

16: THE FUTURISTS

It was a warm golden evening, fit for October, and I was watching (with regret) a lot of little black pigs being turned out of my garden, when the postman handed to me, with a perfunctory haste which doubtless masked his emotion, the Declaration of Futurism. If you ask me what Futurism is, I cannot tell you; even the Futurists themselves seem a little doubtful; perhaps they are waiting for the future to find out. But if you ask me what its Declaration is, I answer eagerly; for I can tell you quite a lot about that. It is written by an Italian named Marinetti, in a magazine which is called Poesia. It is headed "Declaration of Futurism" in enormous letters; it is divided off with little numbers; and it starts straight away like this: "1. We intend to glorify the love of danger, the custom of energy, the strengt of daring. 2. The essential elements of our poetry will be courage, audacity, and revolt. 3. Literature having up to now glorified thoughtful immobility, ecstasy, and slumber, we wish to exalt the aggressive movement, the feverish insomnia, running, the perilous leap, the cuff and the blow." While I am quite willing to exalt the cuff within reason, it scarcely seems such an entirely new subject for literature as the Futurists imagine. It seems to me that even through the slumber which fills the Siege of Troy, the Song of Roland, and the Orlando Furioso, and in spite of the thoughtful immobility which marks "Pantagruel," "Henry V," and the Ballad of Chevy Chase, there are occasional gleams of an admiration for courage, a readiness to glorify the love of danger, and even the "strengt of daring," I seem to remember, slightly differently spelt, somewhere in literature.

The distinction, however, seems to be that the warriors of the past went in for tournaments, which were at least dangerous for themselves, while the Futurists go in for motor-cars, which are mainly alarming for other people. It is the Futurist in his motor who does the "aggressive movement," but it is the pedestrians who go in for the "running" and the "perilous leap." Section No. 4 says, "We declare that the splendour of the world has been enriched with a new form of beauty, the beauty of speed. A race-automobile adorned with great pipes like serpents with explosive breath.... A race-automobile which seems to rush over exploding powder is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace." It is also much easier, if you have the money. It is quite clear, however, that you cannot be a Futurist at all unless you are frightfully rich. Then follows this lucid and soul-stirring sentence: "5. We will sing the praises of man holding the flywheel of which the ideal steering-post traverses the earth impelled itself around the circuit of its own orbit." What a jolly song it would be--so hearty, and with such a simple swing in it! I can imagine the Futurists round the fire in a tavern trolling out in chorus some ballad with that incomparable refrain; shouting over their swaying flagons

some such words as these:

A notion came into my head as new as it was bright That poems might be written on the subject of a fight; No praise was given to Lancelot, Achilles, Nap or Corbett, But we will sing the praises of man holding the flywheel of which the ideal steering-post traverses the earth impelled itself around the circuit of its own orbit.

Then lest it should be supposed that Futurism would be so weak as to permit any democratic restraints upon the violence and levity of the luxurious classes, there would be a special verse in honour of the motors also:

My fathers scaled the mountains in their pilgrimages far, But I feel full of energy while sitting in a car; And petrol is the perfect wine, I lick it and absorb it, So we will sing the praises of man holding the flywheel of which the ideal steering-post traverses the earth impelled itself around the circuit of its own orbit.

Yes, it would be a rollicking catch. I wish there were space to finish the song, or to detail all the other sections in the Declaration. Suffice it to say that Futurism has a gratifying dislike both of Liberal politics and Christian morals; I say gratifying because, however unfortunately the cross and the cap of liberty have quarrelled, they are always united in the feeble hatred of such silly megalomaniacs as these. They will "glorify war--the only true hygiene of the world--militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of Anarchism, the beautiful ideas which kill, and the scorn of woman." They will "destroy museums, libraries, and fight against moralism, feminism, and all utilitarian cowardice." The proclamation ends with an extraordinary passage which I cannot understand at all, all about something that is going to happen to Mr. Marinetti when he is forty. As far as I can make out he will then be killed by other poets, who will be overwhelmed with love and admiration for him. "They will come against us from far away, from everywhere, leaping on the cadence of their first poems, clawing the air with crooked fingers and scenting at the Academy gates the good smell of our decaying minds." Well, it is satisfactory to be told, however obscurely, that this sort of thing is coming to an end some day, to be replaced by some other tomfoolery. And though I commonly refrain from clawing the air with crooked fingers, I can assure Mr. Marinetti that this omission does not disqualify me, and that I scent the good smell of his decaying mind all right.

I think the only other point of Futurism is contained in this sentence: "It is in Italy that we hurl this overthrowing and inflammatory Declaration, with which to-day we found Futurism, for we will free Italy from her numberless museums which cover her with countless cemeteries." I think that rather sums it up. The

best way, one would think, of freeing oneself from a museum would be not to go there. Mr. Marinetti's fathers and grandfathers freed Italy from prisons and torture chambers, places where people were held by force. They, being in the bondage of "moralism," attacked Governments as unjust, real Governments, with real guns. Such was their utilitarian cowardice that they would die in hundreds upon the bayonets of Austria. I can well imagine why Mr. Marinetti in his motor-car does not wish to look back at the past. If there was one thing that could make him look smaller even than before it is that roll of dead men's drums and that dream of Garibaldi going by. The old Radical ghosts go by, more real than the living men, to assault I know not what ramparted city in hell. And meanwhile the Futurist stands outside a museum in a warlike attitude, and defiantly tells the official at the turnstile that he will never, never come in.

There is a certain solid use in fools. It is not so much that they rush in where angels fear to tread, but rather that they let out what devils intend to do. Some perversion of folly will float about nameless and pervade a whole society; then some lunatic gives it a name, and henceforth it is harmless. With all really evil things, when the danger has appeared the danger is over. Now it may be hoped that the self-indulgent sprawlers of Poesia have put a name once and for all to their philosophy. In the case of their philosophy, to put a name to it is to put an end to it. Yet their philosophy has been very widespread in our time; it could hardly have been pointed and finished except by this perfect folly. The creed of which (please God) this is the flower and finish consists ultimately in this statement: that it is bold and spirited to appeal to the future. Now, it is entirely weak and half-witted to appeal to the future. A brave man ought to ask for what he wants, not for what he expects to get. A brave man who wants Atheism in the future calls himself an Atheist; a brave man who wants Socialism, a Socialist; a brave man who wants Catholicism, a Catholic. But a weak-minded man who does not know what he wants in the future calls himself a Futurist.

They have driven all the pigs away. Oh that they had driven away the prigs, and left the pigs! The sky begins to droop with darkness and all birds and blossoms to descend unfaltering into the healthy underworld where things slumber and grow. There was just one true phrase of Mr. Marinetti's about himself: "the feverish insomnia." The whole universe is pouring headlong to the happiness of the night. It is only the madman who has not the courage to sleep.