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**Martin Puchner: Poetry of the Revolution**

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## INTRODUCTION

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### **Manifestos—Poetry of the Revolution**

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot derive its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself, before it has shed all superstitious belief in the past. Earlier revolutions needed to remember previous moments in world history in order to numb themselves with regard to their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury the dead in order to arrive at its own content. There, the phrase exceeded the content. Here the content exceeds the phrase.

Karl Marx published these sentences in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* to explain the failure of the 1848 revolution in France.<sup>1</sup> The revolution failed, Marx tells us, because it was a mere recapitulation of the great French Revolution, a return to a previous moment in history. Marx acknowledges that all revolutions had looked back in this way: Luther's Protestant revolution had referred to the apostle Paul, and the French Revolution, to Roman antiquity. But while such historical borrowings and regressions may have been adequate for Luther and the French Revolution, they are no longer adequate now, in the middle of the nineteenth century, when we need a "modern revolution" (13). But a modern revolution is difficult to achieve.<sup>2</sup> After shedding the costumes and phrases of the past, the modern revolution must somehow invite the future, come up with phrases, forms, and genres that "derive" their "poetry" from this future—and here Marx's term "poetry" resonates with the original Greek meaning of *poesis* as an act of making.<sup>3</sup>

I argue that Marx had already invented a poetry of the future revolution, a form that would help revolutionary modernity to know itself, to arrive at itself, to make and to manifest itself, namely, the *Communist Manifesto*. The *Manifesto* is a text forged in accordance with Marx's eleventh thesis

on Feuerbach, that philosophers should not only interpret the world but also change it. Divided between doing away with the past and ushering in the future, the *Manifesto* seeks to produce the arrival of the “modern revolution” through an act of self-foundation and self-creation: we, standing here and now, must act! Manifestos tend to present themselves as mere means to an end, demanding to be judged not by their rhetorical or literary merits—their poetry—but by their ability to change the world. Marx, however, helps us understand that it is their form, not their particular complaints and demands, that articulates most succinctly the desires and hopes, maneuvers and strategies of modernity: to create points of no return; to make history; to fashion the future.

Scattered texts had been called manifestos for centuries, but Marx and Engels’s *Manifesto* gathered these texts into a distinct genre. However, it took the *Manifesto* decades before it could gain any prominence and therefore define what a manifesto should be. Once the *Manifesto* became the central icon of communism, a new dynamic made itself felt: the genre it helped create could no longer be used without careful deliberation. Many later communist manifestos, such as the founding manifestos of communist parties and of the socialist internationals, were therefore plagued by the fear that writing a new manifesto would somehow displace the *Communist Manifesto*, that new manifestos would relegate the old and original one to the status of a historical document.

The predominance of the *Manifesto* over the subsequent history of the genre means that a history of the manifesto must also entail a history of socialism. A number of Marxian critics, including Antonio Gramsci, Kenneth Burke, Louis Althusser, and Perry Anderson, help me specify how manifestos weave together social theory, political acts, and poetic expression. Manifestos do not articulate a political unconscious that needs to be excavated through careful analysis, as Fredric Jameson does in the case of the novel; rather, they seek to bring this unconscious into the open.<sup>4</sup> This desire for openness and manifestation is central to the manifesto, defining its creative practice, as Raymond Williams might put it, of articulating what has been hitherto unarticulated.<sup>5</sup> Foregrounding this creative practice is at odds with most theories premised on the determining function of history or modes of production. Manifestos need to be recognized not only as symptoms and indices of social formations, as superstructure, but also as moments of actual or attempted intervention, perhaps even as instances of the superstructure altering the base. Whether or not individual manifestos actually accomplish their ambitious goals—some altered history far beyond their wildest dreams—matters less than the literary, poetic, and rhetorical strate-

gies they developed for the single purpose of changing the world. The history of successive manifestos is thus also a history of the futures these manifestos sought to predict, prefigure, and realize.<sup>6</sup>

If identifying the historical formation and poetry of the *Communist Manifesto* is one task, scrutinizing its geographic distribution is another. Here I draw on the invaluable work of Bert Andréas and his publisher, Feltrinelli, who assembled the *Manifesto*'s planned and executed translations and editions. Based on their data, it is possible to track not only the *Manifesto*'s history but also the process through which it became, in its own words, "world literature." The *Manifesto*'s obsession with its own translations, called for in its preamble and reiterated in Marx's and Engels's prefaces, contains the seeds of a new understanding of international literature that resonates in various ways with current discourses on literature and globalization. The map of the *Manifesto*'s geographic diffusion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also prefigures the map of the European and then non-European avant-gardes. Insisting on an international view of the avant-garde, I trace the trans-European and transatlantic travel routes of the Romanian Tristan Tzara, the Cuban-French Francis Picabia, and the Chilean Vicente Huidobro, including the journals that traveled with them. Just as the diffusion of the *Manifesto* shows how this text acquired the status of world literature, so the transportation, transmission, and adaptation of avant-garde manifestos indicate how these texts formed an international avant-garde, an avant-garde at large.<sup>7</sup>

One of the chief interests of this book is to explain how and why the manifesto enters the sphere of art in the early twentieth century. A crucial moment in the emancipation of the art manifesto from the socialist manifesto is Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's fascist critique of Marxism. This critique, drawing on the French syndicalist Georges Sorel, allowed him to break with the communist reverence for the original *Manifesto* and to forge a new manifesto, one that continued to function as a political document but whose primary purpose was now artistic. The impact of futurist manifestos, what I call the "futurism effect," can be fathomed from the strong reactions they caused in the European semiperiphery of industrialization such as Italy and Russia, but also in England and Latin America. Fascist sympathizers such as Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis reacted to the manifesto-driven avant-garde in a mode I call "rear-guardism." Others remained skeptical of Italy's most aggressive export product because it seemed to introduce modes of advertisement and propaganda into the domain of literature. Whether the manifesto was greeted with enthusiasm or suspicion, everyone, including

its detractors, was now relying on it—many even issued manifestos directed against the new manifesto craze itself.

Just as histories of Marxism have tended to foreground the content of the *Manifesto* at the expense of its form, so most histories of twentieth-century art have relied on the definitions and doctrines they found expressed in art manifestos and neglected the form in which these doctrines were articulated. One exception is Marjorie Perloff's important *Futurist Moment*, which relates futurist poetry to the form of the manifesto.<sup>8</sup> Perloff's insight has been taken up recently, yielding studies that are devoted to the various forms and effects of avant-garde manifestos. In his detailed study of French symbolist and Italian futurist manifestos, for example, Luca Somigli has shown how manifestos contributed to legitimizing artists and the art they produced.<sup>9</sup> And Janet Lyon has emphasized the function of the manifesto in articulating group identities, of establishing speaking positions for various minorities seeking to be heard, even if this meant violating the decorum of the public sphere as analyzed by Jürgen Habermas. Finally, her focus on feminist rewritings of manifestos demonstrates the extent to which questions of gender are woven into the fabric of this genre.<sup>10</sup>

Building on these studies, *Poetry of the Revolution* offers a view of the manifesto that is centrally shaped by the insistence on reading avant-garde manifestos alongside political ones. I show how, through their common reliance on manifestos, the socialist internationals and transnational avant-garde movements found themselves in an intimate, if contentious, alliance from which neither could entirely escape. Italian and Russian futurists wrote political manifestos, and Marinetti even ran for political office; dadaism wanted to continue the political struggle of Vladimir Lenin in Zurich and of Rosa Luxemburg in Berlin; Lewis felt the need to declare his political allegiance to the women's suffrage movement; André Breton wanted his manifestos to further the ends of the French Communist Party; and Guy Debord hoped to instigate a revolt against the spectacle. The rivalry between art manifestos and political manifestos came to the fore when these writers' attempts to cross from art into politics were cut short: Benito Mussolini reined in Marinetti and Leon Trotsky, Velimir Khlebnikov; the French Communist Party alienated Breton; and Debord, to escape a similar fate, founded his own political micro-organization. The history of these competing manifestos is thus a history of struggle about the relation between art and politics, a struggle, in other words, about the best poetry of the revolution.

What a study of manifestos requires, therefore, is a poetics of the manifesto that is, at the same time, a politics of the manifesto, an analysis that combines a political theory of speech acts with reading practices in-

formed by the avant-gardes. Central to the methodology pursued here is the terminological pair of performativity and theatricality. Political manifestos are texts singularly invested in doing things with words, in changing the world. They are ideal instances of performative speech in the sense used by J. L. Austin. Many avant-garde manifestos, by contrast, with their over-the-top statements and shrill pronouncements, are at home in avant-garde cabarets and theaters, where they were indeed declaimed with frequency. Yet, despite this difference, both performative intervention and theatrical posing are, to some degree, at work in all manifestos. Political manifestos frequently overcompensate for the actual powerlessness of their position with theatrical exaggerations, and their confidence is often feigned rather than grounded in real authority. At the same time, even the most theatrical avant-garde manifestos achieved some performative effects and left some traces on history precisely through their calculated theatricality. Theatricality and performativity thus describe two conflicting tendencies that informed all manifestos, the two ingredients that, according to their respective degree of influence, produced the various types of manifestos that populate the twentieth century.

The history of the avant-garde that emerges from my focus on manifestos begins with the political manifestos of the nineteenth century and extends, through repeated surges of manifesto writing, to the 1960s and beyond. Here, my argument must contend with critics ranging from Peter Bürger to Perry Anderson, who restrict the notion of the avant-garde to a specific historical period in the early twentieth century. Later developments and movements in the 1960s or even the 1990s that seem to resemble this original and so-called historical avant-garde are dismissed, especially by Bürger, as anachronistic and empty repetitions without historical necessity or force. The fear of being called anachronistic, fortunately, has not stopped artists and activists from writing different types of timely manifestos with impunity. Given the large number and astonishing variety of manifestos produced in the sixties, it becomes difficult to dismiss the resurgence of manifestos as a surface phenomenon that somehow does not count.

Even as I propose a conception of repeated avant-gardes extending beyond the sixties, I draw on the theory of uneven development that underpins, for example, Anderson's analysis. My discussion of manifestos produced in the industrial semiperiphery of Europe, such as Italy and Russia, but also in Latin America, confirms that the most radical forms of modernism occurred not in the most industrialized nations but in places where the forces of modernization confronted violently older forms of production and social organization. However, the repeated waves of manifestos indicate that

one should not think of modernization as a single process or period that gave rise to one historically delimited form of radical modernism, but rather as different waves of modernization, each bringing with it new avant-gardes. Debord, for example, articulated through his manifestos the crisis caused by a new form of media-driven capitalism just as Marinetti had reacted to the airplane and the first machine age. One might expect, by the same token, that the current crisis caused by yet another wave of modernization, one driven by the outsourcing of services in addition to an earlier outsourcing of production, will give rise to yet another form of avant-garde. We must therefore think of the avant-garde in historical terms, but not necessarily as something that is over.

The other weakness of a theory of uneven development is that it underestimates the traffic in manifestos that enabled these manifestos to produce effects elsewhere, whether in the center of modernization such as England and the United States or in barely modernized nations such as China. Only if we attribute to manifestos a formative rather than a reactive and symptomatic role can these effects be adequately understood. The theory of uneven development thus explains well the first emergence of radical or avant-garde modernism, but not the often unpredictable impact and reactions this modernism provoked once it was transported beyond its origin through translations, travels, and adaptations.

The broadly conceived history and geography of avant-garde art sketched in these pages also brings into focus what I take to be this genre's most lasting impact: the hundreds and thousands of manifestos that swept across Europe led to a qualitative change in the conception of art. Focusing on the many combinations and fusions between manifestos and artworks, in collages, plays, poems, and theatrical performances, I show how manifestos intrude onto artworks and are in turn absorbed and assimilated by them. The result is what I call "manifesto art," an art forged in the image of the manifesto: aggressive rather than introverted; screaming rather than reticent; collective rather than individual. Radical modernism and avant-garde art must therefore be regarded as an art based not on the doctrines and theories proclaimed in manifestos but on the formal influence of the manifesto, its poetry, on art.

Manifesto art may seem to be just another name for a radical, politically invested avant-garde as opposed to the reified works of high modernism. Although my study focuses on the various self-declared political and artistic avant-gardes, the category of manifesto art captures essential aspects of modernism as well, in particular modernism's self-authorizing and self-canonizing ambitions and its grandiose claims to have broken with the (Vic-

torian) past. To be sure, important strains of modernism celebrate an art of impersonal detachment where the manifesto tends to undertake collective attacks. However, modernist depersonalization was itself driven by a submerged desire for collectivity, the hope that bracketing the individual would somehow, *via negativa*, allow a new collectivity to emerge. Manifestos, with their multiple signatories and collective demands, can therefore be seen as the very wish fulfillment of modernism. Indeed, modernists such as Ford Madox Ford and rear-guardists such as Lewis and Pound were drawn into the manifesto mania without giving up on their modernist doctrines and sensibilities, a fact that argues in favor of alliances and shared projects across the presumed line separating high modernism and manifesto-driven or avant-garde modernism.

Whether one wishes to emphasize or downplay the differences between modernism and manifesto art, they participate in an important feature that connects them to the larger themes that form the ultimate subject of this book, namely, the time and space of modernity. T. S. Eliot's conception of a retroactive construction of traditions can appear strikingly similar to the way in which Breton, in his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, identifies surrealists *avant la lettre*, and Pound's archaeological collages resonate with Debord's layers of quotes and misquotes from Marx. All these figures struggle with the specific temporality of modernity, a temporality of breaks and new beginnings that nevertheless continues to be confronted with a past that can never be abandoned for good. This temporality, in all its tensions and contradictions, appears in Enlightenment philosophy and political declarations, in modernist primitivism, avant-garde poetry, and the modernist novel, but it appears nowhere as succinctly and strikingly as in the genre of the manifesto.

In the last instance, then, *Poetry of the Revolution* seeks to study the manifesto not for its own sake but as a means to an end, as a genre that uniquely represents and produces the fantasies, hopes, aspirations, and shortcomings of modernity. Subjecting them to a critical analysis is the project undertaken here. Only if we understand the history of the manifesto can we arrive at our own timely articulations.