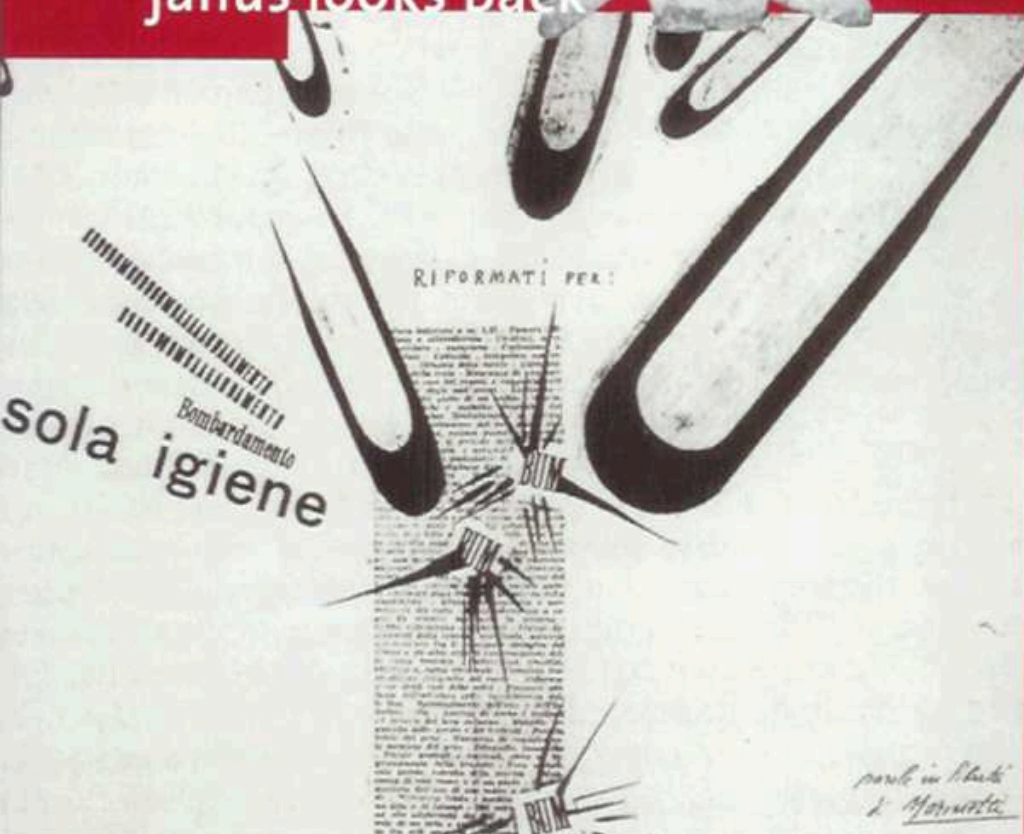


janus looks back



Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, 'Parole in libertà, bombardamento sola igiene' (Words in freedom, bombing is the only hygiene), 1915, ink and collage

Marinetti *versus* Mafarka

by Matteo Giacomelli

Everyone knows about Marinetti, 'killer of moonlight', singer of the praises of war as the 'world's only hygiene'. Fewer are acquainted with Mafarka, his Egyptian-Sudanese alter ego. The 'incendiary' desire of Marinetti presented itself in 1909 through the manifesto entitled 'The Foundation of Futurism', published on the front page of *Le Figaro*. That same year, the world was introduced to 'Mafarka le Futuriste', also in French. While the city would seem to be the most familiar setting of the Futurist aesthetic, readers of *Mafarka* should not be disoriented when they find themselves in Africa, in the midst of an epic novel of origins, with a clear cosmogonic and cosmological intent. Thus Africa is portrayed as a kingdom dominated by archaic primitivism and vitality, not yet structured in the machine aesthetic of orthodox Futurism. Marinetti's epic certainly does introduce itself as a narrative certainty:

'Here is the great, explosive novel I promised you. It is polyphonic, like our souls, and at the same time it is a lyrical song, an epic, an adventure tale and a drama.'

I am the only one who would dare write such a masterpiece that will die one day, killed by me when the growing splendour of the world will have equalled the sun and made it superfluous.'

The plot is disrupted and reworked from within, combining comic and tragic registers in a continuous synaesthetic and onomatopoeic delirium, the voracity of wanting to comprise all, to possess all, in which the redundant use of numerical adjectives is a reminder of grotesque popular literature:

*'How many prisoners have we?
Six thousand Negro men and four thousand Negro women. But here are some more... Here comes the second column.
And the prize?
Three machine guns, two hundred rifles, fifty kegs of rum and five hundred thousand jars of jam... We have captured three hundred bulls, two thousand camels and one thousand dromedaries... There are also more than four thousand cages of hens.'*

Subversion means a violent upset of the 'status quo', of linearity, of a system's security.

In Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's poetics, different levels of subversion appear, in language, in the concept of nature, and in relation to reality.

While still constantly in danger of itself developing into an ideology, subversion remains the territory of art, the only space that gives value to the present and therefore to spiritual human existence in any age.

But who is Mafarka? A savage, a leader, an able storyteller? It is hard to say, because he embodies all these qualities, as if inside him are at least 'eight souls in a bomb'. Above all, he is a king whose movements are accompanied by those of the sun, a man armed, as Nietzsche would have it, only with his own will. The King-Sun combo of oriental monarchs characterizes the progress of the doings of Mafarka; a Sun that is not a star but a god, with whom he walks, step by step:

*'Savage Sun, Sun of energy and cruel power!
... Your rays of red lava flow in my veins...
Oh sea of fire, do not flee far away from me!
I will be no more than a great sand-blocked port, I will no longer be anything if you leave my breast, oh Sun!'*

As a result, Mafarka represents the apotheosis of vital and genital force, and his phallic potency is taken to an extreme in the description of an extraordinary sexual appetite, rich in merriment:

'... then Mafarka threw himself upon

the serving girls as they were clearing the feast, and took them on cushions, one after the other, laughing like a madman...

And the violence of Mafarka increased as he went from one to the next... Suddenly he leapt furiously on the Demon, shouting: 'Your Palace belongs to me... Be off! If you will not get out I will bruise your buttocks!...'

His member had strangely become so much longer, in his attack, that the dismayed Demon ran away from his own palace...

his interminable organ, eleven metres long, was too bulky!... Therefore he decided to carefully roll it up, like a rope, by his bed, and then he fell into a deep sleep...

At this point we might well imagine that our hero is a creature driven by bestial madness, but that is not the case. Once again Marinetti plays with the (comic-tragic) registers, unexpectedly showing us a pious side, in reaction to the rape of the female prisoners by the victorious soldiers:

to Futuristically arrive at hypotheses and practices of reproduction resembling the latest discoveries of genetics...

'... and may you know that I have generated my son without the complicity of the vulva! Do you not understand me? ...

You must believe in the absolute and definitive power of will, which must be cultivated, intensified, following a cruel discipline, until the moment in which it spurts from our nerve centres and leaps beyond the limits of our muscles ...'

The human body, for him, has become a borderline to cross and transcend, so he adds:

'... our will must emerge from us to take possession of matter and modify it to suit our whim. Thus can we shape all that surrounds us, and endlessly renew the face of the world ...

The son of the founding hero (Guzurmah)

the dream that generates it. It is thus that my will, taking over my entire soul, once and for all, fecundated it and freed it from its seed. ...

Guzurmah! Guzurmah! Guzurmah!... Here is my soul!... Give me your lips, open your mouth to my kiss! ...'

The dimension that is opened to Guzurmah at this point is that of the superhuman, he who tames the sun and the sea and all the elements, he who jousts with the winds and defeats them, the master of the firmament, ready to grapple with extraterrestrial spheres, to compete with the very planets.

The delightful conflagration of the intellectual affrontery of Marinetti's pages clashes sharply with the politically correct approach of the real life of Filippo Tommaso, which also turned out to be a failure, confirming the full validity of his words in the field of art, in the full certainty of having pursued a desire worthy of respect.

Perhaps this is precisely the value of subversion:

'Love yourself to the point of giving yourself to any pang, to kill the past at every instant and to make the wait for the future you must surpass be all in vain. Act so that the reality of today will be more beautiful than the realizable dream of tomorrow...'

(Marinetti)



left F.T. Marinetti, 'Otto anime in una bomba' (Eight souls in a bomb), bookcover right portrait of F.T. Marinetti 'Sole Marinetti' (Sun Marinetti) by R. Zadkova, 1920

'... the vulvas of chained women!... There!... There is the enemy you like to fight! ... Have you beaten them, torn them open, mangled them?... Ah! Ah! ... You can truly be proud of yourselves! ...

Oh! I fear not your drunkards' jaw-bones, cracked and vinous like the tavern's tankards... As for your legs, wilted by lechery, they may barely serve you as rags ...'

This merciful side is not, however, generated by a sentiment of a religious or ethical character. Instead, it is the necessary consequence of the 'firm will' of Mafarka, who even bans reproductive sex from his life

cannot, therefore, fail to be even greater than the father, i.e. gigantic, superhuman, capable of taming the elements and competing with them thanks to his mechanical wings.

The epithet of this parthenogenetic issue, therefore, shall be 'hero without slumber', to emphasise the fact that he is not subject to biological and natural necessities. The life and myth of Mafarka are duplicated and regenerated in giving life to Guzurmah, in a continuous flight forward:

'... I have thus created you with the force of my desperation, for the intensity of creative energy is measured by the magnitude of

'Love yourself to the point of giving yourself to any pang, to kill the past at every instant and to make the wait for the future you must surpass be all in vain. Act so that the reality of today will be more beautiful than the realizable dream of tomorrow...'

All the quotations come from FILIPPO TOMMASO MARINETTI, *Mafarka the Futurist*

(1) Mafarka, perhaps from the Arabic mafrāq, 'hybrid', or from the Arabic mafrāqi, 'explosive'.