

## REVIEW ESSAY

### War and Peace in a Hidden Gem of Italian-American Literature

*Io, pacifista in trincea: Un italoamericano nella Grande guerra* by Vincenzo D'Aquila. Edited and translated by Claudio Staiti. Preface by Emilio Franzina. 1931; Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2019. xxx-258pp.

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In 1915, much like thousands of other Italian Americans, under the influence of a potent mix of nationalism and youthful thirst for adventure, the twenty-two-year-old Vincenzo D'Aquila (1892-1975) decided to cross the Atlantic to heed the distress call of the motherland. His autobiography, one of the rare war narratives by an Italian American in WWI, chronicles his experience as a soldier in the Italian army on the Austrian border. The horrors of trench warfare would soon shatter his expectations of a noble fight and a quick victory. After one year on the frontlines, D'Aquila underwent a mystical experience, resulting in a newfound commitment not to kill and the unshakable conviction that an invisible "bodyguard" would lead him unarmed far away from the battlefield. (The original 1931 volume, written in English, is more suggestively titled *Bodyguard Unseen: A True Autobiography*.) Through a chain of fortuitous (providential, D'Aquila would say) events, he did manage to leave the trenches, though his vocal testimony of God's intervention would land him a forced stay in multiple Italian mental hospitals for most of the remainder of the war.

The book is an important reminder of the power of nationalism. As is well-known, in 1914 attachment to the nation helped bridge deep class divisions, spurring workers all over Europe to put aside international class solidarity and kill one another on a large-scale on behalf of their fellow countrymen—much to the dismay of Marxist intellectuals. D'Aquila's story shines light on the less widely known experiences of hundreds of thousands of recent immigrants to the Americas (the phenomenon extended beyond Italians and the United States) that opted to return to their ancestral land and fight for it in the Great War at significant personal cost and risk. In the end—that is, in the "true" autobiography written a decade after the war—D'Aquila was advocating an internationalist theme. "Reverberations of a political, economical and spiritual nature throughout the world emphasize more than ever, the interdependence of all peoples," he wrote to James Wilford Garner, the historian and political scientist; "The nations of the earth are destined to sink or swim together. . . . My book seeks to illustrate through the form of a dynamic personal experience the latent powers within us all awaiting to assert themselves on behalf of the commonweal" (3 Oct. 1931).

This self-critical autobiography is also a helpful antidote to the sanitized and romantic depiction of war so common in literature and cinema—the "Disneyfication" of war eloquently deprecated by Paul Fussell in *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*. D'Aquila's drama is characterized by the loss of friend after friend in pointless offensives against enemy lines, grotesque deaths, insanity, and the defilement of the bodies and dignity of countless young men. This unembellished account of life under arms recalls Emilio Lussu's classic *Un anno sull'Altipiano* (1938) which records a year of trench warfare with the Italian army in WWI.

While both authors paint a similar hellish picture of war, they reach different conclusions about its legitimacy. D'Aquila sees the pacifist imperative as deriving inevitably from first-hand experience of war: once someone has seen with his/her own eyes that war is pure evil, the individual duty to abstain from it becomes self-evident. Though Lussu does not advance general normative claims, the prominence of a

non-pacifist view in his account of heated debates among officers in his battalion might be read as an endorsement: though war is hell, a priori rejecting the use of force would invite one's subjugation by an opponent, if the latter is willing to resort to violence. "What would become of world civilization if violent injustice were always able to impose itself without resistance?"<sup>1</sup>

A pacifist like D'Aquila may correctly point out that the competing position voiced by Lussu has the potential of introducing a slippery slope-type of standard in the moral calculus, which could be used to justify all kinds of large-scale atrocities in the name of preserving some dubious value (in the extreme, all-out nuclear war to defend a state's claim on an uninhabited rock in the middle of the ocean). Yet the words that Lussu reports indicate clearly that, though war is evil, a principled commitment to abstaining from it does not automatically amount to good. As Richard Betts put it, "pacifism is a perfectly respectable moral position as long as one is willing to live with its consequences."<sup>2</sup> One of the most distinctive and tragic features of war is that it often leaves the morally conscious without easy choices.

These contrasting views about war loosely map onto millennia-old debates between proponents of variants of the ethics of absolute principles and advocates of alternative formulations of Max Weber's ethics of responsibility, famously stated in his essay on *Politics as a Vocation*: the former identifies bright lines not to be crossed regardless of the consequences (for example, the pacifist "thou shalt not kill"), while the latter posits that the morality of alternative courses of action is to be assessed by comparing the balance of their likely consequences (that is, morally desirable effects minus the undesirable ones). The different moral perspectives of D'Aquila and Lussu, however, may have more to do with the distinct historical contexts of their writing and the authors' post-WW I personal experiences than with differences in abstract philosophical positions.

D'Aquila's book was published in 1931, at a moment when Wilsonian idealism still held sway. The League of Nations (though the United States had failed to join it) continued to embody the widespread expectation of a "new world order" characterized by the spread of democracy and uninhibited economic exchanges across borders under the tutelage of international law. The 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact effectively outlawed war, by committing its sixty-two members (including all major powers) to renounce the use of force "as an instrument of national policy" and to resolve peacefully "disputes or conflicts of whatever nature or of whatever origin they may be." Contemporary observers saw the 1930 London Naval Conference as a key step towards maintaining world peace by preventing a new arms race between the major naval powers.<sup>3</sup> Yet, before the ink was dry on D'Aquila's book, cracks in the edifice of liberal internationalism began to show. In 1931 the so-called "Mukden Incident" provided Japan with a pretext for invading Manchuria. Then in 1933 Hitler came to power in Germany and Mussolini's Italy attacked Ethiopia in 1935.

The years in which Lussu wrote his book, 1936-37, saw even clearer signs of the "gathering storm," as Germany re-militarized the Rhineland, Spain was engulfed in a civil war, and Japan invaded China, all the while the League of Nations stood by impotent. Lussu's personal experience probably also contributed to his unwillingness to uncritically endorse pacifism in the face of the rising tide of militarism and fascism. While D'Aquila pursued a business career upon his return to the United States in 1918, Lussu experienced directly life under political oppression: for his stern anti-fascism in the 1920s he was arrested and then confined to the remote island of Lipari, from which he would escape in 1929 to join the Italian opposition abroad and eventually the struggle of the *Resistenza* on the ground in 1943.

Claudio Staiti, the editor, must be applauded for discovering this essentially "lost" work and recognizing its significance, for his accurate translation of D'Aquila's limp English and his comprehensive introduction, and for finding a press like Donzelli that will give the book its well-deserved publicity in Italy and elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Lost works of this quality are rarely found, and so all the more credit accrues to Dr. Staiti. At its core relating a profound "conversion" experience, D'Aquila's book is a *concordia discors* of great fascination—the story of a Sicilian who emigrates to America and becomes a US citizen, but returns to fight on the Italian side; the volunteer soldier who becomes an ardent pacifist;

the nationalist youth who turns internationalist; and the individual who finds purpose as part of God's plan in the midst of senseless violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Emilio Lussu, *Un anno sull'Altipiano* (1938: Turin: Einaudi, 1945), p. 181.

<sup>2</sup> Richard K. Betts, "War, Peace, and Strategy" lectures, Columbia University, New York City, Fall 2008.

<sup>3</sup> John H. Mauer, "The London Conference: A Strategic Reassessment," in John H. Maurer and Christopher Bell, eds., *At the Crossroads Between Peace and War: The London Naval Conference in 1930* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> D'Aquila's *Bodyguard Unseen: A True Autobiography* is currently unavailable on Amazon, Alibris, and AbeBooks.