Sex, geography, and death: metropolis and empire in a Fascist writer

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Abstract. This paper is an historical and cultural analysis of the work of a Fascist writer, Gabriele D'Annunzio, and of how Italian concerns with empire are expressed in his geographical tropes. D'Annunzio was one of the leading intellectual practitioners of what Walter Benjamin called the aestheticisation of politics. His texts are distinctly tied to a national discourse which is both consciously and unconsciously imperial, and in his narratives the political map of the nation is overlaid with a tissue of imperial and sexual symbols. I examine how the geographic signs of empire are inscribed in his first novel Il Piacere and his screenplay Cabiria, and how the metropolitan experience is foregrounded whereas the peripheral 'other' is both devalued and made exotic. I also examine how D'Annunzio aestheticised the warrior ethic, whereby death itself is rendered an aesthetic experience.

Introduction
Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863–1938) has suffered a thorough and complete reversal of reputation in English-speaking countries. Though in Italy and France he still enjoys a small but significant readership, in the English world he has been banished to the twilight of literary memory. He is doubly marked as a Fascist and a decadent writer with an overripe, overwrought style which now seems all too obviously the expression of a certain historical moment in the late 19th century. "D'Annunzio", writes Antonio Gramsci, "was the Italian people's last bout of illness" (1971a, page 86). Already by the 1920s D H Lawrence, who had initially expressed some admiration for the Italian poet, described him as "hardly readable", "always in bad taste" and, in a final broadside, found that, "much of what he says is bosh" (Bisset, 1966, page 27). D'Annunzio is certainly problematic for readers who see in his misogynist ravings an example of what some feminist historians have called an 'exasperated masculinism' (De Grazia, 1992, page 25) linked to a backlash against the advances of women during the early years of the 20th century in industrialised countries in Europe. Reading D'Annunzio in our present time is to run the risk of being discomfited by his unrelenting misogyny, nationalism, and imperialism. No doubt these characteristics were some of the very reasons why his fiction was particularly well received by the generation of the Italian middle classes that were later to embrace Fascism.

In North America the literary D'Annunzio is known largely through Mario Praz's critical study The Romantic Agony (1970), which in many ways is a breviary of the archetypical themes of sadism, vampirism, Byzantium, and the fatal woman in romantic and decadent literature. Recently, however, there has been a slow but steady increase in interest in D'Annunzio's literary work. New translations by Raymond Rosenthal of some of D'Annunzio's short stories are collected in Nocturne and Five Tales of Love and Death (1988). In Britain, J G Nichols has translated D'Annunzio's lengthy lyric poem Halycon (1988), Susan Bassnett has most recently translated The Flame (1991), and in 1991 Dedalus Press, in a series of decadent texts, reissued two of D'Annunzio's long-out-of-print novels The Child of Pleasure...
(first published *Il Piacere*, 1889) and *The Innocent* (*L'Innocente*, 1892), and plans to publish more. A new body of critical commentary in English has also emerged. Barbara Spackman's *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio* (1989) is certainly notable, and Paolo Valesio's *Gabriele D'Annunzio: the Dark Flame* (1992),(1) as well as Jared M Becker's excellent work *Nationalism and Culture: Gabriele D'Annunzio and Italy after the Risorgimento* (1994), continue to shore up interest in the flamboyant literary figure. The resurgence in D'Annunzio scholarship in not without its revisionist tendencies. Valesio(2) and Spackman, for instance, stress the various tensions and faultlines between D'Annunzio and Fascism, thereby distancing the poet from his Fascist connections. In so doing, they are following the footsteps of historians such as Renzo de Felice and Michael Ledeen, both of whom have revisionist views of D'Annunzio: they see him more as a radical adventurer who had some stylistic resonances with Fascism but who was fundamentally at odds with the tenets of the Fascist regime.

D'Annunzio, ambitious, restless, vain, with an outsized sense of self, was one of the loudest, most indefatigable advocates of Italian Empire. His shifting political alignments, however, make him a slippery figure to pin down. In 1897 he was selected as a right-wing member of the Italian parliament, then he briefly but dramatically moved to the socialist left (1900); later he was to embrace the radical so-called integral nationalism of the early 1900s; much later, he was to absorb aspects of nationalist syndicalism (1920), and finally, Fascism. He became the most treasured artist of the Fascist regime and lived out his remaining years in relative isolation in the oriental-bazaar atmosphere of his villa, *Il Vittoriale*, on the shores of Lake Garda. Some view these political gyrations as a sign of D'Annunzio's lack of political conviction: he was a weather-vane that shifted with the political winds. "If he knows the times, I know his moods" said Thomas Mann disparagingly of the Italian poet (1983, page 425). Yet there is an underlying consistency, rooted in his imperialism and expansive nationalism, which shaped both his politics and his literature.

Soon after World War 1 D'Annunzio and a group of soldiers occupied what was then the Yugoslavian city of Fiume (now Rijeka, Croatia) and held it for sixteen months, from 12 September 1919 to 18 January 1921, until they were forcibly removed by the Italian government of Giovanni Giolitti. The "Mutilated victory" was the slogan that D'Annunzio had coined on the eve of the armistice and he attracted a motley crew of nationalists, artists, and idealists who felt that the Allies had undermined Italy's rightful claims to the spoils of war at the peace table at Versailles. Fired up by the poet's words, this dedicated group of volunteers, with D'Annunzio as their *Comandante*, held Fiume hostage in an occupation that was concurrently literal, and highly symbolic. A polyglot city with a sizable Italian

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(1) Valesio, along with Spackman and others, was responsible for organising the first major international conference on D'Annunzio in North America. The conference met at Yale University in 1988 and the proceedings, which include essays both in Italian and in English, were published as *D'Annunzio a Yale: Atti del Convegno* (1989).

(2) The attempts to rehabilitate D'Annunzio are not without their ironic moments. In *Gabriele D'Annunzio: The Dark Flame*, Valesio, in an apologetic footnote, describes how one of the chapters in his book, which had first appeared in an anthology in 1986, was dedicated to Paul de Man. The dedication, says Valesio, was made in "unsuspecting circumstances" before "certain revelations about a dark moment in Paul de Man's youth" (page 214); that is to say, before de Man's collaboration with the Nazis during the war became public knowledge.
population.(5) Fiume had been awarded to the Yugoslavian state which had been cobbled together out of the remains of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The Fiume occupation was a colourful political spectacle considered by many historians to have been one of the many dress rehearsals for the Fascist march on Rome. It was in Fiume that D’Annunzio and his occupying army of legionnaires created a new regency and orchestrated many of the blazingly vivid mass rituals and the political rhetoric which came to be associated with Fascism: the Fascist salute, the rhetoric of group solidarity forged by trench warfare and the experience of the war, the ritual liturgy of the fallen warrior, and even some of the political documents which formed the basis of the Fascist corporate state.(6) The legionnaires remapped the imperial territory. The English writer, Osbert Sitwell, an eyewitness to the Fiume escapade who along with the rest of his literary family was sympathetic both to D’Annunzio and to Italian Fascism, wrote that in Fiume, “D’Annunzio had succeeded in uniting for a short time those who loved the past of Italy with those who hated it. Some had been drawn to the cause by the fervor of his words ... while others, who agreed with Marinetti in thinking Venice a city of dead fish and rotting palaces, saw in the policy of the Regency the means of making Italy into a new Roman Empire with skyscrapers and efficient train services” (1950, page 121). In Fiume, D’Annunzio was able to forge a contradictory and often unstable mixture of progressive and reactionary ideas within a carnivalesque space of public rituals and celebrations. The early Fascist groups had been very supportive of D’Annunzio, and Mussolini, along with the futurist Marinetti, had gone to meet the poet at Fiume, and though both were wary and jealous of his fame and popularity, promised further political and economic aid for his cause.

In the turbulent postwar period the Fascists adroitly exploited feelings of national betrayal and the politics of irredentism, but it was the postwar economic crisis that was the crucial factor in the rise and consolidation of Fascism. The economic crisis displaced large numbers of demobilised soldiers—the real shock troops of the early Fascist movement—and impoverished a large part of the lower middle class, the small landholders and sharecroppers, who in turn forsook the bourgeois-democratic parties and rallied to the growing militia defence leagues, largely in order to break the advances of the working classes (Tasca, 1966). The Fascist squadrists, in conjunction with the landowners and capitalist class, were able to smash the socialist peasant leagues and workers clubs, a task that was accomplished partly with the collusion of the state though outside the political legitimacy of a democratic regime. In the early months of 1921, the squadrists ‘punitive expeditions’ were decimating the socialist unions both in the countryside and in the city (Lyttelton, 1973). By now the Fiume episode had ended in failure, and many of D’Annunzio’s former legionnaires were joining either the Fascist or the left-wing militias. In April of 1921, in an effort to turn the tide of defeat, Gramsci, then one

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(5) By 1919 the population of Fiume was approximately 63% Italian, 20% Croatian, and 10% Hungarian, with a small minority of Austrians, ‘Slavs’, Serbs, and Jews making up the balance (see de Felice, 1974, page xxxvi).

(6) For an account of the Fiume adventure see Ledeen (1977) and de Felice (1974) for a collection of speeches and political documents that emerged from Fiume. Both Ledeen and de Felice see D’Annunzio and his Fiume legionnaires as trying to create something that was different and much more radical than the Fascist regime that would later emerge. For an account that stresses the role of D’Annunzio as a creative force in the mass rituals of Fascism see George Mosse, “The poet and the exercise of political power”, in Masses and Man (1987).
of the leaders of the newly formed Italian Communist Party, tried meeting with D’Annunzio in the hope of convincing him to support the embattled socialist forces or at least to speak out more forcefully against squadrism. The event never took place as D’Annunzio, at the very last moment, refused to meet Gramsci, who was anxiously waiting in the poet’s study. Of that aborted meeting D’Annunzio wrote, “I will not let this meeting be imposed upon me. I want to choose the opportune moment. I will not receive Signore Gramsci” (Alatri, 1983, page 499). Whether the political alliance would have proven successful is difficult to predict. But at this crucial historical juncture D’Annunzio remained politically quiescent. On the eve of the March on Rome, 28 October 1922, D’Annunzio received an urgent letter from Mussolini asking him to march with the Fascists. He declined, feeling that they were merely parodying his ideas and actions. Later, when the regime was solidly entrenched, he lent it his support.

Whatever relationship D’Annunzio had with the Fascist regime was largely opportunistic and self-serving, a characteristic which he shared with many other groups and individuals in Italy who assented to Fascist rule. Though D’Annunzio spoke to key themes of a Fascist culture—the aestheticisation of politics, the cult of the warrior-hero, imperialism, and nationalism—at the same time he held views that were difficult to reconcile with some of the policies of the regime. He had powerful enemies within the Fascist leadership. The notorious Roberto Farinacci, chief of the Fascio of Cremona, well known for his brutality and coarseness, hated D’Annunzio and all he stood for. Nevertheless, when Fiume was finally annexed to Italy in 1924, Mussolini proposed to the king that D’Annunzio be made a titular prince of the region and great prestige was showered on the aging poet who, though honoured, was becoming increasingly marginal to the new Fascist politics of Italy. Umberto Eco recently repeated the generally accepted opinion of many contemporary historians when he remarked that the intellectual heritage of Italian Fascism, unlike its programmatic Nazi counterpart, was philosophically weak. Italian Fascism, wrote Eco, “was a fuzzy totalitarianism, a collage of different philosophical and political ideas, a beehive of contradictions ... D’Annunzio, a dandy who in Germany or in Russia would have been sent to the firing squad, ... was appointed as the bard of the regime because of his nationalism and his cult of heroism—which were in fact abundantly mixed up with influences of the French fin de siècle decadence” (1995, page 12). The contradictory “fuzzy totalitarianism” of the Fascist regime was able to accommodate an equally contradictory figure like D’Annunzio. And if, as is often pointed out, D’Annunzio’s cult of the hero, with its irrepressible narcissism and overblown manliness, was pointedly at odds with profamily aspects of Fascist bourgeois ideology (De Grazia, 1992, page 69), it did not prevent the regime from promoting D’Annunzian aesthetics for nationalistic and jingoistic ends. The romantic myth of the man of action and the masculinist ideology of conquest well suited the imperialist designs of Italian Fascism.

My interest in D’Annunzio is primarily cultural, and a good deal of my focus is on examining how politics, social processes, and literature take place together as an ensemble, as something that is more than merely coincidental. In the novels of D’Annunzio—and indeed if we take a sweeping look, in nearly all the knowledge and cultural production of the period in Italy, such as the positivist criminology of Cesare Lombroso, the literature of decadence, and the policies of Italian imperialist politicians—can be found what Raymond Williams has termed “structures of

(5) The PCI (Partito Communista Italiano) was founded in January 1921, a time when the workers had lost their confidence in the possibility of revolution.
feelings” (6) (1984) and what Edward Said has called “structures of attitudes and references” (7) (1993). These linguistic representations, usually in D’Annunzio related to race, nation, empire, and degeneration or regeneration, do not arise from some preexisting coherent idea that a writer autonomously creates, but are instead part of a complex set of conventions, attitudes, and theories that appear at a particular junction in history and work both in a complementary and in a contradictory manner upon the formation of an hegemonic cultural discourse. These elaborate “structures of feelings” are inscribed in the discursive practice of a period; they can be clearly recognised as tropes operating in a literary narrative, and their presence is not simply passive but rather is bound up with and furiously at work in the development of an imaginary national identity.

Decadent literature and European imperialism
In a number of his novels and plays D’Annunzio creates a distinctive national narrative that offers political balm for the ills of Italian culture. Often this narrative speaks of the emergence of a man of action who will reinvigorate the nation and lead it to imperial conquests. Invariably it lapses into political rant. From the publication of his fourth novel Le Vergini delle Rocce (1897, reprinted in English, 1899) (8) onward D’Annunzio used belles lettres as a medium for his politics. Although this self-conscious fusion of art and politics disturbed many contemporary critics, it points to the broader social circumstances under which all art is produced. In the modern age, literature is a cultural artifact of both bourgeois society and politics and is in fact unthinkable without reference to both. Neither independent of politics nor a mere reflection of the political, literature can be positioned as part of a complex cultural discourse implicated in a struggle over meaning (Belsey, 1980). The literary text offers the reader models of behaviour, imaginary resolutions to social and political conflicts and anxieties (Jameson, 1981), and a sense of the aspirations possible in, as well as the limitations of, bourgeois society (Said, 1993).

D’Annunzio’s fiction is tied to a national cultural discourse that is both consciously and unconsciously nationalist and imperial and imagines itself in a geographical world where the political map of the nation is overlaid by a tissue of imperial and sexual symbols. It is by no means an accident that D’Annunzio fixes socially desirable, empowered space in metropolitan Italy or the urban space of other European countries and connects this space by a perceived grand design to distant peripheral worlds which are conceived of as exotic and erotic, but subordinate: sites such as Africa, Byzantium, the Abruzzi, the Adriatic coast, and the countryside in general.

(6) Williams uses the term in The Long Revolution to designate the lived experience of an historical period. “The most difficult thing to get hold of, in studying any past period”, he writes, “is this felt period of the quality of life at a particular place and time”. He uses the term almost synonymously with the notion of “social character”, already well developed by people like Wilhem Reich, Erich Fromm, Theodor Adorno, David Reisman, as well as with Ruth Benedict’s idea of “patterns of culture” (1984, pages 63–64).

(7) Said, though relying on Williams’s idea of “structures of feelings” as part of the lived experience of a culture, want to underscore the point that these feelings exist for the present-day historian and literary critic as textual references. Moreover, these references are never exclusively about a specific culture, say English culture, but are part of a larger geographical articulation. British cultural identity needs a contrapuntal ‘other’ which the subject peoples of the British empire provided. (See Said, 1993, page 53.)

(8) Le Vergine was first published in serialised form in the new imperialist and ultranationalist journal, Il Convito.
These articulations of relation are essential aspects of a discourse about empire and nationalism, and though the two are not synonymous and presuppose different spaces and conceptualisations, the D’Annunzian national narrative, like the narratives of Rudyard Kipling, Auguste-Maurill Barrès, and Joseph Conrad, cannot be detached from Europe’s imperialist moorings, for it both participates in the European excitement of empire and it spreads that excitement within national boundaries.

The literature of D’Annunzio, in fact, represents a significant shift away from the liberal nationalism of the Risorgimento and a move towards a broader European imperial discourse with its crude Nietzscheanism, racist theories, and social Darwinist underpinnings. Many of the national bourgeoisie in Europe in the late 19th century, especially in France, Belgium, England, Italy, and Germany, were avowedly imperialist, and the hegemonic national cultures that took shape during this period extended, repeated, or otherwise engendered imperialist interests and values. Without the fillip of European imperialism, the Italian nationalism of the Risorgimento might have crumbled into regionalism and sectarianism. Imperialism allowed the Italian bourgeoisie, much as it did in other European countries, to mystify the emerging violent class struggle while at the same time promoting new social hierarchies. The peasantry and the urban proletariat could find avenues of escape in colonial lands, whereas the indigenous peoples of the new colonies were delegated to a lower cultural, racial, and ontological status. D’Annunzio’s longstanding affiliation with Italian imperialism allowed him to pay a significant role in shaping this hegemonic discourse both indirectly through his literature and much more forcefully through his political and intellectual intervention in the politics of post-Risorgimento Italy.

D’Annunzio borrowed many of his ideas from a rich wellspring of European sources. The literary critic Praz, whose study the Romantic Agony remains an outstanding, albeit a fundamentally essentialist, critique of the pathologies of romanticism and the disturbed visions of the modern artist, has argued that D’Annunzio was the “most monumental figure of decadence, ... the figure in which the various European currents of the second half of the nineteenth century converged” (1970, page 399). It is D’Annunzio, says Praz, “who was the first to introduce Italians to the Anglo-French Byzantium of the end of the century” (page 279). This is a significant observation as it accurately positions D’Annunzio as an intellectual aligned to the metropolitan centres of Europe, who struggle to relate to a European aestheticism which was at that time saturated with the tropes of empire. His work incorporated—harsher critics say plagiarised—Arthur Schopenhauer’s misogynist and pessimistic

(9) Gramsci opines that D’Annunzio represented such a break: “A certain continuity and unity seems to have existed from the Risorgimento up to Carducci and Pascoli ... [it] was broken with D’Annunzio and successors (1971a, page 111).

(10) The charge of plagiarism is common in D’Annunzian scholarship. See in particular Francesco Floria, D’Annunzio (1926) and Enrico Thovez, Il Pastore, il Gregge e la Zampogna (1910). For a contemporary and more interesting view on this theme see Valesio, Gabriele D’Annunzio: The Dark Flame and Spackman, Decadent Genealogies. I am prone to agree with the later argument that D’Annunzio was an unabashed creative borrower, but I would like to add, on a speculative note, that the impulse to borrow and to ‘plagiarise’ from the latest contemporary trends of literature might have something to do with his desire to enter a European and metropolitan cultural scene and to take part in the adventure of European imperialism. Spackman and Valesio read D’Annunzio as a strong writer who seldom suffers from what Harold Bloom has called the “anxiety of influence”, I prefer to see him as what Michel de Certeau has called a strategic “textual poacher”, someone who liberally appropriates and rewrites cultural artifacts and feels little guilt for it precisely because of the empowerment associated with such appropriation.
aestheticism, Wagnerian idolatry, aspects of Nietzschean philosophy, the Marquis de Sade’s proclamations about nature and destruction, Algernon Swinburne’s interest in flagellation and masochism, the orientalist aesthetics of Gustave Flaubert and Theophile Gautier, the black magic and supernatural absurdities of Merodack Péladan, and all the esoteric and morbid themes of cruelty, horror, and necrophilia that were prominent in the decadent discourses of the fin de siècle. Of course, D’Annunzio, like every other writer, made a selection from among these motifs and transformed them and made them in some way his own. Part of this appropriation, or amalgamation, was the way he spread these tropes over national and geographic space.

Though he never relinquished his personal taste for these themes, his dissatisfaction with the cultural pessimism implicit in decadence emerged rather early in his career. Writing in 1896, he proclaimed, “I am like Richard Wagner a child of this century, that is to say a Decadent; with this difference: I am aware of it and I defend myself” (Salinari, 1970, page 76). The comment offers us a brief glimpse of a man who both embraced and fought against the immobilising tendencies often found within the decadent literary tradition. The French decadents, to whom D’Annunzio is most heavily indebted, used what Patrick Brantlinger has called a “negative classicism” (1983, page 114) to protest the perceived cultural tawdriness of bourgeois society. Alarmed by the rise of commercialism and mass society, French writers such as Faubert, Charles Baudelaire, Péladan, Barbey d’Aurevilly, and Rémy de Gourmont employed classic references and images to convey a mood of impending cultural doom. They disdainfully looked at their present ‘bourgeois’ world, compared it with the tottering empires of old, and prophesied, often in ironic and parodic terms, that it too will crumble. Des Esseintes, the hero of J-K Huysman’s Against Nature, a book which served as a model for D’Annunzio’s first novel Il Piacere, is perhaps the best representative of the decadent aesthete who, having gorged his senses in all kinds of exotic experiences and refined objects, finds he is able to live neither in the ‘refuge’ that he has created in his extravagant home Fontanez, nor in the bourgeois world of mass production and the urban crowd. After failing to create a sanctuary for his narcissism and his neurotic sensuality, Des Esseintes masochistically delights in his own disintegration and in the idea of the downfall of society at large. “Well, crumble then, society! perish old world!” says Des Esseintes in the last pages of the book (Huysmans, 1959, page 218). Decadent literature is full of these kinds of apocalyptic sentiments where the hero wilfully withdraws from society, a dying victim of the modern world. Death will be beautiful, even welcomed. The languid youths of fin de siècle artistic fashion revelled in the sensual experience that they were certain the ebbing of life would bring (Pierron, 1981).

D’Annunzio both exploited and moved away from this image by turning the label ‘decadent’ into a broad term of abuse for his political enemies. Influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche and the medical model of degeneration, D’Annunzio launched a searing critique on the alleged decadent elements of society which, according to him, blocked any cultural or political regeneration. Yet it is somewhat misleading to describe D’Annunzio as someone who moves from the ‘negative classicism’ and the sometimes ironic cultural pessimism found in decadent literature to the more muscular ‘classicism’ associated with Italian imperialism, with its nostalgic metaphors and images of Roman strength and vitality. The ‘negative classicism’ of decadence provides the reader with the pure pleasures of reading about exotic places, the sites of abominable acts, voluptuous tales, exquisite objects, and unspeakable horrors, all of which reveal a hidden interest in the pleasures of empire and of European colonisation.
As with many of the decadents, the collapse of empire provides D’Annunzio with his most evocative images of decay and excess. Praz gives an account of how widespread and deeply entrenched the image of a crumbling empire was in European literature and how its inflections changed during the course of the 19th century. Flaubert and Gautier, in the first part of the century, wrote Praz, “had invoked the imperial orgies of the Orient and of Rome, dominated by some monstrous figure such as Sardanapalus, Semiramis, Cleopatra, Nero, Heliodorus” to denote that the Empire, having reached its maturity, was throwing up disturbing figures as premonitions of decay. By the later part of the 19th century, the Byzantine period was invoked as a marker of deep and unremitting corruption. The vivid invocation of “the gory annals of the Eastern Empire”, continued Praz, “barbaric yet refined, torn by dissention and court hatred, hemmed in by all sides by barbarian conquerors, a body full of bruises and decay enveloped in ... a mantle of heavy gold” (page 418), served to shape a discourse about the deep corruption of European culture. But the “bruised body” of the Eastern Empire and the signifiers of imperial collapse have an even broader political valence. Said has argued that the European imperial attitude gave rise to a strange mix of aesthetic images having to do with imperial possession, which for the European remained hauntingly attractive: “the concubines, dancing girls, odalisques of Gérome, Delacroix’s Sardanapalus, Mattisse’s North Africa, Saint-Sain’s Samsom and Delilah. The list is long and its treasures massive” (1993, page 273). Placed within the context of European imperialism, markers of the Byzantine world become signs of the economic interests of empire, charged with the excitement of exotic desire and transgressive pleasure. That these tropes should arise in the later part of the century when the Ottoman Empire—home of the ‘barbarians’ who had conquered the Byzantine world—was undergoing its own internal disintegration and external dismemberment by European powers, is not accidental and reveals a more complex historical mediation.

The politics of decay and regeneration
In his youthful days in Rome, D’Annunzio made his early reputation as a writer and later as the short-lived editor of an influential and successfully commercial journal, Cronaca Bizantina (1881–85). The masthead of that journal had a epigram from Italy’s leading republican poet Giosuè Carducci: “Unready Italy asked for Rome, Byzantium they have given her”. The reference is to the disappointed liberalism that emerged in Italy after unification. Carducci, who was actively involved with the struggle for independence, wanted the new nation to become a new republican Rome (a Third Rome) which he consciously opposed to the political jobbery and corrupt Byzantium that was modern Italy (Drake, 1980). The Italian philosopher and critic Benedetto Croce, while writing on D’Annunzio in 1904, cast his critical eye on the journal and assessed its importance thus: “In Cronaca Bizantina, worked or appeared for the first time writers of very different dispositions; but old or young, sensualists or ascetic, erudite or bohemians, all had by that collaboration a baptism or a christening in modernity” (1915, page 26). The bizantini writers were not simply followers of Carducci: they were fledgling imaginative writers involved in modern aesthetic issues. The journal gave them a window into modern European culture, an escape from narrow provincialism, and perhaps more importantly, a forum in which to express a literary and political identity. The bizantini were among the first Italian intellectuals to experience the freedoms and perils of the modern press. They were ecstatic with the liberty to write on whatever subjects they pleased, and their articles often ranked with vindictiveness against the philistineism of the reading public they served. Following in the footsteps of the French decadent
writers, some of the *bizantini*, and D'Annunzio in particular, critiqued society with an ironic delight in everything that was ultrarefined or exotic, an ideal which was counterpoised to the plebeian and crude tastes of the bourgeois and the 'mindless herd'. Critics like Croce point to D'Annunzio as a major influence in spreading orientalist faddishness in Italian cultural circles; indeed for Croce, this is an early troubling sign of Italian 'decadentismo' (Calinescu, 1987, page 217): a haughty disregard for a traditional politics and culture, stress on exotic and recherché themes that lay outside the national literature, and mocking revulsion for the way that society was perceived to be falling, in consecutive stages, into disgrace. Although it is true that much *bizantini* criticism was little more than artistic and literary posing—even the name *bizantini* was used as self-irony—it nonetheless became both part of an unrelenting attack on the politics of the day and of a call for national renewal.

In the years during and following his association with the *bizantini* D'Annunzio's polemics against the decadence of Italian culture included many barbed attacks against the pusilanimous nature of the middle class, yet this did not prevent that very same class from accepting a great deal of excoriation as long as they found, as surely they did in his novels and his journalism, a number of converging themes by which a unanimity of view could be maintained. The interests of the middle classes coalesced with those of D'Annunzio most notably in a mutual desire to overcome the perceived national weakness. The disillusionment with the Risorgimento and the compromises and weaknesses that afflicted postunification Italy fostered an urge towards dramatic solutions. Political unification had not brought about the hoped for regeneration of social and cultural life; instead, it highlighted deep divisions. Industrial growth in Northern Italy was sharpening the contrast between North and South. Industrial strikes and peasant uprising became common occurrences and as the fissures and stresses intensified, imperialism was seen by some as an outlet for many of the country's problems.

D'Annunzio's literary career was established during the period when the colourful and dictatorial Francesco Crispi ruled Italy. In the late 1880s Crispi's authoritarian methods and adventurous foreign policies, although failures, were to become a source of inspiration for the nationalists. Imperialism appealed to the self-interests of many groups: adventurers wanted glory, politicians sought prestige, military planners coveted naval bases, entrepreneurs wanted favourable concessions, and Catholic missionaries, converts. But it especially appealed to Southern landowners worried about the land-hunger of the peasantry. Crispi, a Southerner, wanted to strengthen the authority of the state and the monarchy, and under his demagogic leadership a brawling nationalism was stirred both to consolidate the power of the middle-class state and to provide a potential safety valve for both the Southern peasantry and the emerging proletarian class.

As a latecomer to colonial expansion, Italy was especially disadvantaged and had to be satisfied with the 'crumbs' that other European nations let fall from the banquet table. Even the snatching of the few colonial leftovers, however, proved a daunting task. Italian colonial policy had an interest in the Eastern Mediterranean and in Africa, and it began in earnest in 1885 with the occupation of the port city of Massawa on the Red Sea. Soon the Italian army pushed further inland in Eritrea but was routed in 1887 when 400 Italian colonial soldiers were killed at Dogali. This was the situation that Crispi inherited when he came to power. During his tenure he redoubled the nation's effort to gain colonies in Africa, initially with some success. However, as the nation was incapable of undertaking such a task, his plans eventually led to the disastrous battle of Adowa in 1896 when 5000 Italian troops
were killed and nearly 2000 taken prisoner, thus marking the first major defeat of a European nation by an African state (Clark, 1984, page 99). The defeat was a dire blow to Italian prestige. The humiliation and loss suffered in 1896 furnished further proof of decadence and provided grist to the mill of national pessimism. It also brought the Crispi government down in disgrace. As Gramsci later remarked, "Crispi's imperialism was passionate, oratorical, without any economic or financial basis... The still immature Italy not only had no capital for export, but had to have recourse to foreign capital for its own pressing needs. Hence there was lacking any real drive behind Italian imperialism, and it was substituted for by strong popular passions of the peasants, blindly intent on possessing land" (1971b, page 68). The early stages of Italian imperialism, as Gramsci correctly assessed, took place before the arrival of large-scale industry and capitalism, and to compensate for the lack of an economic basis it relied on rhetorical flourishes, nostalgia for the past, and the fictional promise of the wealth of colonial lands.

The oversized national pride of Crispi, with its emphasis on fiery harangues, finds its corollary in D'Annunzio's narratives, especially his later novels Le Vergini delle Rocce (1897) and Il Fuoco (1900), where we find the hero espousing the bombast and rhetoric of strength, conquest, and regeneration. In these novels, the hero is no longer a neurasthenic victim evincing at best a pathetic or ironic sympathy from the reader; he has discovered his inner strength and the reader stands in a kind of shuddering awe of him. The new D'Annunzian hero has reversed his own disintegration and looks to a future when the 'crowd' has been sufficiently nationalised, its amorphous energies focused and subordinated to a leader, so that it can be cast as a protagonist in the momentous struggle for national renewal. As these are imperialist narratives the struggle is between European and non-European 'races'. In one of his most shrill imperialist essays, "La bestia effettiva" (1896), D'Annunzio pointed out how "European civilization like a voracious spider, envelopes in its web the entire globe. In America, whole races have disappeared upon contact with the white man; the people of Oceania are vanishing... Africa has been completely invaded. By what right? By the right of the stronger" (Valesio, 1989, page 53). Following the social Darwinist argument of the "struggle of the fittest", D'Annunzio sees in imperialism a means with which the troubling underclass at home can be both controlled and uplifted from its own degeneration. This had certainly been true of English imperialism, which pushed its conquests abroad while making sure that the urban working classes were contained at home by conscripting them to the cause. And this was certainly the intent of the proselytisers of Italian imperialism like Crispi and D'Annunzio, who wanted to arouse popular passions and channel them towards imperialist ends.

The regenerative side of the D'Annunzian national narrative took a number of years to develop. In his early novels, such as Il Piacere (1889), L'Innocente (1892), and Il Trionfo della Morte (1895), he continued to focus on the fragmentation of

Footnote:

British imperialism was quite open about its intentions of using the Empire as a safety valve for domestic class war. Lenin in his Imperialism (1916) quotes from a 1895 speech of English imperialist and adventurer Cecil Rhodes: "I was in the East End of London yesterday and attended a meeting of the unemployed and listened to wild speeches which were just a cry for bread! bread! ... in order to save the 40,000,000 inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle surplus population, to provide for the goods produced by them in factories and mines. The Empire as I always said, is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war you must become imperialists" (1982, page 75; first published 1916).
consciousness and the ebbing of vital energies. But increasingly, his imperialist politics and desire for renewal made him rethink and refashion his narratives. The growing popularity within the middle classes of the medical model of degeneration played a part in this transformation. By the mid-1890s the pseudo-scientific analysis of degeneration, which had been promoted by the likes of Benedict Morel, Lombroso, Enrico Ferri, and Max Nordau, began to have a considerable cultural influence. Nordau, himself a physician, was the chief populariser of the medical model of cultural decay. In *Degeneration* (1892), dedicated to Lombroso, he outlined all the symptoms of European decay and attacked the whole tradition of modern literature and art for its mental weakness and corrupting influence. Ferri, one of Lombroso’s most noted disciples, made a much more pointed critique. In his book *I Delinquenti Nell’arte* (*Delinquents in Art*) (1892, see Becker, 1994; Spackman, 1989), Ferri analysed one of D’Annunzio’s fictional characters, Tullio Hermil, the protagonist of *L’Innocente*, and called him a classical example of deprived decadent sensibilities and a representative of contemporary social ills (Becker, 1994, page 135; Spackman, 1989, page 142). What Nordau and Ferri criticised as symptoms of degeneration were really the emerging signs of modernist aesthetics, and D’Annunzio never fully abandoned the themes that Croce had seen as part of the novelist’s “decadentismo”: the exploration of the dark subjective forces at the root of personal obsession and inner fragmentation. He did however complement these psychological explorations of decline with a new Nietzschean life-enhancing philosophy that relied on psychological self-inflation, and indeed, it is almost impossible not to notice how much his call to renewal is tied both to personal self-inflation and to imperialist national self-aggrandisement. For a large segment of the educated Italian middle classes, D’Annunzio’s Nietzschean rants, his contempt for the masses, and his wish simultaneously to contain and to ‘uplift’ them through the rhetoric of imperialism, placed him within an established field of meaning that not only made sense, but had the distinctive resonance of common sense.

**The Child of Pleasure**

With the above context firmly in mind I want to turn my attention to D’Annunzio’s novel *Il Piacere*,\(^{(12)}\) in order to examine how the geographic signs of empire are inscribed in the narrative. Such inscriptions use a highly coded language and are situated by an unrelenting use of discursive hierarchies where the European, metropolitan experience is foregrounded and privileged, whereas that of the peripheral ‘other’ is both devalued and made exotic. The choice of *Il Piacere* is not arbitrary. It represents D’Annunzio at the beginning of his novelistic career. Published in 1889, *Il Piacere* was D’Annunzio’s first novel and one can still find in it a certain playfulness that would all but disappear with the author’s growing political stature. It is a book written by a twenty-six year old writer before he became an overbearing egomaniac. Written four years after his involvement with the bizantini, the novel displays D’Annunzio’s fascination for the Roman upper classes and the demimonde about which he wrote in the pages of *Cronaca Bizantina* under his own name as well as various pseudonyms. *Il Piacere* is also a radical departure from his previous short stories. Geographically, his stories, later collected as *Le Novelle della Pescara* (1902),\(^{(13)}\) are set in his native Southern province of the Abruzzi. Written in the

\(^{(12)}\) D’Annunzio, 1978, pages 1–150. All English quotes, unless otherwise indicated, are from *The Child of Pleasure* (1925).

\(^{(13)}\) These were translated as *Tales of my Native Town* (1920). Some of these short stories are found in Rosenthal’s new edition of *Nocturne and Five Tales of Love and Death* (1988).
homegrown style of Italian naturalism (verismo) they are tales of revenge and explosive violence, spiced with ‘savage’ rites and ‘primitive’ passions. Most of the stories deal with madness, disease, and death. As a Southern intellectual within the newly united nation, D’Annunzio was playing the hegemonic role of representing the ‘primitive’ Italian South to a national bourgeois audience and affirming that the cultural ‘backwardness’ of the South had a certain vitality which needed to be both exploited and controlled. Il Piacere, on the other hand, is influenced by French decadent sources, especially Huysmans’s Against Nature, and it highlights an embattled cosmopolitan consciousness at once both national and European.

On the surface the narrative of Il Piacere focuses on the love affairs between Andrea Sperelli and two women, the sensual and enigmatic Elena Muti, who is married to an English aristocrat, and the spiritual Maria Ferres, married to a senior diplomat from Guatemala. Both Elena and Maria are Italian women submissive to the authority of their foreign husbands, and they are represented throughout the text as if they were ‘territory’ to be reclaimed and reconquered by Sperelli. Yet Il Piacere is not a self-conscious text about imperialism in the same way that D’Annunzio’s later work is, such as the play La Nave or novels like Le Vergini delle Rocce or Il Fuoco. There is no superuomo hero, no defiant artist wishing to lead his race to new destiny. There is nonetheless an implicit imperialist “political unconscious”, to use Frederic Jameson’s (1981) term, operating in the text.

Il Piacere was published two years after Italy’s first ill-fated attempt at imperialist expansion into Africa in 1887. The novel is set in the very year of the defeat and offers a much quoted reference to Italy’s African adventure. As Sperelli watches a Roman crowd demonstrating in sympathy of the colonial troops killed in Dogali, he expresses contempt for the “four hundred brutes who had died the death of brutes” (1925, page 244). When Il Piacere was published that phrase scandalised public opinion. D’Annunzio was criticised by the nationalists and his editor Treves was pressured to remove the passage from the novel. In his own defence D’Annunzio argued that the “phrase was uttered by Andrea Sperelli not Gabriele D’Annunzio, and it fits well in the mouth of that monster” (Gatti, 1956, page 181). The passage stayed in. D’Annunzio, of course, had constructed Sperelli as someone who affected the typical aesthete’s indifference to politics, and the phrase was, in fact, a very oblique reference in a novel that, though speaking about the imperial conceit of the artist in an age of the masses, makes only one passing reference to the Italian desire for empire. The novel also contains passing references to a public demonstration by the increasingly organised urban workers, and a brief sketch about a sickly baby seen by Elena and Sperelli which stands out as a commentary on the horrible conditions of the public health of the new country, but these topical themes are located in the background.

Most of Il Piacere is set in aristocratic surroundings in Rome. Descriptions of the city punctuate the narrative and are structurally linked to the characters. Rome appears in many different lights and moods but always the references are to high culture, the past glory of the Roman Empire, and the history of the Roman church as the centre of European culture. From 1870, when Rome first became the capital of the new united Italy, to 1890, the city underwent a dramatic transformation as money poured in: many of the patrician gardens attached to the old city palaces were sold to make room for governmental offices and new dwellings for the Northern bureaucrats. Real-estate speculation ran rampant until finally in the late 1880s the overheated market collapsed and caused the financial ruin of many Roman aristocrats. During this period Rome became an international city, losing in the process much of its insularity. The close-shuttered palaces gave way to a lively cafe society. Il Piacere
Sex, geography, and death

records the changes of the city and describes the charm of the old Rome in great
detail, and is particularly intent at showing the pleasures of a frivolous aristocracy
enjoying the lavish balls, dinner parties, and various entertainments of the metropolis.
For many European travellers to Rome, especially middle-class aesthetes who
came from Paris, London, or Berlin, Il Piacere became, as Phillipe Jullian, one of
D'Annunzio's more lively biographers put it, an indispensable supplement to
Baedeker's famous travel guide (1972, page 66). Indeed, the characters in the novel
themselves are less interesting than the fashionable objects, bibelots, and bric-a-brac
that they use, the paintings at which they look, and books that they read. D'Annunzio
constructed a typology of Rome, not merely of its monuments and its new fashionable
piazzas, but as an ideological landscape in which the signs of contemporary
European empire are both solidly and imperceptibly anchored.

Although Rome occupies a privileged site, a good deal of Il Piacere revolves
around descriptions of precious objects, foreign lands, exotic perfumes, jewels,
ivory, furs, tea from Calcutta, great gilded Buddhas, Japanese swords, and Persian
carpet, all of which are representative of the artifacts and commodities of empire
very much in demand by the upper classes. The narrator explains that "in that year
the craze for bric-a-brac reached the point of madness. The drawing rooms of the
nobility and the upper middle classes were crammed with curios. The sales rooms
were the favourite meeting places, and every sale crowded. Tremendous bidding!
Such wonderful Hispano-Moroccan plaques" (page 32). Many of these objects came
from the villas of the bankrupt Roman aristocracy, and some were objects of past
imperial exploitation. The signifiers of empire appear at times silently in the back-
ground, at others in glaring prominence. But these signifiers are only positive values
insofar as they reflect the glory of empire; the actual representatives of foreign
lands are constructed much differently. Cavaliere Sakumi, one of the secretaries to
the Japanese legation who briefly appears early in the novel, is described as "very
small and yellow, with prominent cheekbones and ... with a glint of malice in his slits
of eyes and a sort of ironical cunning about the corners of his mouth" (page 5). Don
Manuel Ferres, the Guatemalan diplomat and husband of Maria, the women whom
Andrea wishes to "conquer", is also characterised with deeply racist language:
"there was something disagreeably hybrid and morose, that indefinable air of
viciousness which belongs to the later generations of bastard races brought up in the
midst of moral disorder" (page 115). It is no surprise then that by the end of the
novel Don Manuel is caught cheating at cards, bringing dishonour to his family, and
precipitating his eventual banishment from Rome. By contrast, the Italian Maria
possesses an "abundant and varied culture" and a vivid imagination. She has
travelled to far-flung places and has returned enriched by the experience. To
Andrea, Maria seems "to exhale some exotic charm, some strange fascination, some
spell born of the phantoms of the far-off things she had looked upon, the perfumes
she had inhaled, the strange dialects she had heard—all the magic of these countries
in the sun" (page 120).

The surroundings that invigorate the lives of the European characters are
associated with details of empire; often they are used as descriptive aphrodisiacs.
One minor character in the novel refers to an erotic adventure while travelling
through India. Another, in a passage that was excised from the English translation,
launches into a discussion of "the singular smell of Native American women".(14)

(14) This quote is my translation from the Italian edition of Il Piacere, page 77. Georgina
Harding, D'Annunzio's English translator, edited passages that she considered offensive to
Victorian sensibilities. The actual passage reads: "Il Bominanco si mise a ragionare
dell'odore singolare che hanno le donne rosse".
Maria’s travels have added both to her physical beauty and to her “rich” speech, whereas the oriental decor of her room contributes to her spirituality: “from pieces of furniture here and there, came gleams of ivory and mother of pearl; a great gilded Buddha shone out of the background under a tall palm. Something of the exotic mystery of these things was diffused over the drawing room” (page 234). The territory beyond the metropolis is life-enhancing to a European, but curiously corrupting to those who live there, as is evident in the above-mentioned descriptions of Don Manuel Ferres and Cavaliere Sakumi. The unrelenting application of discursive hierarchy produced the ‘high-imperialist’ racist and orientalist narratives which were so widespread at the turn of the century.\(^{(15)}\)

The empire is constructed as the centre of a social Darwinist universe where the mighty rule but are also subject both to the laws of hereditary degeneration and to the ceaseless competition from more virile opponents. Lord Heathfield, Elena’s husband, is a descendant of the Lieutenant General who was the hero of the defence of Gibraltar and who was afterward “immortalized by the brush of Sir Joshua Reynolds” (page 194). Yet he himself carries few traces of the strength of his ancestors and indeed is marked by the signs of physical decay. He is described as having pale eyes and a prominent forehead that “assumed a hideous death-look” (page 213), and “flabby white fingers” with polished pointed nails, “a little livid like the nails of an ape” (page 275). He is suffering from the early stages of a spinal disease that makes his body stiff and his “movements jerky” (page 276). “Mumps” is Elena’s pet name for him. Further, he is not only sickly and possibly syphilitic but also a sadist. A collector of erotic art and literature, he takes special delight in showing Sperelli his private edition of de Sade’s works which had been specially printed for him on Japanese imperial paper and bound with shark skin, and then he brings Sperelli to Elena so that he can carefully watch Elena’s reactions to the presence of her lover. D’Annunzio’s portrayal of Lord Heathfield, pointing to his collection of the works of de Sade with his skeletal fingers while sitting beneath a portrait of an oversexualised Elena, is a brilliant representation of an earlier empire enveloped in voluptuousness, awaiting its final ruin.

Andrea Sperelli is an aesthete and the last surviving member of a noble old Italian family which kept alive culture and art, but which is now being swallowed by “the gray deluge of democratic mud” (page 23). He shares the aesthete’s traditional hatred for the masses and democracy, and believes that the “man” of art—and of course it is always a man—has a spark of genius that sets “him” apart from the rest of society. He is an artist who dreams of beholding a “great river of blood” (page 100) and is nostalgic about the mythic conquests of his warlike ancestors. But he is also tormented by feelings of impeding intellectual degeneration which periodically send him into panic. “What if my intellect has become decadent?—if my hand has lost its cunning? what if I’m not worthy? ... The slow decay of power may be imperceptible to the possessor—that is the terrible thing about it” (page 102). Sperelli’s anxiety demands a constant reaffirmation that the spark of genius has not been extinguished. He must constantly challenge himself with greater acts of creation and greater acts of conquest in order to validate his genius and superiority. Hence, the imperial conceit of the artist conveniently dovetails with the age of empire, a double movement indicated by Sperelli’s desire to conquer two women.

D’Annunzio polarises Sperelli’s lovers into conventional archetypes. Elena, the femme fatale, “has the mouth of the Medusa of Leonardo” (page 62). Maria, on the

\(^{(15)}\) I do not want to imply that European literature no longer contains racism or orientalism; rather, I am alluding to the form such narratives took at a particular historical juncture.
other hand, is a “pre-Raphaelite Madonna” (page 116). Sperelli, caught in the
classic masculine ‘Madonna or whore’ conundrum, wants both Elena’s sensuality
and Maria’s spirituality and so devises a plan that will permit his artistic genius to
synthesise the two women and by so doing “possess a third, imaginary mistress,
more complex, more perfect, more true, because she would be ideal” (page 243).
This is the possibility that aesthetics hold out to Andrea: he can have both women
through artifice and imagination. In practical terms, whenever he is with Maria, in
his imagination he superimposes on her some of the characteristics of Elena, and vice
versa. This imaginary resolution, however, is doomed to fail. While in a tryst with
Maria, he utters Elena’s name and Maria recognises the treachery and leaves him.

Unable to imagine a woman as a complete person, as both object and subject of
desire, Sperelli, aided by what he believes to be his superior aesthetic sensibility,
searches guiltily for an ideal—and therefore nonexistent—woman. His misguided
sense of genius and his overriding narcissism ultimately leave him empty and alone.
The last pages of the novel eloquently express his emotional and intellectual empti-
ness, amply mixed with the panic about social decay that invariably intrudes into his
world. As mentioned above, Don Manuel Ferres’s card cheating has caused a
scandal which forces the family to sell their furnishings and leave Rome. Andrea
goes to Maria’s apartment where the auction is taking place and finds it teeming
with people, gathered around the auctioneer’s table. Most of the buyers are shop-
keepers, secondhand furniture dealers, and the lower classes, who are jostling to get
a bargain on the exotic items that decorated Maria’s rooms. “A vile odour
permeated the hot air exhaled by the crowd of dirty perspiring people” (page 310).
Stifled by the nauseating smell of the “common crowd”, Sperelli walks around the
apartment with neurasthenically heightened senses: “Although he was walking on a
thick carpet, he heard his footsteps as if the boards were bare. He bought the
Buddha, a great carved cabinet, some china, some pieces of drapery” (page 310).
He leaves because he feels that the contact with all those “unclean people” has
contaminated him with “the germs of obscure and irremediable diseases”. Later that
evening, overcome by a desire to revisit the dismantled rooms, he returns and finds
that hardly anything remains. “Some men were taking down the hangings from the
walls, discarding a paper with great vulgar flowers, torn here and there and hanging
in strips. Others were engaged in taking up and rolling the carpets, raising a cloud
of dust that glittered in the sunlight. One of them sang scraps of a lewd song. Dust
and tobacco smoke mingled and rose to the ceiling. Andrea fled” (page 310). The
room that once exuded the spirituality and charm of far exotic lands is now tawdry
and vulgar, marked by torn wallpaper, smoke and dust, and scraps of lewd songs.

Unlike Huysmans’s Against Nature, where Des Esseintes symbolically opens the
floodgates to the vulgar crowd and invites them to his and their own impending
doom, D’Annunzio provides a more moralistic finale. There is no melancholy
delight in one’s own decline, only a wounded recognition that such a state is unbear-
able. D’Annunzio does not shrink from showing the moral bankruptcy of the
aristocrat engrossed in his own pleasures or of the aesthete who claims superiority
though he is in reality simply driven by his own selfish passions. No less a figure
than Croce, who at intervals throughout D’Annunzio’s career accused him of corrup-
ting Italian tastes and who blamed him for bringing into vogue all the bizarre and
questionable values that emerged at the end of the century, agrees that D’Annunzio
is especially honest in showing the “obscure sadness” that dwells at the bottom of all
pleasure and lust (1915). In a character like Sperelli, writes Croce, the reader
recognises the “moral misery”, the “lie”, and “falsity” of his actions. Sperelli, con-
tinues Croce, is not a man of sensualism and egoism; rather, he is “dominated by
sensualism and egoism” (page 48). As a writer D’Annunzio is at his most powerful precisely as he imagines and renders the moment of neurotic obsession and the anxiety of decline. Here the didactic role of a book like Il Piacere becomes obvious. D’Annunzio constructed Sperelli, as he put it in his defence of the novel against the nationalist critics, as a “monster”, as an elementary symbol that could be readily understood by his readers. Part of the function of Il Piacere is to show the disillusionment of the hero’s quest, thus allowing the reader to judge and perceive the ‘wrong’ actions and beliefs of the character without following them. D’Annunzio’s much vaunted reputation as a decadent rests principally on his ability to conjure up such scenes of psychological devastation, which later were to become the perfect foils for a political call to personal and national regeneration.

From Il Piacere to the pleasure of sacrificial death

What is of particular interest to me is how the text of Il Piacere has been worked over and saturated both consciously and unconsciously by an ideology of imperialism. We can recognise how deeply these ideological values have sunk into the fabric of culture in the ways in which the distant peripheral world is exoticised and subordinated to the pleasures of the European metropolis, in the representations of gender and race in the text, and in the way that perceived decay is a source of deep and unsettling anxiety. In his later novels and plays, D’Annunzio gives his heroes new language with which to uplift the ‘Latin race’ and resolve the problems of the nation. Andrea Sperelli is transformed into Claudio Cantelmo of Le Vergini delle Rocce, the Nietzschean superuomo who, wishing to sire a superbambino, goes out looking for a suitable female breeder for the founding of the new race. In Il Fuoco, Stelio Effrena is the Italian Wagnerian mythmaker, a successful orator and dominant of the crowd, who wants to establish a national theatre and to awaken the ‘national soul’ of Italy; in the new ritualised participatory theatre the gap between audience and actor would be eliminated so that both were one. In the last scene of his play La Nave, Marco Gratico, after having killed his brother—a symbolic reenactment of the foundational myth of Rome—and having been betrayed by the femme fatale Basiolila, is about to nail her to the prow of his ship and set sail against Byzantium for the greater glory of Venice. In his subsequent works, D’Annunzio also created characters with a distinctively imperial eye: an eye that casts its controlling and longing gaze on colonial land. In Forse che sì, forse che no (1910) Paolo Tarsis, an aviator and sportsman, was an explorer in Africa, and in the play Più che l'amore (1906) the protagonist Corrado Brando is an explorer whose desire to return to Africa means “more than love” to him. Both works utilise the coloniser’s discourse of systematically assessing, chartering, and observing an unknown terrain which, for the European, is full of possibilities: a place of adventure, a land where fortunes could be made, and sexual desires satiated (Pratt, 1992; Spurr, 1993).

The increasing use of these motifs has a great deal to do with the relative success of Italian imperialism in the early decades of the 20th century. Somalia formally became an Italian colony in 1905, and in 1911, Italy declared war on the remains of the tottering Ottoman Empire, occupied Rhodes and several islands in the Dodecanese, and eventually took possession of Libya. Though this quelled the thirst for revenge that had been burning since the defeat at Adowa in 1896, these advances also demanded a generation of young men to die willingly for their country, and like much of the nationalism of other imperial states, the ideology of Italian nationalism of the 1900s took on a decidedly sacrificial inflection that can best be described by using Richard Slotkin’s term: “regeneration through violence”
(1973, page 7). A brief look at two of D’Annunzio’s works written just before World War I, the play *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* (1911) and the screenplay for the movie *Cabiria* (1914), suggests elaborate links between imperial imagery, masculinist ideologies, and the idea of natural regeneration through death. These links were not uncommon nor were they new; in fact, European culture in the prewar years was saturated with them, partly because of the tireless promotion of figures such as D’Annunzio and Barrès, but largely because of the entrenchment within bourgeois ideology of the cult of manliness which, according to the historian Peter Gay, had become “a servant of diplomatic bullying, imperialist adventures, and the insouciant resort to arms” (1993, page 116). The enthusiasm with which the middle-class youth of various European countries threw themselves into the war, at least initially believing it to be an emancipatory and transcendent experience, suggests the powerful hold of such tropes. The seductiveness of these ideas continued to spread into the postwar era, especially in Italy and Germany, where men who had fought in the trenches looked back nostalgically at the camaraderie of those years as a transformative experience. The nationalists in particular made much of how the experience of the war enabled different groups of men to bond together and reconciled all class contradiction.

*St. Sebastian*, though written several years before the war, speaks to the cult of the hero and to the desires that tie warriors together. It is a mystery play written in French and accompanied by a musical score by Claude Debussy. The play was written during D’Annunzio’s five-year exile from Italy. He fled his creditors in 1910 after his extravagant lifestyle had left him financially ruined. During his exile he continued to write for the Italian press and was able to forge stronger ties with the French nationalists, especially those associated with *L’Action Française*. *St. Sebastian* was in fact dedicated to the French ultranationalist and literary figure Barrès, whose political and aesthetic evolution closely mirrored D’Annunzio’s own. When it first opened *St. Sebastian* was not critically acclaimed, but though it only played for a few weeks, it remained something of a cause célèbre after the Catholic Church unsuccessfully moved to ban further performances for heresy.

Sebastian, the captain of the Emperor’s archers, refuses to deny his Christian faith even though he is tempted by the Emperor with visions of apotheosis and empire. For his unshakable faith Sebastian is sentenced to be executed by his own archers. Although the archers are reluctant to turn on their leader, Sebastian pleads with them to follow the Emperor’s command and to kill him. During his execution the beautiful Sebastian professes not a Christian love of forgiveness for his executioners, but an erotic love, as he yields to and is conquered by the arrows. At least this is how D’Annunzio interprets St. Sebastian, and in this he followed a long-established tradition. Set in classical Rome in an atmosphere of torture and sexual ambiguity, *St. Sebastian* had as its leading star the Russian dancer Ida Rubinstein, whose anorexic figure was all the rage and set a new standard of beauty among the cultured women of Paris. In the last act Rubinstein, almost naked, tied to a cypress tree, her emaciated body bloodied, calls out for “more”, “more” of the

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(17) From Guido Reni’s painting of St. Sebastian to Derek Jarman’s film *Sebastiane* there is an unbroken trajectory of gay iconography. D’Annunzio was exploiting this tradition for his own purposes in order to subsume it within a promilitarist framework.

(18) For a number of interesting insights into the well publicised figure of Ida Rubinstein see Bram Dijkstra (1986).
punishing arrows. The finale of *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian* exemplifies the typical scene in the D'Annunzian theatre of death, and, with its orgiastic-nihilist climax, it evokes one of the central obsessions of romantic modernism: sacrificial death for a high spiritual cause.

*St Sebastian*, with its conscious blending of homoeroticism and death, is perhaps the most vivid example in D'Annunzio's oeuvre of turning death into an aesthetic experience. One of the chief accomplishments of Fascism, according to Walter Benjamin, was its ability to turn death into "an aesthetic experience of the first order" (1976, page 242). To understand this oft-quoted line we must briefly step back and examine the larger ideological grounds which gave rise to such images.

War was glorified by D'Annunzio, for its hygienic function and its erotic and pleasurable dimensions, and as an arena within which men could find and test their manliness. These masculinist ideas had already been well entrenched in the militant nationalism of the European fin de siècle. The literature of imperialism further suggests how much of an exceedingly male affair imperialism really was. Rulers of empire were engaged in fervent male friendships; this was a male world (Green, 1979). Homoerotic references appear frequently in D'Annunzio's texts: in his novel *Forse che si, forse che no* the two protagonists, aviators Paolo Tarsis and Giulio Cambiso, models of the new national heroes who exemplify the resurgence of Italy, are tied by implicit and unspoken sexual bonds. Historian Mosse (1985) maintains that European nationalism was able to elicit the latent erotic aspects of personal relationships between men and at the same time to keep them in check by absorbing them within bourgeois notions of virtue and national duty. Within this male world of an excited but displaced homoeroticism, Mosse maintains, a cult of death, which borrowed generously from the religious apocalyptic tradition, easily took root. Death in war helps to transmit the energies and principles of fallen comrades; the dead are resurrected within the living and those who sacrifice themselves for the nation pass on the 'essence' of the nation to future generations (Mosse, 1987). Fascist literature and rituals were filled with images of death and a celebration of martyrdom. The male figure who dies prematurely, often cruelly, his beautiful body bruised and scarred, symbolises the sacrifice and the redemption of the heroic youth charged with bringing forth a regenerated nation. In *St Sebastian* religious iconography is inscribed upon nationalist discourse and further overlaid with homoeroticism, thus turning Sebastian into an overcharged and contradictory symbol: part saint and part superman, both suffering Christ and beautiful Adonis, a youthful soldier whose death binds others in a rebirth of a new Christian Empire, simultaneously calling forth homoerotic desire and containing it through Christian and nationalistic rhetoric.\(^9\)

\(^{9}\) The association of Fascism with repressed homoeroticism has certainly had a long intellectual pedigree and is rooted in much of the work of the Frankfurt School, from which Mosse borrows liberally. Sometimes this argument is formulated in rather blunt terms, as in Theodor Adorno's aphorism, "Totalitarianism and homosexuality go together". This contention, with its explicit homophobia and implicit masculinism, makes Fascism something that is representational or symbolic; Fascism is not itself but something else: "repressed and distorted homoerotic desire". Though repressed male desire no doubt has a part to play in the formation of a Fascist psychology, such arguments can often function as a distraction from understanding both the horrors of Fascism and the social basis of the mind-set of a self-described warrior class. The psychology of Fascism, as Klaus Theweleit (1987) had argued in his analysis of the Nazi Freikorps, may be far less a displacement or a repression than many theorists of Fascism might think. At the root of Fascist psychology, argues Theweleit, is a socialised desire to produce death. The construction of such "death desire" is inseparable
In the film *Cabiria* the homoerotic theme is toned down and the underlying focus is on the exotic and heterosexual implications of imperial conquest. D'Annunzio's plays, poetry, and novels had a primarily middle-class audience. *Cabiria,* on the other hand, filled the cinemas of Italy and France for years and represents one of those rare moments when the themes and references of an author who considers himself or herself exclusive and too difficult for the general public to understand are successfully brought to a mass audience. This was the first time that D'Annunzio had worked on a film, an art form he did not completely understand, but the potential of which to motivate a national audience he clearly recognised. D'Annunzio had very little to do with the actual making of *Cabiria,* which was directed by one of the pioneers of the Italian cinema, Giovanni Pastrone.\(^{(20)}\) He helped Pastrone in shaping the screenplay and after it was made he wrote subtitles to give the movie narrative continuity. Though a collaborative effort, the film is thoroughly D'Annunzian. Pastrone had originally entitled the script “Eternal Virgin”; D'Annunzio changed it to *Cabiria,* which means “born of fire” in Greek (Cherchi Usai, 1986). D'Annunzio invested fire with special symbolism and seemed to find a morbid delight with the idea of women being burned alive. The protagonists of his plays *La Figlia di Jorio* and *La Nave* both throw themselves into the flames, and *Cabiria* offers a searing spectacle of sacrifice by fire. In one of the most memorable scenes of the film, naked children are offered as sacrifices and forced into the belly of a gigantic fire-breathing statue of the god Moloch. Fire was for D'Annunzio a symbol of regeneration, and several years later during his takeover of Fiume, he christened it the “city of the holocaust”: the city that would spread a flame that would envelop Italy and purify it.

The film, in part, follows the adventures of a Roman patrician, Fulvius Axilla, and his faithful slave Maciste. Italian imperialism placed a special emphasis on using colonies as outlets for the peasantry and the urban proletariat and in *Cabiria,* the figure of Maciste operates as a recognisable metonymic sign of the Italian proletariat. He is the “strong man”, the brawn in the service of his intellectual patrician superior. The relationship between Maciste and his patrician overlord plays out a crucial aspect of D'Annunzio's imperialist politics whereby the leader is the purveyor of meaning to the masses. Without his master, Maciste is represented as powerless and directionless, inexplicably willing to suffer several years of hard labour chained to a grindstone until his master returns: it is only then that Maciste tears open the iron shackles and frees himself. D'Annunzio's profoundly antidemocratic politics in a sense demanded the patrician intellectual to govern and control the popular mind. Yet one of the reasons for the popular appeal of the film is the part played by Maciste: he provides much of the action in what would otherwise be a tedious historical potboiler. And he stands out as a sign of simple

\(^{(19)}\) (continued)
from the history and sociology of men and warriors, of men who lived for perpetual war and the production of death, and who have a deep dread of the feminine: a fear of being swallowed, engulfed, and annihilated by women. The social production of a “death desire” is linked to an organised male world and a male space; these are men who, for the most part, live parasitically in relation to production and whose only production is death. For a general discussion of these themes see Theweleit's *Male Fantasies.* Homoeroticism is clearly invoked in D'Annunzio's *St Sebastian,* but by casting a female lead as the martyred saint D'Annunzio both displaces homoeroticism and affirms the misogyny of the warrior.

\(^{(20)}\) The film *Cabiria* was to influence D W Griffith in creating his epic *Intolerance.*
integrity and strength, a populist figure in a world of overrefined patricians and upper-crust decadence. (21)

Highly derivative of Flaubert’s *Salammbô* (1977), *Cabiria* is set in the imperial city of Carthage in North Africa. The Roman child Cabiria is captured by pirates and brought as a slave to the city. She is about to be sacrificed to the god Moloch when she is dramatically rescued by Maciste and his Roman patrician master, who entrust her safety to Sophonisba, a Cleopatra-like queen. Maciste is captured and spends several years as a prisoner while the Roman patrician returns to Rome. The narrative focus now shifts to Sophonisba and her passionate seduction of Massinissa, an ally of Rome. The city of Carthage is a necropolis, a city of death and of a dying civilization—everything about it speaks of treachery, betrayal, and corruption—and Sophonisba, who rules this pagan empire, is represented very much in line with the imperialist myth of women as bounties to be captured (Hay, 1987). (22) Imperialist ideology consistently produces literary clichés of the exotic colonial ‘other’, and in this film Sophonisba is represented as a femme fatale, placed in an orientalist setting against a backdrop of sumptuous and maze-like palaces constructed on a titanic scale, surrounded by an unparalleled opulence of jewels and rare wild animals. Through these associations the geographical locale is eroticised and the woman becomes a coveted territory that is desired and desiring, inviting the conqueror and releasing his guilt. Much as in *Il Piacere*, where Elena and Maria are juxtaposed as the femme fatale and virginal figure, so too is the innocence of Cabiria set against the corrupting seductions of Sophonisba. The resolution, however, is dramatically different and reveals how far D’Annunzio had moved from his conception of a male hero who could only create his conquests in his neurotistic imagination, to men of action whose daring deeds reinvigorate the Empire.

In the end, Sophonisba, like all femmes fatale, needs to be controlled and contained. She had, through her womanly wiles, entrapped Massinissa, and only through her death or sacrifice—represented in the film in an extremely long, writhing death scene—can order and male dominance be restored. Sacrifice is doubly coded in this film. There is the sacrificial death of Sophonisba, meant to restore the masculinist Roman order, and there is the sacrificial regenerative symbolism associated with Cabiria. Cabiria, after all, means “born of fire”, an elemental symbol of rebirth. Having twice escaped the sacrificial flames of Moloch by the timely

(21) Bartolomeo Pagano, who played Maciste, went on to make scores of films in the 1920s and 1930s based on the character. Pagano was a poor Southerner with no acting experience working in the docks of Genoa when he was discovered by Pastrone and was cast in the role of Maciste. The character was especially popular because of the fascination in Italian popular culture with circus strongmen. In any case, the public had a different reading of Maciste than D’Annunzio perhaps intended. Federico Fellini claims that the films that he best remembered from his childhood were the Maciste films, beginning with Pastrone’s *Cabiria*. As part of his metacinematic discourse Fellini included references to those films in his own work. In 1957 Fellini made *Nights of Cabiria* and both Pagano and Lidia Quaranza who had originally played the role of Cabiria, appeared in brief cameo roles. *The Nights of Cabiria* deals with the misadventures of a courageous and self-reliant modern-day Roman prostitute who is betrayed by beguiling men. Pier Paolo Pasolini, then known mainly as an expert on Roman lowlife, was hired by Fellini to contribute dialogue to the screen play.

(22) James Hay, in his excellent *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy* (1987), makes a number of passing references to Pastrone’s *Cabiria*. Because his focus is on films made during the Fascist period, he spends a great deal more time analysing Carmine Galone’s *Scipione L’Africano* (1937), a remake of *Cabiria* which deals with many of the same themes. *Scipione* diverges from *Cabiria* in a number of important ways: it devotes considerably more attention to battle scenes; the action focuses more on open public spaces; and it does not dwell on the special bond between Maciste, the muscular man of the people, and his patrician master.
intervention of the Roman patrician, Cabiria finally returns to Rome after the fall of Carthage. The closing scene of the film shows the Roman patrician on a ship taking Cabiria back to Rome while Maciste, in the background, plays the panpipe for the two lovers. The final words of Cabiria echo those of Sebastian: “I was not conquered by knights or foot soldiers or ships, but by a newly revealed power whose arrows are released by the eyes of love”. She is repeating, in a simplified form, the aesthetics that link conquest with sexuality, and self-obliteration with eroticism and redemption, but now within a normative heterosexual context. The Roman conquest of Carthage and the return of the heroes to Rome has now invested the Empire with new regenerative energies.

Conclusion
On the eve of the First World War nationalist writers such as D’Annunzio and Barrès in France had become hysterical pamphleteers calling for a new war that would regenerate the ‘Latin Race’. Mann, reflecting on the cultural climate that had contributed to that war, declared that both had created a disturbing “politics of aestheticism” which incited “millions of human beings into a bloody hell”. Mann was particularly unforgiving towards D’Annunzio. “There you have him”, he concluded bitterly towards the end of his Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man, “the politicaized aesthete, the poetic seducer of the people, the blasphemer of the people, the belles-lettres politician, the dago of the intellect” (1983, page 426). The aesthetisation of politics, as Benjamin would later elaborate from a position diametrically opposed to that of Mann, continued unabated and found its logical conclusion in Fascism where art, pressed into the service of politics, produced the choreographed public rituals and mass assemblies that would divert and contain the revolutionary potential of the proletariat masses.

From Il Piacere to Cabiria there is an unbroken articulation of an imperial consciousness, implicit in Il Piacere and explicit and militant in Cabiria. The empire, both exotic and desirable, lay beyond the metropolitan borders and D’Annunzio’s fiction, steeped in the conventions of European representation, makes legible an imaginary construction of both a privileged metropolis and a subordinated but exotic periphery. In D’Annunzio’s fiction, the aesthete who is a slave to his own pleasures is slowly and perceptively transformed into an adventurous superiorno whose pleasures are more forbidding, tied as they are to conquest, strenuous self-assertion, and to a warrior culture where men are socialised to produce death.

(23) Mann’s argument against the marriage of art with politics is based in the binary and essentialist distinctions between realism and irrationalism, North and South, and irony and radicalism. To Mann’s eyes art is never reliable; it has a treacherous and ruthless streak and the “scandalous irrationalism” and “barbarity” that produces beauty is ineradicable. Politics, on the other hand, is a moral and rational pursuit. Mann was suspicious and wary of the irrationality of art which he associated with the seductions of the Mediterranean. As his novella Death in Venice (1982) makes clear, Southern aesthetics threatened to undermine the Puritanical restraints of the North. The only choice for the modern artist was an ironic self-distance rather than political radicalism.

(24) See Benjamin’s celebrated essay “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction”, in Illuminations (1976). Clearly Benjamin does not agree with Mann’s position that art should remove itself from politics; rather he outlines how the Fascist aestheticisation of politics amounts to a series of elisions and displacements: the politics of class are elided, and technology, the productive forces and the proletariat are placed in the service of war and imperialism. For Benjamin, Fascism aestheticises politics, and it is the role of communism, as the last line of this essay makes clear, to once again politicise art.
D’Annunzio’s national narratives had a significant currency in Italian culture and they augured ill. The discourse about the demoralisation of culture and the ravages of degeneration, the belief in a strong political leader, and the fetishistic obsession with violence and regeneration were all part of the mix that went into Italian Fascism. And so too was the searing combination of misogyny and sadistic desire. Many of these themes belong to a wider European library of nationalist and imperialist ideas and beliefs upon which intellectuals drew in order to create cohesive arguments about the ways in which personal dilemmas and political tensions could be solved. The “structures of feeling and references” found in Il Piacere, St Sebastian, and Gabiria circulated widely within Italian culture and European culture in general, and many of them found their way to the heterogeneous spaces that came to constitute Italian Fascist culture and the “fuzzy” totalitarianism of the regime. Though innumerable social and political tendencies converged to create Fascism, D’Annunzio’s national narratives, nonetheless, played a pivotal role in promoting powerful images about the adventures found in empire and the eroticism implicit in violent death. These references, to paraphrase Benjamin, were part of a political aestheticism which Fascism willfully embraced and as the Fascist imperialist designs and the Fascist war machine went into high gear they were once again conscripted to incite more millions to march towards a new purifying holocaust.

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