Italian Art

in the 20th Century

Painting and Sculpture 1900-1988

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Prestel

First published on the occasion of the exhibition
'Italian Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture 1900-1988'
Royal Academy of Arts, London, 14 January - 9 April 1989

Exhibition organized by Norman Rosenthal and Germano Celant

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Cover illustration: Umberto Boccioni, *Modern Idol*, 1911 (Cat. 17)

Translation from the German: David Britt (Wieland Schmied)
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Distributed in continental Europe and Japan by
Prestel-Verlag, Verlegerdienst München GmbH & Co. KG,
Gutenbergstrasse 1, D-8031 Gilching, Federal Republic of Germany

Distributed in the USA and Canada by
te Neues Publishing Company, 15 East 76th Street, New York, NY 10021

Distributed in the United Kingdom, Ireland and all other countries by
Thames & Hudson Limited, 30-34 Bloomsbury Street, London WC1B 3QP

Typesetting by Fertigsatz GmbH, Munich, using
'Janson Antiqua' by D. Stempel & Co., Frankfurt am Main
Offset Lithography by Karl Dörfel Reproduktionsges. mbH, Munich
Printed by Karl Wenschow Franzis-Druck GmbH, Munich
Bound by R. Oldenbourg, GmbH, Munich

Printed in Germany

ISBN 3 7913 0907 2

Adrian Lyttelton

Society and Culture in the Italy of Giolitti

In the later nineteenth century, Italy was haunted by the spectre of backwardness. Industrial development was fitful and, rather than catching up with the leading industrial nations, the Italian economy fell further behind. The contrast with the dynamism of the other new nation in Europe, Germany, was particularly depressing. In the 1880s, there was a brief period of capitalist euphoria accompanied by industrial expansion, but this was cut short by a disastrous slump at the end of the decade. The major Italian banks had preferred to direct their investments towards property speculation rather than industry, and when the market collapsed it brought on a general banking crisis. It was then revealed that the Banca Romana had used its right to issue notes to print illegal excess currency, and that many leading politicians were in its pay. As Luigi Pirandello later wrote in his novel *I vecchi e i giovani*, a tide of mud seemed to have engulfed the whole Roman political scene. For lovers of beauty, the infamy of the new Rome of speculators and politicians had been symbolized by the destruction of the famous park of the Villa Ludovisi. And what had been achieved in exchange? Rather than progress, the new capitalism appeared to have brought nothing but bankruptcy, corruption and social crisis.

The 1890s were a dark decade in Italian history, punctuated by desperate protest movements of peasants and workers, culminating in the nationwide disorders of 1898. In Milan in that year, over one hundred rioters were killed by the brutal military repression of General Bava Beccaris. The aging ex-revolutionary Francesco Crispi had tried to divert attention from the crisis at home by colonial conquest, but his efforts ended in the disaster of Adua in 1896, when an Italian army of 15,000 was cut to pieces by the Abyssinians under their emperor, Menelek. In the last years of the nineteenth century, however, Italian industry finally 'took off'. Italian industrialists proved ready and able to take advantage of the period of world-wide economic expansion which began in 1896. During the next ten years, Italian industrial growth was the fastest in Europe. Italy's future as an industrial nation was finally assured.

Yet Italy's industrial development was particularly uneven. Sixty per cent of all joint stock capital was concentrated in the industrial triangle, Milan-Turin-Genoa. In central and southern Italy, modern industry only took root in isolated enclaves within a largely agricultural economy. This accounted for the continuing feeling that the growth of a new, vigorous and modern Italy was being held back by the dead weight of traditional attitudes and social structures. All industrializing countries experienced the dramatic contrast between the new industrial city and old rural traditions. More peculiar to Italy, however, was the importance of traditional urban life. The prestige of Italy's ancient cities and the existence of an influential pre-industrial middle class maintained a humanist culture which refused to acknowledge the inroads of modern industry and capitalism. One aspect of the modern world in particular did touch these cities deeply: the development of tourism. Filippo Marinetti's declamations against 'past-loving' Venice must be seen against this background: 'We renounce the Venice of foreigners, market for counterfeiting antiquarians, magnet for snobbery and universal imbecility, bed unsprung by caravans of lovers, jewelled bathtub for cosmopolitan courtesans, *cloaca maxima* of passéism.'[1] Italian Nationalists frequently attacked the demeaning influence of the tourist trade, which encouraged servility towards foreigners. Luigi Federzoni and the Nationalist Association waged a press campaign against the 'Germanization' of the Lake of Garda; bed and breakfast signs in German were held to be a menace to national integrity.

Italy had been a laggard in the first, 'palaeotechnic' industrial revolution, that of coal, iron, steam power and cheap textiles, but by the 1900s a handful of successful Italian firms were capable of competing with the technologically advanced leaders of the 'second industrial revolution' of electricity and the internal combustion engine. The development of hydroelectric power was particularly important for Italy, given its lack of coal. The electricity industry became the motor of Italian industrial development, attracting more capital than any other sector. The huge new dams and power stations built to take advantage of the Alpine torrents became the symbol of Italy's industrial achievement (Fig. 1).

The founders of Italy's most famous industrial families made their fortunes in the new industries, the Milanese Giambattista Pirelli in rubber and Giovanni Agnelli of Turin in cars. The success of Agnelli and the Turin firm of Fiat was particularly remarkable. Cars were still a luxury item, and the market in Italy was very restricted. But Agnelli was able to export a sizeable proportion of his output, and though he could not hope to compete with Ford, he was quick to copy the American company's mass production methods. Unlike most industrial products, the early motor car had glamorous associations with adventure and sport. The car industry was *chic;* young members of the Turin nobility helped to found Fiat, and Agnelli himself had been a cavalry officer, hardly a typical occupation for a future entrepreneur. Success was crucially dependent on victory in races and rallies, and Agnelli took care to secure the services of the best racing drivers. The press did a lot to promote the new mechanized sports and methods of travel. The *Corriere della Sera* actually organized the first important bicycle races in the 1890s, and its coverage of motor racing was exhaustive. It even sent one of its own correspondents, Luigi Barzini Sr, on a famous journey from Paris to Peking. The car could evoke in one potent image pre-industrial myths of courage, daring and individual genius, along with modern myths of triumphant mechanical force and energy. It was ideally suited to be the symbol of Marinetti's Futurist vision of a romanticized technology (Fig. 2).

The second industrial revolution transformed daily life far more than the first. It is arguable that even the organization of perception in the basic categories of space and time was affected.[2] Italy was in effect living two industrial revolutions at once. The drama of the process was correspondingly intensified.[3] The natural and prevalent response was to seek reassurance from the continuities of culture. But the juxtaposition of old symbols and new realities, of an ancient urban culture with the new, dynamic industrial environment could create a troubling sense of incongruity for the more perceptive. So, too, could the discord between the heroic values of the recent Risorgimento past and the prosaic realities of the industrial age. It was this

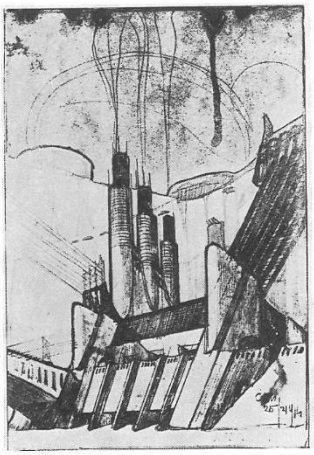

Fig. 1 Antonio Sant'Elia, *Power Station*, 1914. Paride Accettti Collection, Milan

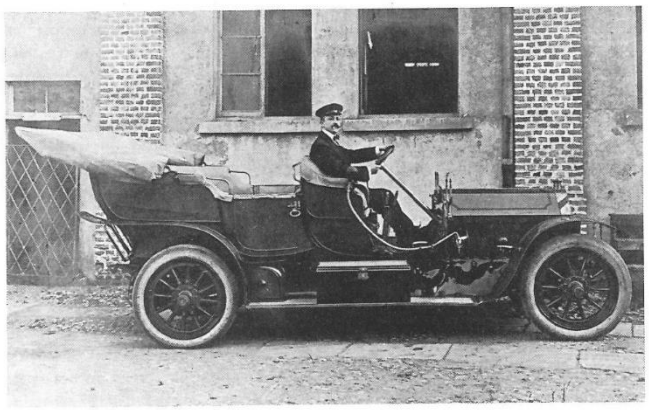

Fig. 2 Filippo Marinetti in a motor-car, c. 1908

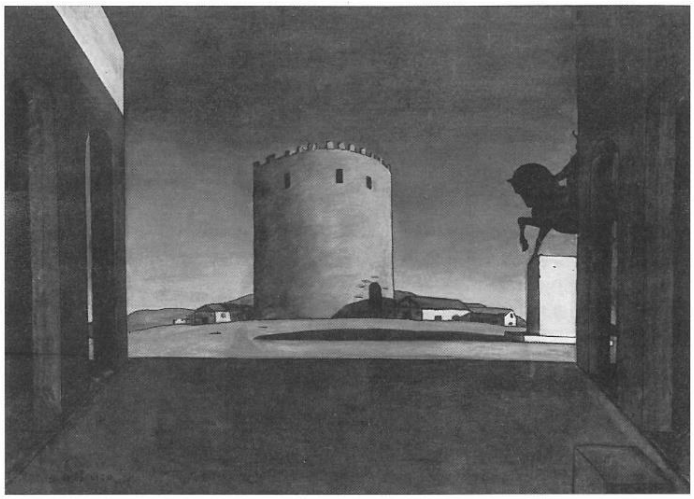

Fig. 3 Giorgio de Chirico, *The Red Tower*, 1913. Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice

sense of incongruity which Giorgio de Chirico embraced (Fig. 3) and which the Futurists, by a radical leap of the imagination, sought to abolish.[4]

The Futurist exaltation of the machine is only explicable in an industrializing nation which still felt keenly its inferiority compared with the leading industrial powers.[5] The cult of the machine can take many different forms. The Futurist cult concentrated on speed and power. It was 'up-to-date' in that its icons were the characteristic products of the second industrial revolution of the end of the nineteenth century: the automobile, the city tram, electricity, the telephone. For the Futurists, the machine was a symbol not of rational design but of uncontrollable vitality. Marinetti was reluctant to acknowledge the more prosaic features of the industrial age; this is less true of the artists of the movement, but to some degree they fell under the spell of his interpretation.

The victory of 'prose' over 'poetry' was exemplified by the political hegemony of Giovanni Giolitti. He was 'all technique, rationality and good sense'.[6] He believed in the primacy of domestic policy over foreign policy. He was also the first Italian prime minister not to have taken an active role in Risorgimento politics. He came from the Piedmontese bureaucracy and it was often assumed, quite unfairly, that he had the limited horizons of the official mind. In fact, as a politician Giolitti was far from cautious or short-sighted. His long-term strategy was extremely ambitious; he aimed to broaden the base of the monarchic liberal state by co-opting the leadership of the two mass movements which threatened it – the Socialist and the Catholic. By playing the two movements off against each other, he hoped to prevent the political balance shifting too far in the direction of either revolution or reaction.

Giolitti's practical temperament led him to underrate the importance of intellectuals and their capacity to form opinion. He once commented that he never believed that his rival, Sidney Sonnino, would be much good as a politician, because he had too many books. There was no Giolittian rhetoric, unless precisely in the declared renunciation of the art of persuasion for an honest politics of 'fact'. Even at the time of Italy's conquest of Libya (1911) he refused to supply the expected patriotic uplift. His skill in making broad political alliances had no counterpart in the cultural field. Although he devoted a lot of time and money to managing the press, he was consistently opposed by the most important newspaper in Italy, the *Corriere della Sera*, under its formidably independent editor, Luigi Albertini. The new intellectual and literary reviews were almost unanimously hostile.[7]

1 F. T. Marinetti, *Selected Writings*, ed. R. W. Flint, London, 1972, p. 55.
2 See S. Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*, London, 1983, passim.
3 Can one draw a parallel between Trotsky's 'law of uneven development' and Boccioni's complaint that he had to subsume in his own art a hundred years of artistic development?
4 See A. Zander Rudenstine, *Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice*, New York, 1985, p. 158, for de Chirico's ironic evocation of the 'imagery of the Risorgimento and a heroic historical past'.
5 See R. Cork, 'The Vorticist Circle, Bomberg and the First World War', in *British Art in the 20th Century*, ed. S. Compton, Munich, 1986, p. 138, for Wyndham Lewis's perception of the different situation in Britain and Italy: 'Industrialization had come to Italy long after Britain, and Lewis believed that Vorticism should view the mechanized age with a greater understanding of its complexity.'
6 A. Asor Rosa, *La cultura*, in *Storia d'Italia*, ed. R. Romano and C. Vivanti, Turin, 1975, vol. 4, pt 2, p. 1111. Giolitti was Minister of the Interior 1901-3, and Prime Minister 1903-5, 1906-9 and 1911-14. But even when he was not in office, he remained by far the most important leader in parliament.
7 The most influential intellectual of them all, Benedetto Croce, served in Giolitti's post-war government as Minister of Education, and came to have great admiration for him. But before the war his attitude was on the whole unfavourable.

Giolitti interpreted liberalism as a practice of mediation, and this angered true believers of all descriptions. Conservatives accused him of failing to defend the interests of the state against the Socialists, while revolutionaries accused him of corrupting Socialism and rendering it innocuous. The image of Giolitti as the cynical manipulator and arch-corrupter did not do him justice, but in one respect it did have some basis in fact. He used extremely unscrupulous methods to secure the election of a solid bloc of government supporters from the south. Even here, it is possible to argue that he was no worse than his predecessors; but perhaps the point is that he was no better either. Giolitti's personal dominance was undoubtedly an obstacle to the development of strong parties, and in this way he may have contributed to the discrediting of the parliamentary system.

The revulsion against Giolitti's prosaic style of government was incarnated by Italy's most famous poet, Gabriele D'Annunzio (Fig. 4). D'Annunzio had voiced his opposition to parliamentary government at the time of the bank scandals. It was D'Annunzio who introduced the potent image of Nietzsche's superman to the Italian imagination. 'Let us with a firm faith prepare through art for the advent of the superman.'[8] He aspired to play a role in Italian culture similar to that of Wagner in German culture. To the German's command of music he opposed his command of the 'word'. But D'Annunzio's ambitions did not stop here. With breathtaking complacency, D'Annunzio let it be known that Nietzsche merely served to confirm what he already knew, as a healthy Mediterranean sensualist, imbued with an intuitive grasp of the beautiful as revealed through the glories of Italian culture. He would not only produce works of art; his whole life would be a work of art. He became a 'star'; he dazzled a mass public even more by his glamorous style of life than by his command of language. Fact and fiction blended to create the image of the D'Annunzian hero as Renaissance man: at one and the same time, an irresistible seducer of women, a daring sportsman, a refined aesthete and a virtuoso of conspicuous consumption. To a provincial bourgeoisie, he offered the vicarious experience of international high society. Significantly, one issue on which D'Annunzio differed from Nietzsche was in his rejection of the latter's criticism of Wagner for having surrendered to the taste of his epoch: 'It is not possible to resist the pressure of the public spirit. The general state of manners always determines the nature of the work of art.'[9] The lonely glories of the avant-garde innovator were not for D'Annunzio; he would take care never to be more than one step ahead of public taste. He was extremely conscious of the new mass public and of the ways of reaching it; he became the hero of a cultural journalism which took on new importance during the Giolittian period.[10] He made *fin de siècle* aestheticism palatable to a large audience.

Fig. 4 Gabriele D'Annunzio examining Clemente Origo's *Centaur and Stag* with the artist in his studio, Florence, 1907. Photograph by Mario Nunes Vais

D'Annunzio had an important role in relation to the visual arts, as critic and arbiter of taste. He was a friend of some of the most successful salon artists of the day, and he contributed a great deal towards establishing their reputation. One of the painters closest to D'Annunzio was Giulio Aristide Sartorio, who combined a 'decadent' sexual imagery, drawn from mythology, with a traditional technique, based on the idea of a 'return to the Renaissance'. Ironically, in view of D'Annunzio's anti-parliamentarianism, Sartorio was chosen to paint the frieze for the Chamber of Deputies in 1908 (Fig. 5). In his preference for mythological imagery and for the high finish or 'licked surface', D'Annunzio set himself clearly against modernist trends in art. Envied and imitated, admired for his violation of the bourgeois code in morals and literature, but despised for his compromises with prevailing standards of taste, D'Annunzio was a figure whom the avant-garde could neither ignore nor accept.[11]

In Italy, the great poet was expected to sing of the nation and its glories. D'Annunzio unhesitatingly embraced the cause of the new imperialism and of naval expansion, and married it to the older, irredentist tradition by calling for the conquest of Trieste and dominion over the Adriatic as the first priority. The cult of the Venetian imperial past served both purposes.[12] In 1908, his speech at a banquet given to celebrate the performance of *La Nave*, his drama on the origins of Venice, drew a strong protest (and excellent publicity) from the Austrian government.

Fig. 5 Giulio Aristide Sartorio working on the murals for the Chamber of Deputies, Rome, 1908. Photograph by Mario Nunes Vais

D'Annunzio prepared a climate of opinion which became increasingly impatient with Giolitti's cautious and rational pursuit of limited gains. The new Nationalist movement was much influenced by D'Annunzio; its founder, Enrico Corradini, took from him the idea that the cult of beauty and the patriotic ideal had alike been sacrificed to sordid materialism. But the Nationalists differed from D'Annunzio in one important respect. The leaders of their movement were admirers of German economic power and militarist determination, and wanted Italy to remain loyal to the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary, whereas D'Annunzio (like Marinetti) never wavered in his support for France.

In the early years of the century, it seemed as if the Italy of culture had turned its back on the Italy of industry. The centres of cultural innovation were Florence and Naples rather than Milan.[13] The whole tenor of Italian high culture changed with the Idealist revolt against Positivism. The values of art were reasserted against the mere facts of science, and the recovery of the past was taken to be a more urgent priority than the prediction of the future. The success of the Idealist revolt was helped by the blatant weaknesses and contradictions of Positivism. The leading Italian Positivists were not always paragons of the spirit of critical enquiry. Belief in 'science' tended to become a new secular faith, and the collection of facts was too often divorced from an adequate theory to make sense of them. If they rejected old superstitions, the Positivists sometimes proved peculiarly vulnerable to new forms of credulity. One of the most representative figures of Italian Positivist culture during the 1890s, the criminologist Cesare Lombroso, took up spiritualism and became a devotee of the famous Neapolitan medium, Eusapia Paladino. The old Positivism was also undermined by new developments in the philosophy of science itself. Science was no longer viewed as a repository of fixed and universally valid laws, but as a constantly changing ensemble of instrumental hypotheses, which did not represent reality but deliberately abstracted from it. This internal crisis in the idea of science lent some plausibility to its depreciation by Benedetto Croce and the Idealists, for whom scientific concepts were only 'pseudo-concepts', incapable of apprehending the higher level of reality as revealed through the development of the spirit in history.

One should not assume, however, that scientific interpretations of history and society ceased to be important, or that all forms of Positivism declined equally. The right-wing interpretation of Darwinism, dominated by the concept of 'the survival of the fittest', gained new potency in an age of heightened international conflict. The new Nationalist critics of democracy and Socialism made effective use of the scientific sociology of Vilfredo Pareto, with its emphasis on the irrational roots of human behaviour. What particularly came under attack was the optimistic synthesis between a Positivist belief in 'evolution' and faith in the inevitable advance of democracy and Socialism. The culture of Filippo Turati and the other founders of Italian Socialism was grounded in Positivism. Marxism was absorbed into an 'evolutionary Socialism'. In the 1890s, Socialism could command a wide area of sympathy among intellectuals who shared the Positivist outlook; however, the scientific claims of Marxism were already being subjected to severe criticism by both economists and philosophers. Croce was even willing to call himself a Marxist before he evolved his own Idealist philosophy of history. But he accepted Marxism only as 'an empirical canon of interpretation', not as a scientific system. The turning-away of intellectuals from Socialism after 1900 can be explained in large part by the rejection of its cultural premises, although it is also true that Socialism was more attractive to them when it was fighting for survival against government repression than when it was visibly gaining in power and influence. The Socialists lost prestige by remaining for a long time deaf to the cultural debate. In 1906, Turati's review, *Critica Sociale*, announced defiantly that 'we are today Marxists, as we are Darwinians, evolutionists, positivists'.[14] But by 1910 the review was on the intellectual defensive, aware of the criticism that the party lacked a philosophy.

Thus among intellectuals the rejection of the evolutionary Positivist synthesis went together with the rejection of evolutionary, gradualist social democracy. At the

8 G. Michelini, *Nietzsche nell'Italia di D'Annunzio*, Palermo, 1978, p. 98.

9 Ibid., p. 112.

10 The cultural 'third page' of Italian newspapers was an innovation of the period after 1900. Its invention dates from the full-page coverage of D'Annunzio's tragedy *Francesca da Rimini* in 1901 by the *Giornale d'Italia*. (G. Licata, *Storia del Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 1976, p. 133, n. 160.)

11 See Boccioni's very revealing note on seeing D'Annunzio at the Brescia motor races (1907): 'I saw D'Annunzio with motor cars, ladies and gentlemen. Everyone watched him and followed him in admiration. He passed smiling amid the looks of the crowd. And I, alone, unknown, an imbecile . . . .' Quoted in G. Lopez, 'La città attorno a lui', in *Boccioni a Milano*, Milan, 1982, p. 94.

12 In 1888, D'Annunzio dedicated the first of his *Odi Navali* to 'a Torpedo-boat in the Adriatic': *Naviglio d'acciaio,/ diritto veloce guizzante/ bello come un'arme nuda*. In his celebration of the beauty of the new war machines, D'Annunzio anticipated the Futurists (see P. Alatri, *Gabriele D'Annunzio*, Turin, 1983, p. 70). Lunaciarski referred to this when he called Marinetti 'an industrialized D'Annunzio', but this ignores the question of style (F. Roche-Pezard, *L'aventure futuriste 1909-1916*, Rome, 1983, p. 178). The writings of Mario Morasso, from which Marinetti borrowed directly, represent a kind of transition between the D'Annunzian and the Futurist celebration of the machine: see P. Bergman, *'Modernolatria' et 'Simultaneità'*, Stockholm, 1962, pp. 229-34.

13 The most important intellectual reviews were published in Florence: *Leonardo* (1903), *Il Regno* (1904), *La Voce* (1908) and *Lacerba* (1913). Naples was the centre of Croce's many intellectual enterprises, although *La Critica* (1903) was published in Bari.

14 Asor Rosa, *La cultura*, p. 1158.

mass level, however, the Socialist identification with 'science' was still effective in a period of rapid urbanization, accompanied by the growth of literacy and secularization. The workers were discovered to be eager neophytes of bourgeois Positivist culture. For the young Florentine intellectual Giovanni Papini, 'an average bourgeois and a worker are alike even in this: that they do not understand either a symphony of Wagner's or a paradox of Nietzsche's.[15] This cultural gap, one might note, was created by the acceptance of the cultural models of the European *fin de siècle*. The rejection of Realism in art and literature ran parallel to the rejection of Positivism in philosophy. Tolstoy and Verdi were compatible with popular Socialist culture; Nietzsche and Wagner were not. For most intellectuals, moderate democratic Socialism, encouraged by Giolitti, posed a more insidious and graver threat than violent revolution. This was, in a sense, a kind of unwilling tribute to Turati's strategy of working towards Socialism through gradual reform. Left and right joined hands in deploring the equivocal nature of the compromise between Socialism and bourgeois democracy. In spite of their very different intellectual standpoints, both Croce and Pareto shared an admiration for the originality and moral rigour of the theoretician of revolutionary syndicalism, Georges Sorel. Croce was responsible for the Italian translation of his famous *Réflexions sur la violence* in 1908.

At first there was a tactical alliance between Croce and the younger intellectuals of the Florentine journals, led by Papini and Giuseppe Prezzolini. In the battle against Positivism these brilliant, but superficial, polemicists played the role of light cavalry assisting the heavy philosophical phalanxes of Croce and Giovanni Gentile by a kind of intellectual skirmishing tactics. The most important of the Florentine reviews, *La Voce*, succeeded between 1908 and 1911 in giving a voice to all the most vital elements in contemporary Italian culture. It made a conscious attempt to break down the barriers between art, politics and literature. In its pages the painter Ardengo Soffici publicized the Cubism of Picasso and Braque. The appeal of the intellectual journals was increased by the stagnation of much academic culture. The culture of the journals had an anti-institutional bias which was favourable to innovation. But it also favoured a rather facile improvisation; intellectual fashions were rapidly absorbed and as rapidly dropped. Croce became increasingly concerned with the irrationalism and lack of intellectual discipline of the younger generation. Papini interpreted the pragmatism of William James in an individual fashion to support a belief in the magic potency of the will. Nietzsche, too, was pressed into service. He provided a heroic self-justification for the isolated intellectual in a secularized and industrializing world. This was particularly appropriate for the artist, at odds with the public and convinced that concessions to prevailing taste would destroy his originality. Nietzsche's insistence on philosophy as a personal interpretation of the world was genuinely liberating. But the rejection of system could easily degenerate into the rejection of all intellectual discipline. Without Nietzsche's passionate rigour, it could become the excuse for a series of 'stunts'.

The revolt against Giolittian mediation, against reformist Socialism and against 'parliamentarianism' was led by the revolutionary syndicalists on the left and the Nationalists on the right. Both claimed to represent the interests of the 'producers', contrasted with a 'parasitic' governing class. Both preached the virtues of an honest confrontation, in which the strongest would win. Both profited from the changing context of politics in the period 1908-14, at home and abroad. The slowing of economic growth after 1907 sharpened class antagonisms. Still more important, the Bosnian crisis of 1908 opened a period of heightened international tension in Europe, in which the Nationalists' attack on the primacy given by Giolitti to domestic reform over foreign policy acquired a new relevance. This made it difficult for Giolitti to ignore the pressure to exploit a favourable opportunity for asserting the Italian claim to Libya, still part of the Ottoman Empire. But the Libyan War undermined the basis of Giolitti's policies. On the right, it raised Nationalist excitement to a new pitch. On the left, the war aroused violent opposition, and secured the defeat of the reformist leadership of the Socialist party by its revolutionary wing. Benito Mussolini rose to prominence in these years as the leader of revolutionary Socialism.

It is in this context that Marinetti gave birth to the Futurist movement. As a political force, Futurism was wholly negligible until 1914. But as a political symptom it was highly significant. The new political and intellectual trends of the years before the war, whether of left or right, had in common a reaffirmation of the moment of decision and action. The Futurist movement was the most extreme expression of a broader current of opinion which can be termed 'the activist revolt'.[16] It was characterized by a belief in the primacy of action, life and inspired creativity over reason and 'dead' systems of thought. It emphasized the role of 'dynamic minorities' and individual leaders in galvanizing the inert masses by means of 'myths' which made their impact through striking images rather than argument.[17] Mussolini participated in this movement, using the ideas of Sorel and Nietzsche to attack the determinist interpretation of Marx hitherto dominant in Socialist culture. Futurism and Fascism both have their origins in this same cultural matrix. Marinetti made plain his political philosophy, if it can be called that, in the original manifesto, and in a supplementary political statement issued for the 1909 general elections he gave a more concise definition: 'We want to combine nationalism with the destructive action of the lovers of freedom.' Indeed, in an extraordinary way Marinetti anticipated the fusion of motifs from the revolutionary left and the Nationalist right from which Fascist ideology was eventually created.[18]

There is a danger in viewing Futurism too exclusively from the standpoint of contemporary 'high culture'. For Marinetti, Severini and Soffici perhaps the crucial reference is to the international avant-garde: but Umberto Boccioni and Giacomo Balla came from a more provincial and limited world where the heritage of late nineteenth-century Socialism, Positivism and scientific popularization was still of primary importance. They even shared the characteristic interest in spiritualism.[19] Balla, Boccioni and Carlo Carrà all took part in left-wing politics, and believed in the social mission of art. Balla participated in an exhibition designed to dramatize the terrible living conditions of peasants in the Agro Romano, and in 1911 Boccioni, already a Futurist, organized an exhibition of Free Art for workers in an abandoned factory in Milan.[20] In 1907, Boccioni recorded a remarkable expression of his artistic aspirations and frustrations: 'I must confess that I seek, seek and seek and do not find . . . . I feel that I wish to paint the new, the fruits of our industrial age. I am nauseated by old walls and old palaces, and by old motifs, by reminiscences. I wish to have the life of today in front of my eyes . . . . It seems to me that today art and artists are in conflict with science . . . . Our feverish epoch makes that which was produced yesterday obsolete and useless . . . . '[21]

Boccioni's paintings of the industrial periphery of Milan, such as *Officine a Porta Romana* (*Workshops at the Porta Romana;* Cat. 14) and *Sobborgo di Milano* (*Suburb of Milan;* Cat. 15), might seem to be an adequate response to his problems, but it was not one which satisfied him for long. We can see how his fascination with 'the feverish epoch' in which he was living predisposed him to accept Marinetti's Futurist message with enthusiasm. This did not mean, however, immediate acceptance of Marinetti's political ideas. What really moved Boccioni closer to Marinetti was his dissatisfaction with the cultural and artistic values of the Socialist left. By 1913, his disillusionment is very evident, and instead of his early faith in a democratic art for the people, we now hear a very different note, of the artist as natural aristocrat or even solitary superman, condemned to be understood only by a few privileged spirits. But this was not just a response to lack of success. What lay behind it was an artistic conversion, Boccioni's refusal to remain satisfied with a modernity of content, and his determination to embrace instead a radical modernity of form. It is this new definition of modernity as a break with naturalistic representation (influenced by the lessons of Cubism) which made Socialism seem no longer modern but 'obsolete', since it was inextricably identified with nineteenth-century realism or naturalism and indifferent if not actually hostile to formal experimentation.[22] The repudiation of the old type of realistic social art was connected with the general phenomenon of the revolt against Positivism and social democracy. The violent rejection of Socialist and humanitarian culture by the artists, especially Boccioni, amounted to a

15 Ibid., p. 1151.

16 It was a philosophy of direct action in both sex and politics, which rejected 'love and parliamentarianism' as unnecessary forms of verbal mediation. A new technological primitivism was to banish psychological introspection: see R. Tessari, *Il mito della macchina. Letteratura e industria nel primo novecento italiano*, Milan, 1973, pp. 222-3.

17 Sorel's concept of the myth as 'a body of images', which could be grasped by intuition alone, was deeply indebted to the philosophy of Henri Bergson, as was Futurist artistic theory: see A. Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power*, 2nd ed., London and Princeton, 1987, p. 366.

18 Ibid., p. 368; conservatism and nationalism were 'linked ideas which must be brutally separated'.

19 M. M. Lamberti, 'I mutamenti del mercato e le ricerche degli artisti', in *Storia dell'arte italiana*, pt 2, vol. 3, *Il Novecento*, Turin, 1982, p. 143n.

20 Ibid., p. 147.

21 M. W. Martin, *Futurist Art and Theory, 1909-1915*, Oxford, 1968, p. 63.

22 See 'Pubblico moderno nella vita, passatista in arte', in U. Boccioni, *Pittura Scultura Futuriste (dinamismo plastico)*, Milan, 1914, pp. 53-64.

deliberate repudiation of their own earlier beliefs. It was not voiced until they had absorbed the messages of both Marinetti and the French avant-garde about the meaning of modernism. At the same time, the artists' interest in science remained much more active than Marinetti's. The scientific revolution contributed to the sense that art, too, required a radical revolution. Both Boccioni and Balla tried to resolve the conflict between art and science in a new view of the world which incorporated such concepts as the equivalence of mass and energy and the relativity of space and time (see Boccioni, *Materia* [*Matter;* Cat. 25], and Balla, *Velocità astratta* [*Abstract Speed;* Cat. 12]).[23] Yet in a culture where the values of scientific enquiry were weak or, if anything, in retreat, the 'scientific' strain in Futurism was likely to have less resonance than the irrationalist call to action, destruction, and war.

The outbreak of the Great War in August 1914 created a situation in which cultural revolt could become militant politics (Fig. 6). Italy had been a partner of Germany and Austria-Hungary in the Triple Alliance, but public opinion sided strongly with France against German aggression. The government's initial decision to remain neutral was therefore generally welcomed, except by the small Nationalist movement; however, between September 1914 and May 1915, the nation became bitterly divided between 'neutralists' and 'interventionists', who agitated for Italy's entry into the war on the side of the Entente. The majority of the Socialist party remained faithful to its internationalist principles, and took a neutralist line, as did Giolitti. But after some hesitation Mussolini took a pro-interventionist stance, which led to his breach with the Socialist party. With money provided by Italian industrialists, he founded his own newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, which served as the rallying point for a motley but vigorous political grouping known as the *Fasci d'azione rivoluzionaria*. It included revolutionary syndicalists, 'heretics' of Socialism like Mussolini himself, and, last but not least, the Futurists. They could claim with justice to have been the precursors of the movement of 'revolutionary interventionism'. Marinetti and Boccioni were arrested in early September 1914 after a demonstration in which the Futurists burned five Austrian flags and wrecked the smart Café Biffi in the centre of Milan.[24] They were pioneers in the rhetoric and practice of violence. The interventionist demonstrations carried on where the Futurist 'evenings' left off.[25] They succeeded in creating a kind of carnival atmosphere, in which war was presented as the ultimate festival. This is very well suggested by Carrà's extraordinary collage, *Parole-in-libertà: Demostrazione interventista* (*Words-in-Freedom: Interventionist Demonstration;* Fig. 7).[26] This composition perhaps reveals even more than it

23 Not enough is known about the artists' scientific culture, but see Lamberti, 'I mutamenti', pp. 143, 156, and G. Ballo, 'Boccioni a Milano', in *Boccioni a Milano*, pp. 12-13, 23, 37. The concept of 'lines of force' may have been derived from Faraday's magnetic field theory. Evidently, the Futurists' use of scientific ideas was eclectic and imaginative rather than consistent or theoretical.

24 Lopez, 'La città attorno a lui', pp. 96-7.

25 G. L. Mosse, 'Futurismo e cultura politica in Europa: una prospettiva globale', in *Futurismo, cultura e politica*, ed. R. De Felice, Turin, 1988, p. 19.

26 The collage was actually created before the outbreak of war, under a slightly different title. For a careful analysis of this problem, see Roche-Pezard, *L'aventure futuriste*, pp. 440-43.

Fig. 6 *Futurist Synthesis of the War*. Leaflet signed by Filippo Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo and Ugo Piatti, September 1914

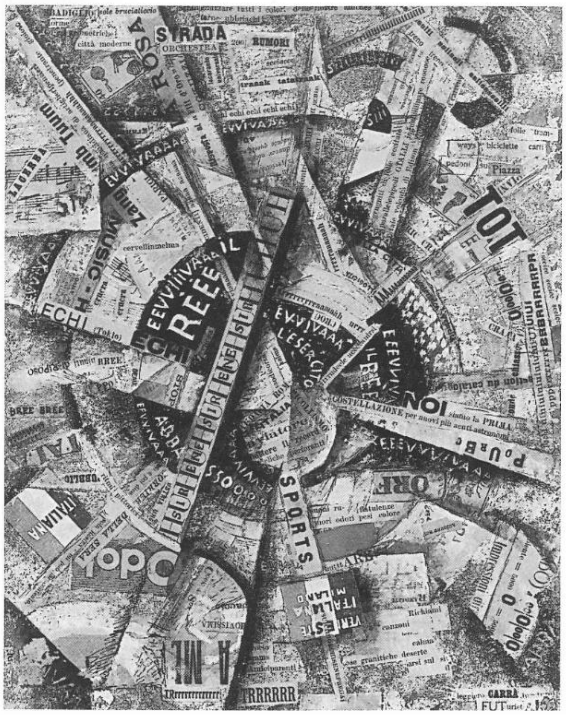

Fig. 7 Carlo Carrà, *Words-in-Freedom: Interventionist Demonstration*, 1914. Mattioli Collection, Milan

intends in the way in which a variety of slogans and motifs, representative of the confused and rebellious aspirations of Futurism and 'revolutionary interventionism', find unity only in the traditional patriotic slogans, *'Evviva il Re'* ('Long Live the King') and *'Evviva l'esercito'* ('Long Live the Army'). The revolutionary currents are sucked into the whirlpool of nationalism; the word 'Italy' has overruled the word 'freedom', as Marinetti had said it must.

The true Fascist movement (*Fasci di combattimento*) was not founded until 1919, but it always acknowledged its roots in the interventionist agitation of 1914-15. The conquest of the *piazza* by the 'dynamic minorities' against the opposition of the neutralist 'masses', both Socialist and Catholic, was a fateful precedent, as was the overriding of the will of parliament. In May 1915, D'Annunzio returned from France, where he had retired to escape his debts, to lead the demonstrations against a possible return of Giolitti to power on a neutralist platform. His oratory mobilized vast crowds in an orgy of patriotic enthusiasm and hatred for the 'internal enemies' who were standing in the way of Italy's destiny. Against the pseudo-religious rhetoric of 'communion' and 'sacrifice', reason had no defence. The politics of 'poetry' defeated the politics of 'prose', and not, unfortunately, for the last time. The novelty and the vitality of Italy's modernist cultural revolt ran into the sands of patriotic unity. The inspiration of the original Futurist group foundered on the contrast between the reality and the rhetoric of war, even if Marinetti's optimism remained extraordinarily unscathed. For artists and intellectuals, the war imposed a revaluation and rethinking of tradition.