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Virilities

Dacchè tutto era, allora, maschio e Mavorte: e insino le femine e le balie e le poppe della tu' balia, e l'ovario e le trombe di Falloppio e la vagina e la vulva. La virile vulva della donna italiana.¹

[For everything then was male and Martial: even broads and wet nurses, and the tits of your wet nurse and the ovary and the fallopian tubes and the vagina and the vulva. The virile vulva of the Italian woman.]

Thus Carlo Emilio Gadda maliciously summarizes the fascist era in his novel *Eros e Priapo* (Eros and Priapo), by carrying the obsession with virility in fascist discourse to its limit: the virilization of woman herself. Gadda's aim is to ridicule fascist discourse by pointing to what he takes to be the absurdity of mixing and matching gender and sex: so outlandish is the fascist rhetoric of virility, his logic goes, that it even extended virility to women's genitalia! But such a gendering is ridiculous only if one assumes a naturalized relation between gender and sex, in which masculinity is the natural property of the male and femininity the natural property of the female, and only if one assumes that virility can be detached neither from masculinity nor from the male. I would like to begin by putting into question such assumptions and suggesting that we cannot assume that we know what interpretants to assign to such a highly charged term as "virility," even before we move on

Unless noted otherwise, all translations throughout the book are my own.

to its more properly rhetorical use in fascist discourse. If some of the discourses we are about to examine will often subscribe to those assumptions, indeed will sometimes vehemently enforce them, others may line up instead on the side of the possibility of mixing and matching. We cannot therefore assume that “virile” is equivalent to “phallic” or to “masculine,” that its contrary is “effeminate,” nor that the term occupies the same area in English as in Italian. In English, according to the *OED*, “virility” may refer to “the period of life during which a person of the male sex is in full vigour, mature or fully developed manhood or masculine force”; it may refer specifically to the “generative organs” or to capacity for sexual intercourse; it may refer to “manly strength and vigour of action or thought, energy or force or a virile character.” As an adjective, “virile” may refer simply to a stage in life in contrast to youth and old age; in Renaissance usage, it may be applied to a woman to mean “nubile”; it may be defined, broadly, as “of, belonging to, or characteristic of man; manly, masculine, marked by strength or force.” Zingarelli’s Italian dictionary is even more loquacious on the topic, offering as examples of “that which is proper to man, as male,” a list of nouns that might be described by the word “virile”: “sex, appearance, beauty, nature, member.” And as qualities that are “proper to the physically and mature adult male,” the following examples appear: “force, voice, age, energy, wisdom, courage.” In Italian the notion of virility appears to have undergone further cultural elaboration and may refer to “that which is proper or suitable to the strong, well-balanced, and self-confident person, aware of his role, duties, responsibilities, etc.” Because the gender of possessive adjectives in Italian refers not to the possessor but to the thing possessed, this last definition appears unmarked by gender in much the same way as “man” in English functions as the universalized, “unmarked” term. These definitions are simply the raw material, the semantic field, that fascism will mine in both senses of the word: all possibilities will be excavated and explosive devices planted where one least expects them.

Yet even this elementary reading of dictionaries is illuminating. Zeev Sternhell, for example, lists virility as one of many qualities and cults that characterize the “new civilization” desired by fascism, yet those cults in fact read like dictionary entries for a single master term.² As mentioned in the preface, these cults — of youth, duty, sacrifice, strength, obedience, sexuality, war, and so on — all are inflections of the term “virility.” Indeed, Mussolini’s public image appears to be similarly dictated by a series of dictionary entries. In Philip Cannistraro’s account of the orders given the press

regarding the image of the Duce to be created, “virility” once again appears as a subcategory of a series of which it in fact stands as rubric.³ No news of the Duce’s illnesses or birthdays, nor of the fact that he had become a grandfather, was to be published. Mussolini himself shaved his head so that no grey hair might mar the appearance of a man in his prime. He was simply not to grow old. The lights left burning late into the night in his Piazza Venezia office similarly signaled not only devotion to his “duties” but vigor and stamina. He was not to be shown participating in “nonvirile” activities (and here the term *non virili* is used) like dancing but was instead to be shown participating in vigorous sports such as riding, flying, motorcycling, and so on. No references were to be made to his family life, to his role as husband and father. The image of the family man would presumably soften his virility. Interestingly, none of the directives cited by Cannistraro excludes information about the lovers and amorous exploits Mussolini was “known” to have.

It is, of course, a commonplace that an obsession with virility is one of the distinctive traits of fascist discourse, a commonplace that is sometimes psychologized, sometimes simply taken for granted as a sort of linguistic tic.⁴ References to virility do indeed pepper the writings of fascist intellectuals as though the word itself were proof of the writer’s fascist credentials, a kind of verbal campaign button. But the latter approach often accepts masculine adjectivation as self-evident, rather than symptomatic. The linguist Giovanni Lazzari’s study of the most exploited semantic fields in fascist discourse, *Le parole del fascismo*, is typical in this regard.⁵ “Virility” appears in his study alongside such categories as “Rome,” “war,” and “the Duce,” yet no attempt is made to analyze the interrelations among these fields. In Lazzari’s case we might attribute this lack of analysis to the restricted scope dictated by the discipline of linguistics itself; what he presents is raw data awaiting analysis of a different type. But these raw data reappear, still unrefined, in Furio Jesi’s suggestive *Cultura di destra* when Jesi takes it for granted that virilization is one of the distinctive rhetorical strategies of fascist discourse. Jesi analyzes the variations in what is presumably the “same” speech given in commemoration of Giosuè Carducci on two different occasions in 1907: one in public and one in a Masonic lodge. What is interesting for the present study is that Jesi’s index for protofascism in the former version is not a philosophical or political position but a rhetoric of virility: “Locutions and stylemes that will later be those of fascist rhetoric are the signs of [the speaker’s conviction that he is] entering into a relation with that value: ‘un maschio viso’ [a masculine face], ‘viril fierezza’ [virile pride], ‘momenti

storici fatidici' [fatal historical moments]."⁶ The "value" in question is that of the past as undifferentiated value, yet Jesi does not pursue the question of the relation between virilization and the attitude toward the past that it presumably signals.

While linguistic and literary studies accept virilization as unremarkable, psychological studies read the fascist obsession with virility as pathological. These studies tend either to indulge in the social fantasy that links homosexuality and fascism or to oppose pathological fascist virility to a model of "healthy virility" usually to be found in Marxism. Representative of the latter tendency is John Hoberman's rather dramatic claim, in *Sport and Political Ideology*, that a cult of virility not only is present in all fascist cultures but is indeed constitutive of them and never appears in Marxist cultures.⁷ Wilhelm Reich, in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, is perhaps the most notable and notorious author of psychologizing theories of the former tendency followed by Jean-Paul Sartre, who attributes homosexual tendencies to the collaborator in "Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur?"⁸ In what will become one of the more pernicious topoi of representations of fascism, Sartre bypasses the homosocial to arrive at the notion of the homosexual as politically aberrant: men *desaxés*, as Sartre puts it, by the Axis.⁹ More recently Klaus Theweleit, in *Male Fantasies*, has analyzed the misogyny and psychosexual development of the "soldier male" whose murderous fantasies are taken as synecdochic for those of Nazism (and sometimes those of Western civilization as a whole).¹⁰ What is interesting and important about these psychological studies is that they take the obsession with virility seriously and examine it as a symptom. What is, instead, dangerous is that such analyses risk associating what they consider to be sexual aberration with what they hope to present as historical "aberration," thereby coming perilously close to the famous Crocean interpretation of fascism as a "parenthesis" in history—the term "parenthesis" implying that its roots could not be traced in all that had come before it and that it did not leave seeds for future fascisms. The association of sexual "aberration" with historical aberration has been perpetuated in various narrative forms, among them cinema. One might think, for example, of Roberto Rossellini's film *Open City*, where the Italian collaborator with Nazism is not only wanton but a lesbian to boot, or of the more recent Bertolucci film *1900*, in which the fascist is not only sadistic but portrayed as sexually perverted.¹¹ These two approaches — that of the linguistic tic and that of pathological aberration — represent the Scylla and Charybdis of approaches to fascism: trivialization and demonization. Demonization, though historically associated with political opposition to

fascism, turns analysis into exorcism, while trivialization precludes analysis altogether.

I would like to chart a third course, suggested by a possible objection to the project itself: one might object that political rhetoric always includes a rhetoric of virility and that the problem is therefore not a specifically “fascist” one at all. To be sure, the introduction of gender into political discourse is hardly a fascist innovation. Just as Klaus Theweleit analyzes the way in which Bolshevism is figured as a sexual threat by the Freikorps officers, so Neil Hertz has analyzed the way in which, in the context of the 1848 revolution and the Commune, a political threat may be represented as a sexual threat.¹² And several of the texts we will be examining explicitly or implicitly invoke a Machiavellian genealogy for their virile virtues. An investigation of the rhetoric of virility would thus seem doubly banal: not only do we “know” that fascist rhetoric is a rhetoric of virility; we also “know” that all political rhetoric is a rhetoric of virility.¹³ But such “knowledge” is based upon an ideological sedimentation so thick that it seems as natural as the ground we walk upon, and easily leads to an acceptance of those gender politics as equally natural. Though layer upon layer of culture have made it appear “natural,” that common ground is a commonplace — rhetorical and ideological — that is neither trivial (simply to be expected) nor demonic (completely unprecedented). Without a rhetorical and ideological analysis of this commonplace, our understanding of the culture that produced fascism and of the culture that fascism produced remains not only partial but ideological as well, for we risk accepting the gender politics of that culture. One such layer of culture can be found in the literary roots of fascist rhetoric.

This literary treatment of fascism is rendered necessary by Italian fascism's refusal (or incapacity) to define itself philosophically, a refusal (or incapacity) that has plagued historians and political scientists who find themselves hard pressed to define their object of study. Their solution is often a chronological, rather than philosophical or ideological, one: “The word Fascism with a capital 'F' refers specifically to the political system of Italy from the early 1920s through the early 1940s and should not be a problem; the problem concerns the word fascism with a small 'f,'" writes the historian Edward Tannenbaum.¹⁴ Such a chronological solution is a heuristic device that merely displaces the problem onto “fascisms.” Indeed, “fascist philosophy” and “fascist ideology” come to be viewed as almost oxymoronic combinations, as contradictions in terms.¹⁵ Yet fascism seems to compensate for this refusal (or incapacity) by overdefining itself rhetor-

ically and semiotically: hence the need to change calendar and holidays, to eradicate all traces of foreign words and dialect from the “official” language, to identify the fascist by the clothes he wears and the slogans he repeats, and, in general, to attempt a realignment of signifiers and signifieds. Thus, in oxymoronic fashion, war comes to be aligned with life and peace with death; socialism comes to be national; the revolution is conservative; and neologisms (in particular, invective) abound. If this “verbal revolutionism,” as it has been called, stands in the place of an “authentic” revolution, it is also one of fascism’s primary modes of self-definition. Hence the fascination that fascism seems to hold for literary scholars: fascism is a movement in semiotic overdrive.

Here we will deal with a small part of that semiotic movement by focusing on the rhetoric of virility of two of Mussolini’s most notorious “preursors”: F. T. Marinetti and Gabriele D’Annunzio. Though it is well known that Mussolini adopted slogans from both writers and that the Duce’s political style owed much to D’Annunzio’s style during his occupation of Fiume, the writings from which both slogans and style were culled remain to a large extent unread. Marinetti’s neglected political writings (*Democrazia futurista* [Futurist democracy] [1919], *Al di là del comunismo* [Beyond communism] [1920], *Futurismo e fascismo* [Futurism and fascism] [1924]) and D’Annunzio’s speeches and writings from the Fiume period (collected in *Il sudore di sangue* [Blood sweat], *L’urna inesausta* [The inexhaustible urn], *Il libro ascetico della giovane Italia* [The ascetic book of young Italy]) belong to the same cultural context in which protofascism, fascism as a movement, had not yet solidified into fascism as regime. The revolutionary aspects of protofascism still coexist, in their works, with the reactionary trend that will out in the end. This combination is often played out as a split between the good revolutionary, Marinetti, and the bad reactionary, D’Annunzio, a split that can be maintained as long as one does not actually read the texts in question.¹⁶ Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, for example, attempts to salvage Marinetti and lay all blame on D’Annunzio:

D’Annunzio relegates woman to her boudoir with her feathers, her sequins, her veils, her simpering, and her fainting, in the style of Sarah Bernhardt and Belle Otero. Woman was “a thousand times woman.” Like a true D’Annunzian (his same whore-mongering tastes will lead him to defend bordellos during the fascist period), Mussolini will choose the sexual and cultural poverty of women as a system of power. Anti-Dannuzianism — represented by Marinetti and clearly marked by the Bolshevik revolution — was in the meantime headed in the opposite ideological direction (a letter from Gramsci

to Trotsky — September 1927 — reveals the extent to which futurist discourse was widespread in the centers of workers' culture in Turin). Marinetti's futurism, before being put in step and distorted by fascism, upset the traditional bourgeois ethic and its familialism that were always accompanied in D'Annunzio by a morality of debauchery for the privileged elite. He extolled divorce, free love, the abolition of women's servitude, women's suffrage. The futurist documents of the twenties addressed to women had as titles: "Manifeste de la femme futuriste" (Manifesto of futurist women), "Contro il lusso femminile" (Against feminine extravagance), "Contro il matrimonio" (Against marriage).¹⁷

This passage is typical in a number of ways: it confuses D'Annunzio's biography with D'Annunzio's literary texts; it accepts Marinetti's own characterization of his relationship to "D'Annunzianismo" at face value; it adheres to a split between a first, revolutionary futurism, and a second, "distorted" (read: fascist) futurism. Such splitting makes it impossible to read anything other than titles, for when the texts that follow those titles are read, one discovers that the two "moments" of futurism are ideologically simultaneous rather than sequential: "tutte le belle libertà" [all the beautiful freedoms] (as Marinetti himself puts it in *Come si seducono le donne* [How to seduce women]) that futurism has to offer women are designed not only to liberate women from slavery to men and to the bourgeois family but also to safeguard virility and ensure the future of the nation and of the race. Marinetti's writings on "women's issues" are the breeding ground for his rhetoric of virility, and so it is to those texts that we now turn.

Marinetti's Border Patrol

"Contro il matrimonio," a manifesto that appears in *Democrazia futurista*, is divided almost exactly in half between the "left" and the "right," the "first" moment of futurism and the "second." In the first half, the bourgeois family is lambasted as an absurd, prehistoric prison in which all participants are victims; marriage is denounced as a hypocritical mask for legal prostitution; the abolition of property, both of land and of women, is declared: "Noi vogliamo distruggere non soltanto la proprietà della terra, ma anche la proprietà della donna" [We want to destroy not only the ownership of land, but also the ownership of woman]. As Macciocchi notes, Engels would have approved. But just as one is about to applaud (and Macciocchi, who quotes only the first half, does applaud), the argument takes a nationalistic turn: "La donna non appartiene a un uomo, ma bensì all'avvenire e allo sviluppo della razza" [Woman does not belong to a man but rather to the future and to the race's development]. This appearance of nationalism

coincides — not coincidentally — with the introduction of a rhetoric of virility, confirming George Mosse's suggestion that the ideal of manliness is a fellow-traveler of nationalism.¹⁸ Indeed, the second half of the manifesto gives a series of quite different reasons for the abolition of family and marriage:

Sarà finalmente abolita la mescolanza di maschi e femmine che — nella prima età — produce una dannosa effemminazione dei maschi.

I bambini maschi devono — secondo noi — svilupparsi lontano dalle bambine perché i loro primi giochi sieno nettamente maschili, cioè privi d'ogni morbosità affettiva, d'ogni delicatezza donneasca, vivaci, battaglieri, muscolari, e violentemente dinamici. La convivenza di bambini e di bambine produce sempre un ritardo nella formazione del carattere dei bambini che immanabilmente subiscono il fascino e la seduzione imperativa della piccola femmina come piccoli cicisbei o piccoli schiavi stupidi.¹⁹

[We will finally do away with the mixture of males and females that during the earliest years always produces a harmful effemmanizing of the male.

Little boys must — according to us — develop far away from little girls in order that their first games be clearly masculine, that is, free of emotional morbidity or womanly delicacy, lively, feisty, muscular and violently dynamic. When little boys and girls live together, the formation of the male character is always retarded. They always succumb to the charm and the willful seductiveness of the little female, like little ladies' men or stupid little slaves.]²⁰

The logic of this passage runs counter to the commonplace that “boys will be boys”: given half a chance, boys will be girls. That dreaded opportunity might be forestalled by segregation, separate but not quite equal, at an early age. But even then the boy's masculinity is not assured, for the manifesto continues and ends with yet another example of harmful mixture. History itself may still intervene at a later age, and men will jump at the chance:

La vasta partecipazione delle donne al lavoro nazionale prodotto dalla guerra, ha creato un tipico grotesco matrimoniale: Il marito possedeva del denaro o ne guadagnava, ora l'ha perduto e stenta a riguadagnarne. Sua moglie lavora e trova il modo di guadagnare un denaro abbondante in un momento in cui la vita è essenzialmente costosa.

La moglie ha per il suo lavoro stesso la necessità di una vita poco casalinga, il marito invece non lavorando concentra tutta la sua attività in una assurda preoccupazione di ordine casalingo.

Rovesciamento completo di una famiglia dove il marito è diventato una donna inutile con prepotenze maschili e la moglie ha raddoppiato il suo valore umano e sociale.

Urto inevitabile fra i due soci, conflitto e sconfitta dell'uomo.²¹

[The wide participation of women in the national work produced by the war has created a typical matrimonial grotesque: the husband had money or was earning it, now he has lost it and has difficulty earning it back. His wife works and finds a way to earn a handsome income at a time when cost of living is high.

On account of her job, the wife needs a nonhousewifely life, while the husband who does not work concentrates all his activity in an absurd housewifely preoccupation.

Complete overturning of a family in which the husband has become a useless woman with masculine pretensions and the wife has doubled her human and social value.

Inevitable clash between the two spouses, conflict and defeat of the man.]²²

The virile soldier returned from the segregated barracks and trenches to find the familial, patriarchal hierarchy inverted. The first, eminently quotable half of the manifesto calls for the liberation of woman from family and patriarchy; the second recasts that argument in terms of the liberation of man from evirating woman: marriage and the family are threats to virility. This refrain is taken up again in the manifesto “Orgoglio italiano rivoluzionario e libero amore” (Revolutionary Italian pride and free love):

Il matrimonio deprime e avvilisce la donna abbreviadone la gioventù e troncandone le forze spirituali e fisiche. Il matrimonio scoraggia e soffoca lo sviluppo del figlio, tronca la gioventù e la forza virile del padre, effemmina l'adolescente, monotonizza e affloscia in un ambiente di mediocrità tre o più individui che avrebbero dato il loro massimo rendimento slegati in libertà e in piena avventura. Il matrimonio è un nemico di ogni audacia e di ogni eroismo.²³

[Marriage depresses and disheartens woman by cutting short youth and stunting her spiritual and physical forces. Marriage discourages and suffocates the development of the son, cuts short the youth and virile strength of the father, effemulates the adolescent, monotonizes and withers, in an atmosphere of mediocrity, three or more individuals who would have fulfilled their potential unfettered in freedom and in high adventure. Marriage is an enemy of all boldness and all heroism.]

One might, of course, point out that there is a good deal of “cutting off” (“troncandone . . . tronca”) going on in this passage and that this “cutting off” has a withering and feminizing effect. But while such castratory language comes as no surprise in this context, it is not really the point—as in the case of the *bambine* cited above, the mere proximity of woman seems enough to wither and feminize.

This latter point is brought home with remarkable clarity in the manifesto “Contro il lusso femminile,” which appears in *Futurismo e fascismo*. Here the inversion of the familial hierarchy, noted in “Contro il matrimonio,” is translated into an “inversion” of another sort, as Marinetti associates feminization with homosexuality, or, as he puts it, “pederasty”:

I gioelli e le stoffe dolci al tatto distruggono nel maschio l'assaporamento tattile della carne femminile. I profumi sono ugualmente contrari al vero desiderio, poiché raramente collaborano cogli odori della pelle, spesso si combinano con essi spiacevolmente, sempre distraggono e astraggono l'olfatto-immaginazione del maschio.

Il maschio perde a poco a poco il senso potente della carne femminile e lo rimpiazza con una sensibilità indecisa e tutta artificiale, che risponde soltanto alle sete, ai velluti, ai gioielli, alle pellicce.

Diventano sempre più rari i maschi capaci di prendere e gustare una bella donna senza preoccuparsi del contorno e del contatto di stoffe scintillii e colori. La donna nuda non piace più. I maschi si trasformano in gioellieri, profumieri, sarti, modiste, stiratrici, ricamatori e pederasti. La *toilettite* favorisce singolarmente lo sviluppo della pederastia e si dovrà giungere presto a quel provvedimento igienico di un doge di Venezia, che obbligò le belle veneziane ad esporsi colle poppe nude alla finestra, fra due candele, per ricondurre i maschi sulla retta via.²⁴

[Jewels and fabrics sweet to the touch destroy in the male the tactile tasting of female flesh. Perfumes are equally contrary to true desire, for rarely do they collaborate with the skin's odors; often they combine with them in an unpleasant way; and they always distract and abstract the male's olfactory imagination.

Little by little, the male loses the potent sense of female flesh and replaces it with an indecisive and completely artificial sensitivity that responds only to silks, velvets, jewels, and furs.

Males capable of taking and enjoying a beautiful woman without worrying about the trimmings and contact with fabrics, glitters, and colors are ever more rare. The naked woman no longer pleases. Males are transformed into jewelers, perfumers, tailors, stylists, ironesses, embroiderers, and pederasts. Toilettitis particularly favors the development of pederasty, and soon we will have recourse to that hygienic measure taken by a Venetian doge who required the beautiful Venetian women to expose their naked breasts at the window, between two candles, in order to lead males back to the straight and narrow.]

Marinetti needs to create two different kinds of women (even if those two kinds are only differentiated by the presence or absence of clothes), two different kinds of proximity, since dispensing with women entirely would leave the male without means to prove his masculinity.²⁵ It is difficult to

imagine a more direct countertext to what might be called the “Decadent Manifesto,” Baudelaire’s “Éloge du maquillage” (and equally difficult to imagine that Marinetti, reader of Baudelaire and Mallarmé, did not have Baudelaire in mind). Baudelaire, of course, had praised cosmetics and the *mundus muliebris* as the model for the artist whose poetics were those of cosmesis rather than mimesis. And in “Un mangeur d'opium,” proximity to the *mundus muliebris* is quite explicitly the incubator of genius:

L'homme qui, dès le commencement, a été longtemps baigné dans la molle atmosphère de la femme, dans l'odeur de ses mains, de son sein, de ses genoux, de sa chevelure, de ses vêtements souples et flottants,

Dulce balneum suavibus
Unguentatum odoribus

y a contracté une délicatesse d'épiderme et une distinction d'accent, une espèce d'androgynéité, sans lesquelles le génie le plus âpre et le plus viril reste, relativement à la perfection dans l'art, un être incomplet. Enfin, je veux dire que le goût précoce du *monde féminin, mundi muliebris*, de tout cet appareil ondoyant, scintillant et parfumé, fait les génies supérieurs.²⁶

[The man who, from the beginning, has long been bathed in the soft atmosphere of woman, in the odor of her hands, her breast, her knees, her hair, her supple and flowing clothes,

Dulce balneum suavibus
Unguentatum odoribus

has contracted an epidermal delicacy and a distinction of accent, a sort of androgyny without which the most severe and virile genius remains, in relation to perfection in art, an incomplete being. In short, I mean that the precocious taste for the feminine world/cosmetics, for the whole flowing, scintillating, perfumed display, makes superior geniuses.]

For Baudelaire, androgyny can be contracted and virile genius completed through physical proximity to women and their *toilette*, “scintillant et parfumé.” For Marinetti, instead, what is contracted from the *mania morbosa* (morbid mania) of the *toilette* (“I profumi... stoffe scintilli colori”) is not androgyny but pederasty. *Toilettite* (toilettitis), as Marinetti calls it, “perverts” masculine desire, and only a naked woman can lead the man back to the *diritta via* of heterosexuality. And once again, the rhetoric of virility is coupled with nationalistic sentiment:

Noi futuristi, barbari raffinatissimi, ma virilissimi, viviamo in tutti gli ambienti; siamo, se non sempre amati, mai trascurati. Abbiamo interrogati i

maschi più fortunati. Sono del nostro parere. Siamo dunque competenti e ottimisti non delusi. Parliamo in nome della razza, che esige maschi accesi e donne feconde. La fecondità, per una razza come la nostra, è in caso di guerra, la sua difesa indispensabile, e in tempo di pace la sua ricchezza di braccia lavoratrici e di teste geniali.

In nome del grande avvenire virile fecondo e geniale dell'Italia, noi futuristi condanniamo la dilagante cretineria femminile e la devota imbecillità dei maschi che insieme collaborano a sviluppare il lusso femminile, la prostituzione, la pederastia, e la sterilità della razza.²⁷

[We futurists, extremely refined barbarians, but extremely virile, live in all environments. If not always loved, we are never ignored. We have interrogated the most fortunate males. They agree with us. We are therefore competent and undeluded optimists. We speak in the name of the race, which demands ardent males and inseminated females. Fecundity, for a race like ours, is its indispensable defense in times of war, and in times of peace, its wealth of working arms and genial heads.

In the name of the great, virile, fecund, and genial future of Italy, we futurists condemn the spreading feminine idiocy and the devoted imbecility of males that together collaborate to develop feminine extravagance, prostitution, pederasty, and the sterility of the race.¹

These concluding demographic preoccupations are “pure” Mussolini and appear in a manifesto that Macciocchi implies *preceded* the distortion of futurism by fascism. The point is not that futurism in 1920 was already distorted (in which case only prewar futurism would be “pure”) but rather that it was always already “distorted.”²⁸ One must not forget that the 1909 founding manifesto of futurism included, as article number nine, the glorification of war, militarism, patriotism, and “il disprezzo della donna” (scorn for woman), and that article number ten called for the destruction not only of museums but also of feminism. Nor should one forget that Marinetti’s argument for women’s suffrage, in “Contro l’amore e il parlamentarismo,” is based upon the premise that since women are absolutely inferior in both character and intelligence, they will be mediocre legislative instruments and will therefore involuntarily aid in the cause of destroying the parliamentary system. But it is not, after all, the texts themselves that are distorted; rather, we, as readers, distort them by sorting out the “left” from the “right” and privileging either the one or the other. They are bound together: the “progressive” cause, women’s suffrage, is but a means to a “reactionary” end, the destruction of the parliamentary form of government.²⁹ This binding creates an ideological double bind with regard to the preservation of virility: the proximity of women turns boys into girls and heterosexuals into “ped-

erasts," but only the proximity of women (naked breasts at the window . . .) can make the boy a man and the man a patriot.

This patriarchal double bind has been astutely analyzed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as the result of a prescription of homosocial behavior (male bonding) and an equally strong proscription of homosexual behavior.³⁰ The boundaries between the homosocial and the homosexual are unstable and always shifting, creating what, as mentioned earlier, Sedgwick calls "male homosexual panic": When does camaraderie become pederasty (as Marinetti would say)? What is the correct proximity of man to man? This double bind manifests itself in Marinetti's texts not in terms of proximity of man to man but in terms of man to woman. Divorce, free love, and destruction of the bourgeois family are all tactics that will enforce intermittent proximity of men to women, as if to draw new boundaries that would protect virility from the "effemimation" that results from cohabitation, and at the same time refuel virility through sporadic contact with women. What distinguishes Marinetti's texts from the texts discussed by Sedgwick, however, is that here the patriarchal double bind is lined with nationalism; the rhetoric of virility is the site where boundaries between the homosocial and the homosexual, and borders between nations (which can be more clearly drawn and more openly defended than those between the homosocial and the homosexual), cross. Internationalism thus becomes the greatest threat to both, for the elimination of or expansion of national borders may also expand or eliminate the boundaries that stake out virility. Indeed, Marinetti's anticommunist manifesto, "Al di là del comunismo," attacks Bolshevism because it would eliminate boundaries between individuals, between classes, but most importantly between nations:

Non si può abolire l'idea di patria se non rifugiandosi in un egoismo assenteista. Dire per esempio: io non sono italiano, sono cittadino del mondo, equivale a dire: "m'infischio dell'Italia, dell'Europa, dell'Uumanità: penso a me."

Il concetto di patria è indistruttibile quanto il concetto di partito.

La patria non è che un vasto partito. Negare la patria equivale a isolarsi, castrarsi, diminuirsi, denigrarsi, suicidarsi.³¹

[One can't abolish the idea of a fatherland without taking refuge in an absenteeist egotism. To say, for example: "I am not Italian, I am a citizen of the world," is equal to saying: "I don't give a damn about Italy, Europe, or humanity; I'm thinking of myself."

The concept of a fatherland is as indestructible as the concept of a political party. The fatherland is nothing other than a vast political party.

To negate the fatherland is to isolate oneself, castrate oneself, diminish oneself, denigrate oneself, commit suicide.]

Any internationalist movement, be it socialist or communist, is castratory not because it kills the father (apart from the word *patria*, there is little justification for such a reading in these texts) but because it effaces differences between nations, classes, intellects, and sexes. The futurist commutation appears to be a simple, if not brutally simplistic, one: no nations equals no wars, and no wars equals no virility. Marinetti states:

L'umanità sogna di stabilire la pace mediante un tipo unico d'uomo mondiale, che dovrebbe essere subito castrato, perchè la sua virilità aggressiva non dichiarasse nuove guerre.³²

[Humanity dreams of establishing peace by creating a single type of man the world over, who should be castrated immediately in order that his aggressive virility not declare new wars.]

Scornful of the prospect of a peaceful, and therefore (to his mind) undifferentiated world where there are no national borders to defend, no class struggles to be won, Marinetti fantasizes the final frontier:

La pace assoluta regnerà forse colla sparizione delle razze umane. Se fossi un comunista mi preoccuperei della prossima guerra tra pederasti e lesbiche, che si uniranno poi contro gli uomini normali.³³

[Absolute peace will perhaps reign with the disappearance of the human races. If I were a communist, I would worry about the next war between pederasts and lesbians, who will then unite against normal men.]

New “nations” will form in the absence of the old, and virility can once again be defended at the border.

If the destruction of national borders leaves virility open to attack, their aggressive defense allows virility's border patrol to relax. It is in this context that we can make sense of *Come si seducono le donne*, the seemingly anomalous futurist self-help manual published in 1916. Why, indeed, should Marinetti set about writing such a “D'Annunzian” text (though D'Annunzio, of course, would never write such a manual) in the midst of a war? The answer, and the text, lie at the crossroads between national borders and boundaries of virility:

Più della metà dei maschi italiani hanno la forza che seduce e capisce il bel sesso. In Spagna ed in Francia essa è molto meno sviluppata che da noi. In Russia e in Inghilterra quasi non esiste.³⁴

[More than half of Italian males have the strength that seduces and understands the beautiful sex. In Spain and in France it is much less developed than in Italy. In Russia and in England it barely exists.]

Once again, cohabitation produces a harmful mixture

La convivenza è sempre nociva poichè distrugge quel bisogno di pericolo, di agguato, di lotta o d'incertezza che è favorevole al maschio specialmente e anche alla femmina.³⁵

[Cohabitation is always harmful because it destroys that need for danger, ambush, struggle, or uncertainty that is always favorable to the male in particular and also to the female].

Uncertainty and ambush can be created instead in rapid-fire seductions and the *conflagrazione generale* that is the war:

Eroismo: ecco l'afrodisiaco supremo della donna! . . . Ecco perchè ora soltanto, durante la conflagrazione generale si può godere e giudicare la donna. Ecco perchè durante la nostra grande guerra igienica, per il raggiungimento di tutte le nostre aspirazioni nazionali, i neutralisti italiani (professori e filosofi germanofili, sozzalisti ufficiali, giolittiani) sono tutti o quasi tutti cornuti. Per non inzaccherare questo libro elastico, aerato, balzante e futurista, non ho parlato più delle molte mogli neutralisti, alle quali ho inculcato rapidamente e con disinvoltura l'ineluttabile necessità dell'intervento!³⁶

[Heroism: that's the ultimate aphrodisiac for women! . . . That's why only now, during the general conflagration, can one enjoy and judge woman. That's why during our great hygienic war for the fulfillment of all our national aspirations, the Italian neutralists (Germanophilic professors and philosophers, official dirty socialists, followers of Giolitti) are all, or almost all, cuckolds. To keep from muddying this elastic, airy, bouncy, and futurist book, I have not spoken about the many neutralist wives into whom I have rapidly and casually inculcated the ineluctable necessity of intervention!]

Only during the war can proximity to women be celebrated, for fighting on the national front allows the male to ease up on another. Girded with nationalistic ardor, the futurist can even cross the border between homosociality and homosexuality: the sexual act itself is "nationalized," intercourse becomes intervention, and the double-entendre *inculcare-inculcare* enacts the "pederasty" that usually lies on the other side of the enemy lines. If Italy's own intervention in the war was finally decided on the basis of a promise that its borders would be expanded, Marinetti's intervention in neutralists' wives similarly expands the boundaries of virility.³⁷ The futurist can *inculcare* both literally and figuratively while heroically defending the nation and fighting for the expansion of its borders.

This same mechanism might explain the otherwise puzzling approval of homosexuality in “Discorso futurista agli inglesi” (Futurist speech to the English), included in *Guerra sola igiene del mondo* (War, only hygiene of the world) and republished in *Futurismo e fascismo*. Chock-full of national stereotypes, the speech condemns the English for their own hypocritical condemnation of homosexuality, citing both the “unforgivable” trial of Oscar Wilde and an “intensification of camaraderie” in youth:

Quanto ai vostri giovanotti di vent’anni, sono quasi tutti, per qualche tempo, omosessuali. Questo loro gusto rispettabilissimo si sviluppa per una specie d’intensificazione della *camaraderie* e dell’amicizia, negli sports atletici, prima della trentina, età del lavoro e dell’ordine, in cui essi ritornano bruscamente da Sodoma per fidanzarsi a una signorina sfacciatamente scollacciata, affrettandosi a condannare severamente l’invertito-nato, il falso uomo, la mezza donna che non si corregge.³⁸

[As for your young men of twenty, they are almost all for some period of time homosexual. This highly respectable taste of theirs develops out of a sort of intensification of camaraderie and friendship in athletic sports before the age of thirty, the age of work and of order, when they suddenly return from Sodom to get engaged to a brazenly decolleté young lady and hasten to condemn severely the born invert, the false man, the half-woman who does not mend his ways.]

Crossing national borders one also crosses the unstable boundaries that separate homosexuality from homosociality; crossing national borders *allows* one to cross the boundaries of sexualities. We have in fact already encountered this “young lady” with the low neckline: she is one of the Venetians exposing her breasts at the window, the naked woman who converts the pederast and leads him away from Sodom. It is the same scenario, and only nationality and nationalism separate the English hypocrite from the virile Italian male.

D’Annunzio and the Virile Vulva

From the balconies of Fiume, D’Annunzio, too, defended borders and contributed to what will become the fascist rhetoric of virility. The borders he championed, however, were those of the mother (Italy, “Madre-patria,” and *mater dolorosa*), and the virility he praised was closer to Roman *virtù* than to that of Marinetti’s Italian male. Nationalism and the rhetoric of virility are bound together by a rhetoric of maternity in D’Annunzio’s speeches at Fiume. Indeed, the Fuman writings are something of an anomaly in D’Annunzio’s corpus; nowhere else is christological language employed

so consistently, and nowhere else does D'Annunzio speak so piously of mothers and of motherhood.³⁹ This particular combination of piety and maternity would seem, in the abstract, to be a recipe for what will become the regime's rhetoric of maternity: "madri degli eroi della razza" [mothers of the heroes of the race], fecund mothers producing sons as martyrs to the "Madre-patria." And "in the abstract" — that is to say, by splitting off the rhetoric of virility from those of maternity and nationalism — it is easy enough to find examples that fit the bill: "madri degli eroi, le sorelle degli eroi, le donne degli eroi" [mothers of heroes, sisters of heroes, women of heroes] clamoring to be the first to decorate the graves of their fallen men.⁴⁰

As we have seen, however, such splitting works to produce an ideological homogeneity that allows Macciocchi, for example, to distinguish the "good" Marinetti from the "bad" D'Annunzio. Thus in studies on Marinetti, there has been a tendency to discard the "right" in order to preserve the "left" (the "anarchic" Marinetti, the "anticlerical" Marinetti, the "revolutionary-form" Marinetti); in D'Annunzio's case, on the other hand, the tendency has been to carve out the "right," in all its flamboyance, and dismiss the "left."⁴¹ Here I assume the existence of the "bad" D'Annunzio, the homogenized, "fascist" D'Annunzio, in order to show how the binding of left and right is at work in D'Annunzio's texts as well as Marinetti's. If I highlight the "left" in D'Annunzio, it is always against the background of the "right."

In the Fuman texts themselves, then, the rhetoric of virility binds together those of nationalism and maternity and produces a mixture that will be inimical to the regime's attempts to enforce the stability of gender. In fascist discourse, gender and sex are not to be mixed and matched: virility is the property of man, and femininity the property of woman. Any attempt to redistribute those properties — and in particular, to allow women to enter the public, political arena, and hence "masculinize" them — was to be squelched. The adjectives "masculine" and "virile" as applied to women were exclusively terms of abuse meant to deride the intellectual, "feminist," and hence sterile woman not properly devoted to her reproductive mission.⁴² It is here that D'Annunzio's own "decadent genealogy" interferes with (even as it contributes to) fascist rhetoric and ideology, for virility in the Fuman speeches is not only, nor even above all, the province of males, just as, in his earlier novels, femininity is not only the province of women. The "feminine" was not a term of invective for D'Annunzio, and no disclaimers marked the inclusion of women's suffrage in the *Carta del Carnaro*, the constitution that he and Alceste de Ambris wrote for Fiume.⁴³ It is not

against the feminine that virility is defined and defended, as in Marinetti, but rather against gluttony, greed, and “adiposity.”⁴⁴ Thus among the romanizing, fascistizing topoi of Italy as the wounded mother, the bleeding, mutilated mother, and Fiume as a locus of fortitude, forbearance, self-discipline, and endurance, we also find a female source of “la Costanza virile”:

Ma il nome di tutte le donne fumane è Ardenza; ma il nome di tutte le donne fumane è Pazienza. Non mai il “pazientissimo ardore” dei Santi Padri fu testimoniato con una vigoria così maschia. Non mai, nella storia delle grandi lotte civiche, le ispiratrici e le sostenitrici rivelarono uno spirito così potente.⁴⁵

[But the name of all Fiuman women is Ardor; but the name of all Fiuman women is Patience. Never has the “most patient ardor” of the Holy Fathers been proven with such masculine vigor. Never, in the history of great civic struggles, have the female animators and supporters revealed such potent spirit.]

This patristic endorsement of patience and the underlying ideology of sacrifice are perfectly consonant with fascist discourse; what is not is the *vigoria maschia* attributed to women. Such crossing of the lines of gender and sex (and here those lines are grammatical as well as ideological, for the feminine ending in *a* of the adjective *maschio* represents a kind of grammatical equivalent of the mixing of sex and gender) would be “perversion” for Marinetti; D’Annunzio instead crossed them in Baudelairean fashion, extending the boundaries of virility to occupy (and speak through) the foreign land that was the woman’s body. I have elsewhere analyzed the modalities and consequences of this occupation in D’Annunzio’s early prose works. Here that body is specifically the body of a (nationalized) mother — of Rome, of Italy, and of Fiume “herself.”⁴⁶ Indeed, in *Il Sudore di sangue*, the mother is the exemplary model of virility:

Nell’atto di offrire il sacrificio, sapendo qual sacrificio ella (Roma) offrisse, non esclamava più, non parlava più. Severo spettacolo, maschio esempio. Rimaneva taciturna, come chi guarda il proprio fato e si sente a lui pari, anzi a lui sovrastante.

Oggi noi vogliamo celebrare quel silenzio, Italiani, non altro che quel silenzio guerriero.

L’Italia aveva partorito il suo futuro con uno spassimo atrocissimo; aveva ansiato prima di assalire; aveva sanguinato prima di combattere.⁴⁷

[In the act of offering the sacrifice, knowing what sacrifice she (Rome) offered, she exclaimed no longer, she spoke no longer. A severe spectacle, a

masculine example. She remained taciturn, like someone who looks upon her fate and feels equal to it, indeed superior to it.

Today we want to celebrate that silence, Italians, nothing other than that warrior's silence.

Italy had given birth to her future with a most atrocious spasm, she had gasped before attacking, she had bled before fighting.]

As if to underline the reversal in the “normal” order of things—“she” supplies the masculine example—D'Annunzio ends the passage with a double *hysteron proteron*, the figure in which the “normal or logical order” of things is reversed, the latter is put as the former: she had gasped before attacking (rather than after) and had bled before fighting (rather than after). The text insists upon the feminine gender of Rome even as “she” offers a masculine example, for Rome's virility in the face of sacrifice is metonymically compared to mother Italy's fortitude in the face of the pain of childbirth. One could imagine this analogy being turned back against women in a fascist version of the arguments against the *parto indolore* (painless childbirth) that the church will later formulate: that is, to be good fascist Christians, women should follow the example of the virile fascist and refuse painkillers in childbirth. Yet at the same time, the mixing and matching present here would make the analogy unpalatable. The analogy itself combines at least two traditional *topoi*: the figuration of Rome, or Italy, as a woman is, of course, at least as old as Italian literature itself—one thinks of Dante's Florence, the provincial lady become whore, or of his widowed Rome, crying out for her Caesar; and the comparison of war and parturition has roots in classical antiquity.⁴⁸ What is striking about the D'Annunzian version, however, is that here the subject of virility can be either masculine or feminine, and its source is what Gadda might have snidely called the “virile vulva of the Italian woman”:

È bello che l'antica libertà comunale si ristampi, di generazione in generazione, nella matrice eroica. La risposta cruda di Caterina Sforza, dall'alto della torre romagnola, è appropriato a questo coraggio feroce: “Qui n'ho il conio.”

I figli sono stampati a simiglianza delle madri, come abbiamo veduto. Hanno bevuto un latte così forte che possono resistere lungamente al digiuno e al disagio. Pare che la mammella materna li sostenga anche quando è inaridita: la sinistra sotto cui batte il cuore infaticabile.⁴⁹

[It is beautiful that the ancient freedom of the communes is remolded, from generation to generation, in the heroic matrix/womb. The crude response of Caterina Sforza from the top of the Romagnolo tower befits this ferocious courage: “Here I have the ‘mint.’”

The sons are molded in their mothers' likeness, as we have seen. They have drunk a milk so strong that they can long endure fasting and discomfort. It seems that the maternal breast sustains them even when it has dried up: the left breast, under which beats an indefatigable heart.]

Gadda's "virile vulva" aims to ridicule fascism by implying that, after all, not everything can be virile; as we have seen, his is a ridicule based on the assumption, shared with fascist discourse itself, of a naturalized relation between gender and sex. Mixing and matching constitutes an absurd impossibility only insofar as it is understood to violate such a "nature." D'Annunzio's "virile vulva" is, I would like to argue, part of an opposing strategy, one with a history of its own. This particular image, in fact, brings along with it a rich political history, for by citing the Caterina Sforza story, D'Annunzio evokes a Machiavellian genealogy and an intertextual depth that we need to sound in order to read its politics in the context of D'Annunzio's speech at Fiume.

The anecdote to which D'Annunzio refers is recounted in the sixth chapter of book 3 of Machiavelli's *Discourses* and is a moment in the history of a conspiracy against the Riario family in the town of Forlì in 1488. The historical details are not a matter of obscure archival interest, however, for this particular episode had long been popular myth, and Caterina's life had, as recently as 1893, been the subject of a three-volume biography.⁵⁰ D'Annunzio's audience, therefore, would have known the outlines of the story, beginning with the murder of Caterina Sforza's husband, Girolamo Riario, at the hands of conspirators. After his death, Caterina was, along with her children, mother, and two half sisters, taken prisoner. In order to consolidate their power, the conspirators needed to take possession of the fortresses of the city, still loyal to the family. They met with nothing but resistance until a shrewd castellan agreed to surrender on condition that he be allowed to speak first with Caterina in the fortress. After several hours of discussion — some of the conspirators smelled a rat — permission was granted; "after all," writes Ernest Breisach, "they still held her children, her mother, and two half sisters. What woman could ignore a threat to such loved ones?"⁵¹ Once inside the fortress, however, Caterina appeared defiantly on the battlements and hurled insult upon her former captors. When the conspirators threatened to kill her children, she responded, some versions of the story say, by lifting her skirts to expose her genitals and retorting that she had the means to make more.⁵²

Of this account, historians dispute only the exposure of the genitals. Literary critics are, of course, interested in little else, and for good reason:

Caterina Sforza's gesture is not unique to her but rather is a variation of a *topos* that consistently forges a link between women and political action. As Neil Hertz has shown, the *topos* gripped those who found themselves on the wrong (that is to say, politically "right") side of the barricades in the French Revolution and was, Hertz argues, the product of "male hysteria under political pressure." In his "Reply" to responses to his essay, Hertz links the reactionary hysterization of history specifically to the Caterina Sforza story, citing it as yet another manifestation of the Medusan imagination in politics. Indeed, in an essay titled "Medusa and the Madonna of Forli: Political Sexuality in Machiavelli," which focuses on Caterina, John Freccero has suggested that Medusa is the face worn by republicanism as seen by the aristocracy. But the specific meaning of the Caterina Sforza episode is, for Freccero, more political than psychoanalytical:

To see the Medusa's face in the body of Caterina Sforza is to read historical significance into the reproductive force of nature. It is also to see in the body of a woman no longer the passive sign of political power, an object to be possessed, but rather an autonomous force.⁵³

Freccero's reading is thus more like that of Catherine Gallagher, who, in response to Hertz, reads the gesture of exposure as a threat to patriarchal control of reproduction and hence to property relations in general.⁵⁴ Of course, this reading cannot simply be transposed to the D'Annunzian text, for it addresses both the specificities of Machiavelli's text and its historical context. But it gives us access to one layer of the *intertext* and draws upon another closer historically to D'Annunzio: Antonio Gramsci's reading of Caterina Sforza as an emblem of the irruption of the proletariat into history.⁵⁵ Once again, Gramsci is interpreting and appropriating the figure as it appears in Machiavelli's text; it is significant, however, that Gramsci, D'Annunzio, and Machiavelli all interpret Caterina's action as an emblem of positive political action, in contradistinction to Hertz's "male hysterics," who see her gesture as castratory. All three writers clearly see it as a threat not to themselves but to their enemies: an apotropaic shield bearing the head of Medusa. To put it in crude psychoanalytic terms, what for their foes may appear to be a threat of castration represents, to these three, a refusal to be castrated: the threat to kill Caterina's children is, after all, an attempt to castrate her politically, and her gesture can thus be read as a refusal to be castrated. The psychoanalytic translation into the Medusa, however, partially blinds us to the potential political meaning of the gesture by subsuming it under the fascination of the phallic mother, a fantasy that

is more reassuring than not for the fetishizing male fantasy. While Caterina shares with Hertz's revolutionary women the gesture of exposure, it is her Medean rather than Medusan aspect that distinguishes her. An alternate, and still Machiavellian, interpretation would be to say that Caterina makes the private public, exposes what "should" remain private, and refuses to be shoved back into the private sphere. The point of the anecdote is that her enemies think they have conquered her because they hold her children hostage — that is, they can defeat her because she is a mother. The point of her gesture is that she is something *in addition to*, in excess of, a mother — a political being, who cannot be drawn back into the private sphere by the tug of the umbilical cord.

What happens when Caterina is transplanted to D'Annunzio's speech at Fiume? Is she still the emblem of republicanism, the face of the proletariat? Surely not, for no single image is of itself "left" or "right"; no individual "element" has a stable meaning; and no rhetorical strategy is inherently fascist or democratic — if they were, the binding machine of fascist rhetoric would have come grinding to a halt. Yet the Caterina Sforza story as ideologeme brings with it an intertextual and political history that must be factored into our analysis. The interpretation I have just outlined would allow us to read her as an antimother who exceeds and violates the parameters fascist discourse sets for women. As the model and mold of female virility, she violates the rigidly gendered, and ultimately Aristotelian, opposition between virile courage and maternal love, an opposition that Mussolini will elaborate in a famous equation: "La guerra sta all'uomo come la maternità alla donna" [War is to man as maternity is to woman].⁵⁶ The line D'Annunzio attributes to Caterina underlines its anti-Aristotelian twist: "Qui n'ho il conio" gives to Caterina ownership of the mold or form, precisely what the male is, for Aristotle, presumed to supply in reproduction. And D'Annunzio could not resist an interlingual pun: the *con* has become *conio*.

Unlike the mother of fascist propaganda, who exalts the son's virility, Caterina as antimother is the original model of virility: the sons are "printed" in the *mother's* likeness.⁵⁷ This *matrie eroica* is not meant to be the incubator for a demographic boom, but rather the matrix and model of political resistance. In the context of D'Annunzio's Fuman writings, then, we might say that Caterina Sforza stands defiantly on her tower, not an example of "l'antiféminisme petit-bourgeois du fascisme"⁵⁸ but rather of a powerfully female political gesture, and of a paradoxically female virility.

For Marinetti and later for the discourse of the regime, virility is possi-

ble only if women are excluded from it; for D'Annunzio, virility is defined and molded through the "feminine." This contrast between Marinetti and D'Annunzio might be subsumed under what Christine Buci-Glucksmann has described as "two statutes of difference": one that is antiegalitarian and conservative and another that is transgressive of the boundaries between masculine and feminine. Buci-Glucksmann identifies the first of these with the "masculine order (der *Männerbund*)" and with what she calls a "virile homosexualization of values that relegates women to nature, originary chaos, and to the procreative mother."⁵⁹ The second, transgressive order engenders instead a space of new knowledge that makes possible the Freudian discovery of bisexuality. Buci-Glucksmann links the second of these to the Baudelaire-Nietzsche line, in other words, to the decadents whom she had examined in *La raison baroque*, the line to which D'Annunzio belongs.⁶⁰ The first of these is, with an important modification, the line to which Marinetti belongs, that is, a virile homosexualization of values that is a *homophobic* homosocialization of values (or, as Irigaray might put it, a "hom(m)o-sexualization").

It would be unfair, however, not to note the way in which Caterina Sforza is domesticated within D'Annunzio's speech. If I have dwelt at such length on the first of the two paragraphs cited, it was in order to highlight the potentially disturbing valence of D'Annunzio's invocation of the *topos* and therefore to swim upstream against a strong current of D'Annunzian criticism. But what happens in the second paragraph? I cite it again:

I figli sono stampati a simiglianza delle madri, come abbiamo veduto. Hanno bevuto un latte così forte che possono resistere lungamente al digiuno e al disagio. Pare che la mammella materna li sostenga anche quando è inaridita: la sinistra sotto cui batte il cuore infaticabile.⁶¹

[The sons are molded in their mothers' likeness, as we have seen. They have drunk a milk so strong that they can long endure fasting and discomfort. It seems that the maternal breast sustains them even when it has dried up: the left breast, under which beats an indefatigable heart.]

The paradoxical female virility that Caterina's gesture conjured up is upstaged by the nursing mother: as the *conio* is replaced by the maternal breast as focus of attention, the body of the mother reverts to being a passive matrix, vehicle for the milk of a national tradition. The virility of the sons takes the place of that of the mother, as it will in the propaganda of the regime.⁶²

This D'Annunzian paradox will not outlive the occupation of Fiume; it

is rather the Marinettian “panic”—stripped of its ambiguously progressive elements—that will become the currency of the regime. But it is not only “the feminine” (in the realm of discourse) and women (in the world of action) who will be affected. Other meanings will be added to “virility.” If Marinetti and D’Annunzio set into motion the semiotic machinery that Mussolini will exploit, neither, finally, determines the direction it will take with Mussolini at the wheel. What Mussolini will absorb from his “precur-sors” must be weighed against what he will discard; the Duce will mint his own version of virility, welding new materials to old. By 1924, a little more than a month after the assassination of Giacomo Matteotti, Mussolini was already hard at work forging a new definition of the “virility” of fascism:

Insomma, per certi signori, la normalizzazione dovrebbe consistere in una volontaria abdicazione del fascismo agli attributi della sua virilità e poscia nel ritorno a quei giochi e giochetti del tempo antico, che avevano suscitato lo sdegno generale. Del resto, Partito e Governo procedono sulla via dell’unica normalizzazione possibile, che è quella fascista.⁶³

[In sum, certain people suggest that normalization should consist of a voluntary abdication by fascism of the attributes of its virility and hence of a return to the little games of old that had caused the general disdain. In fact, both party and government are proceeding along the path of the only possible normalization, which is fascist.]

This virility is a barely disguised euphemism for the fascist militia and the violence it meted out against its political opposition. It is this virility that fascism will normalize and rhetorize and that the fascist regime will not abdicate until its fall nearly twenty years later.

Raping the Masses

Critics often trope the texts they analyze, repeat the structures they claim to demystify, or participate unwittingly in the problems they aim to elucidate. Such is the case with an ideologeme that recurs with disturbing frequency in studies of fascism: the scenario of the rape of the masses. This scenario functions, I would argue, to perpetuate rather than criticize the fascist rhetoric of virility and makes an appearance even in Walter Benjamin’s classic essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” I want therefore to conclude this chapter with a glance at the afterlife of the rhetoric of virility in antifascist critiques.

The novelist with whom we began supplies us with a literary example of this scenario in *Eros e Priapo*. Gadda’s parody is doubly malicious, for

the novel is a critique of fascism not only through an idiosyncratic psychoanalysis but also through a figuration of the receptive masses as woman, and a subsequent attack upon those masses through a not-so-idiosyncratic misogynist discourse. The “feminine,” a term of invective in fascist discourse, is retained as a target of invective in Gadda's presumably antifascist parody:

Kù-cè, Kù-cè, Kù-cè, Kù-cè. La moltitudine, che al dire di messer Nicolò amaro la è femmina, e femmina a certi momenti nottivaga, simulava a quegli ululati l'amore e l'amoroso delirio, siccome lo suol mentire una qualunque di quelle, ad “accelerare i tempi”: e a sbrigare il cliente: torcendosi in ne' sua furori e sudori di entusiasta, mammillona singultiva per denaro. Su issù poggiuolo il mascelluto, tronfio a stiantare, a quelle prime strida della ragazzaglia e' gli era già ebbro d'un suo pazzo smarrimento, simile ad alcoolòmane, cui basta annasare il bicchiere da sentirsi preso e dato alla mercè del destino. Indi il mimo d'una scenica evulvescenza, onde la losca razzumaglia si dava elicitare, prosperare, assistere, spegnere quella foja incontenuta. Il bombetta soltanto avea nerbo, nella convenzione del mimo, da colmare (a misura di chella frenesia finta) la tromba vaginalle della bassàride. Una bugia sporca, su dalla tenebra delle anime. Dalle bocche, una bava incontenuta. Kù-cè, Kù-cè, Kù-cè, Kù-cè.⁶⁴

[Kù-cè, Kù-cè, Kù-cè, Kù-cè. The masses, who in the words of bitter old Nick are female, and a female at times “of the night,” mimicked love and amorous delirium with those howls, just like any of that ilk fakes it, in order to “speed things up” and dispatch her client: writhing in the furors and sweat of an enthusiast, an old bag gasping for money. Up there on his little parapet, old Big Jaws, puffed up to the point of bursting, at those first cries of the rabble was already drunk in a mad rapture of his own, like an alcoholic for whom one sniff of the glass suffices to capture him and give him over to destiny. Whence the mimicking of a scenic evulvescence so that the disreputable rabble gave itself over to eliciting, increasing, assisting, and extinguishing that uncontained lust. Only Mr. Bowler Hat had the backbone, in keeping with the conventions of the mimicry, to fill (equal to that fake frenzy) the vaginal funnel of the riff-raff. A dirty lie, up from the darkness of their souls. From their mouths, an uncontained drool. Kù-cè, Kù-cè, Kù-cè, Kù-cè.]

Gadda invokes an illustrious genealogy for his introduction of gender into an analysis of political discourse: none other than “messer Nicolò,” Machiavelli himself. Sliding the attribution of femininity from *fortuna* to the masses, he recalls the famous conclusion to chapter 25 of *The Prince*, where the *vir* behind the *virtù* steps forth to rape a not unwilling *fortuna*. Here, however, a frenzied female crowd, chanting a barely disguised “Duce,” occupies the place of fortune and is not a willing victim but a whore who

“fakes it” in order to speed up her client. Consent to fascism is thus simulated consent; the relation between the leader and his followers is neither love affair nor rape but a “dirty lie” shared by “consenting” adults. The antifascism of this move lies in its denial that the masses were ever truly fascist; in their whorish hearts, they remained pure. But in order to salvage their purity, those same masses must be turned into “woman.” The antifascist critique thus participates in the rhetoric of virility that it set out to ridicule.

This unwitting participation is not limited to literary writing about fascism but seems to pervade even historical assessment. Three years before the publication of Gadda’s novel, the historian Eugen Weber had written (apparently unaware of his Machiavellian genealogy): “The fascist leader conquers a crowd and subdues it as he would a woman or a horse.”⁶⁵ In the equivalence that Weber establishes between women and horses, as in Gadda’s misogyny, there is an equivocal collusion between what claims to be an antifascist critique and an implicit adherence both to the gender politics and to the image of the Duce promulgated by fascism itself. The analogy is patterned once again upon that of Virtue raping Fortune. That Machiavelli is evoked both indirectly by the historian and quite explicitly by the novelist is due to a chain of association in which Machiavelli seems to stand as the source of a political rhetoric that is also a rhetoric of virility. The hypervirilization of fascist discourse thus comes to be seen as an enactment of a Machiavellian metaphor.

Yet another enactment of the Gaddian-Machiavellian metaphor can be found in Macciochi’s historical analysis of the relation of Italian women to fascism and to Mussolini in particular. Macciochi suggests that women — no longer a metaphorical “woman” but historical beings — were indeed enthralled by Mussolini’s virile charm. In her scenario, Mussolini is procurer rather than client:

Like a true pimp, Mussolini had grabbed the bludgeon and begun to wave it about in his speeches addressed to women with the arrogance of the male who reminds his woman that love will come after the blows.⁶⁶

Macciochi claims that, despite Mussolini’s disdain for them, women were “fanatic” supporters of the regime, and she attributes women’s fanaticism for Mussolini and for fascism to a masochistic pleasure derived from sacrifices requested of them. Those sacrifices ranged from acting as incubators for the demographic boom Mussolini desired, to donating their wedding rings to the state, to “refraining” from seeking employment that might (in Mussolini’s words) “masculinize” them and rob their husbands of their

virility. (In fact, women were excluded by decree from various types of jobs, their employment opportunities limited by hiring quotas and their salaries decreed, in 1927, half that of corresponding male salaries.)⁶⁷ Mussolini would have been pleased with this portrait of himself as the manly man who knows how to keep women in their place. What's more, by assuming the efficacy of the interpellation, Macciocchi replays and reinforces the gender politics of the scenario she criticizes, for she lays the blame for fascism at the feet of women's masochism. She thereby tropes a standard feature of the rape scenario by blaming the victim.⁶⁸ An alternative reading of Mussolini's virile display might suggest that his public speeches addressed to women were designed less to persuade women to do voluntarily what his less flamboyant decrees coerced them to do than to demonstrate one aspect of his virility to quite another addressee: other men. Macciocchi's controversial analysis (one of the first to deal with the question of women under fascism) only hints at the possibility that such triangulation may be at work in the "performance" she describes when she quotes Hitler as saying, "In politics, one must have the support of women, men will follow by themselves."⁶⁹ Yet the staging of Mussolini's sexual forcefulness may also, and perhaps above all, be construed as an interpellation of other men, for in what Irigaray has named the "hom(m)o-sexual economy," women serve as the alibi and mediation of relations, economic as well as sexual, among men.⁷⁰ Such an interpellation would therefore be a "hom(m)o-sexual," or homosocial, one whose success is facilitated and cemented through the mediating presence of "women."⁷¹

Even more disturbing is the role played by the rhetoric of virility in what has become the fetish of studies on fascism: Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." The essay is framed by fascism and by what appears to be a contradiction between its opening claim and its conclusion. It begins by making a distinction between certain outmoded concepts (*überkommener Begriffe*) that lend themselves to fascism and the concepts introduced in the essay that will instead be "completely useless for the purposes of fascism"; it ends by showing how it is that fascism makes use not only of the "outmoded concepts" but also of some of those concepts the essay introduced as "useless."⁷² What accounts for this reversal? The very term "reversal" suggests an answer — the apparent contradiction must be the result of the dialectical movement of thought in the essay. It opens, after all, with an example of dialectical thought in Marx (capitalism not only exploits the proletariat ever more intensely but through that very exploitation creates the conditions for its own destruction) and announces

its intention to analyze the same sort of movement in the superstructure. It takes as object, then, a dialectic in the superstructure, and the story it has to tell about photography and film is structured as one of dialectical reversals: a phenomenon turns into its opposite; quantity is transformed into quality; and so forth. It would seem reasonable to suppose that the relation between the beginning and the end of the essay could be described as such a reversal, an example of the dialectic functioning smoothly. As we shall see, however, the rhetoric of virility that we have been tracking makes an appearance precisely at the moment of reversal and introduces a gendering that does violence to camera and dialectic alike.

Since this violence takes place as a blockage of the movement of the entire essay, we must briefly rehearse Benjamin's argument. A summary would go like this: techniques of reproduction — in particular photography and film — have had a number of consequences for art and for human perception. Reproduction eliminates the qualities that belonged to the work of art as unique object: its presence in space and time, its authenticity and authority, what, in a word, Benjamin calls the "aura." This notoriously hazy concept seems here to be defined provisionally as "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction," and that which withers is "the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be" (221). This withering has as much to do with relations of production as it does with techniques of reproduction; that is, aura as a phenomenon of distance is described as an individual phenomenon inseparable from social privilege, whereas film and photography are mass phenomena.⁷³ What Benjamin aims to describe here, he writes, is the way in which the masses adjust to reality, and reality adjusts to the masses. On the one hand, film and photography are forms of mass art that reveal the relations of production implicit in the auratic work of art. On the other, the decline of the aura can be attributed to the desire of the masses to bring things close to themselves and to their tendency to equate all things, to sense, as Benjamin puts it, the universal equality of things. This tendency is itself the effect of the mode of production, for what Benjamin seems to be describing is the effect of commodity fetishism on human perception. The abstraction that makes exchange possible and that underlies what Marx calls the "mystery of money" has led the masses to *see* things as equivalent. That commodity fetishism is at work — or has already done its work — on human perception is clear from Benjamin's comments on ritual in the fourth section of the essay: "The unique value of the 'authentic' work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value" (224). If in ritual we can locate use value, in mechanical reproduction

and the universal equivalence of things we can locate exchange value. This wrenching of art from ritual — due to the market economy and commodity fetishism — has, as the result of a dialectical reversal, an emancipatory effect: “For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual” (224). As a result of this emancipation, the function of art is reversed; instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice: politics. By the end of the fourth section of the essay, the ground has thus been prepared for the “aestheticization of politics” introduced only in the afterword.

In the intervening sections, an important notion is introduced, one that would seem to be one of those concepts “useless” for fascism:

Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie. The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. (234)

Mechanical reproduction and film in particular transform the relation of the masses to art into a progressive, forward-stepping one. Benjamin is quite specific about the characteristics of film that foster this relation. The viewer necessarily adopts the “attitude of the expert,” described a few pages before as “inherent in the technique of film” (231). This expertise is a consequence not only of the fact that anyone can be filmed but of the position taken by the viewing public: “The audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing” (228–29) [*“Es übernimmt also dessen Haltung: es testet”* (151; Benjamin's emphasis)]. The public, like the apparatus, tests and changes position with respect to the performance and thus adopts a critical attitude. The sentence that follows will be crucial to an understanding of the essay's afterword: “This is not the approach to which cult values may be exposed” (229). The statement is categorical: this is an aspect of film, of the technique itself, that cannot produce cult values. This critical stance is reinforced by Benjamin's description of the mass reaction to film:

The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion. With regard to the screen (*im Kino*), the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide. The decisive reason for this is that individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response they are about to produce, and this is nowhere more pronounced than in the film. (234)

[... Und zwar ist der entscheidende Umstand dabei: nirgends mehr als im Kino erweisen sich die Reaktionen der Einzelnen, deren Summe die massive Reaktion des Publikums ausmacht, von vornherein durch ihre unmittelbar bevorstehende Massierung bedingt.] (159)

The last sentence of this passage is puzzling and rendered even more obscure by the translation. How precisely are the critical and receptive attitudes made to coincide? A straightforward, but erroneous, answer would be to say that the whole is the sum of the parts; the mass reaction is the sum of the individual reactions, some of which are critical, some receptive. The final sentence, however, suggests a different temporality. The mass reaction is not just the sum of the individual reactions; rather, individual reactions are determined by the impending massing of those reactions, which is to say that the whole yet to be constituted determines the parts that will constitute it, and those parts in turn determine the nature of the whole. The fusion of critical and receptive attitudes appears to derive from this dialectical temporality associated with the collectivity as well as from the nature of the space in which viewing takes place. That this is so is supported by Benjamin's statement in this section that the viewing of paintings in galleries and salons was bound to provoke a reactionary response, because "there was no way for the masses to organize and control themselves in their reception" (235). This is not the case for the viewing of films; indeed, what is translated into English as "with regard to the screen" and "in film" appears in the German as *im Kino*, not "in regard to the screen," but in the cinema, in the movie house, in a space that organizes the masses in a certain way.

It is important to note that all of these are formal features, part of the "nature" of mechanical reproduction and film itself: the testing approach of the public that identifies with, takes the position of, the camera; the collective viewing of the film that makes critical and receptive attitudes coincide; the space of the movie house that allows the masses to organize themselves in a certain way. Benjamin makes it quite clear that even when the content of the film is reactionary, film retains its progressive, forward-stepping characteristics: "So long as the movie-makers' capital sets the fashion, as a rule no other revolutionary merit can be accredited to today's film than the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art" (231). In other words, even if the film does not criticize social conditions, the distribution of property, and so forth, it may still offer a revolutionary criticism of traditional (*überkommenen*, which recalls the *überkommener Begriffe* of the foreword of the essay) concepts such as the aura.

How is it, then, that film can be pressed into the service of "auratic"

fascism? Standard accounts of the afterword elide this moment of reversal and go something like this: the categories of the traditional auratic work — authenticity, distance, presence, genius, ritual — are transferred from the aesthetic sphere, chased away by mechanical reproduction to the sphere of politics.⁷⁴ Politics thus becomes a spectacle to be contemplated from a distance, and war as spectacle is the culmination of this politics. The categories of genius, authority, and presence (the “outmoded concepts”) are resurrected in the cult of the Führer. And this is the fascist aestheticization of politics.

But these outmoded concepts are not the only ones to appear in the afterword. What is elided in such an account, in fact, is an explanation of how it is that film and the apparatus — the concepts introduced in the essay as not useful for fascism — come nevertheless to serve its cause. If the progressive reaction to film is built into the medium itself, if the public and the apparatus take up a position that is not that to which cult values (*Kultwerte* [151]) can be exposed, how can film be “pressed into the production of ritual values” (241)? The translation itself smooths over the contradiction, rendering *Kultwerte*, elsewhere in the essay translated as “cult values,” as “ritual values.” How indeed can the camera that destroys cult values now be made to produce them? What dialectical turn can account for this reversal? It is here that the rhetoric of virility makes its appearance:

The logical result of fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses [*Vergewaltigung der Massen*], whom fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus [*Vergewaltigung einer Apparatur*] which is pressed into the production of ritual values [*Kultwerten*]. (241; German, 168)

Once again, the translation smooths over the disturbance in the text; the German *Vergewaltigung*, which Harry Zohn translates as “violation,” refers instead quite specifically to rape.⁷⁵ This is not a matter of a parking violation, of an infringement of a rule. What takes place is rather a double (and syntactically parallel) rape in which fascism rapes both camera and masses. The relationships between fascism and the masses, between fascism and the camera, are now gendered ones. In the first case, of course, the rape is grounded once again on the figuration of the masses as female and facilitated by grammatical gender (*die Masse*). In the second case, the camera is feminized syntactically, through the parallel construction or isocolon, grammatically (the feminine *Apparatur* appears here, rather than the masculine *Apparat*), and ideologically, for whoever, and in this case whatever, is raped

is, socially speaking, raped as a woman.⁷⁶ Even the rape of a machine feminizes.⁷⁷ It is as a result of this rape that the camera is made to serve the production of cult values. But what does it mean to rape a camera? What happens to film's progressive, forward-stepping form? What happens if one now rereads the essay — following Benjamin and Adorno's own dictum that every sentence should be mediated through the totality of the essay — with this gendering in mind, with the possibility of rape before us?⁷⁸ What kind of narrative would that produce? More locally, what kind of model of history does this suggest? In what kind of model of history can "rape" be offered as historical explanation of political events? Certainly this is no dialectical turn; rather, it is the dialectic that turns upon itself. The progressive, forward-stepping movement of history, and of historical explanation, gets stopped in its tracks.

In the place of such dialectical explanation, the text produces first a citation from an unidentified Marinetti manifesto and then a series of "unnatural" figures:

If the natural utilization of productive forces is impeded by the property system, the increase in technical devices, in speed, and in the sources of energy will press for an unnatural utilization, and this is found in war. (242)

War makes it possible to mobilize both technical resources and masses while maintaining the property system. The "natural" movement would have been the stepping forward together of masses and technology; war (here synonymous with fascism) blocks this "natural" movement, forces it into an "unnatural" direction. The metaphor of the human stream that appears at the end of the paragraph underlines this sense of "unnatural" deviation: "Society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches" (242). A natural order is violated; the "natural" course of history is deviated; and both masses and technology are channeled into war. It is, in other words, the nature of fascism and war to be unnatural. The rape of the apparatus is, in fact, merely the first of a series of figures that add up to the *topos* of the "world upside-down": not women are raped, but cameras; not rivers are drained, but human streams; "instead of dropping seeds from planes, it drops incendiary bombs." And finally: "Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for himself" (242). Though this last sentence does not say that mankind contemplates himself at the movies, the final footnote of the essay makes this explicit — the masses experience their own destruction at the movies, watching newsreels:

Mass reproduction is aided especially by the reproduction of masses. In big parades and monster rallies, in sports events, and in war, all of which nowadays are captured by camera and sound recording, the masses are brought face to face with themselves. This process, whose significance need not be stressed, is intimately connected with the development of the techniques of reproduction and photography. . . . This means that mass movements, including war, constitute a form of human behaviour which particularly favors mechanical equipment. (251)

On the contrary, the significance of this process *must* be stressed, since it is not at all clear what that significance *is*. Here the reaction of the masses, watching the spectacle of their own destruction at the movies, seems not to be a fusion of critical and receptive attitudes, but rather wholly receptive. As Benjamin writes in the final paragraph of the essay, humankind “can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order” (242). The critical attitude has fallen away, we know not how — except, of course, as a result of “rape.” Rape is the figure for this otherwise inexplicable receptivity. The consequences of this are, I would argue, far-reaching, since it is this last, “unnatural” situation that grounds Benjamin’s definition of fascism as the aestheticization of politics. The figure of rape functions not only as condemnation of fascism but also as an essential explanatory turn in the argument of the essay. This is no dialectical turn, no negation of a negation. The point is not, however, that Benjamin was a failed dialectician but rather that his very definition of fascism at once criticizes and *participates in* the rhetoric of virility. As with Gadda, what is at stake is the “salvation” of the masses — and here the camera — from the taint of complicity with fascism, and once again that salvation is possible only through a gendering that is itself complicit with a rhetoric of virility.