filigreed brass lamp, owned by F. T. Marinetti.

become the means to the creation of the “sovereign individual,” liberated from the “morality of custom,” and master of a free and autonomous will.²⁰

In the prologue, Marinetti stages the writing of the manifesto as a violent collision between past and present, whose setting and narrative of rebirth already enact the eleven theses adumbrated in the text. Here is the opening scene, whose orientalist decor (fig. 1.2) evokes Marinetti’s youth in Egypt, as well as the actual appearance of the apartment he inherited from his father in the Via Senato, Milan:

We had stayed up all night, my friends and I, under hanging mosque lamps with domes of filigreed brass, domes starred like our spirits, shining like them with the imprisoned radiance of electric hearts. For hours we had trampled our atavistic ennui into rich oriental rugs, arguing up to the last confines of logic and blackening many reams of paper with our frenzied scribbling.²¹

Illuminated by the industrial radiance of electric light, Marinetti and his friends refuse their paternal inheritance of atavistic ennui by physically

trampling one of its symbols, the richly seductive, oriental rug: a now outmoded textile/text. A new, furiously scribbled writing, inspired by pride and scornful of logic, would take its place. Spilling forth on “many reams of paper,” the manifesto is paradoxically the product of a fierce wakefulness (“we felt ourselves alone at that hour, alone, awake, and on our feet, like proud beacons or forward sentries against an army of hostile stars”), and of a quasi-automatic, dreamlike stream of consciousness.²² Marinetti presents the fictive writers as imprisoned and restless within the confines of an interior domestic space, like the electric lights that burn within the filigreed brass lamps; what they long for is the urban street and the thrill of rapidly changing sensations and shocks. Not surprisingly, it will be the beckoning sounds of modern race cars that finally spur them to action. First, however, we read of the “mighty noise of the huge double-decker trams that rumbled by outside” making the Futurists jump, but the silence returns, broken only by the sounds of Milan’s ancient Naviglio (canal system) flowing by just outside Marinetti’s Via Senato home: “old canal muttering its feeble prayers and the creaking bones of sickly palaces.” Finally, these slow, traditional, powerless rumblings are interrupted by “the famished roar of automobiles,” which inspires the Futurists to break out of their prison and greet the dawn, which will cut through their “millennial gloom” like a “red sword.”²³ Significantly, the double-decker tram, a vehicle for the masses, and one that travels a predetermined route with multiple stops, does not suffice to rouse the Futurists, despite its “mighty noise.” Instead, it will be the race cars, “three snorting beasts,” that will carry them swiftly along as if following a scent, in defiance of Death. In a recurring trope, Death appears as a woman, whose seductions must be refused: “Death, domesticated, met me at every turn, gracefully holding out a paw, or once in a while hunkering down, making velvety caressing eyes at me from every puddle.”²⁴

Marinetti describes a traumatic near-death in the climactic next scene, in which the indecisive movements of two cyclists block his path, causing him to take evasive action and roll over into a ditch. Marinetti had, in fact, crashed his four-cylinder Fiat sporting car on 15 October 1908 while driving along Milan’s northwestern industrial periphery, in an incident reported in the *Corriere della Sera* (figs. 1.3 and 1.4):

This morning, a bit before noon, F. T. Marinetti was heading down Via Domodossola in his car. The vehicle’s owner was at the wheel accompanied by a 23 year-old mechanic, Ettore Angelini. Although the details of the incident remain sketchy, it appears that an evasive maneuver was required by the sudden appearance of a bicyclist, and resulted in the vehicle being flipped into a ditch. Marinetti and mechanic were immediately rescued by two race car drivers from the



Figure 1.3. F. T. Marinetti in his 4 cylinder Fiat, 1908.



Figure 1.4. F. T. Marinetti's car crash, 15 October 1908, from *Corriere della Sera*.

Isotta and Fraschini factory, Trucco and Giovanzani, each in his car. Marinetti was transported to his apartment by the former and seems to have received little more than a scare. The mechanic was taken by Giovanzani to the Institute on Via Paolo Sarpi, where he was treated for minor wounds.²⁵

Marinetti recast this crash in the prologue, omitting the mechanic, adding a second bicyclist, and enhancing the confrontation of old and new

technologies. He also gave a retrospective reading of the moments leading up to the collision and of his experience in the ditch. As told in the re-worked narrative, even before the crash Marinetti had been driving recklessly, in defiance of death and conventional wisdom, in order to throw himself violently into an uncharted future. He proclaimed to his friends:

“Let’s break out of the horrible shell of wisdom and throw ourselves like pride-ripened fruit into the wide, contorted mouth of the wind! Let’s give ourselves utterly to the Unknown, not in desperation but only to replenish the deep wells of the Absurd!!”

The words were scarcely out of my mouth when I spun my car around with the frenzy of a dog trying to bite its tail, and there, suddenly, were two cyclists coming toward me, shaking their fists, wobbling like two equally convincing but nevertheless contradictory arguments. Their stupid dilemma was blocking my way—damn! Ouch! . . . I stopped short and to my disgust rolled over into a ditch with my wheels in the air.²⁶

Not only does the frenzied spin signify Marinetti’s Dionysian desire to plunge into the unknown, but it also leaves him surprised by the sudden appearance of the two wavering cyclists, thereby causing the crash. In the literary rendering of this event, the collision seems both willed and the product of a fortuitous accident, whose traumatic effects were all the greater in that Marinetti was unprepared for them. As a result, he found himself submerged in industrial muck, the wheels of his car helpless in the air, his thrilling mastery of the race car and of speed brought to an abrupt and undignified halt. At first bruised and disgusted (but not admitting to fear), he quickly assumed a new, celebratory attitude, and declared his rebirth:

Oh! Maternal ditch, almost full of muddy water! Fair factory drain! I gulped down your nourishing sludge; and I remembered the blessed black breast of my Sudanese nurse. . . . When I came up—torn, filthy, and stinking—from under the capsized car, I felt the white-hot iron of joy deliciously pass through my heart!²⁷

This passage will be analyzed in greater detail in chapter 5, in relation to its colonial references and the dream of the man/machine hybrid. Here I want to call attention to Marinetti’s theatrical myth of personal palingenesis wrought by a collision between his speeding race car and the “stupid dilemma” blocking his path. The two wobbling cyclists shaking their fists at each other, emblems of an indecisive and futile past, most likely represent the dominant political forces in Italy at the time: the governing Liberal Party led by Giovanni Giolitti and the reform wing of the Socialist Party led by Filippo Turati, forever locked into fruitless debate and a

strategy of compromise. Only the untamed and unpredictable power of a race car—a “snorting beast” whose speed and animal fury allowed Marinetti and his friends “to break out of the horrible shell of wisdom”—could cut through this impasse with a violent collision and overturning. Rather than succumb to the shock of this crash with retroactive anxiety or other forms of psychic blockage, Marinetti seizes upon it as an opportunity to experience the joy of imbibing industrial waste, and of regeneration through the fusion of flesh with metal.²⁸ His literary tone is deliberately provocative, simultaneously extreme in its claims, and tinged with self-parody. Returning to the collective “we” after being unmasked as the sovereign driver of his race car, Marinetti proclaims that it is with “faces smeared with good factory muck—plastered with metallic waste, with senseless sweat, with celestial soot—we, bruised, our arms in slings, but unafraid, declared our high intentions to all the *living* of the earth.”²⁹ Here metallic waste mingles with sweat and celestial soot, confusing the boundaries of high and low, the heroic and the abject, as the marks of a new corporeal and psychic pride. Even the disfiguration of broken bones is mobilized as evidence of bodily resilience. Marinetti masters the trauma of the crash, not through a fixation on the past but through an active embrace of its destructive power, which as Jeffrey Schnapp has argued, releases new energies and drives.³⁰ Yet Marinetti’s text simultaneously manifests a Futurist version of the “stimulus shield” theorized by Sigmund Freud and others as a form of protection from unexpected assaults on the psyche; it appears in the fantasy of a metallized body resistant to threats and shocks, in the desire to dominate time and space by imagining oneself as a speeding projectile, and in the assumption of a state of perpetual, combative “readiness” to parry external blows (like “forward sentries against an army of hostile stars”).³¹

The psychosomatic transformations experienced by the race car driver and their links to military readiness and heroism had already been theorized by Mario Morasso, in *La nuova arma (La macchina)* (*The New Weapon [The Machine]*) of 1905, a book that clearly made a strong impression on Marinetti. Writing of the beauty and voluptuousness of speed, Morasso described the experience of the man behind the wheel of a race car:

Here is something heroic; a man seated on a rigid seat, like a barbarian king, with his face covered by a hard visor, like a warrior, with his body leaning forward almost to provoke the race and to scrutinize—not just the course, but destiny. With his hand secure on the inclined steering wheel, with all his faculties in a state of vigilance, he seems truly the lord of a whirlwind, the tamer of a monster, the calm, absolute sovereign of a new force, he who stands straight in a vortex.³²

Morasso rejoiced in the transference of the “vital” power of the machine into men, so that “it is added to ours, and by this union we feel ourselves extraordinarily aggrandized and fortified.” No longer “defenseless” as before, he declared, “we are now extremely strong beings, of an unknown species, centaurs of flesh and iron, of wheels and limbs.”³³ Participating in the life of the machine implied being immersed in its “tenacious metallic body, so that all of its action, its robust, joyful heartbeat, its indefatigability, its haughty indifference, are reflected in us.”³⁴

Thus armed and fortified, the young man who had shown courage behind the wheel would be prepared to engage in war, even to the ultimate sacrifice. Morasso asserted that seeking adventure and risking one’s life could become a need and a habit, which the experience of racing could satisfy in the absence of opportunities for colonial conquest, exploration, travel, or war.³⁵ But if today the race car driver expended his energy in sport and pleasure,

tomorrow he would not refuse before the great necessity, before the complete sacrifice for the most noble ideal; he will bury himself under the mine blown up by his own unshaking hand, he will plunge into the bottom of the ocean with his ship, he will burn in a conflagration for the defense of his fatherland and other men.³⁶

For Morasso, the thrill of the joy ride was easily converted into the thrill of war; both demanded nerves of steel and a steady hand. Inured to fear and craving new adventures, the habitué of velocity would not hesitate to perform heroic acts in war, even going so far as unflinchingly to instigate his own death. Such acts of courage would compensate for the intolerably slow rhythms and utilitarian labors of everyday life in a mercantile society, obsessed by profitable deals and modest, tranquil pleasures.³⁷ He felt the fatal error of the industrial bourgeoisie had been “to elevate wealth to a goal in itself,” rather than to seek imperial conquests.³⁸ Horrified by the specter of Socialism as well as by the merely profit-driven motives of capitalism (as was Marinetti), Morasso could only envision the revival of a preindustrial notion of heroism, of “*antica virtus*,” through an embrace of the machine as a model of self-transfiguration.³⁹ Similar notions had been articulated in the course of the nineteenth century, but they took on a fresh urgency in early twentieth-century Italy, which lagged behind England and France in industrialization and the conquest of speed.

The topos of collision between past and present, with a view to opening a trajectory toward the future, owes much to Marinetti’s experience of cultural displacement and nonsynchronous social and economic development. Born to Italian parents living in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1876, he was schooled in a French Jesuit lycée, where he developed a love of literature and launched his first journal, the bimonthly *Papyrus*. In 1894, Marinetti spent about four months in Paris, completing the second part of his

baccalaureate in letters and philosophy. This relatively brief first sojourn in Paris at the age of seventeen strengthened his linguistic and affective bonds to France, and reconfirmed his fierce sense of Italian patriotism—apparently driven by his recognition of Italy’s relatively low position in the European hierarchy of power and prestige. Following in the footsteps of his father, who transferred the family to Milan in 1894, Marinetti then studied law, first at the University of Pavia, and then the University of Genoa, where he received his degree in 1899 with a thesis on “The Crown and Parliamentary Government.”⁴⁰ But the young, ambitious poet was never to use his law degree. Instead, after winning a poetry contest organized by the *Samedis Populaires* for his poem “Les vieux marins” in 1898, he spent “a triumphal month in Paris” celebrating his prize, and finally convinced his millionaire father to allow him to pursue his passion for literature.⁴¹ In the meantime, he had already begun to publish free verse, written in French, in numerous Symbolist reviews, and to establish considerable renown as a declaimer of French poetry in the literary salons of France and Italy. Other publications reveal an intense interest in politics, social theory, and the psychology of the masses. Around this time Marinetti began to frequent anarchist, Socialist, and syndicalist circles in Milan and elsewhere, priding himself on being welcomed as a rare patriot within this Socialist world.⁴² In 1905, Arturo Labriola, a syndicalist leader and coeditor (with Walter Mocchi) of *Avanguardia socialista*, remarked on Marinetti’s presence at numerous political meetings and riots:

Many of us know him to frequent socialist assemblies, political rallies, popular uprisings, and to participate also in certain national manifestations that exhibit a revolutionary tendency. Perhaps he comes as an aesthete in search of emotions and perhaps also as a doubter and troubled skeptic in search of faith. But certainly he has not found it, because the knowledge of those new faiths and contact with elated crowds instead have aggravated his pessimism and rendered more bitter the sarcasm with which he expresses it.⁴³

At the same time, Marinetti became well known within the nationalist and irredentist groups. The violently patriotic and imperialist ideas he later expressed through the vehicle of avant-garde manifestos and other forms of writing were already circulating among these elite circles, which shared a horror of parliamentary democracy, the politics of reformism, and Socialist pacifism.

As Labriola observed, Marinetti’s early writings reveal a pessimistic assessment of the contemporary political situation in Italy, as well as a strong sense of social alienation. After a privileged childhood in Alexandria, and several brief but exhilarating sojourns in Paris, the young Marinetti was forced to come to terms with the cultural and industrial

backwardness of Italy, as well as its humiliating failure to establish a colonial empire with the loss of Ethiopia at Addis Adua in 1896. His family's status as *nouveau riche* also made his entry into aristocratic and upper-bourgeois society in Milan difficult, while his passion for avant-garde literature further distanced him from the tastes and habits of his class. Despite the freedom afforded by his wealth, Marinetti was evidently frustrated by his lack of a meaningful position within contemporary society, only partly disavowed by assuming the mantle of bohemian and poet. As he observed ironically in an early essay on Gabriele D'Annunzio, who dreamed of directly influencing the public through his books and poetry, "Alas, crowds live in perfect ignorance of poets."⁴⁴

Like many members of the cultural and political elite, Marinetti was hostile to the rising power of the masses and their demands for what he derided as an impossible happiness, viewing historical change as subject to the law of the return of the same. As his satirical play *Le Roi Bombance* (*King Revelry*) of 1905 suggests, he regarded the utopian dreams of the Socialists, based on the satisfaction of base appetites rather than higher spiritual goals, as doomed to failure. Nonetheless, Marinetti harbored an anarchist-inspired desire to break through conventional barriers and embrace the multiple rhythms and dynamism of contemporary life, as is evident in his impassioned advocacy of free verse. Similarly, he refused to recognize established social hierarchies, especially the power of the governing bourgeoisie in Italy, and sought instead to affirm the liberty of the sovereign individual. Such views show him to have been an avid reader of Nietzsche, Georges Sorel, Gustave Kahn, Paul Adam, Mario Morasso, Vilfredo Pareto, Arturo Labriola, Scipio Sighele, and others who exalted violence and the destruction of existing social, aesthetic, and moral norms.

Similarly, Marinetti's early attitudes toward the industrial transformation of Italy, already underway most notably in Milan and Turin, were charged with negativity and an acute sense of psychological crisis. His collection of poems titled *Destruction* of 1904 includes the famous "Le démon de la vitesse," ("The Demon of Speed"), dedicated to his friend and mentor Gustave Kahn. Indeed, this poem remains within the orbit of Symbolism, and seems especially linked to Emile Verhaeren's *Les campagnes hallucinées* (*The Hallucinatory Countryside*) of 1893 and *Les villes tentaculaires* (*The Tentacular Cities*) of 1895, with their plaintive invocation of cities that swallow the surrounding countryside, trains that suddenly cut villages in two, smoking factory chimneys that darken the sun, and feverish crowds driven to revolt.⁴⁵ Despite its Symbolist imagery and framework, Marinetti infuses his poem with greater tension and ambivalence, often describing the collision of forces in terms of their immediate physical and psychic effects.

In “Le démon de la vitesse” Marinetti narrates a long and anxious train voyage across a varied topography that presents a suite of seductions, obstacles, and occasions for an experience of the sublime. The extended temporality of the journey also provides the poet with a means of meditating on the past, redolent with unfulfilled dreams and the ever-present specter of death, that “eternal leper.” At one point the train’s velocity propels him over a phantasmal, feminized geography suffused with indolence and nostalgia, into a liberated, virile future: “Oh soft plains of the past, drenched with tears, / haunted by phantoms vaulted over by memory, / I stride over you, on my train adorned with pride.”⁴⁶ But if the past must be vanquished, “The Demon of Speed” also betrays the poet’s rejection of the sordid and imprisoning features of the industrial present, exemplified by ugly cities, their factories, and crowds. The surging, voracious metropolitan masses, in particular, threatened his sense of singular coherence and identity. In the poem, Marinetti’s alter ego encounters this abject crowd, as if for the first time, upon entering the city in an already panicked state due to his train’s violent arrival in the station. The conclusion of the train journey constitutes a kind of crash, announced by a series of shocks; the train comes to an abrupt halt with “a great collision! . . . an enormous shaking of the joints,” as it is forcibly linked to other cars, thereby losing its freedom of movement and autonomy. Marinetti’s poetic *I* flees this *enchaînement*, this capture by breaking through a window, like a “wolf that gets away, abandoning his tail—luxury object—to the jaws of a trap.”⁴⁷ Thus seeking to protect his autonomy, Marinetti-as-wolf is propelled into the city at the “sinister break of dawn,” where he suddenly finds himself in the midst of the urban crowd, which engulfs him with its teeming, *informe* (miasmatic) presence:

The streets gorge themselves on the bituminous crowd
 hazy in the darkness, which seems painfully to shake
 the stout facades. [. . .]
 The crumbling plumes of heavy, greasy smoke
 horribly coat the crush of the crowd
 that stretches out to me its colossal
 octopus tentacles with stinking suckers . . .
 Males and females . . . they all resemble me! . . .⁴⁸

The agent of this frightening dissolution of difference is the specter of death, the “Demon of Frenzies, / who devoured their faces . . . Oh the eternal leper! . . . / . . . Like me? Like me!”⁴⁹ This “Demon” functions as one of the avatars of the train itself, the “Demon of Speed,” whose frenzied movements at times overwhelm Marinetti’s poetic *I*. But Marinetti

also imagines death as having the visage of an old wretch covered in incandescent ashes, awaiting him at the end of a small road “in this city convulsed by hatred.”⁵⁰ The train rushes relentlessly toward the dreaded metropolis, its velocity courting death. Marinetti’s poetic alter ego responds with a horrified assertion of will, only to abandon the train (and himself) to an exterior force: “Put on the brakes! . . . the breaks are broken? . . . What to do? . . . It is necessary then that I deliver the wild-eyed frenzy of my train to the hostile gliding rails of the tracks.”⁵¹ If the experience of a train’s velocity could at times function to intensify a sense of sovereign individuality (especially when the traveler identified with the driver, or indeed the engine), it could also threaten a loss of autonomy in its complementary role as an emblem of frenzied speed and Dionysian power that overwhelms the largely passive passenger.⁵² In its delirium and unstoppable, the train is also linked to the corrosive effects of industrialization, which convert passengers into mere parcels or commodities, and workers into anonymous raw material. The young Marinetti is terrified by his encounter with the urban crowd, none of whose members seem to suffer for having “lost their features . . . their mask . . . their visage” at the hands of “an unknown.”⁵³ While Marinetti would always resist this leveling de-individuation, preferring to appear as a dandy or galvanizer of crowds, as a Futurist he would nonetheless assume its industrial imprimatur. As we have seen, in *Destruction* Marinetti describes the metropolitan masses as called forth by industry (including the train itself), and as bearing its traces in a heavy coating of greasy bitumen and smoke. Significantly, in the prologue to the “Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” Marinetti will proudly wear this mantle himself as he emerges reborn from the factory ditch. And he will begin to speak and act in the name of a group, in an effort to interpellate a mass audience.

Destruction, however, still posits the poet as a solitary individual, whose unsatisfied desires impel him to flee a dismal reality, or to imagine its violent annihilation. Lacking true confreres, he addresses his impassioned soliloquy to a series of lost or abandoned lovers, potentially rebellious marginal types, or indeed, his own alter egos. The contest of self and other, self and world, suggests a struggle to forge a new, coherent identity from both unmastered inner drives and a threatening exterior world.

A recurring scenario is the desire to escape the allure of carnal pleasure, which, like the crowd’s tentacles, imperils the poet’s autonomy. Disillusioned by the false promises of love and the quest for the “ideal,” symbolized by the alternately liberating, seductive, and despotic sky—“an immense extinguisher, the ghastly sky, which slowly crushes all my desires flaming straight”—Marinetti’s poetic *I* longs for freedom and virility.⁵⁴

Escaping the arms of his lover and an invitation to sleep, and burning with insatiable *désirs flâneurs*, Marinetti's *I* declares:

There! . . . no, life is to burn like a lantern of hay.
It is necessary to swallow it in a hardy gulp,
like fair jugglers who eat fire
with a flick of the tongue, making Death vanish in the belly! . . .⁵⁵

As in the prologue of the "Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," here Marinetti fantasizes vanquishing Eros/Death through the active, homeopathic incorporation and mastery of its destructive force. Yet the forces of Eros are never fully subdued, nor can they be, for the imaginary structure of virility depends on repeated victories over desire and repeated acts of death-defying heroism.

In the next section of the poem, it is the industrial power and speed of an electric tram that threatens the poet with annihilation. The sudden apparition of the tram announces the linked themes of velocity and violence, its gleaming rails and blazing colored eyes rushing into the distance and then returning by frightening bounds and leaps. The "great eyes" of the tram seem voracious, "like the mouths of an ogre seizing the bodies of children," as they plunge toward the hero's palpitating and vulnerable body:

Here they are! . . . Here they are! . . . their aggressive speed
growing miraculously, from sudden leap to leap,
always climbing, by golden shocks,
horribly against my eyes, against my brow, incessantly,
like stones inflamed by comets! . . .

Oh! the cruel anguish! . . . and my heart why does it then
leap beat after beat,
on my chest, on my neck, between my teeth? . . .
Hallucinatory tramways, all trembling with fire,
ah! roll then with your powerful wheels on my heart,
crush it against the rails, like a mouse! . . .⁵⁶

Marinetti's description of the tram emphasizes not only the monstrous vehicle's velocity and surging power but also its sudden jolts, leaps, and shocks. It proceeds by rapid lurching and trembling vibrations, which first assault the poet's senses with their "incessant" rhythms and then give rise to the anxiety of being crushed like an insignificant mouse. Moreover, the "fantastic trams" multiply, their rails interlacing low on the horizon. For Marinetti, they are "innumerable," their "great eyes gliding, growing somber in the crowd, / as their eyelashes of fire collide and cross each other."⁵⁷ The poem emphasizes the shocks produced by early trams and trains on the sensorium of those still unaccustomed to their speed, brilliant lights, rumblings, and jolts. Rather than celebrate the sheer power of a projectile



Figure 1.5. Tramways in the Piazza Duomo, Milan, ca. 1900–1910.

launched into space from the point of view of the thrill-seeking driver, Marinetti's text captures the threatening presence of ever-multiplying trams from the perspective of the traumatized urban dweller, who finds his roads encumbered by crisscrossing rails, roaring vehicles, and the violent glare of moving lights.

The nearly blinding, hallucinatory presence of electric trams at night, arriving directly into the historic center of Milan, is similarly rendered in Carlo Carrà's *Piazza del Duomo* of 1909 (color plate 1). Powered by Milan's first electric plant, which had been built in the adjoining Via Radegonza in 1883, these trams took on a fantastic appearance under numerous arc lamps and intersecting wires (fig. 1.5). In Carrà's painting, the entire atmosphere seems charged with luminous energy, as crowds mill about a piazza now dominated by the network of trams. Glittering lights dissolve the distinct forms of the figures and diminish the clarity of spatial relations, thereby suggesting the immersion of all things in a shimmering field without fixed points or stable boundaries. Viewed from a high perch, the scene demonstrates the new anonymity of individuals, who can only be apprehended as insubstantial, shadowy presences within the newly mobile and chaotic mass. The Duomo, emblem of tradition and of the previous social life of the piazza, is nowhere to be seen, displaced by the new function of the site as a traffic node. Rather than depict

a traditional social space defined by imposing architectural monuments, Carrà's *Piazza del Duomo* presents an unbound, nonspecific terrain that is nevertheless densely occupied and linked to other travel destinations. Even the sky, formerly associated with a sense of openness, spirituality, and natural sublimity, is traversed by electrical wires that continue beyond the framing edge. Carrà's painting thus conveys both the excitement and spectacle of this modern nocturnal piazza—with its fleet of moving electric trams, brilliant lights, and crowds of urban dwellers—and a sense of the spatial and psychic disorientation produced by the new technologies of electric illumination and travel.

In Marinetti's early poetry, including *La conquête des étoiles* (*The Conquest of the Stars*) of 1902 and *Destruction*, the night sky with its mysterious depth, flickering stars, and romantic moon is charged with a host of symbolic meanings. At times it represents a realm of freedom and lofty aspirations; but when these ideals prove impossible to attain, it is quickly transformed into a feminized realm of false dreams of love and erotic plenitude, which the autonomous masculine hero must conquer in order to preserve his virility. Given the importance of the night sky as a metaphor within Marinetti's poetic and ideological universe, it is not surprising that he was acutely aware of its industrial transformation. In a section of *Destruction* titled "Contre les villes" (*Against Cities*), Marinetti's poetic *I* addresses the city's beggars, vagrants, and marauders as brothers, to inquire if they enjoy their life "at the end of streets whose night sky is plastered with soot and mortal boredom by sordid industry?" Sardonicly, he asks: "The sky? . . . do you want it, oh presumptuous rats? . . . / For you the sky is only a ventilator, / grilled with telephone wires! . . ."⁵⁸

This theme, developed with even greater rancor, had already appeared in the poet's early essays, including this evocation of a typical "mathematical" and "jarring" morning in Milan, written for the French newspaper *Gil Blas* in 1901.

Beginning at 10 a.m., Milan becomes the station of a gigantic city that doesn't seem real. It is the reign of electricity and of vapor: bells, trumpeting alarms, aggressive bicycles, smoke and noise. Milan has no horizon, no sky. Over this city, flat and surrounded by walls like a dungeon, one has installed prison bars in the guise of a ceiling: for electric tramways they say; to restrict flights of genius, the malicious say. The fact is that an Italian artist finds himself exiled, outside of Italy, and, in a manner of speaking, like a fish out of water. With iron mesh overhead, one feels absolutely caught in a great net.

Oh! how wonderful it is to leave, leaping into the middle of the sky, with the sudden jerk of an eel, to fall back on the divine beaches of Genoa or Naples!⁵⁹

In this text, the poet finds himself exiled, indeed “outside of Italy,” as he experiences the modern industrial rhythms and shocks of a city—reduced to a station—without a horizon. If, with the founding of Futurism, Marinetti will extol urban noises and factory whistles and celebrate Luigi Russolo’s invention of *intonarumori* (noise-tuners), here he longs for escape to unfettered skies, unregulated movement, and tranquil beaches. His response to the accelerated, “mathematical” routines of city life, both in his early work and later as a Futurist, is the dialectical counterpoint to the shocked response of the “metropolitan man” as theorized by Georg Simmel. According to Simmel, the metropolitan man adapts to “the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu” by developing “a protective organ” in the form of a cold, intellectual mental consciousness. His relations with others and things are determined by an intensification of rationality, associated with the demands of a money economy, such that “a formal justice is often combined with an unrelenting hardness.”⁶⁰ Similarly, his activities are governed by submission to “a firmly fixed framework of time which transcends all subjective elements.”⁶¹ In contrast, Marinetti identifies with the sudden jerks and leaps of an eel, which signify the bodily pleasure of free, spontaneous movement within the invigorating milieu of the natural elements. Marinetti often composed his poetry (sometimes declaiming it *viva voce* to friends) while swimming in the sea, finding the bracing effect of being tossed by the waves conducive to flights of imagination.⁶² This practice continued even as the poet later attributed his primary Futurist sources of inspiration to the transformative experiences of sitting on the gas tank of an airplane and on the bridge of a speeding dreadnought.⁶³

The Futurist painters also learned to take dictation from motors—even preceding Marinetti in explicitly referring to mechanical muses in the titles of their paintings. If Carrà’s *Piazza del Duomo* reveals a certain ambivalence toward the intrusion of electric trams into the heart of Milan, his *What the Tram Told Me* of 1910–11, exhibited at the first Futurist exhibition in Paris at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery in February 1912, approaches the subject in an ostensibly more celebratory, Futurist fashion (color plate 2). Rather than provide a distanced overview of a piazza and its trams as he had in the earlier painting, Carrà now seeks to immerse his spectator in the chaotic sensory fullness of a tram ride as it reconfigures the urban environment. In *Piazza del Duomo* the trams are momentarily at rest, taking on and discharging the crowds of passengers that surround them. By contrast, *What the Tram Told Me* pictures a single tramway positioned dynamically in the foreground, as if it were about to lurch forward into the spectator’s space. Nearly filling the pictorial field, the tram is fragmented and intercut with elements of the surrounding metropolis, so that distinctions between interior and exterior, object and ambience,

partially dissolve. The tram's noises, jolts, and rumblings were meant to speak equally to passengers and beholders, for as Carrà explained in the catalogue published on the occasion of the Futurist exhibition traveling to London in March 1912, the painting expresses "the synchronized emotions of a passenger in a tramcar and of the spectator outside."⁶⁴ Both positions are depicted within the painting, which includes what appears to be the dark shape of a driver with a cap sitting behind a wheel at the center, and a passenger just behind him at left, as well as the shadowy, hunched profile of a man pulling a cart toward the left in the foreground. Farther to the left, the profile of a horse guided by a man emerges from the fray, while in the center foreground another man wearing a red jacket bends over what may be a cart, whose semitransparent forms interpenetrate those of the tram. At the far right, partly cut off by the painting's edge, we see another vaguely defined man. All of these figures contribute to the sense of a busy urban environment, in which slow moving, utilitarian vehicles jostle with the dynamic electric tram. The illegibility of the fractured space, along with the precarious, tilted position of the tram, visualize the speed and violence with which it traverses the metropolis, disrupting traditional rhythms, dematerializing objects, and dispersing the pedestrian traffic in its path. Indeed, the tram hailed the artist, and the spectator of the picture, in the new industrial language of multiplied, fleeting vistas, glaring lights, cacophonous noises, and blurred spatial boundaries. Such qualities could have both positive and negative valences, since the jolts and thrills afforded by speeding trams were linked to an awareness of their threatening power and unpredictability. Although the tram had become a customary sight in certain parts of Milan by 1910 (since electric tram service had been expanded between 1898 and 1905), Carrà's painting brings to the surface a sense of its originary unruly force, as well as its continuing capacity to provide jarring forms of technologically mediated experience.

Only five years earlier, Morasso had extolled the promise of the electric tram of the future, already visible on the horizon. Consisting of a single, agile automotive car rather than a cumbersome, weighty convoy of linked wagons, it would easily attain the current speed of trains. Such trams would follow no schedules and make no preordained stops; no longer "mobile prisons for man," they would simply arrive in rapid succession in response to man's desire, thereby bringing the experience of impetuous velocity—formerly reserved for the wealthy with their "special trains"—within the reach of ordinary urban dwellers.⁶⁵ Carrà's *What the Tram Told Me* captures something of the spirit of this new, volatile (and voluntarist) tram. Ignoring the utilitarian and repetitive uses of the tram, much like Morasso, Carrà focuses on its surging energies and sudden shocks, on its ability to cut through the wavering obstacles in its way, thereby reconfiguring Marinetti's car crash for the masses.

Boccioni's triptych of late 1911, *States of Mind II: The Farewells, Those Who Go, Those Who Stay*, evokes a similar ambivalence toward the overwhelming power and velocity afforded by modern vehicles of transportation (figs. 1.6, 1.7, and 1.8). These paintings, the centerpiece of Boccioni's contribution to the Bernheim-Jeune exhibition, aspire to provide the pictorial equivalent of three distinct affective states occasioned by the departure of a young man on a train. On a surface level, this subject gave Boccioni the opportunity to paint a tumultuous situation typical of modern life, but as Guido Ballo has noted, Boccioni organized the narrative around the experience of loss and melancholy.⁶⁶ The triptych exemplifies the way in which travel by train, while exhilarating for its conquest of time and space, also intensified the division between "those who go" and "those who stay." Displayed in the center of the triptych, *The Farewells* depicts a scene in a train station, with a departing train enveloped in swirls of steam, glowing traffic signals and telegraph poles, and a series of couples who embrace through the windows of the cars. The train, like Carrà's tram, appears in repeated, partly overlapping outlines, so that its interior is opened to the exterior environment. Despite Boccioni's denunciation of the use of chronophotographic effects to convey a sense of motion in painting, he multiplies the image of the train, showing it approaching the station from the upper right, in profile in the center foreground, and then departing into the distance at the left. Boccioni's notes on this painting explain that its most prominent elements, including "the number of the engine, its profile shown in the upper part of the picture, its wind-cutting fore-part in the centre, symbolical of parting, indicate the features of the scene that remain indelibly impressed upon the mind."⁶⁷ Here Boccioni emphasizes the selection of specific details and views for their mnemonic and symbolic value. His sequential views, he implies, should not be compared to those captured by the objective, regulated action of a chronophotographic camera, despite the fact that some hostile critics had accused the Futurists of mimicking its effects. Etienne-Jules Marey's invention of chronophotography could only provide an arbitrary array of successive images, precisely because they were produced at measured intervals rather than in response to affective "states of mind." Boccioni's repetitions of the train, as well as of the embracing couples, serve to embed these images in the viewer's mind, much as they persist in his own memory. Although Maurizio Calvesi suggests that we see a single, repeated couple, close examination reveals differences between the figures, indicating that several memories are mingled with a primary one, probably the artist's departure from his mother.⁶⁸ If the gender of the embracing individuals at the far right is difficult to discern, the much larger heads of the couple just before them are clearly male, whereas the couple at the lower left comprises a man and a woman.⁶⁹ For Boccioni, the experience of parting, whether from his mother, sister, friend, or lover, is



Figure 1.6. Umberto Boccioni, *States of Mind II: The Farewells*, oil on canvas, 1911, 70.3 x 96 cm. New York, The Museum of Modern Art. Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller.



Figure 1.7. Umberto Boccioni, *States of Mind II: Those Who Go*, oil on canvas, 1911, 71.2 x 94.2 cm. New York, The Museum of Modern Art. Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller.



Figure 1.8. Umberto Boccioni, *States of Mind II: Those Who Stay*, oil on canvas, 1911, 70.2 x 95.6 cm. New York, The Museum of Modern Art. Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller.

intensified through the blurring of a particular moment with its memory traces as the train hurtles into the distance. Such parting instantiates a rupture whose reverberations threaten the artist's sense of subjective coherence.

One of the early drawings for this canvas focuses on a sequence of three couples seen from above, to enact the progressive separation of the figures from upper right to lower left (fig. 1.9). Boccioni described the swirling “force-lines” that surround the couples as the quasi-musical equivalents of the “confusion of departure” with its “mingled concrete and abstract sensations.”⁷⁰ The undulating rhythm these lines establish serves both to bind the figures within an enveloping web and to evoke the overwhelming nature of the external energies—speed, steam, and noise—that will ultimately pull them apart.

In another sketch, Boccioni summarized the fraught emotions of the parting couples with the single word, *ancora* (still, yet), a term that suggests awareness of a moment whose termination could already be sensed (fig. 1.10). In the final painting, the climactic moment is reached in the couple at the lower left, the most clearly delineated within the sequence: here Boccioni emphasizes the impending rupture by interposing the physical barrier of the compartment's window between the figures and by the fact that the woman begins to turn away. The “wind-cutting



Figure 1.9. Umberto Boccioni, *Sketch for States of Mind I: The Farewells*, pencil on paper, 1911, 48.5 x 60.9 cm. Private collection.

fore-part” of the train’s engine re-marks this charged emotional site. The decisiveness of its rending force can be gauged from the two lateral panels, depicting *Those Who Go* and *Those Who Stay*. In the former, the partly dematerialized visages of the train’s passengers intermingle with fragments of houses and landscape seen through the window. A torrent of black, blue-lavender, and green oblique lines effaces figure/ground distinctions, and suggests “the violence of speed,” to use Boccioni’s term. The passengers find themselves merely carried along like so much baggage, rather than in a position of exhilarating power behind the wheel, and experience “the sensation of loneliness, anguish and dazed confusion.”⁷¹ The word *forse* (maybe), suggesting uncertainty, appears on one of the drawings for this panel. Similarly, “those who stay,” portrayed in the third panel, evince a state of mind characterized by “distressing melancholy”—“their infinite sadness dragging everything down toward the earth.”⁷² The artist inscribed a sketch for this work with the word, *senza* (without), signifying a condition of lack or separation. Boccioni’s published remarks on his triptych for the catalogue of the Bernheim-Jeune exhibition say nothing of the thrill of pure speed or the quest for adventure and new sensations that a Futurist interpretation of train travel would presumably entail. Instead, the industrialization of travel functions to accelerate the



Figure 1.10. Umberto Boccioni, *Sketch for States of Mind I: The Farewells*, pen on paper, 1911, 16 x 10 cm. Milan, private collection.

rending of affective bonds, to produce sensations of loss and melancholy, and to shatter the previously known boundaries of self and world.

Severini's *Memories of a Voyage* of 1910–11, also exhibited at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery in 1912, similarly addresses the theme of train travel and its effects on subjectivity and memory (color plate 3). The artist intended the painting to signal his “immense ambition to surpass Impressionism, destroying the subject’s unity of time and place.” Instead of portraying an object in its immediate environment, Severini sought to render its relations to

things that apparently had nothing to do with it, but that in reality were linked to it in my imagination, in my memories or by feeling. In the same canvas, I brought together the Arch of Triumph, the Tour Eiffel, the Alps, the head of my father, an autobus, the municipal hall of Pienza, the boulevard . . .⁷³

Whereas Boccioni's *The Farewells* portrays the ways in which strong sensations register as memory images, so that past and present are linked

in a single *durée*, Severini's painting destroys all semblance of spatiotemporal continuity. Yet he too presents the train voyage as a metaphor of consciousness, captured through the lens of panoramic vision. At the center of a "circular" visual field appears the image of a woman with her hands covering her face, perhaps an image of Severini's mother mourning her son's departure, as Daniela Fonti suggests.⁷⁴ Around this fulcrum, a series of objects float within a distorted, dreamlike space. Severini emphasized the purely symbolic status of these objects through the use of inconsistent scale, strange juxtapositions, and intense, often unnatural hues. At the upper right we find an image of a young man, probably the artist, in a diamond-patterned shirt contemplating the black bird in his palm, a symbol of the freedom afforded by flight. Severini located this figure next to the town hall of Pienza, emblem of his home; just below appears the Arch of Triumph, followed by a man in a straw hat driving a horse-drawn cart, and then circling to the left, a double-decker bus, an elegant woman with a green parasol and her driver in a carriage, and then above them, the powerful engine of a train with its metallic sheen. At the upper left Severini gives us the Alps, and at the upper right, his destination, Paris, signified by Sacre Coeur and his new neighborhood in Montmartre. In the upper portion of the canvas a couple (father and son?) embraces to the left of a well, the visage of a blonde-haired woman appears next to a campanile, and various other, smaller figures are scattered throughout.

Through the montagelike organization of these images, all equally vivid, Severini pictures the intensity of his memories of a trip to Paris, perhaps his first in 1906, as they collide and mingle with one another. As in Boccioni's *States of Mind* triptych, the train voyage entails not only nostalgia and longing for people and places left behind, but also the loss of a sense of rootedness. Just as the images seen through a compartment window pass by in rapid succession so that distant places suddenly seem closer, Severini's *Memories of a Voyage* brings near and far into uncanny proximity. A dynamic current runs through the painting, making objects tilt and pitch, suggesting that others might also rise up only to disappear. Their fragmented, intensely colorful, and sometimes warped forms appeal more to the spectator's sense of fleeting (and jolted?) vision than to the slower modalities of touch. While not directly resembling any particular scene observed from a train's window, Severini's work distills many features of the panoramic vision typically experienced by train travelers, especially the sense that the world is laid out for their omniscient overview, even as time and space seem to collapse.⁷⁵ Yet *Memories of a Voyage* also counters the potentially homogenizing effects of such accelerated, distanced, and often blurred vision, by isolating and emphasizing specific, emotionally charged images. It is as if the lived experiences through which memory draws the contours of the self overflow the space of Severini's

canvas, allowing nostalgia for the past to coexist with an affirmation of the artist's assumed identity as a bohemian living in the cosmopolitan milieu of Montmartre.

By contrast, Giacomo Balla's remarkable series of drawings and paintings of speeding automobiles evoke only the present tense, to focus on the immediacy of the driver's (and spectator's) experience of velocity as a modern version of the sublime. Unlike Marinetti, Balla did not own a race car, and there is no record of his having been a passenger in one. His conceptualization of its velocity synthesizes a spectator's view of passing motorcars and of the racecourse with scientific images of motion and the play of fantasy. Balla's earliest pencil studies of motorcars, executed on gridded notebook paper, depict vehicles at rest without any indication of their spatial context. Some of these drawings, which date to late 1912 or early 1913, describe the specific design features of a Fiat Type 3 (1910–12), including the open driver's compartment with its angled steering column and wheel, suspended lamps and retractable window shade, the side door, windows, flat roof, wheels, flared bumpers, running footboard, and in some cases, also the schematic profile of a driver (figs. 1.11 and 1.12). On one of these drawings Balla noted the presence of a brass hood ornament (*ottone*) and parking lights (*luci*). Other drawings include both this design and the Fiat Type 1, a smaller convertible sedan. According to Balla's daughters, he observed these vehicles from a corner in the Via Veneto, in front of the Palazzo Regina Margherita in Rome, as usual relying on direct observation of a phenomenon as the ground for the elaboration of quasi-abstract, equivalent forms.⁷⁶

In 1913, Balla began to execute a series of monochromatic paintings of motorcars that were clearly inspired by Marey's chronophotographs, which captured the sequential phases of objects in motion through partly overlapping images. *Racing Automobile* of 1913 takes its cue from this strategy; it retains a residue of the earlier realist drawings in the repeated views of the Fiat's flat-roofed frame with a driver behind the steering wheel, coursing along the horizon from right to left (fig. 1.13). But the rotary dynamism of the wheels now generates a proliferating series of abstract patterns that can no longer be contained by a descriptive premise, or even by the limits of the pictorial field. The vortices created by the automobile's spinning wheels and the whirlwinds of air they release fly along the paths opened by a set of orthogonals that converge just past the left edge of the paper. Marinetti had evoked a similar effect in his description of the Brescia automobile races of 1907: "Madness blew so violently on the immeasurable air pump of the circuit, that it took the form of a spiral, rising like a screw to the Zenith . . ."⁷⁷ Balla complicates this diagonal trajectory, however, by drawing another set of straight lines that radiate toward the viewer from the advancing, leftmost profile of the race car.

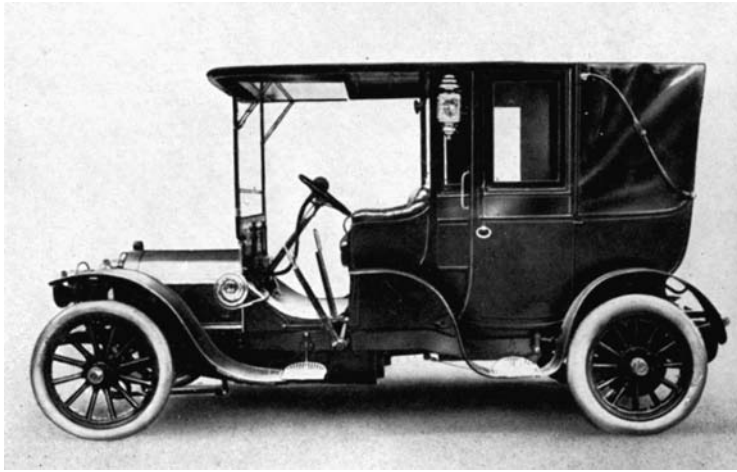


Figure 1.11. Fiat Type 3, 1910–12.

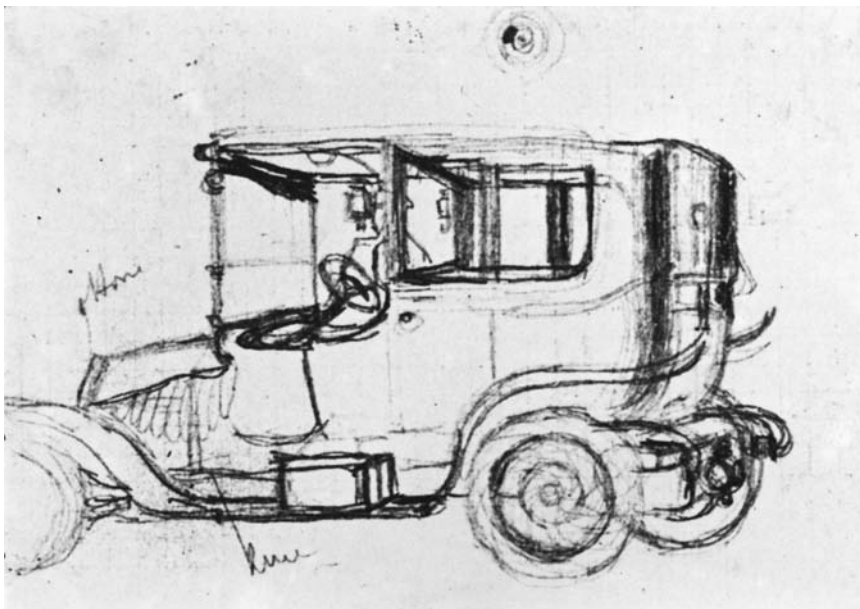


Figure 1.12. Giacomo Balla, untitled, drawing of an automobile, pencil on gridded sketchbook paper, ca. 1913, 8.5 x 13.2 cm. Rome, private collection.

Giorgio Nicodemi reports, based on a conversation with the artist, that Balla intended these projecting lines “to represent the expansion and noise of the motor.”⁷⁸ In a reversal of the Renaissance perspectival system, Balla transforms a series of orthogonals, which normally would recede to a vanishing point in the distance, into dynamic lines of force propelled outward



Figure 1.13. Giacomo Balla, *Racing Automobile*, oil and mixed media on paper, mounted on pasteboard, 1913, 73 x 104 cm. Private collection.

from the depicted race car, so that they impinge upon the viewer. For the latter, it is as if Balla recreates the hallucinatory optic and haptic effect many travelers report: that accelerated movement makes it seem that the traversed environment advances upon the traveler, rather than the other way around.⁷⁹ The rectangular box shapes that also emanate from the race car further emphasize this effect, while the large projecting angles visualize the atmosphere.⁸⁰ More specifically, these rising angles render what Balla elsewhere calls *spessori d'atmosfera* (atmospheric densities), or what Marinetti describes, also in his account of the Brescia automobile races, as the sweeping force of “the blast of air of a departure.”⁸¹ The painting thus functions as a “motor,” to produce an expanding network of intersecting vectors of energy, whose centrifugal flight patterns reach out to the implied spectators. The viewers captured by these surging forces would experience the race car’s velocity as Balla imagined it—as a thrilling onrush of visual, tactile, and aural sensations that partly obliterated subject/object distinctions in the intoxicating sublimity of the moment. For Balla there was little question of sudden jolts, shocks, or even collision. His speeding race cars arrive as roaring projectiles that generate flows of energy in which the car and driver nearly “disaggregate,” as they fuse with a larger oceanic flux.⁸²

As my discussion of these examples seeks to demonstrate, the Futurists' responses to the upheavals wrought by urban modernity were far more varied, and more haunted by ambivalence toward its most disruptive effects, than has usually been recognized. They encountered the belated industrialization of Italy and experienced its psychosomatic shocks and jolts, as well as its losses and displacements, as a series of transformations with both positive and negative consequences. Accustomed to the slower rhythms, forms of perception, and sociality typical of preindustrial, semirural society, the Futurists found themselves lurched into the present by historical change, as well as their own ambitions to become resolutely modern poets, artists, and political activists. To reject modernity would have been to condemn Italy to resting on the glories of its past, in conformity with prevailing stereotypes.

As we have seen, Marinetti's earliest encounters with modern, industrial reality were a source of profound shock and alienation to him. Many of his pre-Futurist poems and newspaper essays reveal a sense of self assaulted by unfamiliar sensations and rhythms: the jarring cacophony of Milan at 10 a.m., the imprisoning web of the city's electric wires overhead and crisscrossing rails underfoot, the velocity and jolts of trains and trams, the glare of electric lights, the factories belching smoke and grime. He seems to have felt particularly threatened by his experience of the "automatic and bituminous crowd," whose sheer numbers and degraded industrial labor (marked by standardization and boredom), led to the erasure of distinctive individualities, implicating his own sense of self.⁸³ In its automatism, the crowd also seemed to succumb to wavelike surges of violence that threatened to engulf him, as he emphasizes in several early texts, including a lengthy description of the riotous mob that attended Verdi's funeral in 1901.⁸⁴ It is as if Marinetti understood the rising political and cultural power of the masses as an entropic phenomenon, which could only lead to a chaotic leveling of hierarchies as the energy that sustained the elites sputtered out. The cult of heroism and violence were among his antidotes to this frightening dissolution of identity in the encroaching mirror image of a homogeneous, abject mass.

Perhaps even more threatening than these shocks encountered in the exterior world were those that seemed to erupt forth from within: the desire for carnal pleasure and feminine love. Marinetti, like many men of his generation confronted with a sense of their own eroded prestige, and with transformations in women's social roles, sought to erect a barrier against the claims of sentiment and lust. In their stead, he exalted the will to power and enthusiasm for heroic deeds in war. If women, like the crowd, were subject to irrational impulses and automatic behavior, the virile Futurist warrior would determine his own fate through acts of willful aggression and violence. He would learn to inure himself to the corrosive

effects of love and lust, to fuse flesh with metal, and to thrill to the erotic frisson of velocity or an exploding bomb.

In the account I have traced here, it is not often easy to draw a definitive line between Futurist attitudes and actions that might be associated with Freud's notion of a defensive "stimulus shield," and those that generated new, pleasurable flows of energy. Indeed, the Futurists often confound seemingly opposed psychic responses to the jolts, shocks, and ruptures of life in the urban metropolis. What follows is a series of speculations that have driven the analysis of Futurist responses to modernity proposed in this book.

In theorizing the ego's production of a defensive "stimulus shield" in response both to innate instinctual impulses and external psychic threats in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* of 1921, Freud draws on observations made during his early studies of hysteria, as well as on the traumas occasioned by the First World War. His hypothesis is grounded in an economic model of psychic equilibrium, in which pleasure derives from a reduction in the quantity of excitation present in the mental apparatus, or at least in maintaining a stable, constant state.⁸⁵ According to this view, excessive stimulation leads only to perceptual displeasure, and results in various mechanisms of repression and fixation associated with "traumatic neurosis." Its effects are most notable when hyperstimulation causes a breach in the ego's protective barrier for which it is unprepared. Whereas anxiety and fear galvanize a strengthening of the psychic shield in advance of an expected danger, the experience of fright leaves the surprised subject vulnerable, so that the danger is registered by the unconscious with full intensity. Freud notes that a physical injury inflicted simultaneously with the frightening event could diminish the psychic effect of trauma by directing psychic energy to the site of the wound.⁸⁶

For Freud, those who suffer a trauma, including "severe mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life," typically manifest a number of regressive symptoms, as they seek to master the danger they experienced retroactively.⁸⁷ Among these symptoms, which point to a subjective rather than organic ailment, are depression, mental impairment, and fixation on the traumatic event and its repetition in dreams and sometimes in life. While often painful, the repetition of an unpleasant situation could carry with it pleasurable effects, especially insofar as it allowed the traumatized subject to actively rework what had initially been experienced passively. It might even be turned into a game, as demonstrated in the famous example of the little boy playing with a wooden spool. In throwing away and recovering the spool to the words *fort* and *da* (*there* and *here*), the boy reenacted and thereby gained symbolic control of his mother's disappearances and returns, while also giving vent to violent impulses.⁸⁸

Freud regards such repetitive behaviors as a means of reaffirming the coherence of the ego, of binding and rendering “quiescent” its disruptive, repressed energies.⁸⁹ A related mechanism is the generation of a stimulus shield or psychosomatic armor to ward off further shocks. By way of explanation Freud posits the analogy of a simple vesicle susceptible to stimulation. By necessity, the exterior surface of this vesicle would become differentiated, allowing it to serve as an organ for receiving stimuli. Yet as a result of the ceaseless impact of stimuli, its outermost layer, down to a certain level, would be permanently modified, forming a “crust” incapable of further modifications. Just below this layer, which offers no resistance to the powerful energies emanating from the exterior world, Freud imagines a cortical layer that

would be killed by the stimulation emanating from these [energies] if it were not provided with a protective shield against stimuli. It acquires the shield in this way: its outermost surface ceases to have the structure proper to living matter, becomes to some degree inorganic and thenceforward functions as a special envelope or membrane resistant to stimuli. In consequence, the energies of the external world are able to pass into the next underlying layers, which have remained living, with only a fragment of their original intensity. . . . By its death, the outer layer has saved all the deeper ones from a similar fate—unless, that is to say, stimuli reach it which are so strong they break through the protective shield.⁹⁰

Although Freud observes that the cortical layer “would be killed” by the intensity of external stimulation if it did not develop a defense, this defense consists in its outermost layer becoming “inorganic,” thereby effecting a partial death in advance. Trauma occurs when a shock is so great that it breaks through this inorganic protective shield, causing psychic blockage and an effort to repair and strengthen the shield through new investments of energy. Similarly, unbound or mobile impulses arising from the instincts can undermine the ego’s stability, leading to renewed cathexis of the stimulus shield, as well as the projection of the threatening forces outward, onto others or onto objects in the world.⁹¹

The Futurists parried the unfamiliar jolts and shocks occasioned by urban modernity in a variety of ways, which Freud’s hypotheses illuminate only in part. Rather than repress or fixate upon the causes of the psychic disturbances that pose a danger to the sovereignty or coherence of the self, they tended to bring them to the surface in works of art, poetry, or other forms of cultural activity. Insofar as their attitudes evince the erection of a stimulus shield—and this is often the case—it operates with numerous cracks and fissures. Hence their works are often suffused with

ambivalence despite the stridency of their rhetorical celebration of modernity. Often a single theme or trope can work on multiple levels to disavow a trauma or lack and to reveal its lingering force.

Several examples explored in this chapter concern the disparate responses of the Futurists to the new technologies of transportation and speed. If Marinetti's earliest encounters with the "demon of speed" were rife with a sense of the train's unruly explosive force and danger, he subsequently embraced these qualities as a cure for the "mortal boredom" and disempowerment of the individual within an increasingly regulated, anonymous mass society. By 1907, in writing about the Brescia automobile races, Marinetti extols the thrill of speed as an intensifier that opens onto an experience of the sublime. Reporting from the perspective of a spectator who identifies with the drivers, Marinetti admires their courageous defiance of death, takes pleasure in their close physical contact with their impetuous vehicles (described as "metallic jaguars," while the race-course is a "jungle"), and envisions an early version of the volatile man/machine hybrid.⁹² Rather than seek pleasure in a diminution of stimulation, or in a constant state of psychic equilibrium, Marinetti wishes to increase the quantity of excitement to the point of exceeding the threshold of the human sensory apparatus. The furious velocity of the race car figures as the supreme expression of desire, as the motor driving the will to power:

Faster than the wind! Faster than lightning! . . . Faster than strychnine launched into the circuit of the veins. . . . One need only desire! Let whoever desires fly! . . . Rise to the sky whoever desires! . . . Triumph to whoever believes! . . . It is necessary to believe and desire! . . . Oh desire, oh desire, eternal magneto! . . . And you, my torrid will, great carburetor of dreams! . . . Transmission of my nerves, throwing planetary orbits into gear! . . . Prophetic instinct, oh gearbox! . . . Oh my explosive and detonating heart, who will stop you from crushing Death? . . . Who prevents you from commanding the Impossible? . . . And make yourself immortal, through a stroke of will! . . .⁹³

Velocity pulses through the poet's veins as the great intoxicator, conjuring phantasmagorical visions of planetary conquest and immortality. The joy of explosively launching desire into a universe without limits heralds future psychosomatic transformations that promise to turn the merely human subject into a thundering, willful god/machine. But the desperate rhetoric of this passage also intimates that it serves to exorcise a sense of lack, of insufficiency in the realm of power, and certainly the fear of death. The exhilarating sensory intensity of the experience of speed could simultaneously compensate for the dull, repetitive rhythms of ordinary metropolitan life and erect a stimulus screen against psychic shocks of an

unpleasant kind. With nerves described as gears and a detonating heart, Marinetti images himself as impervious to unwelcome stimuli or pain. His desire to fuse flesh with metal functions similarly, to fortify an all-too-vulnerable body, rendering it hard, phallic, and immune to attack, whether from within or without. In Marinetti's imaginary universe, as well as in his life, psychic processes of defense and discharge are intimately linked, so that he takes intense pleasure in becoming machinelike, in developing an impenetrable surface and an antihuman psychology, but he simultaneously thrills to the hyperstimulation of speed and the sensation of an exploding, expanding self.⁹⁴

The next chapter analyzes the Futurists' various efforts to interpellate and galvanize the crowd, that anonymous and despised mass that earlier had threatened Marinetti's sense of individuation. Rather than merely reject the crowd in horror, they seek to convert it to their patriotic cause, through direct address in the form of riotous serate and other public manifestations, as well as through the mass media, works of art, and free-word poetry. Although most of the Futurists shared Marinetti's elitist disdain for the masses, they recognized that achieving their aim to renovate Italy demanded an alliance with the most vigorous, youthful, and potentially rebellious members of the public. In appealing to this public, they frequently employed strategies whose motive was to shock, jolt, and otherwise breach its defensive stimulus shield. This culturally produced shield/screen (tradition, habit, propriety), whose purpose was to shelter the subject from a painfully intense, destabilizing apprehension of change or conflict, would have to be shattered so that the shocks of modernity—as rendered through Futurist myth—could be fully and traumatically registered. The violence of Futurist rhetoric and action was intended as a blow to outmoded forms of subjectivity in order to generate a dynamic counterimage: the virile, man/machine vector, whose stimulus shield was newly fortified with fantasies of destruction and heroism. With the outbreak of war, Marinetti wrote to Severini to urge the Futurist painters to create bold, synthetic works that would “strike the imagination and eyes of everyone or of almost all intelligent readers.” He further declared: “I believe that the great war, lived intensely by the Futurist painters, can produce true convulsions in their sensibility, and spur them to a brutal simplification of very clear lines that will strike and incite the readers, just as the war strikes and incites the combatants.”⁹⁵ The Futurists hoped that the experience of shock would function much like Marinetti's car crash, or indeed the war, to reconfigure consciousness so that it would both invite and parry the blows of industrial modernity, while simultaneously unleashing exhilarating new flows of energy and the erotic frisson of the will to power.