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Härmänmaa, Marja

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The Seduction of Thanatos: Gabriele D'Annunzio and the Decadent Death

Marja Härmänmaa

1. Introduction: Decadent Necrophilia?

D'Annunzio was obsessed with death. In his last autobiographical work, *Libro segreto* (The Secret Book, 1935), he calls his peculiar memories "studies of death," as death in one way or another often appeared in his childhood.[1] Death as a personal muse is constantly present in his other nonfictional works through his recollection of deceased friends, and it is also an important element in his literary production. Many of his plays are constructed around death,[2] and death is an important element in some of his poems.[3] In a similar vein, murder, death and suicide are central topics in several short stories and novels.[4]

The importance of death during the *fin de siècle*, particularly in French *décadisme* and Italian *decadentismo*, was closely related to the idea of cultural and societal decay. In addition to this, the emergence of mass society that Europe witnessed during the second half of the nineteenth century was accompanied by fears of the end of civilization. In France the humiliating defeat at the hands of the Prussians in 1870 further fueled the idea of the decay of the Latin race. According to Théophile Gautier, in a decadent period death and corruption would naturally find their way into the aesthetic domain, too.[5]

Death was such a significant topic that Elio Gioanola has called it "the emotional epicenter, the inspiring matrix, and the constitutive foundation" of the culture of Italian *decadentismo*.[6] Several ideas related to death that came to the fore during the *fin de siècle* had a

considerable afterlife and were further developed, for instance, by Sigmund Freud, and even found their way into Italian Fascism. Thus, the aim of this essay is to shed light on how Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938), the most monumental figure of the *decadentismo*,[7] represents death, and what death actually represents to him.[8]

2. Giorgio's Case

In addition to being a symptom and consequence of the cultural crisis of the time, the popularity of the macabre, the perversity and the sadism that the *fin de siècle* inherited from De Sade and Baudelaire, was also due to their profitability. In a period when the publishing industry began to produce cheap editions for the emerging mass audience, books were considered more than ever to be products like any other. Since the writer, now for the first time at the mercy of the market, had to sell in order to earn a living, writing was inevitably conditioned by the demands of commerce.[9]

During his lifetime D'Annunzio was a highly popular author, whose works were both well marketed and sold.[10] Given this popularity, many of the various murders, suicides, or fatal accidents that appear in D'Annunzio's literary works may be regarded as little more than gratuitous ornaments, aimed at captivating, surprising, or even shocking his middle class readers.[11] As a consequence, the protagonists often commit suicide or murder simply to destroy themselves or eliminate an enemy, without any deeper reflection on the real nature of death. In this regard, however, the novel *Trionfo della morte* stands as an exception, since here, through the experiences of the protagonist Giorgio Aurispa, D'Annunzio offers his first extended treatment of the meaning of death.

Indeed, as the title suggests, death is the main theme of the *Trionfo della morte* (*The Triumph of Death*, 1894).[12] Like most of D'Annunzio's literary works, this novel is in many

ways autobiographical.[13] The title is taken from a medieval fresco in Pisa, although there seems to be no other connection between the two.[14] Death is present in the very first pages of the novel, when the protagonists Ippolita Sanzio and Giorgio Aurispa discover a suicide victim below the Pincio hill, one of the most romantic places in Rome. The suicide turns into a symbol of Giorgio's and Ippolita's dying love, representing the dichotomy between Love and Death, Eros and Thanatos, one of the central themes of the novel that is also to be found in many of D'Annunzio's other works.[15] From then on, like a kind of Wagnerian *leitmotif*, death is constantly present in the novel in different ways. The drowning of a boy, and the memory of Giorgio's beloved uncle Demetrio, who committed suicide, are some of the most illustrative examples. Yet, most of all, the very idea of death haunts Giorgio Aurispa. It becomes an obsession, until finally, at the end of the novel, Giorgio kills both himself and the woman he loved.[16]

As the basic plot can be reduced to little more than the meetings of the two lovers, the novel is essentially to be regarded as a psychological study of the modern, cultivated, upper-class man, embodied by Giorgio Aurispa.[17] Giorgio suffers from a deep, yet puzzling, existential crisis. He yearns to live, and most of all to feel "complete and harmonious." Nonetheless, he is tortured by the idea that everyday life is constantly escaping him. In addition to lacking any "reason to live," Giorgio also believes that his real life is under the control of a mysterious force. The possibility that a part of him is already dead ultimately leads him to be attracted to death itself, for only in death would he be able to regain his lost integrity.[18]

Giorgio Aurispa, one of D'Annunzio's most complicated protagonists, in many ways personifies the pessimism and sense of crisis that lie at the very heart of *fin-de-siècle* culture.[19] He bears a close resemblance to the literary prototypes of the period, among whom the best

known is Des Esseintes, from Joris-Karl Huysmans' novel *À rebours*. He is a man without vital energy, dominated by morbid sensibility, and suffering from a secret illness that corrodes his will and impedes his efforts to face reality, thus condemning him to inactivity.[20] As Guido Baldi indicates, this man stands as a literary metaphor, both for the crisis surrounding the role of the intellectual on the eve of the triumph of industrial and capitalist civilization, and of the impotence of the individual in emerging mass society.[21] For him, suicide is a logical solution, representing a protest against life – and not a celebration of death, as the title of D'Annunzio's novel seems to indicate.[22]

The *Trionfo* stands at the turning point of D'Annunzio's ideological development, when the poet moved from a Wagnerian *credo* towards the doctrines of Nietzsche. Even though D'Annunzio had discovered Nietzsche by the early 1890s, and his ideal of the ascendant life is evident in the novel, the composer's influence is still dominant.[23] Giorgio Aurispa is indeed D'Annunzio's last Wagnerian (and Schopenhauerian) anti-hero,[24] who follows the composer's lessons according to which peace could only be found in a "burning and profound desire for death. Complete unconsciousness, dissolution of all dreams, [and] absolute annihilation. Here lay liberation!"[25]

Before committing suicide, Giorgio attempts to find a solution to his existential problem in different ways, such as by seeking a superior Dionysian life in symbiosis with nature in the countryside, and in love for Ippolita. [26] Nonetheless, Giorgio's relationship with her is revealed to be morbid right from the beginning. Since Giorgio considers that the sole certainty in life is knowing that another human being lives only for him, his love is transformed into the will to entirely possess the woman (140-41).

At first Giorgio considers death to be the ideal transfiguration of vulgarity into beauty. After her death the woman would reach "the supreme perfection of her beauty" and become "an object for thought, a pure ideality." Only then could the man love her "without jealous inquietude, with a soothing, changeless sorrow."[27] However, when Ippolita arrives in the countryside, where Giorgio is attempting to heal himself, the man discovers that his love for her is dead. In his eyes the woman has been transformed into a "sexual being exclusively, the inferior being deprived of all spiritual value, a simple instrument of pleasure and luxury, the instrument of ruin and death"(*Trionfo*, trans. Hornblow, p. 198). For this reason, love becomes a burden; and instead of the solution to Giorgio's crisis, the woman turns into an "Enemy," "the Obstacle" that impedes his salvation. The final motivation to kill Ippolita, along with himself, is a paradoxical combination of repugnance and possessiveness. The ties that bind the man to the woman are too strong; Giorgio cannot live with Ippolita, nor can he leave her to someone else. At the end of the novel, as the woman refuses to die, the Wagnerian act of "dying in beauty" is transformed into a brutal and savage struggle that concludes when Giorgio throws the woman, together with himself, over a precipice.[28]

3. Encountering Thanatos

The *fin-de-siècle* authors were mainly interested in dwelling on the prurient rather than on the metaphysical dimension of their subjects. For this reason, as Kline and Schor have indicated, true meditation on death is rare in writings on Decadence.[29] Likewise, the reasons why Giorgio simultaneously commits suicide and murder are quite confusing. Not in this novel, nor indeed anywhere else, does D'Annunzio provide a coherent and exhaustive theory about the

meaning or necessity of death. Nevertheless, in the *Trionfo* D'Annunzio treats many of the ideas about death, life and the afterlife that return in his other works.

The romantic dichotomy between love and death, Eros and Thanatos, which is already present in *Trionfo*, also lies at the core of the lyric poem "La visitazione" (1889, The Visit). Here Death, who kisses the sleeping Love, is depicted in a traditional way, with wings and a scythe.[30] In a short autobiographical essay entitled "Dell'amore e della morte e del miracolo" (Concerning Love, Death, and Miracle, 1905), D'Annunzio reports his personal experience in the face of death.[31] In this so-called "favilla" (spark), he writes of how he stood by the bed of one of his lovers, Alessandra di Rudinì, who was suffering from uterine cancer.[32] The woman comes close to death three times, but finally she recovers, thanks to what D'Annunzio calls "the miracle of the Will to love that overcomes death."[33] As in the case of "La visitazione," in this personal experience death is seen as the opposite of love. Eros and Thanatos are two antagonistic forces that fight over the soul of the woman. Death, which aims to separate the two lovers, is represented as a horrific and devastating experience (1650).

However, the idea of the cruelty of death is an exception in D'Annunzio's production; in *Maia* (1903) he gives a completely different image of death. This epic poem about life is in part imaginary and in part autobiographical--as is the case in many of D'Annunzio's works. It starts with D'Annunzio's description of his voyage to Greece in the summer of 1895. In a series of poems, D'Annunzio concentrates variously on a certain detail of a place he visits, or on the impression the place had upon him.[34] The fourth section of Part 12 is dedicated to the Acrocorinth, the ancient citadel of Corinth, where D'Annunzio metaphorically meets Thanatos, "the gloomy youth":

> At times a funereal wing whirred / in the wind upon the plundered Acrocorinth. / And I saw Thanatos, the gloomy youth, / who blew into the delicate nostrils / and onto the drooping eyelids of those / who took pleasure in you, / O Dorian, / crushing the withered garlands / that have fallen on your wine-besprinkled marble. / And I saw him carried by your Night, / as in the tomb of Cypselus; / and thereafter I always kept him veiled / by my side. / And, ever since I've had him with me, / he seems to make redder the roses / of my pleasure, deeper the sound / of my laughter, ever stronger / my teeth. The torch that he carries / has gone out, but beneath his gaze / my fires burn more ardently.[35]

These verses are significant in many ways. First of all, the description of a young boy carried by her mother, Night, is one of the few cases in which D'Annunzio anthropomorphizes death. The Western personification of death as a man or woman has roots both in antiquity and the Bible. Thanks to the studies of Gotthold E. Lessing (1729-1781), the figure of Thanatos became particularly popular at the end of the eighteenth century, and revealed a changed attitude towards life and death. According to Lessing's interpretation of the Greek god, the cruel Death was domesticated, now appearing as the figure of a gentle, friendly youth, "the last best friend." Thanatos no longer appears as a pitiless killer, the fearsome skeleton that had long been the traditional symbol of Death; instead, he symbolically intimates the extinction of life.[36]

D'Annunzio's Thanatos is thus also the opposite of the common image of death as a dangerous, irresistible seductress that was highly popular during the *fin de siècle*.[37] Instead, the Greek youth corresponds to D'Annunzio's idea of death as a pleasurable experience, which is a recurrent theme in his works. In two lyric poems, entitled "Ammonimento" (1888,

Admonishment) and "Suspiria de profundis" (1890, Sighs from the Depths), death is associated with a longed-for rest at the end of life.[38] Furthermore, when D'Annunzio recounts his childhood memories in the aforementioned *Libro segreto*, he overtly expresses his idea of the mellifluousness of death: "These meetings and encounters did not leave horror, nor terror, nor chills within my spirit, but rather something resembling a modest intimacy, a calm familiarity, a self-assured confidence" (D'Annunzio 2005, 1:1682). In another autobiographical work, *Notturno* (1921, Nocturne), he describes the fascination of death as follows: "In fact, death is present in the way that life is; like life, it is warm; like life, it is beautiful, inebriating, promising, transfiguring."[39]

This idea of death as a sweet, gentle and even sensuous experience partly explains the constant death drive that D'Annunzio expressed for the first time when he, at the age of fifteen, wanted to die (D'Annuzio 2005, 1:1682). Following the canons of *decadentismo*, in the short novel *La Leda senza cigno* (Leda Without a Swan, 1913) he personifies the death drive (but not death itself) as a beautiful and fascinating, yet mysterious and fatal, woman. The *Leda* is a sort of a detective story told by a fictitious man, Desiderio Moriar (whose name, loosely translated from Italian and Latin, means "desire, I will die"), about an adventurous woman he meets at a concert. After various attempts, the woman finally commits suicide.[40] In the long autobiographical afterword to the *Leda*, entitled *Licenza* (Envoi, 1916), he describes the beauty of the death drive as follows: "In the *Leda*, the call to death was expressed with such a novel musicality that it enraptured me. I had given a stupendous woman's face to the 'overriding thought'" (i.e. the death drive).[41]

In the *Licenza* D'Annunzio also reports the meaningless of life and how the death drive springs from contact with sublime nature during a lonely ride in the country: "The past is worth

nothing, nor does the present have any value. The present is nothing if it is not a leavening."[42] The experience creates the will to die: "I have some sort of desire to die. I listen to the melody of the world that says: 'It is time to die, *tempus moriendi* '...No desire to return home, to go on living."[43]

4. Red Roses

Another thing that is expressed in the verses of *Maia* cited above is the constant presence of death in life: "And, ever since I've had him [Thanatos] with me." From the Classical Age until Romanticism, life and death had been distinguished as two opposing concepts, death being the moment of dissolution that precedes the entrance into nothingness. With *decadentismo*, thanks to the philosophy of Schopenhauer, the discovery of the unconscious and the crisis of rationalism, death begins to be present in life. It is no longer a chronological moment that extinguishes the light of existence; rather it is an inner condition that accompanies life after birth. This is not to be taken in the traditional sense, according to which one starts to die when one is born; instead it reflects the awareness that a human being is the one who will die. As Schopenhauer writes: "In human beings, the terrifying certainty of death necessarily found its place with the faculty of reason." It was this certainty that differentiated a human being from a brute.[44] For these reasons, states Gioanola, the entire existential meditation of *decadentismo* culminates in the individuation of death as the basis of being (Gioanola 1993, 176-77).

Schopenhauer, perhaps the most influential thinker of the *fin de siècle*, dedicates an entire chapter to death in *The World as Will and Presentation* (1819), entitled "On Death and Its Relation to the Indestructibility of Our Essence in Itself " (Schopenhauer 2008, 2:518-68). As for the German philosopher and D'Annunzio alike, the pulsation of death is a natural and

inseparable part of life. In one of his "faville," entitled *Il Vangelo secondo l'Avversario* (The Gospel According to the Adversary, 1924), written to commemorate the death of Eleonora Duse, he states that "The one who gives life, must accept death."[45] For D'Annunzio life was "nothing if not a leaven for death."[46] Curiously, for D'Annunzio (and unlike Schopenhauer), consciousness of death was neither destructive nor nihilistic.[47] On the contrary, in *Maia*, the company of "the gloomy youth," the presence of death engenders a zest for life, since "he seems to make redder the roses of my pleasure, deeper the sound of my laughter, ever stronger my teeth." In a similar way, in one of his notebooks, dated August 7, 1915, just before he took off on one of his legendary flights during the First World War, he wrote: "The thought of death makes life *essential*."[48] In other words, consciousness of death gives rise to the cult of life.[49]

However, since death is the fulfillment of life, the manner of death is far from incidental, and D'Annunzio's life of a hero is supposed to end heroically. As he declares in an autobiographical work *Contemplazione della morte* (The contemplation of death, 1912), "I do not want peace. I want to die amid passion and strife. And I want my death to be my sweetest victory."[50] Unfortunately, this was not the case, as the patriotic hero of the First World War was not fated to die on the battlefield. This "failed death" occupies a central position in *Notturno*. While his friends were dying at the front, an accident left D'Annunzio bedridden, with eyes bandaged, for several months at the beginning of 1916. The consequent frustration provoked these bitter lines: "Now death, which was supposed to take the two, took only one, contrary to the pact, contrary to the offering, contrary to justice, contrary to glory."[51] Instead of achieving glorious martyrdom in battle, D'Annunzio died of a stroke long after the war, in solitude in his villa on Lake Garda.[52]

5. When God Died

If the meaning of death was so important for life, we may well wonder about D'Annunzio's conception of the afterlife, as this may also clarify why he considered death such a desirable and marvellous experience. In the *Trionfo*, when Giorgio contemplates the situation after his death, he is only concerned about the feelings of Ippolita and his friends while viewing his body during the wake (125). In other works as well, when focusing on the situation after death, D'Annunzio tends to be mainly interested in the grief of the survivors. For instance, the patriotic poem "Per i marinai d'Italia morti in Cina" (For the Italian Seamen Dead in China, 1900) is almost entirely dedicated to the sorrow of the mothers of the dead seamen.[53] But if D'Annunzio is so concerned about the feelings of the survivors, what did he imagine would happen to the one that dies? In order to answer to this, it is crucial to examine D'Annunzio's attitude towards the Christian religion.

In the *Trionfo*, both Giorgio and Demetrio are described as religious; nevertheless, they do not believe in the Christian God. They are interested in Catholic rituals, but not in the religion itself.[54] This situation profoundly torments Giorgio, and one of his most fervent desires is to be able to believe in God, to find the true faith: "And this was not a vague or passing desire; it was a profound and fervent aspiration of his entire soul, and it was also an extraordinary anguish, which distressed all the elements of his substance …" (*Trionfo*, trans. Hornblow, 237-38). The same grief was shared by many *fin-de-siècle* intellectuals, and by D'Annunzio himself, who faced a world in which scientific discoveries in such fields as geology, biology, astronomy and anthropology had "killed God" and opened the way to criticize institutionalized Christendom and the Church.[55]

D'Annunzio's first creative period, starting with the poems of *Primo vere* (First Spring, 1879), was already characterized by an anticlerical polemic that he had inherited from the Italian poets Giosuè Carducci and Lorenzo Stecchetti.[56] In his later literary works, the Catholic religion was interpreted as fanaticism and superstition.[57] In the *Trionfo*, the critique of the peasants' religiousness culminates in the scene of the pilgrimage to Casalbordino. Participating in the pilgrimage is Giorgio's last attempt to find faith, but here the devotion of the peasants is revealed to be nothing more than an insane display of superstitious fanaticism. It becomes clear that there is no similarity between the peasants and the urban intellectual, and that the Catholic religion can offer no solution to the latter's quest for faith.[58]

For the *fin-de-siècle* generation, the death of God, the absence of the Absolute, and the denial of the hope of resurrection also changed the idea of life. Schopenhauer had characterized life as a short and meaningless episode, an incomprehensible expression of the spirit of Nature in a ceaseless stream of time (Schopenhauer 2008, 2:529-30). Successively, Nietzsche declared life and the world to be only an aesthetic spectacle that required no further justification. Humanity had no goal, nor was there any cosmic support for moral aspiration. What he added to Schopenhauer was the quest for a god, and as God was dead, human beings were impelled to create their own god.[59] In much the same vein, for D'Annunzio, life had no aim, and the only god was man himself:

> Life knows only one destiny, it fulfills only one function: its sole intent is to perpetuate itself and multiply itself. There is no purpose, no goal, no objective in the Universe; and there is no god. "My son, there is no other god but you."[60]

6. The Seduction of Pan

Although scientific discoveries and philosophical notions had shattered the picture of the universe as governed by Providence, and had transformed Nature into a mere biological process or a neutral, animalistic and blind mechanism, the quest for transcendence during the *fin de siècle* did not disappear. Since traditional Christianity was not able to offer a solution, many people turned to other creeds: to esoteric philosophies, to occultism, to mysticism, and to Asian religions–among others.[61] Likewise D'Annunzio, regardless of his anti-teleological vision of the universe and life, was nevertheless deeply religious from the very beginning of his literary career until the end. His religion consisted of devotion to Saint Francis, and a fascination for Eastern mysticism, with which he first became acquainted through Schopenhauer.[62] Yet the most coherent idea of his is a sort of panic sense of life. According to Ettore Paratore, *panismo* or nature worship is "the original and constant thread in D'Annunzio's poetry."[63]

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, in order to rediscover the lost God "killed" by the rationalism, the romantics had turned to Nature. The consequence was the rebirth of pantheism that accompanied the philosophical debate marking the switch from enlightened rationalism to romantic idealism. Pantheism seemed to be able to offer a solution for those who were in search of a new religion to replace the apparently defunct Christian faith.[64] In Italy, the romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi displayed a panic perception of Nature. Successively, says Pietro Gibellini, Giovanni Marradi transmitted a *panismo*, a pantheism infused with Christianity, to the generation of Giovanni Pascoli and D'Annunzio.[65]

According to certain francophone poets (Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Émile Verhaeren in particular), the traditional Christian religion and the nineteenth century's positivist *credo*

committed an identical error in that they both offered a fragmented conception of the world.[66] The appeal of pantheism consisted precisely in providing a unified picture of reality, a picture that can be traced back to the seventeenth century. For Spinoza, God and Nature were two names given to the one and only reality that is the basis of the universe and of which all minor entities are only variations, "Deus sive Natura." The most attractive aspects of his philosophy were the unity of all that exists, the regularity of all that happens, and the identification of spirit with nature.[67]

D'Annunzio's *panismo* consists of the exaltation of "immense, holy, sacred Nature"[68] as a transcendent space of beauty, and the idea of the cosmos as a single holy unity.[69] The quest to participate in this unity is constantly present in D'Annunzio's life and works. Furthermore, the courage to become "the whole man," the basic concern of Giorgio in the *Trionfo*, ultimately means to experience this unity of man with the cosmos, as finally "the spirit dissolved in the grand rhythm."[70] For this reason, the image in *Notturno* of the coffin of D'Annunzio's dead friend in the Venetian lagoon conveys nothing more than a sense of harmony with nature:

> The evening is made of opal, of gold, of amber. / The horizon is bejeweled like a long array of thrones. / Subsequently, this extravagance becomes dim and cold. The sky and the lagoon are two frozen beauties . / Is there a sweetness that wounds? It is this. / The man in the coffin is one with the horizon, the ring of the Universe.[71]

For D'Annunzio, "death is not destruction, but rather transfiguration."[72] It was a metamorphosis of a person from a carnal being into mere spirit, the liberation of the latter from the prison of the

body. The beauty of death, and its fascination, lies precisely here, as he writes in the *Licenza*, when he describes a flight over the Venetian lagoon during the war:

> At that moment, more than any extreme point in my misery, I came to realize that the soul is a perpetual thing, not bound to bodies as a prisoner, but drawn out of bodies, the way a vase draws water and holds it, and then pours it out. Now the soul welled up and flowed like a flood, augmented enormously by the slaughter that emptied numberless bodies every day. Restored to freedom by heroism, the soul floated above the charnel house, transforming the appearance of the land and the meaning of the common breath of our humanity.[73]

7. Becoming Posthumous

Death, comprehended as the fulfillment of unity and liberation of the spirit, does not mean separation from the survivors. On the contrary, in *Trionfo della morte*, after Giorgio's beloved uncle and spiritual mentor Demetrio dies, he is not only closer than ever to Giorgio, but also continues to exist solely for him.[74] Similarly, in *Contemplazione della morte,* the afterlife of Adolphe Bermond is depicted as a mystical experience which allows the man to continue to exist in the memory of the living, after first having conjoined his physical existence to theirs:

> The dead man entered into the living; and, before transforming himself into memory, he lived again within them, with his white hair, his wrinkles, his hunched shoulders, his pallid eyes, his quavering voice, his ulcerated innards. One after another they entered

> the gorge of shadow; they knelt down, they crowded around the bed, they became a compact thing that the dead man weighed down upon, as if on a bier of flesh and bone.[75]

Personal survival after death was indeed a significant preoccupation for D'Annunzio, and it culminated in the quest for immortality that death would ultimately fulfil. The connection D'Annunzio made between death and immortality is present in the play *Fedra* (Phaedra, 1908),[76] and it is unambiguously expressed in *Notturno*, where he writes: "Such a thirst for life is similar to the need to die and become eternal (121). Later he repeats: "Never was sleep so alien to me; never amid so much death did I have so much longing for immortality" (214).

Personal survival in works of art or in fame became a veritable cult, especially in the Renaissance. Mortality validates immortality, for as life is extinguished, it enters into memory, which preserves it and thus gives it permanence. The idea that death bears witness to life is universal; once life is over, it becomes part of history.[77] D'Annunzio's death drive is thus also justified by the proposition that through death he would gain immortality by surviving in the memory of his public, both thanks to his works and to his life. For this purpose, during his entire life D'Annunzio put an enormous emphasis on creating a personal cult, a "cult of the self," a notion made fashionable by the French novelist Maurice Barrès.[78] He marketed his works efficiently, he made his last home at Lake Garda a national monument, and he wrote many autobiographical works that sublimated the past with fantastic imagination and personal mythology.[79]

D'Annunzio's spectacular life was characterized by endless love stories, financial crises, and political and military activism. If we consider it in terms of death, there is still one point to

be taken into consideration. Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, which, together with the ideas of Schopenhauer, finds an echo in D'Annunzio's works, has also been interpreted from the aesthetic point of view. In this regard, the doctrine indicates how to construct one's life (and one's interpretation of it) as an artistic whole, with sufficient aesthetic merit to make its recurrence desirable.[80] The same problematic is already present in D'Annunzio's first novel, *Il Piacere* (The Child of Pleasure, 1889), in which the father of the protagonist Andrea Sperelli advises his son: "It is necessary to fashion oneself, as one fashions a work of art. It is necessary that the life of a man of intellect be of his own making. All true superiority lies in this."[81] If the aim was to create a life that would be worthy of being repeated after death, in this regard, for D'Annunzio, "the inimitable life" was thus another guarantee of becoming immortal. It was the very question of life and death.

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[1] G. D'Annunzio (2005) *Prose di ricerca,* eds. A. Andreoli and G. Zanetti (Milan: Mondadori), vol.2, p. 1682.

[2] Namely, *La Città morta* (The Dead City, 1899), *Francesca da Rimini* (1902), *La figlia di Iorio* (Jorio's Daughter, 1903), *La nave* (The Ship, 1908), *Fedra* (1909), *Le martyre de Saint Sébastien* (The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, 1911), *La Pisanelle* (1913).

[3] Especially the collection of poems entitled *Chimera* published in 1885-1888, in which one of the sections is entitled "Imagini dell'Amore e della Morte" (Images of Love and Death). See G. D'Annunzio (2001) *Versi d'amore e di gloria,* eds. A. Andreoli and N. Lorenzini (Mondadori: Milan), vol. 1, pp. 457-591.

[4] As to the novels, both *Giovanni Episcopo* (1891) and in *L'Innocente* (*The Intruder*, 1892) are constructed around a murder. In *Il trionfo della morte* (*The Triumph of Death*, 1894) there are a

fatal accident, a murder and two suicides. In his last novel, *Forse che sì, forse che no* (maybe yes, maybe no, 1910), the reader is diverted by one death and one suicide.

[5] P. Nicholls (2009) *Modernisms. A Literary Guide* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 42-61. For the idea of the degeneration of the Latin race, see N. Santamaría Laorden's essay in this volume.

[6] E. Gioanola (1993) *Il Decadentismo* (Rome: Edizioni Studium), pp. 175-80.

[7] M. Praz (2003) *La Carne, la Morte e il Diavolo nella letteratura romantica* (1948) (Florence: Sansoni), p. 356.

[8] All the translations from Italian to English are by Christopher Nissen, unless otherwise indicated.

[9] On the publishing industry during the *fin de siècle*, see, for instance, M. D. Stetz (2007) "Publishing industries and practices" in G. Marshall (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 113-30.

[10] For D'Annunzio's popularity, see L. de Castris (1995) *Il Decadentismo italiano. Svevo, Pirandello, D'Annunzio* (Bari: Laterza), especially pp. 48-49, 212-22; M. Cantelmo (1996) *Il piacere dei leggitori. D'Annunzio e la comunicazione letteraria* (Ravenna: Longo).

[11] For D'Annunzio's relationship with his readers, see M. Cantelmo, *Il piacere dei leggitori*.

[12] For more about the novel, see in particular the proceedings of a conference dedicated to it: E. Tiboni and L. Abrugiati (eds.) (1981) *Trionfo della morte. Atti del III Convegno Internazionale di studi dannunziani*. (Pescara: Centro nazionale di studi dannunziani); see also M. G. Balducci (1995) introduction to *Trionfo della morte* by G. D'Annunzio, ed. M. G. Balducci (Mondadori: Milan), pp. v-xxxvi. In this volume, P. Alatri, E. De Michelis, G. Baldi and S. Costa each dedicate a chapter to the novel. See P. Alatri (1992) *Gabriele D'Annunzio* (1983) (Paris: Fayard),

pp. 129-35; E. De Michelis (1960) *Tutto D'Annunzio* (Milan: Feltrinelli), pp. 137-50; E. De Michelis (1960) *Tutto D'Annunzio* (Milan: Feltrinelli), pp. 77-202; S. Costa (2012) *D'Annunzio* (Rome: Salerno Editrice), pp. 109-21.

[13] G. Baldi (2008) *Le ambiguità della "decadenza": D'Annunzio romanziere* (Napoli: Liguori), pp. 81-86. For the autobiographical elements in the *Trionfo*, see also P. Alatri, *Gabriele D'Annunzio*, pp. 133-36.

[14] In his last autobiographical work *Il Libro segreto*, (the secret book, 1935) D'Annunzio attributes the painting to Andrea di Cione, detto Orcagna (1308-1368). See D'Annunzio, *Prose di ricerca*, vol.2, p. 1692. In the novel, Orcagna's painting repeats the motifs of the homonymous fresco in Pisa. The title "Trionfo della Morte" refers both to the plague and to the Last Judgment. Although the date and attribution of the Pisa fresco is uncertain, some scholars think it is posterior to the plague, and that it was painted around 1350. See L. B. Ricci (2000) *Ragionare nel giardino: Boccaccio e i cicli pittorici del Trionfo della Morte* (Rome: Salerno Editrice), pp. 65-71, 182, 243. D'Annunzio's poem "Il sollazzo" (Amusement), from the collection *Chimera*, is an ekphrasis of the painting. See D'Annunzio, *Versi d'amore e di gloria,* vol. 1, p. 459.

[15] The nexus of love and death is particularly important is the tragedies *La nave* (The Ship, 1908), *Fedra* (1909), and *La Pisanelle* (1913). See also S. Costa, *D'Annunzio*, passim.

[16] G. D'Annunzio (1995) *Trionfo della morte,* ed. M. G. Balducci (Mondadori: Milan), p. 382.

[17] P. Alatri, *Gabriele D'Annunzio,* pp. 130, 134. See also E. Paratore (1981) "Il Trionfo della morte," in E. Tiboni and L. Abrugiati (eds.) *Trionfo della morte*, pp. 11-28, here 11-14.

[18] G. D'Annunzio, *Trionfo della morte*, pp. 79-81. See also P. Alatri, *Gabriele D'Annunzio*, p. 132; D. Valenti (1996) *D'Annunzio lettore di Nietzsche. Per una rettifica* (Catania: Boemi), p. 44.

[19] See also G. Baldi, *Le ambiguità della "decadenza,"* pp. 77-112.

[20] G. Baldi, *Le ambiguità della "decadenza,"* pp. 79-80.

[21] According to Baldi, the *Trionfo della morte* is an avant-garde work with respect to the study of this kind of anti-hero. G. Baldi, *Le ambiguità della "decadenza,"* p. 77.

[22] According to Glicksberg, this is usually the case with literary suicides. See C. Glicksberg (1996) *Modern Literature and the Death of God* (The Hague: Nijhoff), p. 88.

[23] The influence of Wagner is evident in the structure of the novel that is constructed around different leitmotifs, such as the obsession with death. See E. Paratore (1982) "D'Annunzio e Wagner," *Quaderni del Vittoriale* 36, pp. 67-82. See also E. Paratore, "Il Trionfo della morte." In the *Trionfo* D'Annunzio for the first time includes a work of Wagner's that influences the psyche of the protagonists; see G. Tosi (1981) "Il personaggio di Giorgio Aurispa nei suoi rapporti con la cultura francese," in E. Tiboni and L. Abrugiati (eds.) *Trionfo della morte* (Pescara: Centro nazionale di studi dannunziani), pp. 87-142, here 122. For D'Annunzio and Wagner, see also H. Hinterhäuser (1968) "D'Annunzio e la Germania," in E. Mariano (ed.) *L'Arte di Gabriele D'Annunzio* (Milan: Mondadori), pp. 439-61. In the last part of the novel there is a description of *Tristan und Isolde*'s final act.

[24] In subsequent novels this character type was replaced by a Nietzschean superman. The paramount examples of D'Annunzio's supermen are Claudio Cantelmo in *Le Vergini delle rocce* (the maidens of the rocks, 1895) and Paolo Tarsis in *Forse che sì, forse che no* (maybe yes, maybe no, 1910).

[25] G. D'Annunzio, "Caso Wagner," in G. D'Annunzio (2003), *Scritti giornalistici,* ed. A. Andreoli (Milan: Mondadori), vol. 2, p. 242. Nietzsche's essay *Der Fall Wagner* appeared in 1888. In this work the philosopher condemns Wagner's ideals as degenerate.

[26] G. D'Annunzio, *Trionfo della morte*, p. 145.

[27] G. D'Annunzio (1896) *The Triumph of Death*, trans. A. Hornblow (Boston: Page), p. 182. The direct quotations are taken from this English translation.

[28] On the death of the protagonists in the *Trionfo*, see also G. Baldi, *Le ambiguità della "decadenza,"* pp. 108-12.

[29] T. J. Kline and N. Schor (2002), preface to *Decadent Subject: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, by C. Bernheimer, eds. T. J. Kline and N. Schor (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins UP), p. xiv.

[30] The sonnet is included in the collection entitled *Chimera*, now in G. D'Annunzio, *Versi d'amore e di gloria,* vol. 1, p. 458. In another sonnet entitled "I gigli" (The Lilies, 1888), there is a dichotomy between death and pleasure. The poem is also included in the collection *Chimer*a, now in D'Annunzio, *Versi d'amore e di gloria,* vol.1, p. 548.

[31] Now in G. D'Annunzio (2005) *Prose di ricerca,* eds. A. Andreoli and Giorgio Zanetti (Milan: Mondadori), vol.2, pp. 1649-52.

[32] D'Annunzio used the term "favilla" (spark) to describe the fragmented autobiographical short stories he started to publish at the beginning of the twentieth century. For the term "favilla," see S. Costa, *D'Annunzio*, pp. 278-84.

[33] See A. P. Cappello (2005) "Note e notizie sui testi" in G. D'Annunzio, *Prose di ricerca*, vol. 2, pp. 3444-45.

[34] On the representation of Greece in *Maia*, see M. Härmänmaa (2009) "La 'città morta': la rappresentazione delle città antiche in alcune opere di Gabriele D'Annunzio" in S. Bach, L. Cecchini and A. Kratschmer (eds.) *Atti dell' VIII Congresso degli Italianisti Scandinavi* (Aarhus: Institut for Sprog, Litteratur of Kultur, Aarhus Universitet), pp. 176-90. On the

popularity of the ancient world during the *fin de siècle*, see A. Antonopoulos' essay in this volume.

[35] G. D'Annunzio, *Maia*, 12, vv. 64-84. In G. D'Annunzio (2001) *Versi d'amore e di gloria,* vol. 2, eds. A. Andreoli e N. Lorenzini (Milan: Mondadori), p. 127. In the poem, "Dorian" refers to the city of Corinth, founded by the Dorians. See A. Andreoli "Note," in D'Annunzio, *Versi d'amore e di gloria,* vol. 2, p. 959.

[36] K. Guthke (1999) *The Gender of Death. A Cultural History in Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), passim.

[37] For the representation of death during the *fin de siècle*, see K. Guthke, *The Gender of Death*, pp. 173-228.

[38] "Ammonimento" is a sonnet included in the collection *Chimera*. Now in G. D'Annunzio, *Versi d'amore e di gloria*, vol. 1, p. 543. The sestina "Suspiria de profundis" is included in the collection entitled *Poema paradisiaco,* now in G. D'Annunzio, *Versi d'amore e di gloria,* vol. 1, pp. 693-96.

[39] G. D'Annunzio (1995) *Notturno* (1921), ed. G. Turchetta (Milan: Mondadori), p. 121.

[40] G. D'Annunzio (1916) *La Leda senza cigno, racconto seguito dalla "Licenza"* (Milan: Treves). For the character of Leda, see also S. Costa, *D'Annunzio*, pp. 269-71; P. Alatri, *Gabriele D'Annunzio*, pp. 315-17.

[41] G. D'Annunzio (2010) *Licenza* in Pasquale Stoppelli (ed.) *Biblioteca Italiana Zanichelli* [BIZ], DVD-ROM (Bologna: Zanichelli), Licenza 2, paragraph 206. "Envoi" is an old poetic term referring to a final stanza attached to a poem to "send it on its way," with a message for the recipient of the poem. The concept of "overriding thought" is recurrent in D'Annunzio's works, meaning "death drive." It probably derives from Giacomo Leopardi's poem entitled "Il pensiero

dominante" (1830-1832, in English, "overriding thought"). However, in Leopardi the overriding thought is love. G. Leopardi (1993) *Canti*, eds. N. Gallo and C. Garboli (Turin: Einaudi), pp. 207-15.

[42] G. D'Annunzio, *Licenza*. BIZ, Licenza 2, paragraph 122.

[43] G. D'Annunzio, *Licenza*. BIZ, Licenza 2, paragraph 123

[44] A. Schopenhauer (2008) *The World as Will and Presentation*, trans. D. Carus and R. Aquila, 2 vols. (New York: Pearson), vol. 2, p. 518.

[45] G. D'Annunzio, *Il Vangelo secondo l'Avversario*, in D'Annunzio, *Prose di ricerca*, vol. 1 p. 1140. A. P. Cappello "Note e notizie sui testi" in D'Annunzio, *Prose di ricerca*, vol.1, p. 3323.

[46] G. D'Annunzio (1995) *Contemplazione della morte*, ed. R. Castagnola (Milan: Mondadori) p. 21. In the *Libro segreto*, he also writes: "FLESH is nothing if not a spirit dedicated to death." G. D'Annunzio, *Prose di ricerca*, vol.1, p. 1914 (the emphasis is in the original).

[47] As Gioanola writes, in decadent literature the presence of death gives a person the ability to choose the essential; the awareness of death makes one appreciate life, whereas learning to die means learning to live. E. Gioanola, *Il decadentismo*, pp. 179-80.

[48] G. D'Annunzio (1965) *Taccuini*, eds. E. Bianchetti and R. Forcella (Milan: Mondadori), p. 740. The emphasis is in the original.

[49] Turchetta has also come to the conclusion that D'Annunzio's will to die is identified with his will to live. See G. Turchetta (1995), introduction to *Notturno* by G. D'Annunzio (Milan: Mondadori), p. xxxii.

[50] G. D'Annunzio, *Contemplazione della morte*, p.74.

[51] D'Annunzio wrote this in two autobiographical works, both in *Licenza* (1916) and *Notturno* (1921); see D'Annunzio, *Licenza*, Licenza 2, paragraph 49; D'Annunzio, *Notturno*, p. 17. In *Il*

Libro segreto he writes about the necessity of violent death: "Of all simple things, the simplest: characterized by an essential simplicity, quite necessary for me, almost my soul's honor, the harsh culmination of my life: such is violent death to me." G. D'Annunzio, *Prose di ricerca*, vol.1, p. 1865.

[52] For D'Annunzio's biography, see A. Andreoli (2001) *Il vivere inimitabile. Vita di Gabriele D'Annunzio* (Milan: Mondadori); J. Woodhouse (2001) *Gabriele D'Annunzio* (Oxford: Oxford UP).

[53] For the *Contemplazione della morte*, see S. Costa, *D'Annunzio*, pp. 254-58.

[54] G. D'Annunzio *Il trionfo della morte* pp. 218-19.

[55] See for instance C. Glicksberg, *Modern Literature and the Death of God*.

[56] I. Ciani (1981) "La religione nel primo D'Annunzio da 'Primo vere' al 'Trionfo della morte,'" *D'Annunzio e la religiosità*, in *Quaderni del Vittoriale* 28, pp. 37-54, here 39.

[57] I. Ciani, "La religione nel primo D'Annunzio" pp. 42-43.

[58] G. D'Annunzio, *Trionfo della morte*, pp. 230-270. See E. Circeo (1995) *L'Abruzzo in D'Annunzio. Studio critico con antologia* (Pescara: Centro nazionale di studi dannunziani); E. Paratore, "Il Trionfo della morte," pp. 11-14; M. Härmänmaa (2013) "Celebrating Decadence: Gabriele D'Annunzio and the Wild Abruzzo in *Trionfo della morte*," *The European Legacy* 6.18, pp. 698-714.

[59] C. Glicksberg, *Modern Literature and the Death of God*, pp. 64-65; B. Magnus and K. M. Higgins (1996) "Nietzsche's Works and Their Themes" in B. Magnus and K. M. Higgins (eds.) *Nietzsche* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), pp. 21-58, here 23.

[60] D'Annunzio, *Licenza*, Licenza 2, paragraph 316. The last quote is from the novel *Forse che sì forse che no*, in which the protagonist, with his flight over the Tyrrhenian sea, turns into a

Superman. See G. D'Annunzio (1998) *Forse che sì forse che no*, ed. R. Castagnola (Milan: Mondadori).

[61] C. Glicksberg, *Modern Literature and the Death of God*, p. 15-16.

[62] M. Ferrara (1981) "Religiosità e creatività in Gabriele D'Annunzio," in *D'Annunzio e la religiosità. Quaderni del Vittoriale* 28, pp. 9-36, here 10. The article is about the similarities between D'Annunzio's ideology and Jung's psychology. Binni also emphasizes D'Annunzio's religiousness; see W. Binni (1996) *La poetica del decadentismo* (Florence: Sansoni), p. 62, passim. For D'Annunzio's devotion to Saint Francis, see A. Fortini (1963) *D'Annunzio e il francescanesimo* (Assisi: Edizioni Assisi).

[63] E. Paratore (1981) "La religiosità nella 'Figlia di Iorio'" in *D'Annunzio e la religiosità*. *Quaderni del Vittoriale* 28, pp. 83-96, here 88.

[64] For pantheism at the beginning of the nineteenth century, see for instance, C. Bouton ed. (2005) *Dieu et la nature: La question du panthéisme dans l'idéalisme allemand*. (Hildesheim: Olms).

[65] P. Gibellini (1999) "'Alcyone' dopo 'Alcyone': note sul paesaggio" in S Capecchi (ed.) *Terre, città e paesi nella vita e nell'arte d Gabriele D'Annunzio* (Pescara: Centro nazionale di studi dannunziani e della cultura in Abruzzo), vol. 3, pp. 513-21. According to Ciani, D'Annunzio's *panismo* has its roots in Carducci and in the pantheism of Zola; see I. Ciani "La religione nel primo D'Annunzio," p. 40.

[66] R. H. Thum (1994) *The City. Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verhaeren* (New York: Peter Lang), p. 12.

[67] In addition to this, the popularity of Spinoza's ideas at the end of the eighteenth century can be explained by the fact that they represented an alternative to materialism, atheism and deism. Among the later philosophers who were most influenced by Spinoza are some contemporaries of

D'Annunzio: Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Einstein. S. West (1993) *Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury), p. 124.

[68] N. Lorenzini (1984) *Il segno del corpo. Saggio su D'Annunzio* (Rome: Bulzoni), p. 98.

[69] M. R. Giacon (1997) "'Distanza e malinconia': Venezia e il Veneto nella vita e nell'opera di Gabriele D'Annunzio,' in S. Capecchi (ed.) *Terre, città e paesi nella vita e nell'arte di Gabriele D'Annunzio* (Pescara: Centro nazionale di studi dannunziani), vol. 4, pp. 91-108, here 97; I. Ciani (1996) "D'Annunzio e Pescara" in S. Capecchi (ed.) *Terre, città e paesi nella vita e nell'arte di Gabriele D'Annunzio* (Pescara: Centro nazionale di studi dannunziani), vol. 1, pp. 91-108, here 94.

[70] G. D'Annunzio, *Contemplazione della morte*, p. 22 .

[71] G. D'Annunzio, *Notturno*, p. 39.

[72] G. D'Annunzio (2003), "Note su Giorgione" in D'Annunzio, *Scritti giornalistici*, vol.2, p. 308.

[73] G. D'Annunzio, *Licenza,* Licenza 2, paragraph 419.

[74] G. D'Annunzio, *Trionfo della morte*, p. 130.

[75] G. D'Annunzio, *Contemplazione della morte*, p. 65.

[76] G. D'Annunzio (2001) *Fedra*, ed. P. Gibellini (Milan: Mondadori). See especially Costa's interpretation in S. Costa, *D'Annunzio*, pp. 184-86.

[77] K. Guthke, *The Gender of Death*, pp. 252-56.

[78] Barrès published his influential novel trilogy *Le culte du moi* between 1888 and 1891.

[79] This is also Angelo Piero Cappello's definition of D'Annunzio's autobiographic works. See A. P. Cappello (2005) "Note e notizie sui testi" in *Prose di ricerca,* by G. D'Annunzio, vol. 2, p. 3426.

[80] B. Magnus and K. M. Higgins (1996), "Nietzsche's Works and Their Themes" in B. Magnus and K. M. Higgins eds., *Nietzsche*, p. 37.

[81] G. D'Annunzio (1984) *Il Piacere*, ed. G. Ferrata (Milan: Mondadori), p. 108.