

## AESTHETIC AND POLITICS IN GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO

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Присъствието на традициите и физическата мощ в консерватизма на Габриеле д'Анунцио е строго подплатено с естетическо измерение. Това измерение, тъй явно открояващо се и издаващо превъзходство у „естествените водачи“, някак увеличава бездната между тях и хората, които следва да пребивават в пълна и безпрекословна подчиненост спрямо тях.

По този начин естетическият консерватизъм на Д'Анунцио се разграничава от основните схващания на Иполит Тен (по отношение на позитивните основания на последния), както и от образите на „земята“ и „мъртъвците“ у Морис Барес, чиито идеи са тъй популярни в края на деветнадесети век. Въпреки че пише политическите си романи (или по-точно романи, в които можем да открием политическите му възгледи) именно в този период, когато му е добре известна френската културна продукция, мисълта му обитава висока поетическа сфера, която придава определен облик и която същевременно възпрепятства истинския диалог между Д'Анунцио и проблемите на неговото време.

When I think of D'Annunzio my first association is the idea of life like a masterpiece of art: an idea rising in the second half of the XIX century, far from the dominant streams of the culture of the period.

At the end of the XVIII century, the first steps of Romanticism brought the topics of individual feelings, interior moods, love and death, to the foreground of European literature; these elements were enriched by the significance of communities and the importance recognized to history: in the Romantic age 'history' became the outstanding key of interpretation, taking the place held in advance by 'nature', and Hegel's idealism produced the most important philosophical interpretation of historical process. At the same time, the heritage of Enlightenments, the strong development of sciences, the industrial revolution and the technological use of scientific discoveries, created and spread an optimistic atmosphere, relying on the future in accordance with the faith in the progress of humanity: a different stream of thinking which found its philosophical expression in positivism.

Baudelaire and Renan are the first authors who separate life from the historical process or from an ideal commitment (to a cause or to the future, for example), to put in evidence beauty and think of life like a masterpiece of art. In all his life Gabriele D'Annunzio gives a various and often extreme interpretation of this label. One of the most important Italian historians of the first part of the XIXth century, Renzo De Felice, writes that, during his life, he

„remains always and first of all a poet“<sup>1</sup> (R. De Felice 1987: 14).<sup>2</sup>

1. As we know, Gabriele D'Annunzio's great renown spread in Europe at the end of the XIX century: his works (short stories, poems, novels, plays), his impulsive character, the eccentric and expensive style of life (he had to live in France for some years to avoid the Italian creditors), the scandal of his love stories (the famous relationship with Eleonora Duse, for example), the emphasized aestheticism of his life, made him prominent not only on the stage of the literary world but in front of the whole of public opinion, and created always strong reactions, dividing clearly supporters and opponents.

On the literary side, after the first poems inspired by symbolism and a period in which he tried the patterns of Italian verism, he felt the influence of Huysmans's and Wilde's aestheticism, of the Russian writers of the period, of Wagner, of the vitalistic and irrational philosophies, of futurisme; on the basis of this youthful experiences he created a personal style increasing his knowledge of human nature, improving the sensuousness of his expression (he could rely on an extraordinary choice of words) and using his taste to go to extremes.

In his mind the artists are full of a superior energy and can sway the crowd, like prophets and chiefs. According to a high evaluation of himself, he tried to live these ideas: not completely satisfied with what the literary field could give him, he decided to participate in political life. He was elected in the Italian parliament (1897) and took part in the activities, sitting (not so frequently) in the right wing; in 1900, he opted for a famous change to the extreme left. The new position didn't bring him the political help of the Socialist party and he wasn't re-elected. Later, after his long

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, all quotations from Italian sources of reference appear in Vittore Collina's own translation in English.

<sup>2</sup> **Editor's note:** because of the above stated fact, the editor has only been able to verify the quality of English in the translation itself, rather than the quality of translation from Italian into English. But even so, there are certain disconcerting cases where the translation in English indicates erroneous syntax which may thwart the immediacy of comprehension of an excerpt (see for instance the quotation on p. 6, beginning: "*Italy's fortune [...]*"). Such places have been left as they appeared in the presenter's original translation.

stay in France, where he was in contact with the great personalities of the cultural life, he supported the intervention of Italy in the Ist World War; he took part in the war, fighting like a war flyer. He distinguished himself in some audacious events and he was wounded during an aerial accident. After the end of the war the famous Fiume expedition gave him a great popularity and in the two following years his image seemed even stronger than Mussolini's in the Italian public opinion (R. De Felice 1987: 19).

2. D'Annunzio's aestheticism begins to get engrossed in the political topics when he comes in contact with the superman worship and the nationalist rhetoric.

In his poems and in his novels we find some political hints: the main topics are national pride, the superiority of Italian country, the fascination with war, the charm of iron and engines, the heroic events, the qualities of boldness and braveness. These subjects are spread in the political culture of those years: in Italy and Europe they react to the liberal and democratic ideas of the second half of the XIX century; they are connected with the Imperialist policy of the great powers and are in between longing for the ancient aristocratic traditions (conservatism) and passion for the new equipments of the industrial age (futurism). In any case they are in harmony with D'Annunzio's taste for standing out and excellence, for going beyond and heroism. As evident they get easily into his overabundant aesthetic world.

The novel in which it is possible to find the clearest expression of his political convictions is *Le vergini delle rocce* (1895). Here he writes unequivocal, rough critique to the ideas of civil equality and popular sovereignty, while all the meaning of the plot brings to the celebration of past and to the cult of a superior head. According to the protagonist's words, „*luzily the state, founded on the basis of popular suffrage and equality, is not only an ignoble building, but it is also a temporary one*“ (D'Annunzio, 2010, p. 37). The theoretic reason to support this critic is that „*the strength is the first law of nature, immortal and impossible to be repealed [...] the world can be set up only on the strength, both in the civilized centuries and in the barbaric ages*“ (D'Annunzio 2010: 36). At that moment this idea was present in Italy, but its most important roots, perhaps, were in France, in the conservatism of Hippolyte Taine and his work on *Les origines de la France contemporaine*. Elitism was one of the consequences to be drawn on that basis and D'Annunzio writes: „*the state must be an institution perfectly adapted to promote the gradual elevation of a privileged class towards an ideal shape of existence, [...] a new holicarchy, a new kingdom of strength*“ (D'Annunzio, 2010, p. 37).

In his opinion both the political institutions and the political actions must follow this ideal direction; but at the time it was necessary to face quite a different situation. In one of the dialogues the protagonist (Claudio Cantelmo) explains the European situation to an old prince (the father of the three virgins): *You see that everywhere the ancient legitimate monarchies are in decline and that the Crowd is on the point of swallowing them up in its muddy whirlpool; „and not only the monarchies, but all the great, noble and beautiful things, all the superior ideals which were the glory of the fighting and outstanding Man, all of them are on the point of vanishing in the huge putrid reality which is swaying and growing“* (D'Annunzio 2010: 158). The scale of values is quite clear. In front of the democratic conquests the foreseen solution is brought by an interior crisis of the 'unnatural' system: *then everything will be desecrated, when all the altars of Thinking and Beauty will be pulled down, all the urns of ideal essences will be broken; then the Crowd will stop, taken by panic; it will feel itself lost; the need for Heroes will descend on it“* (D'Annunzio, 2010, p. 158–59).

These lines are from a novel and we are in presence of a highly imaginative style. But the language is full of meaning: people become the „Crowd“, personified and with the capital letter, living in a 'muddy whirlpool'; on the other side you have „all the great, noble and beautiful things“, „the superior ideals“, „the glory of the fighting and outstanding Man“. The political contents are part of a lyrical prose and are involved in a superior atmosphere of myth and heroism, far from a verist representation of the social subjects and political institutions. They are transfigured and translated in hints to take part in the upper level where everything is enlightened by 'beauty' according to a deep mix of politics and aesthetic.

The same kind of style is present when he speaks of descent and destiny. „*Be what you have to be* (he writes, to emphasize the idea of duty), *you will work to carry out your destiny and the one of your descent“* (D'Annunzio, 2010, p. 47). On the line of this incitement there arrives a kind of divination: „*the superior idea of your dignity arises on the certainty“* [...] *of being the conservative intermediary of a multiple energy which tomorrow, or in a century, [...] will impose itself as an expression of the sublime“* (D'Annunzio 2010: 47). The topics of duty and destiny are strictly connected the one of descent. In France, Maurice Barrès uses the same ideas in his novels (they begin to be present in *Berenice's Garden*, published in 1891) and in his propaganda: the famous label land and dead

people done to epitomize the conviction of a strong determinism coming down from places and generations.

Apart from the specific points on the political topics, the whole structure of the entire novel and the roles of the characters are constructed in order to create a general condition of waiting: waiting for the future hero and for his task of restoring the past traditions. This happens in a general condition of decay of the ancient aristocracy, but at the light of the new arrival; while the country people and the servants are models of humble and faithful submission. Also the elegant and overelaborate descriptions of sceneries and feelings give a contribution to the main ideas of D'Annunzio's conservatism: they introduce and bring the reader to a hierarchic vision of society, a respectful attention to the precious things from the past and a passionate worship of the aristocratic world. At the same time they spread submission and support to the supreme head among the faithfuls. His rich and extreme prose wraps up all these attitudes, attracting much more for its aestheticism than for the political argumentation.

3. Among the other novels it's interesting to present also *Il fuoco* (1900) where political topics are not all that densely present like in *Vergini delle rocce*, but are enriched by new elements.

The protagonist, Stelio Èffrena, a well-known writer, is described like the person who „*was arrived to perform the inner union of art and life in himself and so to find an everlasting spring of harmonies in the bottom of his substance*“ (D'Annunzio 2008: 18). He is in Venice with his lover and the weak plot consists of the important speech that he gives in Palazzo Ducale, of the strained developments of his love story and of the presence in Venice of Richard Wagner, who dies there. Part of the contents are clearly autobiographical; great care is devoted to the representation of feelings and situations; the writing is even too full of sophisticated atmospheres, of striking images and of refined words.

The political topics are less present than in *Le vergini delle rocce*, but in the first part there are many interesting hints: some of them touch subjects already seen, others are new. We already know about the past, about traditions, descent, and the transmission of ancient heritages and treasures, but the point of reference is the city of Venice with all its history and the landscape is an urban one. „*The crowd throbbed and the poet's voice seemed to give back the former life to the secular walls and to renew the original spirit in the cold museum: a core of powerful ideas, made concrete and organized in the most lasting substances to testify the nobility of a descent*“ (D'Annunzio 2008: 56). The descent is conceived in a larger

way and is used to speak of the city, but it is also connected with the idea of a nation. So Wagner's works are considered like „*the supreme flower of the genius of a descent [...], the extraordinarily effective compendium of the aspirations which tired the souls of the national poets*“ (D'Annunzio 2008: 104). On the Italian side, Claudio Monteverdi is represented like one of the heroic souls of pure Italian essence.

On the other hand, in this novel the idea of descent is strictly connected not only with the nation but with race and blood, according to the changes of the concept of the nation in the European culture of the period: the Apollo's Theater on the summit of Gianicolo (in Rome) is presented by D'Annunzio like „*the monumental revelation of the idea toward which our descent is led by its genius. (With it) we reaffirm the privilege with which nature made eminent our blood*“ (D'Annunzio, 2008, p. 114). Stelio's thinking is represented with these words: „*Italy's fortune is inseparable from the destiny of Beauty, her daughter, [...]. From the ruins, flooded by such a heroic blood, hadn't to get up the new art strong of roots and branches? Hadn't to summarize in itself all the forces concealed in the hereditary substance of a nation, hadn't to become a determinant and constructive power in the third Rome, to show to the statesmen the original verities to put as rules for the new Charter?*“ (D'Annunzio 2008: 119).

As to the tension toward a superior level of life and action, present also in *Le vergini delle rocce*, *Il fuoco* underlines more the effort and the necessary energies than the aim to reach: Stelio speaks of „*the effort to go beyond himself without a break*“ (D'Annunzio, 2008, p. 68). Venice is represented like a 'City of Life' and in front of the people hearing his speech he adds a new, important element: this city „*teaches us that pleasure is the most sure means of knowledge given to us by Nature [...] the art of ascending with the virtues of joy to the superior shapes of life*“ (D'Annunzio 2008: 68). In the *Introduction* to a recent edition of the book, Pietro Ghibellini puts in evidence the influence of the Dionisiac spirit in the first part of the novel and explains it with his reading of Nietzsche's *Origin of tragedy* and his travels in Greece.

Actually, the idea of joy comes again: in front of the people gathered in Palazzo Ducale, Stelio's speech reaches its highest point in these words:

“*to create with joy! It's the attribute of God*“ (D'Annunzio 2008: 71). The young people loudly cheer. The relation between orator and public will become the one between artist and the people, a prefiguration of leader and crowd, hero and multitude (D'Annunzio's desire for his future). Far from a scientific aim of definition and taken by the lyric level of his writing, to describe these moments he uses different terms and different

adjectivations: crowd, mass, throng, multitude. The crowd sometimes is an unanimous mass or a monster; and if monster, it's a dreadful monster, a fascinated monster, a great monster, or an ephemeral monster; while the artist (like the hero) is able to reveal the beauty hidden in the crowd in a spiritual communion with it. 'People' is used only in connection with the idea of a nation.

It's interesting to add that, sharing Barrès's vision, when he speaks of the conditioning of the past, D'Annunzio divides the Latin spirit from the German one. So the work of Wagner „*is based on the German spirit, its essence is purely northern*“ (D'Annunzio 2008: 104); while Stelio proclaims himself the prophet of a new art made „*to continue and crown the huge, ideal building of our noble descent. I take a pride in being Latin; and*“ [...] *I recognize a barbarian in every man of different blood*“ (D'Annunzio 2008: 105).

These are D'Annunzio's political ideas emerging in the novels. I agree with the interpretation of De Felice when he says that it is during the war that D'Annunzio becomes actually a politician (according to the limits or the features said at the beginning).

In that period he has the possibility of meeting men from all the social levels, middle-class persons, workers, peasants; he makes friends in the military corps; he can measure the kind of fascination and influence that he exerts; he puts himself on the stage with his audacious expeditions (for example the flight on Vienna). The anti-bourgeois attitude, already present in his artistic production, finds in the war its most appropriate field. War is thought „*the turning point in order to get rid of the hypocrisy of the middle-class selfishness on the national and international plan*“ (R. De Felice 1987: 17). His tendency to push everything to extremes has the possibility to be put in action; his actions often have the features of heroism and in any case are wrapped by a superior mythical aura: „*according to D'Annunzio, action is a masterpiece of art when done by the supreme artist*“ (G. Barberi Squarotti 1987: 320). As to his way to communication, we can cite the beginning of a sharp analysis: „*with the beginning of the First World War D'Annunzio could try the value and efficacy of the word like stimulus to action [...]. The immediate aim of his oration, that is 'action and even violent action' [...] is reflected on the political content of his messages always ad hoc and ad personam, as the result of a rhetoric only done to convince. A rhetoric strongly personalized, where ipse dixit becomes more important than quid dixit. All typical traits of all the right wing oratory*“ (B. Casalini 1990: 41).

After the end of the war he starts his most exciting political and aesthetic adventure. In the difficult atmosphere of the Italian foreign policy (tensed between the claims of the promised territories of London's pact and the request of national independence by Dalmatia people), D'Annunzio first kept himself close to the nationalist positions, then felt the influence of some exponents of the left (Giuriati and De Ambris). He arrived to prepare and head the expedition to Fiume (today Rijeka): the conquest of the town was easy and was done with the help of a military corp, in contrast to the peace treaty and the foreign policy of the Italian government. He kept the rule of Fiume since the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 1919 to the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 1920 and he gave to the town new institutions and a new style of public life.

Written under his supervision, the Carnaro Constitution (from the name of the river crossing the town) feels the influence of the left politicians' taking part in the expedition, and is inspired to a democratic vision of the political power. According to it the sovereignty belongs to the 'people will'. The parliament is composed of the Representative House, elected on the basis of a universal suffrage, and the Economic Council to represent the different kinds of production (the work associations done on the model of Mazzini associations); all the citizens more than 20 years old have the right to vote and this right belongs to men and women (a very advanced rule for the period); the vote is direct and secret with a proportional system of representation; the Economic Council gives a better expression to the activities of work and production. The government is elected by the two assemblies.

Against the dangers of parliamentarianism the local institutions have a strong autonomy, as the principle of De Ambris is: „*to decentralize the public functions to the highest degree, in order to create a real direct democracy*“ (M. Ferri 1987: 41).

To complete the features of the constitution, let us add some more important points: freedom of thought and religion is guaranteed; the linguistic minorities are defended; in the middle schools all the languages have to be taught. Two articles are devoted to work and property and feel the influence of the left wing of the group: for every kind of work is foreseen a minimum salary „enough to live well“; property is not considered an absolute right and it's founded on work (M. Ferri 1987: 40). Much pressure was exerted on D'Annunzio by the conservative wing of his supporters to have them cancelled, but he maintained those rules as well as other dispositions for a social security.

5. During that adventure there was also the introduction in Fiume of public parades, musters, ceremonies, feasts, to mobilize public opinion and



to create a feeling between people and power. The vivid imagination of the poet was full of ideas and produced anniversaries, choreographies, gestures, labels, giving a concrete development to the idea of 'creating with joy'. In the articles of the constitution which he wrote directly we can read: „*the Regency [...] try to lead again days and works towards that sense of virtuous joy that has to renovate the people from the depth*“ (S. Cingari 2005: 150).

The literary transfigurations, brought to the lyric level that we have seen in his novels, become now a great enterprise: „*the effort of founding a new, lay and worldly religion*“ (S. Cingari 2005: 150), on the basis of the classical tradition (ancient Greece, Rome, the Renaissance), but at the light of his activism and aestheticism. As for international politics, he changed his opinion from the nationalistic position of the beginning: Dalmatia's countries were seen in a democratic key, a project was done for the liberation of oppressed people and he proposed the creation of a League of People on the North-East of the Adriatic sea. In this direction he arrived to invite them 'to turn the back to West'. This invitation had an anti-imperialistic meaning and it was mainly against England policy. In any case, it was far from a realistic evaluation of the international balance of powers and of the strength of the Fiume experiment. The Italian government was absolutely contrary to that line as well as Mussolini, who looked unfavourably at his popularity.

In his enormous self-esteem, the adventure of Fiume could seem the moment in which D'Annunzio himself was the superior man, charged to give the new Tables of the Law, like a new Moses. When he became aware that this aim could not be reached, he left politics and came back to the pure artistic production trying to get the best from his relation with fascism and Mussolini (R. De Felice 1987: 21). It was a sudden way to leave the stage: more connected, probably, to his desire of making of his life a masterpiece of art, than depending on a prudent political choice.

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