

D'ANNUNZIO AS A POET OF THE WAR

BY GUIDO DE RUGGIERO

THE latest D'Annunzio — the poet of the war — is not a novelty when compared with the pre-war D'Annunzio. The war has merely proved a favorable opportunity for bringing to light what had long been hatching in D'Annunzio's mind. As an historical motive, quite apart from the lyrical inspiration of the individual, we must give due weight to the Italian tradition of the prophet-poets, who flourished in such numbers from the days of the Risorgimento to our own times, dedicating their gifts, which varied greatly in quality, to the service of their patriotic ideals. The last great prophet-poet, Carducci, whose political passion reflects the calm it acquired from his artistic vision, has exercised a strong fascination over contemporary artists. They have long envied him his rank as a patriotic poet possessing the power of interpreting the historical consciousness of his country and of fertilizing it with his lyrics.

On Carducci's death there was no lack of attempts to enter upon this coveted heritage. Pascoli tried, as did the pre-war D'Annunzio; but their inspiration, differing widely in character, ended by falsifying the patriotic themes which it sought to handle, and which were altogether beyond their reach. They both produced works of lifeless erudition, of strained allegory, instead of the simple freshness of the epic they sought to fashion from the historical narratives of our Risorgimento.

The war gave D'Annunzio the chance of renewing his virginity and assuming once more the part of prophet, either because the very exquisiteness of his sensibility enabled him to draw a

reviving inspiration and an overflowing richness of impressions from its very novelty, or because the highly excited state of popular feeling created the atmosphere of sympathy and of stirring unity of purpose which he finds indispensable for the fulfillment of his task.

But there is a more intimate and spiritual cause at work in the formation of the latest D'Annunzio, a cause not originating in events which are largely external, but in the evolution of his own mind. Even before the war D'Annunzio was tending toward a form of Christian mysticism that was nothing more than an exaggeration of the sensibility which in all his earlier work had been straining to create superhuman experiences and intuitions of life. All the supermen who had failed in his novels and plays were merged in this mysticism, bringing with them that very dissatisfaction with themselves which had in the past separated them into distinct existences when they were in reality but a single personality straining spasmodically after empty space, their efforts proving equally vain in all the different situations in which they displayed them. The superman was at last content to abandon his transcendental ideals. He turned round upon himself, asking from religious experience what other forms of life had been unable to give him.

D'Annunzio's religiousness as it appears, for instance, in his *San Sebastian*, is, however, a false religiousness, just as the D'Annunzian superman is a false man. It is the product of an irritated sensibility, not of a real spiritual intimacy. So true is this that he fails to assimilate the central act of the complex religious life, the simple, direct act of communion with the divinity. Instead of this he lays hands on the external, one might almost say on

the choreographic elements of the formulas and rites that work upon the feelings, trying to draw from them that mystical and spiritual communion which lies altogether outside them. The war found D'Annunzio in the laborious period of the gestation of his mysticism. He welcomed it as his mind was prepared to welcome it, as a symbolic act, a mystic form of expiation. All the learning which he had been slowly accumulating about Christian rites and practices suddenly went off, discharging itself upon the war, which became to him a long allegory, a kind of apocalyptic or Messianic ideality. And this new Father of the Church, being far more of a pedant than the old ones, laboriously worked out a minute comparison between the single concrete actions which constitute the war and the ideal anticipations of them which he had managed to disinter from the Old and the New Testament.

D'Annunzio's principal writings during the war are: *La Leda senza Cigno* (three volumes, Milan, 1916); *Per la piu grande Italia* (Milan, 1918); *La Beffa di Buccari* (Milan, 1918); *La Riscossa* (published by the Sottosegretariato per la Stampa), 1918; *Cantico per l'Ottava della Vittoria* (1918). All, except the first and the last, are collections of articles and lectures previously published.

Before giving an account of these writings from a literary point of view, I feel that I must be allowed to draw a necessary distinction. The D'Annunzio who reveals himself here as a poet and man of letters is in my opinion a weak and feeble artistic personality, very different from the one revealed in the *Laudi* and in a thousand wonderful pages scattered through his rich earlier productions. But I do not mean to suggest for a moment that the D'Annunzio whom we have learned to know during the war deserves such a judg-

ment as this. The citizen who hurried back to his country in the hour of gravest crisis, who fired men's minds to a war of liberation and a victorious resistance, who took his share of the glorious work and its dangers with the enthusiasm of a young man, is unquestionably a great citizen, even though his writings fall below his actions.

La Leda senza Cigno is the first of his war books. To speak more precisely, it consists of two parts, the one written before the war, the other during the first two years of it. The first is a lascivious short story ('Aspects of the Unknown'); the second is a kind of chronicle of the war in France and Italy. The printing of the two works in the same book, though in no way justified by the character of the contents, is, nevertheless, justified by the continuity of the inspiration. This is how the D'Annunzio of the story expresses himself: 'I felt that no devices of my mind could prevail against this creature, whom the divine, as in the myth, could only approach in the shape of an animal.' The same D'Annunzio, in describing the slaughter of the war, describes the divine aspect of the sacrifice in an animal form as follows: 'At every instant the creatures are brought level with the earth; which drinks of their raging blood before swallowing them and converting them into her impassive fertility.' The artist carves with cold precision what his greedy sensibility offers him. At this time D'Annunzio finds in war only the great adventure, the 'stupendous novelty,' the sight of which breathes new vigor into his senses; the realization of the supreme heroism, which had been an empty dream in the earlier incarnations. He accepts without question the prevailing democratic ideals of the war, because all this means for him merely a blare of trumpets suited to the ears of

the many-headed vulgar. In his mind there is no room for humanitarianism, for a championing of right against might. It is might rather than right that inspires him. He would have been even more ready to sing the deeds of the barbarians, had we chanced to deserve that name, than those of the defenders of the right. But there are noble and powerful pages in *La Leda senza Cigno*. In this book D'Annunzio has not yet grown rigid in his apocalyptic mysticism. He describes the war as it appears to his senses, as it is transfigured by his imagination in his lyrical gifts. The descriptions of scenery have all the magic that informed the most beautiful pages of his earlier work.

But this interest cools in his other war books. A stilted hieratic tone takes the place of the free play of the senses in their search for novelty. In *La Leda* this novelty already begins to appear to him, as he tells us, in the form of an annunciation.

And behold, the Comforter descends upon him in the speech *La Sagra dei Mille* (in the volume *Per la più grande Italia*). He turns to the old Garibaldi, in whom he sees the disciples of Jesus, and says to them: 'He was a man, a man among men. And you saw him, most blessed among old men. Veronica sees Christ in His passion. His true image is impressed on your minds, as was the face of the Saviour on the napkin.'

This is how he addresses the young men, to fire them with enthusiasm for the war that is preparing: 'Blessed are they who have more, for they can give more and burn with a greater fire. Blessed are they who have but a score of years, who have a pure mind, a temperate body, a high-spirited mother. . . .' And so on, through the interminable scale of the beatitudes.

This pose becomes nauseating in its unending repetitions. Are we talking

of the Piave? Its water is for us the water of life, bringing regeneration like the water of baptism. Of the distribution of flags? The Godhead was present, as at the distribution of the Eucharist. Of the eleven victories of the Isonzo and of the Caporetto betrayal? The country has felt the sorrow of the exalted Victim who sat among His own people at the last supper. 'The hand of him that betrayeth me is with me.'—Yet there were faithful men with the Master. Were not Italy's eleven victories with her? The twelfth was the dark one, the one that delivered her into the hands of the enemy. Does our country call her sons to the sacrifice? She says to them: 'Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my passion.' And the blood spills over from the cup that has no edge. 'This is my blood; drink of it, all of you.' For the recruits of the 1900 class D'Annunzio can only produce a hideous parody of the Lord's Prayer: 'O dead, ye who are on earth, as in heaven, hallowed be your names, may the kingdom of your spirit come, your will be done on earth as in heaven; give the daily bread to our faith, keep our holy hatred burning within us, etc. (All these quotations are from the volume *La Riscossa*.) In *La Beffa di Buccari* the figure of Jesus is no longer represented by Garibaldi or by Italy, but by D'Annunzio in person. In the act of anointing his feet before going on board for the expedition he feels that he is renewing the Gospel rite, and he selects a pot of ointment that has been touched by a friend killed in the war, thus violating in his Barocco style both the text and the spirit of the sublime rite of the Magdalen.

There are occasional flashes of the old D'Annunzio, as, for instance, when he describes the war as a lyrical event, an enthusiastic outburst of the will to

create; or in the vivid account of the jest of the Buccari expedition. But they are spasmodic flashes that are instantly quenched in the dead sea of sham mysticism. And when at last D'Annunzio endeavored to recover himself and attempt once again the full lyrical ode of the *Laudi*, in the *Cantico per l'Ottava della Vittoria*, it was clear that he had altogether forgotten his better self. The result is confused and ugly, abounding in lifeless learning. At one point he feels compelled to ask:

O vita, o morte. Il mio canto vien di sotterra, o spira nel mio petto? Son io servo dell' inno senza lira o son io signore del fato?

We have every reason for answering that his song comes from underground and that the author is the slave of the hymn that knows not the lyre. The cycle of the poet D'Annunzio is closed and belongs to history. To-day the surviving D'Annunzio can only ask of his Father Apollo in the Gospel language that is so familiar to him: 'Father, Father, why hast thou forsaken me?'

The Athenæum

SELINA'S PARABLE

BY WALTER DE LA MARE

ON the wide wooden staircase that led up to her big sea-windy bedroom in the old house in which Selina was staying was a low, square window. To Selina, every window in her small world had a charm, an incantation of its own! Was it not an egress for her eye to a scene of some beauty or forbiddingness; the way of light; either her own outward, or the world's inward? This small window in particular beguiled Selina, because, kneeling there (it was of too narrow a frame to permit a protracted standing or stooping), she

looked out of it, and downward, upon a farmyard. Selina knew farmyards that more seductively soothed her æsthetic sense — farmyards of richer ricks, of nobler outbuildings, of a deeper peace. But since this farmyard, despite its litter and bareness, was busy with life — dog in kennel, chicken, duck, goose, gander, and goslings, doves, a few wild birds, some even of the sea, an occasional horse and man — contemplation of it solaced her small mind, keeping it gently busy, yet in a state narrowly bordering on trance.

Selina was dark, narrow-shouldered, with eyes of so intense a brown that they were like two small black pools of water when the spirit that lurked behind them was absorbed in what they gazed on; and one long warm languorous afternoon she found herself kneeling at the low staircase window even more densely engrossed than usual. At the bottom of the farmyard, perhaps twenty paces distant, stood a low stone barn or granary, its square door opening blackly into the sunlight upon a flight of, maybe, ten rough stone steps. Beyond its roof stretched the green dreaming steep of the valley. From this door, it was the farmer's wont, morn and evening, to feed his winged stock. This afternoon, though the hour was but hard on four, Selina watched the farmer ponderously traverse the yard, and, in his usual stout Alexander Selkirkian fashion, ascend into the granary, obviously not thus unseasonably to dispense the good grain, but for some purpose unknown — unknown at least to Selina.

Nevertheless, all his chickens, such is faith, instinct, habit, and stupidity, had followed close upon his heels, and were now sleekly and expectantly clustered in mute concourse upon the steps and on the adjacent yard-stones, precisely like an assemblage of humanity pa-