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International Journal of Comparative Literature and Arts

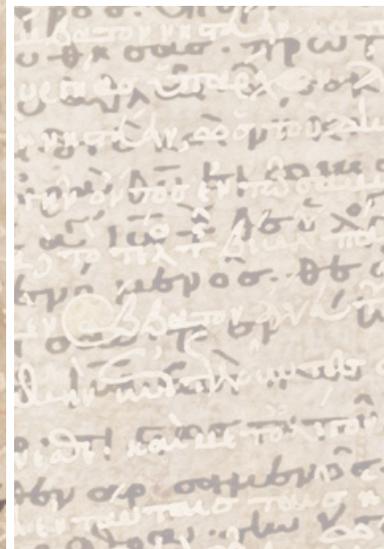
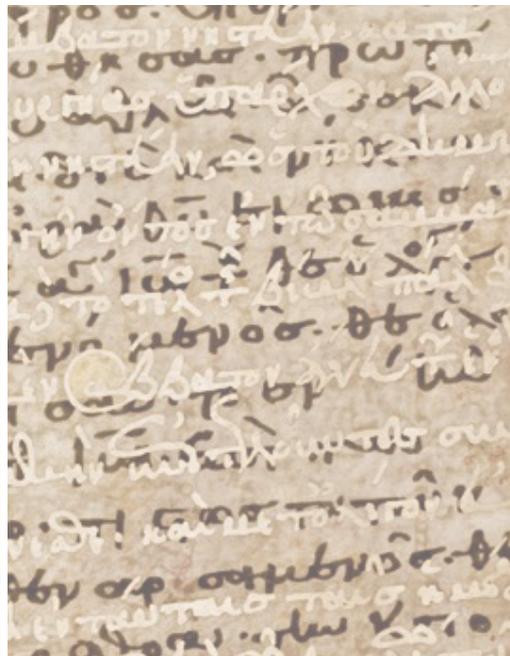
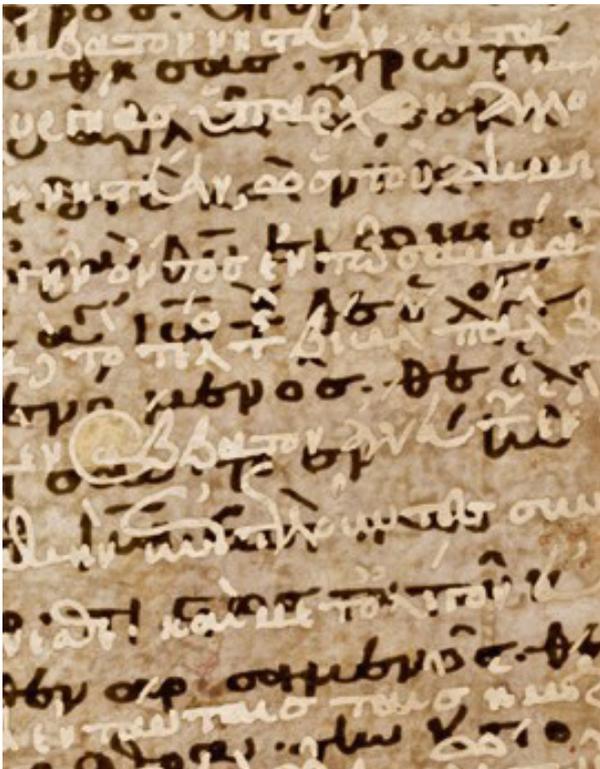
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Marinetti and the *Mafarka* Trial: Re-thinking the Early History of Futurism

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Abstract: The publication of the proceedings of the trial against his novel *Mafarka* showed Marinetti at his organizational and marketing best. It allowed him to depict the state as the very *passatista* and conservative government that Futurism would free Italy of. However, it also draws attention to the text of *Mafarka* and encourages us to place it into a broader political context, one in which the state's actions against Marinetti may have had more to do with his broader Futurist activities and not so much with the purported obscenity of the novel.

Keywords: Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Futurism, *Mafarka the Futurist*, trial.

On October 8, 1910, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the leader of the Futurist movement, walked into a courtroom in Milan to defend himself against the charge of an offense against public morality (“oltraggio al pudore”). The item that had caused such trouble was the Italian translation of his novel *Mafarka le futuriste*, which had been published in France the previous year, just after the release of the “Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism”. That manifesto, and Marinetti's other activities through 1909 and 1910, brought his Futurist movement immediate international attention. This two-day trial would bring further notoriety to the movement and its leader.

Marinetti had had some prior experience with trials against artists. He was expert for the defense at the trial of his friend Umberto Notari in 1906, who was similarly accused of an “oltraggio al pudore” for his novel *Quelle signore*. The resulting publicity had led to the book achieving blockbuster status in sales (Salaris 1990: 106). Marinetti had every intention of turning his trial into a similar spectacle, into a performance for the public. He was an expert in communicating with the people through the means of mass culture—the manifesto, the pamphlet, the poster, the press—and he knew how to communicate his ideas in a straight-

forward manner (Adamson 1997: 98). For him, this was more than a trial to determine whether he was a pornographer or not. It was also a trial wherein the state would have to explain how it could sequester some work and not others. Why was some art worthier of public consumption and not others? On what bases were these decisions being made, and by whom? In the end, this was a trial for intellectual freedom—a simple idea the press and the masses could rally around, even if they had never read *Mafarka*, or even cared for Futurism.

Before the trial Marinetti was not a stranger to the people of Milan, Italy, or even Europe. He was born in Alexandria, Egypt in 1876 to Enrico Marinetti and Amalia Grolli.¹ His education began with the French Jesuits in Egypt, making French his first language, and then continued on in Paris, Pavia, and Genoa. Marinetti had a love of literature early on, but attained a law degree in 1899 in deference to his father. However, after graduation he settled in Milan and began writing full time—his father's wealth afforded him this luxury. In Milan he published a series of works in French which brought him some attention, including *La Conquête des Étoiles* (1902), *Destruction* (1904), *Le Roi Bombace* (1905), and *La Ville Charnelle* (1908). He was also part of an Italian cultural and nationalist rebellion at the turn of the century. These critics lamented Italy's seeming cultural and political backwardness and the degenerative and leveling effects of parliamentary democracy.² In 1905 Marinetti contributed to this onslaught with his journal *Poesia*, which championed free verse over established forms of grammar and syntax. By 1908 Marinetti's interests became more broadly political. That year he joined the rising tide of radical nationalism that called for the conquest of Austrian-held Italian lands—Trieste and the Trentino—after Austria had annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina without any compensation to Italy, its ally in the Triple Alliance.³ Moreover, he was drawn to the labor activism of the revolutionary syndicalists after they had abandoned the reformist Italian Socialist Party, which had remained committed to parliamentary politics.⁴ His quest for artistic revolution merged that year with the political regeneration of radical nationalism and the violent activism found in syndicalism. By February 1909 these twin drives culminated in the publication of the founding manifesto of Futurism, which brought these interests together.⁵ It

¹ For the general contours of Marinetti's life, see Salaris (1997), Vaccari (1959), Agnese (1990), Lista (1976) and Guerri (2009).

² See, for instance, Adamson (1993). Marinetti was integral in the spread of Futurism to Florence.

³ For the development of Italian nationalism at the turn of the century, see De Grand (1978), Gaeta (1981[1965]), Perfetti (1983), Saladino (1965) and Thayer (1964).

⁴ For syndicalism, see Roberts (1979), Roth (1967) and Sternhell-Sznajder-Asheri (1994).

⁵ For this and other manifestos in English, see Rainey-Poggi-Wittman (2009) and Marinetti (2006).

was a wide-ranging document which called for the regeneration of Italy by breaking its dependence on its past glories. Museums, libraries, the established academies, as well as bourgeois moralism and feminism, were to be forgotten to make room for a new culture, a culture of the future, which rejuvenated the individual through the veneration of modern technologies (the speed of the automobile, the freedom of the airplane, the strength of steel), the glorification of war, patriotism, and militarism.⁶

Over the next few months Marinetti held a series of *serate*, or public performances, to spread his ideas. These events were preceded by copious advertisement, and the events themselves were a mixture of declamations of Futurist manifestos and poetry and the verbal abuse of the audience. The latter was specifically meant to shock the audience and to encourage general bedlam, which would inevitably require the intervention of the police, some arrests, and, most importantly, stories in the press the following day. The first event was held in Trieste in January 1910. Here, in this hotbed of irredentism, the Futurists declaimed their founding manifesto, but Marinetti made a point of emphasizing the group's commitment to patriotism and war. This, being delivered in an Austrian region with strong desires to unite with Italy, was very provocative, and that evening the Futurists had to scramble to avoid the Austrian authorities. A month later in Milan the Futurists similarly delivered their message of artistic renewal and militant patriotism. This time they were even more explicitly irredentist in their message. They performed an ode to the anti-Austrian general Vittorio Asinari di Bernezzo, who had just been forced to resign over his political views. Again, chaos ensued in the theatre and the police were called in, but the fighting continued nonetheless outside. It was after the Milan *serata* that the Futurists expanded beyond a purely literary movement, characterized by Marinetti himself and Aldo Palazzeschi, to include the painters Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, and Luigi Russolo. At the subsequent *serata* in Turin the crowd was introduced to the latter's "Manifesto of the Futurist Painters," which was also co-signed by Giacomo Balla and Gino Severini. When the group traveled down to Naples for a *serata* in April, the most violent of such events so far, the Futurists

⁶ During the Great War Marinetti wrote that "On 11 October 1908, after having worked six years on my international journal, Poesia, in order to free from traditional and commercial shackles the lyrical genius of Italy, threatened with death, I realized all of a sudden that the articles, the poems and the arguments were no longer enough. It was absolutely necessary to change methods, to descend into the streets to assault the theatres and introduce the fist into the artistic fight... It was the new formula of art/action, and a law for mental hygiene. It was a young, renovating flag, anti traditional, optimistic, heroic and dynamic, that was to be raised on the ruins of *passatismo* (the static, traditional, professorial, pessimistic, pacifist, nostalgic, decorative and aesthete state of mind)" (Salaris 1997: 58).

added the writer Francesco Cangiullo to their roster. The core group of the early Futurists was now virtually complete (Salaris 1997: 76-89; Ialongo 2015: 40-45). The last major *serata* before the trial was held in Venice on the first of August. Here Marinetti memorably accused the Venetians of acting like whores for its tourists, and were told that the city had to modernize to make Italy stronger. The Grand Canal had to be widened and deepened to become a great commercial port, and “once your canals have finally been filled in, trains and trams will be hurtling along the great streets built over them, bringing stacks of merchandise to a discerning public, which is rich, and busily employed by industrialists and businessmen!” (Marinetti 2006: 166-167). As such, by the time of the *Mafarka* trial the Futurists were already infamous, and the trial would be part of this aggressive marketing campaign for the movement.

The Italian translation of *Mafarka le futuriste: Roman africain* appeared in Italy in 1910 and was translated by Marinetti’s secretary Decio Cinti.⁷ When stripped of all the publicity generated by the trial over the novel’s alleged obscenity, the book reveals itself as simply a foundational text for what Marinetti strove to achieve in his transformation of Italy from the weak state it was in 1909 to the warrior nation he hoped it could become. It is a tale of Mafarka, a successful Arab general who, having usurped power from his uncle, conquers all his African enemies. However, in the midst of his triumphs, he loses his brother Magamal to an attack of rabid dogs sent by his enemies, and thereafter devotes himself to creating a son, both to replace his fallen brother, and to allow himself to surpass his own bodily limits and transfer his spirit into his son: the perfect Futurist man shorn of all weak emotions, created without the help of any woman, and born for conquest.

And thus the novel is a tale of denial. Denial on the part of Mafarka of all that would weaken him as he first conquers his empire and then steels himself for the perfection of his essence, which he will transfer to his son. Women and the lust they create are at the top of that list, as well as pointless rage, despair, and subservience—anything that weakens him. In the novel he is repulsed that his soldiers should celebrate their victory in the infamous “Rape of the Negresses”—the title of the first chapter, and the chapter which got Marinetti into trouble with the authorities. He counsels his brother against his reckless, unthinking courage, which was not effective in battle. He resists virtually all female advances throughout the story, going so far as to feed women to his sharks after they had sought to seduce him. When transporting his brother to

⁷ Cfr. Marinetti (1909) and Marinetti (1910).

his mother's hypogeum he nearly gives in to despair at his loss, but fights back the desire to leap into the sea and end his life. When his soldiers catch up with him and beg him to assume the supreme command of all that he had conquered, he refuses. To rule would make him soft; it was the conquest that mattered most. He then chased them away, cursing them for their desire to be subservient. They should seek to overrule their elders, just as he had overthrown his own uncle. And, finally, he commits himself to crafting a son without the "inefficient vulva", as he calls it. A son born of man only, free of feminine sentiment, able to reproduce himself, never needing sleep, and able to fly. Flight would enable the son not only to surpass his ancestors, but to sever his ties to the earth and conquer all before him.⁸ It was a sentiment further developed by Marinetti in his 1911 manifesto "Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine", in which he called for the fusion of man and machine in such a way that his will could be projected outward far beyond what he could do naturally, as when a pilot takes to the air. And, in order to do this, to prepare for the formation of mechanized and multiplied man, "it is necessary to drastically reduce the need for affection..." (Rainey-Poggi-Wittman 2009: 91). The new man would have no need for the woman as lover or mother. Sex would simply be an act of procreation, and not "genital distraction". Such energies, once wasted on women and love would now be directed at conquest, as the multiplied, mechanized man had mastered time and space (2009: 89-92).

Considering the difficulties the novel caused Marinetti, its purported obscenity has not been the focus of scholarly inquiry through the years. It is Marinetti's misogyny—only briefly mentioned in the trial⁹—that has been the focus of much of the scholarship on *Mafarka*, wherein women and the feminine become the repository of all that must be conquered in order for the new Futurist man to be born. Lucia Re in her seminal article "Futurism and Feminism" put the matter quite well:

Although she is still essential to the reproduction of the species and therefore very much an agent in the construction of the future, for Marinetti and the futurists woman embodies the antithesis of everything they value. Woman is passive, parasitical, peaceful, pacifist and

⁸ Cfr. Marinetti (1998): 28, 84, 102, 122, 141-44, 187-88, 195, 197. The phrase "inefficient vulva" appears on p. 188.

⁹ Cesare Sarfatti, one of Marinetti's lawyers, and no one else, used the term "misogino" once. The prosecutors' comments are not included in the published version of the trial, so it is not clear if they used the term. However, as Marinetti's team only mentioned it once, they did not feel the need to respond to prosecutors' comments, and thus it is likely the latter did not stress this particular issue in the trial. Additionally, Sarfatti's usage of "misogino" is somewhat confused. He claims that misogyny is the hatred of women and that Marinetti is a misogynist, but then advances Marinetti's claim in the dedication to *Mafarka* that the book is an attack on the feminine and all the vices that debilitate humanity, and not on women themselves. See Marinetti-Capuana (2016 forthcoming).

therefore past-oriented rather than future-oriented. Conditioned by her endless desire to love and be loved, woman is a slave to sentiments and sentimentalism, a prisoner of those very same static and suffocating social institutions which the futurists abhor most, namely marriage and the family. Woman represents, in other words, the negative “other” of futurist man, an “other” that must be repressed and exorcised if futurist man is to develop his revolutionary potential. (Re 1989: 254)

And, in *Mafarka*, Marinetti takes the process of freeing oneself from women to the ultimate level, wherein even their help in reproducing the species is eliminated (1989: 254). For Cinzia Blum *Mafarka* was Marinetti’s attempt to create a “Futurist fiction of power,” where man and the masculine could re-impose themselves on an ever-changing world wrought by modernity, in which traditional hierarchies were constantly challenged. Women and the feminine in the novel represent lust, despair, lack of resolution, and, in the imagery of miasma used to describe the rape scene of the initial chapter, a place of diluted, shifting identities. The only solution to temptation, frequently, is to respond with violence, to destroy those that seek to weaken Mafarka’s masculine resolve (Sartini Blum 1996: 17, 57, 59). Along the same lines, Barbara Spackman asks how in a world of hyper-masculine males, where women and the feminine are so hated, do these men maintain their heterosexual identity and ward off homosexual panic? Like Blum, she concludes that woman as person, or matter (nature, the Earth, Africa), must be a target of violence to release these libidinal energies. And, where there is intimacy between men, as in the kiss Mafarka gives first to his brother and then to his son, it can be accepted as permissible intimacy within the family (Spackman 1996: 55-56, 62, 74).¹⁰ For Christine Poggi, Mafarka’s creation of a son without the help of a woman similarly represented a battle against nature, regarded as feminine, in which one is born, lives, and dies. “The misogyny of the text,” she writes, “is an effect of a prior rejection of merely human, abject corporeality and hence, of mortality, which Marinetti projects onto femininity” (Poggi 2009: 159).¹¹

However, *Mafarka* has also lent itself to a variety of other readings, which have focused on the issue of race in the novel, the connection between Futurism and Fascism, and those that see the book as emblematic of Marinetti’s inadvertent or very purposeful feminism. Karen Pinkus sees *Mafarka* as a catalog of negative values projected onto blacks, which the bourgeois male must overcome to become stronger. Blacks, understood by Pinkus to include both the Arab Mafarka and the Africans he conquers, are the dark “other” and represent the primitive, the

¹⁰ The article by Spackman originally appeared in *Modernism/Modernity*, 1, 3 (1994): 89-107.

¹¹ An earlier version of this article appeared in *Modernism/Modernity*, 4, 3 (1997): 19-43.

bestial, the uncivilized, a lack of control, and, as Blum also argues, lack any sense of stable identity as they give in to their varied desires. Mafarka, she writes, does not represent just one thing in particular, “but potentially anything that is abject” (Pinkus 1995: 41). And it is this projection of the negative onto the dark “other” that connects Futurism to Fascism. She argues that after the surprisingly quick defeat of the Ethiopians in 1936 the regime had to quickly realign its propaganda messages in order to educate Italians as to their duty to dominate over, but never to mix with, their new African conquest. In order to develop this racist, colonialist mindset the regime looked to past iconographies that portrayed African blackness in a negative light, and this is the role that *Mafarka* played (1995: 32).¹²

Connections between Futurism and Fascism through the novel, though not through the prism of race, are also highlighted by Blum, who points to the common rhetoric of self-sacrifice, by Spackman, who focuses on the common themes of the conquest of the Africans, and by Alice Kaplan, who looks to the common glorification of the airplane, and flight more generally, as the means for regular man to both transcend his earthly limits and to dominate those under his gaze. For the latter, she points to the opening of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935) as a further example of this phenomenon. The film opens with a view of the world from a pilot’s perspective, and when that plane lands it is Hitler himself who alights, after having surveyed his newly conquered land (Kaplan 1986: 92). In this reading, Gazurmah, Mafarka’s winged, conquering son, and Hitler are bound together. “The airplane,” she writes, “that industrial carrier of Mafarka’s sexual fantasies, is the prime mover in the translation of a futurist spirit into a fascist one” (1986: 88).

Possibly the most interesting reading of *Mafarka*, as it most closely takes Marinetti at his own word concerning the point of the text, is that which claims it represents Marinetti’s feminism. In the dedication to the Italian translation of *Mafarka* Marinetti responded to his critics, which lamented the final part of his well-known phrase from point nine of the foundation manifesto: “We intend to glorify war—the only hygiene of the world—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of anarchists, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and contempt¹³ for women” (Rainey-Poggi-Wittman 2009: 51). To his fellow Futurists he wrote:

¹² Though this is a broadly accurate reading of *Mafarka* as representing the black as “other”, and is certainly accurate insofar as to how Marinetti depicted black Africans in the novel, it does not apply to Mafarka himself, who epitomizes the control, and consequent success, that Marinetti sought to emphasize in the work.

¹³ “Contempt” has also been translated as “scorn”.

When I told them ‘Scorn Woman!’ they all hurled foul abuse at me like brothel-keepers after a police raid! And yet it isn’t woman’s animal value that I’m talking about, but her sentimental importance.

I want to fight the gluttony of the heart, the surrender of parted lips as they drink the nostalgia of twilights...

I want to conquer the tyranny of love, the obsession with the one and only woman, the strong Romantic moonlight bathing the front of the Brothel. (Marinetti 1998: 1-2)

For both Re and Walter Adamson, Marinetti may have been far more a supporter of women’s liberation than either his contemporaries or scholars have accepted. Re argues that Marinetti, in spite of his relentless attack on the feminine, on love, and on sentiment, which is focused on women as their purveyors, there was also a strain in early Futurism which challenged the gender roles which perforce confined women to such sexualized roles and an inferior status in society. “Futurism from its inception,” she writes, “had the merit of raising issues regarding the representation and regimentation of sexuality, the political roots and ramifications of sexual behavior, and the ideological overdetermination of gender divisions and gender roles in cotemporary society” (Re 1989: 256). Adamson writes that “Marinetti’s notorious expression of a ‘scorn for woman’ in his founding manifesto has tended to obscure not only the enthusiasm many women felt for Futurism but also the nature of Marinetti’s ‘scorn’” (Adamson 1997: 102).¹⁴ The nature of this scorn was what Marinetti said it was, not a rejection of woman as a “biological category, but of the discursive position that the feminine had come to assume in fin-de-siècle life” (1997: 103).

The key points in this Marinetti-as-feminist interpretation are both Marinetti’s manifestos and the involvement of women in the movement. Re points to Marinetti’s 1910 manifesto “Against Sentimentalized Love and Parliamentarianism” which called for the vote for women. This suffragist demand, however, was hardly the traditional one. Marinetti claimed that “in her present state of servitude, both intellectual and erotic, woman, finding herself in an absolute state of inferiority from the point of view of intelligence and character, can only be a mediocre legislative instrument” (Marinetti 2006: 56). Thus, to give women the vote would hasten the collapse of a parliamentary system Marinetti hated, as it had become a bastion of lawyers in love with their own voices, having no real tie to their constituents. However, in spite of the rhetoric, Marinetti advanced a very real issue at the heart of all feminism: that biology was not destiny, that

¹⁴ These are sentiments further developed in Adamson (2007).

gender roles were constructed, and that women, given the right opportunity, would be the equal of men: “So far as the claimed inferiority of woman is concerned, we think that if her body and spirit had experienced an upbringing identical to that of the spirit and body of man, over very many generations, it might perhaps have been possible to speak of equality between the two sexes” (2006: 56). Moreover, Marinetti claimed that, whether women were aware of it or not, their demand for political rights was a challenge to these socially constructed gender roles: “They have a deep conviction that as mothers, brides, and lovers, they form a closed circle and are simply totally deprived of any positive role in society” (2006: 58). Marinetti subsequently revived this demand in the 1918 “Manifesto of the Futurist Political Party,” which called for the vote for women as well as the abolition of marriage, provision of easy divorces, and the availability of state-funded upbringing for unwanted children (2006: 272).

Of course, beyond this rhetoric, Marinetti himself did not do very much to advance the cause of women’s suffrage, and under the Fascist regime he accepted its conservative gender policies. But, in the early years of Futurism and through the war, his feminist rhetoric did inspire women to join the movement, and Marinetti welcomed them. Both Re and Adamson point to writers such as Eva Kühn Amendola (writing as Magamal), Valentine Saint-Point, Maria Ginnani, Enif Robert, Rosa Rosà, and Elda Norchi (writing as Futurluce) who all collectively challenged the idea of biological determinism and called for women to assert themselves and form their own identities. Moreover, they showed how the war had destroyed ideas of acceptable gender roles, as women were called upon to do formerly male duties when men were conscripted for service (Re 1989: 259-270; Adamson 1997: 102-105).¹⁵ And, though Re concedes that women were a fraction of the Futurist membership (Re 1989: 263), Adamson contends that “considering Marinetti’s many letters from *amiche* and the many women who attended his [*Mafarka*] trial and *serate*..., it is clear that Futurism appealed to many creative women tired of the limited and familiar options with which bourgeois life presented them and anxious to forge pathways of their own” (Adamson 1997: 104). Marinetti, Adamson notes, knew that if Futurism was to succeed in the modern world, it had to reach out to the masses, and this meant having to offer something to Italian women (1997: 105-106).

¹⁵ In a recent article Re provides a thorough investigation of how Enif Robert in her novel *Un ventre di donna* challenged the societal view of the “normal” woman as a passionless, heterosexual procreator with limited intellectual capacities. Instead, the protagonist in the novel seeks to define herself by her creativity, not her biology, and comfortably embraces her attraction to other women. See Re (2014).

Still, to the authorities who read through the Italian translation of *Mafarka*, the issue foremost in their mind was not the misogyny or feminism of its author, or the author's treatment of race, and, of course, they were not concerned with Fascism in 1910. Their primary concern was the novel's purported obscenity. If found guilty of "oltraggio al pudore," Marinetti would face up to 4 months in prison, a fine of 1000 Lire, and would forever be known as a simple pornographer. To combat the state's accusations Marinetti turned the trial into a public spectacle. In his journal *Poesia* he published an announcement that the book had been seized by the authorities, and claimed that all of Italy was surprised and indignant by the actions of the attorney-general of Milan, since all those who knew Marinetti knew he was a great artist with serious aesthetic intentions for his work. "La volgare accusa, quindi, non può sembrare che assurda" (Marinetti 2003: 233). He went on to state what would be his lawyers' line of defense in the trial: "*Mafarka il futurista* è in realtà un grande poema in prosa, lirico e drammatico, nel quale il Marinetti dà vita a una superba figura d'Uomo ideale, esaltando l'Eroismo e la Volontà come elementi di un trionfale Avvenire della nostra razza" (2003: 233).

The first day of the trial, October 8, 1910, drew a sizeable crowd, which included the noted Futurists Umberto Boccioni, Luigi Russolo, and Carlo Carrà, high-society women from Milan, and members of the press. Marinetti had a number of people speaking on his behalf. Luigi Capuana, author of realist literature and professor at the University of Catania, was the expert witness for the defense. Marinetti's lawyers included Innocenzo Cappa, Salvatore Barzilai, and Cesare Sarfatti. Cappa was a republican with strong nationalist sentiments, who would also defend famed syndicalist Filippo Corridoni the following year after he was arrested on charges of inciting class hatred (Rampazzo). Barzilai was a long-time lawyer and a conservative Liberal with irredentist sympathies when he was younger. At the time of the trial he was preoccupied by the growing intervention of the Giolittian regime into Italian society and its rampant corruption (Colapietra).¹⁶ Sarfatti was a high-ranking member of the Socialist Party in Milan (Cannistraro-Sullivan 1993: 43-61). Marinetti's team, beyond their commitment to defending their client, all came to the trial either ready to do battle with the government to defend a controversial figure

¹⁶ Giolitti was temporarily out of office at the time of the trial, but the decade leading up to the Great War is known as the Giolittian era because of his dominance of the political scene.

(Cappa), with deep suspicion of the government's over-reach (Barzilai), or were hostile to it (Sarfatti).¹⁷

After some preliminary remarks from Marinetti's lawyers regarding the absurdity of the charges, Marinetti delivered his opening statement and made a number of points his lawyers would further develop. He emphasized that his goal in writing *Mafarka*, his most favorite work, was nothing so banal as pornography. His goal was to renew Italy, to give to man a dream of his own perfection, free of lust, sleep, fatigue, and death. Thus, the offending chapter "The Rape of the Negresses" was written to show how Mafarka had escaped from "una gran fornace torrida di lussuria e di abbruttimento" through his heroic will. Additionally, the description of Mafarka's penis in the second chapter, "The Ruse of Mafarka-el-Bar," which similarly caused Marinetti trouble, he claimed it echoed the central role of the phallus found in African literature and in its society in general. Hence, he was only trying to be accurate in depicting his character, and a writer must be honest; he cannot cover over things because of popular sensibilities (Marinetti-Capuana 2016: 13). Finally, Marinetti pointed out to the court that a pornographer

avrebbe scelto un soggetto ben diverso, voglio dire un soggetto europeo, anzi cittadino, e avrebbe scritto per esempio un romanzo sui bassifondi milanesi, invece di un poema africano, acceso di una sbrigliata fantasia, concepito e scritto per pochi intenditori e assolutamente precluso alla maggioranza delle intelligenze, che disgraziatamente non hanno alcuna dimestichezza con la poesia. (2016: 14)

Profound applause greeted Marinetti's closing words.

For the remainder of the day Capuana offered his defense of Marinetti and his work, and the following day Cappa, Barzilai, and Sarfatti voiced theirs. Collectively, they all touched on the same major points, which, as they paralleled Marinetti's opening statement, showed a strategy had been worked out before-hand. First, they claimed that *Mafarka* was a work of art, not pornography, and should be treated as such. Consequently, why should it be sequestered when so many classic pieces of literature with similarly salacious sections were freely available to the public? The examples of such literature abounded in the trial, from Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, to Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (2016: 16, 37-38, 42, 44, 67, 71-76, 88). Second, they emphasized that one cannot simply read one chapter or a section of the book, as the attorney-general had done, focus on that, and then declare that the book is a

¹⁷ Marinetti had one other lawyer, a Brusorio, but his statements at the trial were not recorded in any detail.

work of pornography. In order to understand the purpose of the chapter or section, one must read the whole book to understand the context and purpose of these individual parts (2016: 18-19, 28-9, 33, 78). This then led to their third major point, that if one were to read the whole book they would see that Marinetti's goal was not to spread pornography, but to educate his readers that an ideal man should strive to master his desires so as to strengthen himself for the inevitable battles that he must face in life, either individually or as part of the nation (2016: 17-18, 52-55, 60, 76, 79, 80-81). The lawyers also focused on the technicalities of the charge and on whether it was legitimate. For instance, they asked if anyone had actually checked the translation for its accuracy with the French text. The translation was in fact the work of Decio Cinti, not Marinetti (2016: 30, 86-87). Additionally, the state needed to prove that the author intended to commit an "oltraggio al pudore," to corrupt society, and Barzilai and Sarfatti, in particular, did not see how this could be done. Barzilai focused on the fact that *Mafarka* was not a publicly declaimed work performed to an unsuspecting audience that had no choice but to hear its racy details. The novel was the exact opposite. It was written for the individual who made the choice to buy the book and then read it privately (2016: 48). And, Barzilai further noted, the state polices public morality, not private behavior, so then why would it be concerned with a book somebody bought and then read alone at home? (2016: 62-63). Sarfatti concluded his statement by pointing out, as Marinetti had done the previous day, that there was no intent at corrupting society, as the book was never intended to sell in great numbers (2016: 84-85). The most memorable statement of the case came from Barzilai in a ringing endorsement of intellectual freedom and the perils of state over-reach:

Soltanto più esattamente stabilendo la ricerca dell'intenzione si può ammettere senza scandalo che vi sono libri processati e libri non processati perché il magistrato precisamente non dovrà fermarsi alla materialità, se non messa al servizio di una intenzione oltraggiosa del pubblico costume. Perché altrimenti sarebbe ben ridicolo che il Marinetti fosse come quel tale poeta il solo corrotto del suo tempo e del nostro paese e che soltanto contro di lui, contro questo untorello che vorrebbe da solo spiantare Milano, si dovessero scagliare il fulmini. Ella può volerlo, lo vuole su quel banco, solo perché crede che abbia avuto l'intenzione di offendere il pudore; ed ella solo così può volere, perché altrimenti stabilirebbe una sperequazione di giustizia assolutamente più scandalosa di un articolo o di un romanzo di questo genere. (2016: 59)

In the trial's closing moments Sarfatti galvanized the audience with his declaration that he completely adhered to the Futurist program, as they did not want to destroy churches, museums, or works of art, "vogliono distruggere quel culto del passato che costituisce una tabe nella vita

artistica, letteraria, scientifica, politica italiana... Vogliono distruggere una tendenza per cui anche un pezzo di legno, tarlato e brutto, solamente perché è antico, è degno di venerazione” (2016: 88). His statements were greeted with roaring applause. To close the proceedings Marinetti was asked if he had any final words, to which he answered that “Protesto con tutto il mio sangue contro l'accusa assurda e infame!” (2016: 90). The court retired at 5:55 pm to deliberate. The audience waited in tense anticipation of the verdict. At 6:20 pm the court returned from its deliberations, and the president read the sentence: “ASSOLUZIONE PER INESISTENZA DI REATO”. The prosecution had failed to make their case. The room erupted in applause. Marinetti was seized and hoisted atop the shoulders of his fellow Futurists and was carried out in triumph. A crowd followed the Futurists through the streets of Milan cheering “Viva Marinetti! Viva il Futurismo!” (2016: 90-91).

Such was the triumphant conclusion that Marinetti had sought to share with the world when he recounted the story of the trial. The story was first told in an appendix to the Italian translation of Marinetti's French poem *Destruction*. The Italian translation appeared in January 1911, just a few short months after the trial, and included “Il processo e l'assoluzione di *Mafarka il futurista*” (Marinetti 1911). This text was subsequently republished under the editorship of the Futurists Emilio Settimelli and Bruno Corra as part of *I processi al Futurismo per oltraggio al pudore* in 1918 (Settimelli-Corra 1918), and appeared again in the appendix of a subsequent edition of *Distruzione* in 1920 (Marinetti 1920a). Marinetti made much of his victory, and spoke of it on his travels to England, France, and Russia in the following years (Kaplan 1981: 40).

But something was missing from this story, the truth. *Mafarka* was never ultimately acquitted. The prosecuting attorney in the original case, Valenzano, in fact filed an appeal shortly after losing the original case, which he won in January 1911 and had Marinetti condemned to two months in prison. This sentence was then commuted to a fine and the removal of *Mafarka* from circulation (Salaris 1990: 110; Salaris 1997: 93). Did Marinetti lose the case before he first published the narrative of the trial that ended with his supposedly triumphant victory against the state? It is unclear, but certainly he had lost the trial by the time he was traveling through Europe and discussing his “victory”. It is unlikely he dwelled upon having lost the trial on appeal on those trips. Moreover, in the Settimelli edition of 1918 there is no mention of the trial having been ultimately lost, or in the 1920 version that appeared in *Distruzione*. In fact, when Marinetti published a new version of *Mafarka* in 1920, he published a self-censored version, the only way

he could get it into circulation. This censored version was a shadow of its former self, with references to sexual acts removed, and references to sexual organs reworded or simply eliminated (Marinetti 1920b).¹⁸ But, unless the readers had access to the original version, and laboriously compared it to the censored one, they would be none the wiser, though they would have noticed that the narrative seemed somewhat confused. For instance, Marinetti removed all mention of Mafarka's "zeb" or penis in the second chapter, but then kept the following section in which the audience was laughing at the description of the penis in the original version (Marinetti 2003: 50). In fact, Marinetti did not publicly admit to having lost the *Mafarka* trial until 1929, when he wrote a brief chapter for his book *Marinetti e il Futurismo*, a broadly narrative history of Futurism from its foundation until Marinetti's induction into the Royal Academy of Italy. After reprinting the section recounting the triumphant march through Milan after winning the original trial, he wrote that the attorney-general continued to pursue *Mafarka* and finally achieved a conviction, which was upheld by the Court of Cassation. He wrote that the government had sought to use any means possible to "colpire il creatore del Futurismo sporcandolo con l'accusa di oltraggio al pudore", to which the Futurists responded with immense public rallies against the *passatisti* (Marinetti 1968: 512). If such rallies occurred, they certainly did not merit being recorded by any historian. Why did he admit to the conviction in 1929? Because now he was safely ensconced in the Academy, a member of the Fascist elite, and the once embarrassing legal setback could be re-told within the context of *Marinetti e il Futurismo* as simply a temporary defeat, which the Futurists, and their Fascist allies, would later make-up with the destruction of the Liberal state.¹⁹

There is another oddity with regards to the trial. Why did it take place at all? Marinetti was put on trial for an "oltraggio al pudore". But, as the trial exhaustively demonstrated, the scenes the state deemed controversial were hardly gratuitous, they were in fact an integral part of the narrative. Moreover, they were not meant to titillate the reader, but to express man's savagery that Mafarka had shed himself of. Additionally, Marinetti's lawyers made a strong case that there were abundant examples of other books then available that could also be deemed obscene, but were freely published, sold, and in some cases deemed classics. Finally, when one reads the novel as a whole, keeping in mind the scandal it caused, one is surprised to find just how little obscenity

¹⁸ The 2003 version of *Mafarka il futurista*, edited by Luigi Ballerini, publishes the original 1910 Italian edition, but then notes exactly where the text had been censored. See Marinetti (2003).

¹⁹ Marinetti's strategic re-editing of Futurist history and its texts in order to suit his evolving political needs is exhaustively chronicled in Ernest Ialongo (2015).

is actually in the book. So then why the trial? A hint may be in Cappa's testimony wherein he questioned why some books are censored and others are not. He intimates that the reason seems to be the personal desires of the authority sequestering the book, and, consequently, how that authority feels about the author of such targeted works. Cappa noted:

In qualche libro, per esempio, vi è un passo che può essere pornografico e più piace al P.M. inquantoché non è giustificato da un intento falso o non falso, ma che è anzi esasperato da una prefazione che è l'apologia della sensualità. Eppure questo libro si stampa e si vende perché non c'è di mezzo il futurismo, perché non c'è di mezzo un giovane ricco, dei comizi tumultuosi, perché non c'è venuto l'irredentismo, perché non c'è a un certo momento la foglia di un grande oratore Veneto [Prime Minister Luigi Luzzatti] diventato presidente del Consiglio, perché non abbiamo i barbari alle porte, perché non abbiamo le case invase da una sorpresa nuova, da una nuova immoralità. (Marinetti-Capuana 2016: 38)

Maybe Marinetti had made a nuisance of himself with all of his noisy *serate*. Maybe the attorney-general resented that he was a wealthy artist who felt he could impudently snub his nose at all authority figures and was above the law. Or maybe it was something more: Marinetti's *irredentismo*, his anti-Austrianism, and his desire for war to advance Italian interests that made him a target. As noted above, in the first two *serate* of 1910, in Trieste and Milan, the Futurists were explicit about their desire that Trieste should be a part of Italy, and that if war was the means to achieve such union, then so be it. In fact, the political fallout of the Milan *serata* was significant. The Austrian consulate wanted an explanation from the city's prefect as to why such a pronounced irredentist and anti-Austrian performance was permitted by Austria's own ally (Ialongo 2015: 42). Nor was this the last time Marinetti made explicit anti-Austrian pronouncements in Italy or abroad. Just after the Milan *serata* he was in Paris calling for closer relations between France and Italy so as to one day "strangle" the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary. In March and April he was in London and declared war with Austria was inevitable. In December he returned to London and gave an interview in which he stated that the modernization of Italy's ancient cities, was critical: "As inevitably as the sun rises and sets we shall have to struggle for our life against Austria. If the contest comes when Venice is still sunk in the lethargy of its old romanticism, when Rome is living on its classical traditions, when Florence is nothing but a picture gallery, we are doomed..." (2015: 46). It was after this interview, and a variety of conferences he attended wherein he further expounded his anti-Austrian views, that Italy's consul-general in London felt the need to investigate Marinetti and requested information from the Italian Ministry of the

Interior (2015: 46). Relations amongst the Great Powers were becoming increasingly tense in these years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War, with nations solidifying their alliances and increasing the size of their armies and navies. Italy and Britain were technically members of opposing alliances, though Italy was becoming less and less committed to its alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary. Yet here was Marinetti throughout 1910 pushing for an immediate end to such an alliance, demanding closer ties with France, and then traveling to Britain, France's ally, and pushing the same message. In short, in 1910 Marinetti had made himself into a political headache. The *Mafarka* trial may very well have been political retribution, and may have had little to do with the novel itself.

The publication of the trial shows Marinetti at his organizational and marketing best as he depicted the state as the very *passatista* and conservative government that Futurism would free Italy of. It also draws attention to the text *Mafarka* and encourages us to place it into the broader political context I noted above.

Mafarka has been many things to many scholars over the years, but it is also important to focus on what it meant at the time. For Marinetti, it was one of the foundational texts of his young movement that sought to transform Italy, and, critically, it was a work of art that should be free of state intervention. For the state, it was simply a work of obscenity from a troublesome public figure. In this trial these contending interpretations were played out. Marinetti would win the first round, and the state would take the second one. However, in a few years Marinetti would not have the Liberal state to worry about, and would have a generous patron in the Fascist regime. This trial was thus, amongst other things, also a small step in Marinetti's ultimately successful assault on the Liberal state.

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