

“Il deputato della bellezza:” Gabriele d’Annunzio’s Aesthetic Politics in the *Fin-de-Siècle* Crisis

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Abstract:

Two aspects of Gabriele d’Annunzio’s tenure in parliament (1897-1900) are explored. The first concerns the means with which literary fame could be converted into political capital in fin-de-siècle Italy. By studying d’Annunzio’s strategy, an attempt is made to define the features of his aesthetic politics. Relying methodologically on the sociological study of intellectuals, the article contributes to the historiographical/theoretical debate regarding the forms of anti-utilitarian politics that emerged throughout late-19th century Europe, including the central role of revolutionary nationalism. The second aspect relates to the interaction between d’Annunzio’s strategy and the broader picture of the crisi di fine secolo. In following the anti-liberal evolution of the regime, attention is focused on the institutional constraints and affordances that help explain d’Annunzio’s apparently surprising ralliement to the radical Left.

Keywords: politics, aesthetic – representation, parliamentary – irrationalism – intellectuals, social role of – Italy (1861-1922) –D’Annunzio, Gabriele (1863-1938).

“Il se prépare une magnifique biographie,” Maurice Barrès is said to have remarked, upon Gabriele d’Annunzio’s departure from Paris to agitate for Italy’s entry into the Great War (Petronio 1979: 21). D’Annunzio’s biographical self-fashioning, however, had begun long before 1914, as had his political career and his involvement in nationalist and militarist rhetoric. The focus of this study is the beginning of his participation in public affairs, with his election to the Italian parliament at the end of the nineteenth century. That an artist as controversial and iconoclastic as d’Annunzio could be able successfully to run for office is a puzzle on which I hope to shed light by means of an analysis of his literary and political strategies, centering on the role of aesthetics. D’Annunzio’s case will be contextualized within a wider European debate on the forms that representative politics was required to assume, in the wake of the crisis of liberalism and the rise of the masses at the turn of the century.

I.

In order to place d’Annunzio’s case within a wider theoretical context, in this section we will focus on three aspects: the crisis of rationalism in late nineteenth-century European culture, the debates regarding the widening of the suffrage and the representation of “quality,” and the peculiarities of a politics based on aesthetic judgment.

One of the signal characteristics of the fin-de-siècle period from the standpoint of cultural history was the proliferation of anti-utilitarianisms. The general intellectual climate in Continental Europe distinguished itself from the mid-century years precisely through its critical distance from Victorian liberalism, understood as the confluence of laissez-faire individualism, faith in human rationality, and a belief in the inevitability of social progress (Löwith 1964; Hughes 1958). The crisis of modern rationalism had many aspects, related to artistic taste and scientific discovery as much as politics. Positivist criminology, eugenics, crowd psychology, the biological study of degeneration, to name but a few fields of endeavor, partook of the same intellectual climate that produced decadentist literature and modern political reaction against democracy, parliamentary government, and classical liberalism (Nye 1984). These were also the years in which, partially as a response to the Marxian critique of classical political economy, the discipline of economics sought to emancipate itself completely from moral philosophy, and adopt “value neutral” foundations with the marginalist revolution. Although with a century’s hindsight we interpret this paradigm shift as the birth of the modern academic discipline of economics, for contemporary observers (such as Max Weber)¹ the feeling of retrenchment behind barriers of formalization and loss of a larger cultural impact relative to the hegemonic interpretation of society of John Stuart Mill’s time was palpable. In short, for the turn-of-the-century years we can speak, globally, of a hiatus of the microeconomic analogy in the description of the social world.

The burning real-world issue on which classical liberalism seemed to flounder was the interpretation of collective action and collective desires. The great social changes occasioned by the second industrial revolution demanded that European States solve the problem of the incorporation of the working classes within liberal-representative political systems. However, the newly assertive masses appeared to the ruling elite to exhibit none of the attributes of rationality, consistency, and responsibility necessary for participation in liberal politics. The new mass public existentially threatened the world of cabinet politics, parliamentary oratory, learned debate in political gazettes, and public opinion shaped by the “elegant classes.” While many political and cultural forces operated in the direction of disciplining mass behavior, events such as the anarchist “offensive” of the early 1890s in Paris (Merriman 2009) demonstrated the ease with which destabilizing agents could spin modern society out of control. The inability of the authorities to predict the location and scope of breaches to

¹ On Weber’s position, see Mommsen (2000: 371).

the social order heightened bourgeois anxieties, as it became apparent that little or nothing was understood of the formation of the beliefs, desires, and outlook of the newly urbanized masses (Mucchi Faina 1983).

The intellectual ferment that originated with these pressing practical concerns ultimately led to the founding of the modern social sciences, as a mode of perception of (and discourse on) society that attempted to move beyond the constraining utilitarian model of homo oeconomicus. As I have argued elsewhere (Giglioli 2013), while social theorists in the late nineteenth century were drawn to the study of social and political behavior that would not easily fit into rationalist models of collective action, they maintained on the whole a very sharp distinction between the subject matter and their own position as observers. Irrationalism was a problem, a topic, a phenomenon in search of an explanation—not a method.

There were those, however, at the end of the nineteenth century who did have an interest in practicing irrationalism. Their ranks were quite heterogeneous, and they followed different cultural itineraries to action. Gabriele d’Annunzio, I claim, is one such case: to put the matter in a nutshell, his path to irrationalism was the attempt to use what was widely understood as the core of Nietzscheanism, the doctrine of the “overman” (Übermensch), and apply it to his own self-fashioning as an artist, much in the manner of a how-to book.²

The arena in which this irrationalist praxis could be put to the test was electoral politics. As the central focus of contestation in the process of mass incorporation into the political system, electoral representation was the object of much analysis and debate. Discussion concerning the enlargement and structuring of the suffrage occurred across Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, even though it was declined, naturally enough, according to specific national characteristics. Two common elements of such discussions are of importance for present purposes: the proposals for the political representation of “quality” (as opposed to mere numbers) and the new social role of intellectuals.

² When seen in this light, the frank disgust with which many intellectuals of the age approached the d’Annunzio phenomenon becomes more understandable. Thomas Mann is a symptomatic case: his Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen (1918) seethe with rage against the Italian “warmonger” and “buffoon”, guilty of tackling Nietzsche (with whose thought Mann’s lengthy philosophical and existential travails are well known) in a completely disenchanting manner, as a reservoir of poses, quips, and mythical imagery. D’Annunzio’s use of Nietzsche, however, shows similarities with contemporary interpretations, such as Nehamas’ (1985).

The various schemes for vote ponderation, unelected or indirectly elected legislative bodies, organic representation of societal institutions, and so forth represent a transitional phase on the road to universal suffrage in many European countries (Rosanvallon 1992, 1998); in their proponents' intent, they were expected to stem the tide of popular passions by guaranteeing a (predominant) voice for reason, culture, and property against the egalitarian tide. Among the many proposals, a recurrent one relied on the representation of the national arts and letters, as an element of elite cohesion. Artists and savants could, it was thought, be pressed into national political service as an element of stability and prestige for representative-constitutional regimes.

A less institutionalized avenue for the conversion of cultural capital into political influence was the new public role assumed by intellectuals in the last decades of the century. Interest in this phenomenon, culminating in the years of mobilization around the *Affaire Dreyfus*, was widespread, stemming from the conviction that the public sphere could not be reduced, as in classical liberal doctrine, simply to an arena for the re-composition of individual and group interests. Engaged intellectuals could claim an independent role, reaching beyond the partisanship of politicians in order to “speak truth to power.”³ This “tribunical” function was not a mere application of dispassionate reason to politics, for it called into question rhetorical strategies and mobilization capacities (and hence was part of the theoretical puzzle regarding the formation of collective preferences); however, it necessarily shifted the locus of contestation onto the sources of legitimation of intellectuals themselves, that is, onto the societal mechanisms for the reproduction and differentiation of intellectuals.

Beyond these two possible avenues for the reinvestment of intellectual credibility into the political realm lay a third possibility: what Hanna Pitkin, in a classic study (1967: 92-111), has termed symbolic representation. In this mode, intellectuals do not represent an organicist estate, nor do they give voice to common morality: rather, they embody images and aspirations that the represented admire but strive in vain to attain themselves. Hence, what are called into play are notions of charisma (as for the mechanism), and myth (as for the subject-matter of the representation).⁴ The actual content of the myth may vary, but the

³ Among the vast literature on the *Affaire* as a turning point for the birth of the engaged intellectual, see e.g. Winock (1997: 18-44).

⁴ On political myth, see inter alia the very interesting work by Bottici (2007, esp. pp. 227ff).

invariable function of symbolic representation is physically to embody it. Hence, beyond the particular historical nature of the message, what is celebrated in symbolic representation is a certain form of self-fashioning as a way of life, whose outcome is an incomparable individual. It follows that the sphere of value and mode of judgment most suited to evaluate this human type cannot but be aesthetic. The generational fascination with the question of personality (*Persönlichkeit*), especially in the face of the standardizing pressures of modern industrialism and bureaucratization, can be put in relation with such impulses (Whimster 1999).

However, it is important to realize that the possibility for individuals issuing from the world of arts and letters to fill a symbolic role for the larger population depended on certain material elements peculiar to the historical period. National literary culture could be used as a prestige reservoir at least in part because its mass diffusion was in these same years being attempted in all the main countries of the Continent in the context of nation-building and regime-strengthening schemes for universal public education (Ozouf 1963; Weber 1976). Such diffusion made the language of letters and literary fame intelligible to a wider public, while also creating affordances for the signaling of status distinctions and social distance in the command of education.

In this section, we have begun to show how an a-rational politics of symbolic representation was situated within the intellectual life of the late nineteenth century. In closing, it is useful to consider some of the analytical characteristics of aesthetic judgment that serve both to orient and to limit the possibilities of any symbolic politics.

The main attraction from a rhetorical standpoint in developing aesthetic discourse as a model for political discourse is that it provides a non-dialogic medium for the communication of preferences.⁵ A judgment couched in aesthetic terms, if the speaker is authoritative, takes the form of an absolute, and cannot be argued against in rationalist terms: a logical confutation is condemned to be pragmatically infelicitous. Disagreement in aesthetic matters can simply be taken as a symptom of the lack of educated taste, indispensable for comprehending the criteria of judgment themselves. Therefore, such a form of judgment implies, and indeed essentially consists in, the creation of an in-group and

⁵ Not surprisingly, the prototypical non-discursive art—music—was considered to be the supreme form by this type of *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic sensibility.

an out-group: the utterance’s persuasiveness draws on the complicity established between those who share pre-existing aesthetic values.

Furthermore, the aesthetic sphere is appealing because it grounds individualism in a rank-ordering on the basis of an independent scale of merit (defined by talent or virtuosity) that cannot be reduced to quantifiable, exchangeable market values. Insistence on such a rank-ordering was exacerbated in the period in question in the face of two related challenges. On the one hand, the dawn of the age of the mechanical reproducibility of artworks imperiled the technical monopoly of the artist and the scarcity value of the artwork. On the other, the rise of the arts-and-crafts movement questioned the post-romantic standing of the individual genius in the face of the diffused ingeniousness of the artisan and of the creative *Volksggeist*.⁶ The status issue of the exclusiveness of aesthetic taste became decisive just as the social position of the artistic sphere as a whole was being significantly challenged.

Finally, as for the material component of aesthetic discourse applied to politics, its ambit of expression was typically limited to consumption, and notably to conspicuous consumption (elegance and fashion), rather than production. While the sphere of work and wages could be seen to follow the rationalist laws of political economy, in the realm of beauty symbols were without price. Hence, paradoxically, an aesthetic politics could claim to emancipate itself from the stifling constraints of interest-based politics and the dismal science, while at the same time erecting a wealth barrier against mass participation: the wider public was confined to the completely passive role of undiscerning spectator.

II.

D’Annunzio’s literary career in the closing decades of the nineteenth century can be seen as a consistent strategy, aiming at the conquest of a position of national pre-eminence at the heart of the new Italian State. From his earliest beginnings, with the poetry volume *Primo vere*, published at his father’s expense when d’Annunzio was still in boarding school and promoted by spreading the rumor of its author’s tragic premature death (Andreoli 1990: 32), his public persona was the product of a carefully controlled exploitation of extra-literary activities. It is significant, though, that such a strategy was attempted at the center, in the recently conquered new capital of Rome. Italian authors, despite their significant support for

⁶ The far-reaching ideological and rhetorical consequences for Right-wing aestheticism of the development of the aesthetic Socialism movement have not, to date, been sufficiently explored.

political unification, had a proud tradition of cultural polycentrism, and the great names of the first post-unitary generation, such as Verga and Carducci, remained anchored to their regional roots, from Sicily to Tuscany and Emilia. For d’Annunzio, on the contrary, the creation of a unified literary market and cultural scene was the challenge of the age: his was the first generational cohort that could send young provincials to a national capital in pursuit of Rastignac-like ambitions. Having graduated from the Liceo Cicognini in Prato, d’Annunzio headed to Rome in the early 1880s, and retained the capital city as his base of operations for a decade (Chiara 1978: 29-34).

The cultural field in which d’Annunzio intended to penetrate was itself in flux, attempting to adjust to the new political configuration of the Kingdom of Italy, and to the massification of culture precipitated by the nation-building public education policies and the industrialization of the publishing industry. In particular, the social standing of the producers of culture was being redefined, as the old figure of the man of letters receded in favor of academic professionalization and technical specialization. The role of the public intellectual on the French model was anachronistic in Italy, in view of the limited social preconditions for public discourse (Charle 1996: 346-7), but a certain movement towards autonomy from traditional relations of patronage was already visible, chiefly thanks to the journalistic market (Cammarano 1999: 302-4).

In this context, d’Annunzio attempted to embody a creative redefinition of the traditional role of the poet.⁷ The term abstracted from the designation of a specific literary genre, assuming connotations associated with a general cult for (and expertise in) manifestations of beauty. This general aestheticization of life was congruent with certain Europe-wide tendencies of culture and taste in the late nineteenth century (Chapple and Schulte 1981, esp. section III; Gibellini 2008: 28-33, 40-6), and it did not exclude a reflexive component. D’Annunzio was an early and consistent proponent of the self-fashioning of life as a work of art;⁸ hence, his success as an artist also depended on the public being extensively informed of his private life.⁹

⁷ On the role of the poet as a forerunner of the intellectual, see Charle (1990: 20-4) and Petronio (1979: 25).

⁸ There are striking elective affinities between d’Annunzio’s ideal and the description of aestheticism as the art of living developed by Alexander Nehamas (1998, esp. pp. 10ff).

⁹ It is no doubt symptomatic that a life that was lived in public to such a great extent should nonetheless span a large quantity of myths and legends, on whose trust-worthiness biographers still debate three quarters of a century after his death.

Materially, a love of beauty and a Promethean commitment to living the incomparable life could be expressed in the form of dandyism. A fundamentally transitional social figure, the dandy played on the ambiguities of a relationship of repulsion and attraction with the lay public: the adherence to a strict code of taste was balanced between an exclusionary, dismissive posture towards those who would not (or could not) conform to such fastidious standards and an undeniable exhibitionist tendency. Therefore, at least in his foundational years, d’Annunzio as an artist placed himself in the position of the snob. While in the twentieth century he would achieve the position of centrality in the cultural field that allowed him to assume the new persona of the vate, the quasi-mystical embodiment of national literary genius (Alatri 1983: 264ff), he was, at the outset, part of the artistic opposition to modern society.

In any case, it is important, especially for such a protean figure, to maintain a clear perception of the dynamic element of his literary career. Such a process is most evident when considering the social significance of his passage from one literary genre to another. He began, as we have mentioned, with verse as a teen-ager; once in Rome, for economic reasons as well as for the opportunities it afforded to mix in elegant circles, he engaged in journalism, becoming a regular correspondent for the society pages of La Tribuna and Cronaca Bizantina (d’Annunzio 1948: viii-xii). At the end of the 1880s he felt ready for a further shift, with the first of his great novels, Il piacere, in which many elements of the material setting of his high society chronicles were recycled. In parallel, he tried his hand at essays and feuilletons on political, literary, and philosophical topics, broadening his intellectual appeal and articulating his poetics theoretically. Finally, as we will see, his descent into electoral politics coincided with his entry into the most highly remunerative and socially acceptable of the literary professions of the fin de siècle—playwriting. In building his public persona, the evolution of his artistic inspiration closely mirrored coeval social expectations regarding status in the literary sphere.

Two elements of this social and intellectual trajectory are particularly noteworthy, to understand the complex interplay of material and literary elements in the building of an exceptional fin-de-siècle career, whose influence carried over to the political realm. The first is d’Annunzio’s relationship with his native region of Abruzzo. The relatively backward and under-urbanized area functioned as a reservoir and a refuge for the young artist. In moving to Prato, and then to Rome, he completely internalized the intellectual worldview and

language of high culture, and thus was decisively uprooted from his provincial background.¹⁰ Nonetheless, he returned periodically to his native land, when his creditors became overly insistent or his romantic affairs excessively tangled, and it was in the Ortona a mare district that he launched his bid for a parliamentary seat in 1897. Moreover, the rural life of Abruzzo became a major source for his poetic imagery, in juxtaposition to the refined atmospheres of his society journalism and novels. In fact, it is possible to speak of a form of domestic orientalism:¹¹ d’Annunzio’s portrayal insists on the absolute separation from civilized life of the customs of his native land, whose semi-barbaric peasants are under the sway of primitive superstitions, irrepressible passions, and a savage natural beauty. His urban bourgeois readership was treated, perhaps most famously with the play *La figlia di Iorio* (1904), to the exotic spectacle of an anthropologically alien world in Rome’s own backyard (De Michelis 1960: 308-10). One of the most ideologically interesting moves of his electoral campaign, as we will see, was the transvaluation of this cultural otherness in the service of anti-socialist polemic.

The second element of note regards d’Annunzio’s approach to gender relations. His interaction with women, both in life and in art, was extensive, notorious, and complex. For one thing, women formed, at least in the first decade of his literary career, the core of his readership. A leading critic (Petronio 1979: 22) has gone so far as to claim that in the 1880s d’Annunzio wrote for the wives whose husbands read Carducci. The machismo of most of d’Annunzio’s male characters and the Nietzschean notion of the overman itself should thus be re-considered in the light of their intended audience. Moreover, women were instrumental in allowing him to access new social circles and further his career. A pattern emerges, beginning with his elopement with the teen-aged Contessina Maria Hardouin di Gallese in 1883: the marriage that followed facilitated his initial entry into the world of the aristocratic Roman *salons* (Andreoli 1990: 50-1). The culmination of the trend was d’Annunzio’s stormy relationship with Eleonora Duse, the greatest Italian actress of her generation. It was Duse’s talent and devotion that established d’Annunzio’s reputation as a playwright, in the teeth of concerted critical disparagement.

¹⁰ On the broader issue of provincialism and xenophilia in Italian writers at the turn of the century, see Serra (1994: 12-4).

¹¹ On this topic in the general culture of the age, see the special issue of the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* (17:3, 2012) entitled *Italia Barbara: Italian Primitives from Piero to Pasolini*.

Despite, or perhaps as a function of, the social importance of women in his life, d’Annunzio’s attitude towards them was typically predatory. His public persona was in no small part intertwined with his reputation as a libertine, playing on the mixture of male solidarity and envy associated with the practice of adultery in the *fin-de-siècle*.¹² Such a socially disruptive behavior was not exempt from its train of court cases, duels, and illegitimate children; it was ultimately related to the storied tradition of the Italian man of letters as *tombeur de filles*, stretching from Casanova to Foscolo. This aspect of d’Annunzio’s personality posed significant challenges to his ambitions, in a political sphere that in Italy at the time was exclusively male.¹³

The final point of d’Annunzio’s literary strategy we will discuss relates to the content of his art in its relationship with the cultural establishment. Traditionally, literary criticism has interpreted his poetics as belonging to the general movement of decadentism (Praz 1930, Binni 1949). What such a category implies in terms of themes, tones, and goals remains subject to debate. The decisive question, though, at least for our purposes, is the reliance of d’Annunzio’s aesthetic sensibility on the canons of tradition, or, otherwise stated, on his degree of literary modernism. Without wishing to make a case in terms of literary history, it will suffice to point out that sociologically d’Annunzio’s transfer of literary status into the political sphere required some measure of artistic respectability, which in turn implied a relation with literary tradition and cultural institutions, rather than an exclusive commitment to avant-garde experimentalism (Petronio 1979: 33). This said, such a relation did not need to be a mere submission. A clear example is provided by the numerous cases of plagiarism with which d’Annunzio was confronted, and his capacity to weather the storm of public accusation. By claiming an independent aesthetic value for the reworking and juxtaposing of the material of others, d’Annunzio openly contravened a key norm of the field, while making a bold assertion of innovative poetics that at the same time reasserted the inescapable centrality of tradition. In fact, along with his talent, it was his insistence in sharing the aesthetic idiom of the Italian tradition that allowed him to face his critics, and maintain the inner consistency of his entire literary strategy.

¹² The form of these traditional matrimonial *mœurs* is that on display, for instance, in Feydeau farces or in certain Pirandello short stories.

¹³ *Contra* cf. Gregor (1979: 281-4, quoted in Serra 1994: 63n), according to whom d’Annunzio’s libertarian attitude toward gender relations (albeit at a later stage, in Fiume) was in tune with the most advanced emancipationist tendencies of the age in Italian culture, from Roberto Michels to Futurism. On the topic of virility in d’Annunzio, see Spackman (1996).

The candidacy of d’Annunzio for parliament in the summer of 1897 was sudden and surprising even for his friends and acquaintances (Pariset 1977: 6). In understanding the way in which he aimed to enter the political sphere, it is therefore useful to consider, before analyzing the conduct of his electoral campaign, the aspects of his previous literary production that spoke most directly to political issues. In other words, what is sought is the baseline image that public opinion could have formed of his political views.

The most immediately political part of d’Annunzio’s oeuvre in the 1880s and early ‘90s was devoted to the Italian navy. Two works, in particular, L’Armata d’Italia (1888)¹⁴ and Odi Navali (1892), demonstrated what would become an enduring interest for military affairs (Scrivano 1982: 193). The latter, in verse, was aimed at the glorification of Italian naval prowess (De Michelis 1960: 132ff).¹⁵ The former, on the contrary, while not devoid of lyrical and sentimentalist overtones, was essentially a collection of newspaper articles, occupying a middle ground between investigative journalism, polemics, and feuilleton. The context is notable from various points of view. The proximate political intent was to support the technical expert and military man (the admiral Saint-Bon) in an internal bureaucratic struggle with the politician, Navy Minister Benedetto Brin. A focus on the navy, however, had two further connotations. On the one hand, it pointed towards an anti-Austrian foreign policy, especially because of the memory of the naval defeat at Lissa in the war of 1866. Naturally, war with the Dual Monarchy (despite the plight of the Italian populations still under Hapsburg rule) was a difficult subject to raise in the Italian public sphere, as the country had been part of the Triple Alliance with the Central Powers since 1882. Hence, bringing up the honor of the navy was an indirect way to signal a preference for a heterodox foreign policy. On the other hand, modern war at sea had precise ideological implications: it was the perfect example of the use of modern technology to exalt the single, intrepid spirit of the commander (d’Annunzio 2005: 1940). The linkage between the age of machines and the triumph of the will was to become one of the leitmotifs of both d’Annunzio’s poetics and his political-military activity.

¹⁴ Reprinted in d’Annunzio (2005: 1923-86).

¹⁵ The Odi Navali are also notable for the (prima facie startling) appropriation of Franciscan symbols and imagery for a military setting, drawing on the Christian saint’s participation in the Crusades and in particular on the episode of his disputation before the Sultan in Damietta. Franciscan themes, of course, feature prominently in d’Annunzio’s subsequent literary and political career (Andreoli 2004: 143). I thank Valentina Fulginiti for pointing out this aspect of the text to me.

While his stance on naval affairs was clear-cut, if controversial, in the 1880s and '90s d'Annunzio the artist was much more ambiguous with regards to Italy's colonial policy. Especially contentious was a snide remark to the fallen in the country's first serious African defeat, at Dogali, in d'Annunzio's first novel, *Il piacere*: so much so, indeed, that Benedetto Croce did not fail to recall and stigmatize it, nearly forty years later (Croce [1927] 2004: 108).¹⁶ D'Annunzio had, in fact, attempted to escape the accusation of being anti-patriotically aloof by means of an ode, *Per gli Italiani morti in Africa*; the solution, though, proved even more controversial, as it was the target of the first major accusation of plagiarism (De Michelis 1960: 55). Therefore, in 1897 (the year following the catastrophe at Adua that destroyed Crispi's political career) d'Annunzio was not clearly associated with an expansionary colonial policy. This position, nonetheless, was not particularly toxic for him electorally, for the conservative establishment itself was deeply divided in its response to Italy's colonial woes.

Rather than for his writings on the navy and Africa, however, d'Annunzio was known to the wider public essentially as the vulgarizer and evangelist of the doctrine of the Nietzschean overman. The struggle between the superior individual and the anonymous forces of social ressentiment was the unifying trait of the great majority of his novels. *Le vergini delle rocce* (1896) is perhaps the most outspokenly political: the plot turns on the overman Claudio Cantelmo's selection of a mate to produce the superior heir, who will be worthy of inheriting the title of King of Rome (De Michelis 1960: 153). The novel contained a direct attack on the institution of parliamentary government and on the rule of the mediocre it engendered.¹⁷ Such an anti-democratic stance had been bolstered by similar references in theoretical articles on Nietzsche, published in *Il Mattino*¹⁸ and *Il Convito*¹⁹ in the early '90s. Thus, d'Annunzio's adoption of the overman doctrine could well be

¹⁶ In general, d'Annunzio features in the *Storia d'Italia* as the chief antagonist of Croce's vision of Italian culture, the only figure whose portrayal can be seen to deviate from the tone of sovereign ironic detachment that characterizes the work. Such animus is comprehensible in the context of Croce's antifascist polemics of the late 1920s, although by that stage d'Annunzio himself—as opposed to Dannunzianism—was very much a spent force and an easy target.

¹⁷ On this aspect, also cf. Scrivano (1982: 193-4) and Spackman (1996, chap. 4). Gibellini (1995: 45) makes the interesting point that the multiplicity of overmen in d'Annunzio's novels and the defeats they typically experience at the hands of the uncultured and brutish multitude ultimately serve to undercut the rhetoric of political elitism ostensibly present in his reception of Nietzsche. A much more conventional narrative of exceptional vice punished (in the tradition of Don Giovanni) takes the place of the transvaluation of values.

¹⁸ “La bestia elettiva” (“the elective beast”), 25-26 September 1892.

¹⁹ Now reprinted in d'Annunzio (2005: 419-22); on this, cf. Salinari (1960: 29n, 37).

interpreted as an aesthetic anti-political stance, following numerous and varied coeval European models.²⁰ D’Annunzio’s decision to run for office with the reputation of an anti-parliamentarian, on the contrary, tended to group him with what has been termed, in the French context, the revolutionary Right (Sternhell 1978), i.e. the anti-system opposition, from Drumont to Déroulède.

This reconversion was also aided by d’Annunzio’s ideas regarding the social function of theater (Scrivano 1982: 181). Once again, a philologically questionable syncretism was adopted between Nietzschean ideal and the organizational forms of the Wagnerian movement, with the proposal to create a new “Latin theater” in Albano on the model of Bayreuth (Andreoli 1990: 225). While this project never was implemented (and can perhaps best be interpreted as a publicity stunt to tout the creative potential of the d’Annunzio-Duse duo), a play from 1899, *La gloria*, exhibited a very clear linkage between the ideal of the overman and a political praxis of destabilization and violence leading to a military putsch (Scrivano 1982: 185-200).

These developments, however, lay in the future: when d’Annunzio returned to his native region to stand for parliament in 1897, his Nietzschean credentials were still essentially anti-political rather than proactively reactionary, and his celebration of Italy’s naval might was offset by his muted enthusiasm for revanche in Ethiopia.

The chance to compete for a mandate arose because the Lower House had refused to ratify the election of the conservative incumbent, on a technicality (Pariset 1977: 5). In a by-election, the undivided attention of the national press could be focused on the race, and the poet’s notoriety could be effectively leveraged. The context was not, however, entirely devoid of embarrassments: the main opposition candidate was Carlo Altobelli, the lawyer who had defended d’Annunzio in a court case for adultery in Naples in the early ‘90s (Alatri 1983: 187). The public display of his personal indiscretions did not play to d’Annunzio’s advantage with the conservative electorate. Indeed, the parliamentary opposition attempted to use this affair even after the election, effectively preventing his seating for almost a year.²¹

Biographers tend to agree that, electorally, his victory on 29 August 1897 (by approximately 200 votes out of 2,700 or so cast) was due to the support of the major of

²⁰ On this tradition of interpretation of Nietzsche, see Bergmann (1987) and Shaw (2007).

²¹ Convicted felons were barred from serving in Parliament, and d’Annunzio had in fact lost the court case brought by the cuckolded Sicilian Prince Gravina, but a royal pardon and general amnesty had annulled his conviction and prison sentence (Pariset 1977: 9).

Pescara and his political machine (Alatri 1983: 188; Chiara 1978: 109-10); in Rome the parliamentary majority eventually (26 April 1898) was able to win confirmation for what it considered a safe pro-administration vote.

Of greater interest than the mechanics of his election, however, was d’Annunzio’s political rhetoric. The most important document of the campaign, and virtually the only one whose text has survived (Pariset 1977: 8),²² was a public speech that has come to be known as the discorso della siepe (“hedge speech”).²³ It is worth analyzing the text at some length, for it illustrates many aspects of d’Annunzio’s political strategy.

The first interesting element is the repeated stress on the distance between the candidate and the public: the speech is couched in a very ornate, elaborate prose, which, the poet claims, may well appear incomprehensible to his audience. This distance in education and rhetoric, however, is capitalized upon by subordinating it to a much more basic commonality, guaranteed by the genius loci and shared regional ancestry: classical reminiscences and allusions to contemporary biological theories are merged to evoke a special moral character uniting candidate and constituency. This is the precondition for the central argument of the speech, equating the artist’s appreciation for individualism with the defense of private property as the product of individual activity (symbolized by the hedge delimiting real estate).

Especially notable is the attack on the ideology (socialism) that objects to the division of property, and thus to individualism: not so much for the argument itself, which relies on a nebulous reference to the supposed nomadic/Asiatic historical roots of collectivism, as for the relationship with local material conditions. In a rural, non-industrialized district such as Ortona in 1897, and with a severely restricted suffrage, the possibility that there may have been members or sympathizers of the Italian Socialist Party in the electoral body was a remote one. D’Annunzio may have been aiming to send messages to the national level, but it is hard to escape the feeling that, much as with Corradini’s rhetoric of “bourgeois revanche” in the following decade (Corradini 1980), this anti-socialist stance was more a rhetorical ploy to crush dissent within the ranks of the ruling class by demonizing déclassé fellow travelers than a straightforward polemic against the political beliefs of the working class. In fin-de-siècle Abruzzo, d’Annunzio’s was an anti-socialism in search of socialists.

²² But see the private notebooks devoted to the 1897 campaign (d’Annunzio 1976: 69-89).

²³ Reprinted with the title “Laude dell’illaudato” in d’Annunzio (2005: 429-40).

Be that as it may, the argument regarding the intimate solidarity of the artist's and landholder's standpoint was a remarkably effective rhetorical move, allowing a fundamentally regressive social position the comfort of an anti-materialistic defense: beauty could be allied with property, at the cost of validating an anachronistic aristocratic ethos. Hence, despite the vagueness of the entire structure of the speech, admitted even by friendly press coverage (Alatri 1983: 190-2), the discorso della siepe represented a milestone in the development of a new political lexicon for the Italian Right.

Beyond the textual evidence of electoral speeches, the dynamic that emerges from d'Annunzio's entry into the parliamentary arena is a politics of poses. The motivation to stand for election, in direct contrast with the position espoused in Le vergini delle rocce, is declaredly agonistic: obtaining the votes of a majority of electors is a challenge in and of itself, a potential proving ground for the superior personality. Implicitly, the actual task of representing a district and its people is devalued: the issues, interests, and competences at stake are deemed purely incidental, irrelevant to the electoral contest. Since what matters is the incomparable individuality of the candidate, d'Annunzio could confidently declare to the press that he was “beyond Left and Right, as he was beyond good and evil” (Pariset 1977: 7n).

Absolute individualism, at the same time, served as a guarantee of independence, in a political landscape marred by widespread cravenness in the face of special interests. Corruption and hypocrisy are the characteristic vices of lesser men: the great poet, precisely because his relationship with the people is one of natural superiority, not of humble service, need not blandish them, or lie. His authoritativeness stems from his artistic creativity: spiritual superiority is disinterested, and therefore stands as a guarantee against baseness.

As a consequence, a fundamentally foreign ethos is proposed for domination over the realm of politics. A very clear representation of this state of affairs can be seen in the functional relationship to language. D'Annunzio, true to his dandyish persona, presents himself as a virtuoso of language, whose control of the medium is of incomparably higher status than ‘workaday’ electoral and parliamentary rhetoric. This imperialistic attitude to style is present in the discorso della siepe, where his electorate is, in essence, asked to acquiesce in its inability even to understand the candidate; it reappears in parliament, when d'Annunzio motivates his opposition to a key motion on grammatical grounds, claiming tongue-in-cheek that the construction of a gerund is faulty (d'Annunzio 1913: 591; Pariset 1977: 13).

Boutades aside, d’Annunzio gave short shrift to the traditional language of politics: as with any self-referential idiom, the verbal clichés of liberal parliamentarianism could easily be ridiculed by a gifted controversialist. However, d’Annunzio’s deconstructive efforts, by semantically emptying traditional rhetoric, left political communication in a state of flux. The vague and hieratic verbal gesture of the poet had emancipated itself from the coded language of political exchange to the extent that it became functionally impossible to decipher for those intent on predicting specific policy outcomes, affording him the greatest freedom of maneuver in the realm of real-world political action. The myth of the deputato della bellezza (“the honorable member from beauty”)²⁴ was launched.

Despite the considerable latitude afforded to the type of aesthetic politics d’Annunzio was developing, it must be noted that a fundamental paradox remained with reference to the overman paradigm and the authenticity of artistic talent as the grounds for public authoritativeness. The aesthetic politician in d’Annunzio’s mold could not afford a genuine transvaluation of values, if the cost was to forgo success. At most, he could push political rhetoric beyond convention and institutional pleasantries, openly stating what others thought in silence: what was unacceptable was a deliberate discrediting of entrenched moral codes. In other words, this brand of political rhetoric and action was not and could not be the functional equivalent of the artistic avant-garde, prepared to work for art’s sake, flouting contemporary taste in the hope that posterity would recognize its prescient merits. Rather, it had to rely on the ambiguous game of repulsion and exhibitionism characteristic of the dandy, which by definition could not be carried to revolutionary extremes. An outright electoral rejection would crumble the myth of invincibility and omnipotence whose confirmation was the point of the agonistic electoral challenge to begin with. To use Bourdieu’s (1992) categories, the aesthetic politician could not operate according the rule of inversion “qui perd gagne”.

The analysis of d’Annunzio’s descent into the political arena would not be complete without an examination of the sociological and institutional context in which it took place, in order to gain some sense of what the demand for, and reception of, an aesthetic politics could have been. The final part of this section will therefore endeavor to describe certain aspects of the political milieu in the Italian periphery at the turn of the century.

²⁴ The definition was coined by Melchior de Vogüé (Alatri 1983: 193).

The main axes of political life under the liberal regime were represented by the formal centralization of institutional resources at the national level, following the French Jacobin model, and the material reality of regional variance, countervailing local forces, and a tenacious particularistic spirit embodied by the local notable. The restriction of the suffrage, mentioned above, to some extent insulated the official realm from civil society and transformed elections almost into a face-to-face affair, in a style reminiscent of the political world of Tocqueville or Chateaubriand.

While personal connections were important, the central government also had at its disposal a series of tools, euphemistically referred to as “administrative pressure”, to influence elections, especially in districts, such as Ortona, in which the opposition did not possess an entrenched party infrastructure. By 1897, the traditional distinction between the constitutional parties, the Destra e Sinistra storiche, had largely been erased (Salinari 1960: 43n), especially as a consequence of Crispi’s quasi-cæsarist experiment of the late ‘80s and early ‘90s. The political fault-line, therefore, ran between the ministeriali, the deputies that could be persuaded to support the government, and the opposition, itself divided between the currents that happened to be excluded from the present administration on tactical or personal grounds, and the Estrema, i.e. the anti-system parties (republicans and socialists) permanently excluded from government. The backbench ministeriali were also derisively known as ascari, from the term for the native mercenary troops Italy employed in East Africa: the ideological positions within the constitutional spectrum being broadly interchangeable, only the thinnest of personal and regionalist loyalties held together the various parliamentary factions, thus giving the public the not entirely erroneous sense that support for the government was essentially a business proposition.²⁵

In view of this situation, it is clear why d’Annunzio, as a candidate endorsed by the De Rudiní administration at the center and by the political machine in Pescara, as well as by the national press, was a strong favorite, but also why he was at pains to paint himself as an independent personality, not to be confused with the rank and file of ascari.

²⁵ To cite an example among many, in 1897 the President of the Senate, Farini, noted in his diary a remark addressed to him by the Prime Minister, De Rudiní, a political ally: “I am reproached for not wanting to engage in corruption, but I am ready—and quite willing—to corrupt. All I ask is not to be corrupted myself in the process of corrupting: not to have to steal in order to corrupt others” (quoted in Cammarano 1999: 443, my translation).

In every representative system, and especially in ones with a limited electorate, there is a material distinction between active and passive suffrage, between the mass of electors whose only input into the political process is to vote, and the much smaller group of potential members of the ruling class. In de facto oligarchic conditions, while none of the mass can aspire to be a credible candidate, there is intense competition between members of the in-group to prevail in the electoral competition. Further, who will actually be the face of the ruling class is, a priori, a matter of indifference for the mass (Veyne 1976, chap. III). Similarly, for the establishment as a whole, beyond generic loyalty to the system, the individual characteristics of the single representative are largely immaterial.

D’Annunzio, in this interpretation, was able to exploit the “slack” in the selection norms of the parliamentary system to promote a significantly heterodox politics, at least at the level of style and rhetoric, i.e. of aesthetics, while using the material infrastructure of a traditional candidate. The grounds of his political appeal, indeed, were quite distinct from those of a regular candidate. To his fellow abruzzesi, he was a favorite son, but also one of the very first literary celebrities, as well as a self-made man who had managed to climb from bourgeois anonymity into the aristocratic world of the Roman salons. In any case, it is clear that in the course of the campaign we witness a chapter in the deliberate social construction of charisma, or the mystique of the exceptional personality, which becomes, contrary to Weber’s analysis (1978: 241-5), a self-fulfilling prophecy rather than being hobbled by the tyranny of constant corroboration.

III.

D’Annunzio’s means of presenting himself on the political stage may have been parasitic on the ordinary functioning of the liberal institutions, but the atmosphere in the parliament he finally joined in 1898 was all but ordinary. The systemic crisis originating in the fall of the Crispi government was reaching its apex.²⁶ At stake was the balance of power in the material constitution, including basic liberal freedoms, the accountability of the cabinet to its parliamentary majority, and the limitations on the acceptable use of force to quell popular unrest. On one reading (Duggan 2010), the last fifteen years of the nineteenth century saw the attempt, by a section of the ruling class, to respond to the shortcomings of the nation-

²⁶ On the crisi di fine secolo, I follow the reconstruction developed in Levra (1975) and in Cammarano (1999: 395-512).

building project following the Risorgimento by searching for strong symbolic leadership. Crispi's was an early, failed caesarist experiment: the major struggle took place over the role in public life of the monarchy and the court. A broad political and intellectual alliance, for which Sydney Sonnino forged the rallying cry,²⁷ sought to place the King actively at the center of the system, as political arbitrator and guarantor of national cohesion on the imperial German model. This function was also expected to carry over to material relations, as a symbolic sanction for property and status against the leveling democratic tide. In the absence of universal suffrage, however, a plebiscitarian solution was not possible: the problem of broader popular support for the regime was confined to the sphere of law and order. Moreover, Umberto I, around whom the entire project was to be fashioned, had conclusively demonstrated his lack of charisma and political flair. Hence, in order to impose this modification of constitutional equilibria, a curtailing of basic liberal freedoms appeared indispensable.

The occasion was offered by the popular uprisings of May 1898, originating in the dramatic rise in the price of basic foodstuffs following the end of the tariff war with France. The bourgeois paranoia of insurrection and social war that followed proved a receptive environment for legislative proposals aimed at curbing habeas corpus and press freedoms. Against such an authoritarian degeneration of the regime, the parliamentary opposition, led by the Estrema, adopted a filibuster strategy. As for the ministeriali, their support for the government, on the wave of the anti-socialist psychosis engulfing the propertied classes, was nonetheless muted, for a reform of the system that isolated the executive branch from parliamentary oversight would have deprived them of their main bargaining tool for prebends.

D'Annunzio's role in this developing struggle was, initially, quite peripheral. For one thing, the eventual ratification of his election did not turn him into an assiduous frequenter of Montecitorio. He mostly appeared for role-call votes and kept parliamentary discipline with the ministeriali, but was not otherwise a dutiful foot soldier of the majority. He was

²⁷ His 1897 article in La Nuova Antologia, entitled “Torniamo allo Statuto,” argued for a return to the letter of Italy's octroyé constitution of 1848, the Statuto Albertino, which did not prescribe the parliamentary responsibility of the cabinet.

seldom present²⁸ and never spoke²⁹ in the hemicycle, engaged as he was in establishing his theatrical career, following Eleonora Duse on tour throughout the peninsula and abroad (most notably in Egypt and Greece), and beginning his conquest of the Parisian literary scene, especially thanks to Sarah Bernhardt (Andreoli 1990: 216-9). Voices also began to be raised in the district that the MP was found wanting in his traditional patronage role (Alatri 1983: 195). Had it not been for the events of the Spring of 1900, d’Annunzio’s entire parliamentary experience would have resulted in an anti-climax, a failure from a publicity standpoint as much as from a purely political one.

The disintegration of the solidarity of the ruling class in the face of the “liberticide laws,” however, offered d’Annunzio, among others, a considerable freedom of movement, together with the chance to seize the limelight. At the outset, he was tempted by a hard-Right, hyper-reactionary stance.³⁰ However, in a particularly dramatic session of the Lower House on 24 March 1900, d’Annunzio ostentatiously crossed the floor, abandoning the far-Right seat he had occupied for the far-Left ones of the Estrema.³¹ Later that day, conversing with opposition members in a Montecitorio foyer, he offered a brief statement to justify his action, which received wide circulation in the press (d’Annunzio 1913: 590-3). He claimed to have joined the socialist-led opposition, not out of agreement with their worldview, but because the parliamentary struggle had assumed an existential tone: it was a question of the “many dead men shouting against the few who were alive,” and d’Annunzio, “as a man of intellect,” felt obliged to “go towards life” (Alatri 1983: 196).

Whether this coup de théâtre had more to do with gesture than political intent is an open question: what is undeniable is that it obtained maximum visibility for the poet, and put him at the forefront of political polemics in a key phase of the struggle.³² A few days later, the

²⁸ He had the questionable honor of being included more than once in the section of the parliamentary Gazette devoted to shaming the representatives who had absented themselves without justification from committee work or debate in the full house (Pariset 1977: 13).

²⁹ It is claimed (Pariset 1977: 10) that d’Annunzio’s only utterance on the official parliamentary record was the “Giuro” (“I swear”) with which he took his oath of office.

³⁰ In an article for the English-speaking press that even pro-government dailies in Italy thought too extreme to reprint (Scrivano 1982: 192), he described the street clashes in Florence in 1898 (mounted police had charged striking workers) exclusively from the standpoint of the slight damage suffered by a Cellini statue. The article is reprinted in d’Annunzio (2005: 441-3).

³¹ The press termed his defection from the parliamentary majority “il salto della siepe” (“the jump over the hedge”) (Pariset 1977: 15).

³² It should be noted that other leading intellectuals who could not be suspected of socialist sympathies, such as Pantaleoni, Croce, or Pareto, had at this point publicly attacked the reactionary project: none, however, in as spectacular and mediatized a fashion.

Pelloux government, convinced of its inability to overcome the filibuster, obtained a dissolution from the King, ushering in a general election (Pariset 1977: 25). D’Annunzio was offered the support of the socialist party in a district in Florence,³³ and accepted to stand once more. In the campaign of 1900, therefore, d’Annunzio fell into a very different role with respect to ‘97: that of the fellow traveler. Several extant drafts (d’Annunzio 1965: 409-13, 418-21) and electoral speeches (d’Annunzio 1913: 593-613) document the transformation of his political rhetoric for the new race. As Piero Treves has noted,³⁴ the intellectual forebears of aesthetic-socialist humanism, from Ruskin to Swinburne to Morris, were invoked to legitimate this shift—d’Annunzio even went so far as to pen an ode to May Day. Despite these flourishes, he ultimately was unable to unseat the long-time incumbent, Cambray-Digny, and in 1900 left parliamentary politics never to return, but not before fighting a politically motivated duel with the editor of *La Nazione*, Florence’s pro-establishment daily newspaper (Pariset 1977: 30).

IV.

The first decade of the twentieth century saw d’Annunzio’s consecration as the leading literary figure of Italy. At the same time, his failed re-election campaign marked the beginning of a fifteen-year hiatus in his active involvement in politics. Following the disappointing results of the elections for Sonnino and the reactionaries (and the regicide of July 1900), the country was stabilized in a new liberal political equilibrium under Giolitti. It appeared that d’Annunzio and politics had reached a consensual separation: a stint in parliament had added yet another facet to the poet’s incomparable life-experience and aura,³⁵ while the institutional system had survived its moment of crisis. Leading historians, such as De Felice (1987: 15-6), have thus felt that the entire episode was in fact nothing but a minor affair, of no real importance relative to later political activities.

I have sought to argue that d’Annunzio’s early encounter with liberal politics should not be dismissed so readily: what the case lacks in consistent political strategy and world-historical significance is made up by the interest of d’Annunzio’s rhetoric and his means of

³³ Since 1897 he had had taken up residence on the outskirts of town, at *La Capponcina*, a villa in Settignano near Duse’s abode, *La Porziuncola*.

³⁴ In the 1979 roundtable hosted by the *Quaderni del Vittoriale* on biographical issues in d’Annunzio scholarship.

³⁵ Undimmed by electoral defeat, for the difficulty of securing the conservative Florence district as a socialist-backed candidate provided a reasonable excuse.

converting specific artistic and cultural capital into a more general currency of public influence. Rather than interpreting his parliamentary experience as a dress rehearsal for his condottiere role after the Great War, it is worthwhile to consider it on its own merits, as an archetype. In fact, what was being enacted was a distinct alternative model of public intellectual, what could be termed an “anti-Zola,” in which the individual did not claim to voice a general moral position, but rather one valuable and authoritative precisely because of its idiosyncrasy.³⁶ D’Annunzio’s trajectory, perceived as exemplary, marked the experience of the entire pre-war generation of Italian intellectuals, torn between exceptionalism and avant-garde, and was not without a broader European diffusion (Serra 1990, chap. VI).

More broadly, d’Annunzio’s experiment with aesthetic politics can be seen, I claim, as a conscious attempt to exploit passions in politics, beyond and against the classical liberal-representative framework. The experiment demonstrated the flexibility of the strategy, but the fleeting nature of its socialist aesthetic phase testified to the fact that certain ideological contents were more suitable for mythopoeia than others. In particular, the language of war and revolutionary nationalism,³⁷ while it preserved a strong individualist slant, held the power to turn ineffable artistic experience into a collective emotion (Scrivano 1982: 191). On this basis, despite the recurring tensions between improvised adventure and organizational might (Valeri 1963: 7-69; Serra 1994: 30), a bridge can be established between the dandyish persona of the fin de siècle and the bellicose irrationalist of the tumultuous postwar years.³⁸

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³⁶ In form and gesture, if not in underlying ideological content.

³⁷ De Felice (1978: 150-1) speaks of d’Annunzio’s “patriotism” rather than “nationalism,” distinguishing between him and Realpolitik thinkers such as Corradini, Rocco, and Federzoni. The fact that nationalist ideology could assume a revolutionary guise does not by itself, in my opinion, warrant assimilation with the romantic patriotism of the Risorgimento: between the two lies the development of an exclusionary and reactionary political vocabulary of national supremacy, based on pseudo-biological foundations. Sternhell (1978) has shown how this vocabulary could be utilized for anti-system political agitation in the Belle Epoque; we have endeavored here to discuss d’Annunzio’s cultural proximity to this world of ideas.

³⁸ A particularly interesting analysis of the aesthetics of the political liturgies d’Annunzio instituted in Fiume is in Mosse (1973: 32-41).

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