

Chapter 12

Gabriele D'Annunzio and
the Austrian Reception after
Italy's Entry into the War

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'Dir aber wehe,
Stampfende Zeit!
Wehe dem scheußlichen Gewitter
der eitlen Rede!'

(Franz Werfel, *Der Krieg*)
[4 August 1914]

When Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary, this ended what the historian Manfred Rauchensteiner has described as a story of 'misjudgement and confusion, unfriendly neighbours, "deceitfulness and treachery" and "sacred selfishness"'.¹ With this assessment Rauchensteiner addressed the wavering attitude that the Austrian government took towards Italian neutrality after the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914. Instead of entering serious diplomatic negotiations to outdo the Entente powers' territorial offers and thus prevent Italy's entry into the war, the Austrian government underestimated the seriousness of the 'Italian crisis' and postponed decisions. The deadline was 25 May 1915: Italy justified entering the war in the name of 'sacred selfishness' and the fulfilment of national unity. The declaration of war by the 'unfriendly neighbour' was followed by a wave of indignation in Austria. Public opinion and the press projected negative images onto Italians, of which the accusation of 'deceitfulness and treachery' was not even the worst.

¹ Manfred Rauchensteiner, 'Kriegserklärung an Österreich. Das sterbende Kamel', *Die Presse* (22 May 2015); see Manfred Rauchensteiner and Josef Broukal, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburgermonarchie 1914–1918. In aller*

During these political developments, a so-called 'intellectual war' (*Krieg der Geist*)² broke out among writers, intellectuals and scientists from both nations. The undeniable Italian protagonist of this conflict was Gabriele D'Annunzio, who was the most internationally renowned poet of Italian Symbolism/Decadence and had distinguished himself as the prototype of the *poeta vates*, the national poet. In this role, he campaigned early on for a stronger Italy with his *Odi navali* (1906) and the drama *La nave* (1908). At the same time, he denigrated the Austrians as 'barbarians'.³ In 1912, he had supported Italy's imperialist ambitions in Africa with the *Canzone dei Dardanelli*, directed against Turkey and partly censored for mocking Austria-Hungary and its emperor. After the outbreak of the Great War, D'Annunzio advocated Italy's entry on the side of the Entente. The central parts of his pro-war propaganda were two speeches in May 1915: the first, in Liguria, for the inauguration of a monument to Garibaldi, and the second, shortly thereafter, in the Chamber of Deputies in Rome. In the secret London Treaty of 26 April 1915, Italy had promised the Entente military alliance to join the war within thirty days, which it did just on time on 25 May. Therefore, D'Annunzio's speeches had no direct political impact. Nevertheless, they contributed to the aura of legend around him and strengthened his role as 'the nation's poet' both in Italy and Austria-Hungary.⁴ D'Annunzio became the most important polemical target for the reactions of Austrian writers. Among these were numerous authors who had previously supported and admired D'Annunzio:⁵ Hugo von Hofmannsthal had called him 'the most original artist in contemporary Italy';⁶ Hermann Bahr, who held Eleonora Duse in high regard,

² Uwe Schneider and Andreas Schumann, eds, *Krieg der Geister. Erster Weltkrieg und literarische Moderne* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000).

³ Lea Ritter-Santini, 'Pari e Impari. Gabriele D'Annunzio e i barbari', in *Italia viva. Studien zur Sprache und Literatur Italiens. Festschrift für Hans Ludwig Scheel*, ed. by Willi Hirdt and Reinhard Kleszczewski (Tübingen: Narr, 1983), pp. 335–51.

⁴ Renate Lunzer, '«O poésie, voilà le fruit de tes accouplements avec la politique. . . « D'Annunzio all'avanguardia contro l'Austria', in *Felix Austria – Italia infelix? Tre secoli di relazioni culturali italo-austriache*, ed. by Nicoletta Dacrema (Rome: Aracne, 2004), pp. 104–24.

⁵ Anne Kupka, *Der ungeliebte D'Annunzio. D'Annunzio in der zeitgenössischen und der gegenwärtigen deutschsprachigen Literatur* (Frankfurt/M., Bern: Lang, 1992).

⁶ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'D'Annunzio', in *Gesammelte Werke in zehn Einzelbänden. Reden und Aufsätze I*, ed. by Bernd Schoeller (Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer, 1979), pp. 174–85 (p. 176); see also Elena Raponi, *Hofmannsthal e l'Italia. Fauti italiani nell'opera poetica e teatrale di Hugo von Hofmannsthal*

had favourably reviewed performances of D'Annunzio's plays in Austria.⁷ The situation changed abruptly when Austrian writers, with few exceptions, began to fulfil their patriotic duty in the 'intellectual war'.

In the following discussion of the debate around D'Annunzio in Austria, I first focus on Stefan Zweig. While it is known that Hofmannsthal retracted his affection for D'Annunzio when the Italian poet became involved in politics, Zweig's reaction has not yet been examined. Zweig's view on D'Annunzio also changed after Italy entered the war, even though Zweig, despite harsh criticism of D'Annunzio's political interference, tried again and again – unlike Hofmannsthal – not to lose sight of D'Annunzio's importance as a poet. The second and third parts of the chapter examine the aforementioned 'intellectual war' in its complexity, showing the consequences that these debates had on the reception of D'Annunzio in the twentieth century.

D'Annunzio and Stefan Zweig

Although Zweig responded to D'Annunzio before the beginning of the First World War and also much later, the war gave rise to his secret D'Annunzio studies. Zweig's relationship with D'Annunzio was characterised by an unresolved contradiction: his love for the unique poet was opposed to his consistent dislike of the *poeta vates*. In 1903, Zweig compared D'Annunzio's lyrical talent to that of Stefan George, admiring his poetic virtuosity and ability to evoke the world of dreams.⁸ He regarded the author of the *Laudi* as a lyrical innovator who introduced a new rhythm into poetry. In 1912, working with the German writer Ernst Lissauer on an international anthology of poets using free rhythms, he planned to include D'Annunzio.⁹ The First World War did not dampen his admiration for the Italian poet.

⁷ Elsbeth Dangel-Pelloquin, '«Mondaine Stimmungsakrobaten». Bahrs und Hofmannsthals Kreation der Moderne am Beispiel von Eleonora Duse und Isadora Duncan', in Hermann Bahr, *Österreichischer Kritiker europäischer Avantgarden*, ed. by Martin Anton Müller, Claus Pias and Gottfried Schnödl (Bern: Lang, 2014), pp. 51–81.

⁸ Stefan Zweig, 'Die um Stefan George', *Das literarische Echo* 6: 3 (1 November 1903), pp. 169–72 (p. 169).

⁹ See Stefan Zweig's letter to Benno Geiger, 24 May 1912, cited in Marco Meli and Elsbeth Dangel-Pelloquin, *Benno Geiger: Le ultime avventure* (Florence: Leo Sclabli

Zweig recommended examples from his prose work for publication by the publisher Insel-Verlag. He admired Italian editions of D'Annunzio for their bibliophilic character and the illustrations by De Carolis, and he held D'Annunzio in high regard as a refined interpreter of Dante. Nevertheless, admiration for D'Annunzio was from the outset mixed with criticism. In a 1904 review of the German translation of D'Annunzio's *Elegie romane* (1892), published in German, Zweig expressed doubts about the poet's status as a modern classic and his implicit ambition to be seen as a successor of Goethe¹⁰ – a view that he soon needed to revise, considering the international recognition D'Annunzio achieved with novels such as *Il Piacere* (1889), *L'Innocente* (1892) and *Trionfo della morte* (1894). This criticism was an expression of uneasiness about D'Annunzio's growing commitment to irredentism and pan-Italianism. Further objections to D'Annunzio as a national poet can be found in the review of *Das Schiff* (La nave), published in the same year as the play, in 1908. According to Zweig, D'Annunzio's play justified Italy's imperialist ambitions, shortly afterwards enacted by Italy's invasion of Libya (1911). Zweig argued that D'Annunzio was trying to persuade his people to re-establish hegemony in the Adriatic, as in the time of the Venetian Republic in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. He found these claims preposterous and considered D'Annunzio a nationalist who came 'too late', who misjudged the real needs of Italians.¹¹ In his reviews of Italian works published around the turn of the century, Zweig continued to criticise D'Annunzio's nationalistic tone. Instead, he praised novels by Sibilla Aleramo and Giovanni Cena, *Una donna* (1906) and *Gli ammonitori* (1903), seeing them as examples of contemporary literature with 'European breath'. Zweig's disapproval of D'Annunzio reached its climax after the outbreak of war, in mid-1914. His diaries from the years 1914 and 1915 document his concern over the discussions about Italy's possible entry into the conflict. His tone is surprising: the cosmopolitan writer, and future pacifist, frequently uses xenophobic stereotypes and does not refrain from chauvinistic statements. For example, he writes of D'Annunzio's May 1915 speech in Quarto: 'D'Annunzio's speech becomes a state danger for us, the [Italian] newspapers were so insolent as to consider it "presumptuous" that we ran a French warship

¹⁰ Stefan Zweig, 'Römische Elegien. Von Gabriele D'Annunzio', *Das literarische Echo* 5: 18 (15 July 1904).

¹¹ Stefan Zweig, 'Venedigs glückhaftes Schiff. Gabriele d'Annunzios "La Nave"'

aground in the Adriatic Sea.¹² The usually reserved writer angrily scolds Italians, whom he believes guilty of treason against the former allies of the Triple Alliance:

Dennoch vermöchte ich niemals einem Italiener mehr frei ins Gesicht zu blicken. Sie haben uns zu sehr gequält mit ihrer Perfidie, mit ihrer Verlogenheit, die diesem Raub noch edle Motive unterschiebt. Gegen sie wird sich Deutschlands Haß noch nach Jahrhunderten wenden: es ist eigentlich Wahnsinn, den sie begehen.¹³

(I never wish to look an Italian in the face freely again. They have tormented us too much with their perfidy, with their mendacity, and have attributed noble reasons to this robbery. Germany's hatred against them will still be felt for centuries to come: what they are doing is almost madness.)

When D'Annunzio delivered his second famous speech to the Italian Parliament on 20 May, a few days before the declaration of war, Zweig commented with sarcasm: 'Boundless jubilation for D'Annunzio. He has reached it, *l'alta cima*, higher than Victor Hugo, he has risen in the state as a modern man. It cost 100,000 lives.'¹⁴ Zweig recognised D'Annunzio's success as an event of great symbolic importance. In his eyes, the recognition and honour he was receiving in Italy exceeded even Victor Hugo's standing in France. In his review of *La nave*, Zweig compared D'Annunzio to that French writer, who he depicted as the prototype of the national poet who understands the demands of the people and represents them. In contrast, he saw D'Annunzio's causes as neither timely nor real priorities for Italians. After D'Annunzio's pro-war speeches, Zweig revised his opinion and presented the Italian poet as having achieved higher status than his French competitor. However, the price of this success was the many lives of soldiers and civilians lost in the war.

After Italy's declaration of war, official propaganda in Austria began a powerful press campaign against Italy as an alliance-breaker and against D'Annunzio as a warmonger. At this point, based on his previous opinions, one would expect Zweig to engage in, or even increase, his attacks. Instead, the diary entries of this period show that he stepped apart from the chorus of anti-Italian voices

¹² Stefan Zweig, *Tagebücher*, ed. by Kurt Beck, Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer, 1984 (6 May 1915), p. 167.

and defended D'Annunzio. He denounced accusations of cowardice against Italians as misplaced and sharply polemicised against journalists who decried D'Annunzio while lacking even a shred of his poetic talent.¹⁵ He made no comment on D'Annunzio's famous flight over Vienna on 8 August 1918.

D'Annunzio as the Target of Austrian Writers, 1915–1916

The critical reactions of Austrian writers against D'Annunzio can be divided into two major phases. Immediately after the declaration of war there were indignant statements portraying D'Annunzio as the quintessence of negative features attributed to Italians – a presumed penchant for treason, lust for fame and cowardice. This was followed by a second phase in which persiflage became central. It is striking how almost everyone involved in Austrian art and culture took part in criticising D'Annunzio. In the first year of the war, Arthur Schnitzler's diaries do not contain any detailed comments on political developments in Italy. However, in a letter of 22 May 1915 to the publisher Samuel Fischer, he used sharp words:

Wenn dieser Brief in Ihre Hände kommt, haben die Feindseligkeiten mit Italien wohl schon in aller Form ihren Anfang genommen. Wie ich eben versuche mehr dazu zu sagen, fühle ich zugleich, daß ich darauf verzichten muß, da der deutsche Sprachgeist das Wort noch nicht gefunden hat, in dem die Begriffe Verrat, Erpressung, Tücke, Verlogenheit und d'Annunzio sich vereinigt ausdrücken ließen.¹⁶

(When this letter comes into your hands, the hostilities with Italy will already be started in all forms. While I'm just trying to say more, I feel at the same time that I cannot say more, since the spirit of the German language has not yet found a word to express altogether the terms betrayal, blackmail, malice, mendacity and d'Annunzio.)

The letter had serious consequences for D'Annunzio's reception in German-speaking countries, as Fischer removed his books from its publishing program.

¹⁵ Zweig, *Tagebücher* (28 May 1915), p. 175.

¹⁶ Arthur Schnitzler, *Briefe 1913–1931*, Bd. II, ed. by Peter Michael Braunwarth, Richard Milklin, Susanne Peterlik and Heinrich Schnitzler (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer,

The Austrian critic and writer Alfred Polgar also reacted to Italy's entry into the war with an attack on D'Annunzio. Five days after the declaration of war, on 30 May, he wrote an essay entitled 'D'Annunzio'. He portrayed the Italian poet as a great seducer and demagogue who tricked Italians into exchanging 'desires with realities'¹⁷ – suggesting that winning the war against Austria-Hungary was an illusion. D'Annunzio, he continues, exercised this seductive power despite his ornamental and artificially overloaded language, which he describes as 'a lavish gush that [makes] his [D'Annunzio's] books unbearable'.¹⁸ On the other hand, he cannot help but acknowledge the public impact of D'Annunzio's rhetoric. Despite all criticism, he admits the modernity of D'Annunzio's rhetorical strategies and staging techniques, as well as his ability to seduce the masses. Most people realised that D'Annunzio was a master of mass manipulation only after the events of Fiume in 1919;¹⁹ but Polgar recognised this as early as 1915. He was particularly interested in why an Aesthete like D'Annunzio suddenly wanted to leave his ivory tower to win the favour of the *profanum vulgus*, which he had despised up to that point. Polgar believed this was motivated by dissatisfaction with purely aesthetic existence and the desire to bring art into life. But he also wanted to expose D'Annunzio as a liar, so he argued that his speeches lacked any real passion, that he charmed people at the expense of the truth. He pitied Italians, and he believed they would soon realise what a mistake they had made in following D'Annunzio – a prophecy about the country's future that resembled Zweig's. Polgar then posed the fundamental question of whether it is legitimate for 'a poet, a civilized human being, an aristocrat by spirit'²⁰ to preach war. He condemned D'Annunzio as a 'pied piper, who fills the grave with the childlike and the trusting and the curious', and described the war as a great catastrophe for mankind. Despite the general atmosphere of extreme aggressiveness, Polgar's language is free of any form of chauvinism. The way in which he talks about

¹⁷ Alfred Polgar, 'd'Annunzio', in *Kleine Schriften*, Vol. I, ed. by Marcel Reich-Ranicki (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1982), pp. 6–10 (p. 6).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Hans Richard Brittnacher, '»Der Rhythmus hat immer recht.« D'Annunzio verhängt den Ausnahmezustand in Fiume', in *Europa neu denken II. Mentalitätsgeschichte der Adria – Neugierde und Konflikt als Betriebsgeheimnis*, ed. by Michael Fischer and Johannes Hahn (Salzburg: Verlag Anton Pustet, 2015), pp. 47–58; Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Friedrich Kittler and Bernhard Siegert, eds., *Der Diktator als Kommandant. D'Annunzio erobert Fiume* (Munich: Fink, 1996)

Italians, despite animosity against D'Annunzio, differs from the diary entries by Schnitzler and Zweig. Polgar portrays Italians as uncritical victims of a clever demagogue, defining them primarily as 'trusting' and 'curious'. In contrast to Zweig and Schnitzler, he regrets their tragic fate and imagines their disillusionment: 'When [the people] will reach for the golden words of their poet in days of sorrow and need, only straw and chaff will remain in their hands'.²¹

The attacks reach a climax in the 1915 essay *Von Dante zu d'Annunzio* by Egon Friedell, the prominent Austrian historian, actor, playwright and critic. Friedell pursued the goal of discrediting Italians by comparing them to other 'civilized peoples' and postulated that Italians have produced fewer 'achievements of European renown' than neighbouring peoples. He provocatively asks: 'Why does Italy only send swindlers and flatheads across its borders?' to then answer: 'because it has nothing else'.²² As evidence for this he cites the presumed superiority of Theodor Mommsen's portrayal of Julius Caesar over that of Guglielmo Ferrero.²³ The inferiority of Italians, he believed, was also evident from the state of Italian theatre,²⁴ where actors such as Ermete Zacconi and Ermete Novelli offered weak performances relative to other European actors. In the scientific field Italians similarly underperformed. Cesare Lombroso's *Genio e follia* (1872, translated into German in 1887), from Friedell's point of view, demonstrated only one thing: 'The God of Italy is nonsense'.²⁵ In the central part of his essay, Friedell argues that Italy's path from Dante to D'Annunzio was one of catastrophic and irreversible decay, questioning D'Annunzio's view of himself as Dante's successor, especially since the author of the *Commedia*, in Friedell's view, is only partially Italian: 'This great Lombard [sic!] has stood over Italy for six hundred years as a burning warning sign, a sign of what Italian genius could have become while it has become the very opposite'.²⁶ While Hofmannsthal had sharply differentiated between D'Annunzio's 'false' Italy and the authentic Italy of great

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²² Egon Friedell, *Von Dante zu d'Annunzio* (Vienna and Leipzig: Rosner) 1915, p. 55.

²³ Polgar refers to Theodor Mommsen's *Römische Geschichte* Volumes 1–3, (Weidmann: Leipzig, 1854–56) and to Guglielmo Ferrero's *Größe und Niedergang Roms* (Stuttgart, Julius Hoffman, 1908).

²⁴ Friedell, *Von Dante zu d'Annunzio*, p. 56.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 58.

art (Mantegna) and great politics (Mazzini),²⁷ Friedell distinguishes between Dante's Italy and that of D'Annunzio. For Friedell, even Eleonora Duse's 'great and pure art' was 'certainly not Italian':²⁸ it arose from her femininity and was therefore something 'quite international'.²⁹ In this essay, D'Annunzio becomes representative of the 'Italian Soul' in the most negative sense, even referring to him as a 'Renaissance man' to accentuate the negative characteristics associated with this topos: 'Has D'Annunzio forgotten who is struck by the most terrible curse in the Inferno? Traitors! The utmost distance from God is their punishment. They are stuck in the eternal ice, where even tears freeze.'³⁰ At the end of his remarks, he compares D'Annunzio to 'a depraved hairdresser's assistant, for whom the German word 'Laffe' [fop] seems to have been invented, and who now, cheered on by appropriate tips, handles his rancid pots of pomade with dexterity.'³¹ Friedell refers here to the stereotypes of the Italian barber or Figaro, thus denigrating D'Annunzio's pose as an Aesthete, as well.

After the first phase of rants, D'Annunzio gradually became the target of a campaign of wartime propaganda that culminated in 1916. In this context, it is revealing to consider the book *Die Front im Tirol* (The Front in Tyrol) by Franz Karl Ginzkey, a good friend of Stefan Zweig who had helped his better-known colleague obtain a position in the war press archives. Ginzkey and Zweig both wrote newspaper articles and books praising the heroism of Austrian soldiers, until Zweig gradually found his way to pacifism and emigrated to Switzerland in 1917. In *Die Front im Tirol*, Ginzkey builds a sharp contrast between a Tyrolean singer who has become a soldier and the Italian *poeta vates*, to the benefit of the former:

Das klare, erdgetreue Wesen dieses stolzbescheidenen Sängers, der seinem Volke todesmutig auch zur Tat voraneilt, sticht wunderbar bezeichnend gegen seinen ungleich berühmteren Kollegen im feindlichen Lager und dessen bombastisch in sich selbst erhitzte Phrasen ab. Sitzt auch Herr Gabriele d'Annunzio bereits bei seinen Alpini droben auf irgendeinem umschossenen Felsengrat? So zwischen zwei- und dreitausend

²⁷ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Antwort auf die »neunte Canzone« Gabriele D'Annunzios', in *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben. Prosa III*, ed. by Herbert Steiner (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1984), pp. 81–6.

²⁸ Friedell, *Von Dante zu d'Annunzio*, p. 56.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Meter, zur Rechten den Gletscher –, zur Linken den Kugeltod? Er könnte dort mithelfen, die Suppe auslöffeln, die er seinem verirrtten Volke eingebrockt. Aber die Macht seiner wohlgedrechselten Rede hatte dort droben im Angesicht der schweigenden Hohen wenig Gewalt. Seine Leute würden ihm sagen: Mann, gib uns die Tat und entschäle den Kern deines Denkens. Das Spiel der Begriffe verliert hier jeglichen Wert.³²

(The clear, down-to-earth nature of this unassuming singer, who undaunted by death hurries on ahead of his people to action, stands out significantly compared to that of his incomparably more famous colleague in the enemy camp and his bombastic, self-heated phrases. Is Gabriele D'Annunzio also already sitting up there with his *Alpini* on some all-round fired-at ridge of rock? Between two and three thousand meters, on the right the glacier – on the left death by bullet? He could have helped out there, spooning out the soup that he brought to his lost people. But the power of his well-crafted speech had little impact up there, as they faced the silent mountain heights. His people would say to him: man, give us action, unravel your thinking and get to the point. The game of rhetoric loses all value here.)

While the Tyrolean soldier sings a war song to encourage his people to action, the Italian poet is portrayed as a perfidious seducer, who uses his oratory to persuade Italians, 'lost people', to undertake a disastrous enterprise. D'Annunzio's oratory proves useless in combat: only the heartfelt courage of the Austrian soldier counts. Ginzkey assumes that D'Annunzio would abandon his *Alpini* in the decisive moment, something that D'Annunzio's combat missions, from the so-called 'Beffa di Buccari' to the flight over Vienna, do not substantiate.

The topos of D'Annunzio as a seducer of the masses was also reworked in the aphorisms by the Austrian writer and poet Peter Altenberg, who invoked the duty of the authentic writer to bear moral responsibility for guiding his 'immature' audience, avoiding agitation. Someone like D'Annunzio, in his view, is a 'cowardly rascal, not a poet!'³³ Altenberg accentuates the accusation of cowardice against D'Annunzio already voiced by many writers, denying him the rank of poet because he assumes that a poet should stay away from politics, not instigate people to war. None of his fellow writers had come to this radical conclusion before.

³² Franz Karl Ginzkey, *Die Front im Tirol* (Berlin: Fischer, 1996), p. 14.

In polemics against D'Annunzio, bantering and caricature form a genre of their own, not only in Austria but also in Italy and France.³⁴ The most important contribution to this particular genre in Austrian literature is that of the writer Franz Blei, who in his *Bestiary of Modern Literature* (1920) compares D'Annunzio to a Pegasus – a reference to the Italian poet's great passion for flying,³⁵ and possibly also to his spectacular flight over Vienna in August 1918:

Der Pegasus d'Annunzio schlug mit seinen eleganten Hufen die herrlichsten, herrlichsten Takte der letzten drei Jahrzehnte [. . .]. Später dann verlangte die Zeit Probe aufs große Wort, und der Pegasus gab sie. Er ließ sich die Hufe mit Eisen beschlagen, wirbelte damit die Trommel und wieherte Fanfaren. Die an tönenden Worten reichste Zeit, die des Krieges und seines Après, machte aus dem Pegasus nicht den Tyrtaios, aber das lauthinwiehernde Schlachtpferd gab den hellen italienischen Trompeten Brust, Luft und Schwung. Ein römischer Kaiser hat sein Leibpferd zum Konsul gemacht – der Pegasus d'Annunzio konnte es für möglich halten, daß ihn sein Volk zum Kaiser der Adria erhebe.³⁶

(With his elegant hooves, Pegasus-d'Annunzio beat the most magnificent, most magnificent strokes of the last three decades [. . .]. Later, time demanded proof of his grand words, and Pegasus gave this proof. He had his hooves shod with irons, twirled the drum with them, and neighed fanfares. The time richest in resounding words, that of the war and its aftermath, did not turn Pegasus into Tyrtaeus, but the loudly neighing battle-horse gave the bright Italian trumpets breast, breath, and momentum. A Roman emperor made his personal horse a consul. Pegasus-d'Annunzio thought it possible that his people would make him emperor of the Adriatic.)

Blei mocks D'Annunzio's self-stylisation as Italy's national bard and his propaganda, without, however, disputing the European rank he has achieved as a poet. The question of the legitimacy of a poet's involvement in politics, already raised by Hofmannsthal and Zweig, as well as by others, would continue to influence the debate about D'Annunzio for the next two decades.

³⁴ Gec (Enrico Gianeri), *D'Annunzio nella caricatura mondiale* (Milan: Garzanti, 1941).

³⁵ Peter Demetz, *Die Flugschau von Brescia. Kafka, d'Annunzio und die Männer, die vom Himmel fielen* (Vienna: Zsolnay, 2002).

³⁶ Franz Blei, *Das Bestiary der modernen Literatur*, ed. by Rolf Peter

Conclusions

As evidenced in these examples, Austrian writers reacted to Italy's entry into the war by deploying negative stereotypes and applying nationalistic slogans to ridicule the enemy and its bard, inciting hatred against them. Only in some cases does irony counterbalance the sharpness of these attacks.

In *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit*, Karl Kraus questioned the basic premises of the widespread polemic against D'Annunzio. In this work, two Austrian officers fighting on the Isonzo Front, called *Fallota* and *Beinsteller* – names built around 'fall' and 'tripping' – are ridiculed for their chauvinism. A song sung by both officers (Act III, Scene 3) summarises anti-Italian propaganda stereotypes:

Wir haben sie guat getroff 'n
Die andern do san gloff 'n.
Tschiff, tscheff, tauch, der Wallisch liegt am Bauch.

Könnan nimma Katzl mach'n,
Es tuat halt gar zviel krach'n.
Tschiff –

Den Annunzio und Sonnino
Den machma a no hino.
Tschiff – [. . .]³⁷

(We've scored a direct hit on them,
the others have run away,
Tschiff, tscheff, the Italian lies on its belly.

They can't produce any more children³⁸
because there are too many explosions,
Tschiff –

D'Annunzio and Sonnino,
We'll soon kill them too.
Tschiff – [. . .])

³⁷ Karl Kraus, *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit. Tragödie in fünf Akten mit Vorspiel und Epilog* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 329.

³⁸ The verse 'Könnan nimma Katzl mach'n' literally means 'they can't make any more kittens'. In Austria, the Italians are still called 'Katzlmacher' (cat makers). This has nothing to do with cats but is supposedly derived from famous bowls that the Italians made. The poet is thus playing a phonetic word game which the

By openly pillorying a mainstay of the monarchy such as the officer caste and ridiculing its representatives, Kraus launched an attack on the monarchy as a whole. At the same time, his drama depicts the brutalisation of man at war. In other episodes dealing with Italy, Kraus shows the striking difference between the behaviour of the same man in times of war and peace – for example, when the Fregattenleutnant (Frigate Lieutenant) reports having bombed the same Venice that he had loved as a tourist in peacetime (Act II, Scene 30). In some cases, Kraus attacked his fellow writers directly. In the run-up to the war, for example, he exposed the weaknesses of Hofmannsthal's reaction to D'Annunzio's ninth *Canzone*. He made fun of Hofmannsthal's claim that he felt Italian and of his desire to be part of the 'authentic Italy' to which D'Annunzio, after his political engagement, no longer belonged: 'But M. d'Annunzio is not Italian. At least Herr Hofmannsthal knows what Italian is. Maybe he is even Italian [. . .]. Perhaps Herr Hofmannsthal is d'Annunzio and d'Annunzio is just a Hofmannsthal.'³⁹

Curiously, some of the writers who had attacked D'Annunzio supported Kraus when it came to taking up arms against the press. Zweig referred to journalists as a 'mob',⁴⁰ while Polgar called them 'Brüder im Ungeiste von D'Annunzio' (Brothers in D'Annunzio's mischief), with a play of words that turned the saying 'Brüder im Geiste' (Brothers in spirit), denoting brotherly similarity in attitude and mentality, into its very opposite.⁴¹ In Polgar's view, journalists, with an un-brotherly attitude, multiplied the echo of D'Annunzio's demagogic speeches.

In the 1920s, debate over D'Annunzio intensified because of his support for Mussolini. Twelve years after he first spoke against D'Annunzio, Alfred Polgar, for example, wrote again about him in an essay entitled *Paderewski D'Annunzio*, published in 1927. By then war had ended, the Fiume enterprise had taken place, and D'Annunzio was celebrated alongside Mussolini. Whereas in 1915 Polgar had described D'Annunzio as an absolute novelty in cultural history, he now considered him together with another nationalist artist, the Pole Paderewski. Polgar comments on both: 'They were artists and became "statesmen". They belonged to themselves and now belong to the general public. They traded fame for popularity.

³⁹ Karl Kraus, 'Es wird ernst', *Die Fackel* XIII, 343/344 (29 February 1912), pp. 44f (p. 45).

⁴⁰ Zweig, *Tragödien* (28 May 1915), p. 175.

They give the strangely parodic spectacle of a regression from freedom to servitude.'⁴² Like Zweig, Polgar criticised the intellectuals who chose to take part in politics. In his eyes, this involvement only leads to loss: D'Annunzio lost his freedom and standing as an artist; in return, Polgar adds sarcastically, he gained a uniform. Even more important for the Austrian critic was the fact that D'Annunzio could no longer be seen as an individual case: he became a European problem.

Julien Benda's *La Trahison des Clercs* (*The Betrayal by the Intellectuals*) was also published in 1927. In this book, the French philosopher cited D'Annunzio as an example of the betrayal of the values of the Enlightenment, which an intellectual should defend regardless of ethnicity or nationality. Like Zweig, Benda mentioned the drama *Das Schiff* (La nave) as evidence of his nationalist ideology. Like Polgar's book, Benda's viewed the betrayal by intellectuals not as a national problem but a European problem.⁴³ In contrast to these opinions, Stefan Zweig, after the war, returned to his earlier admiration for D'Annunzio, renouncing the ideological suspicion of his former role model. In a survey of the Italian magazine *Leonardo* in 1925, he described D'Annunzio as a 'passionate word-maker, an ardent artist intoxicated with himself and with all forms of beauty'.⁴⁴ In 1925 he published a book in which he theorised a 'poetics of the demonic' based on the examples of Hölderlin, Kleist and Nietzsche, an irrational poetics based on the fateful determination of existence.⁴⁵ At the centre of this concept of art are creativity, fanaticism, heroism and also tragedy. One has to ask oneself whether the designation of D'Annunzio as a *daimon* artist – in the Greek sense – applied to the Italian poet or not. What is certain is that Zweig here revised his demand for a fusion of literature and morality, which he had made in 1914 following his criticism of D'Annunzio and Verhaeren.⁴⁶ At that time, he believed literature that used beautiful words to represent

⁴² Alfred Polgar, 'Paderewski. D'Annunzio', in *Kleine Schriften*, Vol. I (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1982), pp. 389–91 (p. 389).

⁴³ Renate Lunzer, 'Zum Thema »trahison des clerics«. Fallbeispiel Gabriele D'Annunzio', in *Wenn Ränder Mitte werden. Festschrift für Fritz Peter Kirsch*, ed. by Chantal Adobati (Vienna: WUV, 2001), pp. 617–26.

⁴⁴ Schweig, *Leonardo* 11 (1925).

⁴⁵ Stefan Zweig, *Der Kampf mit dem Dämon. Hölderlin, Kleist, Nietzsche* (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 2007); see also Matjaž Birk and Thomas Eicher, eds, *Stefan Zweig und das Dämonische* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2008).

⁴⁶ Romain Rolland and Stefan Zweig, *Briefwechsel 1910–1940*, Vol. I (Berlin:

morally questionable content was unsuitable in times of political tensions.⁴⁷ Ten years later, he changed his stance. While Zweig criticised D'Annunzio's ideology, labelling him a chauvinist poet or precursor of Fascism, he nevertheless distinguished his poetic achievements from his politics and appreciated the former despite the latter.

Involvement in the debate over D'Annunzio was commensurate with his importance as a literary role model for each writer. Among the most important authors involved, along with Polgar and Hofmannsthal, was Robert Musil, for whom *Il Piacere* had been 'one of the first books through which I became acquainted with "modernity", 40 years ago, and one of the first to have an impact on me. I would give anything to know what impact. Probably a general immorality and also a general Aestheticism.'⁴⁸ Looking back on his early interest in D'Annunzio on the occasion of the poet's death (2 March 1938), shortly before the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany, Musil noted: 'He was a good patriot as far as he was a good poet. But turn it around: he was a good poet because he was a good patriot.'⁴⁹ On the same day, Franz Werfel wrote a diary entry in which he recalled D'Annunzio's time as a *poeta vates* during the First World War. Here, D'Annunzio's poetic achievement disappears in the shadow of his disproportionate ego and hunger for fame:

Alle seine Masken verschwimmen in die letzte, die Totenmaske. Er war ein großer Dichter, doch hat er das Dichtertum nicht erhöht. Er unterordnete den Dichter im Range dem politischen, dem militärischen Führer, ja dem nationalen Filibustier. Das geschah, weil sein Ehrgeiz so ungeheuerlich [war], daß ihm kein Ruhm genügte, nicht die stille, echte, beständige Ehre, die einzig und allein das geistige Sein und Schaffen zu vergeben hat. Er betete die Macht an und den grellen Erfolg sehr kühner Abenteuer, die er mit großem Mute unternahm, teils aus wirklichem Fanatismus, teils um sich dadurch zum nationalen Heros heraufzuzumerieren.⁵⁰

(All his masks blur into the last one, the death mask. He was a great poet, but he did not exalt poetry. He subordinated the poet in rank to the political, the military leader, even the national filibuster. This happened because his ambition [was] so outrageous that no fame was enough for

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 124.

⁴⁸ Robert Musil, 'Tagebücher, Aphorismen, Essays und Reden', in *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben*, Heft 30, ed. by Adolf Frisé (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1955), p. 470.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 142.

⁵⁰ Franz Werfel, *Zwischen Oben und Unten. Prosa. Tagebücher. Aphorismen*

him, certainly not the quiet, genuine, constant honour that only spiritual existence and creativity can bestow. He worshipped the power and glaring success of daring adventures, which he undertook with great courage, partly out of real fanaticism, partly to elevate himself to national hero.)

Yet other authors believed that, despite his unacceptable political stance, D'Annunzio's contribution to modernity could be saved. We have seen that this was the position of Stefan Zweig, who strongly condemned D'Annunzio's relationship with Mussolini yet took D'Annunzio's poems with him into exile in 1934. Walter Benjamin's and Bertolt Brecht's attitudes toward D'Annunzio were similar. After Benjamin read the *Laudi* and *Merope* during his stay on Capri in 1916, he was happy to translate D'Annunzio's poem to Eleonora Duse for the journal *Der Querschnitt*,⁵¹ yet twenty years later he condemned the 'aestheticisation of politics' in his essay on 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. Brecht, similarly, could not deny his fascination with D'Annunzio's language and translated his most famous poem, 'La pioggia nel pineto'.⁵² He wrote in private about D'Annunzio: 'He was a charlatan, but that charlatan wrote pastoral poetry that will never be forgotten.'⁵³ Despite ideological differences, he attributes to artistic personalities such as D'Annunzio, George, Kipling and Ezra Pound 'a certain feudal dignity'.⁵⁴ Like Polgar and Benda, Brecht argued for understanding the 'D'Annunzio phenomenon' in a European context. Unlike them, he thought the Italian poet and his 'colleagues' deserved respect because of their work: they were, after all, part of a literary tradition that could be continued productively.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Gabriele D'Annunzio, 'Die göttliche Eleonora Duse', in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften. Supplement I. Kleinere Übersetzungen*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), pp. 12–15.

⁵² Bertolt Brecht, 'Regen in Pinienhain', in *Gedichte aus dem Nachlass. Gesammelte Werke in 8 Bänden*, ed. by Herta Ramthun (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1982), p. 449f.; see also Alberto Destro, 'Die Faszination des Unpolitischen. Brecht übersetzt D'Annunzio', in *Wo bleibt das »Konzept«? Dov' è il »concetto«? Festschrift für/Studi in onore di Enrico De Angelis*, ed. by Carlo Carmassi, Giovanna Cermelli, Marina Foschi Albert and Marianne Hepp (Munich: Iudicium-Verlag, 2009), pp. 247–55.

⁵³ Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal I*, vol. I: 1928–1942, ed. by Werner Hecht (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 495.

⁵⁴ Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal II*, vol. II: 1942–1955, ed. by Werner Hecht (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 764.

⁵⁵ Ian Knopf, *Brecht-Handbuch. Inrik. Prosa. Schriften* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984)

D'Annunzio's anti-Austrian position, speeches inciting Italy's entry into the war, and eventual collaboration with Mussolini, all earned him a reputation in the German-speaking world as the 'unbeloved poet' (Anna Kupka) or the 'John the Baptist of Fascism'⁵⁶ – a reputation that lingers today. Despite these reservations, the recognition of his poetic talent by such diverse artistic figures as Zweig, Benjamin and Brecht shows that D'Annunzio stands for a modernity that cannot simply be discredited with the accusation of proto-Fascism. This contradictory modernity represents a challenge – like that of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Gottfried Benn, Ernst Jünger, Ezra Pound or Louis-Ferdinand Céline. A challenge that, today, we must consider without prejudice.

Part IV

Complex Legacies

⁵⁶ Stefan Andres, 'Die Tode eines Ungeliebten. Eine Annäherung an Gabriele D'Annunzio', in *Die Tümpel des Faschismus? Kritische Aussagen*.

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Multilingualism, Translation, Reception

Edited by
Elisa Segnini and Michael Subialka

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