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Futurism's Fish Tanks: Rethinking the Human in Marinetti and Bontempelli

Corie Marshall

The ontological parameters of being are a central consideration of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's mythopoeic Futurist novel *Mafarka le futuriste* (1909) and Massimo Bontempelli's later play *Minnie la candida* (1928), two works which stake out and redefine these parameters through confrontation with the nonhuman animal. While Marja Härmänmaa contends that Marinetti viewed the natural world as something to be conquered and exploited,¹ other scholars in recent years have attempted to recuperate nature and its nonhuman inhabitants within Futurist thought. They argue for a more positive and dynamic uptake of the natural world on the part of Futurists than has traditionally been understood due to the movement's *macchinolatria* ("idolization of the machine")² and typically violent and bellicose rhetoric. In his study of the relationship between Futurist man and the nonhuman animal in the movement's founding manifesto, Timothy Campbell insists that the former potentializes himself and overcomes mankind's drift toward malignancy and death through a process of animalization, mediated by technology, which imbues him with the vitality and dynamism of the nonhuman animal.³ Rather than call for nature to be obliterated and replaced by technology, Enrico Cesaretti, in a materialist ecocritical reading, states that Marinetti's writings offer, instead, the "possibility of a nonhierarchical mutuality, interaction, and coexistence between human subjects and nonhuman objects," which displaces Futurist man from the center of a rigidly anthropocentric reordering of the world.⁴ While this essay builds on Campbell's and Cesaretti's efforts to claim a prominent place for the nonhuman animal and ecological questions within Futurist ideology, it also expands on Cinzia Sartini Blum's premise that Futurism as a movement constructs its modern myth of individual power and identity by defining both this power and this identity against an other. According to Blum, the Futurist mythopoeic project anxiously cultivates and rejects the other, making it highly visible while simultaneously seeking to repress it.⁵ Although for Blum this other is woman, I will argue that the anxieties present in Marinetti's mythopoeic reconstruction of man through the character of the superhuman Mafarka can, and should, also be read in ecological terms so as to situate Mafarka, and the Futurist human ideal he represents, in relation to the animals and lower order of humans over which he strives to exert his dominance with the aid of technology. In order to show that the nonhuman animal and the natural world in which it lives serve as vital referents in Marinetti's remaking of man in *Mafarka le futuriste*, as well as persistent sources of ontological doubt, I will juxtapose my close reading of the aquatic animals that are a focal point of the novel's chapter "Le Ventre de la Baleine" ("The Belly of the Whale") with another close

¹ See Marja Härmänmaa, "Futurism and Nature: The Death of the Great Pan?," in *Futurism and the Technological Imagination*, ed. Günter Berghaus (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 337-60.

² All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

³ See Timothy Campbell, "Vital Matters: Sovereignty, Milieu, and the Animal in Futurism's Founding Manifesto," *Annali d'Italianistica* 27 (2009): 157-73.

⁴ Enrico Cesaretti, "Eco-Futurism? Nature, Matter, and Body in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti," in *Italy and the Environmental Humanities*, eds. Serenella Iovino, Enrico Cesaretti, and Elena Past (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018), 222.

⁵ See Cinzia Sartini Blum, *The Other Modernism: F. T. Marinetti's Futurist Fiction of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

reading, this time of the fish tank episode in Bontempelli's play *Minnie la candida*, which appeared almost twenty years later. Bontempelli, whose official affiliation with Futurism had already ended following the conclusion of World War I, nonetheless takes up Marinetti's interest in a technologically mediated relationship between humans and nonhuman animals to present in troubling miniature the collapse, intimated by the earlier novel's anxieties, of the ecological and ontological hierarchy that positioned the Futurist founder's ideal human at its top.⁶ This article thus extends readings of Bontempelli's *Minnie la candida* as a work which interrogates and unravels Futurist themes by arguing that the play's central issue, the "question of the relationship between reality and representation," in Luca Somigli's words, engages the Futurist fear and fascination with the nonhuman animal in addition to, as has been recognized, the movement's fervent interest in the limitless potential of the machine.⁷

A New Biological Hierarchy: Mafarka's Crystal Aquarium in *Mafarka le futuriste*

Originally written in French in 1909 before being translated into Italian by Decio Cinti the following year, Marinetti's *Mafarka le futuriste* is a mythopoeic novel about the origins of Futurism.⁸ Banned for its obscenity after its publication in Italy, the work follows its eponymous hero, Mafarka-el-Bar, as he exerts his increasingly unchallengeable virile dominance over the African sands, slaves, and other peoples whom he encounters and eventually subdues. The novel concludes with the triumphant flight of Gazourmah, Mafarka's hybrid son, half divinity, half machine, to whom the hero gave birth in a miraculous bypassing of the female reproductive system. Gazourmah's takeoff requires Mafarka's own sacrifice, and, indeed, the hero cedes his life force to his mechanical offspring in an agonistic display of simultaneously paternal and maternal love that establishes Mafarka himself as the author of the new Futurist movement.⁹ Despite this sacrifice, Marinetti does not depict in his novel the total subjection of nature to the boundless energies and limitless horizons of a new technological age, represented by the vision of Gazourmah as a divine airplane that takes off from earth to conquer the skies. Instead, Marinetti suggests a fusion of nature and technology through the recuperation and depuration of the natural world as a result of the mediation of machines.¹⁰ In conjunction with this fusion of nature and technology is Marinetti's own reconfiguration of the human, as he draws the

⁶ Ugo Piscopo, *Massimo Bontempelli: Per una modernità dalle pareti lisce* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2001), 94.

⁷ Luca Somigli, "Modernism and the Quest for the Real: On Massimo Bontempelli's *Minnie la candida*," in *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde*, eds. Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 325. For two readings of *Minnie la candida* which address the play's commentary on Futurist themes, see Piscopo, *Massimo Bontempelli*, 345-53; and Somigli, "Modernism and the Quest for the Real," 315-18. Like Somigli, Mara Boccaccio draws a connection between the work's plot and the automatons featured in Marinetti's play *Poupées électriques* (1909) in "Massimo Bontempelli: Un esempio di contaminazione dei generi," *Italianistica: Rivista di letteratura italiana* 39, no. 1 (January/April 2010): 117.

⁸ Lorenza Miretti argues that *Mafarka le futuriste* encompasses numerous genres and reads Marinetti's novel as an epic in the Homeric tradition; see Miretti, *Mafarka il futurista: Epos e avanguardia* (Bologna: Gedit Edizioni, 2005).

⁹ Blum writes that in soliciting Mafarka to kiss Gazourmah on her behalf, Langourama "terminally infects" her son with maternal love and thus precipitates "his lapse into feminine abjection" (*The Other Modernism*, 72). Mafarka's death at the close of the novel represents, therefore, a crisis of identity only resolved once Gazourmah shakes off his father and takes to the skies.

¹⁰ For a positive biopolitical reading of Futurism's engagement with nature and the animal, see Campbell, "Vital Matters," 157-73.

lineaments of the ideal Futurist human through comparison and confrontation with the nonhuman animals populating the novel's representation of a pretechnological Africa.

While this article limits itself to a discussion of the fish found in the chapter "La Ventre de la Baleine," *Mafarka le futuriste* is, as a whole, a novel that repeatedly blurs the distinction between the human and nonhuman animal, while it simultaneously reinforces their disparateness in the form of the superhuman Mafarka. Lucia Re argues that Marinetti and the Futurists appreciated the strength and savagery of animals, particularly animals from the African continent, which they associated with a positive primitivism. However, it is only through the intervention of technology that Marinetti appears capable of appreciating animals most fully in the novel. Only through technology can he channel their savagery and raw strength to new ends in what Re contends is the Futurist integration of barbarism into the paradigms of modern civilization.¹¹

But in the absence of technology, animals and the humans associated with them pose a constant threat in the novel. Mafarka repeatedly distances himself from his fellow human beings, contemptuously ascribing to his black African slaves the features and qualities of ignoble or dangerous animals such as vultures or roaming dogs. Likewise, the bodies of the nubile slave women who both entrance and repel the hero are often described as animalistic, capable of exciting in him only the most primitive senses linked to sexual arousal. Elsewhere in the novel, Marinetti devotes increased space to the overlap between the human and nonhuman animal, while always portraying this lack of separation as a marker of irrationality, inferiority, sickness, and even death. In an early chapter, a storyteller recounts the trick a vengeful demon once played on Mafarka. Unable to ride a particularly well-endowed stallion owned by the hero, the demon castrates the beast and feeds the cooked "zeb" to an unwitting Mafarka.¹² In consequence of the meal, the hero's sexual appetite becomes insatiable and his member grows to inhuman proportions.¹³ In a subsequent chapter, Mafarka's beloved brother, Magamal, is bitten by a rabid dog. The animal's bite contaminates the young man, who then ferociously slaughters his bride and is left nearly unrecognizable, transformed into a hybrid creature and described as "un monstre noirâtre qui ressemblait à la fois à un colmaçon géant et à un colossal oiseau nocturne" ("a blackish monster that simultaneously resembled a giant snail and a colossal night bird").¹⁴ The novel's repeated superimposition of the nonhuman animal onto the human routinely prompts Mafarka's disgust and fear, as Marinetti depicts men and beasts as linked by their shared, uncontrollable sexual urges and propensity for unbridled violence. Animals and inferior humans are represented as carriers of disease and death. Thus *Mafarka le futuriste* becomes a work that hinges on the dialectical relationship between contamination and containment, given that the hero-protagonist never seeks to completely extirpate the lower orders of nature, comprised of both humans and nonhuman animals. Rather, he looks to permit these humans and nonhuman

¹¹ Lucia Re, "'Barbari civilizatissimi': Marinetti and the Futurist Myth of Barbarism," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 71, no. 3 (2012): 357.

¹² Marinetti, who was born and raised in Egypt, knew Arabic. "Zeb" is an Arabic slang term that can be translated as "dick" in English.

¹³ It is worth noting for the purposes of this article that Mafarka consumes the "zeb" believing it to be a cooked fish. This act of consumption and the power dynamics it implies will be reversed in the hero's subsequent feeding of his uncle's ministers and the seductive dancers to the carnivorous fish of his aquarium.

¹⁴ F.T. Marinetti, *Mafarka le futuriste* (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1984), 135. All English translations of *Mafarka le futuriste* are taken, with occasional modifications, from Carol Diethe and Steve Cox's translation, *Mafarka the Futurist* (London: Middlesex University Press, 1998), here, 113.

animals a place in the new technologized society he is trying to found, provided he can hem them in and mediate the dangers they pose through the introduction of machines.

Although Blum writes that in early Futurist manifestos “the machine symbolizes freedom from the past and from nature” with their links to abject femininity, in *Mafarka le futuriste* Marinetti does not call for an absolute liberation from the natural world.¹⁵ Instead, the hero’s crystal aquarium, the pretechnological forerunner of the machines celebrated in the manifestos, retains fragments of that world and a select number of its inhabitants, imposing on them new value that corresponds to their new position within a reordered biological hierarchy, in which Mafarka’s superiority is confirmed. While their biological value is always inferior to Mafarka’s own, the natural objects and beings that possess this lesser value must be continually present in order to maintain the illusion of the hero’s greatness. The risk of contamination is therefore never wholly eliminated, and if for Blum the machine “allows for the fantasy of a triumph over death,” in Marinetti’s novel there exists a subconscious distrust of the machine and its ability to contain and depurate the potentially lethal natural world.¹⁶ In this sense, the birth of Gazourmah, the hero’s transcendent technological son, at the novel’s end can be read as the replacement of the crystal aquarium in Mafarka’s quest to produce a more perfect and fail-safe machine amid his ongoing confrontation with nature.¹⁷

As a movement, Futurism sought to define and usher in a new masculine ideal that kept pace with the rhythms of the modern technology it tirelessly embraced.¹⁸ The incipient features of this ideal, later the subject of numerous manifestos and other Futurist literary and visual works, can be glimpsed in the chapter “Le Ventre de la Baleine” and, in particular, in the confrontation it establishes between the human and nonhuman animal. Having routed his uncle Boubassa’s troops and then crowned himself king, Mafarka orders a triumphant feast prepared in the seaside fortress compound of Gazr-el-Housan. As the hero enters the subterranean portion of the fortress, he passes through its tunnels constructed in cetaceous form by his father, Ras-el-Kibir, as a menacing symbol of death. This act of passing through the whale’s stomach presages the spectacle Marinetti will later present when he has Mafarka feed his uncle’s ministers to his ravenous sharks.¹⁹ It also introduces the themes of consumption and digestion which will occupy the entire chapter and through which values linked to an old world order will be eaten up and fresh ones linked to a new world order will be generated.²⁰ Mafarka emerges from the belly of the beast a king and new man. His victims, however, will be less fortunate, becoming fish food for his aquatic carnivores. Nevertheless, through their deaths, they impart crucial significance to Mafarka’s campaign of violence and world-building.

From the whale’s belly Mafarka makes his way to a vast underground chamber in which the sea is contained within the transparent walls of an immense aquarium. An indisputable sense of

¹⁵ Blum, *The Other Modernism*, 51.

¹⁶ Ibid. Cf. Roberto Terrosi’s optimistic analysis of Marinetti’s depiction of technology in *Mafarka le futuriste*, “Futurismo e postumano,” *Annali d’Italianistica* 27 (2009): 269-70. According to Terrosi, Marinetti displays a technological sensibility that is “non negativa e perturbante” (269; “not negative and disturbing”).

¹⁷ Cf. Somigli, “Modernism and the Quest for the Real,” 315-16. Somigli reads Gazourmah as representing the “merging of the natural and the mechanical” and suggests that this merging is successful, rather than still fraught with anxiety (316).

¹⁸ For a useful overview of the new male ideal of Futurist thought, especially during the Fascist period, see Marja Härmänmaa, *Un patriota che sfidò la decadenza: F.T. Marinetti e l’idea dell’uomo nuovo fascista, 1929-1944* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2000).

¹⁹ Blum, *The Other Modernism*, 64.

²⁰ Härmänmaa, “Futurism and Nature,” 352.

awe pervades Marinetti's description of the aquarium, the place where Mafarka's dominance extends over nature itself, as sea and dry land meet in the labyrinthine caves of the fortress:

À droite et à gauche, les parois courbes de la salle étaient formées de glaces de cristal, dont la transparence limpide donnait sur un aquarium colossal qui communiquait avec les profondeurs de la mer par des trappes ingénieuses. Ce bassin étrange était tout rempli de grands poissons qui s'étaient laissé prendre aux appâts, en côtoyant le promontoire, et on les voyait s'agiter furieusement, tout affamés depuis la veille (108).

(To right and left, the curving walls of the chamber were formed by crystal windows, a limpid transparency looking out on a colossal aquarium that communicated with the deeps of the sea through ingenious hatchways. This strange pool was crammed with big fish, which had taken the bait as they swam along the promontory, and they could be seen darting wildly around, having gone hungry since the day before [89].)

In his description of the aquarium in which the sea's normally hidden depths are revealed through "trappes ingénieuses," Marinetti establishes the possibilities emerging from the liminal space of sea and dry land opened up by the pretechnological intervention of the "glaces de cristal," the crystal panes that restrain the potentially destructive force of the sea for use by Mafarka himself. The chapter presents the relationship between the human and nonhuman animal as hierarchical and lethal, but it also suggests ways in which nature and its inhabitants can be made to coalesce with the nascent Futurist movement. This is particularly evident in the attention Marinetti pays to water, contained and channeled by the aquarium in the novel, but also a prominent feature in two early Futurist manifestos. Although *Mafarka le futuriste* concludes with a scene of the sea panting with rage at the sun as the quasi-divine Gazourmah soars high above the waves and declares himself "maître" ("master") of the firmament, water, presented through the synecdoche of the sea or ocean, plays an integral role in the movement's calls for deviation from the historical trajectory of the nineteenth century and for the destruction of all monuments to *passatismo*.²¹ While Marinetti declares war to be the "sola igiene del mondo" ("the world's only hygiene"), he, along with other Futurists, at least in the embryonic stages of the movement, does not abandon the traditional hygienic properties of water, but, instead, imbues the element with a new purifying capacity mediated by and employed in the service of machines.²²

In "Fondazione e Manifesto del futurismo" (1909), Marinetti describes his entry into the ideology of Futurism as a baptism in the "acqua fangosa" of the "materno fossato" (1:3; "muddy water" of the "maternal ditch" [21]). As the liquid of Marinetti's baptism, the filthy and reeking

²¹ "La mer, au loin, haletait de rage contenue sous les blocs de lave que le soleil fuyard lui lançait, dans les pauses angoissées de sa dérouté, par-dessus les nuages qui croulaient sous la voix de Gazourmah, bélier sonore" (232; "Far below, the sea panted with suppressed anger under the blocks of lava aimed at her by the runaway sun, in the anguished pauses of his retreat, above clouds that crumbled under Gazourmah's voice, a sonic battering-ram" [205]).

²² F.T. Marinetti, "Fondazione e Manifesto del futurismo," in *Manifesti, proclami, interventi e documenti teorici del futurismo*, ed. Luciano Caruso, 4 vols. (Florence: Coedizioni SPES-Salimbeni, 1980), 1:3. All English translations of the "Fondazione e Manifesto del futurismo" are taken, with slight modifications, from R.W. Flint's translation in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1973), here, 22.

water, imbued with thaumaturgic power through the slick of oil and fluids leaking from his totaled automobile, is an active participant in Marinetti's rebirth and merits the Futurist founder's dramatically reverent and prominent reference to it in the manifesto. Marinetti further shores up the positive involvement of water with the incipient goals of Futurism in his subsequent description of his crashed automobile, which is pulled from the muck of the ditch by "una folla di pescatori armati di lenza e di naturalisti podagrosi" (1:3; "a crowd of fishermen with handlines and gouty naturalists" [21]). He next describes his automobile as "simile ad un gran pescecane arenato" (1:3; "like a big, beached shark" [21]). As will be seen in the crystal aquarium of "Le Ventre de la Baleine," which is inhabited by predatory sharks, water and the creatures it sustains do not come to be repudiated by Marinetti, but are, instead, stripped of the old connotations that link them to a placid, contemplative, and beatific vision of the natural world. Dismantled is the nineteenth-century conception of nature with its lingering adherence to Romantic notions of nature's sublimity and mystical qualities. Instead, in his linking of his automobile to the dynamic image of the "pescecane," Marinetti recuperates the natural world through the same process of depuration in which consisted his rebirth and baptism as the founder of the Futurist movement. Rather than abandon the metaphor of the "pescecane" once the fishermen and naturalists literally fish ("pescare") his automobile from the ditch, Marinetti reemploys it and imbues it with new significance when describing the reanimation of his beloved vehicle: "Credevano che fosse morto, il mio bel pescecane, ma una mia carezza bastò a rianimarlo, ed eccolo risuscitato, eccolo in corsa, di nuovo, sulle sue pinne possenti!" (1:3; "They thought it was dead, my beautiful shark, but a caress from me was enough to revive it; and there it was, alive again, running on its powerful fins!" [21]). Marinetti's "pescecane" has not suffered death in the ditch; alongside its driver, it is, instead, reborn and fueled by a new technological dynamism infused with the ferocity of the animal to which Marinetti had originally linked it.²³ In connecting the automobile to the shark, Marinetti not only infuses his automobile with the "aliveness" of the animal, according to Campbell, he also stresses the shark as an important referent in the reconsideration of the human that he advances in *Mafarka le futuriste*.²⁴ In addition, he recuperates that animal's habitat and implants his vision of technology within it, not in an act of total suppression, but, rather, in a sort of biotechnical grafting.

A similar act of grafting is found in the manifesto "Proclama futurista" (1909), in which the passéist cities of Paralysis and Podagra are overwhelmed by the destructive waves of the ocean, which is acting in concert with the Futurists to hasten the demise of the two cities, emblematic of death and decay. Far from being the object of scorn of the Futurists, who survey the destruction from above, the ocean is viewed as a crucial ally in the Futurist depuration of the world, a process by which natural forces are harnessed to guarantee the movement's ends.²⁵ In the cited

²³ Campbell, "Vital Matters," 166.

²⁴ "It is the animal's closer relation to aliveness that accounts for Marinetti's figuration of the transformation as animalization. Speed, the automobile, and technology generally offer the walking dead and the dead object the possibility of coming back to life, which for Marinetti is homologous to moving the human towards the animal and away from the human. The human is always, for Marinetti, to be associated with the presence of death, a deadness held within life; the animal for its part is associated with the sense of aliveness" (ibid.).

²⁵ The Futurists watch safely from lofty perches the ocean's inundation of the passéist world: "Accanito inseguimento.... Ecco scavalcato il Gange! Finalmente il soffio impetuoso dei nostri petti fugò davanti a noi le nuvole striscianti, dagli avvolgimenti ostili, e noi scorgemmo all'orizzonte i sussulti verdastri dell'Oceano Indiano, a cui il sole metteva una fantastica museruola d'oro.... Sdraiato nei golfi di Oman e del Bengala, esso preparava perfidamente l'invasione delle terre," Marinetti, "Proclama futurista," in *Manifesti, proclami, interventi*, 1:5. ("Stubborn chase... Look, the Ganges unleashed! Finally, the impetuous puff of our chests dispersed before us the servile clouds with their hostile coils; and we glimpsed on the horizon the greenish tremors of the Indian Ocean, to

manifestos, Marinetti and the Futurists do not renounce habitation within the natural world, but, instead, welcome it and recategorize its inhabitants through the mediation of technology. This habitation, however, as seen also in *Mafarka le futuriste*, is founded on a rigidly enforced speciesism, on a biological hierarchy in which the ideal Futurist humans top the pecking order and rearrange or discard all other men, women, animals, and natural elements according to their needs. Although it will be Bontempelli who will present in *Minnie la candida* the frightening possibility of the natural world's complete subjection to the sovereignty of the machine, Marinetti and the Futurists advocate, rather, for a prepotent fusion of nature and technology in which the dominant, and positive, traits of the natural world are preserved and passed on. This results in a new technologized habitat in which nature is not entirely eradicated; instead, its serviceable qualities and members are integrated into it.

Marinetti breaks ground in the development of this new technologized habitat in his description of Mafarka's aquarium where, as already seen, nature is reshaped and mediated by the aquarium's crystal walls, an engineering feat that astonishes Mafarka's unsuspecting guests assembled in the great hall.²⁶ But if the Futurist founder allows for a positive grafting of technology onto the natural world, certain aspects of that same world must nonetheless be depurated or excised completely in order for that grafting to be successful. Mafarka's marvelous aquarium represents the beginning of technology's depuration of nature and not its end, in accordance with the general position of the novel at the incipient stages of Marinetti's evolving and rapidly expanding vision of Futurism. Because of this, when Marinetti explores the aquarium's depths and inhabitants, there is a categorical slippage in his description of the fish and humans associated with the aquarium, given that their ontological parameters are still in the process of being redefined. Mafarka's fish are thus described in technological or pretechnological terms; due to their frenetic movements, they resemble the "rouages d'une horloge énorme" (110; "the works of an enormous clock" [91]) or the "engrenages d'une catapulte" (110; "the gears of a catapult" [91]). The fish are also linked to "inferior" humans, particularly women. Pointing out a specific fish to his guests, Marinetti's prehistorical avatar says: "Ce poisson ressemble à une galère. Il a des mâts sur le dos et des rames sur les flancs. Tenez, voici la femelle!... Elle agite autour de son ventre de longues nageoires. On dirait une danseuse aux molles jupes de gaze dans l'eau" (110; "That fish looks like a galleon. It has masts on its back and oars at its sides. Look, there's the female!... She has long fins fluttering around her belly. She looks like a dancing girl with filmy gauze skirts in the water" [91]). The comparison of the fish to a dancing girl suggests a reverse version of the process of animalization that Campbell describes. In this reverse process, humans are no longer animalized; instead, nonhuman animals come to be "humanized" and imbued with the negative traits of the particular segment of the human population they evoke.²⁷ Proof of this point is found in Marinetti's play on

which the sun imparted a fantastic, golden muzzle.... Lying low in the gulfs of Oman and Bengal, it cunningly prepared for its invasion of the earth").

²⁶ In his largely positive reading of Futurism's anticipation of the posthuman, Terrosi writes that the movement did not seek to supplant humanity with machines, but, instead, saw technology as a confirmation of the "potenziamento dell'uomo" ("Futurismo e postumano," 269; "invigoration of man"). While he never directly refers to Mafarka's extraordinary aquarium, Terrosi's assertion that technology is for Marinetti a "strumento di sviluppo e rigenerazione" (269; "instrument of advancement and regeneration") can apply to the aquarium itself, which revitalizes nature and imbues it with a proto-Futurist spirit. According to Futurist ideology, technology assists man in becoming "dominatore del mondo e della natura" (270; "dominator of the world and nature"), something Mafarka becomes when he feeds his victims to his fish.

²⁷ Cf. Campbell, "Vital Matters," 157-73.

the superficial phonetic affinities between “poisson” and “poison” through which he calls attention to the dangerousness of Mafarka’s animals and links that danger to his female fish in particular. Using language evocative of sex and female genitalia, and in keeping with the novel’s virulently misogynistic discourse, Marinetti has his hero indicate an exceptionally lethal species: “Tenez, voilà le tetrodonte! Faut pas copuler avec!...car il décharge son poison par ses organes de reproduction. Voilà la femelle... Pas jolie, n’est-ce pas?... Tant mieux, car ses baisers sont plus dangereux que ceux du mâle” (109; “Look, there’s the pufferfish. No copulating with that one!... for it discharges its poison through its reproductive organs. There’s the female... Not pretty, is she?... And a good thing too, as her kisses are more dangerous than the male’s” [90]).

By having both women and fish occupy the same semantic field, Mafarka also anticipates his later feeding of the sacred dancers to his venomous fish, an act that for all the hero’s bombastic disdain for women occurs after the chapter concludes. Instead, Marinetti offers the killing of Boubassa’s two ministers in expectation of the dancers’ ultimately unseen deaths. Having invited Boubassa’s nephew, Sabattan, to the feast, Mafarka demonstrates the extent of his power by sacrificing his uncle’s ministers, to the horror of Sabattan and the delight of his other guests. The hero introduces the sacrifice by declaring that he himself had been similarly consumed, “exilé dans le ventre de Boubassa durante toute [sa] jeunesse” (115; “exiled in Boubassa’s belly for the whole of [his] youth” [95]). However, he escaped being digested in the metaphorical belly of his uncle by passing through “les écrements nocturnes” (115; “nocturnal evacuations”) of Boubassa’s intestines. This sort of scatological baptism prefigures Marinetti’s own baptism in the ditch and establishes Mafarka as a hero incapable of being fully consumed but capable of voraciously consuming others, humans and animals alike. Within his technologized habitat, in which nature and its inhabitants are reordered and redefined, Mafarka exists at its apex. Ibraïm-Gandakatale and Aciaca, his son, however, meet their end in a striking and abject display of gore that reifies the presentiments of violence embodied by the belly of the artificial whale through which Mafarka passed in his navigation of the subterranean rooms of Gazr-el-Housan. Rather than simply kill the thrashing ministers, the fish devour them in a bloody frenzy. Describing the older Gandakatale’s death, Marinetti writes that his mutilated cadaver sinks to the floor of the aquarium “avec un long frétillement d’anguille” (118; “wriggling all the way, like an eel” [98]). Gandakatale’s son suffers a similarly grisly fate with his legs “avalées” (“swallowed”) by a shark until he resembles a “fantastic and bloody wheelbarrow” (“brouette fantastique et sanglante” [118]), pushed against the transparent walls of the crystal aquarium.

Blum reads Mafarka’s cave as symbolic of the maternal womb in which the hero squares off against his destructive libidinal desires and a “castrating paternal figure who thwarts the son’s yearning for identification and power.”²⁸ Read in this key, Mafarka achieves the death of his uncle Boubassa, a surrogate and castrating father figure, through the death of Gandakatale, which Blum identifies as a “displaced parricide.”²⁹ But while she pays close attention to the cave as the theater of action, Blum somewhat overlooks the importance of the crystal aquarium situated within the cave, the more precise site of the executions of Gandakatale and his son. Within the aquarium’s lurid mix of water and blood, the minister’s and his son’s bodies are broken into fragments by the hero’s sharks; what comes to be fragmented is also the bodies’ humanness, as Gandakatale and his son are alternately described as eels and wheelbarrows, animals and primitive machines, in the slippage between different ontological codes which results in the

²⁸ Blum, *The Other Modernism*, 65.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

ascription of animal and machine-like identities to the men.³⁰ While this slippage remains to be corrected as will be seen in the subsequent scene with the dancers, the ministers' violent disintegration in the jaws of Mafarka's sharks serves to reinforce the nonhuman animals' greater symbolic and biological value, since they are preserved both for their utility as an emblem of power and their function as executioners, while the ministers, being representative of political and cultural passéism, must be culled from the new world order Mafarka, and through him Marinetti, looks to establish.

Along with this political and cultural passéism, the sensual and effeminizing qualities of women must be purged before the new Futurist society can be founded.³¹ After feeding Boubassa's ministers to his sharks, Mafarka calls for dancers to be brought to him and anticipates their similar deaths by asking that they be "plus belles que la clarté de la lune dans l'eau de [son] aquarium" (119; "more beautiful than moonlight shining on the water of [his] aquarium" [99]). Further linking the dancers to their watery demise, this time through a recall to the *poisson-poison* wordplay of the preceding descriptions of the aquarium, Mafarka declares that the two women already have enough "poison sur leurs lèvres" (119; "poison on their lips" [99]) that music with its discomposing properties would simply supplement their feminine venom. The women dance therefore in silence, the focus being entirely on the sinuous movements of their bodies, fluid as water. Interrupting the performance of the two sisters, Libahbane and Babilli, Mafarka next orders a game to be played in which the lights of the aquarium are to be extinguished and the women made to follow "l'instinct de [leur] vulve" (121; "the instinct of [their] vulva" [101]) with the aim of selecting the handsomest and strongest man in the room, who is of course Mafarka. In the dark that accompanies the game, and as the dancers seductively work their way through the crowd, Mafarka describes the breaths of his guests as those of drowning men: "Dans les ténèbres, les haleines des convives sifflaient rageuses et profondes, avec des *glouglous baveux* et des *hoquets de gouttières*, tandis que les danseuses passaient à tâtons"³² (121; "In the darkness, the guests took deep, wild, panting breaths, with *drooling gurgles* and *liquid gasps*, while the dancers groped their way past" [101]). The only man who does not metaphorically drown in the sea of lust that Libahbane and Babilli leave in their wake is Mafarka, who by not drowning implicitly associates himself with the predatory and carnivorous qualities of his fish and distances himself from the weak and quivering flesh of the titillated men by whom he is surrounded. When one of the dancers falls into his arms, having selected him as the paragon of virility, Mafarka, struggling to overcome both his attraction and repulsion, questions whether he holds in his hands "le ventre squameux d'un des requins disparus au déclin de la lune" (121; "the scaly belly of one of the sharks which had vanished with the waning of the moon" [101]). While in the execution of Boubassa's ministers the hero has already utilized his animals to channel his superior capacity for violence and unmatched strength, the association of the dancer with the shark reveals once more that the fusion between technology and the natural world has yet to be perfected, that there exist within the natural world contaminating elements still to be properly categorized or excised. By making

³⁰ Blum locates a similar slippage in the graphic description of the rabies of Mafarka's brother, Magamal, writing: "A profusion of gory details illustrates the fragmentation of identity and confusion of codes—human and beast, eros and Thanatos, fecundation and destruction—wrought by Magamal's disease, the most extreme manifestation of his horror-inspiring ambiguous nature" (ibid., 67).

³¹ For a study on the misogynistic rhetoric of Futurism, the movement's understanding of sexual differences, and the strain of feminism to which Futurism nevertheless gave rise, see Lucia Re, "Futurism and Feminism," *Annali d'Italianistica* 7 (1989): 253-72.

³² The emphasis is mine.

it clear that animals do not always offer for Marinetti a positive biological model for Futurist man to follow and reappropriate, this direct association of the sensual dancers with the sharks housed in Mafarka's aquarium troubles Campbell's reading of the ontological benefits humans draw from their interactions with animals.³³ Through the mediation of his aquarium, the hero has already transformed the bloodthirsty qualities of his carnivorous fish into a reflection of his own political dominance and biological superiority. Nevertheless, he still feeds the two perilously sensual women to his fish in order to eliminate the danger that they pose and to correct their association with his own sharks and their liquid habitat. Technology, therefore, does not simply allow Marinetti through Mafarka to safely tap into the vitality of the animal and stave off humankind's drift toward "deadness held within life"³⁴; it also enables him to overcome the dangerous mutuality between animals and humans that makes debility and death their shared fate. According to Marinetti's conception of an ideal virility expurgated of all effeminizing components, the dancers possess the powerful ability to seduce and unman. Libahbane and Babilli, who earlier took on the qualities of water when moving among the men, thus represent a metaphorical breach of the aquarium itself, in which passéist nature has been contained and depurated by the very construction of its crystal walls.

By condemning the dancers to death, Mafarka attempts to overcome the women's threat to the new order of nature and technologized society that he is working to found by means of the aquarium. He also demonstrates how, if mediated by technology, the natural world and its inhabitants can be repurposed and reorganized in order to serve important functions within the Futurist project. However, this new biological hierarchy exists in an imperfect state even by the end of "Le Ventre de la Baleine." Although the chapter presents the possibilities located within Mafarka's harnessing of the ferocity of the nonhuman animal so as to restructure the natural world and put inferior animals and humans in their place, a threat to this hierarchy still remains. In the chapter that immediately follows, Mafarka encounters his brother, Magamal, who has been infected by the bite of a rabid dog. The novel thus shows the risks still posed by unmediated interactions with nonhuman animals. It is this anxiety which will drive Mafarka to give birth to Gazourmah, a technological semi-divinity seemingly capable of presiding over the natural world without being contaminated by it. However, even following Gazourmah's birth, certain anxieties toward the natural world remain. Enrico Cesaretti contends that Futurism later effected a positive recuperation of the material aspects of the environment by means of aeropoetry, through which aeropoets communicated "an identification between landscape, machine, and poetic self to reduce the distance between the world and the 'I'."³⁵ Yet Gazourmah's flight does not neatly prefigure the Futurist movement's interest in aestheticized renderings of landscapes as seen from the air. Despite its element of triumph, it intimates, perhaps, a deliberate and fearful distancing from the natural world and its contaminants.³⁶

³³ Cf. Campbell, "Vital Matters," especially pages 166-67.

³⁴ Ibid., 166.

³⁵ Cesaretti, "Eco-Futurism?," 216.

³⁶ Blum reads this flight as a triumph precisely because it results from Gazourmah's total rejection of the contaminating feminine. This rejection is embodied by his miraculous birth and by the ensuing deaths of his father, Mafarka, and the synecdoche of all femininity itself, the siren Coloubbi; see Blum, *The Other Modernism*, 73.

Biology in Crisis: Bontempelli's Fish Tank in *Minnie la candida*

If Marinetti with *Mafarka le futuriste* reorders the biological hierarchy through the mediation of the technology epitomized by the crystal aquarium, Bontempelli, following the technological atrocities of World War I, takes this reordering to extremes and demonstrates its disquieting implications in *Minnie la candida*, which was first performed in 1928. The mythopoeic project of Marinetti's novel ends at the nascent stages of technology with the flight of Gazourmah, in whom the machine is still enveloped in a mystical aura. In his play, Bontempelli, however, passes off real fish as machines and divests his phantom automatons of the lingering gleam of this aura. He presents the fish, which the protagonist Minnie believes to be fake as the result of a joke gone wrong, as figures of terror and epistemological dead-ends. While Marinetti proposes a new biological hierarchy through the immense crystal aquarium of Mafarka's Gazr-el-Housan, Bontempelli appears to dismantle it by means of his small fish tank, which is situated in an unidentified restaurant in an equally unidentified Italian city in *Minnie la candida*. As Luca Somigli and Mara Boccaccio point out, with *Minnie la candida* Bontempelli also evokes Marinetti's *Poupées électriques* ("Electric Puppets"), which appeared the same year as *Mafarka le futuriste*.³⁷ In Marinetti's play, the protagonist-engineer's automatons pass as humans so convincingly that they are mistaken for suicides when the former hurls them from his window into the nearby sea. *Poupées électriques* thus presents intriguing parallels with Bontempelli's drama.

Multiple scholars have addressed Bontempelli's ideological and artistic affiliations with Futurism.³⁸ Although his literary production as a whole embraces a variety of twentieth-century modernist and avant-garde currents and influences, from Pirandellian absurdist themes to Surrealism and magical realism, the author was intimately associated with the Futurist movement in the early stages of his career. Following his transfer to Milan from Florence in 1915, Bontempelli moved in Futurist circles. He embraced the movement's bellicose zeal by fighting on the front during the final two years of World War I and served as a war correspondent. He also composed Futurist poetry and founded and edited a Futurist wartime journal. According to Ugo Piscopo, Bontempelli was one of the founding members of the *Partito Politico Futurista* ("Futurist Political Party"),³⁹ and his involvement in the movement was crucial to his later literary output and to his interest in questions related to identity loss and the fragmentation of the self.⁴⁰ While the author made a formal break with Futurism in 1919 following the publication of his Futurist collection of poetry *Il Purosangue-L'Ubrico* ("The Pureblood-The Drunk") that same year, he nonetheless continued to recuperate Futurist themes throughout the 1920s in order to refashion and interrogate them.⁴¹

In *Minnie la candida* Bontempelli troubles Futurism's idolization of machines and its pursuit of the ideal human by questioning the chains of meaning that link humans, technology, and nonhuman animals together.⁴² Perhaps not coincidentally, Bontempelli's fish tank (described

³⁷ Somigli, "Modernism and the Quest for the Real," 316; Boccaccio, "Massimo Bontempelli," 117.

³⁸ For readings of Bontempelli's complex affinities with Futurism, see Lia Lapini, *Il teatro di Massimo Bontempelli: Dall'avanguardia al novecentismo* (Florence: Enrico Valecchi, 1977); Ugo Piscopo, *Massimo Bontempelli*, particularly pages 82-143; Fernando Tempesti, *Massimo Bontempelli* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1974); and Elena Ugnani, *Sogni e visioni: Massimo Bontempelli fra surrealismo e futurismo* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1991).

³⁹ Piscopo, *Massimo Bontempelli*, 89.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 105-06.

⁴² See Barbara Nuciforo Tosolini, *Il teatro di parola: Massimo Bontempelli* (Padua: Liviana Editrice, 1976), 63.

in Act I as a “crystal parallelepiped” or “parallelepipedo di cristallo”) picks up the connotations of feasting and consumption that were earlier ascribed to Marinetti’s aquarium.⁴³ Mafarka shows off his aquarium to his guests during a sumptuous dinner and later has his carnivorous fish dine on the bodies of his uncle’s ministers and the dancers; for their part, Minnie and her companions, Skagerrak and Tirreno, comment on the fish tank while lunching at Astolfo’s restaurant, which is nestled in *Minnie la candida* like a Pirandellian play-within-a-play.⁴⁴ Furthermore, once made to doubt the biological reality of the fish, Minnie will be entirely consumed by the resulting anxiety that leaves her bereft of ontological references by which to anchor herself to the world.⁴⁵ By locating his fish tank within the bourgeois parameters of postwar Italy, Bontempelli provides an updated and disinfected reading of Marinetti’s crystal aquarium, now cleansed entirely of the Futurist founder’s mythopoetic gloss.

In Act I, the trusting Minnie gazes with wonder at the fish tank, mockingly and provocatively termed a “museo” (183; “museum”), that has been dropped off outside Astolfo’s restaurant by a weary worker carting it to a nearby park:

MINNIE. Oh, cari, cari. Dio quanto sono belli. Ma guardate signor Tirreno, questi pesci: sono splendidi.

TIRRENO. Sì, sono molto ben fatti.

MINNIE. Che modo di parlare. “Ben fatti” si dice delle cose che si fanno con le mani, come un tavolino, o i vestiti delle sarte, o i quadri, le poesie... (183)

(MINNIE. Oh such dears. God how they are beautiful. But, Mr. Tirreno, look at these fish: they are splendid.

TIRRENO. Yes, they are very well-made.

MINNIE. What a thing to say. “Well-made” is said about things that are made by hand, like a small table, or seamstresses’ clothes, or paintings, poems...)

Upon seeing the fish, Minnie exclaims that they are beautiful, but Tirreno, taking advantage of her gullibility, tries to trick her into believing that they are fake. Neither Minnie’s wonder, nor her naïveté precludes, however, her epistemological curiosity. In fact, these two qualities seem to fuel her innate desire to know and plumb the world around her. She therefore questions Tirreno’s precise description of the fish as “ben fatti” (“well-made”). Her wonder soon transforms into bewilderment once Tirreno turns his unusual descriptor on her, declaring that *she*, like the fish, is “ben fatta.” Minnie’s innocent reply of “ma io non sono un pesce” (184; “but I am not a fish”) is an irrefutable confirmation of her humanness.⁴⁶ While Mafarka willingly distances himself from the inferior aspects of his own humanness—for example, the weakness exposed and only with difficulty overcome when confronted with the extreme sensuality of his dancers—Minnie

⁴³ Massimo Bontempelli, *Minnie la candida*, in *Nostra Dea e altre commedie*, ed. Alessandro Tirreni (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), 183.

⁴⁴ Tempesti, *Massimo Bontempelli*, 29. “In altre parole le più originali realizzazioni teatrali di Bontempelli prendono corpo in un ambiente pirandelliano con forti elementi, futuristi, di negazione di Pirandello” (29; “In other words, Bontempelli’s most original theatrical realizations take shape in a Pirandellian environment with strong Futurist elements that reject Pirandello”).

⁴⁵ Somigli, “Modernism and the Quest for the Real,” 336. Somigli considers this Minnie’s actual tragedy, not simply her individual estrangement from the world.

⁴⁶ Lapini, *Il teatro di Massimo Bontempelli*, 167. Lapini calls Minnie’s irrepressible candor “una forza dirompente di denuncia” (167; “an explosive force of denunciation”).

implicitly refuses, at first, to relinquish any part of her human nature. Nonetheless, her slow surrender of her humanness over the course of the play's final two acts culminates in her demise once she comes to believe herself something that is neither human nor animal, but, instead, mechanically fabricated. Her suicide is her last desperate confrontation with the falsity of society that has permeated even herself and led to her dissociation from her identity as human.⁴⁷

When Tirreno clarifies the reason why he described the fish as “ben fatti,” saying that it is because they are “pesci finti” (184; “fake fish”), Minnie's curiosity is not dampened, but, instead, sparked more violently than before:

MINNIE. Ma come fanno a muoversi?

TIRRENO. Sono pieni di elettricità.

MINNIE. Ma come li fanno così bene? Guardate, quello apre la sua bocca. Il piccolino va in giù: oh, si scosta per non urtare l'altro che sale. E quei due che giocano a rincorrersi. Forse sono fratelli. Oh, oh, un grosso in fondo che manda su tante bollicine d'aria...

TIRRENO. Sì, Minnie, sono una meraviglia... No, per carità, non toccate l'acqua: dev'essere tutta elettrizzata (184).

(MINNIE. But how do they come to move?)

TIRRENO. They are full of electricity.

MINNIE. But how do they make them so well? Look! That one is opening its mouth. The little one swims under. Oh, it moves away so as not to bump the other one that's swimming up. And these two are playing chase. Perhaps they are brothers. Oh, oh, a big one at the bottom is sending up little bubbles of air...

TIRRENO. Yes, Minnie, they are a wonder... No, for goodness sake, don't touch the water: it'll be completely electricized.)

Throughout the play, Bontempelli does not entirely refute his sympathy for the Futurist sense of awe for technology, here encapsulated in Tirreno's otherwise ironic use of the word “maraviglia” (“wonder”). Indeed, the playwright suggests technological possibilities that surpass even Marinetti's apothecic vision of technology conveyed through *Gazourmah*. However, by positing technology's ability to successfully imitate biological life, Bontempelli presents technology as a destabilizing force by virtue of which human beings no longer reside at the top of the biological hierarchy that Marinetti proposes in *Mafarka le futuriste*. There, technology, in the form of the crystal aquarium, mediates Mafarka's superior position, and identity, in relation to all other humans and nonhuman animals. In *Minnie la candida*, on the other hand, technology does not assist humans in any struggle for dominance within the animal kingdom; instead, it obliterates human beings' sense of themselves within the natural world and their understanding of where they fit in with regard to this world's other inhabitants. If through the character of Mafarka Marinetti views nonhuman animals as belonging to a lesser biological order, threatening disease or death unless they can be brought into alignment with Futurist goals through the mediation of technology, Bontempelli's Minnie offers up a different relationship between humans and nonhuman animals. As a young, naïve woman, Minnie is the opposite of Marinetti's superhuman Mafarka. Unlike the Futurist hero, she possesses an innocent understanding of biological

⁴⁷ Ibid., 196.

existence that does not demand a technologically mediated relationship between humans and animals in order to stave off any risk of death or contamination. Although she declares that she is not a fish, Minnie nevertheless cleaves to a harmonious ecological vision in which different species coexist and are justified in their existence through their shared state of being alive. In her exchange with Tirreno, she questions, furthermore, whether or not the fish might be brothers. Hers is an implicit declaration of sympathy with the living creatures now exposed as biological frauds. Her subsequent reaching for the fish indicates her desire to confirm whether or not they are mechanical imposters, but Tirreno repulses this instinctive gesture, stating that the water in the tank has been electricized, thereby initiating the process by which she will feel herself irremediably cut off from the natural world. Unable to touch the fish for fear of being electrocuted, Minnie cannot verify whether or not they are alive like her. She thus begins to doubt her ability to know whether any alive-seeming being is truly alive or merely expertly fabricated. Her contact with the natural world, epitomized by her impulse to touch the fish, has been severed.

In Bontempelli's play, as a woman, Minnie is driven by instinct and acts as a representative of the natural world before the other characters who have unconsciously and unquestioningly acclimated to a repetitive and meaningless mode of urban bourgeois existence.⁴⁸ As such, she refuses to halt her line of questioning. Her excited queries to Tirreno and Skagerrak, now in on the joke, convey the heroine's fascination with the technological apex before her (that is, the lifelike mechanical recreation of the fish), at the same time as they represent a stubborn refusal to part with her vision of the natural world on which technology has never before intruded so violently:

MINNIE. A toccarli, sono duri o morbidi?

SKAGERRAK. Che cosa, in nome del cielo?

MINNIE. Ma i pesciolini rossi finti.

SKAGERRAK. Oh sono morbidi, come quelli veri.

MINNIE. E a levarli dall'acqua, che cosa accade?

TIRRENO. Come i veri, sempre; sono fatti alla perfezione: boccheggiano, danno due o tre strappi, e poi s'irrigidiscono e non si muovono più. Come se morissero.

MINNIE. E poi?

TIRRENO. E poi si buttano via.

SKAGERRAK. E dopo qualche giorno fanno come se marcissero.

MINNIE. E a darne uno a un gatto?

TIRRENO. Lo mangia, come se fosse vero (185).

(MINNIE. If you touch them, are they hard or soft?)

SKAGERRAK. What, in heaven's name?

MINNIE. Why the fake little red fish.

SKAGGERAK. Oh they are soft, just like the real ones.

⁴⁸ Tempesti, *Massimo Bontempelli*, 188. Skagerrak's uncle is the exemplary bourgeois automaton in Bontempelli's play. Unaware of how he has relinquished his autonomy to a life of comfortable modern conformism, he declares in Act II: "Foggiarmi, sì, fabbricarmi, sì, io posso dire di essermi fatto da me" (200; "Forge myself, yes. Fabricate myself, yes. I can say that I have been made entirely by myself"). His unthinking acceptance of this fact contrasts with Minnie's anguished and questioning naïveté.

MINNIE. And if you lift them from the water, what happens?

TIRRENO. Still just like the real ones. They are made to perfection: they gasp for air, give two or three shudders, and then they turn rigid and no longer move. As if they had died.

MINNIE. And then?

TIRRENO. And then they are thrown away.

SKAGGERAK. And after a few days they even seem to rot.

MINNIE. And if you give one to a cat?

TIRRENO. It eats it, as if it were real.)

Tirreno and Skagerrak's joke is predicated on its ontological irony: as Minnie comes to believe that the fish are mechanically fabricated, the two men insist more fervently on the very biology of the fish that should contradict their status as automatons. Instead, the biology of the fish and the very fact of their being alive are offered as irrefutable proof of their mechanical perfection. When she later attempts to buy one of the fish, Minnie makes an effort to insert herself within the world of the joke, in which nature is no longer fused with technology but has, in fact, been supplanted, rendered obsolete, and stripped of definable meaning by technological advancements. Skagerrak and Tirreno quickly dissuade her from such a purchase and in order to convince her extend their joke far beyond the fish in the tank. Tirreno asserts that other animals have been successfully recreated by technology, including "degli uccellini che cantano e volano" (186; "several little birds which sing and fly"), all of which must be kept a secret. But when Minnie refuses to repress her insatiable curiosity, Tirreno goes further, declaring that lifelike, mechanical reproductions of humans have also been created: six men and six women whom he describes as "precisi, come quei pesci" (186; "exact, just like those fish").

Tirreno's pronouncement that both men and fish can be mechanically fabricated calls into question the biological differences between humans and nonhuman animals that confirmed Mafarka's superiority in *Mafarka le futuriste*. In *Minnie la candida*, technology flattens Marinetti's biological hierarchy and sets humans and nonhuman animals on an even playing field. The militant speciesism of *Mafarka le futuriste* gives way as Bontempelli denies the superiority of one species over another now that all can be seemingly recreated mechanically. If he nullifies the differences in biological value that Marinetti puts forth in his novel, Bontempelli also nullifies biological value altogether. No one species is greater than any other, he posits. Furthermore, no species can fashion its identity against another, since all species are homogenized through their shared status as machines. Because of Tirreno's pronouncement, Minnie soon moves away from fish to question the ontological status of society at large. Consequently, she loses herself within the epistemological gray zone into which she has wandered by way of Tirreno and Skagerrak's joke and in which technology contravenes her abstract, but no less comforting and harmonious, concept of being. As a representative of the natural world within Bontempelli's play, Minnie finds herself surrounded and overwhelmed by the patterns of technological conformism that abolish biological differences in their transformation of life into machines, that reduce fish and humans alike to mechanical simulacra.⁴⁹ Both Mafarka and Minnie sacrifice themselves at the end of their respective works. Mafarka perishes so that Gazourmah can carry out the fusion of technology and the natural world that Mafarka initiated through his violent campaign of conquest and containment. In this campaign, the corrupted aspects of biology were largely, if not entirely, expunged from the

⁴⁹ Piscopo, *Massimo Bontempelli*, 348.

world, and nature was recategorized and redefined according to Mafarka's proto-Futurist vision. Minnie, on the other hand, flings herself from the window as a result of the imperfect fusion of technology and the natural world. She dies because biology has been transformed into an irresolvable source of doubt for her. Its traditional, comforting categories have collapsed, and she no longer knows how to define herself in their absence.

Unable to orient herself within a society in which the borders of the natural and technological worlds do not merely overlap but are blurred and undefined, and in which fish and humans exist not as separate species but as convincing mechanical recreations, Minnie succumbs to her own confusion. Her epistemological crisis results from not knowing the extent of her own artificiality, nor the extent to which technology has infiltrated the natural world.⁵⁰ In a technological age that raises the possibility of the biology of both men and fish being outmoded, this inability to define the ontological parameters of humanness against an animal other proves fatal. If Marinetti's aquarium stages the technologically mediated containment of the dangers posed by the relationship between humans and nonhuman animals, Bontempelli's fish tank stages technology's indiscriminate intrusions on the natural world. With its threat of biological obsolescence, technology does not come to alienate humans from nonhuman animals; instead, it unites them in their nothingness, in their shared lack of a clearly defined identity. Somigli argues that the play's postmodernist acceptance of the total dissolution of life-anchoring values is conjoined with a modernist "nostalgia" for a lost world of meaning.⁵¹ Included among the play's nostalgic desires is the longing for a return to a world ordered according to a benevolent speciesism through which fish and other animals do not merely substantiate the ideal Futurist man's superiority as in *Mafarka le futuriste*, but, rather, confirm humans' existence and participation in a mutual network of thriving biological difference.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 353.

⁵¹ Somigli, "Modernism and the Quest for the Real," 336.