

Despite the fact that his early poetry was grounded in the oral rhetoric of nineteenth-century declamation, F.T. Marinetti invented a new form of visual poetry he called "words-in-freedom." This article explores ways in which oral and print characteristics meshed or clashed in the new form. The new style can be seen at least partially as visual notations for oral performance and as an attempt to unite the interior, isolated spaces of print with the exterior, social event of oral performance. This attempt failed because of the different natures of the two media and because of coding difficulties occasioned by Marinetti's ideology of presence. A reading of Marinetti's poster-poem "Après la Marne, Joffre visita le front en auto" confirms this view.

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Words-in-Freedom and the Oral Tradition

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Young European writers in the years 1900-1915 created a bewildering variety of responses to the poetry, generally termed "symbolist," of the generation that preceded them. While symbolist poetry was enormously influential in shaping the attitudes of future modernists, at the same time many saw it as "a poetry of literati . . . removed from reality" (Eruli 252). As early as 1897, writers as diverse as André Gide in his *Nourritures terrestres*, Francis Jammes in his *De l'angélus de l'aube à l'angélus du soir* and Saint-Georges de Bouhéliér in his "Naturist Manifesto" were calling for a more direct style, closer to popular concerns and natural rhythms (Romani 58-60; for de Bouhéliér see Perloff 84). The young writers no doubt had reason for this reaction. According to René Wellek, "In symbolist poetry the image becomes 'thing.' The relation of tenor and vehicle in the metaphor is reversed. The utterance is divorced, we might add, from the situation: time and place, history and society are played down" (113).

The arch-exemplar of this kind of hermeticism was Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898). For him, the poet's task was to purify language, "donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu" ("to give a purer sense to the

words of the tribe” [Mallarmé 50]). This purified and difficult language would try to express the inexpressible, the absent, the symbol, and not the thing. The poet’s task would culminate in an impossible and paradoxical project, the Book: “All earthly existence must ultimately be contained in a book” (Mallarmé 80; quoted in Wellek 115).

When Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944) inaugurated the futurist movement in 1909, he was reacting partially at least to the bookishness of symbolists like Mallarmé. Futurist poetry was to be liberated of all constraints, including Mallarmé’s cherished syntax. Marinetti devalued the word as aesthetic object, as ineffable purity, and instead insisted that words be treated as material, as weapons in a propaganda war. For Marinetti, the world was not to end up in a book, but rather the book was to end up in the world. To that end, he created a visual style called words-in-freedom. We shall see, however, that while the new style drew upon popular sources like nineteenth-century elocution, it did not entirely shed symbolist traces.

Though the early Marinetti professed great admiration for Mallarmé, the young poet was most closely associated with the less rigorous and less hermetic Gustave Kahn, who favored public declamation of a prosodically loose free-verse poetry. It was as an orator and performer of others’ poems that Marinetti first made his mark in the French and Italian literary worlds: “Marinetti began his career in 1900 as a ‘declaimer’ of French poetry on French and Italian stages, in the broad forensic style of popular elocution” (Flint 11). For the most part, he recited the great French romantic and symbolist poets: “Hugo, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Verhaeren” (De Maria: PCM XLV). But recitation did not occur solely on the stage: his memoirs mention reading aloud “the epic futurist finale of [Zola’s] *La Bête Humaine*” to himself in a small pension and reading a poem to Kahn and his family while on a picnic (Marinetti: GMSI 221, 223; Flint 318). Reading aloud was also common in some Parisian salons of the period: Marinetti recalled visiting, with Alfred Jarry, “the ornate salon of Mme. Périer where from three to eleven at night thirty or forty men and women spouting poetry would parade through all ages appearances” and reciting his “ode on the speed of cars” to the assemblage (GMSI 244; Flint 330).

Brunella Eurli notes that Marinetti was in the habit of composing his poetry, both French and Italian, by

dictation (285), and indeed, his style betrays evidence of oral composition. For example, in the orally-composed memoirs, the name Gustave Kahn is almost invariably accompanied by the epithet “creatore di verso libero francese” (GMSI 204, 223, 243, 320; Flint 307, 318, 329) or by its more sweeping variant “creatore di verso libero” (GMSI 51, 236; Flint 322). In his pre-futurist French verse, a noun seldom appears without the accompaniment of at least one adjective. These adjectives often have the repetitive quality of epithets, and as Eruli notes, “hanno più il carattere di zeppa che della necessità estetica.” (“They have more the character of padding than of aesthetic necessity.”) Sentences in the poems are highly paratactic, proceeding “per immagini parallele stratificate” (“by parallel images piled on top of one another” [284]). Eruli recognizes the oral roots of these epithetic repetitions and paratactic constructions. Interestingly, she sees these qualities as faults when compared with the writing-based virtues of revision and careful word choice (286).

For an oral poet, the repetition of formulaic epithets and a paratactic sentence structure are obligatory (Lord 3-67). Walter J. Ong notes that “written discourse develops more elaborate and fixed grammar than oral discourse does because to provide meaning it is more dependent simply upon linguistic structure.” Oral discourse, meanwhile, relies less on grammar because it has the help of “the normal full existential contexts which surround [it]” to help determine meaning (*Orality* 38). Redundancy is a psychological and semiotic necessity in oral discourse, which vanishes as soon as it is uttered:

Hence the mind must move ahead more slowly, keeping close to the focus of attention much of what has already been dealt with. Redundancy . . . keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track. (Ong: *Orality* 39-40)

In oral poetry, repetition is not only a psychological necessity; it is a metrical and mnemonic one as well. Milman Parry first showed how Homeric lines were not memorized verbatim, but rather, stitched together (Greek *rhapsodein*, “to stitch song together”) from a “massive vocabulary of hexameterized phrases” (Ong: *Orality* 58). Epithets recur for metrical reasons: “Odysseus is *polymetis* (clever) not just because he is this kind of character but also because without the epithet *polymetis* he could not be readily worked into the meter” (*Orality* 58-59). The oral poet does not memorize a verbatim transcript of the poem but rather fills in the outline of the narrative with memorized, pre-patterned, metrical formulas. According to Parry’s student Albert Lord, the oral poet does not strive for

“stability of text, the exact words of the story” but for “stability of essential story” (138).

Marinetti had neither the benefit of a long apprenticeship in oral techniques nor the desire to tell a traditional story. It is only by a kind of temperamental accident that his writings resemble in places the devices of true oral poetry. He called his two early books—*La conquête des étoiles* (The Conquest of the Stars, 1902) and *Destruction* (1904)—“epic,” but they do not stitch together in a disciplined way a series of formulaic narratives. Rather, these “epics” consist of series of rhetorically inflated lyrics placed end to end. As a good symbolist, he avoids narrative but not in the manner of Mallarmé, who manipulates an elaborate syntax and an allusive, metonymic language in order to suggest a subject without actually making explicit statements about it. Instead of leaving things out, Marinetti inflates the *récit* with redundant amplifications of bombastic nineteenth-century rhetoric.

What little there is of narrative in Marinetti’s poems is nearly lost in thickets of anaphora and apostrophe:

***Ton sourire s’ouvrit en l’eau sereine de ton visage,
comme sous la chute calme d’une fleur...
Ton sourire déferla dans le ciel vaste
et fit pâlir la face impétueuse des Astres dans le silence!***

(PCM 310; SF 346)

Your smile opens in the serene pool of your visage
as under the calm fall of a flower...
Your smile unfurls in the vast sky
and makes pale the impetuous face of the Stars in the silence!

This excerpt from *Destruction* shows how the poet can elaborate groups of images by the initial repetition of the master anaphoric term (“ton sourire”). The lyric in question, “La chanson du mendiant d’amour,” inflates a simple anecdote of a romantic assignation to some 250 lines by similar rhetorical devices. Marinetti’s “ode on the speed of cars” (“A mon Pégase”), which he recalled reading at Mme. Périer’s salon, avoids any sense of narrative specificity by liberal use of apostrophe, or direct address:

***Dieu véhément d’une race d’acier,
Automobile ivre d’espace,
qui piétines d’angoisse, le mors aux dents stridentes!
O formidable monstre japonais aux yeux de forge,
nourri de flamme et d’huiles minérales,
affamé d’horizons et de proies sidérales.***

(PCM 310; SF 346)

Vehement God of an iron race,
Automobile drunk with space,
who tramples on anguish, the bit in strident teeth!
O formidable Japanese monster with the eyes of a forge,
nourished with flame and mineral oils,
famished for horizons and sidereal prey.

In his article "Apostrophe," Jonathan Culler notes that this trope "resists narrative because its *now* is not a moment in a temporal sequence but a *now* of discourse, of writing (152). We can agree with Culler's point about narrative while wondering how writing got into this discussion: surely the *now* of a direct address refers to the *now* of the spoken word, which vanishes as soon as it is uttered. Culler attributes the relative critical neglect of apostrophe (as opposed to, say, metaphor) to the "artificial character" of the trope, which leads literal-minded readers to "embarrassment" (152; 140). Most people don't naturally go around apostrophizing machines or, in a notorious example which Culler cites, the West Wind. While he correctly sees that apostrophe refers back to vatic utterance, "the power of poetry to make something happen" (140), Culler fails specifically to connect the device with oral discourse.

Apostrophe may look artificial on the printed page, but it becomes much less so when cloaked in the codes and context of the spoken rhetorical tradition. In oral cultures, words are powerful because they happen in a direct human context; they are not removed from life on a flat page but resonate through things:

Without writing, words as such have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual. They are sounds. You might "call" them back—"recall" them. But there is nowhere to "look" for them. They have no focus and no trace (a visual metaphor, showing dependency on writing), not even a trajectory. They are occurrences, events. (Ong: *Orality* 31)

Culler does note the event-character of apostrophe: "[It] is not the representation of an event; if it works, it produces a fictive discursive event" (153). Apostrophe "works" when words have the vocative power to call up things, to make things happen; it works in an oral context.

With Marinetti, the oral context was that of spoken declamation, which lacks the metrical and formulaic discipline of oral poetics. In this context, "stirring the audience up" by direct address, pathetic exhortations, and emotional and humorous exaggeration is not at all uncommon. Such a practice has the immediate character of an event, is descriptive and propagandistic rather than narrative, and leads naturally to the theatricality of the futurist manifestos and the deliberate audience-

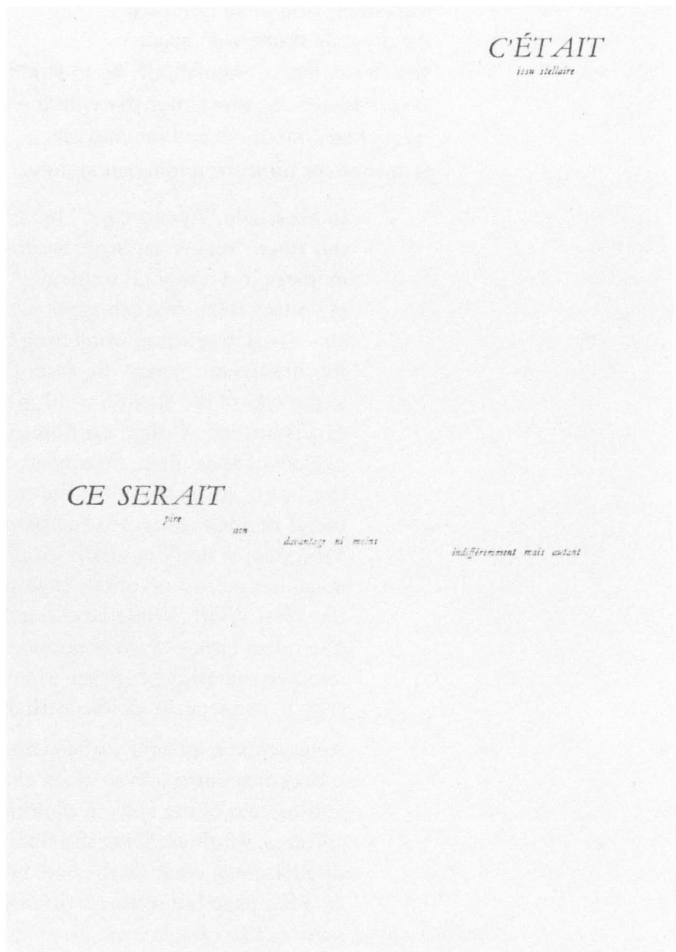


Figure 1
 Stéphane Mallarmé,
Un coup de dés, 1897,
 From *Igitur-Divagations-Un coup
 de dés*, © Editions Gallimard,
 pp. 424-425.

baiting of the *serate futuriste*. (For the theatricality of the manifestos, see Perloff 101-115; for descriptions of “futurist evenings,” see Kirby 12-18, 28-32 and Tisdall 91-93). How, then, did such an orally-oriented poet come to invent a new form of poetry that featured such visual devices as the use of various typefaces for emphasis and the spatial layout of words on the page? And what models did he use to produce this visual poetry?

Mallarmé’s poetry also culminated in a visual experiment, *Un coup de dés* (1897; figure 1). I have reproduced here one two-page spread from a poem of eleven such “pages.” The poem can be read either across the two pages or down each individual page in the more usual manner. Also, by a remarkable feat of syntactic prestidigitation, Mallarmé allows the reader either to scan words in the same typeface consecutively through the poem or to read each word in succession. Thus syntax

LE NOMBRE

EXISTÂT-IL

autrement qu'hallucination épars d'agonie

COMMENÇÂT-IL ET CESSÂT-IL

sourdant que nie et clos quand apparu
c'est
par quelque profusion répandue en rareté

SE CHIFFRÂT-IL

évidence de la somme pour peu qu'une

ILLUMINÂT-IL

LE HASARD

Cboit

la plume

rythmique suspens du sinistre

s'ensevelir

aux écumes originelles

naguères d'où sursauta son délire jusqu'à une cime

flétrie

par la neutralité identique du gouffre

works in concert with spatial values (various type fonts and sizes and the arrangement of words on the blank of the page) to form the meaning of the poem. However, Mallarmé had already "spatialized" his syntax by emphasizing static nouns over verbs and by moving those verbs from their normal, spoken position. By often placing the subject after the verb, he defused its motive, active power (Scherer 148-50). When such syntax is combined with the strategies of metonymic indirection mentioned above, words tend not to make linear, sequential sense but rather to form a visual constellation of signifiers that wink enigmatically at one another without making explicit statements. *Un coup de dés* carried the logic of this syntax one step further by setting it in immobile visual clusters. We have seen that Marinetti preferred oral modes of composition to syntactical manipulation. Even though the pre-futurist Marinetti

revered Mallarmé as a master, he did not imitate the master's syntax or prosody, and it is doubtful that he even saw *Un coup de dés* before attempting his own visual experiments (Webster 22; 31-33).

The invention of futurism (1909) marks a great divide in Marinetti's literary career. Superficially at least, he renounces allegiance to symbolism and indeed, to all past art; he began to write for the most part in Italian, not French; and he began in various ways to call into question distinctions between life and art. This last activity meant an increase in oral-based techniques of rhetorical and theatrical provocation. Ong has noticed that oral discourse is often "agonistically toned," and he gives examples that range from the *Iliad* to the practice common in oral societies of reciprocal name calling, known as "flyting" (43-4). The flip side of this extravagant denunciation is the fulsome praise—panegyrics, funeral orations, victory odes—"found everywhere" in oral societies (Ong 45). Marinetti's efforts to merge art and life often centered around the "agonistically toned" *serate futuriste* we have already mentioned. The futurists deliberately provoked their audiences into participation by shouting inflammatory manifestos, displaying their paintings, declaiming their poetry and berating their audiences for their political and artistic *passéism*. The audiences responded in "agonistic" fashion by hurling back insults and vegetables; these evenings often ended in a near-riotous mutual exchange of verbal and organic missiles.

The manifestos abound in the theatrical, exaggerated rhetoric of fulsome praise and blame. For example, in "Contro Venezia passatista" ("Against Passéist Venice," 1910), Marinetti and the other futurists unleashed their rhetoric on the Jewel of the Adriatic:

Ripudiamo la Venezia dei forestieri, mercato di antiquari falsificatori, calamita dello snobismo e dell'imbecillità universali, letto sfondato da carovane di amanti, semicupio ingemmato per cortigiane cosmopolite, cloaca massima del passatismo.

Affrettiamoci a colmare i piccoli canali puzzolenti con le macerie dei vecchi palazzi crollanti e lebbrosi.

Bruciamo le gondole, poltrone a dondolo per cretini, e innalziamo fino al cielo l'imponente geometria dei ponti metallici e degli opifici chiamati di fumo, per abolire le curve cascanti delle vecchie architetture.

(TIF 30; PCM 26-7)

We renounce the Venice of foreigners, market for counterfeiting antiquarians, calamity of snobbery and universal imbecility, bed shattered by caravans of lovers, jeweled bathtub for cosmopolitan courtesans, *cloaca maxima* of passéism.

Let us hasten to fill in its stinking little canals

with the shards of its leprous, crumbling palaces.

Let us burn the gondolas, rocking-chairs for cretins,

and raise to the skies the imposing geometry of metal bridges and factories plumed with smoke, abolishing the falling curves of the old architecture.

(Flint 55; translation somewhat amended)

In “Noi rinneghiamo i nostri maestri simbolisti ultimi amanti della luna” (“We Abjure Our Symbolist Masters, the Last Lovers of the Moon,” 1915), praise and blame alternate in one oxymoronic phrase: “Oggi odiamo dopo averli immensamente amati, i nostri gloriosi padri intellettuali.” (“Today we hate our glorious intellectual fathers, after having greatly loved them” [PCM 219; Flint 66]).

Marinetti did not confine his oral performances to reciting manifestos or to extempore verbal jousting with a provoked public. We know that as late as 1920 he declaimed Mallarmé’s “L’après midi d’un faune” for a performance in which a dancer interpreted the poem as it was read aloud. It seems that he recited this symbolist gem as a favor: his name did not appear on the program, nor did he appear on stage (Sinisi 26). His vocal prowess was well known. Even a rival (and no doubt envious) observer like Wyndham Lewis was impressed by the sheer volume of Marinetti’s performance of *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1914), a composition about the Second Balkan War of 1913:

It was a matter of astonishment what Marinetti could do with his unaided voice. He certainly made an extraordinary amount of noise. A day of attack upon the Western Front, with all the ‘heavies’ hammering together, right back to the horizon, was nothing to it. (Lewis 33)

Zang Tumb Tumb was written in a new futurist style that Marinetti called “words-in-freedom.” This new style introduced radical syntactical and visual innovations, as can be seen if we take a look at a sample page (figure 2; TIF 696-7).

At first glance, it seems that Marinetti has done away with the oral qualities that characterized his earlier style. Gone are the epithets, the formulaic turns of phrase, gone the anaphora and apostrophe, gone, indeed, anything resembling grammatical sentence

flauti clarini dovunque basso alto uccelli
cinguettare beatitudine ombrie *cip-cip-cip* brezza
verde mandre *don-dan-don-din-biè* **tam-tumb-**
tumb tumb-tumb-tumb-tumb
-tumb Orchestra pazzi ba-
stonare professori d'orchestra questi bastona-
tissimi suooooonare suooooonare Graaaaandi
fragori non cancellare precisare ritttttagliandoli
rumori più piccoli minutissssssimi rottami
di echi nel teatro ampiezza 300 chilome-
tri quadrati Fiumi Maritza
Tungia sdraiati Monti Rò-
dopi ritti alture palchi log-
gione 2000 shrapnels sbracciarsi esplodere
fazzoletti bianchissimi pieni d'oro **Tum-**
tumb 2000 granate pro-
tese strappare con schianti capigliature
tenebre **zang-tumb-zang-tuum**

Figure 2.

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti,
from *Zang Tumb Tumb*, 1914.
(TIF 696-697)

structure. Instead, we find strings of nouns interrupted at intervals by onomatopoeia in different typefaces, by blank spaces, and by verbs in the infinitive, with letters of stressed syllables occasionally repeated. Under the heading “BILANCIO DELLE ANALOGIE,” the reader will notice a string of adjectives enclosed in parentheses and set in yet another typeface (an italicized boldface).

Though we are not primarily concerned with ideological aspects of futurism here, it would be well to note that these innovations stem from the futurist concern to merge art with the modern fast-paced life of the new machine-world. Marinetti defined lyricism as the faculty of “intoxicating oneself with life.” When in “a zone of intense life,” such as a revolution or war, a person gifted with such lyricism would naturally speak quickly,

despise subtleties and nuances of language. Breathlessly he will assault your nerves with visual, auditory, olfactory sensations, just as they come to him. The rush of steam-emotion will burst the sentence's steampipe, the valves of punctuation, and the adjectival clamp. Fistfuls of essential words without any conventional order.

(Apollonio 98)

The practice of intuitive, almost "automatic" writing outlined here joins the poet to modern life and matter: "Solo il poeta asintattico e dalle parole slegate potrà penetrare l'essenza della materia e distruggere la sorda ostilità che la separa da noi" (TIF 46; PCM 82). ("Only the unsyntactical poet who unlinks his words can penetrate the essence of matter and destroy the dumb hostility that separates it from us" [Flint 88]). Periodic sentences were a "myopic" attempt to "dominate the multiform and mysterious life of matter." Now, however, with the suppression of the "intermediary" of syntax, "la letteratura entri direttamente nell'universo e faccia corpo con esso." ("Literature may enter directly into the universe and become one body with it" [TIF 47; PCM 83; Flint 89]). Such a stance has been seen as tantamount to equating nouns with objects (Curi 155) and creates curious semiotic problems, as we shall see. But we need to look first at the implications this style has for oral performance.

At least one critic has called Marinetti's free-word texts "partiture declamabili"—"declaimable scores"—and they are, but of very special kind (quoted in PCM XXI). If we glance back at figure 2, we can see that the heavy black *tam-tumbs* should be recited loudly while the small italicized bird sounds (cip-cip-cip) should be read softly. Likewise, the repetition of key letters in words like "suonare" and "grandi" tells the performer to emphasize those letters while lengthening the syllables. As for the white spaces, they indicate "i riposi o sonni più o meno lungo dell'intuizione" ("the pauses or drowsings more or less long of intuition" [TIF 51; PCM 88]). Presumably, the performer of the fixed typographic text would also pause at the spaces to indicate pauses in the original oral intuition of the poet. Indeed, both of the visual innovations of the text in figure 2 (differing typefaces, blank spaces) serve as visual cues to oral performance.

Yet the discrete, visual isolation of words is actually a characteristic of print, which embeds the word in space (see Ong, *Orality* 123). Print changes words from sound to visible objects fixed on the page. The oral word,

when written, becomes an object on the page. In general, writing and print especially interiorize consciousness since writing takes place alone and is usually received in silent solitude. The shift from the social, event character of orality to the interiority of print can be seen if we compare an oral performance by a traditional bard before an audience with the solitary silent reading of a printed poem. This shift from oral to a printed poetry was canonized into a critical commonplace by John Stuart Mill in 1833: "Eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*" (quoted in Ong, *Rhetoric* 238). Poetry since the romantic age reflects the interiority occasioned, at least in part, by print technology. "The psyche has withdrawn to this extent from the old social, exteriorized oral world into its own isolated spaces" (Ong: *Rhetoric* 19). With words-in-freedom, Marinetti sought in a groping way to unite the interior, isolated (white) spaces of the page with the exterior, social event that is oral performance.

In a world dominated by print technology, such an attempt must largely be doomed to failure. In oral and manuscript cultures, the idea of a final, closed text is an impossibility. Print implies by its structure (bindings, identical multiple copies) that the work is closed off from existential life-contexts (Ong: *Orality* 132-35). For these technological and for other, perhaps more pressing, sociological reasons, art in the European society of Marinetti's time had become detached from the everyday praxis of life. One modern theorist, Peter Bürger, has seen this autonomous social status of art as decisive in the development of the avant-garde. Avant-garde movements like futurism "can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society" (49). Marinetti's typographical innovations would be seen by Bürger as an effort to remove art from its aesthetic, autonomous realm, an effort to move art closer to "life praxis" by inserting "reality fragments" into the work of art (Bürger 77-78). While I do not have the space here to enter into the delicate semiotic and epistemological question of what constitutes "reality" in a sign system like language, it is clear that Marinetti himself claimed his free-word style was more natural than prose and would enable the poem to enter directly into the heart of material. Certainly also, the social agonism of Marinetti's oral performance brings us into the realm of speech acts which have direct, real consequences.

Marinetti hoped that his typographical innovations would help express hand and facial gestures of the performer and that they would bring reality closer to the reader through a kind of pictorial analogy. These

analogies could be as simple as expanding each successive letter of “FUMARE” (“to smoke”) in order to indicate “l’espandersi della noia-fumo in un lungo viaggio in treno” (“the expansion of boredom-smoke during a long train trip [TIF 89; Flint 100]). Or they could be as complex as the spiraling organization of abstract marks (both handmade and typographical) and onomatopoeic words in various typesizes used in “Letter from the Front” (figure 3) to indicate an intensive bombardment. For Marinetti, the typographical innovations were only a means to achieve immediate sensation and were not intended to become a new art form, or an end in themselves:

Queste tavole sinottiche non devono essere uno scopo, ma un mezzo per aumentare la forza espressiva del lirismo. Bisogna dunque evitare ogni preoccupazione pittorica, non compiacendosi in giochi di linee, né in curiose sproporzioni tipografiche.

(TIF 89)

These synoptic tables should not be a goal but a means of increasing the expressive forces of lyricism.

One must therefore avoid every pictorial preoccupation, taking no satisfaction in the play of lines nor in curious typographical disproportions.

(Flint 100)

Too much “line play” could draw attention to itself and obscure the matter. These visual analogies were also somewhat at odds with the oral flow of the recited text, and Marinetti recognized this. He observed that as soon as the visual effect has achieved its “maggiore espressione” (“greater expression”), “le parole in libertà ritornano al loro fluire normale” (“the words-in-freedom return to their normal flow” [TIF 89; Flint 100]).

This mostly oral, “normal flow” of words dominated compositions like *Zang Tumb Tumb*, but in poster-poems like “Letter from the Front” and “Après la Marne, Joffre visita le front en auto” (figure 4), there was no flow to interrupt. Much later, in “La tecnica della nuova poesia” (1937), Marinetti distinguished “tavole parolibere” (“free-word tables”) from “parole in libertà” proper (TIF 182). However, this distinction still didn’t solve the fundamental problem of a poetry that wants to be both oral and visual, both social and private, both event and printed word. In poster-poems or free-word tables like “Letter from the Front” and “Après la Marne,” Marinetti obviously wanted to create visually the same direct effects he achieved in oral performance.



Figure 3
 "Letter from the Front" 1917,
 (from Marinetti, *Les mots en liberté*
futuristes 103).

And certainly, the bold spread of both abstract and letter shapes across the page creates a visual excitement that the usual block-page format conspicuously lacks. But when we go beyond this initial impression and actually try to *read* these works, a tension surfaces between the intuitive visual composition and the semiotic exigencies of language itself. Marinetti wants to create a direct

these clues, a general knowledge of futurist ideology and a careful reading of those parts of the text that form recognizable words, the reader can gather that the poem celebrates the beauty of war (“BELLE,” “GUERRE”), that it endorses the French side over the Germans and that it celebrates the speed and power of the automobile that carries Joffre to the front (“viteeeee,” “spirale pneumatique,” “vire” and “coup de volant”). The “dynamic verbalization” is also no doubt an onomatopoeitic imitation of the automobile (and sounds along the route?), just as “tatata” and the by now familiar “TOUMB TOUM” are onomatopoeitic representations of machine gun and cannon fire. In addition, the reader may also get some sense of disorder and strangeness from the capital letters strewn across the page. Some readers may wish to see these letters as a typographic imitation of the futurist painters’ “lines of force,” creating a sense of movement and a pictorial unity at the same time.

However, this first reading fails to account for large portions of the text. For instance, how are the numbers and mathematical signs to be read? It also leaves other parts of the text in doubt. Are we to put together the large capitals to form a secret message, or do they indicate in a general way troop emplacements and trenches? What is the significance of the words “Mon Ami,” “Ma petite” and “LEGER LOURD”? Above all, how are we to read onomatopoeitic words which, unlike “tatata,” have no readily discernible semantic value? We can answer some of these questions by referring to statements in the manifestos and by looking at proofsheets, but it is doubtful that Marinetti thought we would need to go that far since he believed that readers could understand his new syntactic style instinctively, as if it were spoken, not written:

Corrono infatti fra il pubblico e il poeta, i rapporti stessi che esistono fra due vecchi amici. Questi possono spiegarsi con una mezza parola, un gesto, un’occhiata. Ecco perché l’immaginazione del poeta deve allacciare fra loro le cose lontane senza fili conduttori, per mezzo di parole essenziali in libertà.

(TIF 61-2)

Between the poet and audience, in fact, the same rapport exists as between two old friends. They can make themselves understood with half a word, a gesture, a glance. So the poet’s imagination must link together distant things *with no connecting strings*, by means of essential *free words*.

(Apollonio 98)

5

de la pompe chandelles tourbillon de chandelles tourbillon
 de poussière auto la chasser crooooo-craaaa hootisme
 Tension s'enfarmer

petite chorie chorchie chorie chorchie

++ +
 x + x
 x + x
 x - x
 ++ +

BEL LE (autres plus redress)

TooooooooooooofXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXce

Voooooooooooo + + + x x x = = = x = 0 troc traac
 craac craac croc croc + = + croc craaac
 x + - +
 + - x x x + - x - + - + +
 x

Figure 5b

Mechanical Splendor and the Numerical Sensibility” (1914), which tells us that the mathematical signs, by virtue of their “abstract simplicity,” are fit to render the mechanical shifting of gears in an automobile (TIF 91-91). As for the lists of numbers, Marinetti says that though they “non hanno significato nè valore diretto” (“have no direct significance or value”), they “esprimono le varie intensità trascendentali della materia e le rispondeze incrollabili della sensibilità” (“express the various transcendental intensities of matter and the indestructible correspondences of sensibility” [TIF 92; Flint 102]). Here we reach the semiotic limit of invention and intuition.

The sound-poem at the lower right of the composition, the “Verbalisation dynamique de la route,” remains at the edges of this limit. The keys to it have not been given, neither in the manifestos nor in the poem itself. The title obviously indicates that the poem is meant to be taken as the equivalent for the sounds along Joffre’s route to the front, but which words refer to which sounds? “Intuition” tells me that “viaAAAR” probably

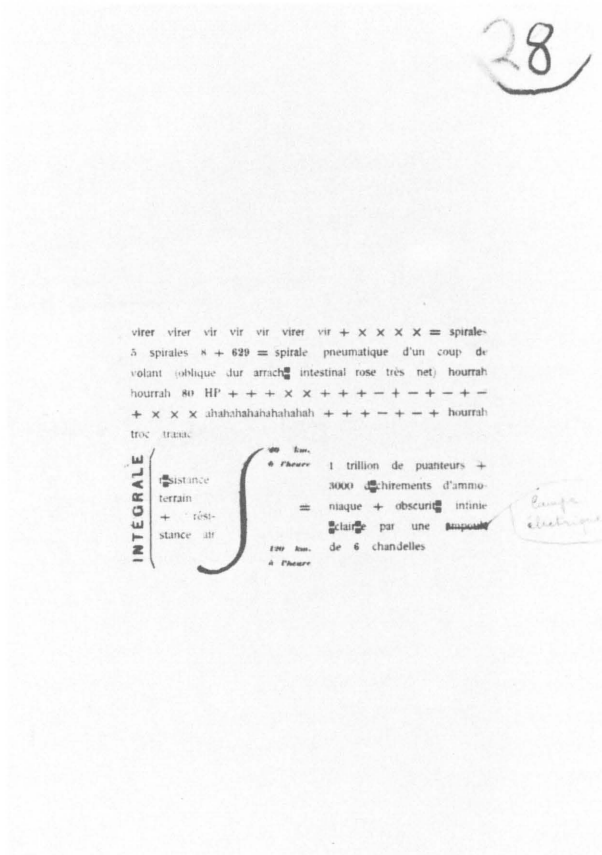


Figure 5c

represents the roar of the engine, and the manifestos have already been consulted for the meanings of the mathematical symbols, but the rest resists all but the most elementary of decodings. It is possible that changes in the endings of the words “angolè angoll angolà angolin” refer to slight shifts in the car’s angle (*angolo*) as it bumps and careens down roads pock-marked by war, but there is no way to say for sure. Other words in the passage are either nonsensical or yield a sense that hardly accords with the context. (“Mocastrinar” might mean “to singe mocha” = burnt uniforms? camouflage?). The sound-poem could be an example of what Marinetti called “indirect and analogical” onomatopoeia, which uses nonsense sounds to create “un rapporto tra sensazioni di peso, calore, colore, odore, e rumore” (“A rapport between sensations of weight, heat, color, smell, and noise” [TIF 90; Flint 101]). The onomatopoeic words do not imitate sounds literally but rather create a sonorous analogy to a sensation. The manifestos cite one example of this kind of correspondence: the syllables “dum-dum-dum-

dum” from the free-word poem *Dune*, which express the “circling sound” and “orange weight” of the African sun (TIF 90). Here the vocables could represent sounds, weight, heat, etc., of Joffre’s auto and of the sights along the route.

Apparently relying on the “indestructible correspondences of sensibility,” Marinetti expects that the reader will intuitively grasp the meanings of his signs, be they onomatopoeias, mathematical symbols or numbers. Whether an onomatopoeia expresses the inner psyche directly or a sensation indirectly, the intuitive processes of writer and reader must function on the same level. The rupturing of syntax implies an intuitive bond between writer and reader, one not based on grammatical rules but on the ability to experience the same sensations. Marinetti first used isolated words as sense-units, and when that was not enough, he introduced visual elements. He adapted old symbol systems to new uses, believing that the new uses could somehow be more direct than the old. These new procedures would shock and mystify and yet be intuitively understood at the same time. His new symbology depended on the kind of intuition present in oral speech situations and thus sometimes ran afoul of the clarity demanded by visual grammar. For example, he wanted to replace the question mark with an X—instead of concentrating doubt into a point, it expanded it over the page—and yet he used this same X to “express” the acceleration of an automobile (TIF 92).

A determined deconstructionist might see this ambiguous symbology as proof that Marinetti understood (intuitively?) the arbitrary nature of the sign and the shifting, slippery character of language itself, which is seen as merely a system of differences without positive terms. To read him this way, however, disregards his ideological statements which indicate that he was not concerned with signs but with presence. Never interested in the word as symbol, he valued intuitive comprehension, quick syntheses, spoken declamation—in short, propaganda. Here style connects with ideology: free-word poetry and the cult of sensation both locate “truth in what is immediately present to consciousness with as little mediation as possible.” That is how Jonathan Culler defines “the metaphysic of presence” (*Structuralist Poetics* 132), and Marinetti seems to be singularly captivated by it. His disregard of the signifier, his preference for spoken declamation and his belief in intuitive communication all attest to his captivity. For him, writing is not writing, but speaking.

To break syntactic connections, to suggest that writing can somehow contain the added semiotic features of speech (gestures, winks, an existential context), to believe that brute sounds can carry a direct meaning not available to words, is to believe in a semiotics of presence or intuition, a semiotics in which the reader understands not by means of a complex secondary sign system like written language ("fili conduttori") but by sign systems that are attached in some way to the phenomenal world. People make gestures and utter sounds; machines make noise; speech-making and theater happen in existential contexts. Marinetti wants to get away from the pure relational system differences that is written language and move toward the force of the real world. His semiotic inventions (the new uses for numbers, mathematical symbols, sound-poetry) betray an ad hoc character (they are "intuitive") and do not form a relational system that can be consistently decoded by the reader. It should not be surprising that Marinetti misunderstands or underrates the nature and power of the written system, given his emphasis on the spoken event and given the rudimentary state of this sort of theory in his age.

Marinetti attempts to put the visual at the service of the oral: in his "words-in-freedom," spacings often serve as indications of pauses for the speaker; in his poster-poems, he renders the auditory chaos of the war with visually prominent onomatopoeias and large, often isolated or overturned letter-shapes. Semiotically, the attempt to connect the written system in a more direct way to the stuff of life was bound to cause coding difficulties for the reader which interfere with the immediate presence Marinetti sought. Creating an absence of syntactical connections does not necessarily make art and life a simultaneous presence.

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