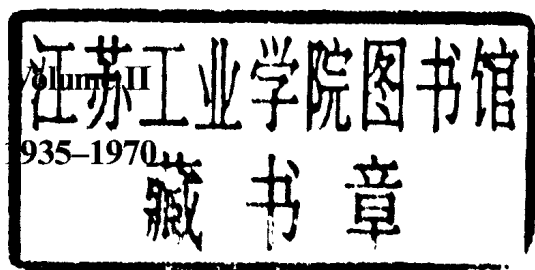




# MODERNISM

Critical Concepts in Literary  
and Cultural Studies

*Edited by*  
*Tim Middleton*



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## THE FUTURIST INTERLUDE

*Janko Lavrin*

Source: Janko Lavrin, *Aspects of Modernism: from Wilde to Pirandello*, London, Stanley Nott, 1935, pp. 183–93.

## I

What one still remembers of the hey-day of futurism (between 1910 and 1915) is mainly a series of scandals connected with futurist gatherings, exhibitions and publications. At present it would be rather difficult to point out a single futurist book or even painting (in spite of such names as Severini and Boccioni) of real significance. Yet the movement itself was significant enough. With all its warlike dilettantism mistaken for novelty, and its impudence mistaken for courage, it proved a useful and even a necessary ferment which exercised a definite influence upon the recent development of art and literature. It helped to modify the technique of the verse (particularly of the *vers libre*); it left its traces in certain aspects of modern prose (disruption of the syntax), painting, sculpture, and even in modern architecture—since Le Corbusier and other similar innovators had been anticipated by the talented futurist Sant' Elia who was killed on the Italian front in 1916.

All things considered, futurism as an independent movement may now be defunct; but a number of post-war currents bore, and partly still bear, its stamp, not to mention the new lease of life it received in the poetry of revolutionary Russia. Far from being the casual outcome of a clique, it concealed behind its extravagances a number of features which were typical of the *Zeitgeist* and which anticipated quite a few disturbing phenomena. For the root of futurism is to be sought beyond, or at least apart from, mere art. It was not so much an æsthetic as a spiritual and social manifestation. And as such it certainly deserves a retrospective scrutiny—a proceeding which can be of value only in so far as it throws some light upon larger and more important issues of the present-day inner crisis.

## II

The safest approach, in this case, is to let futurism speak for itself. Even those readers who are not familiar with the books of its founder Marinetti, can gather all its tenets from the "Initial Manifesto" attached to the catalogue of the Italian futurist paintings, exhibited in the Sackville Gallery in 1912. Here are some of them, signed by Marinetti himself.

"The essential elements of our poetry shall be courage, daring and rebellion.

"Literature has hitherto glorified thoughtful immobility, ecstasy and sleep; we shall extol aggressive movement, feverish insomnia, the double quick step, the somersault, the box on the ear, the fisticuff.

"We declare that the world's splendour has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing motor car, its frame adorned with great pipes, like snakes with explosive breath . . . a roaring motor car, which looks as though running on shrapnel, is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*.

"We wish to glorify War—the only health giver of the world—militarism, patriotism, the destructive arm of the Anarchist, the beautiful ideas that kill, the contempt for woman.

"We wish to destroy the museums, the libraries; we fight against moralism, feminism and all opportunistic and utilitarian meannesses.

"We shall sing the great crowds in the excitement of labour, pleasure of rebellion; of the multi-coloured and polyphonic surf of revolutions in modern capital cities; of the nocturnal vibration of arsenals and workshops beneath their violent electric moons; of the greedy stations swallowing smoking snakes; of factories suspended from the clouds by their strings of smoke; of bridges leaping like gymnasts over the diabolical cutlery of sunbathed rivers; of adventurous liners scenting the horizon; of broad-chested locomotives prancing on the rails, like huge steel horses bridled with long tubes; and of the gliding flight of aeroplanes, the sound of whose screw is like the flapping of flags in the applause of an enthusiastic crowd.

"To admire an old picture is to pour out sensitiveness into a funeral urn, instead of casting it forward in violent gushes of creation and action. . . . Set fire to the shelves of libraries! Deviate the course of the canals to flood the cellars of the museums! Oh! may the glorious canvasses drift helplessly! Seize pickaxes and hammers! Sap the foundations of the venerable cities!

"Look at us! Our heart does not feel the slightest weariness! For it is fed with fire, hatred and speed! . . . That surprises you? It is because you do not remember even having lived! We stand upon the summit of the world and once more we cast our challenge to the stars!"

What is as conspicuous in the quoted passages as the ideas themselves is the bombastic accent, the false rhetoric with its countless exclamation marks. Instead of power one feels in them only an hysterical "will to power" which

asserts itself through a ruthless negation, as well as through the cult of those very elements of modern life which display aggressiveness, violence, and a purely quantitative external strength—the strength of speed and of the machine. The ideas are of course second hand. So much so that it is even unnecessary to mention their sources. Yet underneath it all one can detect a few traits and tendencies worth discussing even after the span of time which separates us from the futurist manifestoes.

### III

One of such outstanding features is the brutal affirmation of the masculine as against the feminine principle in art and literature, and this is more important than it looks. For there is no doubt that both literature and art in Europe have been largely dominated (since the beginning of the romantic era) by the “feminine” impulse. Hence their anti-intellectual, that is, emotional, sensuous and “musical” character, full of refined nerves on the one hand, and of an exaggerated interest in adultery and sex on the other. Hence also the passivity of so many artists—the tender passivity of natures who are unable to cope with the hard realities and are therefore on the look-out for “ivory towers” which would shelter them from life. A kind of collective “mother-complex” seems to hover over a large area of modern sensibility, and the reaction against it on the part of the futurists has been salutary, in spite of all its extravagances.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, they have made the mistake of emphasizing the opposite, i.e., the masculine principle with an equal or even greater one-sidedness.

This in itself is enough to put one on one's guard: to make one suspect that the futurists were in essence but romantic decadents who wanted to overcome their decadence by a reversal of everything from which they themselves suffered together with their age. Herein we may find, perhaps, even an explanation of their creative poverty. For the exaggerated masculine principle in culture leads to the same sterility as an exclusive emphasis on the feminine element, and is moreover considerably less “interesting”, less subtle. And is not a negation of cultural traditions in itself a sign of fear, of impotence? Those individuals only who are unable to digest the past and to overcome it through a creative effort of their own, are likely to turn with all the greater violence against that past the more they are oppressed by its wealth. Unable to find an adequate strength to master it, they instinctively wish to turn it into a *tabula rasa*.

Such was the actual aim of Marinetti and his colleagues when they began to preach that it was enough to rebel against the traditions and destroy all *passéisme* in order to secure a great, an intense future.

## IV

The fact that futurism enjoyed a particular vogue in Italy is in itself significant, because it raises, from a wider angle, the question of cultural inheritance. Of all European countries Italy can boast of a greater cultural heritage than she is able to assimilate for her further creative efforts. Her present seems to be poor from her very wealth—the wealth of the past. While suffocating under its weight, she is still too much fascinated by it not to sponge on her past at the expense of her future. To reject such “sponging” does not mean however to reject cultural continuity. It is precisely in this context that the relationship between the past and the future becomes very complicated. But instead of facing these complications, Marinetti shirked them and made a short cut towards a brutally “simplified” type of man and of culture.

Confusing novelty with originality, and vitality with aggressiveness, he debased not only the idea of artistic creation, but also that of the human Ego, which he reduced to its primitive biological and zoological impulses. Instead of integrating the chaotic modern consciousness, he only lowered it deliberately and dogmatically. An apotheosis of the aggressive male on the one hand, and of the aggressive nation or state<sup>2</sup> on the other; the exaltation of quantitative mechanical achievements, as well as the worship of sport for its own sake, of speed and of the machine—such were the elements necessary for the futurist conception of man and life.

Like the romantics of old, the futurists too indulged in simplifications, but whereas the romantics fled (from a hated present) back to the past, the futurists volunteered for an “intensified” future. Their cry for speed—for a greater and greater speed—and their chase for novelty was also prompted by a hectic desire to escape from the present. A further analysis shows that the very essence of futurism contains a romantic kernel, in spite of its surface negation of all romantic elements. It is largely based on Bergson’s irrational idea of “flux” and of “creative evolution”, interpreted in a purely external mechanical way, as the St. Vitus dance of modern speed.

Art itself was identified by Marinetti as speed and novelty. But as each novelty can only be momentary in a life looked upon as speed, such an idea of art actually abolishes art and substitutes for it something entirely different. Besides, when it comes to artistic creation, the futurists only illustrate through their works their own ready-made theories of art. Moreover, like the æsthetes they confuse the plane of art with the plane of life, but from the other end: if the æsthetes wanted to impose art upon life, the futurists were even more anxious to impose life upon art by means of mixing up both. In a manifesto signed by the principal futurist painters we read the following declaration:

“With the desire to interpret the æsthetic emotions by blending, so to speak, the painted canvas with the soul of the spectator, we have declared that the latter *must in future be placed in the centre of the picture*. . . . If we

paint the phases of a riot, the crowd bustling with uplifted fists and noisy onslaughts of cavalry are translated upon the canvas in sheaves of lines corresponding with all the conflicting forces, following the general law of the picture. These *force-lines* must encircle and involve the spectator so that he will in a manner be forced to struggle himself with the persons in the picture. . . . The public must also be convinced that in order to understand æsthetic sensations to which one is not accustomed, it is necessary to forget entirely one's intellectual culture, not in order to *assimilate* the work of art, but *to deliver one's self up to it heart and soul.*"

## VI

Such a confusion of art and life on the part of the futurists is, however, trifling if compared with their ominous substitution of mechanical civilization for culture. Owing to Oswald Spengler's cheap generalizations (in his *Decline of the West*), the distinction between the two is now a commonplace, although it was first made, not by Spengler, but by the German savant F. A. Wolf (of Homeric fame) at least a hundred years before him. Spengler's conclusion that after its period of maturity each culture is bound to pass into mere civilization, can be replaced with a greater amount of logic by the statement that culture and civilization co-exist as two complementary and yet antagonistic factors (like soul and body in an individual); and that the aforementioned transition takes place only when the balance between the two has been destroyed by a much too accelerated development of the purely mechanical factors of life. Now the problem our age has to face is not Spengler's dogmatic fatalism, but the question as to whether there are any means and ways of *consciously* regulating, or restoring, that balance between the elements of culture and of civilization, which in less complicated ages took care of itself unconsciously. Such a problem becomes urgent, since both America and Europe have practically destroyed culture by an excess of external mechanical civilization run amok.

What then can be more indicative than the attempt of the futurists to transfer the whole of art and literature from the plane of culture to the plane of such a civilization! The attempt was new in its deliberateness and intolerant exclusiveness. Apart from this, however, they have added nothing new to our inventory. Even their "new" poetry, glorifying the machines, masses and factories, can be found long before them—in Walt Whitman. Whatever elements the futurists may have taken from Whitman, that inwardness of his which Jules Romains blended (in his *unanimité*) with an almost mystical conception of the group-soul, was inaccessible to them. On the other hand, the ecstatic worship of speed and of the machine has actually degenerated, with some of them, into a kind of sentimentality in which the picturesque groves, shepherds and nightingales of old are replaced by power-plants, airmen and factory whistles.

Speed has already been turned into a religion. The next step will be to deify the Machine and find in it a substitute for God (O'Neill's play, *Dynamo*, echoes such fetishism). And to crown it all, a few years ago Marinetti even founded in Italy a "Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Machines". Its highly laudable object seems to be to watch that "poor old machines", which are no longer able to earn their living, should not be treated in the same rough way in which their human operators are usually treated, once they have reached the same age and the same degree of decrepitude.

However grotesque this touch may be, it shows that futurism itself has become senile and a matter of the past.

### Notes

- 1 The most remarkable switch in the direction of the "masculine" impulse is noticeable in the literature of the Soviet Russia.
- 2 A few ingredients of futurism can also be traced in the Italian *fascismo*.

# THE FUNCTION OF THE NOVEL

*Philip Henderson*

Source: Philip Henderson, *The Novel Today: Studies in Contemporary Attitudes*, London, John Lane/The Bodley Head, 1936, pp. 13–52.

By the contemporary novel I mean the post-war novel. Taking this as my principal field of enquiry, I have tried to show what some of the more active minds of the present time are thinking and feeling in different countries and the changes that are taking place in the attitude of writers to their work. Since these attitudes are, it is maintained, traceable not so much to technical and æsthetic considerations as to beliefs arising out of the particular kind of social life a writer shares with his audience, my object has been to discover to what extent these beliefs are determined by the writer's position in relation to the society of his time.

Historical criticism has, to some extent at least, always recognized the social roots of culture. But of more recent years, by isolating for analysis the mental states to which literature gives rise, all the emphasis has been shifted from environment to the individual consciousness. As a result criticism has retired from the world at large to the 'inner world' of the psychiatrist's consulting-room and the novel itself has come to be regarded as primarily a form of self-analysis. 'Many, including myself,' writes Mr. Bonamy Dobrée of modern writers, 'are in the position of the sick man (though not too unhappy about it, and by no means bed-ridden), and moreover, are not prepared to pay the price our cure would require'.<sup>1</sup> This is a significant admission, for the mental sickness of the individual can only be a reflection of social ills, and it is the price of curing those ills that many modern writers are not prepared to pay. Hence, they dare not look too closely at social reality lest it lead them to unwelcome conclusions. Their art being based, therefore, upon compromise and evasion, however brilliantly they may juggle with their unresolved perplexities, can never achieve greatness, and will give the effect, like so much writing today, of unnecessarily prolonging a life that has lost all genuine vitality and significance. The patient, we are told, is 'by no means bed-ridden'. Indeed, he is very busy. But nothing he does has much meaning,

either to himself or to anyone else, because he has lost touch with the basic realities of the world which sustains him.

The reading public is itself a sluggish thing and for the most part goes to books to have its familiar feelings confirmed. Hence the great popularity of such writers as Galsworthy, Wells, Hugh Walpole, J. B. Priestley and Charles Morgan. Great novels, however, such as *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Way of all Flesh*, and *La Condition Humaine*, show an uncomfortable tendency to question everything that most of us take for granted, by plunging us at once into those abysses which underlie the facile generalizations of daily life. They are great because they go on where Galsworthy, Wells, Walpole &c. stop short, exploring the most intimate and painful issues of life with a passionate intensity. The function of more mediocre writers, on the other hand, is to keep life on the safe dead level which most people have got used to and which the inertia of custom persuades them is the right way of life for all decent and law-abiding citizens. As far as possible such people avoid looking at anything unpleasant.

It is maintained that the purpose of the most vital novel is and always has been to change mankind, and through mankind society. And so in a tragic and revolutionary age like our own, when politics have so largely superseded the problems of ethics and religion in most active minds, it is only to be expected that the change aimed at by our most vital novelists should be a political one.

If it be objected that this is to make the novel an instrument of propaganda, I would reply that, at a time like the present, so it should be; but whether the novelist will produce a political tract or 'a work of art' will depend on the extent to which his political convictions have become assimilated into his general outlook. In a sense, of course, all art, which comes into being through the resolution of a conflict in the author's mind, will be 'propaganda' for what he believes in and holds most worth while. It will, in fact, be 'propaganda' for a certain attitude to life. It may be crude propaganda, in which case it will be bad art, or it may be subtle, but it still remains 'propaganda' in the widest sense of the term. A writer's work may be in no sense polemical, but it will nevertheless only be significant in so far as he has a point of view, and in so far as he brings his world-attitude, the sum total of his experience, to bear upon the particular fragment of his experience that forms his immediate theme.

Hence I take it that there cannot be such a thing as a purely detached and impartial book. Everyone must believe in something, otherwise there would be no point in living at all. What a man writes will be modified by what he believes, and having got so far it will be almost impossible to say where detachment and objectivity end and 'propaganda', in its more subtle and insidious form, begins.

Our chief interest in criticism, therefore, turns out to be a consideration of the 'ends' to which any writer leads us, and only secondarily the 'means'



which he employs, although on further investigation it appears that the latter is only another aspect of the former. When we come to look at literature in this way, it will be found that form cannot be so readily distinguished from content, for an author's treatment, method, or 'aesthetic', proceeding from his general viewpoint, will directly determine the choice and selection, and therefore the form, of his material. We see, therefore, that the usual distinction between form and content, means and ends, is false, for one could scarcely exist without the other. In the same way, a consideration of the 'aesthetic' of a work, isolated from its general ideological content, will be equally barren, for there can be no essential division between literature as art and literature as social experience.

'The great writer,' observes Granville Hicks, 'has always been wholly and unmistakably of his age, and, by mastering it, has left something of value for succeeding ages. We demand of a writer that he honestly confront the central issue of our age.' And the central issue of our age is that of a society divided against itself in the struggle of capital and labour, the class-struggle, which, in the last resort, is the struggle between fascism and communism. The present era is simply a vast stage on which this fight is being fought to a finish. Writers who imagine that they are above the battle, that they are writing for 'society as a whole', are deceiving themselves, for in a class society there is no such thing. All a writer can do is to address that particular class in society to which he belongs, or to whose interests he has allied himself, and in doing this he will inevitably find himself in one camp or the other. Impartiality will only mean that, for all practical purposes, he is supporting the *status quo*.

When his class is performing a progressive rôle in history, as the middle-class still was in the earlier nineteenth century, a writer such as Balzac, who expressed with such abundant energy both the decline of the aristocracy and the aspirations of his class in the world of business, will tend to be altogether more vital than such a writer as Proust, who came at a time when the same class was in a relative state of decline. In his *Comedie Humaine*, Balzac set himself to tell, as he said, 'the story of social relations. Not fabricated facts, but what is going on everywhere'—a tradition carried on by Zola, who fought the obscurantist romanticism of the decadent Second Empire with a more scientific and methodical naturalism. In his *Recherche du Temps Perdu*, which Edmund Wilson describes as 'the Heartbreak House of capitalist civilization', Proust is only interested in what goes on inside his own mind. For that reason he is superior to Balzac and Zola in self-conscious analytical power, his work deriving from the infinite refinements of a sick sensibility, as he is inferior to them in his grasp of the realities of the external world.

Today the tendency is to take the attitude of Proust still further, for literature to become still more abstracted and introspective, to fly to the past, the future, to fantasy—anywhere, in fact, rather than honestly face 'the story of social relations . . . what is going on everywhere'. It is precisely this attitude of evasion that is responsible for the present devitalized condition of the