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The Vates and the Handsome Guido  
Gabriele D'Annunzio and Guido Da Verona in Hungary

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## 1. Antecedents and Objectives of the Research Task

At the beginning of my doctoral research, I sought the answer to what "Italian literature" meant to the average, moderately educated Hungarian reader in the interwar period and who the most important Italian writers were for the broader domestic audience. The starting point for my research was the examination of the book market, and my work was facilitated by the fact that Imre Várady published a list and bibliographic data of all Italian works published in Hungarian translation in 1933.<sup>1</sup> Before writing the dissertation, I examined the data from this summary regarding independent volumes published after 1920. During this period, four authors—Dante Alighieri, Giovanni Boccaccio, Anna Vertua Gentile, and Giovanni Papini—each had 4 volumes published, making them the third most frequently translated authors. The second place was taken by the former Italian Prime Minister, Francesco Nitti, with five volumes; among Italian authors, he had the most political works published in Hungarian during this period. The list is topped by a wide margin by Gabriele D'Annunzio and Guido Da Verona: according to Várady's records, 9 books were published for each. However, it must be added that, in reality, 11 volumes of D'Annunzio's work were published in Hungarian between 1920 and 1931.

Why D'Annunzio and Da Verona specifically? What did they mean to the Hungarian reading public, and what did professional literary scholars think of them? The aim of the thesis is not only to uncover the reception but also to examine how the sources reflect on questions of literary value, popular culture, and the role of the author.

## 2. Theoretical Background and Methods of the Research

It is evident that D'Annunzio and Da Verona were translated so frequently because publishers saw business opportunities in them and considered their works sellable. Regarding the relationship between literature and society, I rely on, among others, the sociology of literature by Robert Escarpit, the reception aesthetics of Jauss, as well as trends related to popular literature, such as the writings of Krisztián Benyovszky, Tibor Bányi, Noel Carroll, etc. According to Escarpit's views, in the case of successful writers, the partner-audience and the actual audience coincide; thus, readers are active participants in the creative process. The two examined authors are significant from a domestic perspective not only because they

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<sup>1</sup> Imre Várady, *Az olasz irodalom magyar fordításai* [Hungarian Translations of Italian Literature] (Budapest, 1933)

played a central role in the Hungarian presence of Italian culture, but also because, for publishers, the business opportunity inherent in them meant that among Italian authors, they were the most capable of expressing the desires, realities, curiosity, and feelings of the contemporary Hungarian middle class.

As will emerge several times in relation to Da Verona, criticism tends to view readers as an ignorant mass rather than a community of recipients. Hans Robert Jauss, the father of reception aesthetics, stood up for their "rehabilitation" as early as 1967, but in my experience, there are still many opportunities in Hungary for literary-historical, cultural-historical, and literary-sociological research that centres on the reader.<sup>2</sup> In his essay *Horizon Structure and Dialogicity* [Horizontszerkezet és dialogicitás], Jauss states that there is not only a temporal distance between the past and the present, but also the horizon of experience of the current researcher and those who lived when the given work was published also differs. Therefore, for understanding, "translation" is not enough; one must also reflect on the horizon shift.

Keeping the above theoretical considerations in mind throughout, I collected the sources of the Hungarian reception of the two writers: lexicons, literary journals, literary histories, news published in daily newspapers, interviews, reviews, theatre critiques, and opinion pieces, as well as parodies. Nevertheless, I had to expand the timeframe, which was justified by the fact that D'Annunzio retired after 1921, his most literarily productive period concluded, and the perspectives regarding the interwar period are difficult to understand without the antecedents. Therefore, I examine the sources of reception from their first known mention—which for D'Annunzio is February 28, 1882, and for Da Verona, July 30, 1913—until the end of World War II. After 1945, no works of either author were published in Hungarian, and they quickly faded from collective memory. Both writers also undertook public roles; moreover, D'Annunzio's political career is at least as important as his literary work. Therefore, during the analysis of the sources, I could not ignore the examination of the Hungarian echoes of D'Annunzio's and Da Verona's political careers and scandals, in addition to placing greater weight on the reception of their works.

### 3. Structure of the Thesis

Following the methodological introduction, I first present the career paths of the two writers, detailing the parallels and differences in their career trajectories; I also address the Italian and Hungarian literary context where the translations arrived, and I introduce the

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

translators. Following this, I deal with the Hungarian reception of D'Annunzio. First, I present the general lessons of the source base analysis, then I show what could be known about the life of the writer–scandal-hero–politician in Hungary. Subsequently, I present the periodisation of the Hungarian D'Annunzio reception. The first period lasts from the beginning until the outbreak of World War I. In these years, besides minor scandals, the focus is on D'Annunzio's literary activity, and critics are extremely divided: some see him as an epoch-making poet whose works' literary value is unaffected by the scandals, while others see him as an overrated literary celebrity. During World War I, D'Annunzio gained a propagandistic role in Hungary, almost becoming a political allegory: he is the embodiment of the treacherous, depraved Italy; we can find primarily tabloid news and opinion pieces bordering on mudslinging. Regarding his works, there is almost exclusively talk of deficiencies: critics are unanimous in seeing the writer's novels and dramas as boring to the point of unwatchability and overrated.

On September 12, 1919, D'Annunzio occupied Fiume, attempting to establish an independent state, and left the city only in January 1921. During this period, naturally, he is mentioned almost every day in the newspapers, but his literary activity is completely overshadowed; no substantial material has remained regarding his reception. Following this, the writer–politician moved to his own villa, the Vittoriale degli Italiani on Lake Como, which served his own personality cult, and took on the role of a living legend. As far as the Hungarian reception is concerned, a reversal can be observed. We can speak of D'Annunzio criticism again, and opinions are again divided between the exceptional poet-genius and the scandal-hero fashion poet.

Following the periodisation of the D'Annunzio reception, I outline the causes and dilemmas behind the controversial judgement. On the one hand, the hostile attitude of critics, in some cases their condemning opinions based on moral arguments regarding the works, could also be fuelled by a legitimate question: Would D'Annunzio have succeeded in becoming canonised without the hype surrounding his person, and so quickly at that? As we will see in the case of Guido Da Verona, the position of critics is also influenced by what they think of popular works, popular literature in general. Is a work to be considered *good* if it is of interest to readers—whom we view as conscious recipients—or can the needs of the masses be satisfied solely at the cost of aesthetic compromises? Although we classify D'Annunzio as high literature, in my dissertation I argue that in that era this was not unambiguous in relation to all his works; there existed a completely faded popular reading of the novels *Il piacere* and *Il fuoco*. Behind the controversial judgement may also lie a dilemma currently examined by

art philosophers. Tibor Bányi calls it 'language-centred aestheticism' when we consider demanding linguistic form as the sole yardstick of literary value.<sup>3</sup> D'Annunzio's critics had to face a related dilemma: Do D'Annunzio's linguistic–stylistic bravuras make every one of his works a masterpiece instantly? Can an educated intellectual call a *beautiful* work boring?

After the above dilemmas, I present the Hungarian reception of individual works published in Hungarian translation or performed on the Hungarian stage; this constitutes the longest chapter of the dissertation. I deal with the following works in the order of their publication in Italy: *Alcyone* (Alkyone), *San Pantalone* (San Pantalone and other short stories), *Le novelle della Pescara* (Pescara short stories / Toto and other narratives / Italian tragedy), *L'innocente* (The Innocent / The Child), *Il trionfo della morte* (The Triumph of Death), *Giovanni Episcopo*, *Le vergini delle rocce* (The Maidens of the Rocks), *Il sogno di un tramonto d'autunno* (Dream of an Autumn Sunset), *La città morta* (The Dead City), *La Gioconda* (Gioconda), *Il fuoco* (The Flame), *Francesca Da Rimini* (Francesca Da Rimini), *La figlia di Iorio* (The Daughter of Jorio), *Forse che sì, forse che no* (Maybe Yes, Maybe No). Regarding the works, I first publish a summary of the content and a literature review, then I present their Hungarian reception, and finally, I summarise the lessons of this.

In the next part of the dissertation, I deal with Guido Da Verona. First, I present the sources concerning his relationship with Hungary, then I present the reception of his entire oeuvre, and subsequently, I present the reception of individual works. I summarise the reviews published in relation to the following novels: *L'amore che torna* (Returning Love), *Colei che non si deve amare* (She Who Must Not Be Loved), *La vita incomincia domani* (Life Begins Tomorrow), *La donna che inventò l'amore* (The Woman Who Invented Love), *Mimi Bluette, fiore del mio giardino* (Mimi Bluette, Flower of My Garden), *Sciogli la treccia, Maria Maddalena* (Unbind Your Braid, Mary Magdalene), *La mia vita in un raggio di sole* (My Life in a Ray of Sunshine), *Yvelise* (Yvelise), *L'inferno degli uomini vivi* (Hell of the Living Men / No Man's Land), *Cléo, robes et manteaux* ("Cléo" Fashion Salon), *Azyadèh, la donna pallida* (Azyadèh, the Pale Woman), *La canzone di sempre e di mai* (Forever, Nevermore...). Following this, I summarise the conclusions regarding the Hungarian reception of the two authors, then in the appendix, I publish the list of works by D'Annunzio and Da Verona published in independent volumes, as well as the list of performances of D'Annunzio dramas in Hungary.

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<sup>3</sup> Tibor Bányi, *A stílus és az értelem: Tanulmányok az esztétika és a nyelvfilozófia határterületeiről* [Style and Meaning: Studies on the Boundaries of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Language] (Budapest, 2017).

#### 4. General Conclusions of the Analyzed Sources

D'Annunzio's works were made sellable primarily by his life, public activity, and scandals. The source material regarding him is extremely voluminous, and news regarding his person carried at least as much weight as articles regarding his literary activity. The reception can be divided into four clearly distinguishable periods. Before 1914, the image of a scandal-hero dandy emerges whose judgement is controversial. Some critics saw him as an untalented literary celebrity, while others saw him as a life-artist-poet genius. During World War I, D'Annunzio became a central figure of war propaganda, almost a political allegory. He represented the depraved, treacherous Italy through whom the Monarchy could prove its moral superiority. Regarding his literary activity, exclusively negative voices prevailed; all its value is denied, in some cases strongly bordering on mudslinging. Between 1919 and 1921, during the Fiume attempt at state founding, most of the examined sources were created, but in these, D'Annunzio's literary activity played a completely marginal role, because from a Hungarian perspective this was more than an adventurer's action: information regarding the present and future of Fiume was crucial. After 1921, a reversal can be observed: attention is paid to the works again, and critics are divided again, similar to the period between the world wars.

If we concentrate only on literary activity, the Hungarian public could receive most of the accounts about the dramas; we know significantly more theatre reviews than book reviews. No single drama achieved undivided success; critics often find it too long, verbose, or simply outdated. The judgement of his prose is also not uniform; however, they mostly agree that D'Annunzio is an outstanding poet. It is unfortunate that only one volume of poetry, *Alcyone*, was published in Hungarian, and that too at the end of the era, in 1942, and due to historical reasons, it did not receive much attention; thus, for those who do not know Italian—except for a few excerpts—the most highly regarded works of the "prophet" were barely accessible.

Behind the controversial judgement and the sometimes openly hostile tone, serious dilemmas often lie: Would D'Annunzio have succeeded in canonising himself so easily without his scandals? Is linguistic–stylistic bravura a sufficient condition to consider someone a great author? Is it appropriate to consider a *beautifully writing* author boring? Can we consider certain D'Annunzio works as belonging to the popular register in relation to the given era, and does this change anything about their value?

Guido Da Verona is considered by literature to be the democratiser of D'Annunzio, who made the human ideal and life ideal he represented accessible to the masses. His popularity in Hungary coincides with his Italian popularity. In 1944, along with other Jewish authors, his works were banned, but in his case, this was merely a formality: his work had not been published in Hungarian since 1934. Criticism regarding him unanimously classifies him in the popular register, and the opinions of individual critics largely depend on how they relate to popular culture. Does a writer write primarily for readers, and is the love of readers the condition for considering someone a good writer, or is writing one of the manifestations of artistic self-expression, and if we keep the satisfaction of the masses' needs in mind, are we forced into aesthetic compromises?

In terms of the size of the source base, it is no exaggeration to state that Gabriele D'Annunzio and Guido Da Verona are significant figures in Hungarian cultural history between the two world wars. For theatre- and opera-goers, for readers of works considered high literature, D'Annunzio was the most accessible among contemporary Italian authors, and although our sources regarding their influence are unfortunately incomplete, his works and artistic experience influenced their way of thinking and widened their horizon of experience.