Declining Futurism: *La Battaglia di Tripoli* and Its Place in the “Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista”*

We are, a little belatedly, celebrating the eightieth anniversary of the “Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista.” We have not, predictably enough, come here to sing the praises of the other works that Marinetti published in 1912: his brief account of the Italo-Turkish war in Libya, *La Battaglia di Tripoli (26 ottobre 1911)*, *vissuta e cantata da F.T. Marinetti*, or that extremely curious “political novel in free verse,” *Le Monoplan du Pape*, which was itself written on the Libyan battlefields where Marinetti gained his first real exposure to the War that he would spend the rest of his life extolling as the “world’s only hygiene.” What I will be undertaking here is to suggest a few reasons for more closely considering these works, notably the *Battaglia* and its intertextual connections to that “Manifesto” which, for perhaps not altogether obvious reasons, we have been discussing over the course of this conference. As you will recall, the text of Marinetti’s that is most often cited in the “Manifesto,” three times to be exact, is in fact the *Battaglia di Tripoli* (a book that was initially published as a series of articles in the French newspaper *L’Intransigeant*, from 25 to 31 December 1911).¹ For this reason alone, it would seem essential to raise here the question of this little-known battle — a battle covering the same “Oriental” ground as that much better-known “Battaglia,” “Peso + Odore,” which serves as the “Manifesto”’s avant-garde supplement.

Marinetti’s references to the earlier *Battaglia* in his “Manifesto” are predictably restrained: he is well aware that the work does not conform in any obvious way to the avant-garde imperatives that he has been mapping out in the “Manifesto.” The first two references have to do with his use of analogy, which he defines as “l’amore profondo che collega le cose distanti, apparentemente diverse ed ostili” (*Teoria* 42). Where previous writers limited themselves to “immediate” analogies, equivalent to what he calls a “type of photography,”

---

¹ QUADERNI d’italianistica Volume XV, No. 1-2, 1994
Marinetti claims that his orchestral style — simultaneously polychromatic, polyphonic, and polymorphous — allows him to expand beyond the domain of such limited reproductions and “abbracciare la vita della materia.” That such expansionism, such linguistic-corporeal dilation, itself doubles Italy’s imperial enterprise is an obvious but important point. What is perhaps most interesting about Marinetti’s example, however, is that his futurist quest for “new images” (“La poesia deve essere un seguito ininterrotto di immagini nuove senza di che non è altro che anemia e clorosi” [42]) is based upon a very familiar literary practice:

Quando nella mia Battaglia di Tripoli, ho paragonato una trincea irta di baionette a un’orchestra, una mitragliatrice ad una donna fatale, ho introdotto intuitivamente una gran parte dell’universo in un breve episodio di battaglia africana. (42)

Rather than abandoning old poetic practices, these examples simply extend the “photographic” logic of metaphorical substitution that he is ostensibly transcending; moreover, rather than embracing matter, Marinetti here clearly remains within the universe of “humanized matter” that he is trying to work (his way) outside of. Marinetti’s dependence on the very thing that he is contesting obviously demands a deconstructive reading — as does his recourse to the venerable lyric tradition of using woman as the ground for his figural language. This figure of woman occurs again in the second of the “Manifesto”’s references to the Battaglia, a long quotation exemplifying his “chain of analogies” technique, in which a svelte little machine gun is likened to, among other things, “una donna affascinante”; linked in a chain, the “new image” becomes, as it were, cinema — or, viewed from a more critical, deconstructionist perspective, the same old photograph becomes a cinematic still. Indeed, Marinetti himself admits that the images he is citing from the Battaglia are “ancora mascherate e appesantite dalla sintassi tradizionale” (43). What this statement makes plain, though, is that for Marinetti syntax alone constitutes the mask that, once raised, would allow for hidden truths to be revealed, for his words to be “lightened” and thereby liberated from the objectionable realm of literary tradition; he patently does not feel that the actual method by which he comes upon his images needs to be revolutionized in the same way that he acknowledges his use of language must.

What one gleans from these two examples, of course, is the “genealogy” of Marinetti’s avant-garde practice — a genealogy that puts into question both the novelty of his stylistic “innovations” and the urge to embrace matter that attaches to his project. Now, it would have been a simple matter for Marinetti to have avoided these examples from the Battaglia that hold back his futurist project and ground it in the very tradition from which he is purportedly liberating himself; I will be arguing that Marinetti’s failure in this particular case to cover the traces of his pre-“Manifesto” past, a failure that is not always this blatantly evident in his writings at this time, creates the grounds for thinking another futurism, a futurism without transcendence that is best exemplified by D’Annunzio’s Merope — an “anaemic and chlorotic” futurism in which Marinetti’s avant-garde dreams of
radical novelty, of rupture and liberation, give way to the dissonance of a present that can give birth truly to neither past nor future, and that is always at a distance from the material ground it would embrace, from the “Africa” that it would attempt to draw within the boundaries of Europe’s revolutionary/imperial language.

It is precisely this dissonance that is broached in the third of the “Manifesto”’s references to the Battaglia (44): the lengthy passage that Marinetti quotes, by way of exemplifying his concept of a “network of images,” juxtaposes the exotically image of camels at sunset with life in the trenches, and identifies this as an example of “stridori e dissonanze futuriste” (Battaglia 7). As with the first two examples, one could usefully interrogate the passage’s passatista use of language: for instance, when Marinetti describes these camels, in the French original, as “se gargarissant de joie comme de vieilles gargouilles” we can infer that his much vaunted “discovery” of onomatopoeia, far from marking a (re)turn to matter, to the pre-semantic origins of language, is simply a massive escalation of the traditional alliterative practice he engages in here. But what needs to be stressed at this point in our analysis is the actual content of the word “futurism” itself. This is the first occurrence of the word in the text of the Battaglia, and the passage firmly establishes a meaning for it that is by no means simple but, rather, profoundly ambivalent: “futurism” is here positioned, dissonantly, between two worlds rather than on one side or the other of an ideological divide separating past and future; it is located between an exhausted exoticism, on the one hand, and, on the other, the sacred modernity of war that a more conventional reading of the word would direct us toward (and Marinetti himself adopts the latter sort of reading in his preface to the Battaglia, later reprinted on its own as the “Manifesto a Tripoli italiana,” when he explicitly identifies the war as “questa grande ora futurista d’Italia”). By re-citing this ambivalent passage from the Battaglia in an altogether different context, Marinetti unsuspectingly troubles the ecstatically destructionist rhetoric of avant-gardism that characterizes the “Manifesto”; he deflates the “language of rupture” that Marjorie Perloff has correctly identified as the master discourse of futurism, and forces us to confront the possibility that “futurism” might signal not so much a simple break with the past but, rather, a strange and unsettling conflation of old and new worlds that participates fully in neither.

Here, I would argue, is a path toward the future not taken: here is a futurism that declines attempting to construct a new wor(l)d, a new man, but that explores the dissonant landscapes of a contaminated and contaminatory wor(l)d in which the radically new consistently fails to “manifest” itself, in which the idyllic vision of a total stylistic and cultural revolution, of “un’assoluta originalità novatrice,” fails to emerge. This is a future that has, to use Gianni Vattimo’s terms, been fundamentally “weakened”; a future that can exist only in the form of a (Derridean) supplement, attached to a past and a discourse from which it cannot entirely disengage itself.
The supplement is an essential if troubling part of Marinetti’s technique, an element that we find, for instance, not only in the bifurcated Battaglia di Tripoli,\(^5\) but in the “Manifesto Tecnico” itself, which not only features a “Supplemento” (“Risposte alle obiezioni”), but then goes on to “end” with “Battaglia: Peso + Odore,” a work that seems to mark a full break with what comes before, but that nonetheless remains contained within the universe that it contests, rather as the Battaglia di Tripoli in all its passatismo is itself contained within the futurist “Manifesto.” Marinetti’s entire career could be read as the creation of an intertextual network that by virtue of its supplementary nature consistently undermines the discourse of sheer novelty that his work as a whole, just as consistently, insists upon in a language of apocalyptic finality (as in the “Manifesto”’s famous phrase “Dopo il verso libero, ecco finalmente le parole in libertà!” [47]). It is this intertextual network that puts into question the “revolution in style” which so many critics privilege and which, I presume, is the reason for our being here today. The quotations from the Battaglia that we find in the “Manifesto” are an important part of this network: they can be seen not merely as the next best thing to an “unmasked” futurist text that Marinetti could come up with at the time, having not yet written Zang Tuum Tuum (published in 1914), but as the sign of a dissonance which is basic to the other “futurism” that I have been attempting to read here: as the sign of the impossibility of that (stylistic, political) revolution that a simple reading of “futurism” (and Marinetti’s own reading of the word is almost always such) presupposes; as the sign of the inadequacy of both the rhetoric of forward progress that characterizes so much of his work and of the rhetoric of a heroism defined in revolutionary terms as the “potenza ascensionale della razza.”\(^6\) The significance of this unread sign is not merely that such an anachronism marks the “return of the repressed” — of Marinetti’s symbolist beginnings, say — but that it suggests to those who choose to read it the never theorized practice of another futurism, one that will consistently decline to satisfy the desire of critics for that radically innovatory Art which Marinetti was always ready to identify with revolution.

For a more fully theorized practice of that other futurism toward which I have been gesturing here, we must turn to Gabriele D’Annunzio. In his own account of the Italo-Turkish war in Libya, the quasi-epic Merope (first published in installments in the Corriere della Sera, October 1911 through January 1912), D’Annunzio draws out the implications of the dissonances that Marinetti’s work at once exposes, as we have seen, and is forced to ignore in the name of a radical break with the written past and a return to a life that can be, to quote the subtitle of the Battaglia, “lived and sung.” Marinetti was, of course, correct when he referred to D’Annunzio, from the perspective of his own conversion to an avant-garde futurism, as a “passatista convinto [che] ci segue da lunghi,” a purveyor of “la poesia morbosa e nostalgica della distanza e del ricordo” as he puts it in Guerra sola igiene del mondo (Teoria 236, 304). Distance and memory threaten the project of both a lived presence and a radical rupture with the past, and for
that reason Marinetti is right to urge in the preface to the Battaglia: "sia cancellato il fastidioso ricordo della grandezza romana, con una grandezza italiana cento volte maggiore." D'Annunzio's Merope, by contrast, evokes both the " tiresome memory" of the first and second Romes, as well as the prospect of an even greater " Italian greatness" in the future, but it does so at a distance, "da lungi," that cancels out the very things, past and future, that it is evoking. In Merope the rhetoric of both memory and novelty self-de(con)structs in any number of calculated ways: D'Annunzio's claim of forgetting — "siamo cinti d'oblio" — in the very first of its ten canzoni, "La Canzone d'oltremare" (2.647-52), which appears to match Marinetti's call for a total crossing out of the past, and which makes possible his subsequent pseudo-Nietzschean appeals to "la terra che chiamano futura / i messaggeri" ("La Canzone del sangue" 109-10), turns back upon itself time and again in the face of the poem's insistent remembering of the past in a tight network of intertextual allusions to his own and others' works, of rhetorical topoi, and even of plagiarisms (a word whose Greek root, we might note, means " oblique"; D'Annunzio's "futurism" in Merope is clearly plagiarized from Nietzsche and from Marinetti himself; the future it promises is an oblique one at best, diverging from the straight line forward that Marinetti's avant-gardism heroically maps out). The liberated future falls back into a decadent present from which the text is unable to break, a fact which it insistently displays; and the imperial past that D'Annunzio, unlike Marinetti, knows he cannot cancel out gets reconfigured in such a way as to de-realize it, rendering it a sheerly rhetorical creation. The "potenza ascensionale" that generates Marinetti's revolutionary vision of the future is transformed by D'Annunzio into what, in the "Canzone d'Oltremare," he calls a " potenza d'esilio": a power that is founded in impotence, in the acknowledgement of one's insurable distance from both a past away from which one has declined and an impossible future that one can nevertheless not stop dreaming.

Given this profound difference between D'Annunzio and Marinetti in their approaches to the presence of the past and the creation of a radically new wor(l)d, it would be logical to conclude with a discussion of the two men's ambivalent relation to fascism, which on the one hand attempts literally to revive a past that for D'Annunzio is an irrevocable absence, and yet which on the other also cherishes the ideology of rupture and innovation upon which Marinetti's futurist project would ground itself. Rather than pursue this central line of thought, however, I would like to conclude by returning to the (post)colonial margins out of which Marinetti's revolutionary enterprise emerged in order briefly to suggest how it continues to haunt us in ways that we might not suspect and yet that have brought us here together.

At one point in his Discours antillais (1981) — one of the more influential recent works of cultural criticism devoted to the problem of colonialism and its aftermath(s) — the Martiniquan poet, novelist, and theorist Edouard Glissant provides a jeremiadic vision of his island as a successfully colonized territory, con-
demned to a potentially unending detour in a present from which all hope of future political liberation from France (and, more generally, from the mass-mediated consumeristic hegemony of a “West” that can no longer be simply situated in Europe or the United States but that has now taken on truly global dimensions) has been effaced:


Confronted with this degraded present, Glissant nostalgically evokes Frantz Fanon’s “passage à l’acte” (that is, his involvement in the Algerian war of independence): to enter into this passage is, he argues, to “assumer à fond la coupure radicale. La coupure radicale est la pointe extrême du Détour” (36). It was Fanon, of course, who in Les Damnés de la terre (1961) defined decolonization as a sort of “tabula rasa” in which, “sans transition, il y a substitution totale, complète, absolue” — the replacement of one species of men with another (5). This model of complete rupture, of immediate substitution as opposed to transitional supplementation, significantly coincides with the explosive avant-garde dreams of a European writer like Marinetti, whose modernist project was to explore the volcanic heights and depths that would seem to be disappearing from view in Glissant’s “successfully colonized” Martinique.9 The need to overcome the degradations of the present in the name of a radically “liberated” future, to escape the detour of our modernity, intimately binds such projects as futurism and decolonization together, and it is this shared “tensione al futuro come tensione al rinnovamento, al ritorno in una condizione di autenticità originale,” as well as its inadequacy to our own “liquidated” time, that Gianni Vattimo, for one, has so ably pointed to in his discussions of pensiero debole (109).

However, notwithstanding the relevance of Vattimo’s claims to a postmodern age in which the projects of stylistic and political revolution appear increasingly hard to credit, the “language of rupture” upon which such projects as futurism and decolonization are based maintains its hold over us: such Marinettian phrases as “lo slancio verso l’ignoto dell’immaginazione,” “la passione del futuro,” “la sete della rivoluzione” refuse to go away,10 and it is undoubtedly our attraction to them that constitutes the not altogether obvious reasons for our being here today. Not altogether obvious, because unlike Marinetti we are incapable of fully acknowledging what is entailed in these alluring phrases: if we love revolution, be it in the realm of politics or literary style, we are yet unwilling to admit along with the author of the “Manifesto” that such revolution may well be inseparable from war (“la doppia preparazione della guerra e della rivoluzione”), that empire is war (“Império significa guerra”), and that if art — as we hope, and as Marinetti so often claimed — is revolution (“l’arte è rivoluzione”) it must also signify
empire and war. This imperial and bellicose desire for rupture, for a tabula rasa, which binds the likes of Marinetti and Fanon together in one project — a project that can perhaps ultimately be traced back, as Emanuele Severino has argued, to Greek philosophy, “per la quale il futuro è il niente da cui le cose provengono (e il passato è il niente in cui le cose ritornano)” (64) — is characteristic of our modernity: the future is our form of hygiene, the (militaristic) moral according to which we have educated ourselves. To state that this desire is no longer adequate to the realities of our late-twentieth-century postmodern world, that our dreams of revolution and a cleansed and cleansing future are empty, does not simply cancel out that desire nor those dreams. They remain with us, as memories of a future to which we can no longer accede. As we learn to live “tassés sur la ligne d’émergence des volcans,” we must also learn how to control our need for new wor(l)ds: not simply to forget this need and these wor(l)ds, for that is neither possible nor desirable, but to contain them (as did D’Annunzio) in a self-conscious gesture that renounces and declines the very future — a future inseparable from the devastations of war — to which it at the same time cannot help giving voice. The presence of the Battaglia di Tripoli in Marinetti’s “Manifesto Tecnico” is, I have suggested, the (unintended) sign of an absence: the absence of what the “Manifesto” prefigures and what we, in an age of “cool” aesthetics and “weak” thought, still long for — the heat of a battle, the strength of a conviction. If the “Manifesto” provides us with tomorrow’s battleplan (“Nous partirons demain pour la bataille . . .”), the dissonant presence of the Battaglia puts that avant-garde agenda into question, and throws us back on the track of that other futurism, “anaemic and chlorotic,” to which I have tried to give voice today.

College of William and Mary

NOTES

* A version of this essay was first delivered at an international conference held at UCLA in March of 1993 to mark the eightieth anniversary of the Futurist Manifesto. Both for stylistic purposes and in order to highlight (and critique) the aesthetic and ideological presuppositions that generated the idea of holding such a conference, I have chosen to preserve in the main body of the text some traces of the original oral presentation.

1 I will be referring to the Italian edition of this book; as with most of Marinetti’s writings up until the publication of the “Manifesto tecnico,” it was originally written and published in French (La Bataille de Tripoli), but differences between the two texts are minimal.

2 For a full discussion of this futurist poetics of dilation and its relation to nationalism and imperialism, see Schnapp’s article, as well as Hewitt 95-101.

3 For an elaboration of the concept of “genealogy,” see Valesio, especially 12-15, 154-71.

4 My use of the word “idyllic” here is not casual. The “pispiglio idilliaco” (35) of Marinetti’s cannon balls in the Battaglia is, I would argue, no more than the violent re-sounding of Schiller’s appeal in his “On Naive and Sentimental Poetry” (1795) — an appeal that has shaped and directed our modernity — to idyll as the project of the future, “the condition which civilisation, if it can be said to have any particular tendency everywhere, aims at as its ultimate purpose” (147).
5 The Battaglia’s symbolist-generated lyricism, which gives its prose a “trascinante efficacia espressiva” (as Mario Isenenghi, one of the very few critics ever to have written seriously on the Battaglia, once put it [33]), gives way in the Battaglia’s prosaic addendum, the “Risposte alle frottole turche” (65-84), to a journalistic discourse that deflates the aestheticizing language of the text proper. In the “Risposte,” Marinetti adopts the ostensibly transparent language of truth-telling in an attempt at denying rumoured Italian war atrocities and proving that certain incriminating photographs of Italian soldiers have been falsified; he also, interestingly, engages an autobiographical dimension that is virtually absent from the eight chapters of the text proper (“Io sono nato in Egitto . . .” etc. [79]). The (r)evolutionary reading that one can perform on the relation between the 1912 Manifesto and its poetic addendum, “Peso + Odore,” is impossible with these banally political supplements: we are faced not with (the illusion of) a progression as in the “Manifesto,” but with a simple juxtaposition of different, and yet connected, rhetorics. The “bella città di Tripoli” that is described for us in the Battaglia (56) is replaced with the indescendably squalid object of imperial condescension that Marinetti speaks of in both the “Risposte” and in a 1912 British newspaper interview (included in Lista 202-03), where he notes that Tripoli’s “filthiness” is “appalling, unbelievable, even a poet, even a Zola couldn’t describe it,” and where he subjects the Libyan peoples to a series of Orientalist oppositions (degraded coast Arabs versus noble inland Arabs; courageous Arabs versus cowardly Turks; etc.) that are noticeably absent from the text proper. In a like fashion, the “Risposte” supplement the figurative displacement of woman onto landscape or machine — sexualized mammal-dunes, vagina-dentata’d machine guns — that we have already examined with the following sort of “realistic” visions of “native” women, meant to dispel accusations of rape against Italian soldiers: “Provatevi, se potete, a respirare il fetore della loro biancheria sporca, che contiene, in bagni di sudore pestilenziale, le più ricche colture di microbi del colera, della lebbra e della sifilide . . .” (79). The contrast between the ascensional lyricism of the Battaglia’s final two chapters (in which the poet becomes the monoplane pilot Piazza, flying over the Libyan desert) and its prosaic supplement could not be greater, or more revealing of the intertextual tensions that I have been drawing out in this paper.

6 For a relevant sample of this rhetoric, compare this passage from “Al di là del comunismo” (1919-20): “Il sangue italiano versato a Tripoli era migliore di quello versato ad Abba Garina. Quello versato sul Carso, migliore, quello versato sul Piave e a Vittorio Veneto, migliore” (Futurismo e fascismo 217); I have also taken the phrase “potenza ascensionale della razza” from this essay (210).

7 It is worth commenting here on the overarching structure of Meropé. Most of the canzoni conform to the general description that I have given in the text; by contrast, the penultimate canzoni, those dedicated to the Italian soldiers Umberto Cagni and Mario Bianco, are much less “oblique” and seemingly more compatible with the ascending rhetoric of heroism that especially characterizes the final chapters of Marinetti’s Battaglia; however, it is precisely at this moment of climax that D’Annunzio explicitly distances himself from the heroic scenes that he has been describing. “La Canzone di Mario Bianco” ends with the poet’s admission that his vision is but a “declining dream” (“Il mio sogno, astro vegliante, / declina sopra i mari del Futuro” [212-13]); the final canzone, “L’ultima canzone” (2.727-34), chronicles his reawakening, the end of his dreams and the return to a state of solitude and exile. In this state, all that can be affirmed is a melancholic poetics of lontananza: “O lontananza, che dalla parola / en abolita come inane cura, / or sembri nella notte di viola // spanderti senza fine, di pianura / in pianura, di monte in monte, d’acque / in acque. Il mio dolor non ti misura” (73-78). What Marinetti would attempt to present to his reader, D’Annunzio will, ultimately, force us to envision as absent, by situating himself at an insuperable distance from the object of his desire, in a nocturnal world from which “l'alba
Declining Futurism: La Battaglia di Tripoli

certa" (186) and "la vita nuova" (193-94) that supposedly await Italy must appear to us as no more, if no less, than a dream.

8 For an extended commentary on the past as an "irrevocable" absence in D'Annunzio's work, see my Exotic Memories 182-87.

9 On Marinetti's use of volcano imagery as a metaphor for revolutionary change, see the second and third chapters of Le Monoplan du Pape 27-82.

10 The phrases are taken at random from an article in Guerra sola igiene del mondo (Teoria 282).

11 The three quotations are taken from Futurismo e fascismo 60, 20, 217. For an extensive analysis of the intimate connection between war and revolution that I have gestured toward here, and that Marinetti so rightly stressed ("Bisogna che ogni italiano concepisca nettamente il fondersi di queste due idee: rivoluzione e guerra"), see my "Between Apocalypse and Narrative."

WORKS CITED


———. Futurismo e fascismo. Foligno: Campitelli, 1924.


