Modern Italian art was born in 1909. In that year, F. T. Marinetti published the founding manifesto of the Futurist movement and Giorgio De Chirico painted *Enigma di un pomeriggio d’autunno* (*Enigma of a Fall Afternoon*), the first example of metaphysical art. The new course of Italian art was thus inaugurated by Marinetti, in the theoretical and literary field, and De Chirico, in the pictorial field, although each had broader interdisciplinary and ideological tendencies. At the same time, they created—or, at least, synthesized in exemplary fashion—two fundamental directions of modern culture: the avant-garde and its opposite; on the one hand, the abolition of the past, which exalts the progress of History, and on the other a melancholic awareness of modernity, which is lived as a crisis and a loss of traditional values. This peculiar coincidence, which through a complementary relationship both joins and separates the two founders of modern Italian art, invites reflection on the existential itineraries of both. Both Marinetti and De Chirico found themselves involved in a specifically Italian problematic. Their individual ways of conceiving of modernity and modern culture were born first of all as reactions to the mythic image of Italy that had been forged by the Risorgimento. The traumatic experience of living their own Italianness can be found at the heart of their choices. Italian by language and culture but born abroad, neither had any concrete knowledge of the Italian reality at the beginning of the century. Marinetti’s parents, like the parents of De Chirico, instilled in their children the pride of being Italian: they belonged to the culture of a country rich with an immense artistic glory and a unique history in the world—a history that, from the Roman empire to the spiritual empire of the Catholic Church, made Italy the most active center of Mediterranean and European civilization throughout the centuries. Furthermore, it was a country that had become reborn as a result of the Risorgimento, the achievement of political unity and the establishment of nationhood. The word “Risorgimento,” which has practically the same meaning as the word “Rinascimento” (“Renaissance”), evokes all the
mythology elaborated by nineteenth-century Italian culture in its anticipation of a new, glorious destiny. Giuseppe Mazzini had prophesied that, after the Rome of the Caesars and the Rome of the Popes, there would be a “third Rome” capable of producing a new “civilizing unity”; Italy would carry out once again its mission of fostering civilization in Europe and in the world.¹ Both Marinetti’s and De Chirico’s parents belonged to the generation which had seen the successful completion of Italian national unity. The myth of the Italian Risorgimento was still very much alive at the end of the last century when the adolescent Marinetti and De Chirico completed their educations. The De Chirico family lived in Volos, Greece; the Marinetti family in Alexandria, Egypt. In both cases, a restricted colony of Italian expatriates kept alive the cult of the mother country, with the image of an Italy faraway not only in space but also in time. They had no direct experience of the Italian reality of the time, such as the misery that reigned in the countryside, the sterility of the political debate, or the incapability of building a national literary and artistic culture; they cultivated instead an ideal image of Italy, cherished through books, myths, and memories. For instance, a photograph taken of the De Chirico brothers during their childhood shows them together with their father and surrounded by men attired in the glorious red shirts of the Garibaldini, the followers of Giuseppe Garibaldi, the Hero of the Risorgimento (figure 1).² In his memoirs, Marinetti said that when he was a child his mother used to bring him to the far end of the wharf of the Alexandria port, which was built by the Romans. Pointing to the horizon, she would tell him that beyond the sea was Italy.³ Perhaps she also showed him the planet Venus, the first evening star, which appears when sunlight fades, telling him that this was “the star of Italy.” Esperia, the land of sunset, was also included among the Risorgimento’s myths. Starting with Homer, the Greeks had referred to Italy in this way; the name “Esperia” means “the land found to the West, in the direction where Esperos, the first star of the evening, appears.” The secret society founded by the heroic Bandiera brothers was named Esperia. Hesperus was Marinetti’s first literary pseudonym, adopted for his French writings in the newspaper of the College of the Jesuits of Alexandria. How could such an ideal and poetic image of Italy survive its encounter with reality? Studying the existential itinerary of the two young men gives insight into the separate responses that each gave to the question.

The young De Chirico completed his education in Munich, the European capital of Hellenistic studies at that time, and began to paint in Florence, the city of the Renaissance. His formative years were governed entirely by the study of the past. The discovery of the real Italy, the one that Alphonse de Lamartine had outrageously called a “cemetery” of historical fossils, provoked in De Chirico a profound melancholic uneasiness. Italy appeared to him as a museum where time was frozen, where the glorious urban centers of the Renaissance—such as Ferrara and Urbino—were nothing more than “cities of silence,” as Gabriele D’Annunzio had formulated them. His metaphysical paintings reveal his stupefied gaze toward Italian reality. Depicting the Palazzo Carignano in Turin and the statues of
Figure 1. The Young Giorgio and Andrea De Chirico with a group of Garibaldini, Volos, Greece, 1897 (reprinted from Maurizio Fagiolo dell’Arco et al., *De Chirico*. [Paris: Éditions Chêne-Hachette, 1981], 9).
Cavour and the King of Italy, De Chirico commemorated the Risorgimento but treated it like an inert museum exhibit, an idea or fact long before consigned to history.

Marinetti’s conception of the past resulted from a very different process. Marinetti completed his education in Paris, at that time the European capital of artistic and literary experimental research, and began to write in Milan, the most modern city in Italy. Between Paris and Milan, Marinetti became immune to the cult of the past and extremely receptive to the new myth of modernity. Paris had a revolutionary tradition, and Milan had become the capital of eighteenth-century Italian culture and, with the advent of the Enlightenment and of lay thought, a factor of progress and of civil modernity. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Lombard city was still the epicenter of Italian culture, due to the Scapigliatura, Divisionism, and the industrial growth that ushered in the modern era. Marinetti’s refusal of an Italy still subjugated by the rhetoric of the Risorgimento and by the myth of past splendors is, thus, understandable. The theme of his first book of poetry, *La Conquête des Etoiles* (*The Conquest of the Stars*) published in Paris in 1902, is that of a long assault directed by the sea waves against the stellar sky. The destruction of the stars metaphorically translates the will to destroy the old sentimental and ideal world which, as impressed upon him by his mother, was no longer justified by historical reality. The book finishes with the poet’s departing kiss to the last “dying star,” a direct allusion to the “star of Italy.” Marinetti thus rejected the illusory image he had assimilated in his youth, that of the Italy of the Risorgimento, crowned with the star of a glorious destiny. *La Conquèt de Etoiles* announces in this way the most secret contents of Futurism; its founding manifesto proposes as a conclusion a new “challenge to the stars,” the demand to create a novel beauty and a new glorious destiny for Italy, without resorting to the rhetoric of past greatness.

Marinetti reacted against the spirit of the Risorgimento in its celebration of the most stale commonplaces of the mythic Italy of the past. Yet he belonged to a generation aware of the fact that the Risorgimento had not been completely accomplished. Having attained political unity, Italy had become a nation, but it did not have a single united culture. Massimo D’Azeglio had summed up, in one famous peremptory sentence, the impending task of post-Risorgimento intellectuals: “Having made Italy, now we must make Italians.” But how? The evocation of the “history of the homeland” could play this edifying role, according to Giuseppe Mazzini, by giving to Italians the awareness of being a single people, and by inciting them to reawaken in themselves the moral, ethical, and creative virtues of their ancestors. The culture of unified Italy would have to come from the evocation of the great figures and heroic deeds of the past: Dante and Beatrice, Il Carroccio, Ettore Fieramosca, The Council of the Ten of the Venetian Republic, Raffaello, Michelangelo, Muzio Scevola, Orazio Coclite, the Oath of Pontida, and so on. These commonplaces were still present in turn-of-the-century Italian culture—both in poetry, from Giosuè Carducci to D’Annunzio, and in painting, from Gaetano Previati to Camillo Innocenti. Marinetti, however, posed the
problem in a completely different way. Proclaiming the urgency to construct first of all the *modern* cultural identity of Italy, his invention of the avant-garde derived from a single, obsessive idea, which can be defined as “a mythology of the future.” Italy’s glorious past was, by then, a paralyzing factor for artists and poets. They needed to kindle their energies. A new and modern Italian culture could not be born unless they freed themselves from the yoke of the past.

Marinetti elaborated this principle in successive stages between 1904 and 1909, founding the review *Poesia* and introducing Symbolism and free verse to Italy in order to modernize Italian literature and free it from provincialism. The progression toward Futurism came about coherently and according to a constant dynamic. For the launching of the review *Poesia*, Marinetti wrote a manifesto in which he paraphrased Marx: “Idealists, workers of the mind, unite to show how inspiration and genius go hand in hand with the progress of the machine, the hot air balloon, industry, commerce, the sciences, and electricity.” Just a few months later, the review published “A l’automobile” (“To the Automobile”), a poem which exalted speed. At the end of 1906 Marinetti used the word “avanguardia” for the first time, and the terms “moderno” and “modernità” appeared in 1908 in the critical articles of Paolo Buzzi published in *Poesia.* The following year Futurism was born, a revolutionary doctrine founded on the “abolition of the past,” according to Giovanni Papini’s formula. Marinetti called for the burning of museums; he later explained that this proclamation, which scandalized all of Europe, was a propaganda slogan necessary for Italy and referring specifically to the Italian situation. The violence of the Futurist manifesto served to rouse the Italian cultural and artistic circles still resting on the laurels of old prestige. It was this principle so lucidly vindicated by Marinetti that Guillaume Apollinaire referred to when defining the Futurist spirit as “antitradition,” and in doing so he retrospectively gave to it the global meaning of an attitude implicit in all of the modern avant-garde. In reality, by reacting to the particularity of the Italian context, Marinetti was able to radicalize his message to the point of giving it the dimension of a new mythology. Unlike so many theoretical texts on art that strive banally to define a poetics of creation, the Futurist manifesto was a revolutionary call, armed with a true rhetoric of aggression toward bourgeois tastes and of war against the past. The innovation was absolute and destined to inspire in many artists the determination to throw themselves into the battle for the avant-garde. For example, Marinetti’s 1911 leaflet “Schiaffi, pugni e quadri futuristi” (“Futurist Slaps, Punches, and Paintings”) was imitated by the Russian Futurist manifesto “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste” published one year later.

This same warlike rhetoric is found in the February 1910 “Manifesto dei pittori futuristì” (“Manifesto of the Futurist Painters”). In the style of a political manifesto, the text begins with a direct call, “Agli artisti giovani d’Italia!” (“To the young artists of Italy!”). There exist no other examples of texts on art that begin in this way, as peremptory invitations to battle and to action. The manifesto continues by explaining the reason for revolutionary tension:
We are sickened by the vile laziness that, from the sixteenth century on, has forced our artists to live on the incessant exploitation of ancient struggles. For other peoples, Italy is still a land of the dead, an immense Pompei, white with sepulchers. Italy is instead being reborn, and an intellectual resurgence is following its political resurgence.11

In order to understand that the Risorgimento was not only the historical antecedent but also the direct font of strategic and ideological inspiration for Futurism, one has only to reread the manifestos and the calls of Mazzini and of Garibaldi directed “to the Italian people.” Not only the revolutionary rhetoric, but even the fundamental political ideas of Marinetti’s agenda, such as anticlericalism and the abolition of the monarchy, came from the epic of the Risorgimento. Futurism took up again the strategies of action, the national mythology, and the political ideals of the left-wing Risorgimento intellectuals.

The phrase “land of the dead,” as quoted in the “Manifesto dei pittori futuristi” deserves further investigation. In a leaflet published the same year, Marinetti also wrote that Italy, the “land of the dead,” would soon become the most alive country on earth, thanks to Futurism.12 This idea is present, directly or indirectly, in many other Futurist texts: in the 1930s, a Futurist review published in La Spezia was called La Terra dei vivi (The Land of the Living); in 1924, on the occasion of the First Futurist Congress, Luigi Pirandello praised the activist genius of Marinetti, defining him as “a living Italian”; and previously in “Fondazione e Manifesto del Futurismo” (“Founding and Manifesto of Futurism”) Marinetti had addressed “all the men alive on earth.” Why this pleonasm? The expression “land of the dead” referred to the famous controversy provoked, both in Italy and in France, by Lamartine’s Dernier chant du pélérinage d’Harold (The Last Canto of Harold’s Pilgrimage, 1837). Having contemptuously compared Italy to a cemetery, Lamartine was challenged to a duel and wounded on the arm by Guglielmo Pepe. After many other polemic reactions, including a writing by Félicité de Lamennais and a satirical poem by Giuseppe Giusti, the controversy of Italy as “land of the dead” had induced Mazzini to entitle one of his books Scritti letterari di un italiano vivente (Literary Writings of a Living Italian, 1847). Garibaldi preferred instead to reciprocate Lamartine’s offense by remarking that in the French language exceptional people are called “les grands hommes” (“great men”) because France had always been a “terra di piccoli” (“land of the little”). Openly assuming the terms of this famous polemic which spanned the entire Risorgimento era, Marinetti indicated his will to provoke the “reawakening” of the Italians, and to instill a new life in Italian culture. Even from this point of view, the progression toward Futurism came about coherently and according to an intensive dynamic. Immediately following the launching of the review Poesia, Marinetti announced a “competition for Italian poetry.” Several months later he promoted the inquiry on “free verse” which intended to rid the young Italian poets of Classicism. In the following years he also established an award for the best “critical study” of the works of Giovanni Pascoli and then announced two more competitions, one for a book of poetry, the other for “an unpublished Italian
novel.” The natural consequence of this cultural activity, as he later explained, was an outpouring of Futurist action:

After having worked for six years on my international review *Poesia* in order to free the dying Italian lyrical genius from the chains of tradition and mercantilism, I suddenly felt that articles, poetry, and polemics were no longer enough. There was an absolute need to change methods, go into the streets, attack the theaters, and come to blows in the artistic fight.\(^\text{13}\)

In this exegetic perspective, the founding manifesto of Futurism has the same value for Italian culture at the beginning of the twentieth century that Mazzini’s “Manifesto della Giovane Italia” (“Manifesto of the Young Italy”, 1831) had for the previous century.\(^\text{14}\) In both cases, the idea became a moral imperative, and the theoretical speculations resulted in action. This revolutionary struggle initiated by Futurism was not devoted solely to the advent of the new Italy but also to the promotion of a superior civilization in all of Europe. It was in the name of “the religion of the future” that Marinetti, like Mazzini, called Italy to carry out once again its previously established civilizing mission.

Historically Futurism sprang from the will to bring the Risorgimento to its completion, creating the necessary conditions for the development of modern Italian culture. This explains why it was not a mere literary cénacle or an artistic tendency illustrated by the works of a group of creators. The “arte–azione” (“art–action”) of Marinetti was a direct descendant of the “pensiero–azione” (“thought–action”) of Mazzini. From the very beginning, Marinetti conceived of Futurism in the same way that Mazzini had theorized “associationism” for the Giovane Italia. A nucleus of militant Futurists would act in every Italian province, driven by the sole purpose of “putting Italy into revolution,” according to Mazzini’s formula. At the same time, the Italian revolution would be exported, since Futurism was first of all a belief, an ideology that Italy would propagate in all of Europe. Marinetti wrote his “Discorso futurista agli inglesi” (“Futurist Speech to the English,” 1910) and his “Proclama futurista agli spagnoli” (“Futurist Address to the Spaniards,” 1910) with the same spirit in which Saint Paul wrote his letters to the Corinthians or to the Romans. The conferences that Marinetti untiringly held everywhere—from London to Berlin, from Paris to Moscow—were thus a sort of apostolic mission. This international militantism can also be compared with the Romantic behavior of Garibaldi, who fought in France and Uruguay. Marinetti indicated to every nation the specific defects from which they had to free themselves in order to attain the active vision of the world and of the human condition that constituted the Futurist idealistic religion. The ecumenical impetus of the founder of the Futurist avant-garde was the natural instinct of an Italian born of the Roman and Christian civilizations which permeated all of European culture with their values.

It is impossible to study Futurism without taking account of its profoundly Italian nature.\(^\text{15}\) Other cultural phenomena of the avant-garde—like the formalist tendency that derives from French Symbolism or the deconstructive thought that
prevails in the Dadaism of the late 1910s—are also present in Futurism, but only as subordinate or occasional components. The Futurist doctrine was in reality the generous ideology of a pledge aimed at encountering the world enthusiastically, in order to find in modernity the reasons for a new idealism. Futurism owes much to its Italian birth: for example, its having been the first to outline, in the artistic domain, the theme of the body-machine as a new anthropological given inherent to the man of industrialized civilization. The theories of Karl Marx, who had posed the above problem in a chapter of *Das Kapital* (1867), had been at the center of a debate that, in countries other than Italy, was formulated in terms that were purely political. But in Italy, homeland of Humanism and of the Renaissance, it was impossible that the theme of confrontation between man and machine, between the mechanical and the organic would not spill over into the domain of art. It was in the same way, by reactive implication with the characteristics of Italian culture, that Futurism was able to produce its best revolutionary innovations. The "musica dei rumori" ("music of noises") came out of the homeland of the "Bel Canto" just as the "parole in libertà" ("words in freedom") were called for in the land that spawned the incurable rhetoric of Arcadia. The country with the richest artistic past in the world had to create Futurism as an ideological dimension of the avant-garde; the nation which had lived through the Risorgimento was bound to invent "arte-azione," which would bring about the modern unitary culture of the Giovane Italia.

For Marinetti, as for all the Futurists, "antitradition" was the means of bringing about a new Italian culture. This ideology of the modern had precedence over any formal concerns. As a result, present-day students of Futurism are often puzzled by the diversity of their formal experiments. What exactly is the relationship between the post-Dadaist poetry of Farfa (Osvaldo Tommasini) and the neo-Primitivist compositions of Giacomo Giardina, or between the lyrical abstractions of Leandra Angelucci-Cominazzini and the mechanical art of Ivo Pannaggi, or between the artisan wood sculptures by Umberto Peschi and the aluminum forms created by Thayaht (Ernesto Michahelles)? Perhaps none, except for the fact that all of these poets and artists was convinced that they were working towards a new Italian literature and art. Each one of the Futurists was well aware that they were carrying out a mission of renovating Italian culture, and such an awareness gave Futurism its unitary character. As an object of historiography, Futurism exists in virtue of its name; as a body of works or of theoretical texts, it can be determined solely in relation to a label, by dint of the distinctive power of a trademark affixed to the diverse creations of Marinetti's followers. The genius of the founder of Futurism lay in his recognition that in the beginning was the word, since only the name produces the effective existence of things. He thus knew how to impose from the very beginning, even before the creation of pictorial or literary works, the doctrinal label of "Futurism." He had the words "Futurist movement" printed on the official documents sent to the newspapers and on the stationery he used. He also asked the Futurists to indicate always their belonging to the Futurist movement when they signed their names, just as he had seen the
Jesuits of his childhood do. The adjective “Futurist” added to the signed or printed autograph was thus the equivalent of S. J. (for “Society of Jesus”) that the Jesuits add to their name.

The impact that these innovations would have on the European avant-garde is perfectly documented, even in France, the country renowned for the most narrow-minded chauvinism in the world. In March 1919, while introducing the painters of his gallery in the Italian review Valori Plastici, Léonce Rosenberg wrote:

The origin of the word Cubism dates from 1908 and was used for the first time at the jury of the Salon des Indépendants, at the moment when a canvas by Georges Braque was passing by. A jury member exclaimed: ‘Still more cubes! Enough cubism!’ The word, picked up by a journalist, became popular the whole world over.16

A vaguely similar thesis is present still today in the didactic panels of the Musée Picasso in Paris. These false, mean-spirited fantasies result from the superiority complex from which the protagonists of French Culture have always suffered. In reality, only the expression “des cubes” had been used, in an analytic way, in reference to a painting by Braque. Historically, the word Cubism appears for the first time, in quotes, in an article by Charles Morice published in the Mercure de France in April 1909, two months after the publication of the founding manifesto of Futurism on the front page of Le Figaro. A year later in May 1910, when the “Manifesto dei pittori futuristì” came out in French in Comoedia, the impression made by such an explicit ideological claim was even greater. This Futurist manifesto was the very first theoretical text on modern art published in France in those years. Until then, known only by a few friends, the research of Braque and Picasso was not supported by any theoretical stance. The enunciation of a theory of art was instead normal practice for the Futurists, because for them ideology was supposed to precede the formal work of creation. The arising Cubism conformed immediately to the Italian example, confronting the problem of a theoretical codification of formal experiments, as Jacques Villon remembered: “Until 1910, I painted as the bird sings, without preoccupation.”17 But it wasn’t only the theoretical enunciation that accounted for the novelty of Futurism. Imitating the Italians, Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger immediately wanted to form the group of “Cubists” which had their first appearance in April 1911, with the support of Apollinaire, in their own room at the Salon des Indépendants. Until then Cubist painting had existed only in the obscure solitude of the workshops and in the private intimacy of the rare encounters of the artists at Bateau Lavoir in Montmartre, or in the Villon house at Puteaux. Cubism had remained tied to the normal and traditional conditions of cultural work that obliged the artist to produce art while hoping for success. In this way, the artist’s existence as a creator was precarious, in constant struggle with the void and with isolation, since only success gave him social recognition. By contrast, a group of artists that names itself ideologically, signing a collective manifesto published in the newspapers, instead obliges the social body to recognize it, since its existence is
not in question. There is no longer any waiting for social recognition, since the group imposes its presence and it is the public that must react. This was Marinetti’s great lesson, now adopted by the French; Gleizes and Metzinger understood immediately what it meant to have a label and to identify themselves as a group, thus vindicating their own existence even before having produced any works.

French culture elaborated many formal ideas which were later developed by Italian Futurism. Indeed, through the Franco–Italian cultural education of Marinetti, there was a real short circuit produced between France and Italy. However, the fact remains that French culture was unaware of the activist model proposed by the Italian Futurists. From Stéphane Mallarmé to the Groupe de l’Abbaye, French Symbolism had adopted the model of the Ivory Tower, that of the artist who isolates himself from the world of modern civilization. With Paul Gauguin, French post–Impressionism had invented the model of purifying regression that would influence German Expressionism, in which the artist refuses the heredity of Western culture in order to adhere to the uncontaminated expression of primitive cultures. From Arthur Rimbaud to Alfred Jarry, heterodoxy and social marginality were other typical cultural models of the second half of the French nineteenth century. The activist model was instead typically Italian, as it came from the Risorgimento heritage. In February 1912, carrying on their work of spreading into France and Europe, the Futurist group presented a collective exhibit at the Galerie Bernheim Jeune in Paris. The catalogue preface, compiled for the most part by Umberto Boccioni, was a new and more lengthy theoretical text that did not renounce the peremptory tones or the provocation of Futurist cultural agitation. French national pride reacted immediately. In the columns of the newspaper L’Action, the young critic Olivier-Hourcade published his Enquête sur le cubisme (Investigation of Cubism) aimed at showing the superiority of French painting over Italian, while Gleizes and Metzinger announced the forthcoming publication of their book Du cubisme (On Cubism). In reality, their book had not yet been written and was not printed until December of that year. Cubism—as a theoretical position and as a micro-sociological reality of a group constituted under the banner of modern art—was born only as a reaction to Italian Futurism, whose cultural model it imitated. But French chauvinism, as expressed by the arrogant and nationalist bourgeoisie of the Third Republic, refused to admit any Italian influence. The extremely negative image of Italy as a poor country and a land of emigrants provoked other similar chauvinist reactions. For example, as soon as Futurist manifestos were read in Moscow and Leningrad, Russian artists began calling themselves “Futurists,” organized soirées, and published manifestos; in short, they were taken by a new fervor, a feverish audacity and activity that was the result of the Futurist methods invented by Marinetti. All this is documented. In 1913, however, the Russian artists printed a leaflet in which, on the basis of false assertions, they claimed their Futurism existed prior to that of the Italians. In Germany, Herwarth Walden showed more subtlety. After having accompanied Marinetti in a crazy ride around
Giovanni Lista

all of Berlin, throwing Futurist manifestos from their convertible, Walden adopted the unfailing habit of ending his letters sent to the founder of Futurism in Milan with "Long live Garibaldi!". He had understood that, rather than through formal expression, Futurism could be defined primarily through the Romanticism of revolutionary action, the impetus toward the future which Futurism transmitted to all the European avant-garde.

The literary critic Camille Mauclair also understood the ideal aspirations of Italian Futurism and its link to the spiritual and cultural heredity of the Risorgimento. In an article entitled "Le Futurisme et la Jeune Italie" ("Futurism and the Giovane Italia"), published in La Dépêche de Toulouse on 20 October 1911, he wrote: "The Futurists are indignant at the fact that the entire world treats Italy as the land of the dead, where people go only for its museums and its archeological ruins." He explained that Marinetti was suddenly taking up again the hopes of Mazzini and of Daniele Manin, by wanting Italy to affirm itself as a "modern nation." He also added that Futurism had to be judged from the Italian point of view, based on the Italian situation. In other words, the activist model of the avant-garde, that is to say Futurism as it manifested itself in Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century, corresponded to the historical fate of the drive to action that was inherent in "land of the dead." The same fate had led to the actions of the heroes of the Risorgimento, from Carlo Pisacane to the Bandiera brothers, culminating in the glorious deeds of Garibaldi’s Mille: voluntarism was the extreme solution for the inertia of the Italians. In his analysis of the national Risorgimento, Antonio Gramsci wrote:

The statement that modern Italy was characterized by voluntarism is correct, but it is necessary to note that volunteering, even considering its historical merit that cannot be diminished, was a surrogate for popular intervention, and in this sense it was a solution which compromised with the passivity of the national masses.

The entire modern history of Italy is riddled by this characteristic phenomenon of political Italian culture: on the one hand, the disinterest of the popular classes and the bourgeoisie towards national reality and the destiny of the country; and on the other, the volunteer spirit of the chosen, the action of the "missionaries" who intended to stir up from on high the collective energies of the nation. The particular historical dimension of Italian Romanticism, which the Futurist avant-garde and in fact all of modern Italian culture inherited, is related to this dichotomy between idleness and activism, between national popular passivity and the role of the intellectual elite. This urgency and primacy of action are still present in the Italy of today; one has only to think about the typically Italian phenomenon of the figure of the militant critic who creates and names artistic tendencies, such as Arte Povera or the Transavanguardia, organizing exhibits and fostering cultural initiatives of all kinds.

In his seminal Storia della letteratura italiana (History of Italian Literature, 1870–71), written soon after Italy's unification, Francesco De Sanctis identified
the Italian nineteenth century as a phase of crisis and stagnation that impeded the ability of literature and artistic culture to live fully the Romantic experience. The weight of this non-assimilation of Romanticism has been discussed subsequently in various ways by art historians, from Lionello Venturi to Carlo Giulio Argan.14 However, one certainly cannot say that Italy did not live the Romantic experience: the epic of the Risorgimento was a Romantic feat. There exist no heroes more Romantic than Garibaldi, whose deed with the Mille was immediately romanticized by Alexandre Dumas in his 1861 novel Les Garibaldiens. But Garibaldi did not leave behind any Romantic writings or ideas—he merely accomplished the unification of Italy. In other words, Italian culture integrated Romanticism as action, as a confrontation with History. There were many Italian artists of the middle of the nineteenth century, including the Macchiaioli, who participated in the insurrections of the Risorgimento, joining the armed struggle and directly living the military and political experience of the attainment of national unity. That is why the Italian avant-garde was born from the activist myth rather than from formal revolution. Already in 1867, in the columns of the review Gazzettino delle Arti del Disegno (The Gazette of the Arts of Design), founded as an organ of the Macchiaioli, Diego Martelli wrote that the artists working under the emblem of the “macchia” (“stain”) wanted “to recognize each other, gather themselves into a fighting column, and march to the assault.”25 This determination to take the field, before every other artistic or formal consideration, is the same activist choice that is found, a few decades later, in the birth of the Futurist movement. It was therefore this particular dimension of the Italian Romantic experience that made the Futurists behave like Carbonari or the red-shirted Garibaldini of cultural work; it was also this aspect that made Marinetti, in his role as a “missionary” of art, see the Futurists as agitators, similar to the “living books” Mazzini had spoken about when referring to the members of the Giovane Italia.26 But it is still necessary to clarify the way in which Marinetti succeeded in modernizing this cultural model and the consequences that derived from it.

From the very beginning the Futurist movement was structured almost in the manner of a political party. On the organizational level, Marinetti was inspired by unionization and anarchic syndicalism; he even gave the Futurist movement a social seat, his apartment in Milan. Officially called Casa Rossa (the Red House), Marinetti’s Milan apartment was the equivalent, for the artists, of the Borse del Lavoro. Just as the workers of the different corporations called to assume their duty to “the moral forces of the future” (“in Georges Sorel’s words”27) met in the Borse del Lavoro, the Futurists of the different disciplines—that is to say the “artists of the future”—met in Marinetti’s Casa Rossa, in order to conspire against the passéïsm of Italian art. As in the political domain, primacy was accorded to action. Urban manifestations, leaflets, conferences, exhibits, manifestos and controversies in the newspapers, Futurist soirées at the theater, and so on, were organized, so that in every region and in every city new Futurist groups could be constituted. To create a modern Italian culture meant to construct it, by acting
personally in the fabric of historical reality. It meant to intervene in the reality of the social body, to mobilize the forces of creative youth, and to rely on provocation as an instrument of cultural agitation. It was necessary that the propagandistic gesture attain such a force of reality so as to become a historic fact, a concrete entity equal to the work. Futurism had to be a cultural insemination, a volunteer action against “the rust of the centuries” that was paralyzing Italy. The first consequence was the profound mutation of the traditional status of the artist who, no longer being a specialist professionally confined in his discipline (that is to say a consenting victim of the division of labor), was becoming a cultural entrepreneur, a revolutionary agitator, a protagonist of the political and social changes of his own time. The second consequence was the evolution of the traditional status of the work of art. The confrontation with History, destroying every reference to the values proposed by the Academy and by the Museum, cleared the path for the aesthetics of the ephemeral, for the multidisciplinarity of creation, and for the interpenetration of expressive codes. Invention and theoretic practices seemed more significant than the completed work of art. The third consequence was the birth of an artistic and cultural phenomena of national proportions, something which had not happened in Italy for more than two centuries. Futurism succeeded in fact in being unitary and national in spite of the diversity of its members’ productions. One can speak, in cultural and artistic terms, of Futurist Italy exactly as one speaks of Roman Italy, Renaissance Italy, or Baroque Italy. Founded on an ideology of action and an experimentalism open to every creative hypothesis, Futurism had an infinite amount of diverse expressions, yet constituted the first culturally unitary phenomenon of post-Risorgimento Italy.

In conclusion, it is necessary to consider the influence of the activist model of the avant-garde created by Italian Futurism. There is no doubt that the methods of active sociologism proposed by Marinetti influenced the entire European avant-garde, from the French Cubists to the Russian Cubo-Futurists, contributing in a determinant way to the birth of an experimental and revolutionary spirit. It was Tristan Tzara who took greatest advantage of that spirit. At the outset of Dadaism, in Zurich, a conflict erupted between Tzara and Hugo Ball over the choice of the cultural model to which the Dadaist group was to conform. Ball, who had adopted the practice of the Expressionist cabaret, insisted on proselytizing through dialogue and the pacific diffusion of Dadaist ideas. Tzara wanted instead a more incisive action, meaning recourse to the methods of Futurist cultural agitation. In his memoirs Dada, Ascona und andere Erinnerungen (Dada, Ascona, and Other Reminiscences), Friedrich Glauser remembered: “Tzara confessed to me that his ambition was that of ‘inventing’ a new artistic tendency, as he put it. The notoriety of Marinetti, the head of the Italian Futurists, made him lose sleep.” The resolving crisis came in May 1917, when Ball left Zurich, leaving leadership of the Dadaist group to Tzara.

Dadaism recovered from Futurism the entire expressive territory of the art of the avant-garde, from bruitism to the typographic revolution, and from multimedia assemblage to the poetry of abstract phonemes. Tzara’s first manifesto in 1916, Le
Poème bruitiste (The Noise Poem), was a literal paraphrase of the manifestos of Marinetti, Luigi Russolo, and Francesco Cangiullo. But it was only in July 1917 that Tzara—after Ball, who had created “Dadaism” as a spiritual and artistic tendency, left Zurich—decided to found the “Dada movement” by replicating the entire strategy of “cultural agitation” invented by Marinetti. He had envelopes, stationery, and post cards printed with the heading “Dada movement” and his own personal address; as in the case of Marinetti, Tzara’s residence became the operative center of the movement and he gave himself the title of “director” (see figures 2-7). This heading was used everywhere, not only in reviews, but also in the manifestos and leaflets that announced the “Dadaist soirées,” the provocative, aggressive, and violent nature of which imitated Marinetti’s “Futurist soirées.” Just as Marinetti, changing typographic rules, had written “FuTurisMo,” Tzara began writing “DaDa.” In his own writings Marinetti had used the bruitist onomatopoeia to express vital sensation in texts such as Zang tumb tumb; Tzara began repeating “bum bum.” In the Manifesto tecnico della Letteratura futurista (Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature, 1912), Marinetti had theorized crasis as a distinctive sign of a global ideology, motivating Balla to call himself “Futurballa” and to call his paintings “Futurrealtà,” “Futurmaer,” and “Futurlibecciata.” Tzara introduced crasis to Dadaism with “Dadamax Ernst,” “Dadaraoul Hausmann,” “Dadadandy,” “Dadasophe,” and “Dadamerica.” As Marinetti was accustomed to boasting about the journalistic successes of Futurism, announcing for example that one of his dramas had provoked “468 articles in print,” Tzara began writing that Dadaism was greeted by “8,590 articles in print.” With an emphasis reserved for legends, Marinetti recounted in his book Le Futurisme (1911) the epic and scandalistic character of the “Futurist soirées”; in his Chronique zurichoise (Zurich Chronicle, 1920), Tzara boasted about the “Dadaist soirée” of the Cabaret Voltaire, completely inventing the scandals and tumults which in fact never took place as they were described in the newspapers of the period. In short, it was a plagiaristic operation conducted in the basest detail. As far as the Italian activist model is concerned, Tzara was the nephew and pupil of Marinetti, who remains the authentic founder of the historical and modern avant-garde.

Tzara did not at all share the faith in the future and the ideology of progress formulated by Marinetti. However, by placing the Futurist methods of cultural agitation in the service of negativistic thought, he created an explosive mixture that would triumph by scandal in Paris, three years later. Indirectly, as Richard Huelsenbeck recognized in his book En Avant Dada: Eine Geschichte des Dadaismus (En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism, 1920), it was thanks to Marinetti that Dadaism was able to affirm itself in the French capital, thus provoking an international echo. Nevertheless, Tzara never missed an occasion to attack Marinetti, because he too refused to admit his debt to Futurism, the Italian movement which had produced the historical birth of the European avant-garde.
Mon cher Maitre,

Je viens de recevoir votre roman *Stéphanie*, que je lirai avec tout l'intérêt que mérite votre puissant génie. Merci. Merci.

Le problème social que vous agitez est de la plus haute importance. J'ai suivi les polémiques des journaux français et j'approuve entièrement votre réponse définitive sans l'intransigeant.
Il Futurismo, religione di orgoglio italiano, velocità, originalità, eroismo, amore del pericolo, ottimismo artificiale, sport e forza muscolare, guerra, pugno-argomento, arte-vita, splendore geometrico, estetica della macchina, parole in libertà, dinamismo plastico, architettura pura, teatro sintetico simultaneo, vita simultanea, tattilità, arte dei rumori, nacque nel febbraio 1909 a Milano e rinnovò il mondo.


F. T. MARINETTI
Movimento Futurista
diretto da F. T. MARINETTI
Corso Venezia, 61 - MILANO

Figure 4: Postcard used by Marinetti in 1915 (reprinted from Lista, L’art postal futuriste, 34).
Figure 5: Postcard used by Tzara in 1918 (reprinted from Hans Bolliger et al., *Dada in Zürich* [Zurich: Arche, 1985], 257).
Figure 6: Form letter with the heading “Dada movement,” used by Tzara in 1918 (reprinted from Hans Bolliger et al., Dada in Zurich, 257).
Figure 7: Letterhead used by Tzara in 1920 (reprinted from Raimund Meyer et al., Dada global [Zurich: Limmat Verlag, 1994], 245).
Giovanni Lista

Notes

1. According to Mazzini, as Rome’s heir Italy had to bring about a civilizing mission for humanity. See the chapter entitled “L’idea di Roma,” in Federico Chabod, Le Premesse, vol. 1 of Storia della politica estera italiana dal 1870 al 1896 (Bari: Laterza, 1965), 179 ff.


13. The original reads: “Dopo aver lavorato per sei anni nella mia rivista internazionale Poesia per liberare dai ceppi tradizionali e mercantili il genio lirico italiano minacciato di morte, sentii d’un tratto che gli articoli, le poesie e le polemiche non bastavano più. Bisognava assolutamente cambiare metodo, scendere nelle vie, dar l’assalto ai teatri e introdurre il pugno nella lotta artistica” (F. T. Marinetti, “Prime battaglie futuriste” [“Early Futurist Battles”], in Guerra sola igiene del mondo [War, the World’s Only Hygiene], in Teoria e invenzione futurista, ed. Luciano De Maria [Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1968], 201).


15. The organization of Futurism as a “movement” has been examined by only two scholars. In his preface to the book Teoria e invenzione futurista, Luciana De Maria proposes the German term Bund in order to define the Futurist group that based itself on the “elective affinities” of its members. This concept fails to explain the cultural roots of the phenomenon, the democratic proselytism of Marinetti, and the fact that Marinetti wanted to constitute Futurist groups in all the cities and regions of Italy, giving a national dimension to the “Futurist movement.” Glauco Viazzi, in “Il futurismo come organizzazione: tecniche e strumenti di gruppo” (“Futurism as an Organization: Group Techniques and Instruments”), Es 5 (September–December 1976): 36-60, emphasizes Futurism’s character as “political party” and its methods of propaganda used by Marinetti. It is clear that Arturo Labriola, the Marxist theorist of revolutionary syndicalism, was one of Marinetti’s most immediate inspirations, but the activist model belongs to the revolutionary culture of nineteenth-century Italy. Marinetti modernized this model, drawing on the methods of the political struggles of the revolutionary left and of the new forms of communication of mass society. Neither De Maria nor Viazzi explains the reason for Marinetti’s cultural agitation and its aim. In France, during the Third Republic, the artist was already deeply integrated into bourgeois society. Creative activity implied seeking out galleries or publishers in order to sell the product as in any commercial activity separate
from life and from History. The avant-garde culture came about in the solitude of the ateliers and in the
cénacles of the poets, from elitist sentiment and social marginality. In Italy the Risorgimento needed to be
brought to its fruition, giving a united modern culture to the country. It was this revolutionary mission that
Marinetti gave to his Futurism.

16. The original reads: “Encore des cubes! Assez du cubisme! Le mot, ramassé par un journaliste,
fit fortune et le tour du monde” (Léonce Rosenberg, “Introduzione,” Valori Plastici 1.2-3 [February-March
1919]: 3).

17. The original reads: “Jusqu’en 1910, j’ai fait de la peinture comme l’oiseau chante, sans
préoccupations” (Pierre Cabanne, L’Épopée du cubisme [Paris: La Table Ronde, 1963], 163). Like
others, Cabanne also tries to falsify history, writing that the word “cubism” was invented in the autumn
of 1908. Paul Rosenberg refers instead to the Salon des Indépendants which was held in the spring, many
months before the Salon d’Automne. Cabanne cites nothing more than the expression “des cubes” that was
used, along with the other formulae of critical analysis, by Louis Vauxcelles in the 14 November 1908 issue
of Le Gil-Blas.

18. Entitled “Les Exposants au public” (“The Exhibitors to the Public”), the text was written by
Umberto Boccioni with the help of the other Futurist painters (Futurisme, 167).


20. The manifesto, entitled “The Word as Such,” affirmed that the first Futurist work was the 1908 “A
Trap for Judges.” This work, however, is actually dated 1910 (Léon Robel, Manifestes futuristes russes, 27).

21. Walden’s letters to Marinetti are published in vol. 1 of Archivi del Futurismo, ed. Maria Drudi

22. The original reads: “Les futuristes sont révoltés de voir que le monde entier traite l’Italie comme
une terre des morts; on n’y vient que pour ses musées et ses ruines” (Camille Mauclair, “Le Futurisme et la
Jeune Italie” [1911], in Futurisme, 414).

23. The original reads: “L’affermazione che l’Italia moderna è stata caratterizzata dal volontariato è
giusta, ma occorre notare che il volontariato, pur nel pregio storico, che non può essere diminuito, è stato
un surrogato dell’intervento popolare, e in questo senso è una soluzione di compromesso con la passività
delle masse nazionali” (Antonio Gramsci, Il Risorgimento [Turin, Einaudi, 1949], 49).

24. See the writings collected by Paola Barocchi, Storia dell’arte in Italia, vol. 3 (Turin: Einaudi,

25. The original reads: “di riconoscersi tra di loro, di raccogliersi, di formarsi in colonna e di marciare
all’assalto” (quoted in Renato Barilli et al., II Secondo ‘800 italiano: Le poetiche del vero [Milan:
Edizioni Mazzotta, 1988], 124).

26. Alessandro Galante Garrone, Mazzini e gli inizi della Giovane Italia (Turin: Giappichelli
Editore, 1973), 76.

27. Giovanni Lista, Preface to F. T. Marinetti, Le Futurisme (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 1980),
13-18.

28. The original reads: “Tzara gestand mir, sein Ehrgeiz sei, eine neue Kunstrichtung zu ‚erfinden,’
wie er sich ausdrückte. Ihn ließ der Ruhm Marinettis, des Führers der italienischen Futuristen, nicht
schaffen” (Friedrich Glauser, Dada, Ascona, und andere Erinnerungen [Zurich: Peter Schifferli, 1976],
46).


30. Richard Huelsenbeck, En avant Dada: Eine Geschichte des Dadaismus (Hannover-Leipzig:
Paul Steegemann, 1920), 94.

31. Marinetti’s political ideology and his involvement with Fascism are often evoked, and wrongly so,
regarding this refusal to accord to Futurism its own founding history. One should also remember the
connection of Salvador Dalí with Francoism, Louis Aragon with Stalinism, Francis Picabia with Pétainism,
and so on (see Giovanni Lista, “Futurisme, Dada, fascisme,” Ligeia, dossiers sur l’art 15-16 [October