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Between History and Hysteria – Transgressions in the Novel
Danuncijada by Viktor Car Emin



The 49th Annual ASEES Convention
Chicago

Gabriele D'Annunzio, an Italian writer, poet, journalist, playwright and soldier, and about 300 supporters in 1919 occupied the port of **Fiume** or **Rijeka** in present-day Croatia.



A black and white portrait of Gabriele D'Annunzio, an Italian aviator, politician, and writer. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark military uniform with a high collar and epaulettes. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the right of the camera. The background is dark and out of focus.

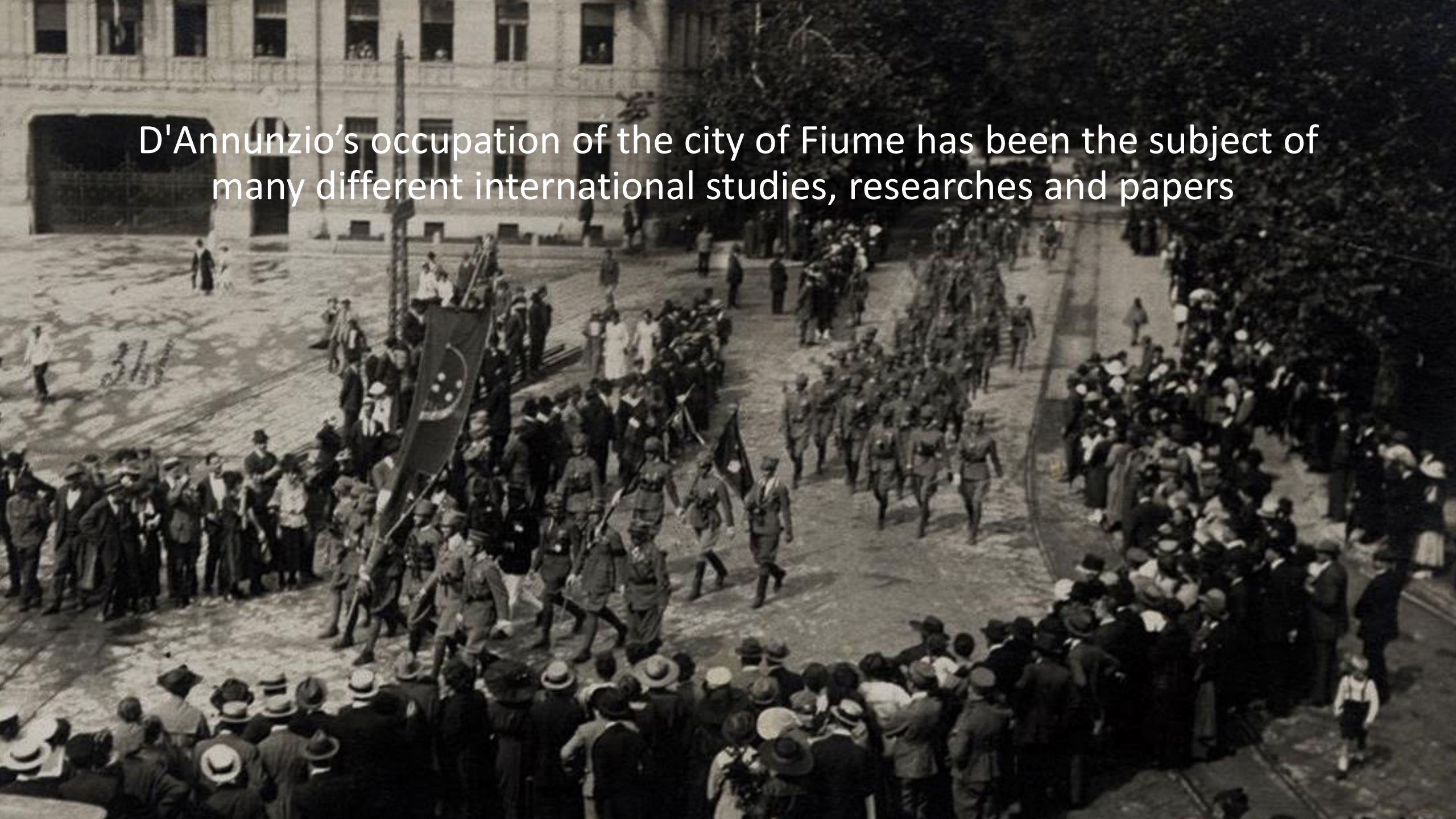
D'Annunzio ruled Fiume as dictator until December 1920, at which time Italian military forces compelled him to abdicate.

D'Annunzio's colorful career, his scandalous amours, his eloquence and political leadership made him one of the most striking personalities of his day.

In a context of World War I, when Wilson and the Allies decided that the Italian-speaking port of Fiume would be given to the new state of Yugoslavia, D'Annunzio saw his chance.

He called on the Italian government to occupy the city, and in September 1919, after they failed to do so, he took matters into his own hands.

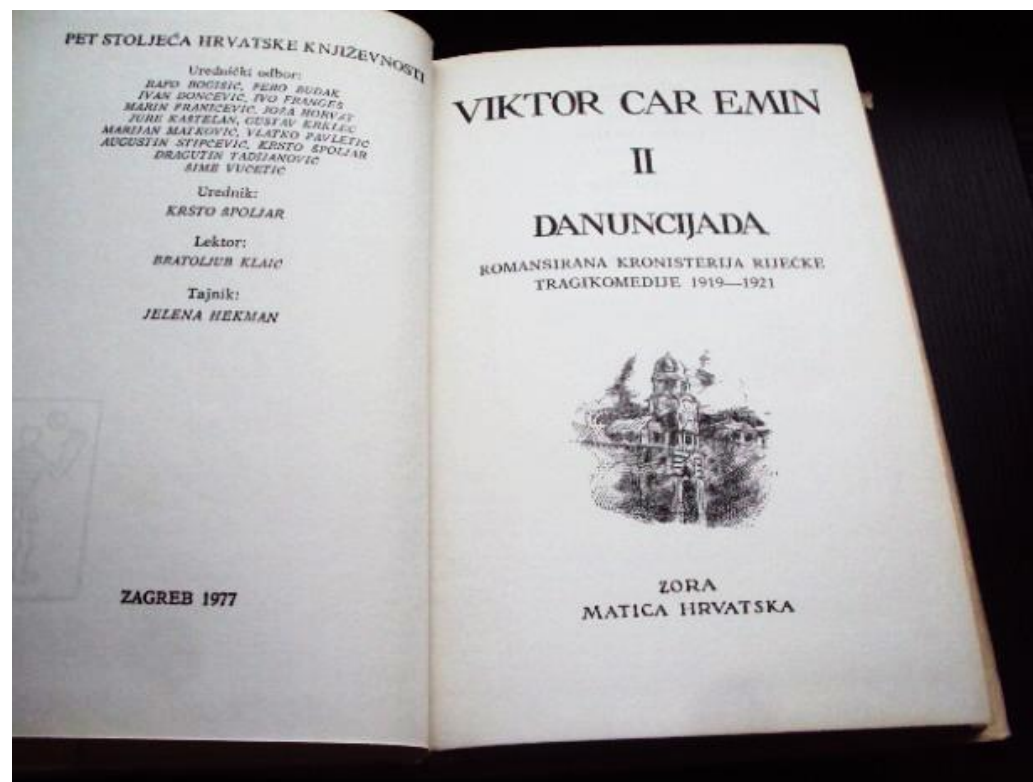
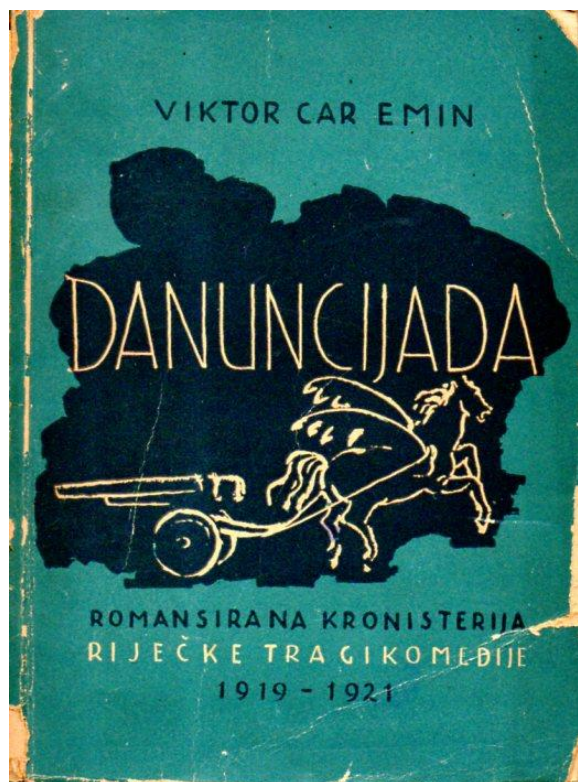
D'Annunzio's occupation of the city of Fiume has been the subject of many different international studies, researches and papers



In Croatian literature, there is a novel about the D'Annunzio's occupation of Fiume, the full title of the novel is

Danuncijada. Romansirana kronisterija riječke tragikomedije 1919. – 1921.

written by **Viktor Car Emin.**



Viktor Car Emin was born on November 1, 1870, in Kraj near Lovran. He had also been politically active but unlike D'Annunzio, he opposed Italian irredentism and fascism strongly supporting **the Croatian National Revival in the Istrian Peninsula.**



His literary work reflects his political engagement and struggle. Using the “**black and white**” technique (common in modernism) of presenting characters, Emin presents the natives (Croats) as positive - “white,” and the invaders as negative - “black.”

While in exile during World War II, Viktor Car Emin wrote his novel about D'Annunzio's occupation (which followed World War I). The novel had been published in 1946 but has not received recognition until recently.

Unlike his previous works, in this novel the character of D'Annunzio is not presented in the “black and white” technique.

Emin had been completely amazed by the complexity of D'Annunzio's personality. Emin denounced D'Annunzio's hysteria (also in the title of the novel - *kronisterija*, meaning “the chronology of hysteria”).

Furthermore, the occupied city of Fiume is not only a geographical place, but is personified as a woman in the novel. The novel denounces a profusion of **transgressions**, for example **the deliberate violation of the status quo and social, linguistic, artistic and other orders in various domains.**





How had these events been presented by Viktor Car Emin in his novel?

Before attempting to answer that question, one should note that the co-existence of literature (in writing about the work) and history (in writing about the past) has always been complex.

Literature has often been denounced as (pure) fiction, as nothing but a fantasy, and thus simply far removed from truth, facts and reality. In contrast to history!

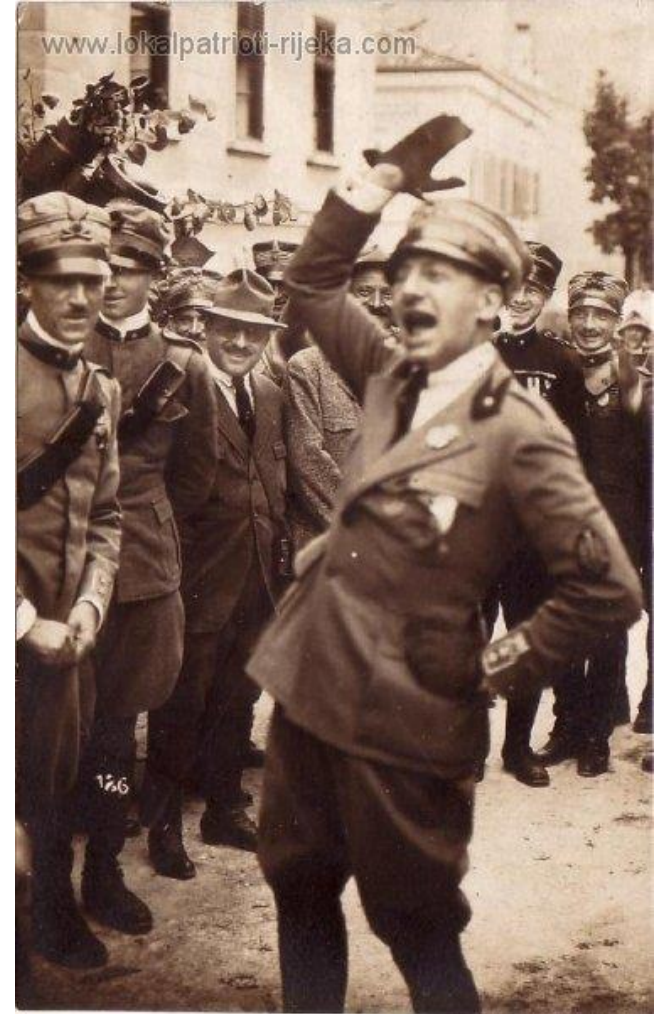
In the current (post)postmodernist moment, **the division between literature (fiction) and history (facts) has been diluted**, as it has been shown that historical writings are itself an interpretation, that is the work of an author who is influenced by the subjectivity of the historian himself.

Moreover, one now sees that it is actually literature in its fictionality which, paradoxically, uncovers the “truth” as it brings to the fore what was quite simply pushed under the carpet of the unconscious.

In this context we also view the subtitle of the novel. Viktor Car Emin had added as the subtitle ***Romansirana kronisterija tragikomedije (1919 - 1921)*** (a **Romanced Chronohysteria Tragicomedy (1919-1921)**), where he emphasizes the word ***kronisterija***.

This blended word synthesizes two ideas, **chronology** and **hysteria**, and its combination points to a departure from **history as a relation of events** (as that would be a chronology), but also to a shift toward a description of the internal development of a character, so that chronohysteria could mean the **chronicle/history (of one's) hysteria**, hysterical chronicle/history.

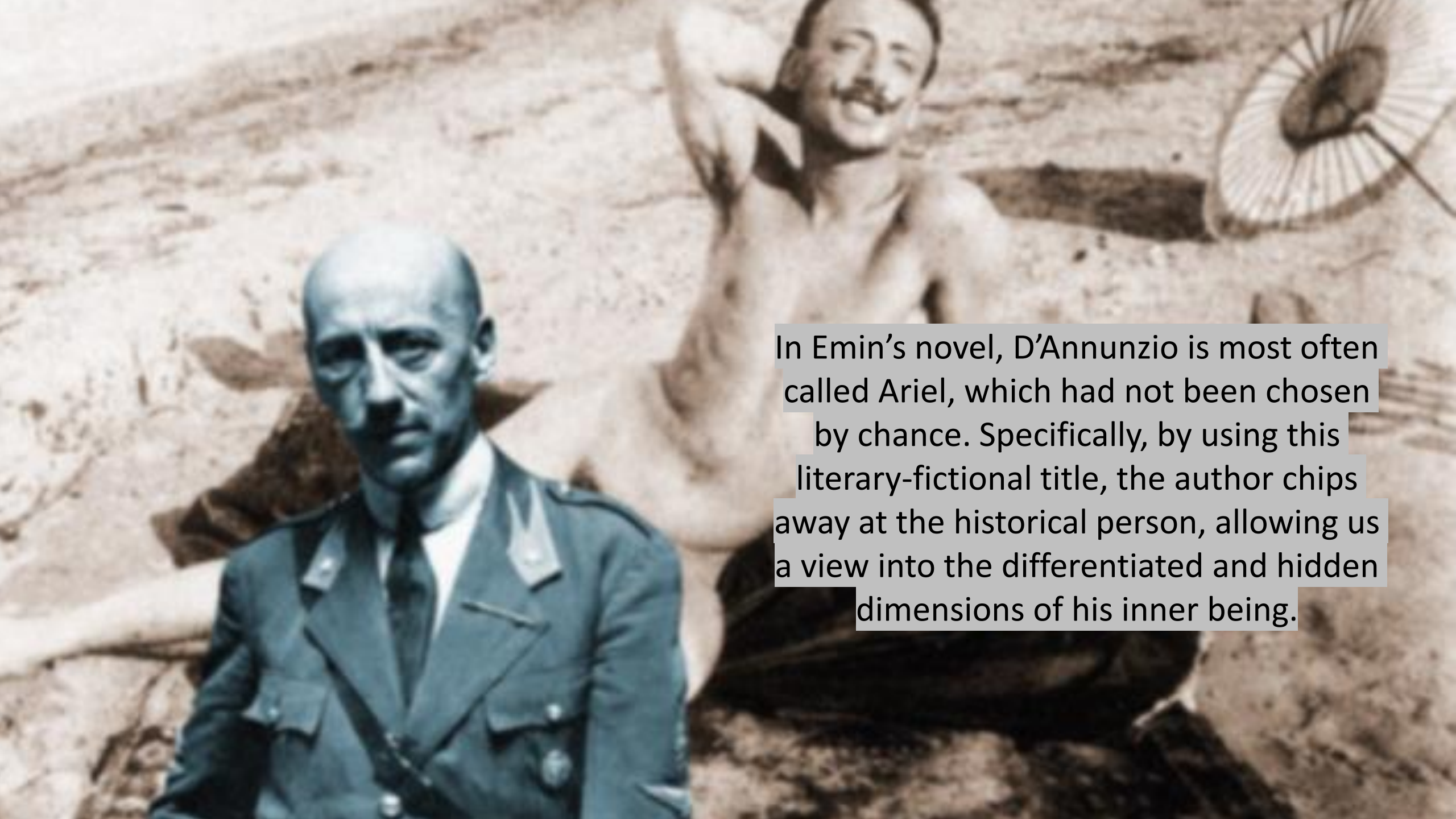
In a word, a meaningful, ironic game
with words:
history – hysteria.



The other blended word in the subtitle – **tragicomedy** – actually supports the complexity of the first word (chronohysteria), and as a whole has a double ironical effect.

In the end, historical hysteria is a tragic comedy.

Moreover, the entire subtitle impressively adds to meaning of the title of the novel *Danuncijada*. That word reminds one of **denunciation**. We can as a result interpret the title of the novel as a denunciation of D'Annunzio.



In Emin's novel, D'Annunzio is most often called Ariel, which had not been chosen by chance. Specifically, by using this literary-fictional title, the author chips away at the historical person, allowing us a view into the differentiated and hidden dimensions of his inner being.

Along with this, there are dialogues, descriptions and narrative sequences which are intertwined with titles, subjects/themes and conceptual elements of D'Annunzio's literary works, which are placed in relation to historical events.

It seems as if what D'Annunzio created in his literary and artistic works is recreated in his military and political campaigns. And the same occurs in reverse. History thus becomes the validation of literature.

But the process in *Danuncijada* also goes in the other direction, as literature validates history. Viktor Car Emin allows us **a parallel reading** of an external (both time and space) and an internal, subjective, mental ("hysteria") panopticon.

In a word, the metahistorical, allegorical, paradigmatic psychogram has been successfully demonstrated using a historical person.

But not only using a historical person. Specifically, Viktor Car Emin provides a great role to **the city** as a collective character, presented symbolically (and physically) **as a woman**. The city is a sexualized *topos* and the main hero of the novel communicates with it as a partner which needs to be conquered and humbled.

Above this anthropomorphic (feminist) conglomerate, D'Annunzio practices the rituals of seduction, subjection, threats and blackmail which shows (or condemns) D'Annunzio's conquering neuroses.





My thesis is that in his novel Viktor Car Emin is seeking to uncover the internal, he is plunging below the surface of visible **history**, beyond chrono-history, bring to light in his literary truth the background to events, and that is **hysteria**.

But he does not accomplish this solely through the prism of the main character, the historical person of D'Annunzio (which, as we have seen, are not the equal concepts), but through the prism of a double denunciation, through another character in this novel, which has not been observed such until now.

This is the collective character called **the City/Città**.

Rijeka is a city which from a geopolitical view is found at the point of confluence of Middle European and Mediterranean cultures, which as a port had developed during the period of the Habsburg Monarchy.

But the history of this city has also been written by many others who came here, leaving behind their influences with which a complex picture of identity had emerged. From the Illyrian Liburnians, who had been conquered by the Romans, through the Franks, Venetians, Austrians, Hungarians, as well as the French, English, Americans, Italians, etc.



D'Annunzio and the City. Emin's entire novel presents a complicated and complex game between the two. Yes, two, as the City is presented as a woman not (only) in a sexual sense, but also in her being.

He sees the City as an extension of himself, as a body which he must subsume. And that body is marked by the history of its numerous colonizations (D'Annunzio is only one in a list) and the subjection of its sexual/social roles.

D'Annunzio, the infamous seducer, known for his insatiable lust and whose life and creative energies had been marked with a stream of interesting women, penetrates the City, treating it as he would a woman.

But, not just any woman. The City is the woman he had sought in his lovers: phantasmagorical, desired, unreachable, *inifinitamente desiderata* - Unattainable. As an aside, it is interesting that **hysteria** as a disorder among men first came to be recognized, studied and treated during and immediately after the First World War. Thus, during the time of D'Annunzio's Entry into the City.

This complicated relationship between **the colonizer toward the colonized**, Emin describes with **the psycho(analytical) definition of hysteria**, which, as we have already seen, is expressly signaled in the subtitle of the novel.

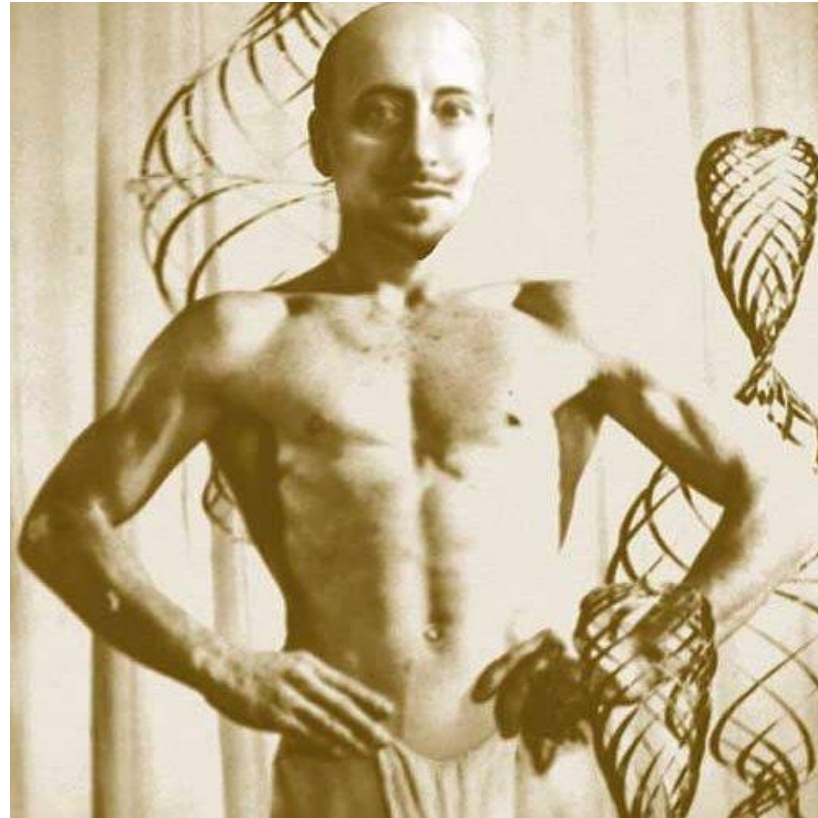
But, we do not wish to imply, that he in any manner discounts the serious and dangerous dimension of the self-proclaimed military leader/conqueror, nor the tragedy of his historic intervention.



D'Annunzio treats the City-woman as an amorphous-libidinous mass, and, in his expressive speeches and correspondence, he modeled her in his propaganda as a feminist block.

This co-relationship, this game, took place in a specific mental state – hysteria – which brought about the degeneration of moral postulates on which the social community had rested and thus brought about a specific social state – anarchy.

Emin implicitly shows that this is not merely a case of simple historical reconstruction (reconstruction of the authentic) and he **does not portray D'Annunzio as a representative or monumental person.**

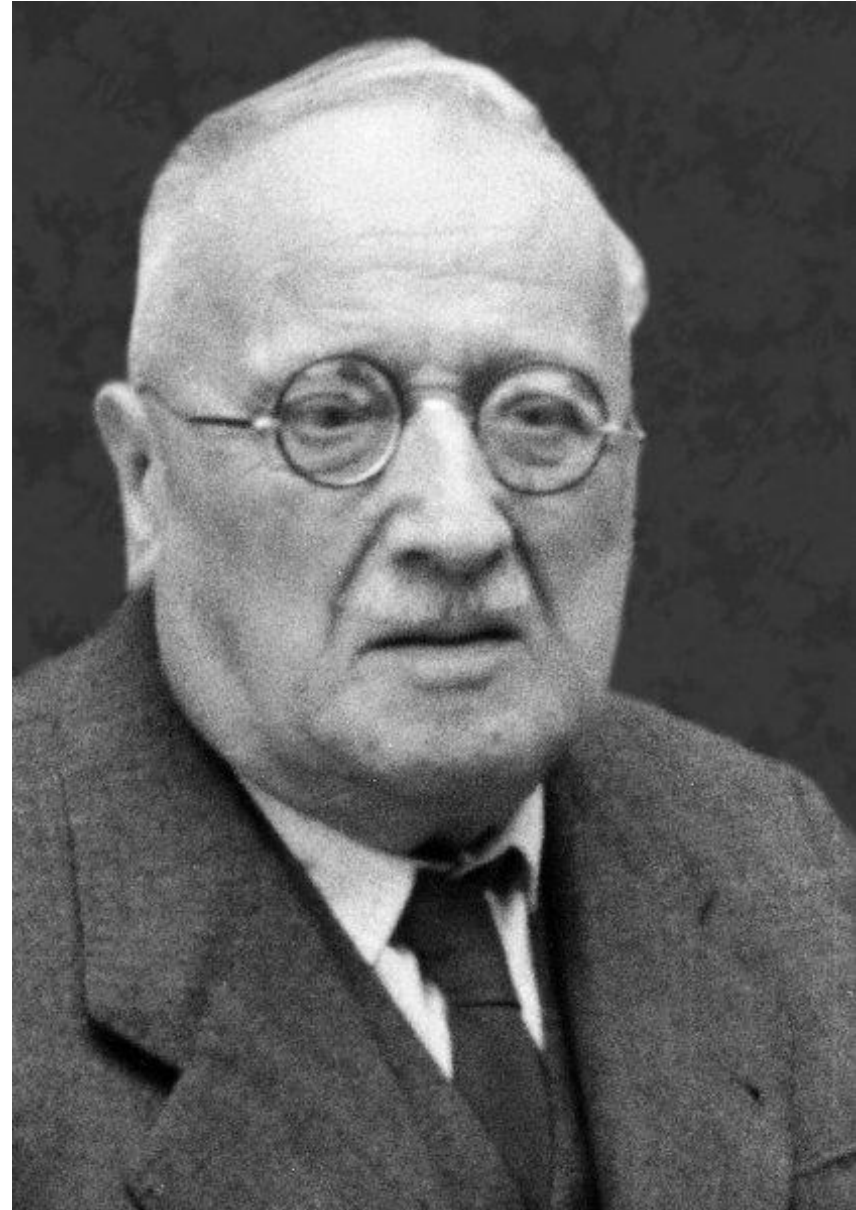


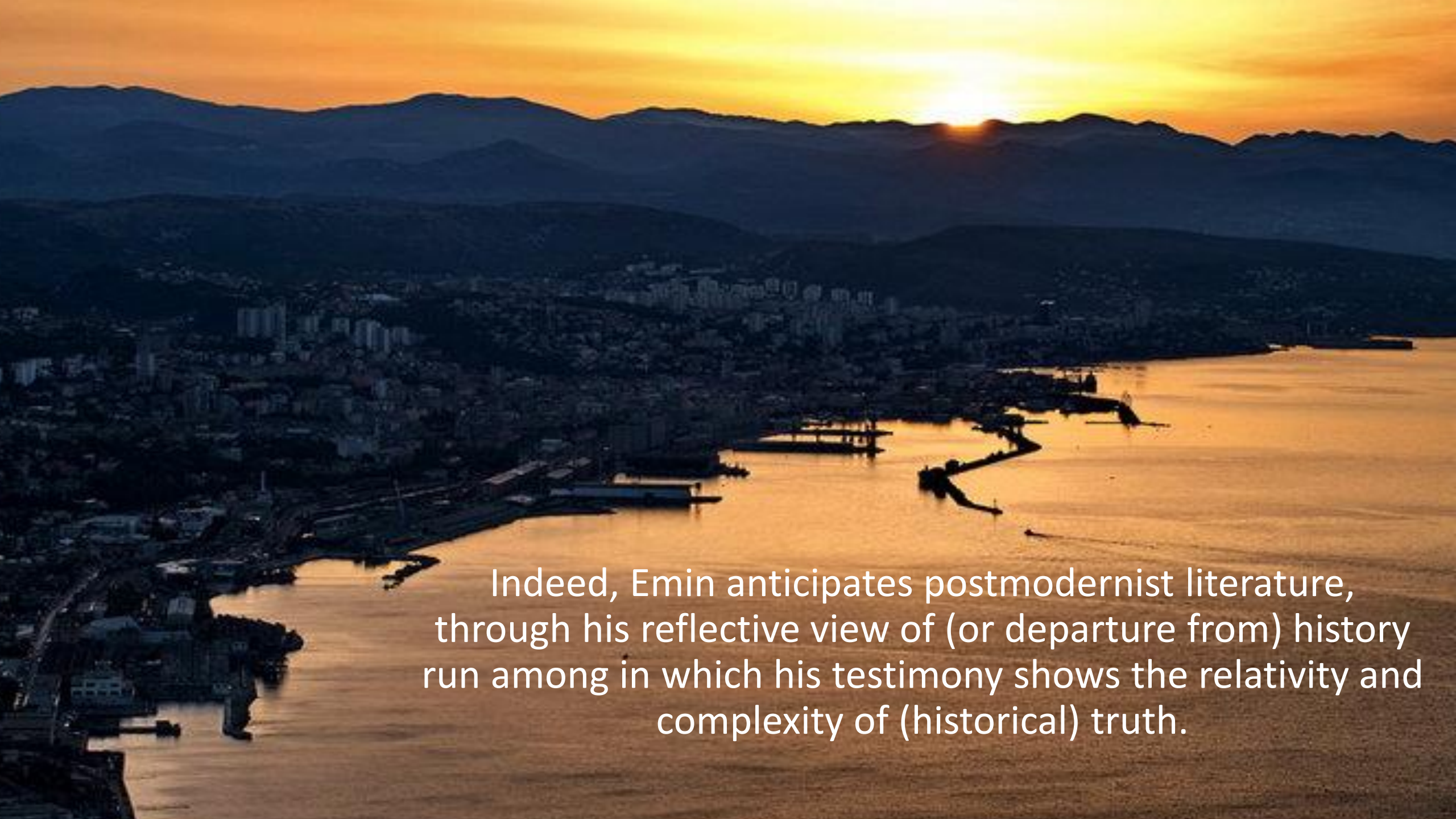
In this context, the author's body and the bodies of the objects of his writing (D'Annunzio, Rijeka) are the loci of polyphonous historical narratives, indeed – variations of history and, thus, the display (of unseen) bodies.

As a result, this chronohysteria acts as an introduction to **never-ending questions concerning the boundaries of the definitions of history and geography**, leading in his writings to memories and history through hysteria – as a product of the body characterized by the lunacy of history.



In conclusion, we can see that **Emin's** condemnation of the *danuncijade* is an extraordinarily deep, complex, precise and meticulous literary-artistic display of (Rijeka's) historical hysteria which completely resonates with the subtitle's term – chronohysteria.





Indeed, Emin anticipates postmodernist literature, through his reflective view of (or departure from) history run among in which his testimony shows the relativity and complexity of (historical) truth.