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Review of Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes.*

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Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 315 pp. ISBN 0691122601.

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The influence that *The Communist Manifesto* has exerted on both the historical development of socialism and the variety of independence movements that have emerged in the twentieth century is widely noted. But what is not widely noted, and what Martin Puchner's recent study succeeds in making plain, is the degree to which the formal properties of the *Manifesto* contributed to the shape of modern art. As Puchner describes it, Marx and Engels developed the form "that would help revolutionary modernity to know itself, to arrive at itself, to make and to manifest itself" (1). The argument (which extends over five chapters) develops in three stages, the first of which focuses on the translation and geographical distribution of *The Communist Manifesto* (the urtext from which all subsequent twentieth-century manifestos derive). The second explores the modulation of the political manifesto into the artistic manifesto. The final stage of *Poetry of the Revolution* details the ways in which the formal properties of the manifesto (its notions of futurity, theatricality, and performativity) "intrude onto artworks and are in turn absorbed and assimilated by them" (6). Taken together, the stages of *Poetry of the Revolution* reveal how the manifesto moved from a socialist document, to an artistic genre, to a form of art.

The Communist Manifesto exerted its influence on modern art by establishing the conditions for a genuine "world literature," one which is built on the "radical concept of translation" (52). Arguing this point, Puchner details the textual history of the *Manifesto's* distribution, noting that Marx and Engels initially obscured both their own authorship (their names do not appear on the original text) and their primary language of composition. This type of effacement, which does not privilege the language of composition over the language of reception or the individual author over the collective consciousness for which it speaks, is instrumental in developing the international urgency of modernism, particularly as it reveals itself through the various artistic movements (Futurism, Dada, Surrealism) that refuse geographical limitation and insist on collective identity. In his evaluation of its geographical dispersal and linguistic transformations, Puchner exposes the latent complications that trouble the *Manifesto*, both at the level of its primary appearance and at the level of its refinement and redistribution. He is particularly adept at evaluating the way in which the prefaces to succeeding editions negotiate the troubling predicament of the text's own historicity, which is precisely its desire to avoid becoming an historical document whose declarations are invalidated by the refusal of world history to enact the revolution that the *Manifesto* summons. In all of its configurations, the manifesto is equal parts credo and history. What complicates it, however, and what charges the genre with its particularly modern relevance, is that it is a history not simply of the past, but also of the future. It is this future history that the manifesto attempts to validate through both its revolutionary language and its own theatrical posturing.

Throughout *Poetry of the Revolution*, Puchner explores the difficult relationship between performance and theatricality. As he understands it, the manifesto is menaced to various degrees by the desire for action (performance) and the competing necessity for exaggeration (theatricality). Every manifesto that Puchner examines, whether artistic or political, exhibits these tendencies but in different measures. In Chapter Two, Puchner draws on the theories of J.

L. Austin, Pierre Bourdieu, Kenneth Burke, and Louis Althusser to evaluate the particular brand of Marxist speech act that underwrites the manifesto's revolutionary desire to transform language into deed: "Speech acts must battle and conquer the threat of theatricality in order to become speech acts. Such a battle between theatricality and performativity is nowhere as visible as in the manifesto" (25). This tension between theatricality and performativity is the animating spirit of the manifesto genre, one that sits uncomfortably at the intersection of powerlessness and authority. As Puchner argues, the manifesto lends itself the authority to speak not by usurping power in the present but by imagining a future in which its own language will be graced with the status of prophecy. In this way, the manifesto reveals a degree of self-loathing that emerges from its desire to arrive at its own conclusion, to finish with words and inaugurate fully the new era that its own composition appears to impede. This suspicion of its own status as text is something that the manifesto shares with that portion of modern and postmodern art that has become wary of its own artificiality.

Part Two of *Poetry of the Revolution* ("The Futurism Effect") poses the following question: Why do fascist writers adopt the form of the manifesto, especially since it is a genre recognized to be steeped in the socialist tradition? The Italian fascists abjured the manifesto as a political device not simply because it emerged from socialism, but rather because it was imbued with socialism's theoretical obsession. Unlike socialism, fascism has no foundational text, no philosophical framework that is rooted in historiography. Its allegiance is to action, to the panorama of willed (or staged) activity and not the confined intricacies of theoretical maneuvering. Both Hitler and Mussolini privileged the spectacle over the word, the political rally over the distribution of literature. For Marinetti, who emerges in *Poetry of the Revolution* as the motivating force behind the ascension of the artistic manifesto, the genre's theoretical heritage did not necessitate that it be jettisoned altogether but that it be refashioned into a performative experience that would be intoned from the stage in what he called "dynamic and synoptic declamation" (87). The particular pressure that Marinetti exerted on the manifesto, his refashioning of both its shape and its functioning, contribute to what Puchner calls "the futurism effect." According to Puchner, Marinetti taught revolutionary modernity how to make manifestos. In his hands, the manifesto becomes the "central genre of futurism" (75) not because it partakes of the revolutionary attitude that characterizes the socialist manifesto, but rather because it imports into the sphere of art the manifesto's formal properties. With Marinetti, the manifesto ceases to become an implement of revolution and becomes instead an agent of war, both in the sense that Marinetti and the Futurists agitated for Italy's entrance into World War I and in the sense that the manifesto becomes a weapon that can distinguish one movement from another, one artistic ism from the next.

The autonomy of the artistic manifesto surfaces in response to the dialectical relationship between artistic movements and political ones, a dialectic that arises almost always at the insistence of the latter. Though it might have aspired to political significance, Italian Futurism was relegated to the sphere of art by the Fascist political machinery. The same is true of the Russian avant-garde, which could not write political manifestos in the face of a revolutionary government that drew its sanction from the *Manifesto* (proper). Though they remain distinct, the artistic manifesto never manages to escape its political heritage. "Instead, the manifesto, now situated in both politics and art, became a genre through which art and politics could communicate, a kind of membrane that allowed for exchange between them even as it also kept

them apart" (79). In light of their antagonism, the manifesto creates the only language through which these two discourses can understand one another.

Section Two concludes with an interesting evaluation of British Modernism in general and of Wyndham Lewis in particular. In the history of modern art, Lewis has long remained a difficult figure to classify. The degree to which he has been mishandled or left aside altogether has partly to do with his political sympathies (his initial support for Hitler, for example) and partly to do with the fact that he does not fit comfortably into the established categories that literary studies have erected. One of the real strengths of *Poetry of the Revolution* is that it succeeds in repositioning Lewis, arguing that he must be understood as the foremost proponent of what Puchner persuasively calls British "Rear-guardism" (108). Unlike Marinetti's, Lewis's energies were conservative in nature. His energies were likewise contrarian. The persona of the "Enemy" that he adopted required that he resist the "grand manifesto onslaught" (117) that Marinetti and the European avant-gardes had unleashed. For Lewis, one of the real tragedies of the manifesto was that it destroyed, in his mind, the distinction between art and politics; a second was that it produced collectivism in the arts. As much as he despised it, Lewis could only succeed against the rise of the manifesto by outdoing it, by creating a new brand of Modernism that announced itself through its own variety of manifestoing. His forays into the manifesto target the principle of revolution. As such, his invective is always regressive, always a form of satire that is engaged in staving off the tide of political language and political art that is overwhelming modernity: "Even though the speech acts of *Blast* are thus infused with violent irony, they continue to participate in what they ironize and continue to be deployed for the serious business of reacting to the Continental avant-garde" (113).

In "The Avant-Garde at Large," Puchner deals with two distinctly international movements: Dadaism and Creationism. Here, Puchner's goal is to demonstrate the degree to which the material history of *The Communist Manifesto* contributes to the culture of translation and travel that these two movements embody. The argument is particularly trenchant when dealing with Dadaism, which, as Puchner notes, is the "most non- or anti-national movement of the time" (135). World War I solidified the struggle between nationalist and global agendas -- between capitalism and international socialism. Dada models itself on both of these forces, taking from each a measure of its transnational character. It is both opposed to national limitations and at home with a process of artistic colonization that resembles capitalism's continual search for new markets. Although it must be regarded as a form of irony, the Dadaists usurped the language of capitalism to advertise their movement. But what distinguishes the Dadaist movement fully, according to Puchner, is its use of the manifesto:

In contrast to Marinetti's nationalist rhetoric of aggression, Lewis's grim satires, or Russian poetic manifestos, dada manifestos seem more playful and experimental, more aware of the fact that the avant-garde manifesto had become a genre that could be variously used and altered. All these features are driven by a single overwhelming tendency: dada manifestoes were born from the spirit of the theater. (146)

Whereas previous manifestos deployed theatricality with some reservation, in some sense as compensation for their inability to be wholly performative, Dadaism descends easily into theatricality. It eliminates the final traces of dogma from the manifesto and erects in its place a

type of manifesto that is aware of itself as art: "The invention of the metamanifesto is the particular contribution of dada to the history of the manifesto; it marks the high-water mark of this genre's theatricalization, the celebration of theatrical overreaching at the expense of its performative and transformative power" (153).

Puchner devotes substantial attention to André Breton, the chief figure behind the manifesto's reconstitution as an authoritative and disciplinary instrument. As he conceives him, Puchner's Breton never settles the debate between art and revolution, between the allegiances that they owe to one another. Like Trotsky and Diego Rivera, with whom he wrote *Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art* (1938), Puchner's Breton feels deeply the burden of orthodoxy, for which reason he retreats from both the idea of the fully explicit and the official doctrine of the Revolution. Deriving principally from Freud, his interest in latency constitutes an escape from the overt exposure of the manifesto and a return to an older, Romantic tradition of prophecy that animates Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* and Shelley's *Defense of Poetry*. And yet, Breton never abandons the concept of revolution itself, claiming that all art is inherently revolutionary. The Breton who emerges from Puchner's portrait occupies uneasily a space between the conflicting impulses that shape art and politics, a figure oscillating between the desire to make manifest (manifestoes) and the desire to preserve the latent majesty of art.

Although it succeeds elsewhere, *Poetry of the Revolution* is less convincing when it extends its geographical argument about the uneven development of modernism to the periphery. Vicente Huidobro is the only non-European writer to receive sustained attention, a responsibility which he bears somewhat uncomfortably, owing to the fact that his own artistic career was carried out partially in Europe. Even though it addresses both Latin American *modernismo* (a movement that predates Marinetti and the futurism effect) and the deep culture of manifestoing active in Mexico, the chapter on Huidobro suggests more than it refutes the notion that the artistic manifesto remains a largely European affair. In spite of this objection, *Poetry of the Revolution* will no doubt long remain the standard by which all subsequent historical and literary evaluations of the manifesto will be measured. It is immensely impressive in its scope and erudition. It succeeds ultimately in positioning the manifesto as one of the key genres through which modernity both announces and recognizes itself.