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Decadent Paradigms:  
*Il piacere* by Gabriele D'Annunzio

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To build a bridge between decadence and neo-decadence, to compare the funereal landscape of the fin de siècle – dark urban passages and stuffy interiors crammed with the glitter of art replicas, decorated with bibelots and assembled *bricolage* – with today's neo-decadent artefacts made possible by hyperrealism, photorealism, and all that realism is capable of, is a task that requires a strong grounding. Nineteenth century decadence is a magisterial exemplum from which the present can recognize its original form, perspective, and teleology.

Gabriele D'Annunzio, an ambitious young man from Pescara, tried his fortune in Rome, writing feverishly for *Fanfulla della domenica*, *Capitan Fracassa*, *Cronaca bizantina*, and *La Tribuna*. He reported on social gatherings, parties, home decorations and menus, the jewels and clothes of the most brilliant Roman princesses and duchesses. The two volumes of his *Scritti giornalistici* [Journalistic Writings] in the Meridiani Mondadori edition contain over 2,900 pages of articles published between 1889 and 1938. As an indefatigable social climber, he signed these articles with an array of intriguing pseudonyms such as Bull-Calf, Il Duca Minimo, Lila Biscuit, Sir Charles Vere de Vere, Happemousche, Filippo La Selvi, Puck, and Michings Mallecho.<sup>1</sup> His occupation as a journalist did not prevent him from writing short stories, poems, plays, and novels, including *Il piacere* [Pleasure] (1889), *Giovanni Episcopo* (1891), *L'innocente* [The Intruder] (1892), *Il trionfo della morte* [The Triumph of Death] (1894), *Le vergini delle rocce* [The Maidens of the Rocks] (1895), and *Il fuoco* [The Flame of Life] (1900).

This article focuses on D'Annunzio's *Il piacere* (1889) – originally translated by Georgina Harding as *The Child of Pleasure* (1898) and recently retranslated by Lara Gochin Raffaelli as *Pleasure* (2013) – published when the author was twenty-six. This early novel not only provides a decadent paradigm for D'Annunzio's contemporaries across Europe, but also contains a schema for

contemporary neo-decadence. *Il piacere* evokes many themes and symbols, including objects, icons, spaces, and colours, that resonate with the modern neo-decadent engagement with an aesthetically attractive incipient dissolution. In the words of D'Annunzio's contemporary, Arthur Symons,

Gabriele D'Annunzio comes to remind us, very definitely, as only an Italian can, of the reality and the beauty of sensation, of the primary sensations; the sensations of pain and pleasure as these come to us from our actual physical conditions; [...] And so he becomes the idealist of material things, while seeming to materialize spiritual things. He accepts, as no one else of our time does, the whole physical basis of life, the spirit which can be known only through the body.<sup>2</sup>

For the protagonist of *Il piacere*, Andrea Sperelli, the world of sensations harbours pure material objectivity: but then sensations are ignited by his culture, by memory, by suggestions that act violently on the senses, activating or impoverishing their ideal power. The novel is an archetypal decadent work akin to the writing of Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, Gustave Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, Oscar Wilde, and Joris-Karl Huysmans, whose works were discussed in the Italian magazines D'Annunzio contributed to, especially *La Tribuna* and *Cronaca bizantina*. Maurizio Serra's recent biography, *L'imaginifico. Vita di Gabriele D'Annunzio* [Magnificent Imagination: The Life of Gabriele D'Annunzio] (2019), places the author at the crossroads of the European literary milieu, focusing on his life as a writer rather than on the scandals and political affiliations that other biographers have emphasized.<sup>3</sup>

### **From *The Child of Pleasure* to *Pleasure***

Harding's translation of *Il piacere*, *The Child of Pleasure*, was published by The Modern Library, New York, in 1910, with an introduction by Ernest Boyd. The verses interspersed in the novel, especially by Percy Bysshe Shelley, were translated by Arthur Symons. In her new translation, *Pleasure*, Raffaelli remarks that Harding had followed the structure of the French translation by Georges Hérèlle and had omitted 'a great many passages that would have shocked a late Victorian reader's sensibilities'.<sup>4</sup> In his study of D'Annunzio, John Woodhouse similarly remarks that the heavily bowdlerized version by Harding not only omitted voyeuristic libidinous descriptions and

references to sadistic and perverted tastes in literature and the arts, but it also excised ‘all kinds of intellectual reflections on serious subjects’.<sup>5</sup> Such reflections amounted to a conscious effort to place the work of the Italian writer at the crossroads of the European decadent fashion, animated by a fertile exchange of translations and connections. Woodhouse notes, ‘For D’Annunzio, *Il piacere* marked a new move into European fashionability. In particular, there is much in the novel to link it with the European literary trend which came to be known as Decadentism’.<sup>6</sup> Woodhouse quotes a letter from D’Annunzio to Hérèlle, in which D’Annunzio remarks that he had crammed into *Il piacere* ‘all my predilections for form and colour, all my subtleties, all my preciousities, confusedly’ thus composing a *mélange* ‘all bursting with art’ in which, he added, the protagonist had some correlation with Huysmans’s hero Des Esseintes. Thus, according to Woodhouse, with *Il piacere*

D’Annunzio showed his further awareness of belonging to that new movement in European literary activity under whose banner could also be counted Swinburne and Wilde in Britain and Hugo von Hofmannsthal in Austria.<sup>7</sup>

Raffaelli’s new translation is faithful and accurate, undertaken with critical awareness of the larger intellectual context to which the novel belongs.<sup>8</sup> She reinstates the original title, *Pleasure*, which encapsulates the protagonist’s quest for experience through ever greater and more transcendent forms of gratification. ‘It is this pursuit of pleasure, of attempting to move beyond pleasure’, Raffaelli writes, ‘that ultimately leads to ruin, exemplifying the Decadent theme of ultimate moral dissolution’.<sup>9</sup>

### **Human portraits, sentient objects**

The protagonist of *Il piacere*, Count Andrea Sperelli, is a young nobleman who lives in luxury in the sensuous, decadent environment of fin-de-siècle Rome. His former and current lovers, Elena Muti and Maria Ferres, two extremely beautiful and cultured women, provide the seduction plot only to finally disappear from the crowded social milieu. *Il piacere* narrates Sperelli’s sexual adventures in

which aristocracy, the ambitious middle class, and a cosmopolitan world mix and jealously compete.

I have assembled a tentative list of elements – of features that range from portraits to objects, colours and scents, from the Byzantine Roman atmosphere to peculiar locations – which, taken together, point to a possible decadent agenda according to the sentiment and the material experience of fin-de-siècle Rome in the novel. This list of paradigmatic elements of a decadent nature could be associated with many resurrections from the past which assume the shape of material, symbolic, and metaphorical corpses that in their unquenchable will to life are endowed with the attraction of repulsion we usually attribute to zombies. *Il piacere* teems with such resurrections, incarnated in the protagonists and in characters who bear a resemblance to ancient portraits and objects. To look like a work of art from the past amounts to an act of exhumation conjoining the corpse and the animated body. Andrea Sperelli's mouth,

pure in form, intense in colour, swollen with sensuality, with a slightly cruel expression when firmly closed, that youthful mouth recalled, for its singular resemblance, the portrait of the unknown gentleman that is to be found in the Galleria Borghese, the profound and mysterious work of art in which fascinated minds believed they could perceive the figure of the divine Cesare Borgia painted by the divine Sanzio.<sup>10</sup>

As for Elena Muti, her classic head 'seemed to have emerged from a Syracusan medal', while the modern spirit in her expression – simultaneously ambiguous, intense, and passionate – recalls 'types of immortal women such as *Mona Lisa* or Nelly O'Brien'.<sup>11</sup> Elena has the mouth of Leonardo's *Medusa*,<sup>12</sup> and after their first meeting, Sperelli boldly declares: 'You, if I am not mistaken [...] must have the body of Correggio's *Danae*'.<sup>13</sup> Her eyes might have been imagined by da Vinci 'after having seen Lucrezia Crivelli in Milan'.<sup>14</sup>

The practice of tracing human features back to works of art which are thus resurrected from the oblivion of dusty museum cases and gallery walls, extends to other characters in the novel: the joyful features of Sperelli's cousin, the Marchioness of Ateleta, which recalls 'certain feminine profiles in the drawings of young Moreau, or in Gravelot's vignettes',<sup>15</sup> and Constantia Ladbrooke, who appears to be a creation by Thomas Lawrence, 'a second incarnation of the little

Countess of Shaftesbury'.<sup>16</sup> The Asian cavalier Sakumi, the secretary of the Japanese Legation in Rome, has a 'wide face which seemed to have come straight from the classic pages of the great comic illustrator Hokusai, [which] glowed crimson like an August moon amid the chains of flowers'.<sup>17</sup> The practice of making contemporary life resemble an antique work of art was a source of endless fascination for many decadent writers, who enlarged the realistic boundary of the portrait genre, moving beyond the Victorian grotesque into the imaginary portrait and aesthetic ghosts revived from bygone masterpieces. This strategy, according to Italian scholar Mario Praz, added distinction to whatever was common, and made whatever was ignoble appear noble and ancient.<sup>18</sup>

Eventually, Elena Muti, the first lover of Sperelli, recedes into her portrait hanging on a wall in Lord Heathfield's house, into 'the dark painting where Elena's bloodless face shone, with her eyes that followed one, and her sibylline mouth'.<sup>19</sup> Her features are replicated on the face of Maria Ferres, the woman who comes to replace her in Sperelli's aesthetic and amorous predilections:

She had an oval face, perhaps slightly too elongated, but with only a hint of that aristocratic elongation overemphasized by fifteenth-century artists in search of elegance. In her delicate features there was that subtle expression of suffering and fatigue which constitutes the human enchantment of the Virgins in the Florentine tondos of Cosimo's era. [...] A soft, tender shadow, [...] encircled her eyes, which had the tawny irises of dark angels. Her hair encumbered her head like a heavy crown [...]. The locks in front had the density and form of those that cover, like a helmet, the head of Antinous Farnese.<sup>20</sup>

The correspondence between the two women is further established by their voices as Sperelli

from the sounds and modulations of her voice [...] recognized the accent of the other. It was an ambiguous voice, one could almost say bisexual, twofold, androgynous; with two timbres. The male timbre, low and slightly veiled, [...] became effeminate at times [...]. The feminine timbre was the one that recalled the other.<sup>21</sup>

Such artful resurrections of the recent and distant past are intentionally endowed by D'Annunzio with a pervasive notion of *déjà-vu*, which eventually amounts to an overwhelming theatricality. Andrea Sperelli is a skilled set designer, setting the scene for his amorous trysts down to the smallest detail:

He tried to imagine the scene; he composed some sentences; he looked around to choose the most propitious place for their talk. Then he even got up to see in a mirror if his face was pale; if it was appropriate to the circumstance.<sup>22</sup>

Objects are positioned to appeal to the senses and entice his visitors: ‘This delicate actor could not comprehend the comedy of love without the backdrops. Therefore, his house was the most perfect theatre; and he was an extremely skilful set designer’.<sup>23</sup> Sperelli’s home at the Palazzo Zuccari, as in other Roman palaces, features objects as allusive elements of the social scene rather than simple stage props. They enjoy a powerful life of their own, in a perfect display of animism that brings them into consonance with the human actors present in the scene:

For [Sperelli], all those objects among which he had so many times loved and taken pleasure and suffered had taken on something of his sensitivity. Not only were they witness to his loves, his pleasures, his moments of sadness, but they had participated in them. [...] Everything around him had taken on for him that inexpressible appearance of life that is acquired, for example, by sacred implements, the insignia of a religion [...]. And such a strong stimulation came to him from these objects that he was disturbed by it at times, as by the presence of a supernatural power.<sup>24</sup>

Together with the objects in Sperelli’s home, each charged with his memories and associated sensations, the resurrected corpses of the past are enlivened by colours, scents, and odours. D’Annunzio was a skilled colourist, applying the strong tints of gouache to the views of Rome and to the interiors of the Palazzo Zuccari. They display the saturated and seductive colours of souvenir images purchased by tourists in Rome. ‘The obelisk’ near Piazza di Spagna ‘was entirely *crimson*, struck by the setting sun, and cast a long, oblique, slightly *turquoise* shadow. [...] The city below was tinged with *gold* against a pale sky on which the Monte Mario cypresses were already traced in black’.<sup>25</sup>

Sperelli’s home also boasts Persian carpets, crystal goblets, curtains of red brocade embossed in silver thread, twisted candles of an intense orange shade. The senses work in unison with his aesthetic tastes, vivid in the present of his experience and nourished by remembrances of the past and by his knowledge of the arts. The scent of roses, violets, jasmynes, lilacs, and junipers stimulates his sensual memory: Sperelli perceives ‘in everything, in shapes, in colours, in sounds, in perfumes, a transparent symbol, the emblem of a sentiment or a thought’.<sup>26</sup> Odours also evoke

strange sensations, such as those arising from the armpits of a lady with ‘an overabundant clump of reddish hair’<sup>27</sup> who resembles a priestess painted by Lawrence Alma-Tadema. This increased potential for sensation insistently fed by artistic discourse – of the collector and the connoisseur<sup>28</sup> – imparts a ghostly animation to the entire scene surrounding the hero of the story.

Sperelli’s mania for interior design and decoration also takes a decadent turn insofar as the art object, once endowed with its own impregnable aura, shrinks into a bibelot, a small *objet de vertu*, the copy being as good as the original, the fragment as good as the whole, the quotation sufficient, in consonance with Walter Benjamin’s dictum about nineteenth-century art in the age of its technological reproduction, and the useless task of invoking the signature of a great master to validate the pleasure provided by an art object. In Sperelli’s palace,

Thick fat roses were immersed in certain crystal goblets that rose, slender, from a sort of gilded stem, widening into the shape of a diamond lily, similar to those that appear behind the Virgin in the tondo by Sandro Botticelli at the Galleria Borghese.<sup>29</sup>

In his study of ‘D’Annunzio arredatore’ [D’Annunzio the interior decorator], Mario Praz remarks that this is ‘a precious interior glazed under a pre-Raphaelite coating whose undefinable diaphaneité disguises a fundamental taste for the *bric-à-brac*’.<sup>30</sup>

Another aspect of resurrection in the text is the use of once-precious material in decorative items of lower status, such as ‘a large cushion cut from a dalmatic of a rather faded colour, the colour that Florentine silk weavers called saffron pink’.<sup>31</sup> In Sperelli’s abode, ‘Everywhere, with ingenious taste, other liturgical fabrics were used as ornaments and for comfort’.<sup>32</sup> The re-use or relocation of *objets d’art* includes exotic items, tokens of a fin-de-siècle Orientalist fashion that resurrects the Far East as Japonisme ensconced inside the Roman palaces, further tokens of secular appropriation from distant colonized countries:

A bronze crane at one side held in its uplifted beak a plate suspended from three chains, like a scale; and the plate contained a new book and a small Japanese saber, a *waki-zashi*, decorated with silver chrysanthemums on the scabbard, on the guard, and on the hilt.<sup>33</sup>

The final evidence of the nature of the resurrected corpses surrounding the actors of this story can be found at Cardinal Immenraet’s auction in the Via Sistina, where furniture, paintings, and



tapestries are jumbled in disorderly display: ‘fabrics, mostly ecclesiastical’, ‘the rarest relics, ivories, enamelled objects, glass pieces, carved jewels, medals, coins, prayer books, illuminated codices, ornate silverware’ were gathered together, but ‘a particular odour, emanating from the dampness of the place and from those ancient things, filled the air’.<sup>34</sup> It is the odour of decomposition, of death. Auctions incarnate the teleology of the aesthetics of decadence:

That year in Rome, the love of *bibelots* and *bric-à-brac* had reached excesses; every salon of the nobility and of the upper bourgeoisie was cluttered with ‘curiosities’; every lady cut the cushions of her couch from a chasuble or from a cope, and placed her roses in an Umbrian pharmacist’s vase or in a goblet made of chalcedony. [...] The auctions were very frequent.<sup>35</sup>

Sperelli himself is a kind of human bibelot, a fragment of past nobility adrift in the ocean of contemporary fashion, vaguely resembling his masterly originals but far inferior in quality, if not for the aesthetic ambition he incarnates in an era in which the splendours of the past appear tarnished by the inevitable decadence of aristocracy:

Beneath today’s great democratic flood, which wretchedly submerges so many beautiful and rare things, that special class of ancient Italian nobility in which from generation to generation a certain family tradition of elect culture, elegance, and art was kept alive is also slowly disappearing.<sup>36</sup>

According to the young provincial *parvenu*, the same thing happened in Byzantine Rome, where ancient families and irrepressible snobs, impoverished nobility and new rapacious builders loaded with money, co-existed in mutual strife for acquisition and survival. Thus, D’Annunzio’s Roman elegy can be condensed, symbolically, in the communion between Eros and Thanatos marking the love stories of Andrea Sperelli, ensconced in the emblems of his human loves as well as his love for objects:

Passion enveloped them and made them uncaring of anything that would not give them both immediate pleasure. [...] And they went so far that often an obscure discomfort possessed them, even at the height of their oblivion, as if an admonishing voice rose up from the depths of their being to warn them of an unknown punishment, of an imminent end. From their tiredness itself desire arose again [...] it seemed that they could find no repose except in exertion, just as the flame finds no life except in combustion.<sup>37</sup>

At the auction that marks the beginning of Sperelli’s affair with Donna Elena Muti, where the elegant crowd of Roman ladies and art amateurs congregate, Sperelli spots an object which

encapsulates, with the fixed static force and discursive potential of the emblem, the nature of the relationship between humans and objects, the unholy communion between decadence and resurrection:

It was a small skull carved into ivory with extraordinarily good anatomical precision. Each jawbone bore a row of diamonds, and two rubies glinted at the base of the eye sockets. On the forehead a motto was inscribed: RUIT HORA [...]. The skull opened like a hinged box, although the joint was almost invisible. The inner heartbeat of the device gave that small skull an inexpressible semblance of life.<sup>38</sup>

Sperelli wins the auction, and the ‘death’s head’ is his. One could not wish for a more suggestive and emblematic object, in which Eros and Thanatos descend towards a *cupio dissolvi*, insofar as the refined artwork and precious materials were constructed to mark the incessant beat of time within a ‘proud and free fantasy of death’.<sup>39</sup>

The novel’s closing act is at the second auction in Rome – the sale of all the furniture that belonged to the plenipotentiary minister of Guatemala, husband of Maria Ferres, who quits the Roman scene. This occurs in perfect symmetry with the first auction, and yet with a stronger disgusting odour that carries the suggestion of infection – material and moral – that had been alluded to in the first parts of the novel. Sperelli smells the stench, which ‘spread through the warm air, emanating from those impure men’, as if the contagion of vulgarity in the greed of buyers, traders, second-hand furniture sellers, junk dealers, had made itself tangible.<sup>40</sup>

In his mouth he had the sensation of an indescribable bitter and nauseating taste, which was surging up inside him from the dissolving of his heart. It seemed that he was leaving that place infected with obscure and immedicable ills, from the contact with all those strangers. Physical torture and moral anguish mingled in him.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, D’Annunzio drives his reader towards the ultimate, unavoidable perception of decadence, which is apparently provided by the ‘impure men’ working at the auction, but in reality affects all his deeds with a nauseating smell.

## **Decadence in gardens and cemeteries**

Another paradigm of decadence in *Il piacere* is represented by the use of specific locations. The passion between Sperelli and Donna Elena Muti unfolds across the main tourist spots of Rome, to the extent that some pages of the novel read like Ferdinand Gregorovius' Roman strolls through the eternal city, or even Murray's 1843 overflowing *Handbook for Travellers in Central Italy: Including the Papal States, Rome, and the Cities of Etruria, with a Travelling Map*. There is an odeporic tourism, the tourism of those often graced by nocturnal shades of darkness, the same that would entice Henry James' Daisy Miller – the unfortunate American girl who wanted to see the Roman ruins at night – to her fatal moonlit visit to the Colosseum. Never missing a view, an old church, a gallery of paintings, Sperelli and Elena imbibe the atmosphere of the ruined city with gusto. Their surroundings display the same aspects of dissolution and decay that thematized the eighteenth-century etchings *Rome in Ruins* by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, whose engravings portrayed classical Rome – but a Rome in ruins.<sup>42</sup>

Later, during their walks, the subtle allusions to death mingled with the pathetic fallacy engendered by the aesthetic decomposition of beauty turn into the frightful spectacle of violent slaughter offered by the destruction of the historical gardens nestling at the centre of Rome. Alongside Villa Sciarra and Villa Albani, such was also the lot of the Villa Ludovisi, a large ancient garden in central Rome, decorated with small temples and shrines to pagan deities, with century-old trees under which wild violets grew in profusion, loved, among many, by Johann Wolfgang Goethe. 247,000 square metres were sold to merchants and builders:

Villa Ludovisi, somewhat wild, consecrated by the presence of Juno, whom Wolfgang adored, where at that time the plane trees from the Orient and the cypresses of Aurora, which seemed immortal, shivered in the presentment of the market and of death; all the ancestral villas, sovereign glory of Rome, were witness to their love.<sup>43</sup>

Contemporary photographs show the exposed roots of the trees felled in the Villa Ludovisi; Hermann Friedrich Grimm wrote about the demolition in *La distruzione di Roma* [The Destruction of Rome] (1886); painters like Guglielmo Mangiarelli in *Una giornata triste* [A Sad Day], or Ernest Hébert, with *Roma sdegnata* [Rome Outraged], immortalized the sacrifice of the ancient sylvan

deities and noble old trees. D'Annunzio, both as a chronicler of Roman events and a novelist, voiced his dirge for the lost gardens of Rome again and again. Not only in *Il piacere*, but also in *Le vergini delle rocce* (1895), and in an article for *La Tribuna*, where he denounced the greed of the owners of ancient gardens in the heart of Rome, and the vulgar industry of the destroyers and the builders:

Era il tempo in cui più torbida ferveva l'operosità dei distruttori o dei costruttori sul suolo di Roma. Insieme con nuvoli di polvere si propagava una specie di follia edificatoria, come un turbine improvviso, afferrando non soltanto i famigliari della calce e del mattone ma ben anche i più schivi eredi dei majorascati papali, che avevano fino allora guardato con dispregio gli intrusi dalle finestre dei palazzi di travertino incrollabili sotto la crosta dei secoli. [...] I giganteschi cipressi ludovisii, quelli dell'Aurora, quelli medesimi i quali un giorno avevano sparsa la solennità del loro antico mistero sul capo di Wolfango, giacevano atterrati (mi stanno sempre nella memoria come i miei occhi li videro in un pomeriggio di novembre), atterrati e allineati l'uno accanto all'altro, con tutte le radici scoperte che fumigavano verso il cielo impallidito, con tutte le negre radici scoperte che parevano tenere ancor prigionie entro l'enorme intrico il fantasma di una vita oltrapossente. [...] Fu allora, da per tutto, come un contagio di volgarità. Nel contrasto incessante degli affari, nella furia quasi feroce degli appetiti e delle passioni, nell'esercizio disordinato ed esclusivo delle attività utili, ogni senso estetico fu smarrito, ogni rispetto del passato fu deposto.

[This was the time when, in Rome, the industry of destroyers and builders was most fervid and turbid. Together with clouds of dust, a kind of building madness spread itself like a sudden whirlwind, affecting not only those who worked with lime and bricks, but also the shy inheritors of papal privileges, who up to that moment had gazed with contempt at the intruders from the windows of impregnable, century-old travertine palaces. [...] The gigantic Ludovisi cypresses, those of the Aurora, the very same which had once spread the solemnity of their ancient mystery over the head of Goethe, lay on the ground (I see them in my memory as my eyes saw them one November afternoon), side by side in a row, with the smoke rising from their naked roots to the pale heaven above, with their black roots all laid bare, and seeming still to hold prisoner within their vast intricacies the phantom of omnipotent life. [...] What happened then, everywhere, was a contagion of vulgarity. In the unceasing business strife, in the fierce fury of appetites and passions, in the disorderly action that excluded useful activities, all aesthetic sense was lost, all respect for the past, were deposed.]<sup>44</sup>

The contagion of vulgarity attacking the noble features of the past perfectly encompasses the spectrum of decadence and resurrection. The time span between these two oppositional forces – the will to life of antique beauty resurrected by the artist's sensual and ideal worship, and its rapid material demolition performed by vulgar hands deprived of memory, of awe, of elegance – here becomes synchronous. In this strident clash the idealistic aspects of decadence meet with an expeditious and cruel dismissal.

In a duplication of effect, Maria Ferres takes Elena Muti's place 'on various peregrinations across Imperial Rome and the Rome of the Popes. This Lenten Virgilian tour was carried out in the villas, the galleries, the churches, the ruins. Where Elena Muti had passed, now passed Maria Ferres'.<sup>45</sup> Exposing and cannibalizing the private diary of Maria Ferres, whose progressing entanglement with Andrea Sperelli is chronicled daily, D'Annunzio deploys the language of Romanticism.<sup>46</sup> Maria writes, 'I am reading Percy Shelley, a poet he loves, the divine Ariel who feeds on light and speaks the language of the Spirits'.<sup>47</sup> She quotes 'a few passages of Percy Shelley's *Epypsichidion*' interspersed with their wanderings in the park of Villa Schifanoia, and with more references to 'Shelley's lyrics to Jane, the *Recollection*'.<sup>48</sup> The work of the English poet influences her response to the Italian landscape; Maria imagines that 'as in Percy Shelley's poem each pond seemed to be a brief sky engulfed in a subterranean world; a firmament of rose-coloured light spread out above the dark earth'.<sup>49</sup> Sperelli's answer takes the shape of the lines of *Epypsichidion*.<sup>50</sup> Eventually the woman's resistance to the assiduous courtship by Sperelli is sealed in Shelley's verse 'And forget me, for I can never *be thine*',<sup>51</sup> extracted from the 1822 poem 'The Magnetic Lady to Her Patient'.<sup>52</sup>

As a predictable crescendo from their entanglement in poetical quotations, Maria Ferres and Sperelli visit the English cemetery in Rome, a place of solitude that resonates with the verse that has subtitled their relationship. The cemetery encompasses a sense of grief that extends to their own lives and their soon to be aborted love:

A sense of solitude pervaded the cemetery. [...] The funereal cypresses rose up straight and immobile in the air; only their tips, tinted gold by the sun, had a slight tremor. Between the rigid, greenish trunks, like travertine stone, emerged white tombs, square gravestones, broken columns, urns, arches. [...] That even regularity of the arboreal shapes and that modest candour of the sepulchral marble gave the soul a sense of grave and sweet repose.<sup>53</sup>

No place but a cemetery, and especially one where eminent poets were laid to rest, could at once quicken memories of art, of the finest achievements of poetry, and the present acknowledgement of the dead nature of their existence. 'The poet's tomb is up there, near the ruin, on the left, under the last tower'.<sup>54</sup> The face of Maria Ferres resembles a marble statue and her

forehead has the whiteness of the moon. ‘They walked on, searching for the grave of John Keats, the poet of *Endymion*’.<sup>55</sup> The scents from the oleanders and the light from the moon contribute to a feast of sensations amounting to a pageant of death. One could not wish for a more decadent statement than the one offered by the lovers’ visit to the protestant cemetery in Rome, with the desired and aborted resurrection of dead poets, buried in marble, and the feeling of an insurmountable distance from Romanticism and its heroic idealism – a distance suggested by their tombs and their epigraphs. The lovers’ visit is a tourist’s stroll charged with superficial and vague emotions, perfumed with sheaths of roses, detailed and guided by short epitaphs engraved in marble. Nothing better than a marble monument entombing the voice of the poets of a past age corresponds with D’Annunzio’s decadent agenda in *Il piacere*, in accord with the definition of the novel by its latest translator, Gochin Raffaelli: ‘This seminal Decadent work’.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriele D’Annunzio, *Scritti giornalistici 1882-1888*, a cura di Annamaria Andreoli (Milano: Mondadori, 1996), and Gabriele D’Annunzio, *Scritti giornalistici 1889-1938*, a cura di Annamaria Andreoli (Milano: Mondadori, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Boyd, ‘Introduction’ to Gabriele D’Annunzio, *The Child of Pleasure*, transl. by Georgina Harding, verses transl. by Arthur Symons (New York: The Modern Library, 1898), p. viii.

<sup>3</sup> Maurizio Serra, *L’imaginifico. Vita di Gabriele D’Annunzio* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Gabriele D’Annunzio, *Pleasure*, trans. with a foreword by Laura Gochin Raffaelli, introduction by Alexander Stille (London: Penguin, 2013), p. x.

<sup>5</sup> John Woodhouse, *Gabriele D’Annunzio. Defiant Archangel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 86. The importance of the language sources animating the prose and verse of D’Annunzio, from Hugo and Mallarmé to Swinburne, Rossetti, and the Pre-Raphaelites, is studied by Mario Praz, ‘D’Annunzio e “l’amor sensuale della parola”’, in Mario Praz, *Bellezza e bizzarria. Saggi scelti*, a cura di Andrea Cane (Milano: Mondadori, 2002) pp. 649-716.

<sup>7</sup> Woodhouse, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> All quotations from *Il piacere* are taken from the English translation by Laura Gochin Raffaelli, published in 2013.

<sup>9</sup> D’Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. xii.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>18</sup> Praz, p. 682. Among the many art portraits incarnated by living actors, Clara Green ‘had “posed” for a *Sibylla Palmifera* and for a *Madonna of the Lily*. [...] She was, therefore, *ennobled* by art’. D’Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 221 (my emphasis).

<sup>19</sup> D’Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 295.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 149-50.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 14-15.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-18.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 16 (my emphasis).
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 17.
- <sup>27</sup> D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 69.
- <sup>28</sup> See Francesca Orestano, 'Ascesa e declino del connoisseur: l'élite del gusto, tra distinzione e ridicolo', in *La formazione delle élites in Europa dal Rinascimento alla Restaurazione*, a cura di Antonella Cagnolati (Roma: Aracne, 2012), pp. 205-224.
- <sup>29</sup> D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 7.
- <sup>30</sup> Mario Praz, 'D'Annunzio arredatore', in Praz, pp. 744-54.
- <sup>31</sup> D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 21.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 212.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 51.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 59.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 62.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 33.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 80-81.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 63-64.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 67.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 324. The same reaction is described by Charles Dickens in *Dombey and Son* (1848). See Francesca Orestano, 'Spectacular Bankruptcy: Mr Dombey's "Retribution", the Auction at Stowe, and the Melodramatic Imagination', *Rivista di studi vittoriani*, 23.46 (2018), pp. 7-28.
- <sup>41</sup> D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 326.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 265.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 82.
- <sup>44</sup> Gabriele D'Annunzio, 'Preambolo', *La Tribuna*, 7 June 1893, in *Scritti giornalistici 1889-1938*, pp. 195-200 (my translation).
- <sup>45</sup> D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, pp. 281-82.
- <sup>46</sup> On D'Annunzio's poetic debt to British Romanticism, and especially to John Keats, see Marco Canani, 'Gabriele d'Annunzio's Keats: Reading Practices, Poetic Traces', forthcoming in *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies* (2025).
- <sup>47</sup> D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 186.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 190, 193.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 195.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 286.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 316.
- <sup>52</sup> Buried in the novel are frequent quotes from Romantic voices, namely: George Gordon, Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, 'The tree of knowledge has been pluck'd – all's known' (D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 132); Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Witch of the Atlas*, 'each flame [...] / Dissolved in ever-moving light' (Ibid., p. 18), 'A Fragment: To Music' (Ibid., p. 184), 'An Allegory' (Ibid., p. 186), *Epipsychidion* (Ibid., pp. 190, 219, 286), 'To Jane. The Recollection' (Ibid., pp. 193, 316), 'The Magnetic Lady to Her Patient' (Ibid., p. 203), 'Death' (Ibid., p. 317), 'Epitaph' (Ibid., p. 319); John Keats, *Endymion* (Ibid., p. 319); Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Roman Elegies* (Ibid., pp. 81, 83).
- <sup>53</sup> D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 317.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 318.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 319.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. xiii.