

Constructing the Futurist Wartime Hero: Futurism and the Public, 1915-1919

1. Introduction

The First World War has long been recognized as a challenging period for European avant-garde movements and none of them survived the war completely intact. In many countries, there was a widespread hostility towards any form of art during the war years, but particular disdain was often reserved for the protagonists of avant-garde groups. In the context of Great Britain, James Fox has discussed how art almost completely disappeared from the press, deemed a luxury activity inappropriate for a society at war (49-51). The Vorticists suffered because they were initially reluctant to enlist, leading them to be branded as war shirkers (Black 169-71). Their reputation as “amusing creatures and puzzle painters” could sustain them no longer and journalists wondered “what on earth was up with us that we should ever have been entertained by them” (Collins Baker in Fox 53). Cubism also fell foul of wartime public opinion in France: it was criticized for its internationalist character and was frequently spelt with a Germanic “K” in the popular press, in order to brand it as being in alliance with the enemy (Silver 8-12).

The case of Futurism in Italy was different. Public responses to Futurism actually improved significantly during the years of the Great War, offering a perhaps surprising counterpoint to the dominant narratives in France and Britain outlined above. By analyzing newspaper reports from 1915-1919, this article demonstrates how public and press reactions to Futurism improved significantly as the war progressed, and in addition, how the Futurists sought to render their theatrical and artistic production more accessible to a wider audience during the war years. Although Walter Adamson has noted in passing that “the avant-garde nature of the relationship between futurism and its public did weaken somewhat” in the later war years (862), Futurist scholarship generally identifies such a shift in the Futurist attitude towards the public as a characteristic of “secondo futurismo” from the 1920s onwards. As Claudia Salaris wrote in the catalogue of the 2014 Guggenheim exhibition on the movement, in the early 1920s “the Futurists grew adept at meeting the demands of an increasingly complex and populous society, succeeding in presenting the group as an avant-garde for the masses and specializing in forms of aesthetic communication intended for a wide audience” (43). In fact, attempting to satisfy the public’s

tastes in art had been part of Marinetti's vision for Futurism since November 1914 and this approach only intensified from 1916 onwards as the war dragged on. A fuller understanding of this shift can only be reached through an examination of the surrounding context of improved press and public reactions towards Futurism following Italy's entry into the war.

The altered press responses to Futurism were initially prompted by the enthusiastic enlistment of many key Futurist figures in the army in May 1915, and particularly by the decision of Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni, Luigi Russolo, Antonio Sant'Elia and Mario Sironi to volunteer for the Lombard Battalion of Volunteer Cyclists and Motorists in May 1915, with whom they saw combat in autumn in the mountains of Trentino at Lake Garda. As a result of the Futurists' voluntary military service, they earned praise and admiration from the press and quickly assumed the status of war heroes. Marinetti, in particular, sought to capitalize on this new-found respect for the protagonists of his movement, and thus began to pursue a more accessible style of art suitable for mass tastes and for the demands of a wartime society. The 1916 and 1917 performances of the "teatro futurista sintetico" genre showcased this new approach in the theater. Initially, it had been Futurist actions which prompted a change in attitude among the press and public, but subsequently it was the public's desire for less extravagant entertainment that pushed the Futurists to modify some of the most provocative elements of their artistic program. The Futurists' heroic status was further cemented in August 1916 with the death of Boccioni while serving with the Italian Army. The final phase of the Futurists' establishment as symbols of Italian military courage and heroism came in 1919 with the staging of the "Grande Esposizione Nazionale Futurista" in Milan and Genoa between March and July 1919. This exhibition marked the re-launch of artistic Futurism after the war, and constituted the culmination of the positive responses to Futurism that had developed during the war, which would have important implications for the movement's trajectory in the 1920s. This article will consider the press responses to these key events during the war (the Futurists' military service; the synthetic theater performances; the death of Boccioni; and the 1919 exhibition) as they succinctly elucidate the transforming relationship between Futurism and the Italian press and public during the years of the Great War.

2. The Futurists as Volunteer Soldiers, 1915

When it comes to their perception in the media, Futurism's jingoism served them very well during in the early months of Italy's intervention, as the demands of the nation were immediately placed above the demands of art. As soon as Italy entered the war in May 1915, all Futurist activity stopped. The Futurist leadership marked this moment by publishing the manifesto "Per la guerra, sola igiene del mondo," which declared that "il movimento futurista letterario, pittorico, e musicale è attualmente sospeso, causa l'assenza del poeta Marinetti, recatosi sul teatro della guerra." The manifesto continued:

Finché duri la guerra, lasciamo da parte i versi, i pennelli, gli scalpelli e le orchestre! Son

cominciate le rosse vacanze del genio! Nulla possiamo ammirare, oggi, se non le formidabili sinfonie degli *shrapnels* e le folli sculture che la nostra ispirata artiglieria foggia nelle masse nemiche.

(Marinetti, "Per la guerra")

There was no possibility that the Futurists could be accused of not doing their civic duty. The Lombard Battalion of Volunteer Cyclists and Motorists departed from Milan in early summer 1915 and spent August and September awaiting front-line duty near Lake Garda. In October, they were transformed into an Alpine unit and were involved in the capture of the Austrian position at Dosso Casina. Because of the lack of suitability of bicycles for the mountainous terrain, the Volunteer Cyclists were disbanded in December 1915.¹

Following the disbandment, Marinetti wrote to Futurist musician, Francesco Balilla Pratella on 31 December 1915, "La stampa è singolarmente migliorata per noi Futuristi" (Marinetti and Pratella 59). The positivity noted by Marinetti is evident in media reports from as early as July 1915. An article commenting on the participation of intellectuals in the war highlighted how these men, the Futurists included, had left to one side "ogni veste di superiorità, per rientrare nelle file di quell'enorme livellatore di uomini che è un esercito in guerra" (Fiorini 655). The Futurists — "bravi giovanotti" — were also praised for having put their interventionist words into action, by volunteering as soldiers (Fiorini 662), which was a common theme in many articles of the time. Valeria Vampa in *Gran mondo* praised the Futurists,

i quali dopo avere tentato con lo sforzo e ben altro con lo scherno di creare una nuova corrente d'idee e di ideali nel campo sconfinato delle arti, dopo aver tentato che non siano stroncate ed offuscate le sfolgoranti ali del genio con i vietati sofismi di decrepite scuole o scuiolette, convergono tutta la forza del loro braccio, tutta l'attività del loro intelletto, sui campi cruenti dove tuttavia si decidono i migliori destini dell'umanità.²

Similarly, an article of *La libreria economica* claimed the Futurists' war service would be their finest hour:

Chi conosce il loro fervore e la loro audacia non dubita ch'essi compiranno appieno il loro dovere di uomini e d'artisti (poiché per loro le due funzioni s'integrano e s'identificano) e che questo sarà, se non l'ultimo [...] il loro canto più bello e più alto.

(Grammona)

Marinetti was singled out for praise in most reports on the Volunteer Cyclists. *La stampa* journalist Carlo Scarfoglio wrote that Marinetti's volunteering "manifesta una grande forza di volontà, perché [...] non brilla più

¹ On the combat experiences of the Lombard Battalion of Volunteer Cyclists, see Daly.

² Full bibliographical details for some periodical articles held in the archives consulted for this research project are not available. When relevant, I have added the archive in which these documents are held as part of their entry in the list of works cited.

del fiore velluto della prima giovinezza” (he was 37 at the time). In *Lo sport illustrato della guerra*, Marinetti’s sporting prowess and his willingness to live up to his warmongering rhetoric by volunteering were highlighted as worthy of admiration (Codara). The reports that Renzo Codara wrote about the Volunteer Cyclists for *La gazzetta dello sport* were unstinting in their praise for the Futurists of the Battalion. Russolo was lauded as a “soldato docile, obbediente, esemplare” while Marinetti was praised for his “giocondità spensierata” and “geniale esuberanza” (qtd. Bellini 31 and 74). He was also described as a “modello di disciplina agli altri, [che] compie scrupolosamente il suo dovere ed è certamente tra i migliori soldati” (Argenti).

Upon his return to Milan in December 1915, Marinetti sought to capitalize on this unprecedented goodwill towards Futurism from the press. He immediately began a media assault with the aim of raising public awareness of his military service with the Volunteer Cyclists. The Futurists’ military service had yielded great dividends and Marinetti realized the importance in continuing to highlight his status as a soldier and veteran of the war in order to maintain the public’s favorable opinion of Futurism. He began to publish accounts of his time on the front lines and gave interviews to newspapers.³ He wrote two articles for *La gazzetta dello sport*, which appeared in January and February 1916, and also produced a manifesto, “Orgoglio futurista,” which appeared in the Futurist-aligned magazine *Vela latina* on 15 January 1916.

3. *Synthetic Theater Performances of 1916 and 1917*

Marinetti’s revised approach was most evident, however, in the “teatro futurista sintetico” tours of spring 1916, which gave performances in Vercelli, Genoa, La Spezia, Imperia, Pavia, Venice, Livorno, Lucca, Viareggio, Siena, Pistoia, Florence and Naples. At each of these events, a selection of *sintesi* was performed and Marinetti concluded the performance with a speech on his “impressioni sulla guerra.” Marinetti had come to the realization that the success of the tour would depend on his own identity as a soldier and on his ability to tap into the patriotic spirit of the audience. Emanuela Scarpellini has noted that plays with war themes were very popular in Milan from 1915, although many were appreciated for their nationalistic sentiments rather than the actual quality of the content (159). In a letter to Pratella of March 1916, Marinetti wrote that unfortunately the short plays by Pratella and Paolo Buzzi had been “*momentaneamente sacrificati*” because “fu necessario non dare che delle sintesi antitedesche e patriottiche e rappresentare almeno un lavoro di [Francesco]

³ Interviews with Marinetti appeared in the following newspapers: *Il giornale del mattino* (Bologna), *Giornale d’Italia* (Rome), *Gazzetta di Messina e delle Calabrie*, and in C. I. Raveda for *Corriere di Mantova*. Photographs of the Futurists in action were also common, e.g., *Domenica del corriere*, *Gli avvenimenti*, and *Lo sport illustrato e la guerra*.

Cangiullo e di Boccioni che non erano stati mai rappresentati” (61), demonstrating his willingness to compromise Futurism’s artistic independence in order to respond to the tastes of the public. Overall, this tour received a positive response from audiences and critics alike. Reviews of the synthetic theater tours in 1916 often refer to the audience’s behavior, not least because it was frequently in stark contrast to that which had characterized the Futurist *serate* of the pre-war and interventionist years. Commenting on the premiere of the first tour of “synthetic theater” held in Florence in March 1916, the critic Baccio Bacci observed:

Noto che la folla è migliorata: non si sono ripetute quelle ignobili becerate passatiste che deplorammo sinceramente, allorché fu data al Teatro Verdi una grande serata futurista. Allora trionfò il becerismo e udimmo soltanto il rumore di oggetti che volavano. Ieri sera no. Abbiamo ascoltato, applaudito e anche fischiato. Ma decentemente.

(101)

Although the performance was by no means met with universal approval (Novelli 102), the nature of the dissent was markedly different from that which both the Futurists and critics had come to expect. A significant factor in this newfound positivity was the fact that Marinetti was now a soldier, and that many of the patriotic *sintesi* being performed had been written by Futurist soldiers, such as Boccioni, a reality Marinetti alluded to in his *sintesi* entitled *L’arresto*. It would have been unthinkable for the audience to pelt the performers with objects, as had occurred during the first synthetic tour in 1915. As a member of the army, Marinetti could not be ridiculed as he had been when he had been merely the leader of a provocative and marginal artistic movement. Indeed, Marinetti’s status as a soldier was commented upon in reviews; one critic wrote:

Marinetti, Settimelli, Corra, Boccioni, Chiti, sono uomini di talento e di coraggio. [...] Marinetti è reduce dal fronte e vi tornerà a pagare il suo tributo di fede e di sangue. È gente che vive: con rumore, con stranezza, con segni esagerati di esistenza. Ma vive.

(Bacci 101)

The positive reception of Futurist synthetic theater continued in 1917, when there were two performances of the genre held in Florence in aid of military families. The program began with *Il dramma del futurista*, which comprised four *sintesi* by Settimelli and Corra that bore remarkably little resemblance to the enigmatic offerings of the first synthetic theater tour in 1915. As a reviewer commented, “[...] si tratta di un nuovo tentativo di teatro futurista, più accessibile alle menti ed ai gusti degli spettatori che si ostinano a rimaner passatisti” (“Gli spettacoli” 115). The four *sintesi* largely conformed to the norms of traditional dramas and appeared like short one-act plays with a clear narrative structure and traditional staging, all focusing on the figure of Italo, a

young Futurist poet and volunteer in the war.⁴ The anonymous reviewer for *La nazione* noted that the *sintesi* were “assai applaudite” and that they had “un relativo sapore futurista.” Another critic noted that they were “accettati dal pubblico con una certa simpatia” and observed that there were “poche risate ironiche e niente commestibili [...]. Il futurismo progredisce forse perché il pubblico si è un po’ più avvicinato a lui” ([no title], *Il nuovo giornale* 116). However, the Futurists were also reducing the distance between themselves and their audiences by appealing to the taste of the masses. These 1917 performances were far more focused on pure entertainment value than had been the case in previous iterations of the genre of synthetic theater, and featured Futurism’s first foray into the field of cinema, the most popular of all popular entertainment. While still featuring a war-themed program, the Futurists also addressed the public’s need for escapism. This was remarked upon by the reviewer for *Il nuovo giornale*, who wrote:

In uno spettacolo futurista tutto è interessante, anche il pubblico. Questo aveva oggi l’aria di pensare: “Su da bravi futuristi! Non siamo in vena di rissa, né di pugilati! La guerra ahimè altrove e le patate costano un po’ care! Siate voi artisti o guastamestieri, non siamo qui per combattere una battaglia letteraria, ma per ridere, sia alle vostre spalle, sia alle nostre!” I futuristi, dal canto loro, per rispondere al desiderio del pubblico, gli hanno ammannito tutta roba di primissima qualità... futurista.

(116)

4. “Artificial Optimism” and the Death of Boccioni, August 1916

In August 1916, the Futurist movement suffered a great tragedy when Boccioni died after falling off a horse during a training exercise as part of his military service. The loss of the movement’s foremost artistic talent was widely reported on in the Italian media and his dogged commitment to his military ideals garnered him enormous support and compassion, which was unknown to him during his lifetime. As had occurred with the decision to enlist in the Battalion of Volunteer Cyclists, Boccioni’s death “sotto le armi” drew praise for the “coerenza [...] in lui tra parola e azione” (“Necrologio”). Readers of reports on Boccioni’s death were reminded that once Italy entered the war in 1915, the Futurists “non hanno più sentito che una necessità, superiore e imperiosa: dare tutto alla Patria, al suo avvenire, alla sua grandezza” (Mastrigli). The critic for *Corriere della sera* wrote, “la sua vita, tra queste due milizie, quella della patria e quella dell’arte, aveva raggiunto la sua più perfetta unità” (Simoni in Crispolti 121). Boccioni’s death did not bring about a sudden fondness for his art or for Futurism, but it did mark a break from the mockery and dismissal that had

⁴ The four *sintesi* were: *I corvi* (published in *L’Italia Futurista*, 18 March 1917), *Uccidiamo il chiaro di luna* (published in *L’Italia Futurista*, 11 March 1917), *Dichiarazione di guerra* (published in *L’Italia Futurista*, 3 April 1917) and *Attacco di aeroplani austriaci*, by Settimelli only (published in *L’Italia futurista*, 10 February 1917).

characterized earlier responses to his work. As one critic remembered, “I quadri e i gessi di Boccioni [...] in Italia vengono benevolmente giudicati come opere indecifrabili d’un simpatico pazzo” (Interlandi). In fact, praise for Boccioni came in spite of his status as a Futurist rather than because of it, and there was a reluctance to engage in aesthetic judgments of his work in the wake of his death. A journalist for *La sera* claimed,

Certo non oggi si può valutare convenientemente l’opera di questo pittore, che fu artista completo nello spirito bizzarro, nei multipli atteggiamenti, nell’impulsività creatrice, nella vita esteriore. Domani forse, dopo questo sconvolgimento di valori e di idee, gli artisti ameranno e studieranno l’opera di Boccioni.

(“La tragica morte”)

Although Boccioni’s death prompted an outpouring of praise from sections of the Italian media, Marinetti’s own attitude to commemorating Futurism’s war dead was rather different. He was fiercely opposed to the “schifosa tendenza che spinge tutti a mettersi comodamente a tavola sul corpo di un artista morto” (Marinetti and Pratella 62; letter of 20 December 1916). Instead, he argued that Futurism had to prove its continued vitality. He instructed Pratella that “*I vivi, i vivi soltanto sono sacri. Il Futurismo, malgrado l’immensa spaventosa scomparsa del povero Boccioni e di tanti altri, è più vivo che mai*” (62). Marinetti objected to special commemorative volumes and obituaries for Futurism’s fallen, as he wrote in a letter to Carli in the summer of 1917 (46). In fact, he simply marked Boccioni’s death on the front page of the periodical *L’Italia futurista* with an abstract drawing by Giacomo Balla entitled *Il pugno italiano di Boccioni* and Marinetti’s own words:

È morto UMBERTO BOCCIONI caro grande forte migliore divino genio futurista ieri denigrato oggi glorificato superarlo superarlo superarlo durezza eroismo velocità avanti giovani futuristi tutto tutto doloresanguévita per la grande Italia sgombra ingigantita agilissima elettrica esplosiva non lagrime acciaio acciaio!

(1)⁵

This insistence on positivity was nothing new for Marinetti. In the 1911 manifesto “Noi rinneghiamo i nostri maestri simbolisti ultimi amanti della luna,” he had declared the need to replace “determinismo scettico e pessimista” with “il culto dell’intuizione creativa, la libertà dell’ispirazione e l’ottimismo artificiale” (306). This “artificial optimism” sustained Futurism through the war years and it was also to define Marinetti’s attitude to an art that would be suitable for a post-war society. In an article for *L’Italia futurista* of June 1917, Marinetti was critical of *passéist* critics who were preparing for official commemorations and

⁵ The issue featured Marinetti’s tavola parolibera “Con Boccioni a Dosso Casina” and Boccioni’s “Uomo + vallata + montagna” on p. 3, an extract from Boccioni’s ‘Pittura scultura futurista’ on p. 2 and a dedication to him in an article by Carli on p. 2.

historical investigations of the war. He objected to the idea of war heroes, “i numerosissimi autentici eroi della nostra guerra” being subjected to “un bombardamento di discorsi e di statue balorde.” Instead, he believed that

L'arte del dopoguerra sarà fatta di libertà, di audacia, di entusiasmo giovanile, di velocità, di varietà di colore e di impreveduto. [...] Come è necessario ora fare con energia la guerra, senza rievocare nostalgicamente la pace passata e senza piagnucolare, con forza, tenacia e ottimismo fino alla vittoria completa, così si dovrà poi, nei relativi riposi pacifici dell'umanità, lavorare e vivere intensamente aerandosi i cervelli con sempre nuove e inattese forme d'arte ultraallegre, ultrasorprendenti e ultraspensierate, senza rievocare gli orrori della guerra.

(“Imbecilli” 1)

5. *Re-launching Futurism: The Great Exhibition of 1919*

This is the approach that dominated the “Grande Esposizione Nazionale Futurista” of 1919, which constituted the re-launch of artistic Futurism after the war. In the exhibition catalogue, Marinetti wrote that “il movimento futurista artistico, che subì durante la guerra un rallentamento forzato, riprende oggi il suo dinamismo eccitatore e rinnovatore” (144). The exhibition opened in the Galleria Centrale d'Arte in Milan on 22 March and remained there until 9 May before transferring to Genoa where it opened on 24 May for two months.⁶ The planned iterations of the exhibition in Florence and Venice never took place. In July, Marinetti told Gino Soggetti, “L'esposizione a Venezia non ha potuto aver luogo causa lo sfascimento del padiglione costruito al Lido dall'impresario Moretti.” Around the same time, Marinetti told Gerardo Dottori (a painter and one of the earliest adherents of Futurism) that the exhibition “verrà aperta a Firenze dopo le elezioni,” which took place in November 1919 (qtd. Cialfi and Pesola 35). There is no evidence, however, that this exhibition ever took place. In an article in *Roma futurista* on 4 January 1920, there is a reference to the exhibitions in Milan and Genoa but no mention of a planned event for Florence (Balla et al. 1).

By all accounts the exhibition was well attended. A critic for *Il secolo* remarked on the “enorme successo di curiosità destata dal semplice annuncio della mostra e manifestazioni coll'affluenza di una vera folla” (“Esibizione futurista”) and an advertisement in the Futurist magazine *Dinamo* claimed that the exhibition in Milan welcomed 2,000 visitors every day, of which 1,990 were “simpatizzanti intelligenti” while 10 were “critici, professori, pittori passatisti, velenosamente esasperanti” (“Alla mostra”). Press reactions to the exhibition were also on the whole very positive, based on three major factors: the Futurists' status as war veterans; their improved attitude towards the public; and the optimistic outlook of the exhibition. Marinetti told Cangiullo that he considered the exhibition to be “un trionfo grandioso” and continued: “Folla enorme,

⁶ The exhibition closed at the end of July. See “La chiusura” and Marinetti *Taccuini* 427.

entusiasmo. [...] Tutta la stampa ha marciato. Molti giornali favorevoli.”

Before considering the reaction the exhibition garnered in the press, one should examine the vision of Futurism that Marinetti wished the exhibition to embody. As Giovanni Lista has commented, the exhibition marked a “svolta fondamentale del futurismo” (179). This is true both of the Futurists who were included in the show and the works that they exhibited. Works by thirty-five Futurists were exhibited and a further nineteen were represented in the catalogue. Giacomo Balla and Russolo were the only “original” Futurist painters to be included. Others such as Francesco Cangiullo, Fortunato Depero and Sironi had joined the movement after 1912 but were active prior to the outbreak of the war in 1914. The majority of the exhibitors, however, had become affiliated with Futurism only since 1915, and in this respect the exhibition fully adhered to the vision Marinetti had had for Futurism since 1914.

Even before the war, Marinetti’s willingness to open up the ranks to new members had angered some of the movement’s original protagonists, particularly Carlo Carrà and Gino Severini (Coen 282-88). The expansion of the movement brought about a reduction in artistic quality according to those critical of Marinetti’s approach. Severini disapproved of Marinetti’s *modus operandi* during the war, writing to Pratella in August 1916 that for Marinetti “l’elemento arte, nel suo valore totale, tende a divenire sempre più piccolo mentre in me è il contrario. Questa è la chiave della nostra divergenza” (qtd. Pratella 71; letter of 23 August 1916). By June 1916, even Boccioni, Marinetti’s closest ally, had reservations about Marinetti’s strategy, writing to Pratella that “è terribile il peso di dover elaborare in sé un secolo di pittura. Tanto più quando si vedono i nuovi arrivati al futurismo afferrare le idee inforcarle e correre a rotta di collo stroppiandole” (qtd. Drudi Gambillo and Fiori 372; letter of 16 June 1916). Marinetti did not take such concerns seriously, either during the war or after it. His objective in the “Grande Esposizione Nazionale Futurista” was to present his movement as a dynamic and lively force in Italy’s cultural life. As Fabio Benzi has pointed out, “più artisti esso coinvolge, tanto più il verbo futurista risulterà vittorioso e condiviso, assorbito da ogni strato della società” (237). The version of Futurism presented in the exhibition was one both intimately connected to the war that had just ended but also one that wished to signal an independence from wartime Futurism. War themes were very prominent in the works on display and one of the “free-word” artists represented was a General in the Italian Army whom Marinetti had known during his military service. In the catalogue, Marinetti declared that Italian Futurism was “l’anima della nuova generazione che ha combattuto contro l’impero austroungarico e l’ha vittoriosamente annientato” (qtd. Crispolti 144); in an article for *Il popolo d’Italia*, he highlighted the fact that almost all of the painters had done “eroicamente il loro dovere sui campi di battaglia” (“L’esposizione nazionale”). However, absent from the roll call of the exhibition was any Futurist who had lost his life in the conflict, including Boccioni and

Sant'Elia. The message was clear: Futurism, and its members, had survived the war intact.

It would appear that Marinetti's strategy was successful. A number of articles on the exhibition presented Futurism as a movement that had been revitalized rather than decimated by the war. According to the critic D. B. for *Perseveranza*, the exhibition constituted "un voler contarsi, a guerra finita, fra i pittori avanguardisti." Although the war had killed some of them, he commented, "ne ha generati molti di nuovo." An article in *La sera* began with the triumphant statement that "La guerra è finita: i futuristi ritornano" ("La mostra di pittura futurista"). Reports responded positively to the Futurists' status as ex-combatants. An article from *Il caffaro* of 25 May 1919 summed up the prevailing response to the Futurist exhibitions. Marinetti told the journalist, P. de G., that some Futurist painters had not been able to participate in the exhibition because they were still on active duty with the Army, leading the reporter to acknowledge that "i futuristi hanno manifestato in ogni campo la loro attività battagliera" and thus he asked, "Come negare tutta la simpatia a questi combattenti di ieri?" Marinetti made sure that the Futurists' military involvement was prominently featured at the exhibitions. At the inauguration of the Milanese show, Mario Carli, a captain with the elite *Arditi* troops, gave a speech about the *Arditi*, which was applauded "alla fine con calore" ("Alla mostra futurista"). His status as a volunteer and the injuries he sustained were both highlighted in the short article. Although his judgment of the exhibition's content was negative, the journalist from the *Rivista di Milano* could not criticize the Futurists' combat record; he acknowledged that Futurism "non ha fatto che la guerra in questi ultimi anni e l'ha fatta da valoroso" ("L'esposizione futurista").

Not only did the exhibition mark a clear break with the protagonists of pre-war Futurism; it also broke with earlier conceptions of Futurist art. Paintings gave way to *tavole parolibere*, which were heavily represented in the exhibition, following a trend that Marinetti had begun during the war years. The exhibition was divided into four sections: "quadri, disegni, complessi plastici, teatro plastico"; "tavole parolibere"; "alfabeto a sorpresa"; and "architettura"; and four trends in Futurist art were identified by Marinetti: "pittura pura"; "dinamismo plastico"; "decorativismo dinamico futurista"; and "stato d'animo colorato, senza preoccupazioni plastiche" (qtd. Crispolti 144). The fact that Boccioni's beloved "plastic dynamism" constituted only one of the four trends (and listed only second, at that) is further evidence of Marinetti's desire to shift the focus from Futurism's pre-war painterly incarnations. Benzi has suggested that Marinetti's mention of a "ricerca di puri valori plastici" under the first heading "doveva suonare come una sorta di proposta di accordi" with Mario Broglio's recently launched magazine *Valori plastici*, which was "l'organo più avanzato in Europa del 'ritorno all'ordine'" (235).

Newspaper reports frequently remarked on a newfound accessibility in the

Futurist artworks, on the curiosity and interest of the members of the public and in turn of the Futurists' improved attitude towards its audience. The hostility towards the Futurists, which had been in evidence in the pre-war years, was almost entirely absent in reactions to the 1919 exhibition, a fact commented on by a number of reports. One journalist reminded readers that before the war people followed Marinetti's movement "con un sorrisetto sulle labbra" ("La mostra di pittura"), while another recalled the situation of just a few years previously when Futurists received nothing but "balorde curiosità o stupido dileggio" from the public (*Le arti*). Now, by contrast people flocked to the exhibition "in una predisposizione dello spirito di benevola, ansiosa e caparbia determinazione di comprendere, disposizione ben diversa da quella di un tempo non lontano!" ("La prima Mostra"). The public was by all accounts eager to engage with the movement. The student newspaper *La fiamma verde* confidently asserted that "il visitatore resta piacevolmente meravigliato di trovarvi, in luogo delle estavagazioni che aveva temuto, delle opere quasi tutte facilmente comprensibili" (Rebizzi), while the *Rivista di Milano* critic agreed but was less enthusiastic of the outcome, writing, "I mezzi di espressione forse nell'intenzione di farsi semplici, sono diventati poveri" ("L'esposizione futurista"). The critics were not incorrect in identifying an attempt by the Futurists to be less opaque in their artwork. This attempt in fact had been an approach advised by Marinetti in 1914 to at least one painter, Gino Severini. Marinetti had long desired that Futurism should not be "limitato a un piccolo cerchio d'intenditori" (qtd. Boccioni 131; letter of 20 November 1914). In order to achieve this, he counseled Severini to paint war-inspired paintings that would be "una espressione talmente forte e sintetica da colpire l'immaginazione e l'occhio di tutti o quasi tutti i lettori intelligenti." Anticipating Severini's possible objections, he clarified that he did not view such an approach as a "prostituzione del dinamismo plastico," although he acknowledged that the proposed new direction for Futurism would probably result in "quadri o [...] schizzi meno astratti, un po' troppo realistici e in certo modo una specie di post-impressionismo avanzato [...] e forse anche un nuovo dinamismo plastico guerresco."

On the other hand, the critic from the Genoese newspaper *Il caffaro* claimed that the visitor would be unable to understand anything of the works on view but that this inability did not matter. Finally appearing to grasp the concept of avant-garde art, he informed his readers that "per intendere un quadro non si vuole che rappresenti qualche cosa: [...] di pittura che tali cose rappresentano ce n'è tanti che non si può dar torto a questi bravi artisti futuristi che hanno finalmente il coraggio di presentarsi in diverso modo" (P. de G.). Marinetti was also praised for his availability to visitors and for his willingness to explain the artworks on display, which was a markedly different approach to that which had characterized the riotous Futurist *serate* of 1910 and 1911. Marinetti was "di una cortesia inalterabile" (P. de G.) at the inauguration of the Genoa leg of the

exhibition, moving from one room to the next, rendering the atmosphere “più movimentata” (Ang.).

In fact, references to the positive and dynamic atmosphere of the exhibition were common in reports. The critics responded well to the works on display, judging them to be an appropriate response to the three years of war Italy had just endured. An ability to understand the artwork was, in a way, less important than the viewer’s emotional response to it. The critic Ang. from *Il lavoro* was particularly impressed, writing that upon entry into the gallery “siete subito attornati da una vera ridda di colori. Vi trovate in un vortice nel quale rappresentate centro” and noting that the exhibition delivered “una sensazione di piacere. Sarà forse un piacere che non dà riposo, un godimento un po’ eccitante, ma alla fine sempre una sensazione.” The works displayed “una gioia di colori e di forme, una gaiezza decorativa, che avvolgono in una atmosfera di ottimismo il visitatore” (“L’esposizione futurista”). There was a sense among the critics that the Futurist movement, as represented by the exhibition, had tapped into the public mood in spring 1919, as Italy emerged from a state of war. According to one, Futurism “ci porta in un mondo nuovo” and another declared that “il futurismo è l’arte sola e vera che saprà imporsi domani” (Guglielmino).

6. *The Diverging Fortunes of Political and Artistic Futurism in 1919*

The almost entirely positive reaction to the 1919 exhibition must have come as something of a surprise to Marinetti. A year previously, in February 1918, in the Manifesto of the Futurist Political Party, Marinetti had taken the extreme decision to divide the movement into two distinct strands: one political and one artistic. He explained this decision, stating:

Il movimento artistico futurista, avanguardia della sensibilità artistica italiana, è necessariamente sempre in anticipo sulla lenta sensibilità del popolo. Rimane perciò una avanguardia spesso incompresa e spesso osteggiata dalla maggioranza che non può intendere le sue scoperte stupefacenti, la brutalità delle sue espressioni polemiche e gli slanci temerari delle sue intenzioni. Il partito politico futurista invece intuisce i bisogni presenti e interpreta esattamente la coscienza di tutta la razza nel suo igienico slancio rivoluzionario. Potranno aderire al partito politico futurista tutti gli italiani, uomini e donne d’ogni classe e d’ogni età, anche se negate a qualsiasi concetto artistico e letterario.

(“Manifesto del partito”)

However, in the immediate post-war period Marinetti discovered that he had misjudged the public mood. While the 1919 exhibition constituted a coup for artistic Futurism, the political wing did not experience a similar level of success. The first branch of the Futurist Political Party had been formed in Florence on 30 November 1918 and other branches sprang up in cities such as Milan, Naples, and Rome. The number of adherents to these branches was, however, very small. In February 1919, a Roman police report noted that the

membership was limited because of scarce publicity and “perché le idee stravaganti propagate dal futurismo politico non si fanno strada, specialmente nella gran massa del pubblico” (qtd. Gentile 84). While their war service and sacrifice had earned them new respectability for, and acceptance of, their cultural pursuits, both theatrical and artistic, among the public and press, the Futurists were unable to translate this changed attitude into broad support for their political ideas.

The diverging fortunes of the political and artistic branches of the movement in spring 1919 meant that already by the summer of that year Marinetti's desire to keep both aspects of the movement alive and running simultaneously was waning. After the exhibition closed in Genoa, he wrote to Dottori that “con la più energica decisione ed elasticità futurista, noi riprendiamo il movimento artistico, senza lasciarci sopraffare dall'attuale caoticissimo momento politico” (qtd. Cialfi and Pesola 35). In October 1919, Giuseppe Bottai complained that Marinetti was uncommitted to the work of the political party, writing that in Rome “molto c'è da lavorare. Marinetti però se ne infischia” (qtd. Gentile 100). However, despite this ambivalence regarding Futurism's political destiny, Marinetti was one of the three Futurists who stood for election on the Fascist list in the November 1919 elections. Mussolini's party performed disastrously, achieving only 1.72% of the vote in Milan (Berghaus 146). The election results mark a decisive turning point for Futurist political engagement. Within two months, Futurism had withdrawn from the political arena, and the Futurist Political Party was no more. In January 1920, at Marinetti's insistence, the journal *Roma futurista*, which had been the mouthpiece of the political party, ceased to engage in political affairs and dedicated itself entirely to the promotion of literary and artistic Futurism. This turn away from political Futurism defined the course of “secondo futurismo” in the 1920s and 1930s. The Futurists' active participation in Italy's war effort on the front lines had an enormous impact on the direction of the movement in the post-war period. Marinetti and his followers moved towards the cultural mainstream, culminating in Marinetti's appointment to the Accademia d'Italia in 1929. In fact, the end to Futurism's marginalization within Italy's cultural marketplace began during the war years as they exploited their new-found identities as volunteers, combatants and veterans. The retreat into art at the beginning of 1920 was a viable possibility for Marinetti not just because of the changes in Italy's politics but also because of the positive reception the movement had garnered and cultivated among the public and the press during the years of the “Grande Guerra.”

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