

GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO

Poet of

BEAUTY and DECADENCE

By

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GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO is a man of medium size, outwardly unimpressive, even cold and indifferent, all the more so when in cacophonous tenor he gives vent to a deliberate flow of rhetoric. He is totally bald, with heavy bulging lines of dissoluteness beneath his fishy eyes, one of which was injured in the war. Yet there is in his frigid, non-committal countenance a contour of resoluteness, asserting itself near the mouth, and in his smooth-shaven face furrows of suffering mingle with furrows of incontinence, flashes of virility mingle with suggestions of temperament. The mellowing sculpture of the years, cancelling some of the feebler facial lines, has now left in his expression the imprint of indefatigable energy, of deep-seated intelligence, and a more rigid impression of meditation, harmoniously in keeping with his autumnal season. Such is the man as he appeared in Venice in September, 1918, when, in the uniform of a colonel and not flaunting one of his many medals, he received from the army the gift of an airplane. The sight of this man leaves one utterly disappointed; his work makes men at once idolize or hate him. Somewhere between these two feelings, both of which point to an extraordinary personality, lies the truth. Disliking him as a man and admiring him as a patriot, detesting him as a novelist and praising him as an artist, let us try, briefly and without prejudice, to sketch him as a poet, in his main quality and in his main defect, in his beauty and his decadence.

D'Annunzio was born in the Abruzzi, very near the birthplace of Ovid, in 1863. Since he is fifty-nine years old, may we not reasonably consider that, having left behind him the more impassioned lyricism of juvenile exuberance, though still in the prime of his Septembrual season, he has now revealed the real significance of his life-message? Not that he is no longer a poet. Only minor poets, like minor streams, grow dry in summer. Real poets, though necessarily shifting vision with the shifting perspective of the years, remain poets to their last breath. D'Annunzio always was and still is primarily a poet. The principal element of interest in his novels is his poetry, the charm of his dramas is his poetry, the unsavory prose of his private life is redeemed by the epic poetry of his warlike deeds, and even his recent book, *Notturmo*, though in prose, is a gorgeous symphony of poetry. Let us observe for a few minutes the two chief attributes of D'Annunzio's poetry and muse with enthusiasm and tolerance on their significance, in order to form a more just opinion of the poet himself, and also to attain a richer understanding of Italy and of our times. For the poet, in singing, interprets; his parables of yesterday may be prophecies for today; his unique sensitiveness, attuned to influences which most of us recognize but are unable to express or even to detect, may crystallize in words the character of a time and the attitude of a nation. Hence his mission and his responsibility.

D'Annunzio was still in school, a mere boy of sixteen, when he published his first poem, which, with characteristic audacity, he addressed to the King of Italy. In the same year, 1879, he published his first book of verse, which won him immediate recognition. This extreme precocity, obviously a native gift, affirmed also a distinct literary personality, and made it possible for him, after an apprenticeship remarkably brief, to create poems of a craftsmanship almost perfect. Even when his very youth precluded the creation of master-

pieces of thought, his expression was masterly, and his voicing into verse of animal sensations uncannily beautiful. This beauty of form and this sensitiveness, both typical attributes of the poet, he developed, as we shall see, even to excess, so that they are today the outstanding qualities of his work, be it a novel of sophisticated modern society or a tale of his native hills; be it an autobiographical story of libidinous meanderings or a turreted drama of the Middle Ages. For art is a personal thing, and, like a man's facial characteristics, asserts itself early and remains, throughout time and circumstance, essentially individual.

During these early years D'Annunzio studied tirelessly and imitated unhesitatingly. And can we blame any ambitious youth, exploring the wonderland of literature, and especially of Italian literature, with all its wealth of varied perfection, for spontaneously coveting, in fervent emulation and righteous desire, the craftsmanship of his masters? He imitated the classics, particularly Horace; he imitated Italian poets from Dante and the Singers of the Sweet New Style to the joyful strains of Lorenzo's Renaissance lyrics and Politian's stanzas; and, among his Italian contemporaries, Carducci. Voraciously from all sides he sought to learn, and was able so skilfully to absorb from others that he gave forth poems imprinted with his own manner—a manner that definitely “dannunzianized” form and content into a new work of art. The form was as sculpturally chiseled as that of Cellini, bold and musically crystalline in deft manipulation of words, and ever lavishly glistening in imagery; the content was steeped in the analysis of physical sensations, sung even down to their lurid details, indeed with insistent emphasis on the foul.

Let us read three of his short early poems. In the first we have an almost perfect lyric. The English translation is given precedence for the benefit of those who do not readily understand Italian. The version is as good as can

be expected in the well-nigh impossible art of poetic translation.

O sickle of moonlight declining
That shinest o'er waters deserted,
O sickle of silver, what harvest of visions
Is waving down here, thy mild lustre beneath!

Ephemeral breathing of foliage,
Of flowers, of waves from the forest,
Goes forth to the ocean; no cry and no singing,
No sound through the infinite silences goes.

Oppressed with its loves and its pleasures,
The life of the world lies in slumber;
O sickle declining, what harvest of visions
Is waving down here, thy mild lustre beneath!¹

Now listen to D'Annunzio's Italian, and even should you not understand it, the music of it, the rhythm, the exquisite alternation of vowel sounds cannot fail to reach and charm you.

O falce di luna calante
che brilli su l'acque deserte,
o falce d'argento, qual mèsse di sogni
ondeggia a'l tuo mite chiarore qua giù!

Aneliti brevi di foglie
di fiori di flutti da 'l bosco
esalano a'l mare: non canto non grido
non suono pe'l vasto silenzio va.

Oppresso d'amor, di piacere,
il popol de' vivi s' addorme ...
O falce calante, qual mèsse di sogni
ondeggia a'l tuo mite chiarore qua giù!²

¹ G. A. Greene, *Italian Lyrists of Today*, p. 8. London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane; New York: Macmillan and Company, 1893.

² *Canto Novo*, ii, 10.

Merely a light, sensuous lyric of nature, as you see, without message, without decadence, but of exquisite beauty.

Here, on the other hand, is one of D'Annunzio's imitations. This time his model was no less a poet than Victor Hugo, whose *Saison des Semailles*, *Le Soir*, D'Annunzio surpassed, attaining indeed a sweep of grandeur and pastoral nobility quasi-Virgilian, and one that our translation is barely able to suggest.

THE SOWERS¹

The sturdy peasants plod across the field
Leading the oxen, slow and placid-faced;
Behind them smokes the furrow, iron-traced,
And open for the coming season's yield.
Then with a flinging gesture of the hand
The sower casts the grain; the agéd seem
To lift to heaven all their prayers, and dream
Of copious harvests—if the Lord command.
Almost a pious human gratitude
Today honors the Earth. In the faint light
Of dusk the temples of the hills, snow-white,
Arise at vespers, while men lift a crude
Plain chant on high, and there is in their mien
A sacerdotal majesty serene.

If this poem should be compared with Victor Hugo's, one would surely hesitate to cry plagiarism, noting how adroitly D'Annunzio has succeeded in making the subject his own and creating a splendid poem. Thus unscrupulously acts at times the potency of a real poet.

Many of D'Annunzio's lyrics, sonorously enchanting, could be cited, and many excerpts from his novels, particularly beautiful in the author's numerous digressions from the unsavory vicissitudes of his victims; and, finally, many passages from his plays, in which there are pages and pages of

¹ *Poet Lore*, XXXIII (Spring Number, 1922), p. 137.

exquisite verbal rhapsodies, to prove again and again the unquestionable craftsmanship, the magic of this poet. Let us take at least one more poem, neither as beautiful as the first, nor imitated as the second, but in one way even more typically D'Annunziesque. Here, in describing a perfectly natural poetic mood, the author gratuitously thrusts into his imagery the element of the foul.

There murmur swarming through my drowsy head
In this vast furnace of a summer day
Relentless verses clamoring to be said,
As beetles round a putrid carcass play.

I search with open mouth and burning breath
A little coolness on the shadowed sward,
Beyond, the Adriatic, still as death,
Shows dreadful dazzlings like an unsheathed sword.

Far in the cloudless sky, malignly fair
And motionless, the sea gulls disappear
Without a cry in far-off whitish throngs;

And now and then, through odors of salt air,
Like voices of the ship-wrecked, dim with fear,
Tremble the weary wings of dying songs.

Even through a translation one may note the poet's ability to select the sensuous detail, the pictorial impression, to compress them into a few telling phrases flowing with unerring rhythm and music.

Two words, however, surprise us: *putrid* and *carcass*. They are two of D'Annunzio's favorite vehicles of imagery! Is it absurdly Victorian (according to certain contemporary poetasters the most opprobrious of terms!) to state that to our fastidious sensibilities those words are intrinsically repellent, that they mar the effect of the poem, indeed actually defeat poetic purpose? Let us note that *putrid* signifies decayed and that decadence of course signifies decay, so that we may fairly say here that D'Annunzio's choice of imagery is decadent, the rest of his verbal craftsmanship remaining a thing of beauty.

It would take too long to follow D'Annunzio's emphasis on the foul throughout his works, in fact our findings might fill a large volume. Obviously, too, this peculiarity was one of the current symptoms of that naturalism that created and deformed so much of our late nineteenth-century literature, and whose god-father was Zola. What may be legitimate material for the novel, however, may, and at times must, be excluded from the more exalted realm of poetry. D'Annunzio went to still greater excesses in the verbal manipulation of filth in his novels, and somewhat also in his plays, all of which are, in spite of this blemish, brimming with poetry. For the sake of curiosity let us mention at least one of his plays or dramatic sketches, *The Dream of a Spring Morning*, for instance. Beneath so charming a title, suggestive at once of some delightfully pastoral idyl, we find the following scene: A young woman whose lover has been slain in her arms lies all night, bathed in his blood and clinging to the body of her beloved until, obsessed by blood, she goes mad. Here, too, the poetic is based on the horrible, on the foul. Though one would not for the world insult that unfortunate defunct lover by calling his frame a carcass, it is undoubtedly a corpse, and one, moreover, drenched in blood, the picture being to all of us naturally repellent and therefore unpoetic, more fit for the morgue than for poetry.

Perhaps the most famous, and deservedly so, of D'Annunzio's dramas is his *Francesca da Rimini*. The story is taken, of course, from Dante's immortally perfect episode in the fifth canto of the *Inferno*. We do not complain if, in broadening the story from a brief, narrated episode to a five-act play, D'Annunzio filled it with details and actions which the inimitably compact original could not include, and we gladly admire the texture of the drama, the pictorial atmosphere of the Middle Ages, and particularly the poetic aroma that fills it from beginning to end. But we note, with a mixture of surprise and dismay, that while in Dante the one

reaction from the tragedy is pity, infinite pity for the eternally condemned victims of passion, a pity so potent that, at the end of Francesca's words the poet, utterly overwhelmed, swoons and "falls as a dead body falls," in D'Annunzio the tragedy of love and pity has become, according to his very words, *dramma di sangue e di lussuria*, a tragedy of blood and lust. Is not this a deterioration of poetic aim and of emotional values? And as deterioration precisely signifies decadence, is not D'Annunzio's response to Dante's inspiration that of a decadent? And not a trace of sympathy or pity do we find in D'Annunzio. This statement is true not only of his *Francesca* but of all his works. The trend of all his fiction is tragic; in all the forms it has taken, tragedy is the recurrent burden. It is the tragedy of fanaticism, of sickness, of insanity, of sensual pleasure driven to excess and culminating in crime, of pathological personages demolishing their victims and themselves to reach some mad goal of personal desire; it is the tragedy of adultery, of rape, of incest, of slaughter—and throughout this kaleidoscope of horrors, set forth with unparalleled realism of detail and in unparalleled poetry of diction, never does the author manifest the slightest sympathy, the slightest pity for his tortured characters. On the contrary, his insistent choice of such subjects and the details he gloatingly describes, point to his deriving from these sufferings a cruel relish, a quasi-sensual pleasure. Nor is this illogical. Psychologists tell us, in fact, that extreme sensuality and cruelty are often closely related. The innermost reasons for this relation must be left obviously to scientific specialists. At first sight, however, sensuality and cruelty both appear to us distinctly as attributes of animality, hence of primitive men, that is to say, of human beings upon whom the moral restraints of civilization have not yet exerted a curbing influence. To a certain extent, of course, the brutal is still manifest in all of us, as episodes of our daily life abundantly attest. Peoples less

permanently influenced by the molding forces of refinement would then of course still more abundantly manifest their primitive impulses. The people of the Abruzzi, for example, from whose stock sprang D'Annunzio, living as they have lived for centuries in the mountain retreats of the south-eastern Appennines, aloof from the pressure of refining civilization, hardly know any restraints whatsoever, if we are to judge them from their literature, and especially from the extraordinarily realistic pictures made of them by their poet-interpreter, Gabriele D'Annunzio, in his collection of brutal stories, *Le Novelle della Pescara*. Would that time permitted us to examine these stories, these poetically treated fragments of lurid physicality. Ten years ago, with Professor Wilkins, we edited one of these stories, the very tamest of all, in fact the only one printable in a college textbook, and every year students are horrified at its brutality. These attributes, then, of brutality, unrestraint, excessive sensuality and fondness for the lurid, are part of D'Annunzio's heritage, not only because of his literary inheritance from the schools of naturalism and ultra-naturalism which were flourishing at the moment of his début in the literary world (and still are), but because of his geographical inheritance as well. The land of his birth is an emphatically southern land, one, that is to say, in which the very sincerity and directness of solar heat make human beings warm-tempered and expansive; and a primitive land. Perhaps these observations will go far toward explaining the trend, atavistic and literary, of D'Annunzio's decadence.

Now to some these symptoms, which may not incorrectly be called decadent, may be pleasing and admirable. They cannot, however, be lovable. Even the most rabid among Italian partisans of D'Annunzio's manner, lifting it with exaggerated loyalty to supreme heights, ought to admit that, however they may admire it, they cannot love it. This fact leads us to venture a generalization upon literature.

Those of us who spend our lives among literary masterpieces, who read them, re-read them, study them, draw from them day by day our spiritual and aesthetic sustenance, find that there are writers we love: Horace, Dante, Molière, Dickens, Fogazzaro; that there are others whom we admire rather than actually love: Petrarch, Corneille, Flaubert, Fitzgerald; that there are others again whom we sometimes despise and sometimes love: Rousseau, Byron, Verlaine, Edgar Allan Poe. In which of these arbitrary categories would we put D'Annunzio, novelist, dramatist, poet? Perhaps most aptly in yet a fourth division, that of authors whom we must both admire and despise, but whom we can never love. Now what is it in D'Annunzio, in this man who has made it his life-vocation to present, clad in exquisite artistry, such a varied collection of sensations and violent emotions, that fails to move us? The question may be answered in a very few simple words. He arouses no love because he gives no love. Never was this author known to laugh or weep with his characters or his readers. The laughter which is the envoy of humor, of that humor that laughs not *at* but *with* the frailties of mankind, with the contrasts dramatic or ludicrous arising from contacts and temperaments and incidents—this laughter D'Annunzio never knew. Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, told splendid stories of questionable morality, but there was a merry twinkle in their eyes. Their silent laughter makes even gross pornography excusable, because not morbid. D'Annunzio's tragic eroticism offends and nauseates us, and makes us wish at once to adopt the gruffly wise manner of our far western cowboys, and peremptorily shout to him: "When you say that, damn you, smile!"

Nor did he ever know tears, the tears that are envoys of compassion, of sympathy for our fellow-beings, for the sufferings so often futile, undeserved, which prey upon human relations, crushing individuals and their lofty cravings. Such tears D'Annunzio never was able to shed. Manzoni, the

greatest of Italian novelists, and his disciple, Fogazzaro, fashioned scenes of tremendous power, scenes of supreme anguish, but even though they tried to maintain a spirit of objectivity, one can feel between the lines a deep, throbbing, compassionate understanding. D'Annunzio has genius, ample learning, extraordinary sensitiveness, artistic craftsmanship—what does he lack? He lacks decorum, to be sure; yes, and more than decorum, what he most lacks is a spiritual norm, in short, a conscience.

Another proof of this spiritual vacuum in D'Annunzio's poetic make-up might be adduced by showing that nowhere in his fiction and poetry does he espouse a great humane cause. "The only great joys and sorrows," says Carrère,¹ "are public joys and sorrows." In fact, looked at in this light, the numberless libidinous bickerings of fatuous paramours with which D'Annunzio fills thousands of pages seem utterly petty. The intimate aberrations of personages exceptional and subnormal do *not* contain that universality of appeal and significance that one always finds and should find in permanently great works of art. The poet must be the sponsor of humanity. This brings us back to what was merely mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, namely, the mission and the responsibility of the poet.

In one of D'Annunzio's dramas, *La Gioconda*, a quiet little story of adultery, suicide, dereliction, and bloody mutilation, he attempts to prove that all merely conjugal and paternal bonds should by all means be sacrificed by an artist in the supreme pursuit of his art. If this thesis were true, then art would indeed assume a superiority which would in turn place upon it new and heavy responsibilities. And poetry, with its appeal more definite and all-pervasive, would have to bear an even greater share of such responsibility

¹ Jean Carrère, *Degeneration in the Great French Masters* (*Les Mauvais Maîtres*), p. 135. Translated by Joseph McCabe. New York: Brentano, 1922.

than her less universally articulate sister-arts. Little did D'Annunzio suspect when, in 1898, he penned his dramatic thesis, that it might go forth, and as a boomerang return to point at its father's delinquency, and call him verily a bad master. Let us here adopt the very words of that eloquent diatribe against *Bad Masters* by Jean Carrère:

By a bad master, a source of degeneration, I mean one who, gifted with the power to seduce men by the charm and wealth of his imagination, by his skill in weaving harmonious and captivating phrases, instead of urging himself toward heroism and drawing toward it the souls which he influences, surrenders himself in his writings to all the weaknesses of passion and all the seductions of a life of ease, uses his talent for the exaltation of mean pleasures and gross desires, and on that account becomes, for those whom he has enchanted, a teacher of weakness, egoism, cowardice, and cupidity.¹

Severe as such an indictment seems, it applies to D'Annunzio in all but two details. As a matter of fact, nobody can justly accuse him of having quite led a life of ease. On the contrary, his activity has been prodigious. That artistic creation happened to be, in his life-quest of pleasure, one of his greatest pleasures, cannot in justice be held against him. His very latest book, it is said, was composed, proof-read and published in one month—a phenomenon which indeed shows in this old *roué*, a youthful buoyancy of inspiration and a power of toil which are enviable. Nor can we accuse him of not having exalted heroism. His best poetic work is in four large volumes entitled, *Praises of Sky, Sea, Earth and Heroes*. His patriotic poems, plays, essays, and speeches are numerous, eloquent, unquestionably sincere, have had an incalculable influence on his countrymen, and one that goes far to offset the pernicious influence of his lascivious deviations. Let us remember that when, early in 1915, Italy, though convinced of the righteousness of the Allied cause,

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. xvii.

stood hesitantly neutral, it was the fire of D'Annunzio's speeches that gave the final impetus to the Italian people and government. To few poets throughout the ages was it ever given so influentially to wield their art. Furthermore, whatever we may think of his philosophy of sensuality, let us gladly admit that D'Annunzio may be accused of anything, but not of cowardice. The epic of his record during the war must, we repeat, redeem, in the sight of all, his previous lyric and moral shortcomings, and prove, besides, that they had not fatally undermined his virile stamina. His patriotic poems, his war speeches, and his war record make him a national figure, a national poet.

Then too he is national in another sense. His extreme eagerness for beauty of form and his extreme skill in achieving it are, we should say, typically Italian. If it is true, and we believe it to be as true as any generalization can be, that perhaps the most recurrent element in English literature is a certain didacticism, and in French literature, clarity, then in Italian literature the recurrent element is a perpetual striving for beauty of form. Italian churches are dazzling with sunny, multi-colored marbles on the outside, they have beautiful domes and campanili, and are ultra-decorative in their façades, though the inside may be, and frequently is, bare. Italian churches lack the sombre spirituality of English cathedrals, the perfect structural significance of Notre Dame, but have, on the other hand, a joyous humanity of color and light. Italian poetry, having as its felicitous vehicle the most musical of languages, finds an infinite and quite understandable zest in manipulating it, sometimes with a careless disregard for spiritual content. D'Annunzio, by emphasizing in all his work this national characteristic, appears again as characteristically national, as a national interpreter and poet.

A moment ago D'Annunzio's philosophy was mentioned. Of what does it consist? It consists of a deliberate and

unrestrained search for pleasure, which he considers the very best means to wisdom, and one that will reveal endless manifestations of beauty. This beauty he is impelled to record in artistic form. The symptoms, then, of what we call decadence, which we find so abundantly in his work, are not the mere manifestations of his senses, they are also the expressions of his creed. A very facile creed, by the way, which, unlike creeds in general, presupposes no discipline whatsoever, and consists in slipping down the line of least resistance with a maximum of speed and pleasure, recording the while one's sensations in musical verbosity. To be sure his time was one of materialistic reaction. After the heroic years of the Risorgimento, Italy, like all countries which have gone through a heroic crisis, settled down to enjoy a crass, bourgeois materialism. The times were, then, so far as moral restraint is concerned, all against him. But making allowances for all circumstantial decadence, there yet remains in his philosophy a fundamental fallacy. Leaving alone the application of such a philosophy to his personal life, which does not concern us in the least, and examining it only in so far as it affects the poet, we find that D'Annunzio has, in our judgment, misconceived the function of poetry. Just as literature is not fashioned merely for entertainment, poetry also is not merely a musicalizing of any and all the haphazard sensations of an egomaniac. Though, as Mr. Neilson says,¹ the artist's appeal is sensuous rather than intellectual; and though the artist must be given his freedom, with the essential limitation that he be true to art, namely, to real beauty, poetry has the higher, nobler function of re-creating ecstasy, exaltation, inspiration. This is the ideal mission and the responsibility of the poet. The air pilot who takes us in his airplane will give us more ecstasy of sensation than a

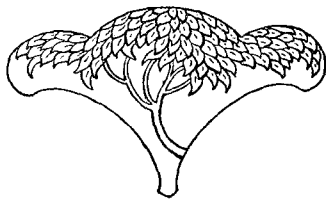
¹ W. A. Neilson, *Essentials of Poetry*, p. 39. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912.

chauffeur, but he has also a more perilous responsibility, for a fall from the heights is sure to change a beautiful experience into a repulsive catastrophe.

Poetry should certainly be ready to plant its feet solidly on the soil of fact. Not for that, though, need it clip its wings forever and grovel in the mud. It is perhaps not without symbolic significance that the most lyric of animals is the winged bird: the worm does not sing!

Was it not Balzac, himself a realist, who said that the mission of the artist was also to raise the beautiful to the level of the ideal? Only patriotically has D'Annunzio shown idealism.

Because, therefore, D'Annunzio has never achieved, and never even admitted in any of his varied compositions, the supreme function of poetry, we must continue to dislike him as a man while admiring him as a patriot, to detest him as a novelist while praising him as an artist, and, finally, in his poetry, while hurling ceaseless maledictions at this perpetual panegyrist of blood and lust, irresistibly bless him as the master-wielder of beauty in modern Italian literature.



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