



## I redentori della vittoria: On Fiume's Place in the Genealogy of Fascism

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*I redentori della vittoria: On Fiume's Place  
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**'But is it not true** that the best of the movement called "fascist" was engendered by my spirit? Did I not announce today's national uprising forty years ago — and has not the leader of Ronchi promoted it ever since? So how can I be your enemy? And how can you be mine?'<sup>1</sup> These sentences from a letter that Gabriele D'Annunzio wrote to Benito Mussolini on 9 January 1923, five weeks after the fascist seizure of power, are pervaded with resentment. Playing with the semantics of his name (Annunzio=I announce), the poet took credit for, with his march from Ronchi to Fiume in September 1919, having both renewed the spirit of Garibaldi's March on Rome in 1862 and foreshadowed the 'national uprising' of Mussolini's March on Rome in October 1922. The notion of a second March on Rome had indeed arisen during the fifteen and a half months that Fiume was occupied.<sup>2</sup> But, while the idea's realization had elevated Mussolini to the role of Prime Minister, the one-time Commander of Fiume had been left to languish since the end of his Adriatic regency in the golden cage of the 'Triumphal' on Lake Garda — a villa still known at that time as the 'Hermitage of Cargnacco'.<sup>3</sup> Although he had good personal reasons for feeling used by Mussolini,<sup>4</sup> D'Annunzio publicly celebrated the Duce as the fulfiller of his enterprise and attempted to characterize his situation as a freely chosen act of renunciation: 'I will give you all my strength and patience, in silence, without asking, without ambition.' Only a few lines later in the same letter, however, this reserve transformed itself into an assertion of historical grandeur. The office he held at the time as 'public representative for naval workers' took on messianic attributes. His fate, he claimed, was to be the 'saviour of the workers'. And his promise was no less grandiose: 'I will help the workers to achieve redemption.'<sup>5</sup>

In the wording of this letter, it is impossible to disentangle D'Annunzio's political illusions from his opportunism. Certainly,

the official historiography of the fascist state would regularly assign him a secondary role. Mussolini's biographer and lover, Margherita Sarfatti, described D'Annunzio's famous actions during the first world war and the occupation of Fiume rather condescendingly as 'marvellous exploits, all of them, marked by fire and daring and originality, but also . . . in the nature of mere episodes'.<sup>6</sup> Nor have present-day historians resolved the tension between fascist historiography's devaluation of D'Annunzio's deeds and his own claim to be the inventor of fascism. According to Renzo de Felice's interpretation, for example, what stood behind Italian fascism was 'the attempt of the rising petite bourgeoisie to assert itself as a new class, as a new force', and he credits only Mussolini with having had the 'charisma' necessary to 'mobilize these masses'.<sup>7</sup> In order to explain the occupation of Fiume, then, there remains only the rather thin thesis that it was 'a symbol of the fascist movement'. This amounts to an admission of cluelessness with respect to the task of understanding the high value that the Fiume episode held for contemporaries in the genealogy of fascism. It is especially remarkable that even historians such as Renzo de Felice and Michael A. Ledeen, the authors of a series of important publications on the Fiume episode, seem to stumble when confronted with this issue.<sup>8</sup> For, at least on a pre-conceptual level, they seem to concede both Fiume and D'Annunzio a historical weight that goes beyond that of a 'mere symbol'.

In his essay on 'Fascism as a Political Religion', Emilio Gentile has opened up what is surely a more productive perspective by reminding us that fascism viewed the Risorgimento's struggle for national unity as 'an *unfinished* revolution'.<sup>9</sup> Only against this background does it become possible to interpret the series of historic marches — Garibaldi's on Rome, D'Annunzio's on Fiume and Mussolini's on Rome — as not merely a sequence of *figurae*, but rather as an increasingly complete realization of a national ambition — or, negatively put, as the gradual 'redemption' of this ambition's unfulfilled claims. Such redemption, according to Gentile, was already anticipated in the symbolic activity of early fascism: 'Prior to its seizure of power, all fascist rituals were symbolic displays of the nation's "new birth", which had been redeemed through the blood of its war heroes and through fascist martyrs.'<sup>10</sup> The precondition for such an obsession with redemption was the imagined existence of a historical space, governed by

fate, in which both the individual and collective will to power had the possibility of proving themselves.<sup>11</sup>

This political use of the term 'redemption' has a pre-history that reaches back well into the nineteenth century. Accordingly, the entry on Irredentism in the *Enciclopedia Italiana*, published between 1933 and 1941, opens with the phrase 'unredeemed territories'. The phrase had been employed by Italian patriots since 1877 with reference to the city of Trieste, which had come under Austrian rule in 1866. With surprising acuity, the encyclopaedia of the fascist state explains the success and the dynamics of this metaphor in terms of its ability to leave territorial demands unspecified so that they may be redefined at any given moment. Although the city of Fiume was added to the catalogue of demands comparatively late, it was the Fiume episode that ensured that the concept of Irredentism became 'the direct and visible conjunction between the Revival [i.e. Risorgimento] and Fascism'. In other words, fascism took shape around the Risorgimental conviction that the morally and historically legitimate claims of the nation for the re-establishment of a happy (but unspecified) past were yet to be redeemed. The complexity of the Encyclopaedia's thesis about the double relationship between the Risorgimento and fascism on the one hand, and between the city of Fiume and the concept of Irredentism on the other, far exceeds the current interpretation of the Fiume episode as a mere 'symbol of fascism'. The point is confirmed by eyewitness reports. For Corrado Zoli, a former Secretary of State in the Foreign Ministry of Fiume, and D'Annunzio's most trusted confidant in the last months of the 'Regency', the adventure of the years 1919 and 1920 was not merely 'a wonderful field of experimentation',<sup>12</sup> but rather, above all, the historical period in which 'the consciousness of the victory of the first world war was rediscovered'<sup>13</sup> — precisely because this victory had not given Italy control over Fiume. The same feeling that an obstacle had to be removed in order truly to reap the reward of a victory 'achieved in the carnage of the battlefield' led D'Annunzio to describe the Fiuman legionnaires with the very formula featured in this article's title: 'i redentori della vittoria' (the redeemers of victory).<sup>14</sup>

In the following pages I attempt to show that the interplay between the hope for redemption, the act of redemption and the postponement of its attendant reward was constitutive of fascism's historical outlook and thereby also of its modes of

action. It was just these components that distinguished fascism from other political movements which relied on teleological models of a continuous development toward a final historical goal. In addition, I argue that it was primarily during the occupation of Fiume that the Risorgimental concept of national redemption was adapted to the new political, social and intellectual conditions of the early 1920s. This leads me to concur with D'Annunzio's claims regarding the 'invention of fascism in Fiume'.

There was, of course, no explicit fascist theory or philosophy of redemption. Rather what we have is a dynamic of emotions and expectations that came together out of overlapping and gaps between central terms and images in the language of fascist politicians. While it is my concern to make visible such unspoken or unwritten elements in fascism's fascination with redemption, it is safe to assume that, because of their Catholic socialization, the adherents of D'Annunzio and Mussolini found it easy enough to hear or read 'between the lines'. Coming to grips with what it meant to trust in redemption after 1918 should help us to understand the rise of fascism (and not only in Italy). Scarcely twenty years later such hope in redemption had already become transformed into a self-destructive 'compulsion to redemption' that, for its part, made an essential contribution to the redemption of Europe from fascism.

### Redemption Theology<sup>15</sup>

A short discussion of redemption theology is necessary in order to understand the distinctive forms redemption assumed under fascism. Despite all efforts to fix it dogmatically, the term 'redemption' is every bit as hard to pin down in the theological context as it is in its later political use. Redemption myths can be occupied by alternative elements of content, while the basic model of time constitution, however, remains constant. Redemption presupposes an ideal past, the memory of which remains intense enough to keep the wish alive for its restitution in the future. Between that past and a present experienced as deficient there lies an event that explains the interruption of the ideal starting condition. In the realm of Judeo-Christian culture this space-in-between is almost always occupied by a sin, for which the

sinners and their descendants are punished by a transcendental power. Functional equivalents of 'original sin' can also be one-sided decisions or even conspiracies of unjust deities and powers.

Acts of redemption make possible a return to the happy starting condition. Such acts offer either satisfaction to the gods for the offence they suffered through the sin, or (as the Latin word 'redemption' indicates) an actual payment as a prize attached to the return to happiness. Satisfaction as well as repurchase are achieved through sacrificial offerings made by those who have been punished with the loss of the ideal condition. When it is gods that must be satisfied, redemption is never achieved via simple repayment. In these cases an act of self-mutilation on the part of the sinner is usually required. Such self-mutilation can be seen as a radical form of self-purification, which in turn leads to a variation in which, instead of self-purification, an aggressive act of redemption turns itself against 'impure' others.

I have already mentioned that a redeemed state hardly ever follows directly upon the act of redemption. In principle, the act of redemption only procures the certainty that redemption will occur some time in the future. The hiatus between the act of redemption and the arrival of redemption itself is 'bridged' by signs that both recall the act of redemption and announce the condition of being redeemed. Wherever the act of redemption occurs as a sacrifice and the sacrifice occurs as an act of self-mutilation, images of scars, amputated bodies, blood and corpses dominate the iconography of religions based on redemption myths. Redemptive actions are without exception *representative* actions. Thus, persons who were not even born at the time of their occurrence can always profit from them. Additionally, since the severity of redemptive sacrifice inevitably underscores the strength of the collective or individual subject of redemption, this subject normally comes to take on an aura of transcendental dignity. On the other hand, redemptive figures can never belong exclusively to a supernatural sphere since they would then no longer be able to stand in as representatives of the people to be redeemed. Redeemers thus typically possess semi-divine status. Where the loss of their life is the necessary sacrifice, the rites of the Mass and the Eucharist ensure that sinners who are being redeemed 'gain a share of the expiatory power of their death'.<sup>16</sup>

The complexity of the redemptive action is now further increased in that not only is it a representative action, but its

primary intention — the return to the ideal condition of the community — is never achieved in a direct fashion. The hoped-for restitution of a happy past can only be effected by a transcendental power who must be fully satisfied by the sacrificial offering. Because this usually results in a deferral between the time of redemptive action and its redeeming effects, redemptive actions often contrast with everyday actions inasmuch as they yield no immediate result. Hence the sense of composure displayed by subjects caught up in redemption dramas. For them direct results are necessarily precluded. So the form of their action becomes more important than its outcome; or, to be more precise, fulfilment of their actions depends upon the degree of perfection achieved by the *form* of execution. In many cases, an essential component of this form of execution is the place where the redemptive action is carried out. It can be the site of original sin or that of the humiliation whose effects are to be suspended; it can also be the place to which the community will return after its redemption, or a sacred place — like an altar — that renders the redemptive action broadly visible.

Except in theodicies, redemptive actions are frequently experienced as tragic.<sup>17</sup> Tragedy becomes plausible in both the future as well as the past perspectives, since those who must sacrifice themselves are often neither responsible for the original commission of sin nor in a position ever to be party to the pleasure of being redeemed. Besides original sin (in the past), one reason for such tragedy being possible (in the future) is the exceptional emphasis on chiliastic temporal models. While in Christian forms of chiliasm a reign of peace of many hundreds or even thousands of years precedes the resurrection of God as the ultimate end and goal of history, fascist redemption myths abolish the irreversibility of the condition of being redeemed. Even after the occurrence of redemption, the redeemed community can always revert to an unredeemed state. Because redemptive actions can, in this connection, never definitively avert fate, they often fall under the pressure of repetition and renewal.

It goes without saying that redemption myths had always been available in the Judeo-Christian context. How then can one explain their remarkable success during the decades around 1900, decades during which they proved a decisive factor in European politics?<sup>18</sup> In this context, one might best begin by referring to a specific historico-philosophical context. In the

second half of the nineteenth century, an increasingly aggressive problematization of the optimistic teleologies institutionalized since the Enlightenment gave rise to a collective longing for a return to a lost world of security. On top of that came the collapse of an epistemology that had offered man as Knowing Subject the prospect of a full understanding of the Objective World. The longing for a return to better times, which in Germany led to the intellectual movement known as the 'Conservative Revolution', converged with the basic temporal model of redemption myths. A world that one once believed could be observed as an Object from the safe distance of a Subject now was increasingly experienced as a world whose everydayness absorbed even those spheres that had once transcended the here and now. Such loss of confidence in the existence of a 'beyond' explains, among other things, the fascination that emerged at the end of the first world war with a vision of death no longer considered as a transition or an entry into another world, but as an integral part of life. Likewise, the loss of the 'beyond' also makes intelligible the readiness of various European societies to let themselves be misled by leaders who claimed to be the executors of transcendental forces like 'fate' or 'providence'. The plots of redemption stories — with their interactions between gods and humans and their preference for semi-divine figures — lent themselves well to this intrusion of the transcendental in the everyday. Finally, the period around 1900 saw an acceleration in the tempo of change that was perhaps never before or again experienced with such intensity in European culture. Metaphors for a 'rift' in the linear path of time articulated this impression in various contexts, and they could be readily integrated into the two sites of temporal discontinuity constitutive for redemption narratives. Thus, the feeling of a rift in time could always reconfirm the hope that one was indeed on the proper path between an act of redemption and the state of being redeemed.

#### From Redemptive Certainty to Postponement

The earliest seeds of D'Annunzio's rhetoric of redemption can be traced back to 1893, at which time, some twenty-six years after the war in which Italy lost the city of Trieste to Austria, he composed a series of poems on themes from the history of the Italian

fleet, published under the title *Odi Navali*. But it was the Italian declaration of war on the central powers on 24 May 1915 that more directly set the stage for D'Annunzio's decisive contributions during the occupation of Fiume.<sup>19</sup>

For many months the administration of Prime Minister Giolitti had resisted mounting public pressure to enter the war. For Benito Mussolini this same domestic political position had by autumn 1914 already become irreconcilable with his post as editor-in-chief of the socialist newspaper *Avanti* — and shortly thereafter he was expelled from the Socialist Party.<sup>20</sup> But it was precisely this hesitation on the part of the Italian government and its nearly one-year neutrality that created such a strong negotiating position vis-à-vis the Allies. Should victory be achieved, Italy was promised that Trieste would become a 'Free City', and that all of South Tyrol, including the Brenner Pass, Istria and its coastal islands, and much of Dalmatia, would become Italian territory. In the negotiations at Versailles that followed the war's conclusion, however, these promises were quickly abandoned in the name of the Allies' interest in establishing a sovereign Yugoslav state.<sup>21</sup> At issue also was the moral right of the eastern European nations to self-determination, the fact that the Allies agreed to the 1915 secret treaty with Italy in the context of intense military pressures, and that Italy's vulnerability along its eastern flank had been eliminated by the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It goes without saying that Italian society, which had fallen into a deep economic and political crisis after the demobilization of the army and the end of industrial war production, experienced this breach of the treaty as a national slight. All the more so, since the Italian government had no negotiating power which would have allowed it to influence its former allies more favourably. That in this bungled situation the city of Fiume (which had not even been mentioned in the treaties of 1915) should emerge as the emblem of Italy's national humiliation and longing for redemption, is one of the great ironies of early twentieth-century European history.

What made the postwar disappointment so tangible for the Italians was the sudden upsurge of images of bodily mutilation and of rebirth. It is in these terms of imagery that, as can be seen in a letter dated 1 January 1919 from Mussolini to D'Annunzio, the fascist programme was already taking shape:

Our ideas converge in three fundamental points:

1. We will not allow victory to be mutilated — neither in the name of democracy nor in the name of a Croatian version of Wilson's politics.
2. Starting from the land of Victory, it is necessary to undertake a profound renovation of our national life.
3. We have to close the street to those who committed sabotage during the war.<sup>22</sup>

Since the end of the war, disabled bodies and the hope of their restitution were no longer merely motifs embedded within distant mythologies. A mutilated body had become the concrete reality for around a million war veterans, and therein might have lain an essential reason for the maimed soldiers' inclination to embrace fascist discourses founded upon concepts of redemption. No one tapped such collective feelings with more inventiveness than Gabriele D'Annunzio. He described the national situation in sharply paradoxical terms, as when he spoke of 'a pledge taken back by the conquerors of the conquered',<sup>23</sup> or complained in an article for the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, 'This victory cost us a million dead and maimed soldiers, and another million injured and weakened people.'<sup>24</sup> With an air of outrage, D'Annunzio refused to consider the war over until a redeemed state had been achieved as a reward for Italy's costly sacrifices: 'Not only has our war not ended — it has only now reached its climax.'<sup>25</sup> Above all, the poet never wearied of bringing before his countrymen's eyes the bodily pains experienced so directly in the postwar years, to serve as a token of the national situation: 'I and my companions don't want to be Italians in an Italy that has become stupid from the transatlantic care packages of Dr Wilson and that is amputated by the transalpine surgery of Dr Clemenceau.'<sup>26</sup> To the association between war-damaged bodies and the damaged nation D'Annunzio explicitly added the further denotation of Christian myths of redemption. Thus the bodies of the disabled veterans were discursively construed as holy signs of the national sacrifice and were consecrated as offerings. Not coincidentally, D'Annunzio maintained that he had witnessed the following scene in the church of San Giorgio in Venice:

A poor foot-soldier in his beige coat entered; and with his hat in his hand he stopped in front of the iron bars. He had a scar on his forehead, and his arms were invisible. And I remembered the foot-soldiers of the Carso, those who had perhaps just the Adriatic winds to quench their thirst, those I had seen in the trenches . . . with only half a leg left, those whom I had seen lying on the straw in

that church at Doberdo close to the altar where instead of chalices the helmets and the boots of the dead were accumulated. Who had given the order for this to happen? The sacrifice of the Eucharist began here for me. And the clear shining blood seemed to drop down into the silence from the only lamp that was hanging high up from the ceiling. When the priest entered he was wearing this light of blood — and not his usual chasuble.<sup>27</sup>

This passage is from the *Lettera ai Dalmati*, dated 15 January 1919. It might seem surprising that D'Annunzio prefaced such a florid text with praise for military-rhetorical *brevitas*. 'You all know how reluctant I am to do this easy kind of mass-preaching. And I don't have to apologize for it because I have so often spoken in a few words to companions who were ready to depart.'<sup>28</sup> With the remark that he needed no self-justification, D'Annunzio was in fact justifying his refusal to speak at a mass rally the next day.

Such scenes of delay were typical of D'Annunzio's public appearances in the spring of 1919.<sup>29</sup> It would be inadequate to explain them away as little more than tricks to increase the public standing of his person and his words — inadequate because D'Annunzio was doubtless aware that individual actions could not accelerate the advent of redemption. Even if guaranteed by a sacrifice that has been made and accepted, the actual event of redemption is necessarily projected into an open future.<sup>30</sup> This imposes the need for patient waiting and the time of waiting can be filled with words — words that, however inadequate, consecrate redemption actions and announce the impending advent of a redeemed state. It was this ambivalence between silence and proliferating speech within the paradoxical temporal logic of redemptive theology that soon came to dominate D'Annunzio's behaviour during the occupation of Fiume. On 25 April 1919 — the day of San Marco, the Patron Saint of Venice — the theatricals of D'Annunzio's public appearance were already moving according to such paradoxical sequences:

The machine gun is silent as long as the storm of the battle does not penetrate. This flag of Fiume does not speak — it gives orders: from the depths of the centuries it gives orders to the future, like that *condottiere* who returned, like that bronze statue of Alexander the Great on his horse. Like an armoury, it does not move. For a spear, it has the will of a free people. It will only have a voice in the most intense moment of our joy, tomorrow.

*Great acclamation. Voice 'long live Fiume!'*

And the flag of the Dalmatians turns back to its traditional colour this morning:

its colour is red. This morning red prevails in all our flags. Who cares about green? Who cares about hope? We no longer hope, we demand. Do you understand? We demand. Speak this word after me.

*Everybody shouts: 'We demand!'*

Repeating this in flesh and in spirit, each of you — even the most modest — creates a new destiny.

*People shout once again: 'We demand.'*

This is enough.<sup>31</sup>

D'Annunzio's text plays with the semantic difference between hoping (waiting) and wanting, though from the reaction of the crowd one might guess that it was perceiving the far more dramatic contrast between hoping (waiting) and acting (deeds). This misunderstanding results from the overlap between the redemption myth and the expectations of the 'disabled nation' upon which D'Annunzio's postwar rhetoric was based. From the redemptive perspective, the sacrifice that was to ensure that redemption would be achieved had already been accomplished via the sufferings of the first world war, as a result of which the advent of collective happiness could now be patiently awaited. (no additional deeds were required). This was the prospect that justified D'Annunzio's procrastination. The view of the patriots who were outraged by the Treaty of Versailles, however, differed sharply and they demanded not words, but deeds from their idol. The distinction between hoping and wanting in D'Annunzio's speech on 25 April 1919 thus seemed to be a concession to public expectations of action, but his words' strategic function was precisely *not* to issue a call to action.

Such interference between the mythology of redemption and a public longing for action helps us to understand why, on the one hand, rumours were proliferating in the summer of 1919 that D'Annunzio was already involved in planning a coup or, at least, an assault on Fiume,<sup>32</sup> while on the other, the poet himself was operating on the assumption that he would be participating in an airplane 'raid' to Tokyo in the autumn. In the end, a small group of Fiuman agitators must have succeeded in persuading him that he could no longer postpone the moment of action. Nonetheless, D'Annunzio set numerous conditions before agreeing to lead the March on Fiume. He demanded that he be received by the entire population upon his entering the city; he reserved for himself the rank of commander; and he fixed the date of 11 September for his unsurprising surprise attack, convinced as he was that the 11th of

each month brought him good luck. Upon his arrival in Ronchi, a village to the west of Fiume where the marching columns were gathering, D'Annunzio was overcome by fever. He then discovered that the truck which was supposed to be carrying his sharpshooters had not arrived. But the danger — or the chance — of a further postponement was frustrated by Guido Keller, a first world war ace in the Italian air force whom D'Annunzio was soon to name his 'Action Secretary'. Within a few hours Keller was able to rustle up twenty-six trucks from a nearby transportation depot. The march and the occupation of Fiume finally unfolded without any enemy contact, but not without the sort of theatrical gestures of which D'Annunzio had long been the unchallenged master. For example, as the government-loyal General Pittaluga, merely following commands, ordered the marching column to turn back, the poet-commander offered him his own highly-decorated breast with the — scarcely daring — invitation to let Italian soldiers take their aim at him, the patriotic hero. But above all, D'Annunzio did not forget to remind his followers of his bodily sufferings: 'Everybody look at me. Yes, it is true, I have a high fever. I do not know whether my face is pale or red. But certainly a demon — my demon — is burning inside me. And as this condition does not reduce me, it only becomes a source of strength.'

Having abandoned waiting for the sake of acting, D'Annunzio seemed momentarily persuaded that he had definitively liberated Fiume, thereby not only preparing the way for national redemption, but also partly achieving this goal. It is in this manner that one must read, for example, his letter to Mussolini on the day of the mobilization, with its parallels to Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon:

My dear companion,  
the die is cast.  
I depart. Tomorrow morning I will conquer Fiume.  
May the God of Italy help us.  
With fever I get up from my bed. But I cannot defer anymore.  
Once again, the spirit will tame the miserable flesh.<sup>33</sup>

That D'Annunzio believed he had altered the course of fate is confirmed by the speech he gave on 12 September, immediately after the occupation of Fiume. In fact, the speech once again mixed verbal violence with gestures of verbal denial ('Here I am.

Today I will not say any other word.') But instead of winding up with an allusion to a more or less vague future, his text ended with a declaration that was ritually to proclaim Fiume's restitution to the Italian nation:

As volunteer, as regular soldier of all the different units, as foot soldier, as soldier of the navy, as pilot, as maimed soldier of the war, I believe that I interpret the profound anxiety of our true nation in declaring today that the city of Fiume has been given back to mother Italy for eternity.<sup>34</sup>

D'Annunzio was persuaded that his action had inexorably altered the political scene, and he now hoped to reshape the world according to his intentions. In his mind, the occupation of Fiume became a starting-point for further annexations along the eastern coast of the Adriatic.<sup>35</sup> Such restlessness seems to belong to the defining characteristics of a politics based on redemptive hopes. While within the framework of teleology-based ideologies every success can be interpreted as a single step along the lengthy road that leads to history's end-point, in redemption myths the advent of a redeemed state puts a sudden end to the narrative's motivating force. Thus, once redemption has been realized, either a fear of falling back into an unredeemed state must be activated<sup>36</sup> or a new object of potential redemption must be taken up so as to ensure that these myths retain their efficacy.

Journalistic coverage of the Fiume occupation in September and October 1919 shows that the reaction of the international public followed this logic. The story of D'Annunzio's conquest was every journalist's dream, and it is therefore not surprising that, during the second half of September 1919, many newspapers dedicated detailed articles to the latest developments in the Adriatic conflict. Within this coverage D'Annunzio emerged as the undisputed hero. What, however, considerably reduced the appeal of the Fiume adventure was the astute reaction of the Italian government, which neither was ready to give in nor fell into the trap of reacting with dramatic gestures and retaliatory actions. When, by the end of October, it had become clear that, on the one hand, D'Annunzio did not dispose of sufficient military support to resist a possible attack of the allied forces and, on the other, a negotiated integration of Fiume into Italian territory was out of the question, the press lost interest. D'Annunzio knew well that the military forces at his disposal could not support

further actions, nor would the Italian government help him rise to the rank of a sacrificial hero through a bloody liberation of the city. In this disastrous situation he had no other choice but to rely upon the enthusiasm of his adherents with deeds that — since they did not bring forth innumerable successes and could provoke no symmetrical counter-reactions — corresponded exactly to Georges Bataille's definition of the 'heterogeneous actions' typical of fascism: '*Heterogeneous* fascist action belongs to the entire set of higher forms. It makes an appeal to sentiments traditionally defined as *exalted* and *noble* and tends to constitute authority as an unconditional principle, situated above any utilitarian judgment.'<sup>37</sup>

It was the business of the 'Action Secretary' Guido Keller to think up and execute spectacular and often bizarre actions in order to supply D'Annunzio's speeches with 'poetic' material. By September 1919 Keller had already written to the psychiatric institutions of Italy asking them to release all their non-dangerous patients and send them to Fiume.<sup>38</sup> There were public celebrations of the coups (*colpi di mano*) in which he forced ships passing Fiume to unload their weapon and food cargoes — although the pirated weapons proved of little use and neither the Allies nor the Italian government had interrupted the food supplies to the occupied city. On 14 November 1920, Keller went so far as to throw an inscribed chamber-pot from his airplane onto the Roman parliament. The inscription read: 'Guido Keller — shining wing of action — offers to the parliament and to the government who only survive through time, lies, and fear, the concrete allegory of their value.'<sup>39</sup> Such politically ineffectual actions cloaked the protagonists of Fiume in an aura of aesthetic self-admiration. In essence, Keller's goal became 'to assault Europe with daring and elegance',<sup>40</sup> and he celebrated D'Annunzio's style with words whose hyperbole surpassed even the commander's own: 'He has a behaviour that reveals the style of the discipline of will which reigns over his lyric and his mystic soul. He is an artist whose inspiration has made dreams real.'<sup>41</sup>

But this aesthetic of action, gesture and style only made it clear that D'Annunzio's enterprise had, by autumn 1919, retreated behind the threshold that he had hesitantly crossed in spring. Since the March on Fiume did not lead to redemption proper, all subsequent actions exhausted themselves as merely symbolic. The Fiume adventure had to be reinterpreted as a ritual sacrifice,

and the advent of a redeemed state had to be postponed yet again. This tendency to discover the deeper meaning of failed actions in a hint of future salvation was eventually to develop into one of the core points of fascist propaganda. In the *Carta del Carnaro*, the Fiuman constitution proclaimed on 18 September 1920, D'Annunzio even created a sacred 'estate' dedicated to waiting for the arrival of a redeemed future:

The tenth [estate] does not have an art or a number or a word of its own. Its plenitude is being expected as that of the tenth Muse. It is dedicated to the mysterious forces of the people in labour and on the rise. It is like a sculpture consecrated to the unknown genius, to the apparition of the truly new man, to the ideal transfigurations of the works and the days, to the freedom of the spirit over the painful anxiety and the sweat of blood.<sup>42</sup>

Another image for the 'still unknown future of fulfilment', now a basic component in D'Annunzio's speeches, was that of 'the fifth season . . . , of which many of us have as yet no clear consciousness but only a vague feeling'.<sup>43</sup> This formulation turns up in a text dated 27 October 1920 under the title *La fiamma intelligente*, which D'Annunzio placed at the beginning of the published version of his 'Sketch of Orders for the Liberation Army'. At no other point is it so clear how the postponement of the redeemed state serves to salvage all the elements of redemption. Although D'Annunzio could not demonstrate any palpable successes in his (by then) more than thirteen-month reign, he could at least boast that he had reinforced belief in the position that he represented: 'After a year of hard tests, we are confirmed in our truth and exalted in our confession.'<sup>44</sup> While it was true that Italy had not yet been 'robbed' of the prize of victory in the Great War, D'Annunzio could no longer claim, on the other hand, to have definitely won even a part of this prize: 'We, and we alone, have impeded, continue to impede, and will until the end impede Italy from being robbed of the reward for her blood.'<sup>45</sup> Sentences of this kind abounded in D'Annunzio's speeches even before the March on Fiume, but they became ever more enmeshed in his sacrificial mythology in the context of the legionnaires' retreat:

We are living a life of plenitude and honesty because our life is not a gift that we owe to others but, rather, a gift that we can offer to others . . . . No other — divine or human — power can ever match the power of the sacrifice which throws itself into the darkness of the future in order to make new images and the new order rise.

The sacrifice is the highest vocation and the highest dignifying of our earthly life. What is written in blood can never be taken away.<sup>46</sup>

To the extent that the future was still attainable through images associated with the spirit of sacrifice, the tendency to see signs of past sacrifice and future redemption everywhere became an obsession. D'Annunzio even went so far as to count the eye that he had lost in the first world war<sup>47</sup> among the countless sacrificial 'seals', 'fatal signs', 'inscribed words', and 'scars'.<sup>48</sup>

In November 1920 the governments of Italy and Yugoslavia signed a treaty in Rapallo which brought Italy territorial gains along the Adriatic coast and lent Fiume a special status. This outcome was the political result of a new international situation. Yugoslavia's protector, Woodrow Wilson, was no longer the American president and Giolitti had taken Nitti's place as Prime Minister in Rome. Both of these circumstances created the basis for the 1924 integration of Fiume into Italian national territory.<sup>49</sup> D'Annunzio's active engagement in politics concluded with the same hybrid nationalist and Christian images of sacrifice that he had invoked in the spring of 1919: 'And if it is necessary to die, Fiume will not die unless crucified on the Italian flag.'<sup>50</sup> In the end, it was the siege of Fiume's harbour by Italian warships, the salvos fired at the *Palazzo Municipale* (supposedly just missing D'Annunzio), and the casualties suffered during the so-called *Natale di sangue* — the 1920 Christmas defence of the city — that made it possible for the departing poet to portray himself as the high priest of a national Eucharist:

We hear the son of God. Our sacrifice gives us a ray of immortality.

We are all united in the elevation of the chalice.

We all thought that we saw the face of the slumbering Fatherland in the face of the son of man who did not appear.<sup>51</sup>

That the poet planned to publish a collection of his Fiuman speeches under the title *La penultima ventura* corresponded fully to the laws of that version of redemption mythology in which there can be no definitive state of redemption.<sup>52</sup> Whatever in the form of the future appeared to promise an end is retrospectively seen as just a preliminary end. In the almost eighteen years between the Christmas bloodbath known as the *Natale di sangue* and D'Annunzio's death, however, *La penultima ventura* was never published.

Unlike the fascist state's propagandists, Benito Mussolini was eager to give D'Annunzio credit for the Fiume episode, which he defined as a glorious chapter of Italian history. The price for such generosity was the exclusion of the Fiume events from both the pre-history of the fascist state and from its ideology and rituals. But if he was successful in establishing a distance between D'Annunzio's and his own claims to historical glory, Mussolini fell prey to the same logic of redemption that had structured the plot of the Fiume episode. This was the case not only because the concept of redemption became a key concern in official fascist literature and philosophy but also because, starting in the mid-1930s, Mussolini found himself under increasing public pressure to identify new objects to be redeemed and to stage new acts of redemption. Unlike ideologies that are teleological in orientation, fascism could neither offer new goals to be conquered after the 'redemption' of the nation in 1922 nor guarantee that the state of being 'redeemed' would last for ever. This is probably the main reason why Italy conducted a brutal war of conquest against Ethiopia in the later 1930s: a war whose strategic and politico-economic goals failed to persuade many even in the inner circles of government; a war that was also officially characterized as a revenge for and a redemption from a defeat that Italian troops had suffered in Abyssinia during the year 1896. The situation of the German National Socialist government was so similar to Mussolini's problems that one may indeed ask whether a longing for redemption on both sides was not a powerful motivation for the Italian-German convergence on the battlefield of the Spanish Civil War and a main reason behind that limitless greed for ever further conquests that ultimately helped to redeem the world from fascism.

Gabriele D'Annunzio died of a stroke on 1 March 1938, exactly eighteen months before the beginning of the second world war. In his last letter to Mussolini, written on 26 January 1938, he admits — in the tone of a retired officer who takes pride in publicly declaring that he was wrong — that Mussolini's empire had grown faster and larger than even he, the visionary poet, had ever dared to dream. For a moment it looked indeed as if the boundless need for redemption had materialized in a potentially boundless national territory:

From today on your Italy is a lively and active realization of what used to be a lyrical prophecy, an all-too-far-reaching hope. Your Italy 'makes of all the

oceans' one single Ocean that is praised by a single name: heroic Ocean. Its only borders are those of the entire world, those of the Italian potency and will.

### Notes

1. Renzo de Felice and Emilio Mariano, (eds), *Carteggio d'Annunzio-Mussolini (1919-1938)* (Verona 1971), 38ff.

2. Cf. Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini. Eine Biographie* (Munich 1983), 73.

3. D'Annunzio rented the Villa di Cargnacco on Lake Garda in February 1921 and bought the property in October of the same year. On 22 December 1923 he bequeathed his house to the Italian people.

4. Cf. Smith, *Mussolini*, 72f. Smith, however, also notes that D'Annunzio and King Victor Emanuel were the only two people whom Mussolini 'treated almost as his equals' (189).

5. For D'Annunzio's position as 'patron' of the *Federazione italiana dei lavoratori del mare*, cf. Renzo de Felice's Foreword to *Carteggio d'Annunzio-Mussolini*, XXXIff. In *D'Annunzio davanti al Fascismo* (Florence 1963, 143f.), Nino Valeri, on the basis of this episode, develops the (well-intentioned but historically indefensible) thesis that after the Fiume adventure D'Annunzio was closer to socialism than to fascism.

6. Margherita G. Sarfatti, *The Life of Benito Mussolini* (New York 1925), 6.

7. Renzo de Felice, *Fascism. An Informal Introduction to its Theory and Practice. An Interview with Michael A. Ledeen* (New Brunswick 1978), 49f, 55, 75.

8. Cf., besides de Felice's above cited editions of the *Carteggio d'Annunzio-Mussolini* and the Fiume speeches of D'Annunzio, *La Carta del Carnaro nei testi di Alceste de Ambris e di Gabriele d'Annunzio* (Bologna 1973); and Michael A. Ledeen, *The First Duce. D'Annunzio at Fiume* (Baltimore 1977).

9. Emilio Gentile, 'Fascism as Political Religion', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 25, 2-3, (May-June 1990), 229-51, here 231.

10. Gentile, 243.

11. Cf. Gentile, especially 247.

12. Corrado Zoli, *Le Giornate di Fiume* (Bologna 1921), 126.

13. *Ibid.*, 7.

14. Gabriele D'Annunzio's designation for the 'conquerors' of Fiume: 'Il Calvario Trionfale' (21.3.1920) in Renzo de Felice (ed.), *La penultima ventura. Scritti e discorsi fiumani* (Verona 1974), 217.

15. Cf. as a basis for the considerations in the following section the article 'Erlösung' in Heinrich Fries (ed.), *Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe*, vol. 1 (Munich 1970), 337-53; Joachim Ritter (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 2 (Basel 1972), cols 717-19; Michael Buchberger (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Theologie und Kirche* (Freiburg 1931), cols 759-66; and the article 'Chiliasmus' in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 1 (Basel 1971), cols 1001-5.

16. *Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe*, vol. 1, 339.

17. This can be explained by the interference of two observer perspectives. From the — distanced — 'second order' observer perspective it becomes clear to

the 'first order' observer acting in the events of redemption, that in spite of the sacrifice made by him, he might possibly share in none of the pleasure of being redeemed.

18. The answers to this question rely on theses from my book, *In 1926. An Essay on Historical Simultaneity* (Cambridge, MA 1996).

19. Cf. for the circumstances of the Italian entry into the war, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Das Zeitalter des Imperialismus*, Fischer Weltgeschichte, vol. 28 (Frankfurt 1969), 305ff.

20. Cf. Giovanni de Luna, *Mussolini*, RoRoRo Bildmonographien, vol. 270 (Hamburg 1978), 28ff.

21. Cf. R.A.C. Parker, *Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert I. 1918-1945*, Fischer Weltgeschichte, vol 34 (Frankfurt 1967), 36ff.

22. Carteggio, 3.

23. Lettera ai Dalmati in *La penultima ventura*, 9.

24. 'Aveu de l'ingrat' (25.2.1919) in *La penultima ventura*, 33. Because of an intervention by French censors this text was never published in *Le Figaro*.

25. Lettera ai Dalmati, 5.

26. *Ibid.*, 16.

27. *Ibid.*, 7f. Besides the theme of redemption, a further connotative bridge between nationalist myth and Christian myth is provided by the parallel between the body of the maimed veterans and the body of the suffering Christ. D'Annunzio, moreover, often associates the crucified body with the silhouette of an airplane, as for example in 'L'ala d'Italia è liberata' (9.7.1919). In *La penultima ventura*, 102: 'It has been said that the silhouette of the winged machine is similar to the silhouette of the cross of sacrifice and salvation.'

28. Lettera ai Dalmati, 5.

29. This same observation is made by Jeffrey T. Schnapp in 'Le parole del silenzio in Gabriele D'Annunzio', *Quaderni Dannunziani*, 3-4 (1989), 35-59. Schnapp's interpretation of the pattern in D'Annunzio's rhetoric does not, however, start from the structure of redemption mythology, but rather from the interference of gender specific discourses.

30. The thought that — since one cannot anticipate the future — one can only live in the present found its most complex philosophical development in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*. Cf. for example paragraph 74: 'Only an entity which, in its being is essentially *futural* so that it is free for its death and can let itself be thrown back upon its factual "there" by shattering itself against death — that is to say, only an entity which, as futural, is equiprimordially in the process of *having been*, can by handing down to itself the possibility it has inherited, take over its own thrownness and be *in the moment of vision* for "its time". Only authentic temporality which is at the same time finite, makes possible something like fate — that is to say, authentic historicity.'

31. 'Dalla Loggetta del Sansovino nel giorno di San Marco' (25.4.1919), *La penultima ventura*, 49f.

32. Cf. Ledeen, *The First Duce*, 61: 'The conspiracy to take Fiume was one of the worst-kept secrets of all time.' For the episodes mentioned in the following concerning the march from Ronchi to Fiume cf. *ibid.*, 58ff.

33. Carteggio, 9.

34. 'La prima voce dell'arengo' (12.9.1919), *La penultima ventura*, 127.

35. Cf. Ledeen, 124ff.

36. Cf. Jeffrey Schnapp, '18BL: Fascist Mass Spectacle', *Representations*, 43 (Summer 1994), 123, in reference to Italian fascism in the 1930s: 'The promise of a transfigured national collectivity is always shadowed by the menace of dissolution and loss. Fascism never ceased in reflecting upon decline, whether in the domain of the body or the history of peoples.'

37. Georges Bataille, *Die Psychologische Struktur des Faschismus. Die Souveränität* (Munich 1978), 21.

38. Cf. Atlantico Ferrari, *L'asso di cuori. Guido Keller* (Rome 1933), 110. What Keller's intention with this letter really was remains unclear. Ferrari's thesis is scarcely convincing: 'In all likelihood, Keller had the intention of dedicating himself to psychoanalysis, and because of certain projects he was carrying around in his mind these people appeared to be very useful elements.'

39. Cf. *L'asso di cuori*, 122f. Considering Keller's nearly boundless admiration for his commander, it does not seem impossible that the Action Secretary was making reference to the flight on 9 August 1918 during which D'Annunzio released 400,000 fliers over Vienna.

40. 'Aggredire con audacia ed eleganza l'Europa', cited from Keller's text 'L'Aeronautica nel futuro' (1926) in *L'asso di cuori*, 199.

41. From Keller's text 'Fiume' in *L'asso di cuori*, 202.

42. *La Carta del Carnaro*, 47. Cf. the analogous interpretation of this passage in Schnapp, 'Le parole del silenzio in Gabriele D'Annunzio', op. cit., 51.

43. Translated from the foreword to *Reggenza Italiana del Carnaro. Ordina-mento militare dell'esercito liberatore* (Fiume d'Italia 1920), 8f.

44. *Reggenza Italiana del Carnaro*, 25.

45. *Ibid.*, 17.

46. *Ibid.*, 28, 29, 33.

47. Cf. *ibid.*, 9.

48. Cf. *ibid.*, 8, 14, 19, 23, 27, 33.

49. Cf. *Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert I*, Fischer Weltgeschichte, vol. 34, 39, and Ledeen, *The First Duce*, 197ff.

50. Al popolo di Fiume (21.12.1920), *La penultima ventura*, 432.

51. Orazione funebre (2.1.1921), *La penultima ventura*, 459.

52. Cf. Renzo de Felice's foreword to *La penultima ventura*, LXXXIff., for its publication history. Interestingly, there is no explanation for the title chosen by D'Annunzio.

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