Rome is Burning: Reevaluating Futurism's Relation to Fascism

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ABSTRACT

Futurism’s political orientation has long perplexed and disturbed scholars. The movement’s militant nationalism often forces academics to marginalize or ignore Futurist politics entirely, by treating it in purely aesthetic terms. However, evaluating Futurism as purely nationalistic in nature constitutes an oversimplification. The movement paradoxically sought to synthesize collectivism with anarchic individualism. Like the Fascists, Futurists glorified the Italian State. However, they abhorred the Fascist reverence for the Roman Empire. Instead, they advocated for an uncompromisingly modern Italy, in both an aesthetic and moral sense. This thesis argues that Futurism’s Fascist patriotism and militarism ultimately led to the dissolution of the movement. Marinetti and the other Futurists could not reconcile their anarchic impulses with their Fascist tendencies. This paradox led to multiple ideological quandaries, including the problem of how the individual relates to the State, as well as the problem of the woman’s place within the State.

INDEX WORDS: Futurism, Fascism, Feminism, Christianity, Avant-garde, Anti-clericalism
ROME IS BURNING: REEVALUATING FUTURISM’S RELATION TO FASCISM

by

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ROME IS BURNING: REEVALUATING FUTURISM’S RELATION TO FASCISM

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DEDICATION

To my mother, father, Alex, and Megan. I always carry your love and support with me.

To Giuliana, for invigorating my spirit, and inspiring me to put words to paper.
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1 INTRODUCTION

Italian Futurism is an artistic movement founded by F.T. Marinetti in 1909, with his “Manifesto del futurismo” (“Manifesto of Futurism”). The bold, iconoclastic treatise not only inaugurates the Futurist movement, but the text also expresses the Futurist desire to, among other goals, “shake the doors of life to test their hinges and bolts” (Marinetti 49). Aesthetically, the group draws its inspiration from the rapid industrialization of the early 20th century. The Futurists glorify “the beauty of speed,” arguing that it is more beautiful than classical sculptures (Marinetti 51). The Futurist aesthetic is abstract in nature, often evoking machines as a symbol for their relentless desire to move forward, toward a novel, distinctly Italian ideal. Their bombastic, yet prescriptive manifestos, such as Luigi Russolo’s “L’arte del rumori” (“The Art of Noise”), unapologetically and unequivocally necessitate innovation in several artistic media, including music (“The Art of Noise”), painting “Manifesto dei pittori futuristi” (“Manifesto of Futurist Painters”), among several other artistic modalities.

In this thesis, I will argue that Futurism’s nationalistic fervor, its desire to “glorify war,” and to extol patriotism, left Futurism vulnerable to the reactionary, totalitarian impulses of Fascism (Marinetti 51). Marinetti, along with other leaders of the movement, would forsake Futurism’s individualistic ethos, its “destructive gesture of anarchists,” in order to serve imperialistic ambitions. This is why, in large part, the Futurist movement died in 1944 with Marinetti. The fact that Futurism allowed itself to compromise its modernist spirit, by aligning itself with Fascism, also explains why scholars largely avoided the issue of Futurist politics, until fairly recently.

My analysis is comprised of seven sections, framed by my introductory and concluding remarks. I begin by introducing Marinetti’s libertarian ideals, showing how they conflict with his
nationalistic proclivities. I then show how the Futurist avowal of anarchic individualism contradicts Fascist collectivism and its emphasis on historical continuity, a discrepancy that even contemporaries of the Futurists recognized. In the following section, I briefly illustrate how the Futurist emphasis upon youth serves as a prediction of its inevitable demise, as it too became dogmatic and reactionary with age. Afterward, I contrast Futurist anti-clericalism, which Marinetti heavily borrows from Nietzsche, with Mussolini’s opportunistic appropriation of Catholicism. I then show how Futurism differs from Nietzschean thought, particularly with regard to nationalism and morality. I then outline Marinetti’s brief departure from Fascism, in order to show that even during this time period, his concerns were never purely aesthetic. I further postulate that his return to Fascism created a schism within the Futurism movement, as many Futurists retired from political life permanently around the same time period. Finally, I discuss how the contradictory Futurist attitude toward sexuality and womanhood differs from that of Fascism. I conclude by observing that the nationalistic zeal of the women Futurists prevents them from espousing complete female empowerment, just as patriotism leads Marinetti to abandon individualism.

1.1 Overview of Scholarship on Futurism

Since Marinetti’s 1909 “Manifesto of Futurism” first outlined the goals of the Futurist movement, scholars have struggled with how to evaluate the political and artistic ideals of Marinetti and his Futurists. Because of Marinetti’s association with Benito Mussolini’s Fasci di Combattimento, formed ten years following the “Manifesto of Futurism” on March 23, 1919, critics often focus on the Futurist movement prior to the creation of Fascism. In a misguided effort to salvage Futurism’s aesthetic vision, Christopher Adams contends, critics have largely ignored Futurist activities during the Fascist reign. The period after the creation of Fascism has
been “‘widely ‘condemned as a product of Mussolini’s corrupt regime’ (Bohn 2005, 3–4) and, as a consequence, marginalized” (Adams 422). However, such an attempt to distance Futurist aesthetics from Mussolini’s increasing influence upon the movement seems problematic. If one merely considers the modernist principles upon which Marinetti founded his movement, one fails to comprehend the ways in which the reactionary influences of Fascism led to the dissolution of Futurism. As Fascism became more conservative and autocratic, Marinetti responded by disavowing the iconoclastic principles of his vision, instead focusing solely on his nationalistic goals.

For decades, the issues inherent to Futurist politics curtailed a discussion of Futurist aesthetics as well. Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi surmises that “a process of reevaluation of the group only took place at the beginning of the 1960s” (40). Moreover, in his statistical analysis of secondary sources on Futurism, Günter Berghaus estimates that roughly eighty-five percent of these works of criticism came into being between 1970 and 2010 (397). This disproportionate amount of scholarship within a forty-year period provides two insights into the nature of Futurist scholarship. Firstly, Futurism was comparatively ignored during the immediate post-war period. Secondly, the study of Futurism has seen what Berghaus refers to as “rapid growth rates” in the relatively recent past (397). He arrives at the conclusion that “ideological barriers had to be removed before the full spectrum of Futurist creativity could be appreciated” (Berghaus 395). This reevaluation of Futurist aesthetics occurred “slowly but steadily” between the 1950’s and the 1970’s (Berghaus 395).

In agreement with both Adams and Berghaus, Ernest Ialongo notes in his book on Marinetti’s political life that studies of Futurist politics are “not the main focus” of critical works on the movement (7). Instead, scholars prefer to analyze Futurist aesthetics separately from Futurism’s
nationalistic ideals, for fear that overemphasizing the Futurists’ ties to Fascism might “prejudice the appreciation of Futurist art” (Ialongo 7). This is certainly not to say that analyses of Futurist politics do not exist, but rather that critics have largely distanced themselves from them. In their attempt to engender the appreciation of Futurist aesthetics, critics have omitted the fact that Marinetti, even prior to Fascism, used Futurism as a political catalyst. He first addressed the Italian electorate in “Elettori Futuristi!” (“Futurist Voters!”), which he published in the same year as his founding manifesto. Throughout Marinetti’s career, he sought to harmonize art and politics, and Futurism, at least partially, reflects these efforts.
2 FUTURIST LIBERTARIANISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

To his credit, Ialongo’s scholarly work addresses the quandaries associated with Futurist politics. By focusing on Marinetti’s political career, he properly contrasts Marinetti’s libertarian ideals with the conservatism of Mussolini’s regime. He argues that during Futurism’s founding, Marinetti lacked a coherent political ideology. He sought to harness individualistic, anarchic tendencies for the goal of “national advancement” (Ialongo 37). However, prior to 1918, Marinetti lacked a “means to bring these contradictory goals together into a workable politics” (Ialongo 37). Through his anti-clericalism, libertarianism, anarchism, and other such ideals, Marinetti sought to appeal to the political Left. Unfortunately for him, those on the Left found themselves repulsed by his nationalism, anti-socialism, and his Nietzschean glorification of war as “the only hygiene of the world” (Marinetti 51). Eventually, Marinetti would find that his Leftist ideals rendered him too irreverent and anarchic for the Right, while his nationalism branded him too reactionary for the Left. In his mind, his only recourse was to awaken the latent patriotic spirit of Italian Leftists.

Even during the inchoate stages of Futurism, this proposition seemed highly unlikely. On June 30, 1910, Marinetti gave a lecture in Milan on *The Necessity and Beauty of Violence*. The audience “consisted mainly of workers of Anarchist and Syndicalist conviction, many students, and about forty adherents of the Futurist movement” (Berghaus 29). Unsurprisingly, this predominately Leftist audience expressed both enthusiastic approval and contemptuous indignation, upon listening to Marinetti’s two hour lecture. They appreciated his appeals to the anarchic, destructive spirit, yet they derided his avowal of national pride as a heroic ideal. Once he expressed these “patriotic and bellicose” viewpoints, the crowd vociferously voiced their revulsion with dismissive shouting. Calls of “le idee anarchiche non hanno nulla da vedere col
futurismo!” (“Anarchist ideas have nothing to do with Futurism!”) echoed throughout the lecture hall (qtd in Berghaus 30). For Marinetti, this disdainful heckling represented the challenge of his political career: synthesizing individualistic anarchism with devotion to one’s nation.

In order to accomplish this ambitious goal, he founded the Futurist Party in 1918, and the resulting manifesto represented Marinetti’s first attempt at developing a feasible political program. Although Marinetti had espoused political ideals throughout his career, this manifesto marked his first attempt to crystallize these prescriptions into concrete policy. As with his founding manifesto, contradictions abound within the ideas presented in the “Manifesto del partito futurista italiano” (“Manifesto of the Italian Futurist Party”). This treatise tends toward radical libertarianism, anti-democratic elitism, and “revolutionary nationalism” (Marinetti 247).

In terms of individual rights, Marinetti argues for universal suffrage, which seems at odds with the infamous “contempt for woman” mentioned in the founding manifesto (Marinetti 51). Furthermore, he also demands “abolition of marital authorization [by the Church],” “easy divorce,” and “a gradual dissolution of matrimony in favor of free love and making children wards of the State” (Marinetti 248). Under Marinetti’s theoretical government, citizens would have the right to strike, freedom to assemble, and freedom of the press, among other liberties (Marinetti 249). In addition to these allowances, Marinetti’s conceptualization of “progressive taxation on inheritances” appears to be an almost socialist appeal to the Italian working class (Marinetti 248).

However, as a nationalist political party, The Futurist Party envisioned itself as a patriotic, militaristic alternative to the cosmopolitan and pacifist nature of socialism. In order to indoctrinate the working class into promoting national interests, Marinetti’s manifesto calls for the “patriotic education of the proletariat” (Marinetti 247). Thus, the Futurist notion of individual
freedom is contingent upon pride in the Italian nation. As Marinetti aphoristically states in a 1913 manifesto, “Programma politico futurista” (“Futurist Political Program” or “The Futurist Political Movement”), “the word ITALY should predominate over the word FREEDOM” (Marinetti 218). He elaborates on this maxim by proposing a political system which would permit “all freedoms except that of being cowards, pacifists, [or] anti-Italians” (Marinetti 218). Through this limitation on freedom, in favor of a vague notion of national pride, one can see how Marinetti would eventually ingratiate himself toward the Fascist regime. Nevertheless, one could best characterize the relationship between Marinetti and Mussolini as turbulent, especially during the early years of Fascism.

Initially, efforts to integrate Futurism and Fascism proved somewhat successful. Emil Oestereicher notes that “by 1919, Marinetti was campaigning for a Fascist, Futurist revolution under the leadership of ‘a proletariat of geniuses’” (530). Marinetti had conceived of this “proletariat of geniuses” a year earlier, in his “Manifesto of the Italian Futurist Party.” In this text, he calls for “a Parliament wiped clean of dotards and scum” (Marinetti 247). In order to extirpate these undesirable elements from the body politic, he proposes lowering the minimum age of members of Parliament to twenty-two. In doing so, Marinetti expresses his hope that innovation, through youthful idealism, would triumph over conservatism and archaic ways of thinking. To this end, the Futurist Party would replace the Senate with an “Assembly of Scrutiny,” which would be composed of “twenty young people under thirty years of age” (Marinetti 247). Marinetti also advocates for “the transformation of Parliament by means of a government that includes equal participation by owners of industry, farmers, engineers, and shopkeepers” (Marinetti 247). Within this ideal Parliament, lawyers and professors would be marginalized, on the basis of the former’s opportunism and the latter’s reactionary tendencies.
Should this “proletariat of geniuses” fail to produce results, the Futurists would disband Parliament altogether. Afterward, Marinetti would replace Parliament with a “government of twenty technicians elected by means of universal suffrage” (Marinetti 247).
3 IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICTS BETWEEN FUTURISM AND FASCISM

In spite of the radical libertarian ideals proposed in Marinetti’s political manifesto, Mussolini championed the Futurist Party as allies of the Fascists, and welcomed Marinetti into their ranks (Oestereicher 530). Furthermore, Mussolini rebuked “the philistine stupidity of bien-peasants,” who had “always pretended not to take Futurism seriously” (qtd. in Oestereicher 530). He wanted to ensure that one could never dismiss Futurism in such a way again. To this end, he added Marinetti to the central committee of the Fasci di Combattimento, a precursor to the Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF), or the National Fascist Party (Oestereicher 530).

Marinetti would, at least initially, accept this honorable distinction within the Fascist ranks. Furthermore, in 1923, he described Mussolini as a Futurist par excellence. He proclaimed that “we Futurists are happy to salute in our not yet forty year old Prime Minister a marvelous Futurist temperament” (qtd. in Oestereicher 530). This disingenuous, sycophantic declaration is problematic for two reasons. First, Marinetti neglects to mention the fact that he himself left the Fasci di Combattimento in 1920, citing its conservative stances on the monarchy and the Church. Second, the Futurists did not unanimously approve of Marinetti’s fervent support of Fascism.

Some artists, such as the Florentine Giovanni Papini, envisioned Futurism as a purely aesthetic movement. Papini, Ialongo notes, believed that “the entire political game was fixed” (Ialongo 50). In his 1913 diatribe against political activism, “Fregiandoci della politica” (“Let Us be Free of Politics” or “Let’s Not Give a Damn about Politics”), Papini argues that “an intelligent man cannot belong to any party,” because “the real political forces are outside the parties” (qtd. in Ialongo 50). Due to the insidious influences of external forces, such as the Church, the media, political lobbyists, and so on, people of intellect should not waste their time engaging in political life. Such preoccupations constitute wasteful misuses of their creative
energy. Papini’s conclusions are motivated by the idea that artists represent an exceptional breed, which must affect “the isolation of élite culture from mass politics” (Adamson, Avant-Garde Florence 178). In this context, political activism not only qualifies as a superfluous pursuit, but it also obfuscates the artist’s vision.

For Marinetti, Futurism is a political movement, which cannot exist separately from its modernist aesthetic. As such, Papini’s polemic treatise incensed Marinetti, who wanted to ensure that the public recognized Futurism as having political ambitions. To this end, just ten days after Papini had released his work in the literary journal Lacerba, Marinetti published his rebuttal, the “Futurist Political Program,” in the same publication. He also wrote Papini a scathing eight-page letter. “We read with pleasure the powerful demolition that you made of contemporary Italian politics,” Marinetti begins. Regardless, Marinetti (and therefore the Futurists) were “disappointed not to see a second part that would seem to us absolutely necessary, in fact indispensable.” Namely, “that which must contain the hopes, faith, and desires of us the Futurists to purify, rejuvenate, [and] accelerate the Italian political conscience” (qtd. in Ialongo 51). By insinuating that this criticism of Papini applies to all Futurists, he denies the very existence of a schism, in regard to the political agenda of Futurism.

Papini was not the only avant-garde artist to recognize the discrepancies inherent to Futurist doctrine. In 1923, the same year as Marinetti’s statement praising Mussolini, Giuseppe Prezzolini, a prominent Italian writer and literary critic, published a piece called “Fascismo e futurismo” (“Fascism and Futurism”), in which he argues that the two ideologies are incompatible. Specifically, he cites the Fascist emphasis on glorifying the past, which sharply contrasts with Futurism’s contention that the “useless admiration of the past” will only leave one “fatally spent, diminished, [and] crushed” (Marinetti 52). Prezzolini argues that Fascism
represents the very “tradition” and “observance of authority” that stands “inimical to the program
and the reality of Futurism as art” (Prezzolini 276). While Fascism “invokes Rome and the
classical past,” Futurism rejects such tired relics, instead mounting “a protest against tradition”
(Prezzolini 276).

For Prezzolini, the Futurists’ absolutist rejection of conventional ways of thinking manifests
itself both morally and aesthetically. He accuses Fascism of “trying to restore all our moral
values – including even moralistic ones of the sort found in bookshop windows” (Prezzolini
276). One cannot reconcile this goal with the aims of Futurism, whose founding manifesto
champions the amoral inclination toward “[fighting] against moralism” (Marinetti 51). In
addition to Futurism’s avowedly amoral stance, the movement also prides itself on artistic
innovation. Prezzolini draws a sharp distinction between the linguistic expression of Futurism
and that of Fascism. Futurism’s use of language is decidedly modern, preferring “free verse,”
“free expression,” and “words-in-freedom,” to the standard syntactical use of language
(Prezzolini 276). In contrast, Fascism “wants schools that will be more vigorous” and “wants
Latin to be required everywhere” (Prezzolini 277). Prezzolini maintains that the Fascist advocacy
of neoclassical values and aesthetics are contradictory to the progressive spirit of Futurism.

Prezzolini’s criticism of Fascism, that its conservatism stands antithetical to the Futurist
worldview, is consistent with the principles of Fascism, as defined by Benito Mussolini and
Giovanni Gentile in 1932. According to La dottrina del fascismo (The Doctrine of Fascism),
“outside history man is nothing” (Mussolini 41). The Fascists further reject the very possibility
of a novel Futurist spirit, by arguing that “no doctrine can boast of an absolute ‘originality’”
(Mussolini 53). The goal of the Fascists is historical preservation, as a way of reinforcing
national identity. Shared history serves as a vital bonding mechanism, which invigorates the individual spirit, and integrates it into the larger framework of the State.

Marinetti’s vision of the ideal State holds that individual liberties, combined with “patriotic education of the proletariat,” will inevitably result in a proud, prosperous nation. However, by the time Mussolini and Gentile wrote *The Doctrine of Fascism*, the notion of individual liberty under Fascism proved entirely out of the question. The very idea that human beings cannot exist without a sense of cultural and historical continuity undermines the existence of individual liberty, in favor of collectivist conformity. “The man of Fascism is an individual who is nation and fatherland,” Mussolini argues (39). In turn, “nation and fatherland” are bonding agents, which integrate “individuals and the generations into a tradition and a mission” (Mussolini 39-40). Mussolini goes on to stipulate that the success of the Fascist mission lies in self-denial, “the sacrifice of [one’s] own private interests,” and the abstinence from “the brief round of pleasure” (40). This Fascist asceticism has several implications for Futurist libertarianism.

First, according to this dictum, the Fascist is not an individual as such, but only a vessel for the “nation and fatherland.” Each person must deny his or her instinct toward cultivating his or her unique personality. One also should not occupy oneself with the satisfaction of physical or emotional desires. Instead, each individual must uphold the mores of his or her State, in order to accomplish the stated goals of the nation. Thus, individuality and uniqueness are only valuable within Fascism if they fit within a cohesive, unified whole. This self-denying collectivism conflicts with the Futurist notion of individualism, which rejects austerity. Within the context of Marinetti’s 1918 political manifesto, insofar as individuals do not *interfere* with the State, they are free to pursue their liberties as they see fit. As Fascism became more autocratic, Marinetti’s position on liberty would change. For example, in his 1920 manifesto “*Al di la del Comunismo*”
(“Beyond Communism”), he mirrors Fascist language by describing the State as “the greatest extension of the individual” (Marinetti 256). Such an opportunistic shift constitutes yet another instance of Marinetti’s apostasy from the anarchic spirit of Futurism.

Although Marinetti would resign from the Fasci di Combattimento shortly after the publication of “Beyond Communism,” his abandonment of individualism serves as a premonition of his return. Indeed, not only would he realign himself with Fascism, but he would also become one of Mussolini’s chief propagandists, as evidenced by his 1923 characterization of Mussolini as the ideal Futurist. This reverent appraisal of Mussolini signifies a fundamental shift in Marinetti’s thought, and therefore, in the destiny of his movement. By referring to Mussolini as a man of “a marvelous Futurist temperament,” Marinetti had consciously synthesized Futurism and Fascism. As such, it would have been equally appropriate for Marinetti to refer to himself as having developed “a marvelous Fascist temperament.” While critics should certainly not ignore the history of Futurism after 1919, one could account for the contradictions inherent in Futurist politics through periodization: By evaluating pre-Fascist Futurism as something separate from post-Fascist Futurism, scholars may be able to objectively assess both stages of the movement independently.
4 MARINETTI’S PREDICTION AND THE FUTURIST CULT OF YOUTH

Ironically, as Walter L. Adamson remarks, in his 1909 founding manifesto, Marinetti himself declares that the Futurists have ten years to bring their audacious plans to fruition. Just days after this ten-year period had elapsed, Mussolini founded his Fascist movement in Milan’s Piazza San Sepolcro (Adamson 231). Throughout the “Manifesto of Futurism,” the thirty-three year old Marinetti emphasizes that he and his “strong and youthful Futurists” will become obsolete within ten years’ time (Marinetti 52). Furthermore, when Marinetti praised Mussolini in 1923 as the ideal Futurist, he referred to him as “our not yet forty-year old Prime Minister.”

For Marinetti and the Futurists, youth confers a privileged position within social and political life. The young are more innovative, less prone to fundamentalist, reactionary ways of thinking. “The sickly, the ill, or the imprisoned” are the only ones who should find consolation in tradition, because they are wretched creatures, for whom “the future is now closed” (Marinetti 52). This cult of youth provides the rationale for Marinetti’s advocacy to lower the minimum age for members of Parliament in his political manifesto. In the “Manifesto of Futurism,” Marinetti clairvoyantly hypothesizes that “when we are forty, others who are younger and stronger will throw us into the wastebasket, like useless manuscripts” (Marinetti 53). He then exclaims that the Futurists “want it to happen” (Marinetti 53). Therefore, according to this discriminating criterion, there can be no middle-aged Futurists; only the youthful can sufficiently harness the irreverent, destructive spirit of Futurism. Once old age sets in, stagnation and traditionalism inevitably follow.

Marinetti himself is no exception to this rule. Beginning in 1919, Marinetti the Futurist had begun his transformation into Marinetti the Fascist, his brief departure from political life in 1920 notwithstanding. By 1919, he had “completely forgotten his prophecy,” such that he “succumbed
to the illusion of a Futurist–Fascist alliance,” in search of political gain (Adamson 231). This opportunistic quest for power would eventually leave Marinetti’s once influential movement fractured and in “total disarray” (Adamson 231). In spite of Marinetti’s attempt at amalgamating the two ideologies, irreconcilable ideological disagreements persisted between the Futurists and the Fascists.
5 ANTI-CLERICALISM AND NOTIONS OF SEXUALITY

In “Beyond Communism,” Marinetti reaffirms his commitment to “liberate Italy from the papacy” (Marinetti 260). One should not limit this anti-clerical objective to the dissolution of Church hierarchy. By arguing for the destruction of the papacy, Marinetti expresses a Nietzschean desire to liberate Italy from Christian dogma and what Marinetti saw as suffocating asceticism. The Fascists, on the other hand, often used religious doctrine to suit their agenda, referring to religion in *The Doctrine of Fascism* as “one of the deepest manifestations of the spirit” (Mussolini 56). Mussolini understood that religious faith deeply affects the “simple and primitive heart of the people” (56). Knowing the influence that faith has over the average citizen’s daily life, he sought to callously appropriate Church doctrine to serve the interests of the State. Nowhere is this callous perversion of faith more prevalent than in issues of sexual autonomy and sex education.

The Fascists simply could not allow for sexual empowerment in their highly conservative, regimented society. Matters of the bedroom, as *The Doctrine of Fascism* suggests, should not take pleasure as their primary aim. Instead, the Fascist State intended sexual intercourse to serve two very specific purposes: marriage and procreation. Fascism “[returned] women to home and hearth” and “[confined] female destiny to bearing babies” (Grazia 1). In order to coerce women into having more children, the Fascist State prohibited birth control, sex education, and legal abortion (Grazia 5). However, in contrast to the Catholic Church, the Fascists implemented these laws for secular, political reasons, rather than spiritual ones. Giovanni Gentile, who served as Minister of Public Education from 1922 to 1924, instituted a series of drastic, discriminatory educational reforms (Grazia 150-151). Under Gentile, religious education became mandatory for Italian girls, on the misogynistic basis that a female’s “grasp of the ethical nature of being could
only be approximate,” due to her innate intellectual deficiencies (Grazia 152). The scope of these reforms was not limited to the education of females. Indeed, Mussolini’s regime had reinstated the catechism in all primary schools, and required Catholic instruction for all public schools (Wolff 6).

Contrasting the ubiquity of religious education, sex education was lacking. Secondary schools discussed courtship by providing archetypes for ideal love, such as “Petrarch’s chaste passion for Laura, Dante’s inspirational Beatrice, or Jacopo Ottis’s pinings for Theresa” (Grazia 136), but they avoided love’s physical manifestations. Thus, the Fascist education system mandated a sentimentalist, classical view of love and romance. The curriculum also conspicuously omitted courses on anatomy or sex education; even courses on biology were absent from Italy’s schools (Grazia 136). Such a puritanical, archaic view of sexual matters is antithetical to the Futurists’ perspective on carnal pleasure.

This view of sexual liberation as inherently dangerous contrasts sharply with the Futurist understanding of sexuality. Rather than viewing “the brief round of pleasure” as harmful, Valentine de Saint-Point glorifies passion in her 1913 “Manifesto futurista della lussuria” (“Futurist Manifesto of Lust”). She argues that one should not be bashful in the face of sexual desire, and that one should certainly not repress carnal urges. Instead, people who have been “drawn together by physical attraction” must “dare to express their desires, the allure of their bodies, [and] their presentiments of joy or disappointment at the prospect of fleshly union” (Saint-Point 131). Futurists reject the Christian view of lust as “a source of shame to be hidden, a vice to be repressed” (Saint-Point 131). Instead of suppressing natural forces, Saint-Point implores Italians to “stop despising desire, this attraction, at once delicate and brutal, which draws together two bodies of whatever sex” (Saint-Point 131). Not only does this bold
declaration refute the notion of chastity, but it also rejects heteronormativity; Saint-Point does not pass judgment upon those who engage in same-sex relations, preferring instead to consciously include them in her definition of “desire.” This is distinct from the Fascist position, which evaluates sexual matters strictly in terms of procreation and marriage. On the basis of this understanding of sexuality as strictly procreative, the government outlawed homosexuality among men in 1931 (Grazia 43).

It is precisely “Petrarch’s chaste passion for Laura” that Saint-Point and the other Futurists seek to banish from Italian life. Saint-Point makes her revulsion for such sentimental notions abundantly clear, by advising Italians to cease “camouflaging [lust] in the pitiful clothes of old and sterile sentimentality” (Saint-Point 131). She continues her discussion of classical notions of love by excoriating romanticism. She claims that “the mesmerizing complications of sentimentality,” rather than lust, are responsible for social ills (Saint-Point 131). Accordingly, Italians must resist romanticism in all of its forms, including “the phrases that intoxicate and deceive, the pathetic staging of separation and eternal fidelity, literary nostalgia,” and finally, “all the histrionics of love” (Saint-Point 131). Thus, the way in which Fascist curriculum privileged Petrarchan conceits and tales of doting devotion actually accelerates the degradation of society’s moral framework, by rendering it tame and hopelessly reactionary. Because such poetic pretensions are “comfortable,” they “diminish us” as a species (Saint-Point 132).

For Saint-Point and the other Futurists, lust constitutes “an activating virtue, a hearth that nourishes energies” (Saint-Point 130). Accordingly, one should not seek to stifle or hinder such a force through “counting daisy petals” or “moonlight duets” (Saint-Point 131). Instead, one must “make lust into a work of art” (Saint-Point 132). Contrary to the Fascist notion of lust as something to be repressed, sentimentalized, and nationalized, Saint-Point and the Futurists
maintain that one must channel such energy as a catalyst for creativity. For Futurists, lust is a “perpetual battle that is never won,” which renders it an ideal impetus for artistic vision (Saint-Point 132).

In large part, Saint-Point’s 1913 manifesto clarifies and expands upon Marinetti’s conclusions, which he made four years prior in his “Manifesto of Futurism.” Specifically, Marinetti contends that “no work that lacks an aggressive character can be considered a masterpiece.” He characterizes ideal poetry by stipulating that it “must be conceived as a violent assault launched against unknown forces” (Marinetti 51). By arguing that lust must become a “work of art,” and by referring to it in militaristic terms, as “a perpetual battle that is never won,” Saint-Point corroborates Marinetti’s claim that art cannot exist without struggle. She then furthers Marinetti’s declaration, by partially characterizing the nature of this struggle, which serves as a prerequisite for creating truly meaningful art. As an eternal conflict between desire and satisfaction, lust qualifies as proper inspiration for a “masterpiece,” according to Marinetti’s criterion. In other words, Marinetti’s definition of art consists of “movement and aggression, feverish insomnia, the racer’s stride, the mortal leap, the slap and the punch” (Marinetti 51). Saint-Point concurs with the worthiness of these attributes, but adds a few of her own, such as “the painful joy of flesh fulfilled” (Saint-Point 130). As for Marinetti’s description of poetry as “a violent assault launched against unknown forces,” Saint-Point agrees with this as well, describing lust as “a carnal search into the unknown, just as thought is the mind’s search into the unknown” (Saint-Point 130). By combining Marinetti’s use of mystical language with his warlike sensibilities, Saint-Point effectively makes the Futurist case for lust as an effective stimulus for artistic creation. She also eviscerates the sentimentality and “literary nostalgia,” which informed Fascist curriculum.
Nevertheless, distaste for celibacy and prudishness were not the only motivations behind Futurist anti-clericalism. The work of Friedrich Nietzsche features prominently among Marinetti’s “mixed bag of political influences,” especially in regard to their shared anti-theism (Ialongo 19). For Marinetti, Saint-Point, and the Futurists generally, adherence to Christian doctrine breeds sentimentality, traditionalism, and repression of the individual spirit. Marinetti pithily contrasts Christian morality with Futurist ethics in his “La nuova religione – morale della velocità” (“The New Religion – Morality of Speed” or “The New Ethical Religion of Speed”).

According to Marinetti’s summation, Christian ethics “protected man’s physiological structure against the excesses of sensuality” (Marinetti 224). In contrast, “Futurist morality will protect man against the inevitable decay produced by slowness, memory, analysis, rest, and habit” (Marinetti 224). Such an ethical code exalts “human energy, multiplied a hundredfold by velocity,” which will “dominate Space and Time” (Marinetti 224). Thus, while Christianity urges its adherents to inhibit and stifle their innermost desires, Futurism elevates worldly pleasures, so long as they promote the vitality of the human spirit and innovation.

Ialongo briefly illustrates the Nietzschean nature of Marinetti’s anti-clericalism by quoting from Nietzsche’s 1895 treatise, Der Antichrist (The Antichrist). In the polemical tract, Nietzsche condemns Christianity as exalting “all that is weak and base, with all failures, it has made an ideal of whatever contradicts the instinct of the strong life to preserve itself” (Nietzsche 571). Nietzsche’s criticism of Christianity, as a debilitating force that enfeebles the strong, exerted an “undeniable” influence upon Marinetti and the Futurist movement (Ialongo 33). This indebtedness to Nietzsche’s philosophy clearly manifests itself in both “The New Religion – Morality of Speed” and Saint-Point’s “Futurist Manifesto of Lust.”
In the latter manifesto, Saint-Point specifically denounces Christianity for describing lust as “a vice to be repressed.” As a rejection of this austere view of carnal desire, she declares that “for a strong race, [it] is not a mortal sin, no more than pride” (Saint-Point 130). She then goes on to describe lust as an “activating virtue.” Thus, for Saint-Point, as for Nietzsche, one must reject Christian morality, on the grounds that it requires the strong to repress their inclination toward righteous, life-affirming actions. Instead, it extols repression, stagnation, and asceticism. In time, the practice of such repression mutilates the noble spirit, rendering it impotent. Thus, Saint-Point argues that lust, far from being repressed, should inspire artistic creation. As such, her revolt is not simply against sentimentalism, but she is likewise opposed to Christianity, because it, like sentimentalism, diminishes the aristocratic spirit.

Marinetti’s ideal morality also seeks to dismantle the oppressive repression inherent to Christianity. According to him, far from being maligned and subdued, individuals must cultivate and actively channel “human energy,” or instincts. Only through “destain for obstacles” and “the desire for the new and unexplored,” a concept Marinetti refers to as “velocity,” can human beings become “strong, optimistic, invincible, [and] immortal” (Marinetti 225-229). In a 1911 treatise, Marinetti outlines his Nietzschean interpretation of morality even more clearly. The text was originally published in French as “Le mépris de la femme” (“The Contempt of the Woman”), and is often anthologized in English under the less provocative title, “Against Sentimentalized Love and Parliamentarianism.” In the work, he defines virtue as “whatever develops and increases the physical, intellectual, and instinctive activities of mankind, urging the fulfillment of man’s most splendid being” (Marinetti 67). Accordingly, vice consists of “anything that erodes and interrupts the development of these activities” (Marinetti 67). Naturally, in his 1918 political manifesto, Marinetti would add anti-patriotic activities to his list of unpardonable sins.
Nevertheless, his language here corroborates Nietzsche’s definition of wrongdoing, as that which “contradicts the instinct of the strong life to preserve itself.” While Marinetti’s nationalism would ultimately contradict Nietzschean individualism, one would be remiss to deny Nietzsche’s influence on Futurist morality.

These prevalent Nietzschean impulses within Futurism create further discrepancies, in regard to its ideological relationship to Fascism. Fascists did not present themselves as outwardly hostile to Christianity. According to The Doctrine of Fascism, “The Fascist State does not create a ‘God’ of its own,” nor does it aim to “expel religion from the minds of men,” as Bolshevism had done (Mussolini 56). Rather than denouncing the Christian faith as a debilitating force which corrupts the strong, “Fascism respects the God of the ascetics” (Mussolini 56). The way in which Fascism sought to appeal to the austere Christian sensibility illustrates one of the most pervasive conflicts between Futurism and Fascism.

Unlike the Fascists, the Futurists explicitly sought to create a new religion. Marinetti’s “religion of speed” not only subverts Christian morality, but also replaces Christian rites with its own ceremonies. “If to pray means to communicate with divinity,” Marinetti proposes, then one should “run with all speed to pray” (Marinetti 225). Marinetti encourages acolytes to “kneel on the rails to pray to divine speed” (Marinetti 225). He then describes “the inebriation of great speeds in cars” as representing “the joy of feeling oneself merged with the only divinity” (Marinetti 226). Thus, driving, especially at an accelerated speed, replaces the Christian Eucharist, by proposing a new form of apotheosis. Providing a framework for a religious creed and a form of worship, Marinetti defines an ecumenical hierarchy and further elaborates on what constitutes “divinity” within the new faith. “Sportsmen,” he proclaims, “are the first catechumens of this religion” (Marinetti 226). He also designates gasoline, automobile tires,
battlefields, machine guns, trains, train stations, and other symbols of modernity as “divine” (Marinetti 226).

When one closely examines this manifesto, it appears as though Marinetti’s “new religion” serves as a metaphor for a novel ethical system. However, even if one concludes that Marinetti does not actually wish to “create a ‘God’ of [his] own,” one must nevertheless accept that he strives to “expel [Christian] religion from the minds of men.” In either case, Marinetti certainly does not revere, nor even begrudgingly admire, the Christian faith. Even Mussolini’s attempts to consolidate power through compromise with the Vatican disgusted Marinetti. For example, when Mussolini signed the Lateran Accords in 1929, which established the Vatican as its own sovereign territory, Marinetti “consciously buried his private resentment” (Ialongo 20). Marinetti’s acquiescence yet again displays his willingness to renounce his radical ideals, in order to promote his nationalistic fervor. The fact that Mussolini had “strengthened the people’s bond with the state without weakening the state’s authority” was “all that mattered” to Marinetti (Ialongo 20-21).
6 NIETZSCHEAN AMORALITY AND PROGRESSIVE NATIONALISM

In order to affect any political change whatsoever under Fascism, Marinetti would have to stifle public pronouncements of his Nietzschean, anti-clerical position. Furthermore, his attempt to synthesize Nietzsche’s thinking with nationalism created “a series of intellectual problems that were never really resolved” (Ialongo 21). In one of Zarathustra’s speeches, he argues for the dissolution of nationalism. “Only where the state ends,” Nietzsche declares through Zarathustra, “there begins the human being who is not superfluous: there begins the song of necessity, the unique and inimitable tune” (Nietzsche 163). Marinetti certainly concurs with Nietzsche’s definition of “goodness” as “that which invigorates the strong.” However, he, unlike Giovanni Papini, would never arrive at the conclusion that the dismantling of the State would allow human beings to reach their full potential. Quite the contrary, according to “Beyond Communism,” the interests of the State must take precedence over individual freedom. “The idea of the fatherland,” Marinetti observes, “cannot be abolished except by taking refuge in a form of egotistical absenteeism” (Marinetti 256). As an example of such reprehensible narcissism, Marinetti cites cosmopolitanism. To identify oneself as a “citizen of the world” equates to arrogantly boasting “Damn Italy, Europe, Humanity, I’ll think of myself” (Marinetti 256).

A disavowal of one’s homeland denotes a misanthropic denunciation of humanity itself, according to Marinetti. Contrary to Nietzsche’s position, Marinetti forcefully stipulates that “to deny the fatherland is the same as to isolate, castrate, shrink, denigrate, or kill yourself” (Marinetti 256). In his “Manifesto of the Italian Futurist Party,” Marinetti advocates for the “patriotic education of the proletariat,” precisely as a means of combatting the disastrous effects of cosmopolitanism and anti-nationalism. In the same work, Marinetti proposes “revolutionary nationalism,” which would promote “the freedom, the well-being, the physical and intellectual
betterment, the strength, progress, grandeur, and pride of the entire Italian people” (Marinetti 247). In the context of this treatise, the ideal human is one who can develop his or her own unique talents in service of the fatherland; the individual only maintains his or her worth in reference to the collective. While the ideal Futurist State extols individualism, it inevitably restricts one’s liberties. This concept of individualism as ultimately serving the needs of the State blatantly contradicts Nietzsche’s description of the “overman,” who can only exist “where the state ends” (Nietzsche 163).

In *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik (The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music)*, Nietzsche claims that it is “only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified” (52). In spite of Marinetti’s modernist sensibilities, he would never accede to purely artistic amorality. Although his founding manifesto outlines a crusade against moralism, even his most irreverent treatises implore citizens to possess a patriotic countenance. In the context of his “new religion,” he sanctifies patriotism, referring to it as “the direct velocity of a nation” (Marinetti 226). The essence of velocity consists of “an intuitive synthesis of all forces in movement” and a “synthesis of all forms of courage in action” (Marinetti 225). Marinetti’s new faith replaces traditional notions of “good and evil” with “speed” as the paramount virtue, and “slowness” as a capital sin (225). Consequently, by referring to patriotism as “the direct velocity of a nation,” Marinetti characterizes this love of one’s fatherland as courageous and virtuous, in the sense that it exists as a reflection of speed.

Contrary to Marinetti’s stated disdain for moralism in his founding manifesto, his ideology, unlike Nietzsche’s, does not completely lack ethical standards. Rather than eliminating moralism, Marinetti has consciously substituted traditional morality. His new ethical code seeks to rejuvenate the strong. Perhaps more importantly, it maintains that fervent, forward-thinking
nationalism provides the best way for both the individual and the collective to realize their true potential. Just as his politics attempts to stroke a balance between anarchism and nationalism, his morality strives to amalgamate individualism with collectivism.

Marinetti’s description of patriotism as “the direct velocity of a nation” not only describes the individual’s relation to the State, but it also hints at the uniqueness of his conceptualization of the State itself. In *The Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini defines the State as “the conscience and universal will of man in his historical existence” (41). Under Fascism, one is nothing without history, and one cannot exist outside of it, because one exists as part of a cohesive whole, which forms the framework of the State. In contrast, Marinetti spent a considerable amount of his political career attempting to extricate The State from the confines of history.

In his 1919 manifesto “Vecchie idee a braccetto da separare” (“Old Ideas That Go Hand in Glove but Need to Be Separated”), Marinetti himself recognizes that the popular notion of nationalism requires a sense of historical continuity. “Whenever you say ‘nationalism,’ you immediately think of a conservative spirit, of a systematically greedy imperialism, of a spirit of tradition and reaction, of police repression, militarism, emblazoned nobility, and clericalism” (Marinetti 297). He then repeats the refrain: “Ideas that go hand in glove but must be ruthlessly separated” (Marinetti 297). He also refutes the traditional definition of “revolution” as being associated with “antipatriotism,” “internationalism,” and “pacifism,” before repeating his mantra again (Marinetti 297). These commonplace interpretations of “nationalism” and “revolution” hold them to be antithetical concepts. In that regard, it is no wonder that Marinetti’s wish to combine “patriotism” with “the destructive action of libertarians [or anarchists]” would seem “a mere joke to the political establishment” (Marinetti 298). In order to illustrate this paradox,
Marinetti rhetorically asks, “Why on earth was the word ‘patriotism’ not accompanied on that occasion by its friend, monarchy of order and reaction?” (Marinetti 298).

Marinetti answers his own inquiry by arguing that these two ideas joined together in May of 1915, when he, Mussolini, and other Italian nationalists took part in pro-war protests in Milan and Rome (298). These demonstrators sought to pressure the Italian government into entering World War I. According to Marinetti, when they demanded that Italy take up arms, their actions denoted both radicalism and patriotism (298). In his mind, this act of defiance and unity changed the political landscape forever. “Nowadays,” Marinetti boasts, “we separate the idea of the Nation from that of the priest-ridden Monarchy. We link the idea of Nation with those of bold Progress and revolutionary, antireactionary democracy” (Marinetti 298).

Marinetti associates Mussolini with his notion of an “antireactionary democracy,” which he had outlined a year earlier in the “Manifesto of the Italian Futurist Party.” However, in May of 1920, Marinetti would disavow Fascism, having found that Mussolini had failed to enact the more radical prescriptions of the Futurist program at the Fascist congress (Ialongo 96). Following Mussolini’s decision, most of the other Futurists permanently abandoned Fascism as well (Adamson, Avant-Garde Florence 229). They, like Marinetti himself, were disillusioned with Mussolini’s increasingly reactionary platform. However, unlike Marinetti, they had also grown weary of political affairs in general, instead opting for “the uncompromising world of pure culture” (Adamson, Avant-Garde Florence 229). Nationalistic fervor did not compel them to continue grappling with ideological conflict, as with Marinetti.
7 THE PROBLEM OF ARTOCRACY

In spite of his momentary departure from political life, Marinetti’s writings still display a fixation on the individual’s relation to the State. In November of 1922, a mere few days after Mussolini had assumed power, Marinetti published an anti-socialist polemic, “Ad ogni uomo, ogni giorno un mestiere diverso! Inegualismo e Artecrazia” (“To Every Man, a New Task Every Day! Inequality and the Artocracy”). Although he had agreed to rejoin Fascism in September of 1922, Marinetti describes politics as “an extremely stubborn leprosy-cholera-syphilis” and encourages Italians to “quarantine, as soon as possible, those who are infected” (Marinetti 355). He immediately refutes his own anti-political stance by advocating for the dissolution of such “old, outworn, grubby ideas” as “Equality, Justice, Fraternity, Communism, and Internationalism” (Marinetti 355). Marinetti even abandons the idea of universal suffrage, which was the signature policy of his Futurist Party. When one considers these totalitarian prescriptions, it may seem as though he had finally abandoned his radical program, in complete subservience to Fascism.

However, Marinetti also advocates for “originality in the individual” and implores his reader to “push [uniqueness] to the extreme” (Marinetti 355). Through “multiplying differences” and “dynamic Inequality,” the individual can distinguish himself or herself from “the huge, heavy, muddy whole” (Marinetti 355). As in the “Manifesto of the Italian Futurist Party,” Marinetti postulates that the practice of individual liberties will create a “proletariat of geniuses,” who will rule over Italy. Whether this “proletariat of geniuses” serves in Parliament, or rules by “artocracy,” is of no consequence. In both instances, the Futurist State allows for a form of
liberty that stands antithetical to Fascism. For the Fascists, tradition and a shared history ensure one’s subservience to the State. When one defines the concept of nationalism in this way, Marinetti’s proposal seems absurd. This entirely unique “proletariat of geniuses” is impossible, because no being can exist outside of the State, or without the bond of tradition; under Fascism, no one can transcend what Marinetti disparagingly refers to as the “the huge, heavy, muddy whole.”

Marinetti’s continuing insistence upon individual liberty illustrates why he ultimately failed to affect change within the Fascist movement. Polemic treatises and fiery speeches notwithstanding, he could not unify Futurism with Fascism. Rather than simply living an isolated life, devoid of any political influence whatsoever, Marinetti chose to support Mussolini’s government on the basis of its anti-socialism and nationalism (Ialongo 124-125). From his return to Fascism in 1922 until his death in 1944, Marinetti would both sing Mussolini’s praises and denounce reactionary tendencies within Fascism. However, he never succeeded in implementing his radicalism, which encapsulates the iconoclastic spirit of Futurist art and politics alike. As Ialongo argues, were Marinetti able to successfully harmonize Futurist individualism with Fascist collectivism, he never would have left Fascism in 1920 (Ialongo 125).
8 FUTURISM, FASCISM, AND GENDER POLITICS

Futurist nationalism not only conflicts with libertarianism, but also results in an ambivalent relationship to feminism. Saint-Point’s empowering “Futurist Manifesto of Lust” provides women with agency by arguing that women are “no less lustful than men” (Adamson, Avant-Garde Florence 176). Furthermore, women also recognize the necessity and sensuality of violence, which furthers the Futurist cause (Adamson, Avant-Garde Florence 177). From Saint-Point’s perspective, women uphold an integral role within the Futurist movement. They are not merely the passive muses of antiquity. Instead, they take an active role in satisfying their carnal desires, and in creating art inspired by the physical sensation of longing.

In apparent contrast to Saint-Point’s viewpoint, Marinetti argues in the founding manifesto that Futurists must display “contempt for woman” (Marinetti 51). In 1912, Saint-Point published “Manifesto della donna futurista” (Manifesto of the Futurist Woman”), largely in response to Marinetti’s troublesome assertion. She rejects the traditional biological dichotomy between men and women, arguing instead that “[humanity] is composed only of FEMININITY and MASCULINITY” (Saint-Point 110). “Every superman,” Saint-Point posits, “every hero to the extent that he has epic value, every genius to the extent that he is powerful, is the prodigious expression of a race and an era precisely because he is simultaneously composed of feminine and masculine elements” (Saint-Point 110). Gender is a fluid synthesis of femininity and masculinity. In order to form a “complete being,” one must cultivate both traits (Saint-Point 110). It is not that women are inherently inferior, a misogynistic idea underlying Gentile’s educational reforms. Rather, both sexes become impotent, if they seek to develop only one of these two dispositions. Saint-Point pithily summarizes this precept by observing that “an individual exclusively male is nothing more than a brute; an individual exclusively feminine is nothing more than a girl” (Saint-
Point 110). True greatness cannot exist within an individual without an adequate degree of both elements.

Saint-Point’s microcosmic prescription, that an individual must balance masculinity and femininity, also has macrocosmic implications. According to her paradigm, one can measure the relative prosperity of a society by its ability to affect this equilibrium throughout history. “Fecund periods” are those which embrace both masculinity and femininity (Saint-Point 110). Eras characterized exclusively by masculinity produced few heroes, and instead resulted in needless, brutish bloodshed (Saint-Point 110). Historical periods preoccupied only with femininity sterilized the “heroic spirit” and “annihilated themselves in dreams of peace” (Saint-Point 110). Both masculinity and femininity are not self-sufficient entities. In isolation, masculinity causes brutal destruction, while femininity in isolation results in a stagnant calm, devoid of progress. In her criticism of femininity, Saint-Point echoes Marinetti’s description of war as “the only hygiene of the world.” Taken as such, peacetime is dangerous; it results in sentimentalism and nostalgia, which deprives the human spirit of the vitality necessary for innovation (Saint-Point 110).

Saint-Point depicts early 20th-century Italy as a period saturated with feminine energy. Accordingly, Italy needs “virility,” irrespective of whether it derives from men or women (Saint-Point 110). Futurism, “with all its exaggerations,” correctly exhorts Italians, including women, to cultivate “virility” and “brutality” (Saint-Point 110). In order to counterbalance the excess of femininity within Italian society, “only the opposite exaggeration will be healthy.” Accordingly, “IT IS THE BRUTE THAT MUST BE PROPOSED AS A MODEL” (Saint-Point 110). In this context, the ideal women occupy several roles. They are the “warriors who fight more ferociously than men,” the “lovers who incite,” and the “destroyers who contribute to racial
selection by smashing the fragile” (Saint-Point 111). Cleopatra and Joan of Arc are among her models of ideal womanhood (Saint-Point 111).

Saint-Point advises women to “launch a shout of war” and to “proceed to unexpected conquests,” by “riding upon her instincts with joy” (Saint-Point 111). Such a perspective on femininity as influenced by instinct renders her views on womanhood rather difficult to categorize. Berghaus briefly alludes to this discrepancy by remarking that while Saint-Point advocated for the “total equality of the sexes,” she nevertheless rejected feminism (30). The feminist movement “had focused too much on appealing to the intellect rather than the instinct” (Berghaus 30). A woman’s instinct will allow her to be “freed from every constraint” (Saint-Point 112). One should therefore seek to harness this primordial force, rather than subdue it through rational thought (Saint-Point 112).

Like the feminists, Saint-Point believed in the equality of the sexes (Berghaus 30). However, her strategy for attaining sovereignty for women requires them to harness their instincts, rather than their intellect. Considering the nuances inherent to Saint-Point’s views on womanhood, it is problematic to dichotomize Futurist gender politics as “feminist” or “antifeminist.” Saint-Point was a feminist, in the sense that she believed that women are equal to their male counterparts. She also viewed gender as a spectrum, a complex interchange between the individual and society. This notion of gender as a fluid construct bears remarkable similarity to Simone de Beauvoir’s 1949 claim in *Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex)* that “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (Beauvoir 283). The construct of femininity exists irrespective of “biological, psychic, or economic destiny” (Beauvoir 283). Instead, “civilization as a whole” materializes “this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine” (Beauvoir 283). In other words, society itself informs the expectations
commonly associated with womanhood. Neither young boys nor young girls have any conception of themselves as masculine or feminine entities, because “they apprehend the universe through their eyes and hands, and not through their sexual parts” (Beauvoir 283). They exist only as a genderless subject, a tabula rasa. This tabula rasa, or cogito, as Judith Butler refers to it, “somehow takes on or appropriates” the gender assigned to them by society. According to Butler, this subject, or cogito, could alternatively “take on some other gender,” under certain circumstances (11).

In her “Manifesto of the Futurist Woman,” Saint-Point argues that not only can an individual “take on some other gender,” but they must do so, in order to become a “complete being.” The cogito must resist subsuming its traditional gender role, so as to arrive at what Saint-Point refers to as “genius” and “heroism.” Both men and women should resist becoming static entities, limited by the prospects of their prescribed gender roles. In short, Saint-Point would concur with Beauvoir, in regard to the idea that femininity exists as a social construct. Saint-Point argues, however, that women must counter their femininity with masculinity.

Although Saint-Point strongly disagrees with Gentile and the Fascists about women’s biological inferiority, she nevertheless fails to completely embrace feminine empowerment. As with Marinetti’s cognitive dissonance between libertarianism and militaristic nationalism, Saint-Point’s own warlike inclinations require that women play a particular, subservient role within the State. She implores women to become the “ferocious and egoist mother,” who “JEALOUSLY GUARDS HER CHILDREN” (Saint-Point 112). However, she emphasizes that the woman’s role as a caretaker should only persist “AS LONG AS [HER CHILDREN] HAVE NEED OF HER PROTECTION” (Saint-Point 112). Once her children develop the ability to fend for themselves, the mother stunts their growth by insisting in futility upon shielding them from the
outside world. Whether the man be a son or a father, Saint-Point advises mothers to “let [him] live his own life of audacity and conquest as soon as he possesses physical strength” (112). The woman who instead prostrates herself before her lover with “tears and sentimentalism” is more contemptible than a prostitute (Saint-Point 113). The woman of sentimentalism emasculates and devitalizes her lover, while at least a prostitute “impels a man, by prompting him to boast, to preserve his domination over the depths of the city with a revolver in his hand” (Saint-Point 113). The former invites stagnation and impotence, whereas the latter “cultivates energy that could serve better causes” (Saint-Point 113). Inevitably, these “better causes,” which women must serve, involve men “warring and struggling” (Saint-Point 113). In order to aid these noble and heroic exploits, women must bear children, and raise them “in ample freedom, through complete development” (Saint-Point 113). Mothers must ensure that their offspring affect the proper balance between femininity and masculinity, to arrive at “completeness.”

As in Marinetti’s founding manifesto, Saint-Point expresses a wish to free womankind from “MORALS AND CONVENTIONS,” through the cultivation of “SUBLIME INSTINCT” (113). This primordial force will allow women to freely indulge in “VIOLENCE AND CRUELTY” (Saint-Point 113). For Saint-Point, as for Marinetti, warfare stands as “the only hygiene of the world.” Nevertheless, a woman’s place is not on the battlefield. Instead, Saint-Point relegates her to the household, to enable men to attain glory through conquest. In this way, Saint-Point arrives at the same contradiction as Marinetti, whose nationalism prevents the full realization of individual liberty. Saint-Point wishes to free women from oppression, and argues that they are equal to men. However, her glorification of war requires women to maintain their place as homemakers, albeit ones who strive to instill independence in their children, rather than implicitly nurturing them. In short, Saint-Point has not liberated women from domestic life. Even
so, it is problematic to label her and the Futurists as categorically “antifeminist,” because they, unlike the Fascists, did not recognize women as biologically inferior. Furthermore, Saint-Point’s two manifestos seek to free women from passive sentimentality, in favor of active sensuality and vitality. Accordingly, to deny that Saint-Point’s work possesses feminist tendencies is as absurd as to deny that Marinetti’s work displays anarchist and libertarian leanings. In both cases, they aim to liberate the human spirit from the destructive forces of tradition, but fall short of this lofty ambition, due to their pervasive nationalism and preoccupation with militarism.

While Saint-Point attempts to subvert traditional feminine conventions, she ultimately acquiesces to them, just as Marinetti proves largely subservient to totalitarianism. Clara Orban illuminates this discrepancy, in her observation that Saint-Point “attempts at times to break from the female stereotypes, but ultimately succumbs to Marinetti’s virile propaganda” (65). In her discussion of Marinetti’s 1920 manifesto, “Contro il lusso femminile” (“Against Female Luxury”), Orban describes his ambivalent position as an attempt to both “liberate women and conversely to relegate them to their stereotypical role of womb-producer” (55). Scholars often attribute her categorization of this specific manifesto to the Futurist view of women in general, as being rife with contradiction.

Other Futurist women are just as conflicted as Saint-Point in their attempts to reconcile the “liberated woman” with her duties imposed by patriarchal norms. In “Le donne del posdomani” (“Women of the Near Future”), written by Rosa Rosà in 1917, she discusses how women’s roles shifted during World War I, particularly regarding their participation in the workforce. She remarks that “women are useful now, very useful” and encourages her readers to ponder “how openly their importance has been recognized, far more than even the most feminist of feminists could have hoped” (Rosà 233-34). Unlike Saint-Point, Rosà does not criticize the
feminists, but rather accepts that their efforts have afforded social mobility for women.

Furthermore, the idea that “women are useful now” implies that they are far more suited for the workforce than they ever were for their patriarchally prescribed role as “womb-producers.” As such, from Rosà’s point of view, it would be quite unfortunate indeed for women to return to their traditional role. Rosà contends that the role of women “will never become as narrow as it was before,” an optimistic prediction that ultimately proved untrue once the Fascists came to power (Rosà 234).

In spite of Rosà’s hopeful appraisal of women’s changing social roles, she also embodies the same contradiction as Saint-Point and Marinetti. Namely, her preoccupation with the “energy of the nation” requires that women maintain a characteristic “passionate tenderness,” which “no social transformation will be able to destroy in the heart of a woman who truly loves” (Rosà 234). As with Saint-Point, this “passionate tenderness” abhors the “passion of little conceited dolls” (Rosà 234). Instead of assuming a subservient position to men, women assume the role of “companions tempered by the greatness of the times” and work alongside men as “strong women” (Rosà 234).

As with Saint-Point, Rosà’s vision of women allows for vitality, but not independence. Although Rosà does not explicitly relegate women to the role of “womb-producer,” lamenting that a “maternal temperament” forces women to “live more for others than themselves” (Rosà 244), she nevertheless requires them to altruistically serve patriotic causes. “Women,” for Rosà, constitute beings who consciously reject “pleasurable idleness” (Rosà 234). This prescribed purpose, while far more charitable than Gentile’s view of women, nevertheless requires them to sacrifice themselves to the State. In this sense, Rosà’s women are just as confined as stifled as those of Marinetti and Saint-Point. They must become “heroic,” like their male counterparts;
they are required to reject femininity, in favor of virility. Only by assuming a more masculine countenance can women emerge as a “superior type,” which bears a striking similarity to Saint-Point’s “complete being” (Rosà 246). In Rosà’s laconic treatise, we see a paradox that recurs throughout Futurist thought: In order to achieve empowerment, women must relinquish their femininity. However, the Futurist criterion for women’s empowerment does not necessarily constitute misogyny as such, because men must also embrace the tendencies of the opposite sex.

Scholars are sharply divided about how to categorize Futurist women, who were neither feminist nor strictly speaking antifeminist. Orban credits Futurist women with finding “ways to stake small claims to their speech, as well as their bodies, even during the height of political repression” (73). However, other historians and literary critics affect a less conciliatory tone when discussing the relationship between women Futurists and reactionary politics. For example, Grazia argues that Futurists, and Italian cultural movements in general, merely accommodated Fascist thought, or resorted to what Lucia Re refers to as “self-annihilation” or suicide (80).

For my part, I am inclined to concur with Orban. Particularly in regard to sexuality and maternity, Futurist women advocated for ideas that were subversive, in terms of Fascist thought. While they certainly were not feminists, privileging masculinity over its feminine counterpart, they nevertheless recognized social change as inevitable and necessary. Even so, their nationalism prevented a full recognition of feminine autonomy, hence the “smallness” of their claims to feminine empowerment. When assessing the culpability of Futurist women in promoting patriarchal standards, one must recognize that they faced opposition from both the chauvinistic Marinetti, and later the reactionary Mussolini. Taken as such, one should avoid celebrating or condemning them, because they were operating under numerous constraints.
Accordingly, to refer to them as “problematically antifeminist” constitutes presentism, and a lack of appreciation for the historical context in which these women wrote.

Problematic as they may be by modern standards, the Futurist conceptualization of women differs starkly from that of Fascism. As Grazia maintains, Mussolini sought to return women to their sanctuary, the “home and hearth.” Yet Saint-Point and Rosà, particularly the latter, disparage the so-called “maternal temperament,” as being antithetical to female self-actualization. Women who possess the “maternal instinct” are deficient in a “conscious, autonomous, and self-reflecting selfhood,” which “alone are capable of knowing how to penetrate the world, UNDERSTANDING IT FULLY” (Rosà 244). Motherhood is not an ideal state, in the sense that it limits the cultivation of insight; it also renders women dependent on her children, who provide them with a sense of purpose. For Rosà, “there is a fundamental, inseparable difference between the two concepts “mother” and “free personality” (Rosà 244). A mother should cultivate the latter, for her own sake and that of her progeny (Rosà 244). Only then can both mother and child arrive at a “clear, strong, and distinct vision” of reality (Rosà 245).

Just as women must consciously reject their feminine nature, so too must womankind abandon the “maternal instinct.” Under Fascism, in contrast, maternity was “tantamount to the act of making babies,” which resulted in procreative matters “potentially [defining] every aspect of their social being” (Grazia 44). Far from being Saint-Point’s Cleopatra or Rosà’s “free personality,” women under Fascism were excluded from political and social life, because their “preeminent duty was to bear the nation’s children” (Grazia 44). Rosà in particular rejects the idea that women cannot have a political or social role in society. For her, the social changes that occurred during the Great War cannot and should not regress back to traditional social norms. As
for Saint-Point, while she is certainly less critical of motherhood than Rosà, she nevertheless maintains an image of maternal instinct that differs wildly from the doting, devoted mother of “home and hearth.” In spite of their differences, these Futurist female archetypes differ from the Fascist cult of maternity in that they allow women a measure of agency. Perhaps even more significantly, the Futurist notion of gender as a social construct refutes biological essentialism, upon which the Fascists based their sexual politics.
9 CONCLUSION

It is improbable that scholars will ever reach consensus about Futurism’s political orientation. For decades, the repugnance of Marinetti’s strong association with Mussolini curtailed a discussion of Futurist ideology. Even in the context of contemporary scholarship, the reactionary, nationalistic tendencies of the Futurists loom over academic discourse like a pervasive shadow. As I have shown, these very militaristic, totalitarian impulses fractured the Futurist movement, and left a conspicuous stain upon its legacy. Nevertheless, it is imperative that scholars strive toward a complete understanding of the mercurial Futurist doctrine. It is impossible to truly appreciate Futurist aesthetics without recognizing the ambivalent relationship between anarchic individualism and nationalism, which characterizes Futurist ideals.

Rather than dismissing Futurism entirely due to its espousal of nationalistic and patriarchal ideas, scholars should consider the effect that these reactionary tendencies had on the movement and its art. In regard to feminism and women’s rights, scholars should not perseverate upon Marinetti’s avowed “scorn for women.” Instead, they should evaluate the Futurist concept of “womanhood,” which complicates the typical biological connotations associated with the term. Correlatively, academics should examine the works of these women conscientiously. Hopefully, such an evaluation will yield an appreciation for the subtle ways in which women writers, such as Saint-Point and Rosà, promoted female agency within a patriarchal paradigm.
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