

## *“The Decadent Barbarian”*

**D’Annunzio**, by Philippi Jullian; translated by Stephen Hardman, *New York: The Viking Press, 1973. 366 pp. \$12.95.*

IT IS DIFFICULT to believe that D’Annunzio died only in 1938. He already belongs to such a remote world, to a *fin de siècle* which savors of Münchhausen, Ruritania

and the preposterous nonsense of Futurism. He was a man of many parts. Beginning as an unspoiled boy from the wild Abruzzi, he traveled to Rome in 1881 to make his fortune and rose by way of the boudoir to become the first gossip columnist of modern times. This gave him an irresistible position of power and an entree into society, after which he never looked back until Mussolini in 1924 created him Prince of Montenevoso. Everything that he crammed into these forty years was picturesque and picaresque. He became a famous eccentric, a notorious duelist and amorist. He conquered Fiume in 1919 and ruled it flamboyantly as an acknowledged duce for fifteen months. He also persuaded most of his biographers that he was a heroic soldier. And Osbert Sitwell thought him a far better writer than Byron.

D'Annunzio's literary work was his most serious activity and some of his lyrics have survived, but the celebrated novelist and dramatist is now unreadable. He tried to emulate a Wagnerian orchestra in his writing, and this helps to explain why the sonorous rhetoric fails in English translation. Overloaded with endless metaphors and similes, his baroque prose manages to convey a minimum of meaning in a maximum of space, and both the sentiments and plots of his novels now sound false. Just as he carefully chose his amors to arouse jealousy and shock, so too he depicted the characters in his books without any sympathy, admiration or balance. They are usually deliberate projections of his own sensualism and brutality. Like their author, they are phrase-makers, exhibitionists who always seem to be striking some artificial pose.

D'Annunzio was eventually to win fame by exploiting the exaggerated nationalism of Italy, but already before then he had achieved notoriety as an immoralist and libertine. He had led the crusade against Victorianism, preaching the convenient doctrine that all should be forgiven to the creative artist, who was a superman above ordinary mortals. His life had to be spent in search of novel sensations, the more lux-

urious and sensational the better. As a precocious voluptuary of sixteen, D'Annunzio had invoked

Breasts of Grecian concubines to  
pass the night. I crave long orgies and  
strange unknown forms of love.

But after he had exhausted these unknown dissipations, his muse still remained extravagant and insatiable, demanding yet greater passion, a more scandalous private life, a still more violent assault on convention. Through his lush, crepuscular imagery he allowed people to discern half-concealed visions of unmentionable splendor and excitement. Often he came up with a successful formula, which not only reflected but molded Italian taste. "I think it should please the public," he wrote of *Il libro delle vergini*, for "its scenes to alternate between the church and the brothel, between the odor of incense and the stink of decay." In this perpetual search for sensationalism he developed a fixation on blood, lust, incest and murder. He came to love mutilations on the stage and the gouging of eyes. "As the arrows penetrate his body, the Saint cries 'More! More!' and the archers bend their bows in a kind of savage desperation." We are not surprised to discover that D'Annunzio used to be ecstatic over his more excited passages.

M. Jullian has some shrewd observations to make on D'Annunzio's character, and he has examined dexterously and convincingly how D'Annunzio himself and those who knew him were captivated by the legend he cultivated and how this unattractive man from a poor family turned himself into one of the most romantic, seductive and heroic figures in Europe.

What is remarkable is the skill with which M. Jullian has documented the trajectory of D'Annunzio's sexual tastes, from the stimuli of snobbery to coprophilia and pederasty, from his affairs with noblewomen in Rome, Florence, Naples and Paris to his infatuations with sailors in Fiume. He has revealed incidents which have hitherto lain deep beneath the dust of discretion. He

has consulted unpublished journals and letters and he has interviewed many people who encountered D'Annunzio but never before disclosed their impressions of him.

M. Jullian's biography does not try to sum up the whole historical phenomenon of D'Annunzianism. It is confined to the facts of his life and to substantial quotations from those interminable blasts of rhetoric. The soul is wearied by these and yearns for one shred of intelligence, of humor, even of cunning. Why are they so boring? One would have liked to see examined the question whether it is because they would be boring at any time, or because the whole spirit they advocated has been tried and has been shown to lead to disaster and civil strife. One would have also liked more about the intellectual climate in Italy against which D'Annunzio rebelled, about Nietzsche and Marx and Sorel and the Positivists and Croce and a clear picture of a nation still in the making.

The final impression that emerges from M. Jullian's biography is that D'Annunzio's most remarkable characteristic is a sort of volatile changelessness. One might say he bounced through life like a rubber ball—until it finally knocked the bounce out of him. He lacks even the enigmatic fascination of the inhuman characters—Borgia and Tiberius—with whom, in certain moods, he would have invited comparison. And the highly publicized seclusion, the *clausura et silentium*, of the last years was, one feels, little other than a mask for the void.

As for the politician and man of action, no one would want to deny D'Annunzio courage, along with a weird blend of miscellaneous idealism and a total lack of scruple. But it is easy to overestimate his exploits as it is to be overimpressed with the plumed and booted police from Gilbert and Sullivan whom one sees occasionally in Italian streets. Fiume was a sinister omen. But what followed would have happened without it. D'Annunzio's later career was not so much a cause of fascism as an earlier symptom of the same malady. And

if one finishes a study of this particular superman with a feeling that his contributions to art, humanity, or even the dirtier pages of history were minor compared to the noise he made in life, then that, in its way, can be a salutary moral. The merit of M. Jullian's long and breathless biography is that it tends to enforce it.

Reviewed by GABRIEL GERSH

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### *The Shape of Man to Come?*

**Psychopaths**, by Alan Harrington, *New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972. 288 pp. \$7.95.*

FUTURE HISTORIANS may well argue that the most significant development of this last quarter of the twentieth century was the astonishingly rapid rise of a new breed, the psychopaths. Although many of us have been calling attention to this for years, Alan Harrington's book may be cited as the most popular account to date of the phenomenon that has become an unacknowledged scandal in our time.

Harrington's work is a desperate, impressionistic, half-reasoned effort to explain the nature of modern psychopathy. No one will be pleased with the book because it leaves many issues and causes unresolved, and Harrington demonstrates his own inability to even define the problem. After a diffuse, almost incoherent introductory chapter entitled "The Coming of the Psychopaths," he recounts a number of "tales" supposedly illustrating various types of psychopathy. As Richard Schickel mentioned in his excellent *Commentary* review, Harrington confuses neurotic and psychotic behavior with the psychopathy he tries to define in the introduction as different from clinically classifiable mental disorders.