

### GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO (1863-1938)

Gabriele D'Annunzio, Prince of Montenevoso and Duke of Gallese, was an Italian writer, poet, journalist, playwright and soldier during World War I. He occupied a prominent place in Italian literature from 1889 to 1910 and then Italian political life from 1914 to 1924. He was often referred to under the epithets *Il Vate* ("The Poet") or *Il Profeta* ("The Prophet").

He was born in Pescara, Abruzzo on March 12, 1863, the son of a wealthy landowner and mayor of the town, Francesco Paolo Rapagnetta D'Annunzio (1831–1893). Francesco had originally been born with the surname Rapagnetta (the name of his single mother), but at the age of 13 he had been adopted by a childless rich uncle, Antonio D'Annunzio. Thus, the name D'Annunzio became the surname of his descendants.



Gabriele D'Annunzio's precocious talent was recognized early in life, and he was sent to school at the Liceo Cicognini in Prato, Tuscany. He published his first poetry when he was 16 and still at school, a small volume of verses called *Primo Vere* (1879; "In Early Spring"), which was influenced by Giosuè Carducci's *Odi Barbare*. Along with his own poetry, there were some imitations of verses of Lorenzo Stecchetti, the fashionable poet of *Postuma*, and also some Latin translations. These were all distinguished by such agile grace that Giuseppe Chiarini on reading them brought the unknown Gabriele to public attention in an enthusiastic article. In 1881 D'Annunzio entered La Sapienza-University of Rome, where he became a member of various literary groups, including Cronaca Bizantina, and wrote articles and criticism for local newspapers.

He published *Canto Novo* (1882; "New Song"), which contains poems with more individuality than *Primo Vere* and is full of exuberance, the promise of power, and passionate, sensuous descriptions of the sea and some of the Abruzzese landscape.

These poetic descriptions were commented on and completed in prose by *Terra Vergine* (1882; "Virgin Earth"), a collection of short stories dealing in radiant language with the peasant life of the author's native province of Abruzzi. In 1882, Angelo Sommaruga, a book publisher and magazine editor, proposed to D'Annunzio that he publish his books *Canto Novo* and *Terra Vergine*. This established a lasting personal and professional friendship between the two.

*L'Intermezzo di Rime* (1883; "The Interlude of Rhyme") is the beginning of D'Annunzio's second and new characteristic style, in which he chose to express all the most subtle vibrations of voluptuous life. Both this style and content began to startle his critics, some of whom had greeted him as a young protégé but now rejected him as a perverter of public morals. Others hailed him as a poet bringing a breath of fresh air and a vital impulse into the somewhat prim, lifeless poetry that had previously existed.

These were soon followed with *Il Libro delle Vergini* (1884; "The Book of the Virgins"), and the greater part of the short stories that were afterwards collected under the general title of *San Pantaleone* (1886). Meanwhile, the favorable reviews published by Angelo Sommaruga stopped because of a personal scandal that forced him to leave Italy for several years, and the group of young writers and poets he had supported found itself dispersed. Some became teachers and stopped writing literary pieces, others threw themselves into journalism.

D'Annunzio took this latter course, and joined the staff of the *Tribuna*. For this paper, under the pseudonym of “Duca Minimo,” he wrote some very impressive articles. Also, this was a period of maturity and deeper cultural awareness for him and he wrote *Il Libro d'Isotta* (1886; “The Book of Isotta”), a love poem in which for the first time he drew inspiration from the richness of the Italian Renaissance that he adapted to modern sentiments and passions. Also *Il Libro d'Isotta* is interesting because in it one can find the seeds of most of the descriptions and emotions which went to form the aesthetic contents of his important later works.

His autobiographical novel *Il Piacere* (1889; “The Child of Pleasure”) introduced the first of D'Annunzio's passionate Nietzschean-superman heroes; another appears in *L'Innocente* (1892; “The Innocent” also translated as “The Intruder”). *L'Innocente*, after it was translated into French by Georges Herelle, brought D'Annunzio notoriety and the praise of foreign critics.

Thus, D'Annunzio had already become famous when his best-known novel, *Il Trionfo della Morte* (1894; “The Triumph of Death”), appeared. This and his next major novel, *Le Vergini delle Rocce* (1896; “The Maidens of the Rocks”), featured viciously self-seeking and wholly amoral Nietzschean heroes.

In 1883 D'Annunzio married Maria Hardouin di Gallese, and they had three sons, but the marriage ended in 1891. In 1894 D'Annunzio began a long liaison with the actress Eleonora Duse which became a cause célèbre. He began writing plays for her, notably the tragedies *La Gioconda* (performed 1899) and *Francesca da Rimini* (performed 1901). He eventually broke off the relationship and exposed their intimacy in the erotic novel *Il Fuoco* (1900; “The Flame of Life”), which also contained ardent glorifications and descriptions of Venice. After meeting the Marchesa (Luisa) Casati in 1903, he began a lifelong turbulent on-again off-again affair with her that lasted until a few years before his death.

Other plays were important parts of his literary oeuvre, especially *Il Sogno di un Mattino di Primavera* (1897; “The Dream of a Spring Morning”), a lyrical fantasia in one act, and his *Città Morta* (1898; “Dead City”), written for Sarah Bernhardt. In 1898 he wrote his *Sogno di un Pomeriggio d'Autunno* (“Dream of an Autumn Afternoon”). *La Gloria* followed a year later; it was an attempt at contemporary political tragedy which met with no success, probably because of the audacity of the personal and political allusions in some of its scenes. *Francesca da Rimini* (written for Eleonora Duse) followed in 1901 and was a perfect reconstruction of medieval atmosphere and emotion, magnificent in style, and declared by an authoritative Italian critic—Edoardo Boutet—to be the first real, if imperfect, tragedy ever given to the Italian theatre. D'Annunzio's greatest play, most critics agree, was *La Figlia di Iorio* (performed 1904; “The Daughter of Iorio”), a powerful poetic drama of the fears and superstitions of Abruzzi peasants.

D'Annunzio continued his prodigious literary production until World War I. His major poetic work was a lyrical collection entitled *Laudi del Cielo del Mare della Terra e degli Eroi* (1899; “In Praise of Sky, Sea, Earth, and Heroes”). The third book in this series, *Alcyone* (1904), a re-creation of the smells, tastes, sounds, and experiences of a Tuscan summer, is considered by many to be his greatest poetic work.



Maria Hardouin di Gallese



*Portrait of Marchesa Casati  
by Adolph de Meyer*

In 1897, D'Annunzio was elected to the Chamber of Deputies for a three-year term, where he sat as an independent. By 1910, his extravagant lifestyle had forced him into debt, and he fled to France to escape his creditors. There he collaborated with composer Claude Debussy on a musical play *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* (1911; "The Martyrdom of St Sebastian"), written for Ida Rubinstein. The Vatican reacted by placing all of his works on the *Index of Forbidden Books*. [The work was not successful as a play, but it has been recorded in adapted versions several times, notably by Pierre Monteux (in French), Leonard Bernstein (sung in French, acted in English), and Michael Tilson Thomas (in French)]. In 1912 and 1913, D'Annunzio worked with opera composer Pietro Mascagni on his opera *Parisina*, staying sometimes in a house rented by the composer in Bellevue, near Paris.

D'Annunzio was still in Paris when war broke out in Europe in August, 1914. Having a marked talent for self-publicity, he passionately urged his country's entry into the war on the side of the Entente Powers. Following almost a year of an official policy of neutrality, Italy finally entered the war on May 23, 1915. D'Annunzio, who by

then had returned home, plunged into the fighting himself, seeking out dangerous assignments in several branches of the service. He was a man of remarkable energy and continuous enthusiasm (generally self-directed). He was fond of bold, individual military actions, ultimately losing an eye in one of his flight escapades. In February, 1918 he took part in a daring, if militarily irrelevant, power-boat surprise raid on the Austrian fleet in the harbor of Bakar (La beffa di Buccari, "the Bakar Mockery"), helping to raise the spirits of the Italian public, still battered by the Battle of Caporetto disaster, where the combined forces of Austria and Germany had routed the Italian 2nd Army. On August 9, 1918, as commander of the 87th fighter squadron, "La Serenissima," he gained fame for leading a flight mission of eight aircraft over Vienna that dropped thousands of propaganda leaflets aimed at demoralizing the Viennese population. Of course, D'Annunzio had written the leaflets.

Following the Armistice, D'Annunzio resumed his aggressive pre-war ultra-nationalist stance. He charged that the Italian government (led by Vittorio Orlando) had not done enough to achieve Italy's just desserts at the Paris Peace Conference. He campaigned widely for Italy to assume a role alongside her wartime allies as a first-rate European power. He was angered by the proposed handing over of the city of Fiume (now Rijeka in Croatia), whose population was mostly Italian, to the newly created state of Yugoslavia, proposed at the Paris Peace Conference. On September 12, 1919, he led the seizure of the city by 2,000 Italian nationalist irregulars, forcing the withdrawal of the inter-Allied (American, British and French) occupying forces. While wildly popular with the general populace at home, the seizure proved a heavy embarrassment to the Italian government. The plotters sought to have Italy annex Fiume, but Italy refused. Instead, Italy initiated a blockade of Fiume while demanding that the plotters surrender.

D'Annunzio then declared Fiume an independent state, the "Italian Regency of Carnaro," with himself as "Duce." (The Charter of Carnaro made "Music" the fundamental principle of the state, which was corporatist in nature. The Charter foreshadowed much of the later Italian Fascist system). As Duce, he attempted to organize an alternative to the League of Nations for various oppressed nations of the world that he determined would benefit from joining (such as the Irish, whom D'Annunzio attempted to arm in 1920). He also sought



*Italian translation of the propaganda leaflet which D'Annunzio threw from his airplane during his flight above Vienna.*

to make alliances with various separatist groups throughout the Balkans (especially groups of Italians, but also some Slavic and Albanian groups). D'Annunzio unsuccessfully attempted to ignore the Treaty of Rapallo and he declared war on Italy, only finally surrendering the city in December 1920 after a bombardment by the Italian navy. Nevertheless, by this bold action he had established Italy's interest in Fiume, and the port became Italian in 1924.

D'Annunzio subsequently became an ardent Fascist (derived from his reading of Nietzsche), but he recognized that further designs upon high political office were likely to come to nothing under Mussolini and his government. He entered into

decadent, drug-ridden retirement in 1922 at his villa at Gardone Riviera in Lombardy and spent his later years writing and campaigning.

Although he had a strong influence on the ideology of Benito Mussolini, he never became directly involved in fascist governmental politics in Italy, being temporarily crippled and shocked after an attempted murder on August 13, 1922, which occurred shortly before Mussolini's March on Rome (October 22-29, 1922). He was pushed out of a window by an unknown assailant; he survived but was badly injured. He did not completely recover before Mussolini had been appointed Prime Minister and hailed by the fascists as "Duce del Fascismo."

Despite D'Annunzio's retreat from active public life after his "accident," Mussolini still found it necessary to regularly dole out funds to D'Annunzio as a bribe for not re-entering the political arena. When asked about this by a close friend, Mussolini purportedly stated: "When you have a rotten tooth you have two possibilities open to you: either you pull the tooth or you fill it with gold. With D'Annunzio I have chosen for the latter treatment."

In 1924 he received a national edition of his works, and he was ennobled by King Victor Emmanuel III and given the hereditary title of "Principe di Montenevoso." Even though he was in retirement, D'Annunzio kept attempting to influence Mussolini almost until his death in 1938. He wrote to Mussolini in 1933 to try to convince him not to take part in the Axis pact with Hitler. In 1934, he tried to disrupt the relationship between Hitler and Mussolini after their meeting, even writing a satirical pamphlet about Hitler. Again, in September 1937, D'Annunzio met with Mussolini at the Verona train station to convince him to leave the Axis alliance. Mussolini in 1944 admitted to having made a mistake not following his advice.

D'Annunzio died on March 1, 1938 of a stroke, at his home, a year after he had been made President of the Royal Academy of Italy. He was given a state funeral by Mussolini and was interred in a magnificent tomb constructed of white marble at Il Vittoriale degli Italiani. D'Annunzio's life and work are commemorated in a museum there, which he had planned and had developed himself, adjacent to his villa at Gardone Riviera on the southwest bank of Lake Garda, between 1923 and his death. Now it is a national monument, composed of a military museum, library, literary and historical archive, theater, war memorial and mausoleum. The museum preserves his torpedo boat MAS 96 and the SVA-5 aircraft that he flew over Vienna. His birthplace is also open to the public as a museum, the Casa Natale di Gabriele D'Annunzio in Pescara.

D'Annunzio's colorful career, his scandalous love affairs, his daring in wartime, his eloquence and political leadership in two national crises, all contributed to make him one of the most striking personalities of his day. D'Annunzio's literary works are marked by their egocentric perspective, their fluent and melodious style, and an overriding emphasis on the gratification of the senses, whether through the love of women or of nature. Apart from certain interesting autobiographical works such as *Notturmo* (1921; "Nocturne and Five Tales of Love and Death"), D'Annunzio's prose is somewhat tedious; he was too receptive of contemporary thought and style, so that his work is liable to indiscriminately reflect the influences of other writers. The same can be said of most of his plays, with the exception of *La Figlia di Iorio*, which has powerful and vivid characterizations.

As a poet D'Annunzio derived much of his power from his great emotional susceptibility. Already in *Primo Vere* and *Canto Novo*, he had shown an astonishing gift for rendering with precision and power the healthy exuberance and youthful intensity of a boy in love with nature and women. Though he then turned to morbid and decadent themes in his subsequent poems, he recovered the vitality of his inspiration and found a new, more musical form for its expression in the great work of his maturity, *Laudi del Cielo del Mare della Terra e degli Eroi*, and especially its third book, *Alcyone*. Some of the poems in this book, in which D'Annunzio proclaims his sensuous, joyful feeling of communion with nature, are among the masterpieces of modern Italian poetry.

*Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: thefirstworldwar.com; on-line edition of Encyclopedia Britannica; Jonathan Galassi review of three books at newrepublic.com (Feb. 8, 2014); and Wikipedia.*

