

## **Interventionism in 1915 and the Man of Letters: The Ethical Commitments of Serra and the 'Armed Poet' D'Annunzio<sup>1</sup>**

Patrizia Piredda  
*University of Oxford*

*Abstract: This article analyses the rhetorical structures in the works that Gabriele D'Annunzio and Renato Serra devoted to their reflections on war, focusing on the issues of the manipulation of public opinion in D'Annunzio's speeches and the ethical question of individual morality in the face of war in Serra's works.*

Keywords: Ethics and literature, rhetoric, Literature of World War I

On 24 May 1915 Italy, which had been an ally of the Habsburg Empire since 1882, declared war on Austria-Hungary, which was already at war with Great Britain, France and Russia. Since the outbreak of the conflict on 28 July 1914, public opinion in Italy had been split on which position the new-born nation should take. On the one hand there were the interventionists, on the other the neutralists who promoted an intense debate that ended with the last great neutralist demonstration in Turin on 17 May 1915.<sup>2</sup> Piero Melograni, who has analysed the moral issues of the Italian soldiers in World War I, writes:

The Socialist Party expressed its moderation by officially adopting the formula of "neither join nor sabotage" [...]; Catholics declared that they would act as citizens who loyally respect the law [...]; the followers of Giolitti, stunned and dismayed perhaps more than all others, maintained a cautious and discreet attitude [...]. The neutralist group "Italia nostra", not very strong but nonetheless representing a considerable part of the intellectual class, was finally disbanded the day following the Italian intervention in the war so that its members could participate in the general effort as well, while its founder, Cesare De Lollis who was over 50, enlisted as a volunteer for the frontline (Melograni, 1972: 115).<sup>3</sup>

Part of the debate concerned the role that intellectuals were to play in the face of the war: whether they should participate materially or only theoretically, whether their intellectual, critical and artistic activity should remain above the actual circumstances, whether it was possible to create art and thought in time of war, when normal social values were in disarray. Among the various intellectuals who joined in the debate, Renato Serra<sup>4</sup> and Gabriele D'Annunzio<sup>5</sup> provide contrasting examples of the Italian interventionist intellectual, and have influenced the idea of the man of letters and his social role throughout the twentieth century and up to the present day. They were two individuals quite different in terms of spirit, education, their concepts of cultural duty and, above all, the way in which they conceived of the role of literature in society.

Serra's life in the provinces can be considered the opposite of D'Annunzio's 'inimitable life'. Ezio Raimondi described Serra thus: '...caught between "idleness" and "pique," he indulges in dull provincial love affairs despite his always deferred desire, as a man of the Risorgimento, to achieve some "moral discipline" in the end' (Raimondi, 1964: 97). He was overwhelmed by a gambling addiction, which in 1912 brought him to moral and financial ruin and eventually forced him to leave Cesena. It is only with the onset of World War I that Serra realised how his restlessness, boredom and anguish had reached the limits of exasperation, leading to an intense period of ethical reflection. On the other hand, as Andreoli writes, at the outbreak of war D'Annunzio 'carrie[d] the burden, having just turned fifty, of being the old protagonist consigned to the exhausting life of the stage. The flashes of what one might call his final flame glimmer[d] in France, where the exile [flung] himself headlong into high society, into what he call[ed] the "carefree life"; nonetheless, this force[d] him to play the role of Gabriele D'Annunzio more than ever' (Andreoli, 1990: xxxiii).

Thus, on the one hand there is D'Annunzio, the '*imaginifico Vate*' (the image-forging poet) who intertwines life and literature in order to create the image of a unique, heroic and inimitable existence; nonetheless, as Andreoli writes, at that time 'he ha[d] been imitated for far too long, and two generations ha[d] learned how to seduce a woman, how to dress, which sort of sports they should play or where they should go on holiday, from the only dandy in post-unification Italy' (Andreoli 1990: xxxi). On the other hand there is the provincial Serra, whose decision to stay marginalised 'was born not from renunciation, but rather from distrust of that which has no foundation, from the fundamental awareness, so to speak, of a loss of continuity' (Raimondi, 1984: 19). Nevertheless, such marginalisation must not be understood as a desire to remain isolated: in opposition to the glitter of mundane life, Serra feels the need to propose a profound and fully pondered critique of the essence of human action that

might act, at the same time, as a means to gain knowledge and awareness of the limits inherent in reflecting on reason itself.

During the months between the outbreak of war and his decision to enlist, Serra struggled with two opposing moods: on the one hand, the sudden dynamism of events and the turmoil of war excited him and gave him the inspiration to take action, whereas on the other, the boredom and repetitiveness of daily life in Cesena made him feel a lack of vitality, a void of inertia, and the compelling need to escape the suffocating life in which he was imprisoned. According to Serra, the awareness of the historical moment does not come to one spontaneously; instead it requires the mediation of thought through a period of detachment and reflection, so that the judgement as to whether or not to take part in the war will be valid only after it has been scrutinised by reason. Serra does not share the enthusiasm of the interventionists who see the conflict either as the opportunity to take action for action's sake, as in the case of the Futurists, or as the final solution to the unification of Italy following the three wars of independence of the nineteenth century, as in the case of D'Annunzio. In her preface to *Esame di coscienza di un letterato* Tonzar (1994: xii) writes:

Having rejected the rhetorical and celebratory emphasis of much of the "bellicose" and "interventionist" literature – D'Annunzio is one of the preferred targets of his polemic – Serra implacably proceeds to destroy and demystify all rational interpretation of history and all justifying mythology of war, of which [...] he highlights the nonsense and absurdity, the blind and aimless progression, the burden of inexplicable and irreducible pain that the victors share with the defeated.

Serra's idea of Italy as a nation is far from any fictitious or mythical representation: he considers the images used by the nationalist propaganda harmful to Italy and the Italian people because they overshadow and blur the popular notion of 'being Italian', which was already substantially weakened.

Serra's thoughts on anti-nationalism become explicit in a fragment of his *pagine sparse* that inclines toward prophecy:

As for nationalism: anti-Italian. We do not utter it only as a thought, as an imitation of ideas, but rather in the spirit of practicality: "Italian" does not mean anything as a concept. But in practice it does: in the context of civilisation, each family of man represents a special practical imperative that it endows with its own name [...] In nationalism, this imperative has declined into a sort of selfishness disguised as literature, a sort of pompously overblown materialism, or sadism (Raimondi, 1964: 59).

A little later, in a short article written in 1900 that is also focused on the issue of nationalism, Serra asks who the subversives are, whether they are

'those who instigate the crowd to thoughtless riots, those who undermine the most fundamental and untouchable institutions'; or else people who look for ways to establish new ethical foundations. He poses his question thus:

Who are the subversives, we or they? Is it fair to call "subversive" the patient, enlightened and beneficial deeds of those who had the desire, as well as the capacity, to bestow upon the nation a breath of new life, who could nurture a prosperous growth of civilization and progress in Italy? The deeds of those who have redeemed, and are still redeeming, ever more of the disadvantaged population from the yoke of ignorance and superstition, from the horrendous goad of hunger? Those who have changed unconscious people into humans? (Serra 1974: 5)

Serra includes uplifting speeches imbued with the rhetoric of immediacy, which were calculated to have an immediate emotional effect on the hearer through the evocation of familiar images that would not prompt critical reflection about the content of the discourse; as such they resemble subversive forms of propaganda, the speeches of those who act so as to hinder human intellectual progress by founding a *doxa* (opinion) on false belief. Serra, as in the case of all other intellectuals of his time, finds himself compelled to judge an event that might represent a radical change both in his life and in the historical development of the nation. Being aware of such a potentiality, Serra tries to comprehend and evaluate the circumstances rationally, setting aside both stereotyped opinions lacking in epistemological value, and opinions based on the myths of the Risorgimento (Esperide 2011; Di Fiore, 2010). Such myths now appear to be anachronistic in the face of the new century's trial, although several intellectuals still entrenched themselves in notions such as 'the *irredentismo*<sup>6</sup> that denounced the peril of Slavic cultural influences in Trieste and Istria, the nationalism that longed to wash away the stains of Lissa and Custoza,<sup>7</sup> the imperialism that dreamt of crowning the Campidoglio with further laurels. Moreover, they found refuge in patriotism as opposed to internationalism, and also in *garibaldinismo*, *mazzinanesimo*, syndicalism, reformism and even populism' (Rella, 1972: 20). The main text in which Serra unfolds his ethical reflections, which he believes should be undertaken by all intellectuals in order to achieve a full personal awareness of the meaning of action, is the *Esame di coscienza di un letterato*.

*Esame di coscienza* was born out of a dialogue of the author with himself about the crucial problem of the ethical choices that a man of letters must make in the face of war. According to Serra, the decision of whether or not to take part in the war is extremely important and everyone must make it independently, by reflecting on his own past, present and future, and without being superficially influenced by the exhortations of other people. He conceives of war as a solitary experience because only a choice

matured in total freedom, as an individual reflection, can eventually be responsibly fulfilled. The circle of experience, which begins with the atomistic isolation of self-examination, will then grow wider and will include the human feeling of *philia*, friendship. Serra's notion of freedom does not imply the fulfilling of our own inclinations and desires without taking into account the existence of others, nor should it require forsaking the unavoidable bond between action and society. Freedom, on which ethical choice is grounded, is the necessary condition that permits the evaluation of action by referring to conscience, without following given models blindly and mechanically, but also without falling back into selfishness. Such a positive process is possible because Serra, in agreement with Kant, believes that independent thought and choice must occur in conjunction with 'being in the place of the other' and 'remaining always consistent with one's own decision'.<sup>8</sup> Being a 'provincial' man of letters finally acquires here a vein of irony and of 'anachronism':

It has been said that the discreet voice of anti-conformism in the face of the vogue for novelty, in literature as well as in custom or the poetical awareness of the world, can be obtained only in one way, namely by means of eccentricity [...]. Not only did he make himself into a sorrowful existential figure; he also brought about, both within himself and within Italian society, a transformation of the status of the intellectual and the man of letters. His response pointed toward Nietzsche's idea of "anachronism", although corrected by Kant's ethics (Raimondi, 1984: 22).

In the case of Serra the reference to Kantian morals is particularly appropriate: his philosophical interests, developed under the influence of positivistic theories, soon focused on the critical study of the Kantian system and in particular of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. From Kant, Serra inherits the concept of freedom as the condition of acting under the guide of the categorical imperative 'you must', as well as an essential trust in enlightened reason.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, ethical choice should not be anything but a pondered, analysed and scrutinised decision that must be consistent with the moral law that has been determined by practical pure reason.

The ethics of moral duty founded on the supremacy of reason does not disregard personal considerations, yet no conscious decision can be made without reason having previously investigated the problem in depth. This is why Serra writes that 'everyone is able individually to review the story of our personal participation in war in the past months, with its misunderstandings of illusion and naïveté and with its subtle shadings of absurdity' (Serra 1994: 4). Everybody must realise his moral duty in order to evaluate it, by adopting his own individual rationality as a scale. Serra comes to the decision to take part in the conflict after having spent considerable time pondering while inactive, surrendering to baseless

generalised public opinion, and struggling with second thoughts and criticism. His own decision, which he arrives at rationally, finds its most appropriate form in the writing of *Esame di coscienza*, a work founded on the presumption of the honesty and soundness of its argumentation, even though this means admitting that pettiness and fear caused Serra to seek self-justification during the time in which he suspended his judgement and delayed his choice.

During the first eight months of the war, the dilemma becomes Serra's main concern, overshadowing all other duties: not only can he not decide whether or not to volunteer, but he also neglects his literary activities. His doubts about the appropriateness of writing literature in time of war, as well as the doubt that war will be able to act as the driving force of literary renewal, prevent him from writing. Nevertheless, Serra slowly develops the belief that no contradiction exists between literature and war: he is 'sure that nobody is allowed to take leave of his own every-day corner in the world' (Serra 1994: 19), but he is also sure that war will not be the instigator of an Italian literary renaissance, 'the dawn of a new literature, heroic, great, worthy of historical drama, through which mankind is newly tempered by virtue of blood and sacrifice' (Serra, 1994: 21).

The process that leads Serra to make his decision is founded rationally on a thorough analysis of different opinions that will bring him to the final formulation of a personal judgement – the judgement that had caused the rationalist Descartes to determine the coordinates of his epistemological method. Before he could answer the questions and enigmas of knowledge, Descartes had spent nine years searching, during which he had analysed and investigated others' opinions in order to evaluate their correctness and validity. He writes in his *Discourse on Method*: 'those nine years went by before I had taken up a position with regard to the difficulties which are commonly debated by the learned, or had begun to look for the foundations of a philosophy more certain than the common one' (Descartes, 1960: 59). Like Descartes, Serra narrates his own story and the theoretical questioning that causes him to abandon those opinions that lack rationality and to adopt those that enhance his own awareness, and which will lead to the decision to fight in the war. Like Descartes, he therefore decides to apply the analytical method, which is that particular process of dividing (from *analyon*, to separate) the investigated phenomenon until it is reduced to its elementary parts, so that they can be analysed and verified. Differing from Descartes, who limits himself to defining a method of epistemological investigation by using the practice of inner dialogue only as a stepping stone, Serra's awareness goes beyond the singularity of the individual and opens itself to the perspective of others who are aware of their moral choices.

Choice must be total and cannot be contested if the authority of reason upholds the decision. Serra, who must acquire the courage to look at the

war, at its horror and the possibility of death, still lingers in inactivity and hesitation and submits his own conscience to a test. The true examination to which Serra submits his conscience, and which he has so far avoided, is the horror of war and the clear possibility of death that it represents; in this way he has permitted his superficial opinions to excuse inaction and indecision. Serra debates with himself in Socratic terms, recalling and criticising events, thoughts and actions that should have occurred but did not, or that only existed as expectations but were never realised. Raimondi writes that in general

the multiplicity of perspectives that a critical discourse requires can be obtained through an intimately dialogical technique, which permits the reader's consciousness to transform itself into an equal number of images or standpoints, and gradually probe them in an almost dramatic rhythm of questioning and answering, of doubting and confirming, of stopping and restarting (Raimondi, 1964: 39).

Serra reviews all those intellectuals who have expressed their opinions about the war, even Croce, in whose ethical fragments, which Serra criticises, the Neapolitan philosopher claims to affirm the truth. According to Serra, no one can affirm the truth because truth belongs in a dimension, as Kant writes, to which man has no access: the domain of the 'thing in itself'.<sup>10</sup> As pure and transcendent, the concept of war cannot directly influence the contingency of the actual war *hic et nunc*. Therefore, having forsaken all hope of comprehending war in itself, one can only evaluate the phenomenon in its historical contingency, in its past conditions, in its development and finally in its future possibility: knowledge, action and hope. The truth about war that Serra pursues is therefore not an absolute truth inherent in the knowledge of the phenomenon in analytic terms, but is rather the universal truth of moral choice, as far as it concerns all human beings: it is thus a truth that involves the individual's sphere of moral faculty even more than that of knowledge.

From such a humanistic perspective the idea of heroism is no longer connected to, and does not descend from, any abstract conceptual formula or mythical imagery that is uncertain and insubstantial in the face of the real event. Instead, heroism becomes the quality that urges to action the man who reaches a more profound awareness on the basis of a critical and rational process, thanks to which he will be able to make his own ethical choice.

\*\*\*\*\*

While Serra believes that reason alone must be the judge of the choice that moves one to action, and that reason alone can consequently define the ethical role of the intellectual, D'Annunzio considers action and choice on

the basis of visceral and irrational desire. In his writings about war, reason appears to be enslaved by desire and passion. Moreover, since it is incapable of governing irrational needs, reason seems to be devoted to the invention of a sort of language that excites and transmits feelings rather than thoughts. While Serra questions, investigates and evaluates the actual state of facts about the war in order to achieve some clarity about the role that intellectuals should play in the face of such an historical trial, D'Annunzio, through his 'drug [...] of multicolour illusions', his 'gallery of charming as well as anachronistic and unreal poses', his 'repertoire of suggestive words [...] inasmuch as they remain unverifiable', which constitute a 'surrogate of conscience', aims to create a new common imagery suitable for the '*Italiotta giolittiana*' (the 'insignificant Italy' under the administration of Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti), an Italy that has forgotten 'the greatness, the myths of conquest and the dreams of power of a frustrated generation, which is unconsciously ready to provide a mass consent for the political programmes of rising industrialism' (Alatri, 1980: 18).

While Serra's rationalism shows a close bond with the moral philosophy of the Enlightenment, D'Annunzio's hedonism and superhuman<sup>11</sup> aspirations only superficially match the original philosophical grounds of Epicurean hedonism and Nietzsche's 'will to power' (Nietzsche, 1968). In fact, despite being popularised by Bentham's utilitarian philosophy (Bentham, 1960), the Epicurean philosophy of pleasure had been founded on the primacy of the *nous*, or reason, which has the duty of restraining excessive carnal and spiritual desires that are as such unnatural. In Epicurean philosophy, luxury, power and the general lack of moderation that casts man into a greater and greater dissatisfaction must be mastered and put under the control of reason. D'Annunzio's notebook of 1915, which details his daily expenditures during his stay in France just before he returned to Italy for the inauguration of a statue of Garibaldi in Quarto where Garibaldi set off on the Expedition of the Thousand, allows one to understand the nature of his pleasure: "'Accountancy-book - starting from 16 November 1914. Hang the expense! Miscellaneous expenditures (fruit, flowers, perfumes) 25; cigarettes 35, taxis 100" and further on "*Fleurs* 50, *chenil* 200", more "*fleurs* 50, *vin* 100, *cravates* 50"' (D'Annunzio 2002: 83): all expenditures rising week by week. In the midst of such hyperbolic economic excesses there are also the insistent references to his Italian publisher Albertini, who often intervenes to rescue D'Annunzio from the threat of ruin due to the exorbitant lifestyle of his 'inimitability' (Andreoli, 2002: xxviii).<sup>12</sup>

As in Epicurean hedonism, there is in D'Annunzio's hedonism a form of rational calculation,<sup>13</sup> but not one aimed at working out which pleasures should be satisfied in order to achieve happiness in the form of the absence of suffering and pain. D'Annunzio's rational calculation is aimed at the



achievement of an effect on an external observer, such as when the young poet had accompanied the publication of his first poetry collection with the announcement of his premature death, as an advertising technique.<sup>14</sup> D'Annunzio's pleasure is inseparable from the rhetorical, and non-actual, construction of his own myth, just as the irrational pleasure of which Epicurus speaks is inseparable from the belief in false myths: in both cases the word is the instrument that creates opinions. There is an intimate link between pleasure and words, desire and intellect, flesh and knowledge. The main rule of such a game of relations is the creation of oppositions on which the relationships between rationality and irrationality, reason and the senses are grounded.

In the war, D'Annunzio sees the possibility of a general renewal of Italian society from an idealistic standpoint, as the fulfilment of the entire historical course of national unification. He bases his historical view on the irrational idea of a national 'fate' that must be accomplished through action, and he consequently conceives the potentiality of language, including that of the sublime poetic tradition, as a powerful means of persuasion and pro-intervention propaganda. His discourse aims to urge the audience to support war. One should not forget that the entire debate about Italy's intervention in the war was not being followed by the majority of the population, who nevertheless had to fight a war for which they did not understand the necessity, the causes or the advantages. The experience of war unified men coming from all corners of the peninsula for the first time; in many cases they were forced to abandon their dialects and search for a common language to communicate with each other.

D'Annunzio's speeches are therefore aimed to reach a certain part of society. He does not speak to the upper-middle classes to whom he had addressed his novels, nor to the lower-class masses, especially rural; but rather to the urban middle-class that was used to the language of journalism and daily information, and whose members were closer to the big and small inventions of modernity. Such characteristics allowed this class to be influenced and conquered by appeals to interventionism.

The argument in his interventionist speeches is grounded on a synthetic series of apodictic statements, in which the truth is presented as absolutely certain and evident. Far from striving to persuade by means of rational argumentation, D'Annunzio's discourse aims to impose a truth regardless of its actual validity. The language of his propaganda is grounded neither on the logical construct of the classic syllogism nor on the enthymeme (Plebe, 1961: 48), on which the argumentative form of persuasion is based. Instead, it evokes those easily recognisable tropes and myths that are deeply rooted in common opinion and imagery, even if they are scarcely representative of the reality of the new war, the first truly modern conflict fought with industrial techniques and machinery in Europe. The rhetorical device of constructing the argumentation by

exploiting the mythical and legendary heritage of the 'Risorgimento' aims at manipulating common opinion, not by basing it on reflection or on the comprehension of reality, but on the unreality of an aestheticised idea. This is possible when the spoken word is the form of a 'dead' concept that is no longer capable of producing new sense, maintaining only its capacity to be meaningful according to a given set of values, notions and beliefs, so that such a word 'no longer aims to persuade, but addresses an audience that is already convinced, that asks for nothing more than a collective ritual of celebration' (Alatri, 1980: 45).

By means of analogical associations these kinds of linguistic images can immediately be recognised according to their meaning. They no longer produce the sense that activates reasoning, without which knowledge cannot be achieved, but instead they replicate a consolidated meaning and consequently an established set of moral values. In order to create such an immediate effect that avoids the control and judgement of reason, D'Annunzio, as Alatri writes, 'no longer employs rational argumentation, but appeals to feeling, to instincts, to the superficial reaction, and he establishes a direct dialogue between the orator and the crowd that is called on to take part in a ceremony whose character is mystical if not even religious' (Alatri, 1980: 46). In his discourses D'Annunzio uses words as a means to excite his audience in favour of the war, without taking into account whether war is the best solution to Italy's concerns or whether the motivations and expectations about this particular war can actually be adequate to the historical moment. D'Annunzio is not concerned with the evaluation of the conflict in its singularity as an historical event, but considers it as an ideal, or, one could say, as a thing in itself. This is why he rationally creates an irrational text that consequently does not induce critical reasoning, but excites the irrational and emotional involvement of the audience that longs for war as the highest expression of a vitality that will lead Italy to a new life, far from the corrupted decadence of Giolitti's politics.

A good example of D'Annunzio's rhetoric is the speech in Genoa on 4 May 1915 that focuses on the heroic figure of Giuseppe Garibaldi, who was transformed into a myth in post-Risorgimento Italian memory. Garibaldi is the indisputable heroic ideal and in his name D'Annunzio urges the people of Genoa to pray. The commemoration of the hero seems to create a holy and religious atmosphere in which the exceptional qualities attributed to Garibaldi can empathically affect the souls of the praying crowd. D'Annunzio re-creates an image of the hero that lives apart from history as if he had existed beyond mankind, endowed with some sort of super-terrestrial qualities that made him capable of accomplishing semi-divine actions. Thus the noble and heroic spirit of Garibaldi has the power of transforming the vigil into a mystical event, during which everybody can hear in the silence of his own prayer the hero's words 'that enlightened the

face of destiny' (D'Annunzio, 1947: 8). The mystical words of the hero demand an act of faith and act as the indisputable and certain sign that determines the necessity and the righteousness of war; thus the crowd is induced to cry out loud repeatedly: '*Fiat! Fiat!* Let it be done! Let's do it!' (D'Annunzio, 1947: 8). This is the final invocation in the speech urging the population of Genoa to support the growth of the nation with the cry, 'Long live Saint George in arms! Long live the just war! Long live the greater Italy!' (D'Annunzio, 1947: 10)

In the speech, the construction of the image of Garibaldi, after having been raised to the higher circle of heroes, diminishes its trajectory and descends to the ground again. From spirit to matter: from words in which the essence of Garibaldi appears through the mediation of myth to words in which the historical actuality of the hero is recalled by means of his statue. This is the moment in which D'Annunzio directly addresses the elderly, who have matured wisdom through experience. D'Annunzio appeals to their memories and rhetorically pleads with them to provide their support to the cause. The elderly of the city saw with their eyes the hero 'in the body of a man, in the mortal human body, with a man's step upon the earth' (D'Annunzio, 1947: 16). But they also saw him with their 'holy' eye capable of discerning the shadows in the depths of memory and of recognising the real face of the hero as 'a man amongst men' (D'Annunzio, 1947: 18), which they will never forget because it is impressed upon their souls 'as in the shroud the face of the Saviour' (D'Annunzio, 1947: 16). Garibaldi, evoked in the minds of these elderly people, suddenly loses his heroic costume and comes to wear that of a religious, mystical character. His deeds become moments of passion and suffering, in the face of which the wisest men also affirm: 'all the passion of our lives is not enough to ease your agony [...] we are men, we are little men; and you are too great' (D'Annunzio, 1947: 17).

With the glorification of Garibaldi as a Christ-like image, the trajectory of the speech begins to rise again, with a another shift in language: the focus now passes from the speaking statue of the hero to the word of the '*Duce* D'Annunzio' by means of a new rhetorical construction inspired by The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:5, 1-12), in which Jesus reveals to his followers the bliss that will be their reward. Like Christ's disciples, those who believe in D'Annunzio's words will be blessed: 'Blessed are those who are in their twenties [...] who, waiting and trusting, do not waste their strength [...] who have despised sterile love [...] who are hungry and thirsty for glory, because they will be fulfilled [...] because they will see the new face of Rome' (D'Annunzio, 1947: 21).

It is not by chance that this discourse, which was generally welcomed both in Italy and France, also caused the vehement reaction of intellectuals like Romain Rolland, who writes of D'Annunzio that he is nothing but 'literary fake made flesh':

He dares act like Jesus! He plays Jesus and remakes the Sermon on the Mount in order to excite Italy to breach its treaties and fight against its former allies: "... *Beati i giovani che sono affamati e assetati di gloria, perché essi saranno satollati!\ Beati i misericordiosi perché essi avranno da asciugare un sangue risplendente e da fasciare un dolore raggianti!\ Beati coloro che hanno il cuore puro: beati coloro che tornano con la vittoria ...*" (Blessed be the young who are hungry and thirsty for glory, for they will be satisfied! / Blessed be the merciful, for they will have to wipe away the bright blood and bandage a radiant agony! / Blessed be those who have a pure heart; blessed be those who return with victory...), and so on; this infamous comedy naturally excites with enthusiasm two thirds of Europe. People do not know what the truth is. One cannot say that they betray it. They live in perpetual error. For them words take the place of true sentiments (Rolland, 1960: 276).

Rolland perfectly catches the sense of D'Annunzio's speeches, noting that they aim to excite the spirits of those who base their choices on generic and simple opinions, created by trivialising language to some sort of banal journalism and a form of communication which is calculated to manipulate, which acts as the opposite of moral reflection and the research that is intended to help one acquire knowledge. This is the reason why, between the two discourses of Serra and D'Annunzio, the model of the second would deeply influence public opinion to the extent that, years later, the rise of Fascism would be grounded on the sensational but void of moral and rational substance.

## Notes

1. I wish to thank Professor Christopher Nissen for his help in editing the text.
2. For a close examination of the historical-political aspect see Isnenghi (2007; 2008).
3. All translations from Italian are mine.
4. Renato Serra was born in Cesena in 1884 and was killed in action on Mount Podgora in July 1915. He graduated with professor and poet Giosuè Carducci and was mainly a literary critic, working in the Malatestiana Library in Cesena for almost all his life. Before the war he wrote his main text, *Esame di coscienza di un letterato*, in which he questions the morality and value of the decision to go to war.
5. Gabriele D'Annunzio was born in Pescara in 1863 and died in Gardone Riviera in 1938. His literary production is immense and multifaceted, ranging from poetry to drama, from novels to journalism. His life was marked by the scandals provoked by numerous love affairs, and he always lived in magnificent luxury, which eventually forced him to flee his creditors by going into exile in France until the outbreak of the war, in which he fought and of which he was one of the most enthusiastic supporters. He was one of the most influential figures in Italian and European literary circles: his poetry includes aspects of decadence, symbolism and

aestheticism, and is influenced by the irrationalist philosophical theories of the late nineteenth century.

6. Irredentism is the idea that urges a population to act in order to complete the process of unification of the nation, which has not yet been entirely reclaimed from the domination of foreign populations. For further reading see, for example Renate Lunzer, (2009) and Bruno Gatta (2008).

7. Lissa and Custoza were two infamous battles of the Italian third independence war of 1866, which were serious defeats for both the Royal Army and the Royal Navy; they provided a reason for resentment against Austria, the historical enemy of the nation. Nevertheless, Italy won the war thanks to its alliance with Prussia, which defeated the Habsburg armies. This represents the prelude to the ambiguous and contradictory participation of Italy in the Triple Alliance signed in 1882 with Austria and Germany. Only the victory achieved by Garibaldi's volunteers in the battle of Bezzecca saved the honour of the Italian army in 1866. See for further reading Marco Gioannini (2003).

8. Judgement derives from three fundamental rules: think on your own, think by putting yourself in the position of the other, and always be consistent. Hannah Arendt, in her studies on Kant, highlights the link between the three rules of the critique of taste and the critique of practical reason. Judgement permits the connection, otherwise impossible, between the two different forms of reason, the pure and the practical, each of which determines a precise, enclosed and self-defining domain. Moreover, judgement also creates an analogical and symbolic connection with the parts of the philosophical system devoted to anthropology, which investigates man as a social being. This is why man must, according to the principles of the Enlightenment, think independently (according to the supremacy of reason) but always strive to comprehend the standpoint of the other, since his existence is essentially a society-based one (reduction of reason within the limits of human experience) (Arendt, 1982). In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant writes: 'the following maxims of the common human understanding do not belong here, to be sure, as parts of the critique of taste, but can nevertheless serve to elucidate its fundamental principles. They are the following: 1. To think for oneself; 2. To think in the position of everyone else; 3. Always to think in accord with oneself. The first is the maxim of the unprejudiced way of thinking, the second of the broad-minded way, the third that of the consistent way' (Kant, 2000: 174, §40).

9. Immanuel Kant, in the first part of the *Critique of Practical Reason* that concerns the analysis of pure practical reason (the part devoted to the definition of principles), distinguishes the practical principles, i.e. those propositions containing a universal determination of the will, a subjective form, namely the maxim, from an objective form, namely the practical law. The latter exists as the unconditioned categorical imperative that determines moral action. The categorical imperative that commands action on the basis of the schematised formula 'you ought to do that because the moral law states so unconditionally' upgrades the particular subjective maxim, undermined by the influence of inclination and desire, into a universal objective law: 'act in accordance with a maxim that can at the same time make itself a universal law' (Kant, 1996: 86).

10. The thing in itself is 'something actual for itself but uncognized by us. For that which necessarily drives us to go beyond the boundaries of experience and all appearances is the unconditioned, which reason necessarily and with every right

demands in things in themselves for everything that is conditioned, thereby demanding the series of conditions as something completed' (Kant, 1998: 112).

11. Translation of the German adjective *übermenschlich*, which literally means 'beyond human'.

12. "Write, sing... I expect to see the most beautiful of your poems..." Thus the stern editor of the *Corriere* rebuked D'Annunzio on 5 August, the night before his daring flight over Trieste, after he had been informed in detail of the spendthrift extravagances of the illustrious volunteer. "Work and spend less; I don't know if I will ever be able to persuade you that one can live as well as you do spending a third or a quarter of what you spend. I doubt it."

13. Rational calculation in Epicurus consists of the capacity to evaluate whatever can bring about the greatest amount of happiness; thus one should be able to decide to renounce a given pleasure now when another possibly greater pleasure has been foreseen in the future. Once man has understood that happiness occurs when all primary necessities are satisfied, i.e. when hunger and thirst are sated and the need for shelter is fulfilled, and when all primary spiritual necessities are satisfied as well, as for example, when man can rely on friendship, then he lives in a state of imperturbability (Epicurus, 1993).

14. D'Annunzio preceded the publication of *Primo Vere* (1879) with the invented news of his death following a fatal riding accident.

## References

- Alatri, P. (1980), "D'Annunzio: ideologia e politica", in G. D'Annunzio, *Scritti politici di Gabriele D'Annunzio*, Milan: Feltrinelli.
- Andreoli, A. M. (1990), "Lo scriba recluso", in G. D'Annunzio, *Di me a me stesso*, Milan: Mondadori.
- Andreoli, A. M. (2002), "Introduzione", in G. D'Annunzio, *Diari di guerra. 1914-1918*, Milan: Mondadori.
- Arendt, H. (1982), *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bentham, J. (1960), *A Fragment on Government and An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- D'Annunzio, G. (1879), *Primo Vere*, Chieti: Giustino Ricci.
- D'Annunzio, G. (1947), "La saga dei Mille", in *Prose di ricerca, di lotta, di comando, di conquista, di tormento d'indovino, di rinnovamento, di celebrazione, di rivendicazione, di liberazione, di favole, di giochi, di baleni*, 2 volumes, vol. 1, Milan: Mondadori.
- D'Annunzio, G. (2002), *Diari di guerra. 1914-1918*, Milan: Mondadori.
- Descartes, R. (1960), *Discourse on Method, and Other Writings*, London: Penguin.
- Di Fiore, G. (2010), *Controstoria dell'Unità d'Italia. Fatti e misfatti del Risorgimento*, Milan: Rizzoli.

- Epicurus (1993), *The Essential Epicurus. Letters, Principal Doctrines, Vatican Sayings, and Fragments*, New York: Prometheus Books.
- Esperide, A. (2011), *Il mito della nazione. Personaggi e storie del Risorgimento*, Pescara: Tabula Fati.
- Gatta, B. (2008), *Italia irredenta*, Udine: Del Bianco.
- Gioannini, M. (2003), *Custoza 1866. La via italiana alla sconfitta*, Milan: Rizzoli.
- Kant, I. (1996), "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals", in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, 14 volumes, vol. 4, "Practical Philosophy", Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. (1998), "Preface to the Second Edition", in *Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
- Kant, I. (2000), *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Isnenghi, M. (2007), *Il mito della grande guerra*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Isnenghi, M. (2008), *La grande guerra, 1914-1918*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Lunzer, R. (2009), *Irredenti redenti. Intellettuali giuliani del '900*, Trieste: Lint.
- Melograni, P. (1972), "Governo, interventisti e neutralisti", in M. Isnenghi (ed.), *La prima guerra mondiale*, Bologna: Zanichelli.
- Nietzsche, F. (1968), *The Will to Power*, London: Kaufmann.
- Plebe, A. (1961), *Breve storia della retorica antica*, Milan: Nuova Accademia Editrice.
- Raimondi, E. (1964), *Il lettore di provincia. Renato Serra*, Florence: Le Monnier.
- Raimondi, E. (1984), "Il critico e la responsabilità delle parole", in R. Serra (ed.), *Il critico e la responsabilità delle parole (con inediti)*, Ravenna: Longo.
- Rella, L. (1972), *L'inquietudine di Renato Serra*, Salerno: Libreria Internazionale Editrice.
- Rolland, R. (1960), *Diario degli anni di guerra. 1914-1919. Note e documenti per lo studio della storia morale dell'Europa odierna*, Milan and Florence: Parenti.
- Serra, R. (1974), "Chi sono i sovversivi?" (1900), in *Scritti letterari, morali e politici, saggi e articoli dal 1900 al 1915*, Turin: Einaudi.
- Serra, R. (1994), *Esame di coscienza di un letterato*, Pordenone: Edizioni Studio Tesi.
- Tonzar, B. (1994), "Prefazione", in R. Serra, *Esame di coscienza di un letterato*, Pordenone: Edizioni Studio Tesi.