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The Literary Grounds of Italian Sovereignty: D'Annunzio and Svevo after the Great War

Daria Kozhanova

Introduction

The struggle over the forms and nature of sovereignty was central to the aftermath of the First World War—the period when Italy disputed and annexed territories along its eastern and northeastern borders and underwent a transition from the Liberal era to Fascism. In the postwar international order, the traditional notions of sovereignty—the highest authority over a territory and its people—were redefined according to the principle of nationality that equated nation-states' borders "with the ethnic borders of homogenous national identities."[1] This idea, which underpinned the reshaping of European frontiers at the Paris Peace Conference, hardly aligned with the multiethnic character of regions of the dissolved Austro-Hungarian Empire. The link between a state's sovereignty and nationality destabilized the definitions of sovereignty, particularly in the Adriatic, where, in the final days of the conflict (October 1918), diverse political and ethnic groups advanced their claims for self-determination.

In Trieste, different factions of the Italian socialist party and Yugoslav Social-Democratic Party (JSDS) debated over the scenarios for the city's political future—the establishment of an independent republic (the Italian socialist leader Valentino Pittoni and Henrik Tuma in the JSDS), annexation to Italy (Edmondo Puecher), or to the forming South Slav state (Slovenian socialists who joined the local body of the National Council of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs, SHS).[2] From the last days of October 1918, Trieste was ruled by a mostly pro-Italian provisional government (Committee of Public Safety) that included members of the Italian national-liberal party, Italian socialists (who shifted to pro-annexation positions), and Slovenian representatives. After the Committee sent a delegation to Venice, asking for the aid of the Allied forces, Italian troops disembarked in Trieste on November 3. The Italian military command dissolved the Committee and later the SHS Council.[3] With the occupation of Trieste and Istria, Italy exercised its sovereignty over these territories, although they were not formally annexed until 1920–21 under the Treaty of Rapallo. The instability of postwar sovereignty was especially evident in the case of Fiume/Rijeka. In late October, Fiume's representative in the Hungarian parliament, Andrea Ossoinack, claimed the city's right to self-determination. The local SHS Council envisioned Fiume as part of the forming State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs. The Italian National Council announced the unification of Fiume with Italy, challenging Woodrow Wilson's decision to make Fiume a free

[1] Glenda Sluga, *The Problem of Trieste and the Italo-Yugoslav Border: Difference, Identity, and Sovereignty in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 29. See also Marcus M. Payk and Roberta Pergher, eds., *Beyond Versailles: Sovereignty, Legitimacy, and the Formation of New Polities after the Great War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).

[2] Milica Kacin-Wohinz, "I socialisti sloveni di Trieste nel 1918," trans. Nada Pretnar, *Prispevki za zgodovino delavskega gibanja* 17, no. 1–2 (1977): 115.

[3] Marco Bresciani, "The Battle for Post-Habsburg Trieste/Trst: State Transition, Social Unrest, and Political Radicalism (1918–23)," *Austrian History Yearbook* 52 (2021): 186.

city-state. The socialist Workers' Council called for the formation of an independent republic.[4] The Inter-Allied occupation and then the seizure of Fiume (1919–20) by the nationalist poet and war veteran Gabriele D'Annunzio—when the Italian government refused to recognize its annexation—and his later proclamation of the independent Italian Regency of Carnaro and the League of Fiume further revealed confusion over the enactment of sovereignty after the war. Fiume was annexed to Italy in 1924 (Treaty of Rome), during the Fascist government.

Beyond territorial disputes and shifting borders, the ambiguities of Italian sovereignty in Trieste and Fiume stemmed from the inconsistency between the homogeneous Italian national identity, as a grounding principle of Italy's sovereignty, and different notions of identity of former Habsburg subjects.[5] Irredentists in Italy viewed Trieste and Fiume as unambiguously Italian cities and translated linguistic and cultural affiliations of their Italian-speaking majorities into Italian national sentiment. This nationalist perspective on the ethnically diverse port cities (with Italian, Slavic, German, Jewish, and/or Hungarian populations) did not consider more flexible and fragmented definitions of Habsburg *italianità* (Italianness), marked by the overlap of Italianness with other ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Instead of a definite national affiliation, Italian Triestines and Fiumians frequently shared national indifference[6]—multinational and regional attachments, grounded in local patriotism and loyalty to the House of Habsburg.[7] Despite the presence of irredentist groups, many Italian intellectuals cultivated cultural rather than political loyalty to Italy and did not support the annexation. In Trieste, the promotion of italianità often served to obtain larger cultural and political autonomy for Italian-speaking elites,[8] and the Italianness of Fiume was tied to its special semi-autonomous status.

Such overlapping identities and loyalties did not disappear after the end of the Dual Monarchy and implicitly undermined Italian sovereignty—in the context of the postwar rise of nationalism and even under Fascism, when former Habsburg subjects had to declare (at least formally) loyalty to the Italian state. Countering the Italian-centric narratives focused on D'Annunzio's *impresa di Fiume* (Fiume endeavor), Dominique Kirchner Reill's study shows that the local government (the Italian National Council), while reaffirming the city's Italianness, reworked "residual imperial infrastructure"[9] to maintain Fiume's autonomy in preparation for its future incorporation into Italy, and Fiumians maneuvered between multiple allegiances and identities. As historians Glenda Sluga, Maura Hametz, and Roberta Pergher have demonstrated, both Liberal and Fascist governments used the politics of nationalization—the official reinforcement of Italianness—to assert still

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[4] Dominique Kirchner Reill, *The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 41–47; Ivan Jeličić, "Fiume's Political Elites and Their Challengers, 1918–1924," *Halbjahresschrift für Geschichte und Zeitgeschehen in Zentral- und Südosteuropa* 35, no. 1–2 (2023): 28–57.

[5] See the articles from the special issue "Decade of Violence," especially Borut Klabjan, "A Decade of Decadence, or Ten Years that Shook the World: The Adriatic Borderland, 1914–1924," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2026): 2–12; Maura Hametz, "National Precarity in the Adriatic Borderland, 1920–1925," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2026): 29–43.

[6] Tara Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010): 93–119.

[7] See Pamela Ballinger, *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Dominique Kirchner Reill, *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation: Adriatic Multi-Nationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste, and Venice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Mario Maritan Bonifazi, *The Fight for a Supranational World: Trieste, the Adriatic, and the Habsburgs, 1848–1867* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2026).

[8] See Anna Millo, *L'élite del potere a Trieste: Una biografia collettiva, 1891–1938* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1989).

[9] Reill, *Fiume Crisis*, 16.

uncertain Italian sovereignty in the newly annexed provinces.[10] Given that Italianness essentially became the core of Italian sovereignty, the debates by the state, Italians, and locals from the (un)redeemed lands over contrasting meanings of italianità acted as a battleground for (or against) sovereignty.

This essay contributes to scholarship on the shifting contours of nationality and sovereignty during and after the First World War from the perspectives of cultural and literary history. It turns to the works of the writers Gabriele D'Annunzio and Italo Svevo to explore how literature—the essence of Italian national identity and italianità—intervened to affirm or dispute Italianness and, therefore, Italian sovereignty in Fiume and Trieste. The conceptual links between Italian literature, nationhood, and sovereignty originated in Risorgimento nationalism, which was of a literary nature.[11] In the context of Italy's political fragmentation, literature became the main expression and foundation of Italian nationality, grounded in the shared tradition of Italian letters dating back to Dante. As the core of Italian nationhood, literature in the Risorgimento also acted as both means and grounds of Italian sovereignty, supporting the demands of Italian patriots for Italy's independence. In post-Unification Italy, Francesco De Sanctis's *Storia della letteratura italiana* (*History of Italian Literature,* 1870–71) outlined the mission of Italian writers in the cultivation of national sentiment. The role of literature as the main force of Italian nationhood and sovereignty was reactualized in the context of the First World War's irredentism. Italian men of letters (like D'Annunzio) consolidated the myth that the Great War was the "fourth war" of the Risorgimento[12] and reasserted the Italianness of "unredeemed lands" to sustain Italy's claims for sovereignty. By contrast, Svevo rewrote this Italian nationalist narrative from the position of a former Habsburg subject, after Trieste was incorporated into Italy.

While critics have tended to group Svevo and D'Annunzio in discussions of Italian decadentism and modernism,[13] the straightforward inclusion of Svevo into the Italian national tradition (because of the language of his writing) and nationalist interpretations of his texts can obscure Svevo's multiethnic identities and allegiances (which determined the early, cool reception of his novels in Italy).[14] My approach to Svevo is informed by the scholarship on Habsburg Italian literary culture and Austro-Italian literature that draws attention to the Habsburg, Mitteleuropean

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[10] Sluga, *Problem of Trieste*; Maura Hametz, *Making Trieste Italian, 1918–1954* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005); Roberta Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire: Sovereignty and Settlement in Italy's Borderlands, 1922–1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Pergher argues that Fascism aimed to spread Italianness in Libya and South Tyrol through mass population settlement of Italians, which became the regime's main tool to affirm and consolidate Italian sovereignty in the "borderlands."

[11] Alberto Mario Banti, *The Nation of the Risorgimento: Kinship, Sanctity, and Honour in the Origins of Unified Italy*, trans. Stuart Oglethorpe (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020); see also Stefano Jossa, *L'Italia letteraria* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006).

[12] Mario Isnenghi, *Il mito della grande guerra da Marinetti a Malaparte* (Bari: Laterza, 1970).

[13] Arcangelo Leone De Castris, *Il decadentismo italiano: Svevo, Pirandello, d'Annunzio* (Rome: Laterza, 1989); Riccardo Scrivano, *Dopo il naturalismo: Esercizi di lettura su D'Annunzio e su Svevo* (Rome: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 1996); Antonella Santoro, *D'Annunzio o Svevo* (Naples: Guida, 2015).

[14] D'Annunzio's works have been recently reconsidered through transnational, comparative, and cosmopolitan lenses: Silvia Guslandi, "'The Homeland Is on the Ship': D'Annunzio's *La nave* and the Construction of Nationhood," *Forum Italicum* 57, no. 2 (2023): 641–59; Valerie McGuire, "On 'Savage Thought': Gabriele D'Annunzio, Guido Boggiani, and Italy's Transatlantic Mediterranean Empire," *Italian Culture* 41, no. 2 (2023): 153–70; Elisa Segnini and Michael Subialka, eds., *Gabriele D'Annunzio and World Literature: Multilingualism, Translation, Reception* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023). For the analysis of D'Annunzio and Svevo under the comparative paradigm of Italian modernism grounded in the reception of German idealist philosophy, see Michael J. Subialka, *Modernist Idealism: Ambivalent Legacies of German Philosophy in Italian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 59–81.

Italianness and non-Italian (especially German) cultural affiliations of Aron Hector Schmitz—born to an Italian-German-Jewish family in Habsburg Trieste and educated in Germany, writing under the pen name "Italo Svevo" (Italian Swabian).[15] Salvatore Pappalardo has argued that despite Svevo's apparent adherence to literary and cultural norms of Italian nationalism, he dismantled them from inside, reaffirming his Habsburg nonnational loyalties.[16] The alignment between D'Annunzio and Svevo within the national (Italian) framework does not mean "succumbing to nationalist history-writing"[17] of the First World War and nationalist literary history. Instead, it helps question Italian nationalist mythologies of the Great War—D'Annunzio's impresa di Fiume and "redemption" of Trieste—and reexamine the ideological nexus between Italian literature, nationhood, sovereignty, and Italianness.

In the first section, I trace how, in his poems, speeches, and Fiume's Constitution (the Charter of Carnaro), D'Annunzio reinterpreted a passage from Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* (*Divine Comedy*)—the key figure of Risorgimento nationalism and an emblem of italianità—to affirm the Italianness of Fiume and justify Italy's imperialist expansion in the Adriatic. Relying on the expression "Dante's Carnaro" to cast the Kvarner Gulf as intrinsically Italian, D'Annunzio reasserted Italian sovereignty, which, during his occupation of Fiume, was enacted through essentially literary strategies (speeches during public ceremonies and circulating texts and printed proclamations).[18] Nevertheless, the literary nature of this sovereignty made it unstable and malleable. This allowed the local government and ordinary Fiumians to reappropriate the same cultural and linguistic notions of Italianness as the core of Fiume's autonomy and regional identity and navigate between different loyalties and sovereignties, thus undermining the Italian sovereignty claimed by D'Annunzio. In the second section, I analyze Svevo's retrospective short story "Una burla riuscita" ("A Perfect Hoax," 1926, published in 1928) as an ironic response to D'Annunzian literary nationalism. Against the discourse of Italian nationalism and irredentism, Svevo situated the hoax of a mediocre Italian-speaking novelist from Trieste on the day of the city's "liberation" by the Italian navy at the end of the war, which marked the symbolic transfer of sovereignty from Austria to Italy. Questioning the literary norms of italianità and nationalist mechanisms of Italian literature that had sustained Italian claims to the city, Svevo challenged the literary Italianness of Trieste and symbolically destabilized Italian sovereignty in the annexed city from within.

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[15] See earlier studies: Giuseppe Antonio Camerino, *Italo Svevo e la crisi della Mitteleuropa* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1974); Elizabeth Schächter, *Origin and Identity: Essays on Svevo and Trieste* (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2000). For an overview of Austro-Italian literary scholarship, see Salvatore Pappalardo and Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski, "The Emergence of Austro-Italian Literary Studies," *Journal of Austrian Studies* 56, no. 2 (2023): 63–73.

[16] Salvatore Pappalardo, *Modernism in Trieste: The Habsburg Mediterranean and the Literary Invention of Europe, 1870–1945* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

[17] Roberta Pergher, "An Italian War? War and Nation in the Italian Historiography of the First World War," *Journal of Modern History* 90, no. 4 (2018): 899.

[18] Since this article critically examines D'Annunzio's impresa, I refer to the Adriatic city as "Fiume" and use the Italianized version "Carnaro" for the Kvarner Gulf.

"Dante's Carnaro": Italian Sovereignty and Its Limits during D'Annunzio's Occupation of Fiume

In his pro-interventionist "orations" and poems from *Canti della guerra latina* (*Songs of the Latin War*, 1918), D'Annunzio recast the war through the nationalist discourse of the Risorgimento.[19] The regenerative sacrifices of the battlefield would forge "a Greater Italy"—the powerful Italian nation that extended beyond its existing borders.[20] His rhetoric exemplified the intersection of Italy's nationalist and imperialist ambitions in the First World War, in which the goals of national unification and liberation of Italian "unredeemed" territories overlapped with territorial expansion.[21] Some years earlier, with his poems from *Le canzoni della gesta d'oltremare* (*Songs of Great Deeds Overseas,* 1912), D'Annunzio, like nationalist authors Enrico Corradini and Giovanni Pascoli, fueled and celebrated the colonial conquest of Libya in the Italo-Turkish War (1911–12). D'Annunzio advanced Italian pretensions on Tripolitania and Cyrenaica based on their heritage from the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean, which was supposed to ensure the belonging of Libya to Italy as its "fourth shore."[22] His pro-war texts similarly reaffirmed the Italianness of Istria, Dalmatia, and Fiume, drawing upon the "Latin" civilizational legacies of ancient Rome and the Republic of Venice, to support Italy's claims for sovereignty during the "scramble for Adria."[23]

The writer consistently outlined the rightful configuration of Italian borders. "Il mio confine a oriente è segnato dalle alpi Bebie e dalle alpi Dinariche, che continuano le alpi Giulie. Tutta quella banda di paese, che fu costantemente di origine e di essenza italiane, mi appartiene" (My eastern border is marked by the Velebit and the Dinaric Alps, which continue the Julian Alps. All that band of country, which was constantly of Italian origin and essence, belongs to me),[24] D'Annunzio declared in his "Lettera ai Dalmati" ("Letter to Dalmatians," 1919), speaking figuratively from the perspective of the Italian nation before the opening of the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919. The Italian delegation in Paris appealed to the Treaty of London—the secret agreement signed upon Italy's entry into the war on the side of the Allies that promised Italy large territories—and, in addition, demanded Fiume. When Italy's territorial demands in the Adriatic (Dalmatia and Fiume) were rejected, D'Annunzio's concept of *vittoria mutilata* (mutilated victory) became the main expression of the Italian postwar nationalist resentment. While the socialist intellectual Gaetano Salvemini claimed Italian sovereignty in some Adriatic territories (Istria and Fiume), he highlighted the need to ensure peaceful coexistence among Italian and Slavic populations, approaching multiethnic issues in the region with more pragmatic and more democratic positions (this included, for example, protection of rights of minorities, Italians in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and Slavic communities in Italy).[25] D'Annunzio's

[19] For an overview of D'Annunzio's war poems, see Marja Härmänmaa, "Gabriele D'Annunzio and War Rhetoric in the *Canti della guerra latina*," *Annali d'Italianistica* 33 (2015): 31–51.
[20] See Emilio Gentile, *La grande Italia: Ascesa e declino del mito della nazione nel ventesimo secolo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1997).
[21] Vanda Wilcox, *The Italian Empire and the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
[22] See Lucia Re, "Italians and the Invention of Race: The Poetics and Politics of Difference in the Struggle over Libya, 1890–1913," *California Italian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 1–65.
[23] Borut Klabjan, "'Scramble for Adria': Discourses of Appropriation of the Adriatic Space before and after World War I," *Austrian History Yearbook* 42 (2011): 16–32.
[24] Gabriele D'Annunzio, *La penultima ventura: Scritti e discorsi fiumani*, ed. Renzo De Felice (Milan: Mondadori, 1974), 11. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are the author's own.
[25] For nuances of Salvemini's position on the Adriatic question, see Sluga, *Problem of Trieste*, 28–31.

defense of Italian sovereignty in the Adriatic exalted the notion of Italianness associated with political and cultural imperialism.

In the final stages of war and its immediate aftermath, Fiume's sovereignty and political future were uncertain. To prove the Italianness of Fiume, and therefore its belonging to Italy, D'Annunzio reinterpreted a passage from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, a key text of Risorgimento literary nationalism. Writers and political leaders, among them Vittorio Alfieri, Ugo Foscolo, and Giuseppe Mazzini, rediscovered Dante and converted him "into an emblem of national unity" to support the Italian national project.[26] Their interpretations emphasized political aspects of Dante's works rather than their purely literary and aesthetic qualities.[27] These nationalist readings also underpinned the preference of Dante over Petrarch: while the former represented the civic role of the Italian writers in the formation of national sentiment, the introspective lyric style of the latter did not suit the patriotic mission.[28]

By the late nineteenth century, Dante had become "a key symbol of Italianness," and irredentists appealed to Dante to affirm the italianità of the unredeemed lands.[29] Founded under the leadership of the poet Giosuè Carducci, the Dante Alighieri Society (1889) promoted Italian culture and language to maintain Italian national sentiment in the *terre irredente* (unredeemed lands). Irredentist politicians in Trento erected Dante's monument (1896), positioning the poet as a protector of Italian civilization in Trentino. Carducci's poem "Per il monumento di Dante a Trento" ("For Dante's Monument in Trento," 1896) similarly cast Dante, "awaiting" in Trento, as a defender of Italian borders, alluding to an eventual unification of these lands with Italy.[30] During the Great War, Dante's figure was widely used in patriotic campaigns, especially by the Dante Alighieri Society, which distributed propaganda materials featuring the poet's image.[31] Moreover, before the conflict, irredentist writers and Dante scholars often relied upon a quote from Canto XX of *Inferno*, in which Dante outlined Italy's northern borders—"l'Alpe che serra Lamagna / sovra Tiralli" ("Alps that form a border with Germany / near Tyrol")[32]—to support Italian territorial claims to Trentino.[33]

D'Annunzio appealed to Dante's mapping of Italy in a similar way to advance his irredentist agenda.[34] He reinterpreted the lines from Canto IX (*Inferno*), in which Dante envisioned Italy's eastern borders, "Sì come ad Arli, ove Rodano stagna, / sì com' a Pola, presso del Carnaro / ch'Italia chiude e suoi termini bagna, / fanno i sepulcri tutt' il loco varo" ("Just as at Arles, where

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[26] Andrea Ciccarelli, "Dante and Italian Culture from the Risorgimento to World War I," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 119 (2001): 125.

[27] Stefano Jossa, "Politics vs. Literature: The Myth of Dante and the Italian National Identity," in *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century: Nationality, Identity, and Appropriation*, ed. Aida Audeh and Nick Havely (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 31.

[28] See Ciccarelli, "Dante and Italian Culture."

[29] Fulvio Conti, *The Ultimate Italian: Dante and a Nation's Identity*, trans. Patrick John Barr (London: Routledge, 2023), 83.

[30] Anna Pegoretti, *Dante a Trento! Usi e abusi di una retorica nazionale (1890–1921)* (Rome: Castelvecchi, 2022), 108, 112.

[31] Conti, *Ultimate Italian*, 108.

[32] Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto XX, lines 62–63. The original and English translation by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander are from the Princeton Dante Project, https://dante.princeton.edu/cgi-bin/dante/DispPoemByTitle.pl?TITLE=Inf.&SECT=xx.&LINE=61-63.

[33] Pegoretti, *Dante a Trento!*, 222–24.

[34] On Dante's presence in D'Annunzio's works and his role as a political model for the poet, see Paolo Valesio, *Gabriele D'Annunzio: The Dark Flame*, trans. Marilyn Migiel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Elena Borelli, "Dante in Gabriele D'Annunzio's Poetry and Prose: From Mystical Lover to *Poeta Vate*," *Mediaevalia* 38 (2017): 111–27.

the Rhone goes shallow, / just as at Pola, near Quarnero's gulf, / which hems in Italy and bathes her borders, / the sepulchers make the land uneven").[35] Dante outlined the borders of Italy, drawing upon the civilizational legacies of Rome, embodied by the Roman necropolis in Pula (Istria), which he compared to the large Roman necropolis in Arles (France). Echoing the Risorgimento literary nationalism that supported claims for Italy's unity and sovereignty through Italian literary tradition, D'Annunzio used Dante's text to assert Italian sovereignty in the contested territories and redraw Italy's borders. Marking the Carnaro as "Carnaro dantesco" ("Dante's Carnaro"), he at once underscored its unambiguous Italianness and legitimized Italy's claims.

The passage from the *Divine Comedy*, however, states clearly that Italian borders are delimited by Pula. Placing the emphasis on the Carnaro—the Kvarner Gulf between Istria and Dalmatia—D'Annunzio deliberately misread Dante to expand Italy's territorial demands. This interpretation of "Dante's Carnaro" emerged in D'Annunzio's literary accounts of the *beffa di Buccari* (the Bakar mockery). On the night of February 10–11, 1918, D'Annunzio joined the Italian navy's raid, when small motorboats (MAS) infiltrated past the Austrian military ships in the Bay of Bakar (part of the Kvarner Gulf), and the poet left mocking messages to the Austrians in floating bottles.[36] Like his flight over Trieste in summer 1915, when D'Annunzio showered the city with small Italian flags and messages addressed to his Triestine "brothers," the beffa di Buccari marked an overlap between D'Annunzio's speeches, poems, and actions. It also served to symbolically reaffirm Italian sovereignty in the unredeemed lands. D'Annunzio's "La canzone del Quarnaro" ("The Song of Quarnaro," 1918), dedicated to the beffa di Buccari, for the first time referenced the mentioned passage from the *Divine Comedy*. The writer underscores how the legacies of the Republic of Venice legitimize Italian domination in the broader Adriatic. In the line "Padre Dante, e con la scia / facciam 'tutto il loco varo'" (Father Dante, and with the wake / we make 'all the surface uneven'),[37] D'Annunzio incorporates Dante's quote, implicitly substituting the Roman sepulchers with Italian motorboats. If, in Dante, the Roman heritage ensures the belonging of Carnaro to Italy, in D'Annunzio's rewriting, the symbolic conquest of the Kvarner Gulf through the raid, under the authority of "Father Dante," prefigures annexation.

In his prose narrative of the beffa di Buccari (1918), D'Annunzio positions the raid as the "guarantor" of the Treaty of London: "Nel Quarnaro di Dante andiamo mallevadori del Patto di Londra" (We are going to Dante's Quarnaro as guarantors of the Treaty of London).[38] D'Annunzio then admits that the raid—as a substitute for conquest—extended Italian territorial demands beyond Dante's configurations of borders: "Abbiamo o non abbiamo preso possesso del Quarnaro? La scia temeraria ha trasferito molto più a levante i termini danteschi e giustamente riempito la lacuna del Patto di Londra" (Have we or have we not taken possession of the Quarnaro? The reckless wake shifted the Dantean boundaries much further east and rightly filled the gap of the Treaty of London).[39] As D'Annunzio alluded to the Italian claims to Fiume, which were absent from the treaty, he used the expression "Dante's Carnaro" as the grounds and the means of his imperialist project to extend Italian sovereignty in the Adriatic. The poet recalled this conceptual

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[35] Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto IX, lines 112–15, https://dante.princeton.edu/cgi-bin/dante/DispPoemByTitle.pl?TITLE=Inf&SECT=IX&LINE=112-117.

[36] See Lucy Hughes-Hallett, *Gabriele D'Annunzio: Poet, Seducer, and Preacher of War* (New York: Anchor Books, 2014), 371–74.

[37] Gabriele D'Annunzio, "La canzone del Quarnaro," in *La beffa di Buccari: Con aggiunti La canzone del Quarnaro, Il catalogo dei trenta di Buccari, Il cartello manoscritto e due carte marine* (Milan: Treves, 1918), 69.

[38] D'Annunzio, "Pagine del diario," in *La beffa di Buccari*, 30.

[39] D'Annunzio, "Pagine del diario," in *La beffa di Buccari*, 51–52.

formula in his speech "Italia o morte" ("Italy or Death," 1919) right before the march from Ronchi, which launched his Fiume expedition.[40]

D'Annunzio's Fiume orations constructed the genealogy of the Italian spirit of expansion in the Carnaro that originated in the beffa di Buccari and continued in the "occupation" and "liberation" of Fiume.[41] The progressive change of linguistic form—from "Quarnaro" or "Quarnero" to Dantean "Carnaro"—reflected the symbolic transfer of sovereignty in Fiume from Austria-Hungary to Italy, which began during the night raid in 1918. D'Annunzio proclaimed in his speech when he and his legionnaires triumphantly entered Fiume on September 12, 1919, "E dico che il Quarnero austriaco ridivenne Carnaro italiano in quella notte; e che da quella notte prese principio l'impresa italiana di Fiume. Italiani di Fiume, lo spirito notturno di Bùccari vige" (And I say that the Austrian Quarnero became Italian Carnaro again that night; and that from that night the Italian Fiume endeavor began. Italians of Fiume, the nocturnal spirit of Buccari is alive).[42] The references to "Dante's Carnaro" were recurring in D'Annunzio's Fiume speeches—"Il Carnaro è nostro. È un mare dantesco" (The Carnaro is ours. It is a Dantean sea)[43]—as a marker of Fiume's Italianness and foundation for Italy's rights of possession. This nationalist imaginary of Dante was reiterated in the woodcut *Dantes Adriacus* (1920) portraying Dante with an open book of the *Divine Comedy*, which the painter Adolfo De Carolis dedicated to D'Annunzio and Fiume.

The legitimization and enforcement of Italian sovereignty on the literary grounds of "Dante's Carnaro" culminated in the Constitution of Fiume—*Carta del Carnaro* (The Charter of Carnaro), a manifesto of *fiumanesimo* (August 1920). Historian Renzo De Felice cautions against the interpretation of the Charter of Carnaro as merely "una intuizione poetica" (a poetical intuition) by the poet D'Annunzio, though acknowledging its "indiscutibile valore letterario" (indisputable literary value).[44] The futurist Mario Carli, one of several poets who joined D'Annunzio in Fiume, called the Constitution D'Annunzian "capolavoro" (masterpiece).[45] Written in collaboration between D'Annunzio and anarcho-syndicalist Alceste De Ambris, it proclaimed the Italian Regency of Carnaro—an independent corporate state with a republican order, ruled by D'Annunzio.[46] This move did not contradict the goal of unification with Italy and aimed to pressure the Italian government, which condemned D'Annunzio's expedition, to recognize annexation.

The first paragraphs of the Charter of Carnaro, "Della perpetua volontà popolare" ("Of the Perpetual Will of the People"), mentioning the 1918 declaration of the Italian National Council, reiterate Fiume's right to reunite with the Italian motherland. The Constitution reuses a passage from D'Annunzio's speech "Italia e vita" ("Italy and Life," October 24, 1919) with a reference to "Dante's Carnaro": "Fiume è l'estrema custode italica delle Giulie, è l'estrema rocca della cultura latina, è l'ultima portatrice del segno dantesco. Per lei, di secolo in secolo, di vicenda in vicenda, di lotta in lotta, di passione in passione, si serbò italiano il Carnaro di Dante" (Fiume is the ultimate

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[40] D'Annunzio, "Italia o morte," in *La penultima ventura*, 111.
[41] See D'Annunzio, "Il secondo anniversario della Beffa di Bùccari," in *La penultima ventura*, 203–6.
[42] D'Annunzio, "La prima voce dell'arengo," in *La penultima ventura*, 124.
[43] D'Annunzio, "Agli ufficiali e agli equipaggi delle navi: *Dante Alighieri*, *Nullo*, *Mirabello*, *Abba*, nelle acque di Fiume italiana," in *Prose di ricerca, di lotta, di comando, di conquista, di tormento, d'indovinamento, di rinnovamento, di celebrazione, di rivendicazione, di liberazione, di favole, di giochi, di baleni* (Milan: Mondadori, 1950), 1:1020.
[44] Renzo De Felice, *D'Annunzio politico 1918–1938* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1978), 110.
[45] Mario Carli, *Con D'Annunzio a Fiume* (Milan: Facchi, 1920), 82.
[46] See Renzo De Felice, "Introduzione," in *La carta del Carnaro nei testi di Alceste De Ambris e di Gabriele D'Annunzio*, ed. Renzo De Felice (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1974), 7–31.

Italian guardian of the Julian Alps, the outer stronghold of Latin culture, the last bearer of Dante's sign. For her, from century to century, from one event to another, from struggle to struggle, from passion to passion, Dante's Carnaro remained Italian).[47] The figure of Dante, again, is at once a symbol and a proof of Fiume's Italianness, which constitutes Fiume's "diritto storico" (historical right)[48] to be incorporated into Italy and supports Italy's territorial claims. The Charter's article "Dell'istruzione pubblica" ("Of the Public Education") positions the Italian—Dante's—language as the core of Fiume's italianità: "Sul Carnaro di Dante il culto della lingua di Dante è appunto il rispetto e la custodia di ciò che in tutti i tempi fu considerato come il più prezioso tesoro dei popoli, come la più alta testimonianza della loro nobiltà originaria, come l'indice supremo del loro sentimento di dominazione morale" (In Dante's Carnaro, the cult of Dante's language is precisely the respect for and preservation of what has always been considered the most precious treasure of peoples, the highest testimony of their original nobility, and the supreme indicator of their sentiment of moral dominance).[49] D'Annunzio defines the Italian literary language as the expression of Italian cultural, spiritual, and moral superiority ("nobility")—overturning Dante's notion of "nobility" as divine virtue and moral worth—that justifies Italy's civilizational "dominance" in the Adriatic.

During his fifteen-month occupation, D'Annunzio maintained and enacted Italian sovereignty in Fiume through fundamentally literary strategies—speeches to the crowds (from the balcony of the Governor's Palace and in the theaters) that were then published in the newspaper *La Vedetta d'Italia*, and printed proclamations and posters distributed around the city. Historian Federico Carlo Simonelli aptly calls the narratives about the impresa di Fiume that D'Annunzio was constructing through various discursive tools "un poema in diretta" (a live poem),[50] in which the *Comandante* was at once the author and the main protagonist. The literary mechanisms were an essential part of D'Annunzio's symbolic performances—military parades, public assemblies, civil and religious celebrations. These ceremonies acted as nationalist rituals to recreate the Italian national community and affirm Fiume's unquestionable Italianness. D'Annunzian theatrical-liturgical rites would provide an ideological and cultural model for the Fascist movement; both represented, as historians George L. Mosse and Emilio Gentile have argued, the aestheticization of mass nationalist politics and its transformation into "secular" religion.[51] As Fascist political culture reinterpreted and integrated D'Annunzian symbols, the deep conceptual connections between the two were not limited to stylistic appropriation.[52]

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[47] Gabriele D'Annunzio, "La Carta del Carnaro," in De Felice*, La carta del Carnaro*, 35.
[48] D'Annunzio, "La carta del Carnaro," 35.
[49] "La carta del Carnaro," 63.
[50] Federico Carlo Simonelli, *D'Annunzio e il mito di Fiume: Riti, simboli, narrazioni* (Pisa: Pacini, 2021), 13.
[51] George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1975); Mosse, *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1980), 87–104; Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio: La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista* (Rome: Laterza, 1993). For the links between D'Annunzio's nationalist culture and Fascism, see also Jared Becker, *Nationalism and Culture: Gabriele D'Annunzio and Italy after the Risorgimento* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).
[52] See Simonelli's book, especially the last part: *D'Annunzio e il mito di Fiume*, 223–79. While scholars generally agree that Fascism reappropriated D'Annunzio's style, an influential strand of postwar historiography questioned the univocal interpretation of D'Annunzio's impresa as a political precursor of the Fascist movement and highlighted its revolutionary aspects, ideologically different from Fascism. These works include, among others, Michael A. Ledeen, *D'Annunzio a Fiume* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1975); De Felice, *D'Annunzio politico 1918–1938*. For the detailed discussion of this historiographical approach and more recent works, see Federico Carlo Simonelli, "Fiume e d'Annunzio: I cento anni di un caso storiografico ancora aperto," *Storicamente* 15–16, no. 57 (2019–20).

From the cultural perspective, rather than being dismissed as a mere "avventura letteraria" (literary adventure),[53] D'Annunzio's seizure of Fiume can be better understood within the links between Italian literature and nationhood proper to (post-)Risorgimento nationalism. In his key speech in Trieste in 1920, Benito Mussolini noted that "la poesia ha anche il compito di suscitare l'entusiasmo e di accendere le fedi" (poetry also has the task of arousing enthusiasm and igniting faith) and praised D'Annunzio as the greatest Italian poet who "realizza nella magnifica unità di pensiero e di sentimento, l'azione che è una caratteristica del popolo italiano" (in a magnificent unity of thought and feeling, he fulfills the action that is a characteristic of the Italian people).[54] Mario Carli similarly celebrated D'Annunzio's deeds, drawing a distinction between "literature," as something passive and detached from reality—"Qui non si fa letteratura, signori italiani!" (We don't do literature here, Italian gentlemen!)—and "poetry," the spiritual inspiration for heroic actions: "Pensate che ogni parola dei proclami di Gabriele d'Annunzio è un grido della passione fiumana. Che ogni suo volo lirico corrisponde a un volo, forse tragico, di un nostro aviatore" (Consider that every word of Gabriele d'Annunzio's proclamations is a cry of Fiumian passion. That his every lyrical flight corresponds to a flight, perhaps a tragic one, of one of our aviators).[55] His words recall the conceptual division—"literature meaning artificial and trivial word-games, and poetry real inspiration, human passion, and spiritual strength"—in the readings of Dante by Risorgimento intellectuals and post-Unification critics, particularly Francesco De Sanctis, who distinguished between a poet (Dante) / "poetry" and an artist (Petrarch) / "literature."[56] Stefano Jossa further observes that for De Sanctis, Dante was at once "the enemy" of "literature" and the founder of the new civically engaged Italian literary tradition that contributed to national redemption.[57]

Dante as a *poeta vate* provided a model for the patriotic vocation of the post-Unification Italian writers who were called to contribute to the progress of the great Italian nation—which D'Annunzio's "liberation" of Fiume was meant to complete. For D'Annunzio, Fiume embodied the true spirit of the Italian nation—the endlessly young heroic Italy contraposed to the old Italy of politicians (like Francesco Saverio Nitti) who subscribed to the unjust postwar order imposed by Western powers in Paris: "Fiume è d'Italia, ma di un'altra Italia" (Fiume belongs to Italy, but to a different Italy).[58] Within the discourse of Risorgimento, D'Annunzio transformed the project of Fiume's "restitution" to the Italian motherland into one of Italy's national regeneration.[59]

Failure of the Impresa: Ambiguous Sovereignties and Fiumian Italianness

Given D'Annunzio's ambitions to found a new Italy from Fiume (and the celebratory nationalist narrative constructed about his impresa), to what extent did he succeed in asserting Italian sovereignty over the city? The literary essence of Italian sovereignty reaffirmed by D'Annunzio

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[53] De Felice, *D'Annunzio politico 1918–1938*, 148.
[54] Benito Mussolini, "Discorso di Trieste," in *Scritti e discorsi di Benito Mussolini: Edizione definitiva*, ed. Valentino Piccoli (Milan: Hoepli, 1934), 2:101–2.
[55] Carli, *Con D'Annunzio a Fiume*, 74.
[56] Jossa, "Politics vs. Literature," 45.
[57] Jossa, "Politics vs. Literature," 45.
[58] D'Annunzio, "Volete notizie?" in *Prose di ricerca*, 1:1030.
[59] Welch has analyzed how, in D'Annunzio's Fiume speeches, the symbolic figures of dismembered bodies (of the Italian motherland and mutilated Italian soldiers) and motifs of spilled Italian blood symbolically ensured the rebirth of the Italian nation. Rhiannon Noel Welch, *Vital Subjects: Race and Biopolitics in Italy, 1860–1920* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 131–90.

in Fiume reflected the confusion about the meanings and forms of sovereignty in the aftermath of war, as well as its profound fragility.[60] Given the unwillingness of the Italian government to incorporate Fiume, going against the international agreements with the Great Powers, the sovereignty of the "true" Italian nation that D'Annunzio defended was paradoxically separated from the sovereignty of the Italian state. The Italian Regency of Carnaro was a self-proclaimed entity. The project of the League of Fiume that would unite oppressed peoples across the globe and all those who supported "the spirit of Fiume" against the hegemony of the Western capitalist powers also remained merely on paper. In the end, D'Annunzio did not manage to fulfill his main objective—to unify Fiume with Italy. After Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes signed the Treaty of Rapallo in November 1920, which designated Fiume to become an independent state, D'Annunzio's occupation ended in late December 1920, when Italian troops attacked the city (the so-called Bloody Christmas).

Beyond larger geopolitical conditions that determined the failure of the impresa, the grounds of D'Annunzian Italian sovereignty in Fiume—based on the cultural, linguistic, and literary notions of Italianness (epitomized by Dante)—made it more susceptible to different interpretations in the local Fiumian context and, therefore, more unstable. D'Annunzio's depiction of Fiume as a *città italianissima* (more Italian than Italy itself) relied on the nationalist and irredentist discourse that presented the Adriatic city as unproblematically Italian. This perspective obscured the complex dynamics of identity formation in a multicultural and multilingual port city, where the Italian majority lived alongside Hungarians, Slovenes, Croats, and other ethnic groups, and Fiumians used to speak several languages and dialects. Under Habsburg rule, Italian Fiumians shared multiple national (and nonnational) loyalties and strong local patriotism.[61]

These overlapping allegiances contributed to more elastic notions of Fiumian italianità reaffirmed by diverse political groups, even when it was mediated through the same symbols of Italian national identity, such as through Dante. In September 1908, irredentists from the association *Giovine Fiume* (Young Fiume, 1905) joined Fiume's delegation to participate in the Dante celebrations in Ravenna, together with Italians from other unredeemed lands. In their newspaper, Fiumian irredentists evoked Dante as a symbol of Italianness to ensure Fiume's belonging to the Italian national community—"Fiume fa il suo dovere di città italiana, di città che lotta e combatte contro nemici tutti insidie e tranelli in difesa dell'italianità di cui Dante è padre" (Fiume fulfills its duty as an Italian city, a city that struggles and fights against enemies, overcoming all dangers and traps in defense of the Italianness of which Dante is the father).[62] The

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[60] See a passage from Mussolini's article discussed by Pergher: "Che cosa significa in concreto la sovranità Italiana? La sovranità implica l'annessione? E in caso negativo implica almeno la continuità territoriale collo stato Italiano? La formola della 'sovranita' è elastica" (What does 'Italian sovereignty' mean concretely? Does sovereignty entail annexation? And if it does not, does it at least entail territorial continuity with the Italian state? The formula for 'sovereignty' is elastic). Benito Mussolini, "Il discorso," *Il Popolo d'Italia,* September 28, 1919, 1. The English translation is from Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire*, 69.

[61] See Gianluca Volpi, "Fiumani, ungheresi, italiani. La formazione dell'identità nazionale a Fiume nell'epoca dualista (1867–1914)," in *Nazionalismi di frontiera: Identità contrapposte sull'Adriatico nord-orientale, 1850–1950*, ed. Marina Cattaruzza (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2003), 47–72; Ilona Fried, *Fiume, città della memoria: 1868–1945*, trans. Lavinia Sándor and Ilona Fried (Udine: Del Bianco, 2005); Raoul Pupo, *Fiume città di passione* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2018). About Fiumian local patriotism during the war and in its aftermath, see Ivan Jeličić, "Redefining Fiumians: Flag Usage and the Ambiguities of the Nation-Building Process in the Former Habsburg-Hungarian Corpus Separatum, 1914–1924," *Contemporary European History* 33, no. 2 (2024): 685–704.

[62] "L'omaggio di Fiume a Dante," *La Giovine Fiume*, July 4, 1908, 3, quoted in Giovanni Stelli, "L'associazione irredentistica 'La Giovine Fiume' e i pellegrinaggi alla tomba di Dante a Ravenna del 1908 e del 1911," *I Quaderni del Cardello* 21 (2014): 80.

delegates from the Adriatic city brought to Ravenna their municipal flag to reconsecrate it on Dante's tomb because, according to the Fiumian irredentists, the flag lost its sacredness when it was carried in the parade at the Hungarian millennium celebration. As historian Ivan Jeličić points out, Fiumian irredentists expressed their loyalty to Italy through local symbols;[63] their nationalist fervor was intertwined with distinct regional identity.

Most importantly, having been incorporated into the Kingdom of Hungary under a special status (*corpus separatum*), Fiume historically enjoyed a large degree of autonomy and had an Italian-speaking municipality. For this reason, Fiume's cultural and linguistic Italianness was strictly interconnected with—almost equated with—its autonomy. The preservation of these conditions determined the city's political life.[64] Fundamentally, to defend Fiume's cultural italianità meant to defend its right to self-government. In October 1908 (not long after the Dante celebrations), the prominent member of the Autonomist Party, Antonio Grossich, proposed to rename the major square of the city, Piazza Adamich, as Piazza Dante. His proposal was initially rejected by the head of the municipality but then accepted after protests in irredentist circles. Both autonomists and irredentists appealed to Dante as an epitome of Italianness to reassert the city's Italian character.[65] The link between Italianness and autonomy made Fiumian italianità radically different from the "standard" definition of Italianness that aligned with the homogeneous Italian national identity and allegiance to Italy.

The persistence of distinct Fiumian notions of Italianness after the dissolution of the Dual Monarchy helps us better understand the ambiguities of Italian sovereignty in Fiume during D'Annunzio's rule, seeing beyond the teleological discourse of Italian nationalism. From October 30, 1918, when the Italian National Council proclaimed the unification of Fiume with the Italian motherland, this provisional government, composed of members of Fiume's municipality, local elites, and irredentists, dedicated itself to obtaining annexation to Italy, rejecting the Wilsonian decision about Fiume's independence. The politicians from the Council welcomed D'Annunzio and celebrated him as a savior of Fiume's Italianness. "Per fortuna nostra è venuto Gabriele d'Annunzio, il sublime poeta soldato, il nostro liberatore…" (Fortunately for us, Gabriele d'Annunzio arrived, the sublime poet-soldier, our liberator…), the Council's president Grossich exclaimed during the government's meeting on November 11, 1919.[66] Before and after the arrival of D'Annunzio, the Italian National Council tirelessly adopted policies and symbolic practices to demonstrate Fiume's "undisputed" italianità. One of their first moves to reclaim Italianness was the renaming of the major square as Piazza Dante (which had regained its old name, Piazza Adamich, in 1916).

However, as Reill has argued in her work on the Fiume crisis, under this performance of Italianness and the Italian nationalist agenda, the Italian National Council (which remained in office under D'Annunzio's occupation) reused the remaining imperial "frameworks" for the regulation of the city's social, economic, and cultural life (whether it was the currency markets, the legal system, or the school curriculum) to maintain Fiume's autonomy in preparation for its

[63] Jeličić, "Redefining Fiumians," 693.
[64] About autonomism in Fiume, see William Klinger, "Dall'autonomismo alla costituzione dello Stato: Fiume 1848–1918," in *Forme del politico tra Ottocento e Novecento: studi di storia per Raffaele Romanelli*, ed. Emmanuel Betta, Daniela Luigia Caglioti, and Elena Papadia (Rome: Viella, 2012), 45–60.
[65] Stelli, "L'associazione irredentistica," 88–89.
[66] Danilo L. Massagrande, ed., *I verbali del Consiglio Nazionale Italiano di Fiume e del Comitato Direttivo 1918–1920* (Rome: Società di studi fiumani-Archivio Museo storico di Fiume, 2014), 45.

incorporation into Italy.[67] Likewise, the enthusiasm of Fiumians and Italian Fiumians about D'Annunzio did not translate automatically into their univocal Italian national identity and nationalist sentiment. They preserved their local affiliations and multiethnic identities and at the same time took advantage of the official pro-Italian policies and participated in the display of Fiume's Italianness. Appealing to the same cultural-literary notions of italianità that underpinned D'Annunzio's nationalist project, elites and ordinary Fiumians rearticulated it, linking Italianness back to the local autonomy (sovereignty) and regional identity proper to the Habsburg era. Such reinterpretations of italianità reveal complex overlapping loyalties and sovereignties in Fiume under D'Annunzio's occupation, which undermined the Italian sovereignty reasserted by the poet.

Svevo's Rewriting of Literary Italianness in the "Redeemed" Trieste

Between the last stages of the war and its aftermath (1917–19), Italo Svevo evoked the figure of Dante as a synonym of italianità but reworked him into a symbol of Italian pacifism.[68] In his unfinished essay "La Lega delle Nazioni [Sulla teoria della pace]" ("The League of Nations [On the Theory of Peace]"), the Triestine author advocates for the necessity of Italy to join the League of Nations, "perchè ciò è voluto dal suo interesse, le sue tradizioni e il carattere del suo popolo" (because this is dictated by her interests, her traditions, and the character of her people), and—as he notes, self-identifying as Italian—"perchè il nostro popolo è per sua essenza pacifico. Non conosce ne intolleranze ne xenofobie" (because our people are peaceful by nature. They do not know intolerance or xenophobia).[69] Italy will play an important role in the League of Nations, given that "lo sforzo più magnanimo" (the most magnanimous effort) to create a theory of peace was done in Italy: "una teoria completa e perfetta se anche non più applicabile alle nostre circostanze fluì dalla nobile mente di Dante che per aver conosciuti gli orrori…della guerra Senese divenne un pacifista fervente" (a complete and perfect theory, although it is no longer applicable to our circumstances, flowed from the noble mind of Dante who, having witnessed the horrors…of the Sienese war, became a fervent pacifist).[70] While Svevo does not discuss any specific text of Dante's, he most likely refers to his treatise *De Monarchia*, a utopian project of a universal Christian empire; his mention of the "Sienese war" also points to the Battle of Montaperti between Florence and Siena that Dante evoked in *Inferno*. As Salvatore Pappalardo has observed, Svevo included Dante in his essay to convince the future Italian audience of the "Italian character of his pacifist theory."[71] Facing the difficult task of promoting a pacifist agenda, as the D'Annunzian notion of "mutilated victory" dominated the public sphere (and fueled the nascent Fascist movement), Svevo appealed to Dante's authority as the father of Italian nationhood and transformed the poet into a founder of the Italian pacifist tradition that would ensure Italy's willingness to contribute to international peace.

The Triestine writer envisions a possible solution to achieve peace in a liberal weakening of political and economic borders between European countries, which he models on the United States and the Swiss cantons. His propositions to attenuate Italy's borders contradict Italy's wartime

[67] Reill, *Fiume Crisis.* See especially the analysis of how Fiumian elites reworked the principles of Habsburg "multi-layered sovereignty," selectively maintaining old laws and adapting some Italian legal norms, to negotiate the local sovereignty (autonomy), 108–34.
[68] Stefano Carrai, "Dante nella cultura triestina del Novecento," *Bollettino di italianistica*, no. 1/2 (2023): 95.
[69] Italo Svevo, "La Lega delle Nazioni [Sulla teoria della pace]," in *Scritti giornalistici, saggi postumi, appunti sparsi e pagine autobiografiche*, ed. Brian Moloney (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2018), 279.
[70] Svevo, "La Lega delle Nazioni," 280.
[71] Pappalardo, *Modernism in Trieste*, 157.

expansionist agenda as well as postwar nationalist resentments, which culminated in D'Annunzio's seizure of Fiume. Like Fiumians under D'Annunzio's occupation, Svevo apparently subscribes to the Italian nationalist agenda and declares his loyalty to Italy in preparation for the annexation of Trieste. Yet, in this essay, he emphasizes the role of the League of Nations as a subject of supranational sovereignty to implicitly confront the sovereignty of the Italian nation-state, drawing upon federalist ideas of Austro-Marxist Habsburg intellectuals.[72] Most importantly, Svevo recasts the Italian nationalist icon Dante to articulate a different, nonnational project, critically reinterpreting the politics of Italian literary nationalism. In a later letter (1925) to the critic Giuseppe Prezzolini, Svevo recalled how, to work on his treatise about "pace universale" (universal peace), he reread Dante, "maggiore fra i pacifisti" (the greatest among pacifists), and added, "Non si offenda! Non voglio mica dire che Dante abbia avuto colpa di ciò che poi avvenne" (Please do not be offended! I am not trying to say that Dante was to blame for what happened later).[73] Given Svevo's ambivalent style, his remark reveals that "what happened later"—postwar nationalism and the rise of Fascism—was embedded in Italian cultural nationalism, embodied by Dante (whom the Fascist regime would elevate to the supreme symbol of italianità).

While Svevo's pacifist treatise remained in the manuscript, his published postwar literary works similarly challenged the nationalist rhetoric of Italian writers (like D'Annunzio) that positioned the Great War as a continuation of the Risorgimento. In the final part of his most famous autobiographical novel *La coscienza di Zeno* (*Zeno's Conscience*, 1923), which depicts the outbreak of war with Italy (May 23, 1915), instead of using heroic tones, Svevo creates a grotesque scene of linguistic confusion on the border between the main character Zeno Cosini, an Italian businessman from Trieste, and Austrian soldiers.[74] In this comic and brutal episode, citizens of the same country (Zeno and the Austrians) do not speak the same language. Zeno risks being shot, but he continues asking the Austrian official whether he can cross the military border to pick up his hat and coat and drink his coffee.[75]

A lesser-known short story of the Triestine author, "Una burla riuscita," strategically complements this novel.[76] Set in Trieste during the First World War and in its aftermath, it tells the story of an aging, mediocre Italian-speaking novelist and office worker, Mario Samigli, tricked by his friend, traveling salesman Enrico Gaia, who convinces Samigli that a representative of a prestigious Viennese publishing house, Westermann, wants to translate his old, unsuccessful novel into German. The key event, the hoax, takes place on November 3, 1918—"la giornata storica di Trieste" ("a historic day for Trieste")[77]—when, in the afternoon, the Italian navy docked at the San Carlo pier (later renamed the "Molo Audace," after an Italian destroyer). This day marked the city's unification with the Italian motherland, when General Carlo Petitti di Roreto took the city in the name of the King of Italy, and Italian troops were enthusiastically welcomed by Triestines (Svevo

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[72] Pappalardo, *Modernism in Trieste*, 154–66.

[73] Italo Svevo, *Epistolario* (Milan: Dall'Oglio, 1966), 772.

[74] Italo Svevo, *La coscienza di Zeno*, in *Opere di Italo Svevo,* ed. Bruno Maier (Milan: Dall'Oglio, 1959), 945–48.

[75] See Moloney's classic interpretation of *Zeno's Conscience* as the "war novel." Brian Moloney, *Italo Svevo narratore: Lezioni triestine* (Gorizia: Libreria Editrice Goriziana, 1998), 95–115. For a detailed analysis of the episode on the border, see Richard Robinson, *Narratives of the European Border: A History of Nowhere* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 40–65.

[76] Earlier scholarly articles about the short story mostly focused on Svevo's irony and relationships between life and art, without discussing the issues of Italian national identity. Paula Robison, "Una Burla Riuscita: Irony as Hoax in Svevo," *Modern Fiction Studies* 18, no. 1 (1972): 65–80; Peter Bondanella, "'The Hoax': Svevo on Art and Reality," *Studies in Short Fiction* 10, no. 3 (1973): 263–69.

[77] Italo Svevo, "Una burla riuscita," in *Racconti e scritti autobiografici*, ed. Mario Lavagetto (Milan: Mondadori, 2004), 219; Italo Svevo, *A Perfect Hoax*, trans. J. G. Nichols (London: Hesperus Press, 2003), 25.

himself was in the crowd).[78] This crucial moment, however, is absent in the short story, and the triumphant landing of the Italians is briefly narrated only by the hoaxer Gaia. To begin his trick, Gaia tells Samigli that he met a Westermann representative "nella folla plaudente" ("in the cheering crowd")[79] and approached the German to annoy him. Svevo's fictional account differs from the narratives of irredentist Italian Triestine authors. His friend Silvio Benco described the events on November 3 within the discourse of the Risorgimento, when, while the whole city was cheering "Viva Italia!" (Long live Italy!) and under the sounds of "Inno di Garibaldi" (The Garibaldi Hymn), Trieste was welcomed into the Italian national family.[80] By contrast, overlapping the great patriotic event with the story of the hoax, Svevo ironically overturns the Italian nationalist narrative around the redemption of Trieste.

By establishing a link between the immediate aftermath of the war and the later period of Svevo's writing (the 1920s), this short story also alludes to the continuity between Liberal and Fascist politics of Italianization in the annexed Trieste. Habsburg Trieste comprised Italian, German, Slavic, and Jewish populations, and Italian Triestines spoke Italian, German, and the local dialect (*triestino*). This cultural and linguistic heterogeneity, together with the city's cosmopolitan commercial spirit, shaped multinational attachments and more flexible notions of italianità typical of Italian Triestines.[81] Svevo himself was linked to nationalist and irredentist circles of the city—in the 1880s, he collaborated with the liberal irredentist newspaper *L'Indipendente*—but did not support the political claims of irredentism. Angelo Vivante's influential essay *Irredentismo adriatico* (*Adriatic Irredentism*, 1912) challenged Italian irredentist discourses, reasserting the multiethnic nature of the Habsburg city.

After the war, to nationalize former imperial subjects, the Liberal Italian government started developing strategies of assimilation and Italianization to reinforce "cultural notions of *italianità* or 'Italianness' consistent with the statehood."[82] Such politics intensified with the rise of Fascism, which, even before Mussolini's ascent to power, declared itself the promoter of italianità in Italy's "borderlands"—recently annexed territories where Italian sovereignty was uncertain.[83] In his fundamental speech in Trieste in September 1920, Mussolini affirmed that the "primo pilastro fondamentale dell'azione fascista è l'italianità" ("first fundamental pillar of Fascist action is Italianness")[84] and outlined this "più delicato, più sacro, più difficile, più necessario" (more delicate, more sacred, more difficult, more necessary)[85] task of Fascism in the new provinces. While there had been long-standing portrayals of "Slavs" as a threat to Trieste's cultural Italianness, Fascists fueled violent tensions between Italian and Slavic populations to pursue their nationalist and political goals.[86] In July 1920, squads of the Triestine *Fascio* (local Fascist party branch), reorganized into a paramilitary organization, burned down *Narodni Dom*, a cultural, social, and economic center of Trieste's Slovenian and other Slavic communities. Already by the March on Rome in 1922, Trieste was the Italian city with the largest membership in the National Fascist Party. This support of Fascism arose from undefined contours of national belonging in

[78] John Gatt-Rutter, *Italo Svevo: A Double Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 290.
[79] Svevo, "Una burla riuscita," 221; Svevo, *A Perfect Hoax*, 27.
[80] Silvio Benco, *Gli ultimi anni della dominazione austriaca a Trieste*, pt. 3, *La liberazione* (Milan: Casa editrice Risorgimento, 1919), 149–50.
[81] Hametz, *Making Trieste Italian*, 4; Pappalardo, *Modernism in Trieste*, 25.
[82] Hametz, *Making Trieste Italian*, 4.
[83] Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire*, 15.
[84] Mussolini, "Discorso di Trieste," 2:100. The English translation is from Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire*, 1.
[85] Mussolini, "Discorso di Trieste," 2:107; Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire*, 62.
[86] Bresciani, "Battle for Post-Habsburg Trieste," 182–83.

Trieste; the Fascism offered to pro-Italian Triestines included an influential and assimilated Jewish community, a convenient model to assert the Italian national identity and confirm their national loyalties. The Fascist regime strived to transform Trieste into "a paragon of devotion to Italy and a model for the new Italian nation."[87] Mussolini's government restricted and then banned Slavic languages in schools and launched the campaign for Italianization of non-Italian surnames.[88] Italianization politics likewise aimed to suppress Italian Triestines' multiethnic identities and multicultural affiliations that did not align with official norms of italianità.

Complexities of Trieste's Literary Italianità

Written in the context of the 1920s Italianization, Svevo's short story tacitly troubles Trieste's unambiguous italianità and scrutinizes the literary essence of this Italianness: it situates the trick played on a failed Italian-speaking novelist from Trieste at the moment when sovereignty in the city was symbolically transferred from Austria to Italy. Translation scholar Sherry Simon has remarked on the significance of Svevo's decision to "tell his story of deception and translation" on the day of Italy's victory in the war when "Trieste itself was becoming less international, less multilingual."[89] Svevo's work demonstrates how Habsburg notions of identity continued to silently persist in the "redeemed" city. His retrospective narrative illuminates definitions of Habsburg Italianness, in which italianità overlapped with multiple ethnic, cultural, and linguistic attachments.[90] As a cultural identity, this heterogeneous Italianness clashed with the ideal concept of a homogeneous italianità, taking shape through connections and confrontations between the two.

The cultural Italianness of Italian Triestine intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was grounded in the Italian literary tradition. The engagement with the prestigious Italian literature, especially with Dante and Risorgimento authors, allowed Triestine writers—such as Scipio Slataper and Giani and Carlo Stuparich, contributors to the Florentine literary magazine *La Voce* in the 1910s—to symbolically join the Italian national community.[91] At the same time, they were greatly influenced by Austrian and German literary cultures, philosophy, and psychoanalysis. The sense of fragmented identity at once informed the aspirations of Triestine intellectuals toward italianità (associated with Italian literary and cultural superiority) and revealed the inadequacy of these attempts. The impossibility of achieving cultural homogeneity prompted Italian Triestine authors to articulate distinct and expanded notions of Italianness that could account for their own multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual realities. Slataper, who once defined himself as "slavo, tedesco e italiano" (Slav, German, and Italian),[92] famously outlined a vision of Triestine identity that would integrate (rather than reject) its conflicting Austrian commercial identity and Italian cultural identity: "E Trieste non può strozzare nessuna delle due:

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[87] Hametz, *Making Trieste Italian*, 124.
[88] For an overview of Fascist politics toward minorities, see Marina Cattaruzza, *Italy and Its Eastern Border, 1866–2016* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 125–37.
[89] Sherry Simon, *Cities in Translation: Intersections of Language and Memory* (London: Routledge, 2012), 83.
[90] See Ara and Magris's classic study, which highlighted the complexity of Triestine identity, though it emphasized its cultural Italianness. Angelo Ara and Claudio Magris, *Trieste: Un'identità di frontiera* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982).
[91] See Katia Pizzi, *A City in Search of an Author: The Literary Identity of Trieste* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 37–48, 100–17.
[92] Scipio Slataper, *Alle tre amiche: Lettere*, ed. Giani Stuparich (Milan: Mondadori, 1958), 421, quoted in Pappalardo, *Modernism in Trieste*, 18–19.

è la sua doppia anima: si ucciderebbe" ("And Trieste cannot do without either: it is her double soul, it would kill her").[93]

Along the same lines, Svevo's literary Italianness coexisted with his non-Italian linguistic and cultural affiliations (especially his links with German culture), and while he adopted Italian for his writing, Svevo situated himself at once within and outside Italian letters. Given that his multiethnic background and his style did not fit into the models of literary italianità, Svevo's novels did not enjoy much recognition in Italy until his works became successful in translation in the mid-1920s.[94] Even then, rediscovered by Italian critics, Svevo could not be fully admitted "nel nobile castello della tradizione letteraria italiana" (into the noble castle of Italian literary tradition).[95] His novels were more aligned with contemporary works of European modernism. Svevo's language, infused with the mix of German and Triestine dialect, did not conform to "beautiful" standard Italian,[96] which he often dubbed "Tuscan," an artificial language of the elite Italian literary canon (and its foundational figure, Dante), contraposed to the *triestino* (the vivid language of everyday Triestine life).[97] His Italian-German pseudonym (a reflection of his overlapping identities) embarrassed postwar Italian critics as "unpatriotic."[98]

The figure of the unsuccessful Italian Triestine writer Samigli, in several aspects, represents a comic version of Svevo. "Ettore Samigli" was Svevo's earlier pen name, which he used when collaborating with *L'Indipendente*. Significantly, this last name contains German and Jewish origins[99] and, in conjunction with the Italian name "Mario," the protagonist's identity becomes an equivalent of "Italo Svevo." Samigli and his friend and boss Brauer embody not only the two sides of Svevo's professional self—a man of letters and a businessman—but also his multiethnic background ("Brauer" is also a reference to his German and Jewish origins). Svevo's *Profilo autobiografico* (*Autobiographical Profile*, 1928), written by his old friend, nationalist author Giulio Cesari, and revised by the writer himself, underlined Svevo's Italianness and his devotion to the Italian nationalist cause, erasing his German and Jewish backgrounds.[100] Whereas Svevo refrained from openly affirming his ethnic affiliations in the context of the Fascist promotion of italianità, in his short story, he was able to cautiously reinstate them through onomastic markers. Svevo's story displays the inconsistencies in the declared literary Italianness of the Italian Triestine Samigli, who (despite his lack of success) proudly considers himself "an Italian writer." In one episode, Samigli reads the Italian dictionary aloud—"con la riverenza che per quel libro ha ogni buono scrittore italiano" ("with the reverence which every good Italian writer has for that

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[93] Scipio Slataper, *Scritti politici*, ed. Giani Stuparich (Rome: Alberto Stock, 1925), 28. The English translation is from Scipio Slataper, *My Karst and My City and Other Essays*, ed. Elena Coda, trans. Nicholas Benson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 93. For the analysis of Slataper's views of Triestine identity, see Elena Coda, "'This Little Corner of Europe': Slataper's Reflections on and around Trieste's Cultural and National Identity," introduction to *My Karst and My City and Other Essays*, ix–lxxxiv.

[94] Svevo published all his novels at his own expense: *Una vita* (*A Life*, 1892), *Senilità* (*As a Man Grows Older*, 1898), and *La coscienza di Zeno*.

[95] Bruno Maier, "Introduzione," in *Opere di Italo Svevo* (Milan: Dall'Oglio, 1954), 20.

[96] Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski, "For a Jewish Italian Literary History: From Italo Svevo to Igiaba Scego," *Italian Culture* 40, no. 2 (2022): 134.

[97] On the linguistic politics in Svevo's works and the tensions between "Tuscan" and Triestine, see Robinson, *Narratives of the European Border*, 43–48; Pappalardo, *Modernism in Trieste*, 149–54, 172–86.

[98] See Gatt-Rutter, *Italo Svevo*, 208.

[99] Samigli "reads like a transliteration from the Hebrew equivalent of Schmitz and its Yiddish forms *Shlemil* and *Shlemazl*." Pappalardo, *Modernism in Trieste*, 143.

[100] See Svevo, "Profilo autobiografico," in *Racconti e scritti autobiografici*, 797–815.

book").[101] He wants to check the use of a word in his novel and discovers that he did not use an auxiliary verb correctly. During the writing process, Svevo himself also relied on the dictionary of the Italian language and Triestine dialect.[102] This scene comically questions the rigid normativity of Italian literary language and how the Italian literary canon is venerated.

Moreover, Svevo demonstrates how the Italian-speaking writer from Trieste is unable to perform his literary italianità by subscribing to the nationalist role of Italian literature. The writer Samigli is of Svevo's age—the first line defines him as "un letterato quasi sessantenne" ("a man of letters, getting on for sixty years old")[103]—and therefore, he was also born at the time of the Italian Unification. Forty years earlier, Samigli had published at his own expense his first and only novel, *Una giovinezza* (*One Man's Youth*). The title not only reads as a parodic reference to the D'Annunzian and Fascist cult of "giovinezza" (youth) but also symbolically juxtaposes Samigli's literary career with the biographical plot of the "young," recently unified Italy. In this way, it highlights his ambitions to enter the national tradition of Italian letters. It echoes Francesco De Sanctis's literary history, in which literature contributes to the progressive reawakening of the Italian nation, taking it from a state of oppression to the redemption of the Risorgimento. De Sanctis was widely read in the Triestine irredentist and literary circles in which Svevo participated in the 1880s; the critic was an important point of reference in the realm of Italian letters for the young Triestine author.[104]

Svevo reflects ironically on the national-patriotic mission of post-Unification Italian authors, like Edmondo De Amicis and Antonio Fogazzaro, both very popular among irredentist intellectuals in Trieste.[105] Svevo has Samigli read De Amicis's and Fogazzaro's novels to his infirm brother Giulio as bedtime stories, mocking the patriotic agenda of Italian writers.[106] When Giulio asks Mario to read him De Amicis and Fogazzaro (instead of his novel), Samigli feels indignant, "ecco che nel momento stesso in cui il mondo intero si stava aprendo al suo successo, riceveva un ultimo calcio da coloro che sempre l'avevano respinto" (at the very moment when the whole world was being open to his success, he was being given a final kick from those who had always rejected him).[107] Comically demonstrating Samigli's ideal model of Italian letters—to which he aspired to belong and which did not accept him—Svevo displays his skepticism toward the stances of Italian literary nationalism.

The scene on the "historic day," November 3, 1918, best represents Samigli's clumsy attempts to contribute to the Italian national narrative. Triestines, including Samigli and Gaia, go to a café to exchange news about the arrival of the Italian navy. Samigli wants to participate in this moment of national triumph:

> Mario tentò di affinarsi per essere all'altezza della situazione e, com'è naturale, ricordò di essere un letterato. La parte più fine della sua natura si destò per protendersi alla storia. Disse letteralmente: – Vorrei saper descrivere quello che

[101] Svevo, "Una burla riuscita," 242; Svevo, *A Perfect Hoax*, 50.
[102] Pappalardo, *Modernism in Trieste*, 150.
[103] Svevo, "Una burla riuscita," 199; Svevo, *A Perfect Hoax*, 3.
[104] See Pizzi, *City in Search of an Author*, 110; Laura Diafani, "De Sanctis maestro di letture e di critica di Italo Svevo," *Studi desanctisiani*, no. 11 (2023): 57–70.
[105] Pizzi, *City in Search of an Author*, 110–11.
[106] Pappalardo, *Modernism in Trieste*, 148n14.
[107] Svevo, "Una burla riuscita," 244; Svevo, *A Perfect Hoax*, 3.

> oggi sento –. E, dopo una lieve esitazione: – Bisognerebbe avere una penna d'oro con cui vergare le parole su una pergamena alluminata.[108]
>
> (Mario tried to sharpen himself up in order to rise to the occasion and, naturally, remembered that he was a man of letters. The most refined part of his nature was aroused to reach out to history. What he said literally was, 'I should like to be able to describe how I feel today.' Then, after a little hesitation. 'One would need a pen of gold to write the words on illuminated vellum.')[109]

Samigli's reference to the "pen of gold" and "illuminated vellum" reveals the artificial nature of Italian as a written language of elevated literary tradition. Mario cannot continue his speech because of the communicative confusion: he tries to speak as if he were writing. The narrator's remark that, because of the war, there were no golden pens and illuminated parchments in Trieste, reinforces an ironic effect of Samigli's pathetic nationalist "oration."

Parody of D'Annunzian Nationalism

The attempts of the "Italian" writer Samigli to glorify Italian nationhood in the "redeemed" Trieste are parodically modeled on the nationalist rhetoric of Italian literature and explicitly on D'Annunzio. The cult of D'Annunzio fundamentally shaped nationalist and eventually Fascist culture in Trieste.[110] In his account of Trieste's "liberation," Silvio Benco recalled how some Triestines confused the aviator Giuseppe Pagliacci, the first Italian to enter the city, with D'Annunzio and began shouting, "Viva Gabriele!" (Long live Gabriele!).[111] During the occupation of Fiume, Triestine Fascists adopted D'Annunzian language and political rituals.[112] When Mussolini gave his key speech in Trieste in September 1920, the audience reacted to his celebration of D'Annunzio, springing to their feet and shouting, "Viva D'Annunzio! Viva Fiume!" (Long live D'Annunzio! Long live Fiume!). Mussolini appealed to D'Annunzio's deeds in Fiume to express his "fiducia illimitata nell'avvenire della nazione italiana" (limitless faith in the future of the Italian nation)[113]—the mission of national regeneration that Fascism could successfully achieve. Already in this speech that predated Mussolini's rise to power, D'Annunzio—"quest'uomo di pura razza italiana" (this man of pure Italian race)[114]—was codified in the Fascist discourse as an ideal model of italianità. In March 1922, Triestine Fascists, Fiume's irredentists, and ex-legionnaires overturned the first elected administration of the Free City of Fiume. Fiume was then ruled by provisional leaders and Italian military governors, which set the ground for the annexation of the city under the Fascist regime in 1924. Fascism transformed D'Annunzio's impresa into an integral part of its nationalist mythology.[115] The fulfilled "redemption" of Fiume represented the heroic resurgence of the Italian nation that began with the liberation of Trieste and other unredeemed lands during the war.

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[108] Svevo, "Una burla riuscita," 220.
[109] Svevo, *A Perfect Hoax*, 26.
[110] See Pizzi, *City in Search of an Author*, 119.
[111] Benco, *Gli ultimi anni*, 145.
[112] Simonelli, *D'Annunzio e il mito di Fiume,* 140–41.
[113] Mussolini, "Discorso di Trieste," 2:107.
[114] Mussolini, "Discorso di Trieste," 2:107.
[115] See Simonelli, *D'Annunzio e il mito di Fiume*, 211–17.

This glorification of D'Annunzio as a foundational figure of Fascism alongside Mussolini permeated literary criticism in the period when Svevo was working on "A Perfect Hoax." D'Annunzio's 1925 biography by the Triestine critic Ferdinando Pasini (whom Svevo read) celebrated D'Annunzio and Mussolini as "i due uomini più rappresentativi dell'Italia nel momento attuale" (the two most representative men of Italy at present).[116] In summer 1926, Svevo remarked in a letter to Prezzolini, "Valentino Piccoli, parlando di D'Annunzio e di Mussolini, invita… gli ammiratori di Italo Svevo a ricordare tali due uomini. Come se qualcuno in Italia sapesse trascurarli anche senza di tale invito" (Valentino Piccoli, speaking of D'Annunzio and Mussolini, invites… admirers of Italo Svevo to remember these two men. As if anyone in Italy could ignore them even without such an invitation).[117] Reviewing the collection of D'Annunzio's speeches and Mussolini's biography by Margherita Sarfatti, the Fascist journalist Piccoli contrasted the "passion" of these works with the detached aestheticism of Svevo, Proust, and Joyce.[118] Although Svevo did not oppose the Fascist regime politically, his writings reflected his alienation from and rejection of the dominant notion of Italianness associated with D'Annunzio's nationalism and the model of the "superuomo dannunziano e poi fascista" (D'Annunzian and then Fascist superman).[119]

Svevo's ironic response to D'Annunzian literary nationalism in "A Perfect Hoax" is both aesthetic and ideological. Samigli's pompous vocabulary hyperbolically mirrors the refined style of D'Annunzio's poems, novels, and orations, which became extremely influential in contemporary Italian letters and toward which Svevo had always been skeptical. Conceptually, the scene is based on the discrepancy between the nationalist mission of the Italian writers and Samigli's comic performance of this role, which acts as a parodic equivalent of D'Annunzio's patriotic oratories. Svevo's narrator justifies Mario's rhetorical style by saying that on such an important day, "era dovere della parola, specie in bocca di chi per destino non aveva agito, di essere anch'essa forte ed eroica" ("words themselves—especially in the mouth of someone who had not been destined to take any physical action—were duty-bound to be strong and heroic").[120] Mario is unable to deliver his speech after the introduction, and instead of promoting patriotic spirits, his words have the opposite effect and trigger Gaia to begin his trick: the traveling salesman is infuriated that "the writer" Samigli dares to talk about himself "al cospetto di un avvenimento d'importanza storica" ("in the context of an event of historical importance").[121]

Given that Svevo frequently splits references to real-life personalities (including himself) between different characters of his works, not only Samigli but also Gaia parodically incorporates D'Annunzio's traits. Samigli begins his speech in response to Gaia's enthusiastic account of the Italian landing that he witnessed in the afternoon. Earlier in the story, Gaia is explicitly marked as Italian—not only because of his clearly Italian name but also because of his association with "Tuscan": Gaia "adorava la burla come gli antichi toscani" ("loved a practical joke just like the ancient Tuscans").[122] However, in this scene, the narrator shows that Gaia is a false Italian nationalist and irredentist: he "faceva della retorica, perché era venuto il momento di gonfiare il suo patriottismo che non era stato grande prima dell'arrivo degl'Italiani" ("became rhetorical, because the time had come to exaggerate his patriotism, which had not been very great before the

[116] Ferdinando Pasini, *Gabriele D'Annunzio* (Rome: Alberto Stock, 1925), 454. See Svevo's 1925 letters to Pasini: Svevo, *Epistolario*, 761, 767.
[117] Svevo, *Epistolario*, 802.
[118] Svevo, *Epistolario*, 803–4.
[119] Bruno Maier, *Gli scrittori triestini e il fascismo* (Trieste: Edizioni Italo Svevo, 1975), 33.
[120] Svevo, "Una burla riuscita," 220; Svevo, *A Perfect Hoax*, 26.
[121] Svevo, "Una burla riuscita," 221; Svevo, *A Perfect Hoax*, 27.
[122] Svevo, "Una burla riuscita," 217; Svevo, *A Perfect Hoax*, 22.

arrival of the Italians")[123]—only to attract new possible clients for his affairs. Gaia is fifty-five years old, which, incidentally, corresponds to D'Annunzio's age in 1918. His physical description comically reinforces the wicked aspects of Gaia's personality: "il Gaia aveva realmente l'aspetto dello spirito del male" ("Gaia really looked like the spirit of evil")[124] and "i suoi piccoli occhi neri ardevano di una malizia allegra e di presunzione" (his little black eyes were gleaming with cheerful malice and conceit),[125] and the narrator notes that Gaia limps like Mephistopheles. Finally, Gaia's love of tricks that he orchestrated in his numerous trips as a traveling salesman in Istria and Dalmatia recalls D'Annunzio's multiple *beffe* (mockeries)—such as his flight over Trieste, the beffa di Buccari, and the occupation of Fiume. At the end of the short story, Gaia's initially successful ("perfect") hoax is discovered. Samigli not only confronts him but also, because of the devaluation of Austrian currency, unexpectedly gains financially from the trick, after his friend Brauer deposits a false check given by Gaia. This final twist reinforces Svevo's ironic subversion of the notion of *burla* (trick).

The D'Annunzian echoes in the episode of the hoax underscore how Svevo targets the politics of Italian literary nationalism that had sustained Italian claims to Trieste. Samigli, an "Italian man of letters," does not doubt that the Viennese publisher is interested in his old novel (after Austria's defeat!). He is convinced that "quando il suo libro fosse stato pubblicato in tedesco, la meraviglia in città e in tutta la nazione sarebbe stata maggiore se inaspettata" ("when his book was published in German, the wonder throughout the city and the whole nation would be all the greater because it was unexpected").[126] This demonstrates the mismatch between Samigli's loyalty to Italy and his non-Italian allegiances, proper to Habsburg Trieste, counteracting the nationalist mission of Italian letters that Samigli's "oration" was meant to fulfill.

Conclusion: Many Visions of Italianness

The keyword in the title of Svevo's short story ("hoax") indicates that Trieste's homogeneous Italianness reasserted in the Italian nationalist discourse is a deception and that the Italian Triestine writer, Samigli, likewise deceives himself when he strives to follow the norms of Italian literary nationalism. Svevo ironically subverts and neutralizes the conceptual link between Italian literature, Italianness, and sovereignty. By strategically situating the hoax on the day when Italy's sovereignty was reaffirmed in Trieste, Svevo questions the city's literary italianità and symbolically destabilizes Italian sovereignty—both retrospectively, in the moment of Trieste's "unification" with Italy at the end of the war, and from within the already incorporated city in Fascist Italy.

Read alongside each other, the works of Svevo and D'Annunzio reveal how diverse meanings attributed to Italianness in the Adriatic borderlands made italianità at once a foundation of Italian sovereignty and an instrument to question it. In addition, the two cases related to Trieste and Fiume open a broader discussion on the continuing legacies of Habsburg Italianness in postwar and Fascist Italy. Habsburg cultural and linguistic heritage manifested itself in how Svevo maintained his attachment to German culture (and transferred it to his ironic alter ego Samigli), and in how former irredentists and pro-Fascist intellectuals in Fiume published literary journals, *Delta* (1923–24) and *Termini* (1936–43), that featured translations of Hungarian, Yugoslav, and Czechoslovak

[123] Svevo, "Una burla riuscita," 220; Svevo, *A Perfect Hoax*, 26.
[124] Svevo, "Una burla riuscita," 219; Svevo, *A Perfect Hoax*, 25.
[125] Svevo, "Una burla riuscita," 220; Svevo, *A Perfect Hoax*, 26.
[126] Svevo, "Una burla riuscita," 226; Svevo, *A Perfect Hoax*, 33.

literatures, in line with traditions of cultural exchanges in the Habsburg world.[127] These examples also prompt us to reflect on how various definitions of Habsburg Italianness can shift our understanding of the "standard" italianità.

Similarly, the analysis of Svevo and D'Annunzio outside the nationalist literary historiography ultimately encourages us to outline more elastic definitions of Italian literary identity and Italianness, revisiting them from the vantage point of the postwar period. In those years, with the newly annexed territories, Italy had an opportunity to truly become more multiethnic and multilingual, and the notions of both political and cultural italianità could have been reconfigured and expanded.

[127] Fried, *Fiume, città della memoria*, 230–43, 260–82.