



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 7, Issue 1

Autumn 2024

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ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 24 July 2024

Date of Publication: 6 December 2024

Citation: Darcy Sullivan, 'Decadence in Graphic Novels: An Introduction',  
*Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 7.1 (2024), 121-144.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v7i1.1847.g1954

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## Decadence in Graphic Novels: An Introduction

Darcy Sullivan

The Oscar Wilde Society, UK

Let us begin with disappointment. There is no decadent movement in comics, graphic novels, *fumetti* or *bandes dessinées*. In fact, there is no correspondence between any literary or artistic movement and the medium that the French call the 9<sup>th</sup> art. Comics – a word used in this article to describe narrative pictorial works, as distinct from illustrations, caricatures, or animation – have their own trends, just like television or film. This article will therefore not discuss decadence as a phase or sub-genre in comics, but rather works in the medium that relate to the decadent literary tradition, and to a lesser extent, to the Symbolist movement that corresponded with decadence. Here, too, the sample is relatively small. This is because the decadent spirit is at odds with the comics medium for several reasons.

The first of these is thematic. Much of the literature described as decadent deals with themes of sin and corruption, from Joris-Karl Huysmans's *La-bas* to Jean Lorrain's *Monsieur de Phocas*. As Jane Desmarais and David Weir note in their introduction to *Decadence and Literature*, 'Decadence has been used to describe racial degeneration, historical decline, philosophical pessimism, personal immorality, physical entropy, artistic imperfection, and more.'<sup>1</sup> Stories of this kind, especially those concerning personal immorality, tend to be subsumed within the horror genre.<sup>2</sup> The decay of a man's soul must find some kind of objective correlative in his actions, as in the case of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which is the most frequently adapted decadent novel in the medium, precisely because the supernatural element tips it into the horror or 'weird fiction' genre, and the plot resembles that of many horror stories.

The second is structural. Much of decadent literature is concerned with mood or atmosphere, often conveyed through description rather than action; *À rebours* is an ideal example. While comics can and do convey mood through both words and pictures, action and events are

the building blocks. In his seminal work, *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud notes that panels in comics are separated by what the industry calls ‘the gutter’ – the space between panels. ‘Nothing is seen between the two panels, but experience tells you something must be there! Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments.’<sup>3</sup> In general, the content of these panels are the peak moments of action. While there are many exceptions, and artists who make exceptions their speciality, this concept of hopping from high point to high point determines the structure of most comics.

The third is commercial. Adaptations of literary sources constitute a very small proportion of comics, and these are generally not bestsellers. There have been highly regarded adaptations of literary classics, such as Stéphane Heuet’s multi-volume version of Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, illustrated in the *ligne claire* style popularized by Hergé, the creator of Tintin. But most of the adaptations of literature have been by famous genre writers such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Jules Verne, and Stephen King.

Our focus here, therefore, is to find what examples we can of the strange flowering of decadence in comics, and, in the case of this article, in Western comics not Japanese manga. We will explore five themes:

1. adaptations of works by decadent authors, and biographical works about these authors;
2. notable adaptations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*;
3. the influence of symbolist art on comics artists, particularly on the American artist P. Craig Russell;
4. decadent narrative and linguistic tropes in 1970s horror comics;
5. as a special case, the representation of Gabriele d’Annunzio in Italian *fumetti*.

As noted above, decadent literature has not had much of an influence on the comics medium. However, through these five themes, we can find different pathways for studying the *reflection* of decadent authors and styles in comics. Those reflections, though rare, are fascinating.<sup>4</sup>

## Decadent authors in comics

Among French authors, Charles Baudelaire has frequently appeared in comics. However, while illustrated versions of *Les Fleurs du mal* proliferate, including one illustrated by the prominent Italian comics artist Liberatore,<sup>5</sup> actual comics versions of his poetry are rare, because comics generally rely on a linear narrative. Poems do not need pictures for the same reason that paintings do not need captions. However, in the collection *Poèmes de Baudelaire en BD*,<sup>6</sup> 16 poems are adapted by various writers and artists. It is aimed at younger readers and includes brief notes on Baudelaire's life and poetry. As is often the case, the juxtaposition of verse and literalized drawings is generally disappointing, although there are a couple of notable examples, such as the appropriately seedy *mise en scene* for 'Le Jeu' by the artist Espe and the writer Ceka.

More common are biographical representations of Baudelaire himself, in volumes such as *Baudelaire* (Noël Tuot & Daniel Casanave, 2006), *Baudelaire ou le roman rêvé d'E. A. Poe* (Tarek and Aurélien Morinière, 2006), *Baudelaire* (Andreas Lapovitera and Gian Marco de Francisco, 2021), and *Crénom, Baudelaire!* (Dominique et Tino Gelli, 2023).<sup>7</sup> The increase in number of these adaptations demonstrates the enduring appeal of Baudelaire's persona, as well as the growing interest in biographies in the Franco-Belgian comics tradition (commonly abbreviated as 'BD' – 'bande dessinée' meaning literally 'drawn strips'). Among the later volumes is one that more successfully marries its subject and treatment: *Mademoiselle Baudelaire* (2020) by the Belgian artist-writer Yslaire (Bernard Hilaire) and published by Dupuis. Focusing on the relationship between Baudelaire and his mistress Jeanne Duval, Yslaire's book is erotic to the point of pornographic, frenzied, doleful, sumptuous, and macabre. Strange apparitions such as a blue, winged sphinx give its pages a heady dose of symbolist beauty, and one page features a magnificent homage to Goya's *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*. It is one of the few gems of truly decadent *bandes dessinées* to be discussed here [fig. 1].



Fig. 1: Cover and Goya-inspired page from Yslaire's *Mademoiselle Baudelaire* (Marcinelle: Dupuis, 2020).  
© 2021 Dupuis

Another inspired work was created not by an artist of the Franco-Belgian tradition but by the British artist-writer Nick Hayes. His 2018 book *The Drunken Sailor: The Life of the Poet Arthur Rimbaud in His Own Words* weds lines from the poet with dreamlike images, a fluid form (no panel borders) and a muted colour palette of greys, olives, and rust [fig. 2]. One doesn't so much read it as float through it, as indeed through a poem. A stylized Rimbaud, his hair swirling to a leaflike point (possibly an allusion to Tintin), dances from youth to death, through Paris and Africa, and through a relationship with Paul Verlaine. *The Drunken Sailor* is one of a new breed of artistic graphic novels marketed to adults in Britain and America, a phenomenon that, after several misfires, began in earnest with Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in 1991.<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 2: Nick Hayes' *The Drunken Sailor: The Life of the Poet Arthur Rimbaud in His Own Words* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018). © 2018 Nick Hayes

*The Drunken Sailor* includes Rimbaud's time in Africa, and this period is the primary focus of other books, such as *La ligne de fuite* (Christophe Dabitch and Benjamin Flao, 2007), *Le chapeau de Rimbaud* (Christian Straboni, 2010), *Arthur Rimbaud: l'explorateur maudit* (Philippe Thirault and Thomas Verguet, 2022), and *Le dernier voyage d'Arthur Rimbaud* (Bernard Chiavelli, 1991).<sup>9</sup> It is partly due to that adventure, and partly due to his status as the James Dean of the *poètes maudits*, that Rimbaud has captured the imagination of so many BD artists, resulting in a greater number of books than even Baudelaire. Like Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe, another writer frequently fictionalised in comics, Rimbaud makes a great character.

There are also BD devoted to the rascal, muckraker, decadent writer, and Proust duellist, Jean Lorrain. A very rare 1977 book by the artist Guy Puccio, *Le prince dans la forêt suivi de Histoires de masques d'après Jean Lorrain*, contains homoerotic versions drawn in a floridly detailed art nouveau style that is more akin to fan art than that of a mature artist [fig. 3]. Issued by the poetry publisher Éditions Arcam, it features an introduction by Philippe Jullian, who is perhaps best known among English-speaking readers for his book *Dreamers of Decadence* and for his biographies of personalities

such as Oscar Wilde, Robert de Montesquiou, and Lorrain himself.<sup>10</sup> Puccio's drawings do convey the decadent spirit, despite or perhaps even because of their lack of mature talent: details matter more than form, effect more than substance, sensuality more than symmetry. In this, Puccio's artwork appears to have been influenced by two mainstream American comics artists who reached popularity in the mid-1970s, Barry Windsor-Smith and P. Craig Russell, the latter of whom we shall examine shortly.

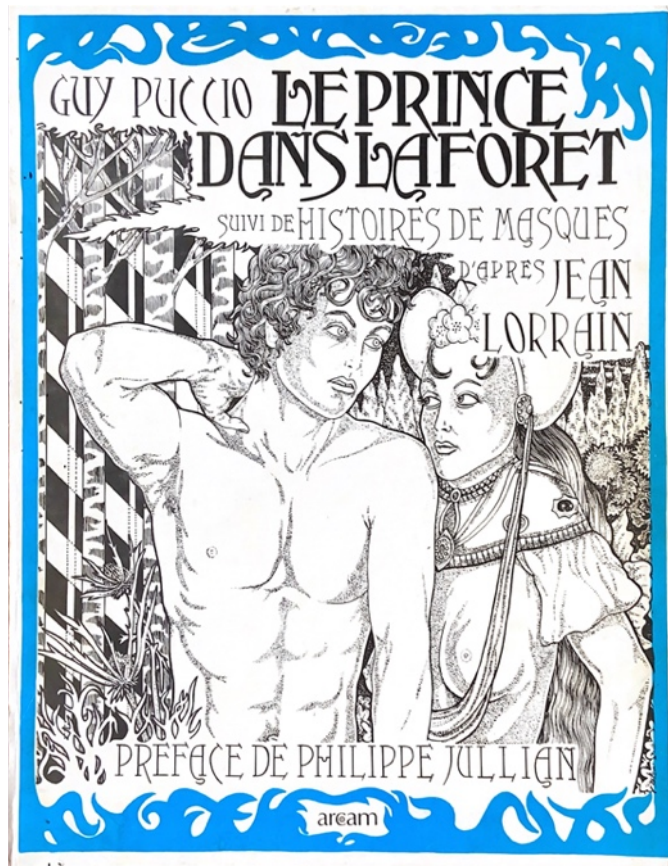


Fig. 3: Guy Puccio's rare graphic novel *Le prince dans la forêt suivi de Histoires de masques d'après Jean Lorrain* (Paris: Éditions Arcam, 1977) © 1977 Arcam.

Odder still, Lorrain's stories have found favour with the young artist Jahyra, who has published three volumes of French-language manga-style work adapting his stories of princesses and princes, *Princesses d'ivoire et d'ivresse* (Népaonthès, 2018), *Princesses d'ambre et d'Italie* (Népaonthès, 2019), and *Princesses de nacre et de caresse* (Népaonthès, 2021) [fig. 4].<sup>11</sup> It is a jarring juxtaposition to see the smiling, prettified characters caught in Lorrain's *contes cruels*.



Fig. 4: Cover of *Princesses d'ivoire et d'ivresse* (Paris: Népaonthès, 2018), one of Jahyra's three volumes of stories based on Jean Lorrain. © 2018 Jahyra

It is surprising that Huysmans, one of the 'founding fathers' of French literary decadence, is not to be found in comics yet. Neither he nor his 'breviary of the decadence' *À rebours* seem to have made a mark on the 9<sup>th</sup> art. Obviously, this is not because he has been forgotten: he was the subject of an exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay in 2019-2020, which occasioned a lavishly illustrated catalogue and edition of *À rebours*. Just as some novels are deemed 'unfilmable', it may well be that *À rebours* is considered 'undrawable'. It is, after all, a work of description and mood, not of story or arc; even *Là-bas*, while probably more marketable due to its occult theme, has not been adapted, and probably for the same reason. Nevertheless, the woodcut-style drawings by Arthur Zaidenburg for the first American edition of *À rebours* look very much like comics panels and may one day tempt an artist to turn des Esseintes into a BD anti-hero.<sup>12</sup>



### *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Undoubtedly the most adapted decadent work in comics is *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.<sup>13</sup> There are several reasons for this, including Wilde's brand recognition, the clear fairy-tale structure of the story, the opportunity to visualize the decay of the painting, and the story's location within the horror genre – long popular in Western comics. However, many adaptations remove the story from the realm of decadence, ignoring the subtext and even changing the story to fit a more 'wholesome' crime or horror template. The most extreme example of how the decadent atmosphere and homosexual themes of the novel were at odds with the youth-oriented comics industry is the very first adaptation, for the British series *Thriller Comics Library* in 1956.<sup>14</sup> Rather than an effete man about town, Dorian is a man's man who, freed from moral compunction by the magical painting, runs a London gang of criminals as a sort of Moriarty or Fagin. This version even reins in Dorian's evil inclinations, having him accidentally kill the painter Basil Hallward in a swordfight rather than outright murdering him.

While subsequent comics adaptations have taken fewer liberties, most have failed to match the mood and the sensual aesthetic of the original novel. There are, however, two notable exceptions. The first is in *Scream 5* (1974), a horror magazine published by the short-lived publisher Skywald, to which we will return later. Although the story is radically condensed to nine pages, writer Alan Hewetson and artist Zesar Lopez (credited as Cesar) convey a sense of decadence largely through the artwork, which has an art nouveau revival feel to it, inviting associations with Aubrey Beardsley. This is one of the few comics versions of the story to make Dorian's pansexuality evident, with a single panel showing a shirtless Dorian lying in bed and smoking next to both a boy and a girl *en déshabillé* [fig. 5]. While the caption describes Dorian's 'perverted, endless pleasure', the image is neither perverted nor sinister – it is beautiful.<sup>15</sup> This sort of thing would never pass the Comics Code Authority operating in the USA at the time, and which had been formed some twenty years earlier, partly and specifically to censor horror comics. But comics

published as magazines were outside their jurisdiction, even though the magazines were available in the same stores as the comic books and could be bought by the same children the CCA was set up to protect.



Fig. 5: A remarkable sequence from 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' in *Scream 5*. Adaptation by Alan Hewetson, art by Zesar Lopez. Copyright information unavailable.

By far the most decadent version of the story came from Enrique Corominas in 2011. *Dorian Gray* is a tour de force of visual lavishness and corrupt atmosphere. This is a painted comic, and Corominas uses colour to mark the moral decay, moving from more naturalistic colours to more expressionistic hues. While the book is awash in pink and aqua, Corominas uses yellow for the pages that represent the poisonous book Gray reads, an imaginative melding of the book's real-life model, *À rebours*, with the colour most associated with decadence, in part due to *The Yellow Book*. As Corominas says in his introduction, a heavy dose of symbolist art is evident and the twisted images we see in the yellow section were taken from Comte de Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* [fig. 6]. Corominas also added a brief epilogue to the story, in which Lord Henry completes the tale of Dorian's death as a story told to an amused audience at a fin de siècle dinner party. In his essay, Corominas says that Wilde shows us how 'hedonism leads to the most terrible

loneliness’, and contrasting Dorian’s death with this sense of community is powerful.<sup>16</sup> Of course, like Wilde, Corominas revels in the hedonism before seeming to pass judgement on it, and it must be noted that the Mephistophelean Wotton – never more diabolical than here – has the last laugh.



Fig. 6: The portrait and a representation of the ‘poisonous book’ from *Dorian Gray* by Corominas. © 2021 DM

### Decadence in horror comics

There are ways in which horror comics, and horror literature more generally, have a decadent streak, in that they feature themes of decay, amorality, madness, and cruelty. However, it is fairly easy to separate the two, as it is to separate crime comics from decadence, though there are decadent works like Jean Lorrain’s *Monsieur de Phocas* that are preoccupied by crime. There are auteurs whose work reflects both genres, such as the French filmmaker Jean Rollin, but in general the aim and even the mood of most horror stories is quite different from that of decadent works.<sup>17</sup>

In comics, the formula for horror tales emerged in the 1940s and was fully defined in the 1950s, when the immensely popular series of comics from EC Comics concocted it. Horror comics depended on Saki-style ‘gotcha’ or twist endings more than on the sustained and depressing mood

of Poe, who was both the father of American horror literature and, of course, an important inspiration for the French decadents. The EC stories ended

with the protagonist virtually always exacting a well-deserved measure of poetic justice against the antagonist, even if the protagonist had to somehow return as one of the walking dead to exact his revenge. This was Old Testament, an eye-for-an-eye style retribution.

noted Grant Geissman in a history of EC Comics.<sup>18</sup> However gruesome they were, horror stories in comics were generally morality plays – as is, for that matter, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This formula is still evident in comics such as *Shudder* and TV series such as *Tales from the Crypt* (1989-1996), based on EC stories, and *Creepshow* (2019-present).

Horror comics came back onto the American market in the 1960s, in magazine format so as to skirt the Comics Code Authority (as noted earlier) but following the EC formula. In the 1970s, a new publisher called Skywald introduced three horror comics magazines,<sup>19</sup> and editor Al Hewetson brought a distinctly different feel to the books: intelligent, deranged and fiercely unwholesome. Hewetson called his approach the ‘Horror-Mood’ and aided by a talented clutch of Spanish and Filipino artists he produced surprisingly literate stories of depravity and existential angst that broke from the horror comics story formula. As Richard Arndt put it:

What exactly the Horror-Mood was even Hewetson couldn’t really explain, even years later, but the end result of the advent of the Horror-Mood were B&W magazines that oozed mood, even more than story integrity. [...] Thus, the Skywald stories often resembled fever dreams that drifted above, below and around horror motifs rather than traditional horror stories.<sup>20</sup>

Hewetson was an avid Poe fan, and adapted several stories for his magazines, but beyond that Poe’s essential pessimism and morbidity seeped from the comics pages. As noted earlier, comics are generally focused on action more than characters’ state of mind, but the Skywald characters would spill forth their corrupted thoughts at great length, and often in the first person, addressed to the reader. Decay – or, to use the genre’s jargon, ‘rot’ – affected not only characters but the structure of the stories, which often shambled to an end without conclusion, in clear opposition to the snappy endings of traditional comics horror stories.

To further infect readers with the Horror-Mood, Hewetson even departed from a longstanding comics typographical tradition. Most sentences in comics ended with exclamation points, both to amplify the sense of excitement and because simple periods would often disappear due to the inexpensive printing methods used. Hewetson replaced these with ellipses and dashes – on some pages, all sentences in captions and word balloons ended with nothing else. If an exclamation point conveys closure and drama, an ellipsis conveys drift and uncertainty.

The story ‘Kill, Kill, Kill, and Kill, Again’ by Hewetson and Ferran Sostres demonstrates the move away from traditional horror tropes and into an unsettled domain.<sup>21</sup> After a page where a *commedia dell’arte* style devil exhorts his legions of normal-looking people to ‘go and kill – go – and maim and slaughter...’ we are introduced to Simon Ingels<sup>22</sup> with a full-page image and a long caption describing him as ‘a pawn, in the complete sense of the word – a very angry man – a very brutal man – determined to be brutal and bloody.’

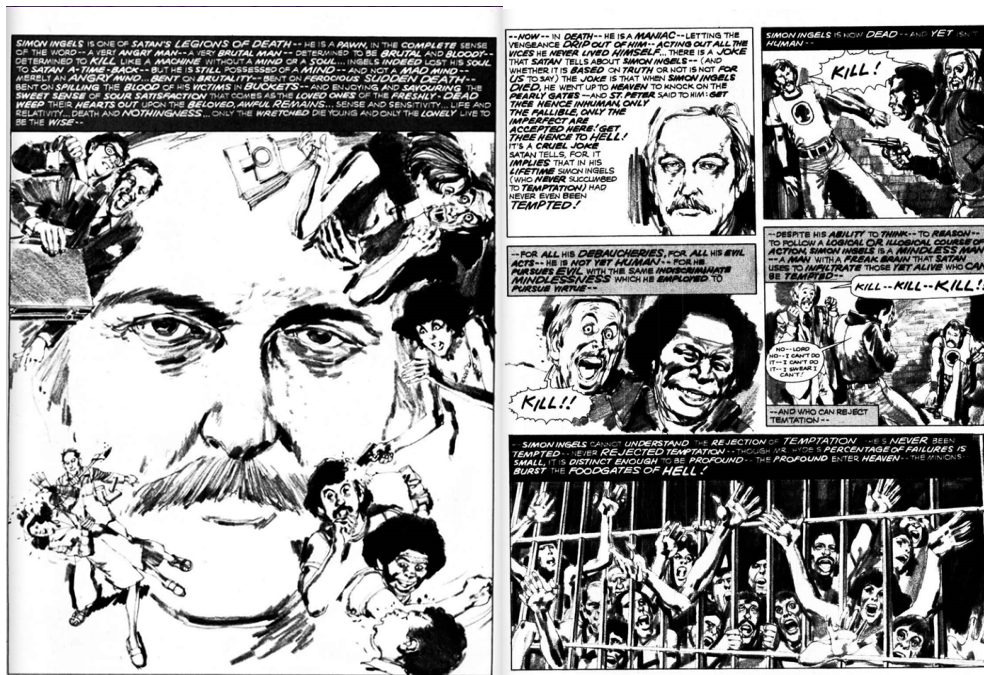


Fig. 6: Two pages from ‘Kill, Kill, Kill, and Kill, Again’, written by Alan Hewetson and illustrated by Ferran Sostres, from *Nightmare 22*. Copyright information unavailable.

The next three pages illustrate his spirit causing ordinary people to murder or commit other crimes. But when Ingels tries to possess an armed black man to kill, the man refuses the temptation.

The final panel shows an array of caged and angry people, with the caption:

Simon Ingels cannot understand the rejection of temptation – he’s never been tempted – never rejected temptation – though Mr. Hyde’s percentage of failures is small it is distinct enough to be profound – the profound enter heaven – the minions – burst the floodgates of hell!<sup>23</sup>

Despite the concession to closure and punctuation that ends this story, there is really no narrative closure at all, nor any narrative to close. We are given a sort of illustrated hypothesis as to how supernatural forces might be adding to the violence of the world (and particularly in a post-Vietnam, post-Manson America), and that’s all. Following the opening page, there are just five word-balloons for dialogue across six pages, further eroding the connection with comics storytelling, which is largely based on dialogue and the expectation, as in film, that we are experiencing the story in real time. This is not an EC-style morality play, it’s an existential essay that works to establish a grim mood and then says, “Th-th-th-that’s all, folks!”<sup>24</sup>

Decades after the magazines folded, Hewetson told an interviewer,

Sanity is perverse. Absolute sanity perverts absolutely. A good horror story *always* perverts sanity. Which is why a really good horror story *always* makes perfect sense. Whereas, most things in everyday life make absolutely no sense at all. Only in utter madness will you find pure truth and sanity.<sup>25</sup>

This statement clearly shows the influence of Poe. By mutating the narrative structure of a well-defined genre, Al Hewetson and the artists and writers for Skywald created arguably the first decadent American comics.

### **Decadence and symbolism in comics art**

The influence of the decadent tradition on individual artists and their œuvre is difficult to ascertain. Certainly there are artists, particularly in the Franco-Belgian tradition, whose work repeatedly returns to themes of physical corruption, spiritual alienation and morbidity that suggest an affiliation with decadence. An excellent example is the Belgian artist Frédéric Bézian, whose dark

stories and unique, semi-scribbled style weave together on stories such as his Adam Sarlech trilogy.<sup>26</sup> Certainly Sarlech – a troubled dandy figure with degenerative bloodline issues – has echoes of Des Esseintes, though the greater correspondence is with Roderick Usher, and with Poe rather than Huysmans. Here again, we see the comics tradition even in France aligning more naturally with the gothic horror tradition, which shares with decadence the tropes of illness, madness, and alienation.

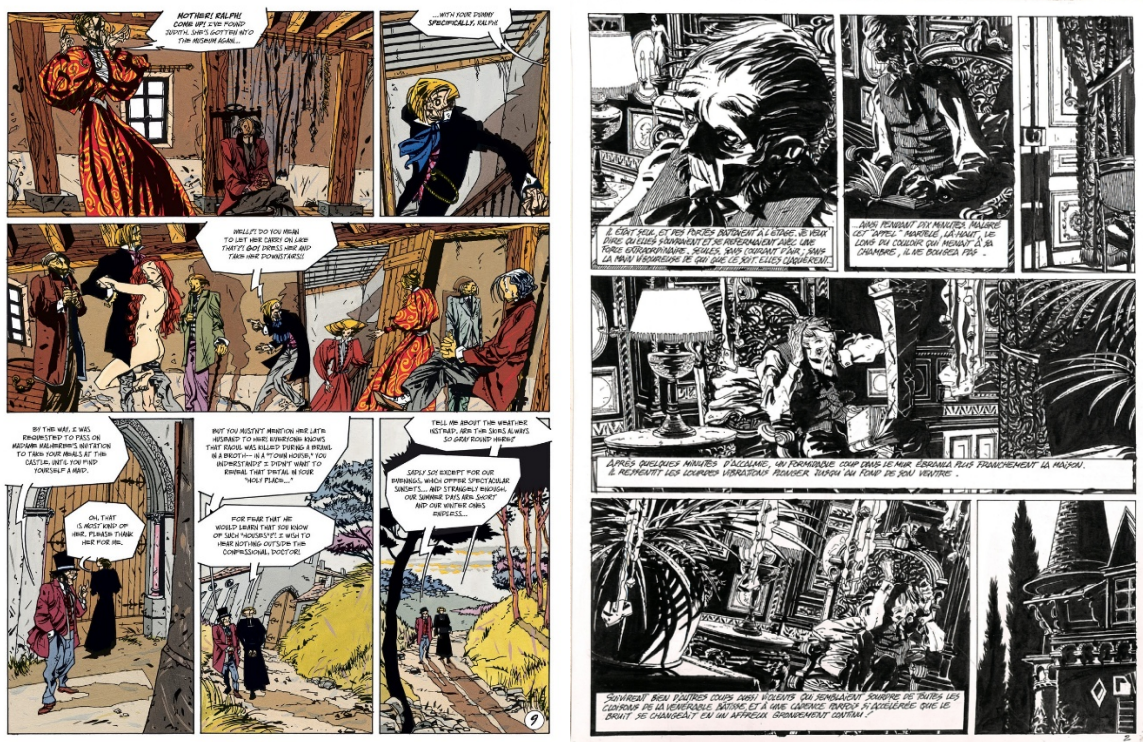


Fig. 7 Frédéric Bézian’s most decadent series, *Adam Sarlech* (©1989 Les Humanoïdes Associés), and a scene from his *La danse des morts* (© Point Image 1986)

One artist who self-identifies with the symbolist tradition is the American artist P. Craig Russell. Russell came to American mainstream comics in the 1970s, following in the wake of the hugely popular Barry Windsor-Smith, a British artist who brought Pre-Raphaelite touches to comics, beginning with Marvel’s adaptations of Robert E. Howard’s pulp hero Conan. After gaining cult status working on Marvel books such as the science fiction comic *Killraven*, Russell became known for his independent adaptations of opera, particularly Wagner’s Ring cycle, and the stories of Oscar Wilde.

In the introduction to his 2021 collection, *Symbolist Fantasies and Other Things*, Russell described the day in 1972 when he first discovered *Dreamers of Decadence: Symbolist Painters of the 1890s* by Philippe Jullian: ‘It was a revelation’, he wrote:

Four years of art history studies at the University of Cincinnati – without a single reference to this movement and its importance and influence – had not prepared me for the astonishing artists that it recalled to life. Artists who sought to visualize the unseen and invisible world of dreams, spirit, and emotion – a world revealed through suggestion rather than statement.<sup>27</sup>



Fig. 8: Symbolist-influenced art by P. Craig Russell. © 2021 P. Craig Russell

Russell’s artwork combines the flowing lines and decorative framing of Art Nouveau with elegant human forms and an emphasis on mythological figures, as befits his love of grand opera. While he hearkens to the symbolists, that tradition’s historical connection with the decadents is



largely absent in his work, if only because of his overwhelming focus on beauty. His work is ideally suited to magical and mystical scenarios, ranging from *The Magic Flute* to Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* to Marvel's *Dr. Strange*. While he has illustrated *Salomé*,<sup>28</sup> being both an opera and Wilde buff, the grace of his lines and his gift for composition emphasized the musicality of the text rather than the grotesqueness of its scenario and protagonist. Ultimately, Russell's work is too idealistic to be considered decadent.

### **D'Annunzio indomitable**

As this research was first presented at a conference co-organized by the Centro Universitario di Studi Vittoriani e Eboradiani (CUSVE) at the 'G. d'Annunzio' University of Chieti-Pescara, Italy, and took place at that university near d'Annunzio's birthplace of Pescara, it seems imperative to review the career in *fumetti*<sup>29</sup> of the war hero, poet, playwright, sex addict, aesthete, decadent and city-state ruler himself. While far too fond of technology and nation-building to align perfectly with the decadents, his lifelong devotion to aestheticism and his literary posing make him at least a decadent at heart.

Before comic artists took out their pens, d'Annunzio had already been the subject of hundreds of caricatures and *ex libris*. When he began to appear in comics, the focus would of course be on his wartime exploits, war being a popular comics genre. What his many appearances in *fumetti* reveal is the consolidation of his many personae into two primary characters: the poet-lover and the war hero.

As one would expect, d'Annunzio's real-life adventures in World War I and his bold takeover of the coastal city Fiume/Rijeka after World War I naturally dominate his appearances in *fumetti*. He is portrayed as a sort of Red Baron style hero in *Il folle volo* (Fabrizio Capigatti and Samuela Cerquetella, 2008), which focuses on his flight dropping wry propaganda pamphlets over Venice.<sup>30</sup> The more expansive *Fiume o morte* (Manilo Bonati, Carlo Sicuro, Yildirim Örer and Mauro Vecchi, 2018)<sup>31</sup> uses the talents of two writers and two artists to explore the Fiume saga, with

d'Annunzio represented as he undoubtedly would have wished – as a patriot, idealist, and martyr for the Italian state.

Other notable *fumetti*, told more or less from d'Annunzio's perspective, include a romanticized three-part biography *Gabriele d'Annunzio: La vita a fumetti*<sup>32</sup> (1992) and *Gabriele d'Annunzio: Tra amori e battaglie*<sup>33</sup> (2013). Both works were illustrated by Marco Sciame, and to some degree idealize their subject, not least in his physical appearance. For instance, one of the three covers of the first series shows d'Annunzio in the style of Boldini's famous portrait of dandy extraordinaire Robert de Montesquiou, a very flattering comparison for the man sometimes called a gargoyle. In the latter, d'Annunzio is represented in much the same way – tall, thin, with his trademark pointed moustache and goatee, although in the period covered by the *fumetto* he was short, stout, and completely hairless.



Fig. 9: Three covers by Marco Sciame for the *fumetti* version of d'Annunzio's life, the third one based on Boldini's portrait of Robert de Montesquiou. © 1992 Affari Srl

In a 2022 email conversation with this writer, Marco Sciame said,

The representation of d'Annunzio was actually debated. In the first series our poet was in his early Roman youth and therefore still handsome and with more hair, let's say. We complied with historical photos and we made some calculations. The choice on the comic strip released with the theatrical show [the 2013 *fumetto*] is quite different, and there were various disagreements there. Originally I had done a series of comic strips with a very old

and bald Gabriele, which was challenged by the publisher. I agreed to rejuvenate the Vate, but without taking responsibility for the recommended choice. I didn't support it but I still did the work and I satisfied the publishing house in Milan.<sup>34</sup>

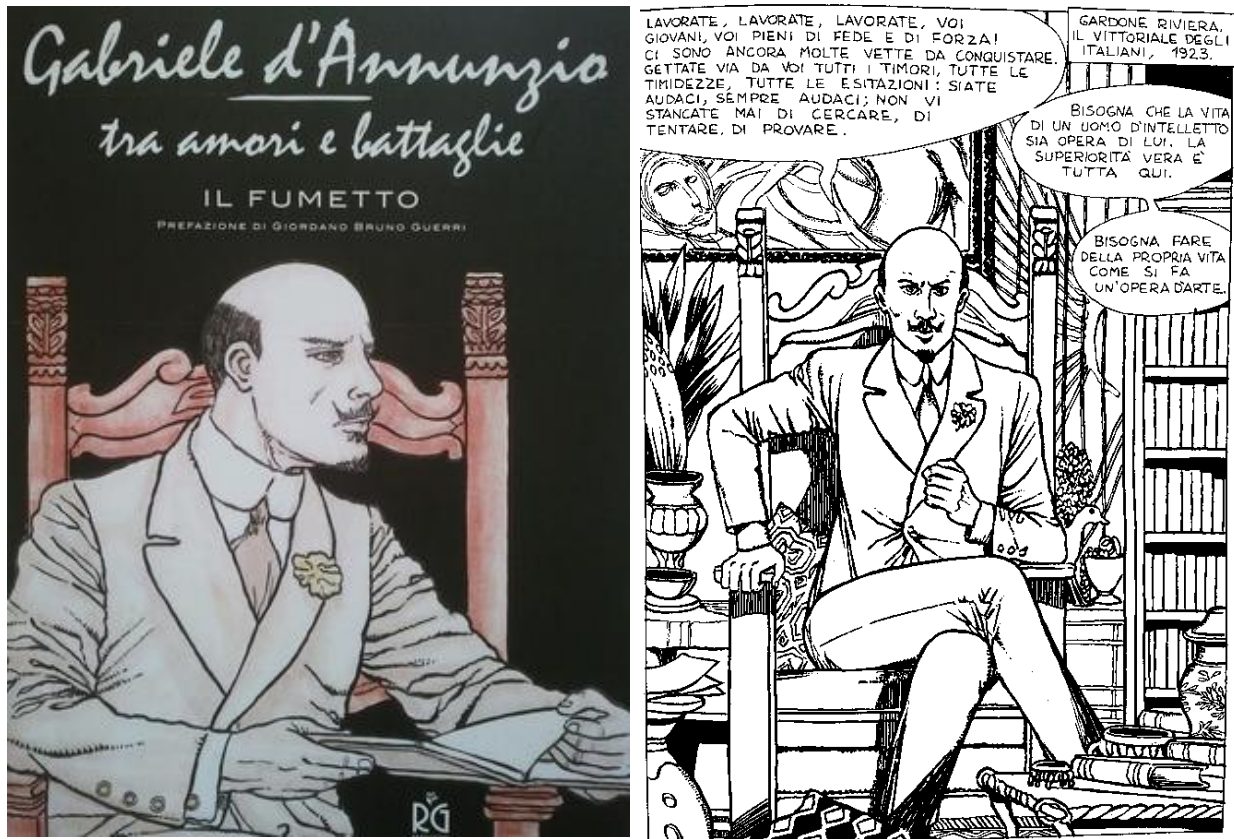


Fig. 10: (left) Marco Sciame's 'idealized' d'Annunzio; (right) an adaptation of a play. © 2013 RG Produzioni

This, then, is d'Annunzio the icon, the d'Annunzio Italians want to see and the image that connotes his literary career more than his military one. It is this d'Annunzio that appears in *fumetti* where he is a supporting character in someone else's narrative (an idea that surely would have appalled him). These stretch way back to his appearance in *Favola di Venezia* (Hugo Pratt, 1977), an adventure of Corto Maltese, one of the most critically and commercially successful Italian adventure series.<sup>35</sup> The story, set in 1921, includes a cameo from d'Annunzio, who announces himself as a poet. He takes a similar role as a literary adventurer in an offshoot of the long-running Italian adventure series *Martin Mystère*. In *Storie da altrove: L'isola che giaceva in fondo al mare* (Alfredo Castelli, Carlo Recagno, and Sergio Giardo, 2005), set in 1902, he helps the Altrove organization uncover a sinister plot.<sup>36</sup>

The most recent graphic novel featuring d'Annunzio was *La Casati: La Muse Égoïste* by Vanna Vinci, a biography of the Marchesa Casati, one of d'Annunzio's lovers and a woman whose theatrical flamboyance and idiosyncrasies rivalled his own. Here, d'Annunzio is portrayed as a caring, thoughtful partner.<sup>37</sup>



Fig. 11: (left) D'Annunzio arrives in Hugo Pratt's *Corto Maltese: Favola di Venezia*. © 1977 Cong S.A.; (right) a selection of d'Annunzian moments from Vanna Vinci's *La Casati*. © 2013 Vanna Vinci

A decidedly more complex characterization, one that breaks from d'Annunzio as icon, is given in the independent graphic novel *Black Paths*. Author David B. (David Beauchard) is an accomplished French cartoonist whose work, as here, often covers political themes. Beauchard portrays Fiume as a chaotic and violent state that attracts philosophers and criminals in equal measure. The story's main arc concerns a young couple, but d'Annunzio features heavily as the city's default ruler; while he is not lionized as in some Italian comics, he comes across as intelligent, if idiosyncratic and narcissistic.



Fig. 12: Two pages from David B's *Black Paths*, the first showing his compatriot Guido Keller.  
© 2008, 2010 Futuropolis

In an interview with comics writer Paul Gravett, Beauchard described d'Annunzio's intentions in taking over Fiume:

So it was [a] kind of poetic republic he wanted to create here. Lots of intellectuals came here from all over Europe to create something new after the horrors of the First World War. He wanted an idealistic republic of artists and he succeeded at the beginning, but after the war was going on and the Fascist part of the people helping him seized power, all that collapsed. [...] D'Annunzio tried to create something from all that and he succeeded for a moment but politics and reality took over. He was also a collector so everywhere he went, he takes his collection with him. He mixed up all kinds of things. He had this precious medieval statue of St Francis of Assisi and he put on it a belt with two guns that someone offered to him. It was his way to collect things, as an artist, also a surrealistic joke.<sup>38</sup>

In this brief statement, Beauchard reveals his interest in d'Annunzio as a fellow *creator* – someone who put his talent to work not only in art but in life, attempting to create a kind of artistic paradise while also curating his own collection. In his book, Beauchard fuses the seemingly irreconcilable aspects of d'Annunzio – poet, aesthete, warlord – into a flawed but most importantly *creative* force, a man who treated an entire city as an artistic project. There is a priceless scene in *Black Paths* where

d'Annunzio shows a Commissioner Crispi around a room stuffed with his statues and other curios. 'Oh!' Crispi utters. 'It's your famous collection of objets d'art.' D'Annunzio, fists on hips, replies with pride, 'Only part of it...'.<sup>39</sup>

The wealth of d'Annunzian comics and other graphics (there have been at least two books on caricatures of him, and at least two exhibitions of d'Annunzian *ex libris* art) demonstrates not only his enduring mystique but also the remarkable appeal of his image, which became as familiar in Italy as, say, Oscar Wilde's in Britain or Pushkin's in Russia. What sets his representations in comics apart from those Wilde or Pushkin, and indeed from the likes of Baudelaire and Rimbaud as well, is that his image is not fixed. While there are clear variations in, say, the comics biographies of Baudelaire, they are stylistic variations on a culturally accepted 'take' on who Baudelaire was and what his work means to culture. Attitudes toward d'Annunzio – an author of some renown but also a proto-fascist who inspired Mussolini – vary greatly. This makes him perhaps the most interesting of the decadent figures in terms of representation in comics, though it is also true that he has never reached the iconic status of Baudelaire or Wilde outside his native Italy.

Let us leave d'Annunzio with a last strange comics-related image. In his book *D'Annunzio Story*,<sup>40</sup> artist Francesco di Lauro offers a number of caricatures of d'Annunzio, one of which shows the poet held aloft by an Olympian athlete. The athlete's face will be familiar to American comics fans as that of Alfred E. Neuman, the mascot of the humour comic magazine *MAD* (the only publication of EC Comics to survive after the creation of the Comics Code Authority wiped out its horror and crime books). It seems ironic that d'Annunzio, who so loved mottoes such as 'Io ho quel che ho donato' that they appear all over his home at Il Vittoriale, should find himself twinned with Neuman, who had his own famous slogan: 'What, me worry?'

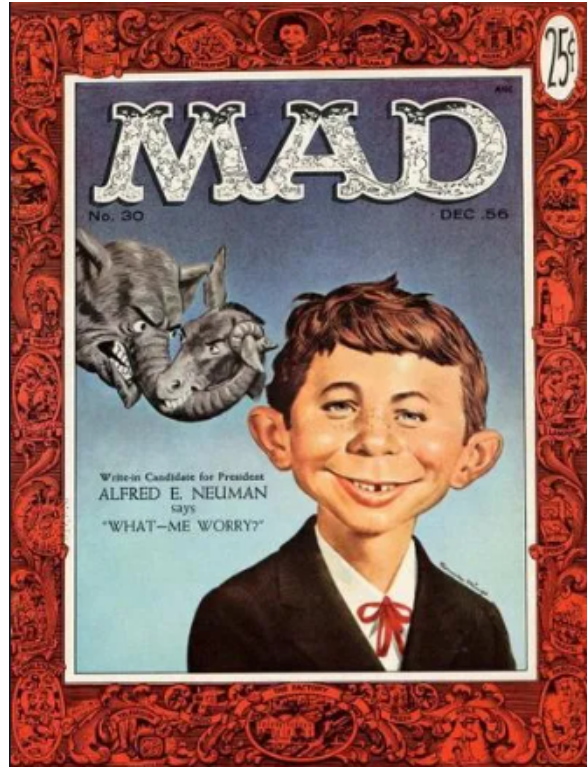


Fig. 13: (left) 'Lo Sponsor' by Francesco di Lauro, from *d'Annunzio Story*. © 2003 Edizioni Noubis; (right) Alfred E. Neuman and his catchphrase on the cover of *MAD*, 30 (1956). © 2023 DC Comics

### The dawning age of decadence in comics

Comics as an industry is just a century old, younger even than cinema. It may seem surprising then that so many of the works discussed in this article were published in the twenty-first century. This reflects the evolution of the industry and the artform in the West. In America and Britain, there is now much greater acceptance of comics aimed at adults, and a much greater market for comics generally. As recently as twenty-five years ago, it would have been difficult to find a large bookstore with a comics section, whereas now it would be hard to find one without. In Europe, which had an adult comics market much earlier, the proportion of non-genre comics has grown rapidly.

These changes have given artists and writers the freedom to explore topics that would have been too *risqué* or just too niche for publishers in the past, and to devote the time to create beautiful artwork that would have been compromised by the shoddy printing techniques of the past. We can appreciate works such as Yslaire's *Mademoiselle Baudelaire*, Nick Hayes' *The Drunken Sailor*, and Corominas's *Dorian Gray* not only for their union of decadent themes and art, but for the influence

they may have on other creators. These works may be the first rays of a new dawn for decadence in comics.

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Desmarais and David Weir, eds, *Decadence and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Other authors have noted the absorption of decadent motifs into the horror genre. In particular, Brian Stableford discusses the transition of the short-lived British decadent tradition ‘into the still evolving tradition of British weird fiction’, citing authors such as Arthur Machen, M. P. Shiel, and Vernon Lee, who straddled both genres. He also notes that this can be viewed as ‘reversion to an earlier phase’, given the influence of Poe on Baudelaire and other French decadents, before citing twentieth-century weird fiction authors whose work has decadent elements, H. P. Lovecraft, and Robert Chambers. Brian Stableford, *Glorious Perversity: The Decline and Fall of Literary Decadence* (Cabin John, MD: Wildside Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton, MA: Tundra, 1993), p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> I do not have the space to cover underground comix, which burst out of the hippie scene in the 1960s. Political, taboo-busting and often pornographic, they have some resonance with the decadents but are probably more in the spirit of the anarchists.

<sup>5</sup> Liberatore, *Les Fleurs du Mal de Baudelaire* (Grenoble: Glénat, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Various, *Poèmes de Baudelaire en BD* (Paris: Petit à Petit, 2001), reprinted with new covers in 2006 and 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Noël Tuot et Daniel Casanave, *Baudelaire* (Montreuil: Les Reveurs, 2006); Tarek and Aurélien Morinière *Baudelaire ou le Roman rêvé d'E. A. Poe* (Saint-Egrève: Mosquito, 2006); Andreas Lapovitera e Gian Marco de Francisco, *Baudelaire* (Teramo: Lisciani, 2021); Dominique et Tino Gelli, *Crénom, Baudelaire!* (Paris: Futuropolis, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991). The first publication in book form followed its serialization in the oversized anthology comic *RAW*, edited by Spiegelman.

<sup>9</sup> Christophe Dabitch et Benjamin Flao, *La ligne de fuite* (Paris: Futuropolis, 2007); Christian Straboni, *Le chapeau de Rimbaud* (Bordeaux: Akileos, 2010); Philippe Thirault et Thomas Verguet, *Arthur Rimbaud: l'explorateur maudit* (Boulogne-Billancourt: Glénat BD, 2022); Bernard Chiavelli, *Le dernier voyage d'Arthur Rimbaud* (Paris: Dargaud, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Jullian was himself a talented artist, as seen in his illustrations for Proust.

<sup>11</sup> Jahyra, *Princesses d'ivoire et d'ivresse* (Paris: Népaonthès, 2018), *Princesses d'ambre et d'Italie* (Paris: Népaonthès, 2019), and *Princesses de nacre et de caresse* (Paris: Népaonthès, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Huysmans does appear as one of several dandies, including Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, and Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, illustrated in the frontispiece of Stanislas Gros' 2020 BD *Le dandy illustré*.

<sup>13</sup> See Darcy Sullivan, ‘Picture Stories: Dorian Gray in the Comics’, *The Wildean*, 48 (2016), pp. 28-48. There is also a recorded Zoom presentation by myself, ‘Dorian Gray in Comics’, hosted by the British Association of Decadence Studies and the Oscar Wilde Society, which can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCTV-KSjnY4&t=112s> [accessed 5 November 2023].

<sup>14</sup> *Thriller Comics Library 148: The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Leonard Matthews (London: Amalgamated Press, 1956). The writer and artist are uncredited, which was standard practice in comic books until the 1960s, when Marvel Comics began providing credits.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Hewetson and Zesar Lopez, ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray’, in *Scream 5* (New York: Skywald, 1974), pp. 9-18.

<sup>16</sup> Corominas, *Dorian Gray* (Paris: Daniel Maghen, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> See note 1.

<sup>18</sup> Grant Geissman, *The History of EC Comics* (Köln: Taschen, 2020), p. 151.

<sup>19</sup> *Nightmare*, *Psycho* and *Scream*.

<sup>20</sup> Richard J. Arndt, *Horror Comics in Black and White* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Company, 2013), p. 163.

<sup>21</sup> Alan Hewetson and Ferran Sostres, ‘Kill, Kill, Kill, and Kill Again’, in *Nightmare 22* (New York: Skywald, 1974) pp. 7-13, rpt. in Alan Hewetson, *The Complete Illustrated History of the Skywald Horror-Mood* (Manchester: Headpress, 2004), pp. 142-48.

<sup>22</sup> The name is a reference to ‘Ghastly’ Graham Ingels, who drew for EC Comics.

<sup>23</sup> *Nightmare 22*.

<sup>24</sup> The reference is to the end of Warner Brother cartoons.

<sup>25</sup> Interview by David Kerekes and Stephen Sennitt, qtd. in Hewetson, p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> *Adam Sarlech* (Paris: Les Humanoïdes Associés, 1989), *La chambre nuptiale* (Paris: Les Humanoïdes Associés, 1991), and *Testament sous la neige* (Paris: Les Humanoïdes Associés, 1993). All three volumes were collected into an English translation as *Adam Sarlech: A Trilogy* (Los Angeles: Humanoids, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> P. Craig Russell, *Symbolist Fantasies and Other Things* (Hudson, OH: Wayne Alan Harold Productions, 2021), p. 5.



- <sup>28</sup> P. Craig Russell, *Salomé* (Staten Island, NY: Eclipse Comics, 1986).
- <sup>29</sup> *Fumetti* are so-called for the word balloons that resemble little puffs of smoke.
- <sup>30</sup> Fabrizio Capigatti e Samuela Cerquetella, *Il folle volo* (Jesolo: Edizioni del Vento, 2008).
- <sup>31</sup> Manilo Bonati, Carlo Sicuro, Yildirim Örer e Mauro Vecchi, *Fiume o morte* (Roma: Ferrogallico, 2018).
- <sup>32</sup> Marco Sciamè e Paolo Cerasoli, *Gabriele d'Annunzio: La vita a fumetti* (Pescara: Marketing Research, 1992), published as supplements to *Pescara Affari*.
- <sup>33</sup> Edoardo Sylos Labini, Francesco Sala e Marco Sciamè, *Gabriele d'Annunzio: Tra amori e battaglie* (Milano: RG Produzioni, 2013). The *fumetto* is an adaptation of a play by the same name by Labini and Sala.
- <sup>34</sup> It is worth noting that, in the play on which the *fumetto* was based, co-author and actor Edoardo Sylos Labini looked just like this more glamorous version. By contrast, the 2020 film *Il cattivo poeta* featured Sergio Castellitto in a much more accurate representation of the older d'Annunzio.
- <sup>35</sup> Hugo Pratt, *Favola di Venezia*, published in *L'Europeo* 21/22-51 (1977).
- <sup>36</sup> Alfredo Castelli, Carlo Recagno e Sergio Giardo, *Storie da altrove: L'isola che giaceva in fondo al mare* (Milano: Sergio Bonelli Editore, 2005).
- <sup>37</sup> Vanna Vinci, *La Casati: La muse égoïste* (Paris: Dargaud, 2013). Vinci also included an image of d'Annunzio in her book *Parle-moi d'amour: Vite esemplari di grandi libertine* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2020), along with none other than Jean Lorrain.
- <sup>38</sup> Paul Gravett, 'David B.: The Armour of the Night', *Paul Gravett: Comics, Graphic Novels, Manga*, [http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/david\\_b](http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/david_b) [accessed 5 November 2023].
- <sup>39</sup> David B., *Black Paths*, transl. by Nora Mahoney (London: SelfMadeHero, 2011), p. 31, originally published as *Par les chemins noirs* (Paris: Futuropolis, 2008).
- <sup>40</sup> Francesco di Lauro, *D'Annunzio Story* (Chieti: Noubis, 2003).