

## Populismo e femminile nella Fiume dannunziana

### The Triumph of the Noble People: Gabriele D'Annunzio and Populism between literature and politics

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*The article is the paper I prepared for 2019 ASMI conference (Promised Land of Populism? "Populist" Culture and Politics in Italy 1800-2019, London, 29-30 november 2019). I meant to enlighten the more or less populist character of Gabriele D'Annunzio's politics and aesthetics through his literary production and main political discourses. After his aristocratic literary outlets, the famous poet opposed a "Noble People", forged by the War, to Italian liberal elites. D'Annunzio's peculiar "populism" was connected to the "long" crisis of liberal State in Italy and it was displayed at most in the Occupation of Fiume-Rijeka, a laboratory where critics of liberal institutions, attacks to post-war democratic balance and foundation of a new national-socialist imperialism converged. The present work means to renew the studies on D'Annunzio ideology, merging cultural approach with political categories usually neglected by historiography.*

**Keywords:** Gabriele D'Annunzio, Liberal Italy, First World War, Fiume-Rijeka Occupation, Populism

**Parole chiave:** Gabriele D'Annunzio, Italia liberale, Prima guerra mondiale, Occupazione di Fiume-Rijeka, Populismo

#### Introduction

Gabriele D'Annunzio's conception of life and politics, considered mostly esthetic and spiritual even by his contemporaries, and without a political outlet, has been, and still is today, the object of various and sometimes opposite interpretations. The centenary of the occupation of the city of Rijeka-Fiume (September 1919-December 1920), undoubtedly his political "masterpiece", has once again polarised scholars between those who underline his creative genius, his libertarian and libertine way of life, and his revolutionary and even anti-Fascist views, and those who highlight the dark side of the poet, seeing him as a champion of a new violent Italian nationalism and the supporter of imperialism<sup>1</sup>.

This is not the place to resolve the debate one way or the other. I only intend to bring a contribute to the studies on D'Annunzio's vision, relating it with the

<sup>1</sup> G.B. Guerri, *Disobbedisco. Cinquecento giorni di rivoluzione*, Fiume 1919-1920, Mondadori, Milano 2019; M. Mondini, *Fiume 1919. Una guerra civile italiana*, Salerno, Roma 1919; E. Serventi Longhi, *Il faro del mondo nuovo. D'Annunzio e i legionari a Fiume tra guerra e rivoluzione*, Gaspari, Udine 2019; L. Villari, *La luna di Fiume. 1919: Il complotto*, Guanda, Milano 2019.

ambiguous political concept of “populism”<sup>2</sup>. As we are about to see, D’Annunzio’s speech and writings contained several elements identified by Paul Taggart as constitutive of populism: an open hostility towards representative politics, the idealisation of a mythical homeland, and an extreme reaction to severe economic and political crisis<sup>3</sup>. It shall be also useful to redefine D’Annunzio’s thought according to a grid proposed by political scientist Roger Brubaker<sup>4</sup>. In it, populism is simultaneously located on the vertical axis high/low, opposing a “pure” people to a vile and corrupt ruling class, and on the horizontal axis in/out, that sees that same people clashing with.

On the other hand, I’m not fully agree with other scholar of historical “populism”, as Federico Finchelstein. He considers the nationalistic movements prior to Fascism – which he regards as the father of post-Second World War populism regimes – at most as pre-populists, characterised by anticipatory glimpses of populism but certainly not able to develop a full populist ideology<sup>5</sup>. In my opinion, if we identify the genesis of populism in Fascism, we lose the intimate connection between the crisis of liberal democracy and the onset of populist tendencies. D’Annunzio’s populism lies between the apogee of the Italian liberal system and its post-First World War crisis, and it is far more significant to think of D’Annunzio’s use of the concept of people for ideological and political purposes in relation to the crisis of the liberal order.

Historiography has warned not to underestimate the complexity of D’Annunzio’s vision, irreducible to simplistic schemes or labels<sup>6</sup>. So, associating D’Annunzio with populism opens up various issues. First of all, neither he nor his followers ever defined themselves as populist<sup>7</sup>. As a consequence, in using the term, the risk is to water down and blur the specificity of D’Annunzio’s ideological pattern that belongs to a historically and geographically well-defined nationalism, and bending it instead to a concept, populism, that has growing significant global implications, as shown by recent studies<sup>8</sup>. Secondly, how can populism, understood as an ideology hinging on the conscious and rational use of the masses, be associated with the decadent and hedonistic writer, considered by many as the torchbearer of anti-political

<sup>2</sup> E. Laclau, *La ragione populista*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2019; F. Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, University of California Press, Oakland (CA) 2017; A. Arato, *Post Sovereign Constitution Making. Learning and Legitimacy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016.

<sup>3</sup> P. Taggart, *Il populismo*, Città Aperta, Troina 2002.

<sup>4</sup> R. Brubaker, *Populism and nationalism*, in «Nations and Nationalism», n. 1, 2019, pp. 44-66.

<sup>5</sup> F. Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, cit.

<sup>6</sup> G.L. Mosse, *The Poet and the Exercise of Political Power*, in «Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature», n. 22, 1973, pp. 32-41; H.U. Gumbrecht, *I redentori della vittoria: On Fiume’s Place in the Genealogy of Fascism*, in «Journal of Contemporary History», n. 2, 1996, pp. 253-272; M.A. Ledeen, *D’Annunzio. The First Duce*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick 2002.

<sup>7</sup> J.R. Woodhouse, *Gabriele D’Annunzio. Defiant Archangel*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998; A. Andreoli, *Il vivere inimitabile. Vita di Gabriele D’Annunzio*, Mondadori, Milano 2000.

<sup>8</sup> B. De Cleen, Y. Stavrakakis, *Distinction and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism*, in «Javnost - The Public», n. 4, 2017, pp. 301-319; B. Bonijkowski, et al., *Populism and nationalism in a comparative perspective: a scholarly exchange*, in «Nation and Nationalism», n. 1, 2019, pp. 58-81.

irrationalism and individualism<sup>9</sup>? In this regard, while it is true that D'Annunzio's political involvement was long believed to have begun after the end of the First World War, when he became the lead proponent of a nationalist revolution and one of the main protagonists of the Italian public scene, most recent historiography not only revealed his several political experiences in the liberal pre-war period, but also underlined the ideological character of his early works<sup>10</sup>. D'Annunzio's Decadentism was not only a literary genre, but also the means to express his whole conception of life. The aestheticization of politics itself, which has an intimate connection with populism, is the core of D'Annunzio's ideological universe, and not just its formal, superficial and "spectacular" wrapping.

#### *Aristocratic Elitism (Before 1900)*

D'Annunzio's early Decadent phase is characterised by a clear aristocratic elitism denoted by, among other things, the free development of the senses of the individual, the glorification of the military, and the aversion towards mass society. For D'Annunzio, the main problem was liberal society as a whole, composed of a weak and corrupt ruling class unable to lift Italy to glory, and of the common people, mostly urban, who were devoid of moral virtue. In an early writing<sup>11</sup> he celebrated the Army as the only real depository of greatness, while stating that the masses could only be subordinated to military institutions and be but the passive witnesses to glorious enterprises, as shown by his use of expressions such as «the eyes of the people», or the «waiting» «throbbing» people, or the people «garlanding the heroes» and worshippers of the army.

The criticism of liberal democracy is more evident in another article<sup>12</sup>. In it, D'Annunzio condemned the "1789 dogma" that sovereignty belonged to the people, and that the authority of subjects can exceed that of kings. As a Decadent, he stressed (and did not oppose) the irreversible decline of the monarchy, noting how such decline might foster the accession of the people to power and, therefore, the destruction of civilisation. For him, democracy's only merit was, paradoxically, universal suffrage that, «invented with extraordinary care to strip the plebs of their rights», kept the masses «naturally devoid of feelings of freedom» and distant from the new bourgeois government. For the rest, however, these «democratic floods» were a tragedy, erasing spiritual differences, mortifying excellence, and promoting the idolatry of money and economic interests. Nonetheless, they were perhaps a ne-

<sup>9</sup> M. Calinescu, *The Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-London 1977; A. Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1993.

<sup>10</sup> R. De Felice, *D'Annunzio politico 1918-1938*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1978; *L'Italia e la «grande vigilia»*. Gabriele D'Annunzio nella politica italiana prima del fascismo, a c. di R.H. Rainero, S.B. Galli, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2007.

<sup>11</sup> G. D'Annunzio, *L'Armata d'Italia*, in «La Tribuna», 27 May-6 June, 1888.

<sup>12</sup> Id., *La bestia elettiva*, in «Il Mattino», 25-26 September, 1892.

cessary tragedy that could bring together the most ingenious and free souls, namely intellectuals and poets, the only ones capable of governing the deepest spirit of the Nation and to guide the new trends of modernity.

In another work<sup>13</sup>, adopting part of Nietzsche's moral and philosophical perspectives, D'Annunzio interpreted in his own way the reference to a «new aristocracy» which, he believed, would demolish bourgeois morality and reaffirm Power against illusion. For him, two moralities were in fact opposed: that of the «nobles» and that of the «servile flock». The «noble» was not understood as a member of an old patrician family, given the decay of the monarchy, but rather as someone with an «inner sovereignty», living openly as a free man aware of the arrival of a new «Regime of Fortitude». No hope could instead be placed on the people, since the «plebs always remain slaves, having a native need to stretch their wrists to the restraints».

D'Annunzio's Decadent literature juxtaposed the political establishment with the aristocracy of intellectual-poets, hoping for a heroic revolt against the liberal order. Consistent with a widespread European spirit, especially German – and here we refer not only to Friedrich Nietzsche, but also to Richard Wagner and Julius Langbehn – D'Annunzio professed the duty of the esthetic man to challenge in the public arena the dominant ethics of utilitarianism: «Such autocracy of conscience is the main sign of the new aristocrat»<sup>14</sup>.

He opposed every form of egalitarianism, utilitarianism and commodification of life, because according to him, they suppressed natural sentiments of faith and obedience as well as social actors' innate spiritual hierarchy. An example of this can be found in another article<sup>15</sup>:

The people of Italy, rolling in their own misery as pigs in the mud, do not notice those who disappear: they feel no sorrow for the extremely faithful guardians of refuted ideals and downed hopes. They gift no crowns for the poets who passed away after revealing with harmonious images some deep aspiration of the race.

Consistent with his invitation to civil participation by artists and intellectuals – the “new aristocracy” – D'Annunzio ran successfully for MP in 1897 with the conservative Right. His election speeches were a rant against the democratic farce of liberal Italy, the merchant bourgeoisie, and politicians clinging to power. The urban and industrial masses remained on the margins in his tirades, which primarily justified social inequalities, praised land ownership, and acclaimed the Poet as the one true Hero of his time. In his speeches, an almost mythic archetype appeared in the form of the Peasant, the commoner who preserved the virtues of the Italian lineage.

In D'Annunzio's following statements, the democratic people, however, proved themselves incapable of self-elevation, remaining servants to the mercantile bourgeoisie and becoming almost savage-like in their acts of anger and rebellion.

<sup>13</sup> Id., *Le Vergini delle Rocce*, A. De Bosis, Roma 1895.

<sup>14</sup> Id., *Il caso Wagner*, in «La Tribuna», 23 July, 1893.

<sup>15</sup> Id., *Elogio di Enrico Nencioni*, in «La Tribuna», 1 September, 1896.

In 1898, revolts broke out in various parts of Italy against the high cost of living. This so-called “Spring of Blood” was branded by the poet as a manifestation of the reckless masses. D’Annunzio approved without hesitation the repression at the hands of the troops of General Fiorenzo Bava Beccaris, since he saw this «revolution with no heroes» as a revolt of the «feminine and childish plebs» that left behind worthless destruction and terror. It was a revolt of «drunken slaves» that threatened the destruction, as it happened in Florence, of artistic masterpieces and therefore, in extension, of the entire Latin civilisation. D’Annunzio’s indictment ideally combined the condemnation of crimes against the army and crimes against Beauty: «All the bloodshed was not enough to avenge such infamy. No people had ever denied before the inherent nobility of their race with a more infamous act»<sup>16</sup>.

His parliamentary experience (1898-1900) was characterised by his absence from Parliament and by very few interventions. The only exception was the famous *Salto della siepe* (hedge jump) to protest the appointment to Prime Minister of the leader of the Conservative Right Luigi Pelloux. D’Annunzio considered him a fearful and accommodating choice, typically bourgeois, who aimed at preserving the *status quo* rather than favouring institutional change. For this reason, on 24 March 1900 he, as a member of the majority, took part in the obstructionist practices promoted by the oppositions against new laws that were limiting political freedoms. Three days later, he passed with a blatant gesture to the benches of the Left. He did not share with the Left, as he himself underlined, socialist ideas on social and economic policy, but he appreciated «their destructive and anti-liberal effort», and the moral fervour with which they defended their claims<sup>17</sup>. For D’Annunzio, the mediocre tendency towards immobility of conservative circles was even more dangerous than the egalitarian challenge of the democratic threat.

### *Esthetic Populism (1900-10)*

The *Salto della siepe* represented a turning point in D’Annunzio’s attitude towards the masses. On his second, and failed, attempt to run for office in 1900, he gave two speeches that were more clearly populist. He abandoned his hostility towards the people, and deprecated and denounced the bad liberal administration for intertwining politics and finance, and for subordinating the judiciary power to merchant bourgeois interests. His disgust for “the plebs” turned into a paternalistic benevolence for the humble people, imagined as innocent victims of liberal elites:

None of these [elites] were ever representative of the national genius; none ever considered with a sharp eye the history of the race up to the present, nor extracted an ancient truth to be the foundation of new statutes. They did nothing but disfiguring

<sup>16</sup> Id., *The Springtime of Blood*, in «The Morning Post», 26 May, 1898.

<sup>17</sup> As quoted at p. 16 in F. Pariset, *Le aule della Camera al tempo dell'onorevole d'Annunzio*, in «Strenna dei Romanisti», n. 38, 1977, pp. 289-294.

and tampering with the sacred things that were to be instead raised on the altars of the homeland and honored with a solemn cult. And now they seek only to maintain a thick and grey mud where an ignoble multitude agitates and lives as in its natural element<sup>18</sup>.

For D'Annunzio, there was «in the multitude a hidden beauty», which only the poet-prophet could express and translate into political terms. As he wrote, «The word of the poet to the crowd is an act such as the gesture of the hero»<sup>19</sup>. In these speeches, as literary scholar Pappalardo writes:

D'Annunzio's populism takes its first, unequivocal test: the idealisation of the subordinate classes (in which, once again, his habit of representing reality and life as imitating Art returns), will lead to a different vision of Italian society, to the discovery and enhancement of the popular dimension of the Risorgimento, and therefore to the redefinition of national identity itself<sup>20</sup>.

A new combination of elitism and populism was also linked to a new artistic attitude. D'Annunzio “discovered” the pedagogical and psychological effectiveness of the theatre and its remarkable capacity to influence people. Thus, his literary production changed to embrace dramatic and play-like structures and more explicitly lower-class characters. In *La figlia di Iorio*, written in 1903 and staged in 1904, the term «people» appears 11 times in the 4th scene of the third act, always accompanied by the adjective «righteous». «The Righteous People» are also mentioned in his following works, in which the masses stopped to be depicted as in waiting and in adoration, but became «living», «ardent», «great», «resurrected», and, above all, «Latin»<sup>21</sup>.

In this theatre-based period characterised by what could be called an aesthetic populism, D'Annunzio multiplied the public readings of his works, continually appealing to the mythical idea of a “Latin people” that was no longer accessory to or guilty of social decadence, but that was instead forced to live an anonymous existence in a democratic society. In D'Annunzio's rhetoric, the people began to take on more concrete characteristics, transforming into a group of intellectuals, farmers, seafarers and soldiers. Peasants still stood out as a true «healthy bloodline, strengthened by the sun and purified by the wind» and as the most genuine representatives of the Italian race. He also, for the first time, addressed industrial workers, inviting them to abandon professional politicians, to not to give in to democratic enticements, and to follow the genius of the race, as revealed by the Poet. To solve the contradictions of modernity, D'Annunzio proposed to overcome the hiatus between the working class and the nation. In this ideological operation, Gramsci identified a sort of “National

<sup>18</sup> G. D'Annunzio, *Della mia Legislatura*, in «Il Giorno», 29 March, 1900.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> F. Pappalardo, *Popolo nazione stirpe: la retorica civile di Gabriele d'Annunzio (1888-1915)*, Pietro Lacaita, Manduria 2016, p. 76.

<sup>21</sup> G. D'Annunzio, *Laudi del cielo del mare della terra e degli eroi. Libro primo, Maia*, Fratelli Treves, Milano 1903; id., *Laudi del cielo del mare della terra e degli eroi. Libro secondo, Elettra*, Fratelli Treves, Milano 1904.

Socialism”, recalling a type of *ante litteram* populism meant for creating an illiberal and inter-class block to fulfil the imperialist mission of a “Third Rome”<sup>22</sup>.

References to the imperialist spirit that tied the Latin lineage and its imperialist right to the Adriatic Sea reappeared in his new tragedy<sup>23</sup>. On 11 January 1908, as guest of honour at a royal banquet, three days after the premiere of *La Nave*, he proposed a toast in which he linked the success of his work and the ambition to recover the «lost» and «Latin» lands from the dominion of «Slavic barbarians» in Dalmatia and Istria. D’Annunzio justified this project of control of the East with imperialist and spiritual positions: «Above all we have a terrible and superb moral problem concerning the true essence of our race and of our most immediate destiny»<sup>24</sup>.

### *Warlike Populism (1911-18)*

The imperialist nature of D’Annunzio’s populism became even clearer on the occasion of the Libyan expedition. In 1911, the war against Turkey catalyzed all nationalist currents<sup>25</sup>, and even poets like Giovanni Pascoli, hailing from a socialist culture, spoke and wrote in favour of Italian interests<sup>26</sup>. D’Annunzio gave an original tone to the campaign in favour of the intervention. Among the ten *Canzoni d’Oltremare* that he wrote and that were dedicated to the war of 1911, *La Canzone dei Dardanelli* stood out<sup>27</sup>. In it, the idea of the Latin lineage as a bulwark against the “Turkish barbarians” blended with that of the need to fight the hegemonic ambitions of the other European powers, especially of the British Empire and Germany. His typically expansionist pattern broadened, twisting in religious terms the importance of the Italian mission. He repeated the usual references to the need of crusades against infidels and to superior Christian rights, while for the first time an ideological call to a new national community, consecrated by empire, war and patriotic fervour, appeared: «A true religious faith shakes our souls in these days of awakening, in which the Nation is assaulting the future not only with its new strength, but also with the faith and the energy of the past»<sup>28</sup>. It was, as Benedetto Croce has showed, a process of sacralisation of the homeland intimately connected with the experience of war: «The bread of war – made with pure hands – is a bread

<sup>22</sup> A. Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere*, v. 2, (1930-1933), a c. di V. Gerratana, Einaudi, Torino 2001, pp. 796-797.

<sup>23</sup> G. D’Annunzio, *La Nave*, Fratelli Treves, Milano 1908.

<sup>24</sup> J.R. Woodhouse, *Gabriele D’Annunzio*, cit., pp. 239-240.

<sup>25</sup> E. Gentile, *Il mito dello Stato nuovo*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1982; E. Papadia, *Nel nome della nazione. L’Associazione nazionalista italiana in età giolittiana*, Archivio Guido Izzo, Roma 2006; *Nazione e anti-nazione*, v. 2, *Il movimento nazionalista dalla guerra di Libia al fascismo (1911-1923)*, a c. di P.S. Salvatori, Viella, Roma 2016.

<sup>26</sup> G. Pascoli, *La grande proletaria si è mossa*, in id., *Limpido rivo. Prose e poesie presentate da Maria ai figli giovanetti d’Italia*, Zanichelli, Bologna 1922, pp. 218-229.

<sup>27</sup> G. D’Annunzio, *La Canzone dei Dardanelli*, in *Laudi del cielo del mare della terra e degli eroi. Libro quarto, Merope*, Fratelli Treves, Milano 1917, pp. 109-132.

<sup>28</sup> E. Scaglione, *La conquista libica nell’arte, nell’industria e nel commercio*, Bideri, Napoli 1913 p. 3.

of communion – where the entire transubstantiated homeland lives – like the body of the Redeemer – in Eucharistic offering»<sup>29</sup>.

The people were not only a theatre audience, who received passively the word of the Poet-Hero from a political stage, but were also the active followers of a Church, and received the sermon of the Poet-Priest from the altar of war. Compared to other nationalists, D'Annunzio's message was paradoxically more universal because it gained its legitimacy in both religious and aesthetic spaces and contexts, presenting itself as eternal rather than historically bound. The goal was not to defend and expand traditional values and institutions, but to propose a new and more modern sacred link between war and the Nation, as an instrument for the emancipation of the people from their moral misery.

Military commitment represented the best way to foster the spiritual elevation of the people without the mediation of representative bodies and political parties. Patriotic communion rites could be officiated in main public squares, the ideal stages for D'Annunzio's performances. In 1914-15, after returning from France, he was one of the main protagonists of the interventionist campaign that led Italy to enter the First World War. In every speech given, his communication strategy remained the same, with the people defined both in opposition to political representatives and in participation to the cult of the Nation. His attacks were oriented towards a widespread anti-Giolittian sentiment or were a political criticism of the government's choices, stressing the legitimacy of violent and masses-based power that was willing to unhinge the liberal state from its foundations:

On 20 May, in the solemn assembly of our [National] Unity, the impudent presence of those who, for months and months, have bartered Italian will with the enemy must not be tolerated. [...] Write down your list of proscription, with no mercy. You have the Right, nay, you have the civic Duty to do it. Who saved Italy, in these days of darkness, but you, the real People, the genuine People? [...] Ring the Bell and Flock! Today the Capitoline Hill is yours, as when the People took over, eight centuries ago, and established its power there. Oh Romans, this is the real Parliament. Here and today war is deliberated and proclaimed by you. Ring the Bell!

Parliamentary power passed to the people, but only by virtue of their bellicose will:

“Stop! Stop!” is today's password. Stop the delay, stop the subterfuge, stop the quibble, stop the reticence, stop the slyness, stop every kind of cowardice, every kind of shame. Stop, finally, everything that is not Italian. This is your will, nay, your command. We will meet again before sundown. Viva the People of Rome, Fathers of the Homeland<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> B. Croce, recensione a *In Gabrielem D'Annunzio stultis comparationibus Sacram Eucharistiam offendentem, Objugatorium carmen cum italica paraphrasi*, in «La Critica», n. 18, 1920, pp. 121-122.

<sup>30</sup> G. D'Annunzio, *Per la più grande Italia. Orazioni e messaggi*, Fratelli Treves, Milano 1915, p. 100.



During the war, D'Annunzio faced the enemy first-hand, getting quite a name for his reckless air and naval missions, and fostering a myth of heroes and martyrs. He also concentrated his efforts on creating and stabilizing popular consensus for the army, and on refining his elaborate system of myths, symbols, rites and slogans. In this operation he was supported by military hierarchies and by a part of the political system, which identified in him the most capable agent for heroising the war effort and for countering pacifist tendencies. They however underestimated that D'Annunzio did not intend to limit himself to giving moral support to the internal and international front, but rather that he was cultivating within the war the founding moment for a new world order.

### *Revolutionary Populism (1918-20)*

At the end of the war, D'Annunzio stepped back into the political arena and became the promoter of the campaign against Italy's "mutilated victory". Violent attacks to the state of the peace negotiations undergoing in Paris, that did not recognise all of Italy's territorial claims, had not only diplomatic implications. They were also accompanied by a strong opposition to demobilisation that, according to D'Annunzio, would have led to the reconstruction of pre-war liberal society, based on the separation between civil society and the army, and between the People and the Nation. For D'Annunzio war was an instrument for the elevation of the people because it taught the cult of the Nation and the importance of the ultimate self-sacrifice. Because of this, he wanted to re-cast warfare into civil society to definitively overwhelm the liberal system.

The national revolution was thus no longer an exclusive revolt of the elites, but the consequence of a popular movement capable of better expressing itself through new military and intellectual vanguards. D'Annunzio announced that the experience of the war had forged a new "noble people", young and combative, peasant and soldier, directed by interventionist leaders, poets-warriors, and military elites, defined by D'Annunzio as the new "noble people" because of their participation in the conflict.

On 5 May 1919, during a speech in Rome, he stressed the necessary imperialist mission to the eastern borders, framed as a sacred Eucharistic communion with the people. He had eaten the «bread of Fiume that had been sent just for me to Trieste and from Trieste to Venice» and he felt ready to «break and multiply that bread which was truly soaked with bloody sweat!»<sup>31</sup>. The blood of martyrs fallen in war mixed with the sacred ground of the homeland and shaped a new "noble people" finally capable of making the Nation grow: «A nation that births such heroes can look to the whole future as the field reserved for its seed».

Members of "noble people" could become the protagonists of the insurrection against the established order by placing themselves outside of and against the liberal State and its legal forms: «Just as the People preceded the State in proclaiming war, so must the State advance in achieving its purification, its revelation, and its under-

<sup>31</sup> Id., *La penultima ventura*, v. 1, *Il sudore di sangue*, L'Oleandro, Roma 1931, p. 132.

standing». D'Annunzio would have wanted once and for all «to clearly separate the virtue of the people from the ineptitude of the (democratic) leaders»<sup>32</sup>. «Command passes to the People» he stated, and it would be necessary to bring down the liberal government and «the political caste trying by any means to prolong disfigured and scorned forms of life».

According to D'Annunzio, the Rijeka occupation of 12 September 1919 – demanded by the local Italian community and accomplished with a heterogeneous army composed by deserters and volunteers (the so-called Legionaries) – was not only a symbolic denunciation of the failure of diplomatic negotiations, but also the triumph of this new “noble people”. The political system of “sovereign dictatorship”<sup>33</sup>, as the state of exception of the occupation in Rijeka was defined, was the most suitable to favour the affirmation of a mature populist vision.

The tools to strengthen the “noble people” were various: the heroization of Legionaries, who had to become the prototype for the new Italians, the praise of disobedience as a complete break from liberal-democratic laws, the satirical representation of the liberal ruling classes, the plebiscitary relationship with the citizens of Rijeka, seen as a small-scale representation of Italians as a whole, and the stress of a concrete internal enemy (socialists and autonomists) as well as an external one (Yugoslavs).

Community ceremonies with the Legionary army grew increasingly frequent in the form of patriotic rites and military training. Attempts to establish a connection with the population of Rijeka were also constant, taking the form of public speeches from the balcony of the Governors' Palace, parades in uniform, and flags displays on private and public buildings. Militarisation and sacralisation processes became even more evident after December 1919, when populism took on an explicitly revolutionary character. Some of D'Annunzio's politically moderate emissaries and representatives of the Italian government had signed a *modus vivendi* to guarantee the end of the occupation. The agreement was rejected by the more extremist fringes of the Legionaries and by D'Annunzio himself, who feared the return to normality and the stabilisation of the political situation in Italy. The text was then entrusted to a popular consultation, a real plebiscite through which the Italian-speaking citizens of Rijeka would decide whether or not the occupation would continue. A large majority voted in favour of the *modus vivendi*, disavowing D'Annunzio and the Legionaries. The Commander disregarded the verdict, cancelled the outcome of the vote and decided to remain in Rijeka even against the will of the Italian-speaking citizens. However, this was a sharp setback for D'Annunzio's populist project, since once Rijeka's civil society was lost, and the consensus of Italian public opinion faded, the only “noble people” who remained at his side were the Legionaries, in their twofold role of representatives of the profoundest national will and of concrete authors of D'Annunzio's spiritual revolution.

After the plebiscitary vote, the occupation of Rijeka assumed the character of ideological laboratory even more. D'Annunzio temporarily lost the chance to chan-

<sup>32</sup> Id., *Il comando passa al popolo*, in «Idea Nazionale», 23 June 1919.

<sup>33</sup> E. Serventi Longhi, *La «dittatura sovrana» di Fiume. Innovazioni politiche, sociali ed economiche (1919-1920)*, in «Mondo Contemporaneo», n. 2, 2016, pp. 139-167.

ge political balances and to demolish the liberal order. The archetype of the “noble people” was internationalised by deploying a rhetoric of the oppressed peoples against the plutocratic and capitalist powers, guilty of corrupting genuine national and popular sentiments. This anti-plutocratic discourse served D’Annunzio’s imperialism, that attempted to transform Rijeka, by virtue of the alleged moral superiority of the “noble people”, into a beacon for a new world order for every small nation oppressed by liberalism and international plutocracy. Representatives from countries with different religions and ideologies were contacted, such as Catholic Ireland and Islamic Egypt, and even the rights of German minorities in Czechoslovakia and Croatian minorities in Yugoslavia were supported, in open hostility to Anglo-American powers and to the new nations born after the war<sup>34</sup>.

The synthesis of the experience was entrusted to a Constitution (the so-called *Carta del Carnaro*), prepared in March and promulgated in September 1920, when D’Annunzio formally established the Free State of Fiume, also called *Reggenza del Carnaro*. The text was intended as a sort of sacred book of the revolution of Fiume and had clear references to D’Annunzio’s populist vision. Several articles referred to a «perpetual popular will», to self-determination, and to a «genuine government of the people». The masses would thus finally be «freed from a uniform regime of constraints and lies», namely the liberal system, and would regain their freedom by raising the right of the Nation, conveying a revolutionary conception of the State and of public authorities. Of particular interest is the part dedicated to the *State of Exception* which explicitly established a more or less transitory dictatorship of a Commander, who would assume all political, military, legislative and executive powers «when the *Reggenza* is in extreme danger, and finds its health in the devoted will of the One who knows how to gather, excite and lead the people through the struggle and victory». Finally, the fate of the “sovereign people” was inextricably linked to the definition and defence of the borders of the motherland. The *Carta del Carnaro*, the sacred book of the Legionaries, was, in fact, the «perpetual advocate and defender of the Alpine terms marked by God and Rome»<sup>35</sup>.

### *Waning Populism (1921-22)*

Around Christmas 1920, a few weeks after the promulgation of the *Carta del Carnaro*, the occupation of Rijeka ended abruptly with the violent eviction of the Legionaries by Italian troops. In the historiographic analysis, it has emerged that the main effect of the enterprise was to politicise in subversive terms large portions of the army. Such cultural earthquake fostered the *squadristo* and widened the basis of Fascist consensus.

After a long silence of more than two years, D’Annunzio reappeared in October 1922 on the balcony of Palazzo Marino in Milan: he promoted the pacification and

<sup>34</sup> M. Cuzzi, *Tra autodeterminazione e imperialismo: la Lega di Fiume*, in *L’Italia e la «grande vigilia»*, cit., pp. 129-164.

<sup>35</sup> *La Carta del Carnaro nei testi di Alceste De Ambris e di Gabriele D’Annunzio*, a c. di R. De Felice, il Mulino, Bologna 1973, p. 35.

restoration of a national community that the civil war between Fascists and anti-Fascists was tearing apart:

Here we are, before the strength of the race, the goodness of the race, the task of the race. Here, in the midst of the creative people, creative energy rises. Here, the people feel, in actual and profound reality, how their destiny is beyond what is consumed, dissolved, and perished. There is today a part of Italy that lives following its guts, that wants to deny victory, that wants to deny the martyrs, that wants to corrupt the youth, that wants to turn into beasts, that wants to feed like livestock in the stables. But there is also a part of Italy that looks up and ahead, that is re-learning the Roman art of building thoroughfares, multiplying them and extending them towards remote horizons and ideal destinations. There is also a part of Italy that remembers, that recognises, that affirms, that works, that operates, that waits, that suffers, and that from its suffering gains its courage, that dares and from its daring does its duty. [...] Today it is not healthy to be outside the Nation, or to be against the Nation. Work is sterile if it does not contribute to the power of the Nation. Every will, every effort, every attempt is sterile if it is not subordinated to the law of the Nation. We do not breathe; it is the Nation that breathes in us. We do not live; it is the Homeland that lives in us. The stronger we are, the stronger our country is. The greater our Homeland is, the greater we are<sup>36</sup>.

D'Annunzio was hoping to preserve the heroic heritage of the war and of the *impresa di Fiume*, and to not see the cult of the Nation degraded by socialism, or appropriated by other parties and other factions, like the Fascists. Yet, in a moment of fundamental crisis for the liberal system, D'Annunzio never mind the problem of the conquest of the State. His populist imperialism had matured over the years but continued to remain anchored to extra-state terrain. The very idea of revolution was linked to a sacred and military conception of power without concrete references to government and administration. The formal State was vilified if liberal, but in its authoritarian, dictatorial or socialist versions it was also substantially rejected as a rational and cold shell bound to depress the strength of the Homeland, denying the authentic genius of the race and the very authentic role of the "noble people".

But the same Legionaries, the core of his "people", were fatally attracted to Fascism because it provided a concrete and viable direction to the revolution that the poet had advocated for, albeit in a different way. Fascism foresaw and sought, with less "pure" or "heroic" means, the conquest of the public authorities. Thus, D'Annunzio's spiritual populism went out of fashion and was supplanted by a more complete form of State dictatorship, that was ready to use his original rhetoric and rituals, and even his populist schemes, bending them to a regime destined to become not populist or anti-liberal, as so much definitely totalitarian.

<sup>36</sup> G. D'Annunzio, *Il libro ascetico della giovane Italia*, L'Olivetana, Milano 1926, p. 164.