

Decadence and Regeneration in d'Annunzio's *Il piacere* (1889)¹

Guylian Nemegeer (Ghent University, Department of Literary Studies)

This paper considers the dialectics between national decadence and regeneration in d'Annunzio's *Il piacere*. It argues that the novel's fin-de-siècle reception was conditioned by the author's prior classification as an immoral, anti-national writer in the wake of the poetry collection *Intermezzo di rime*. This classification determined a reading of d'Annunzio's debut novel in terms of decadence, while *Il piacere* itself actually pointed towards a literature of regeneration. The novel staged d'Annunzio's opposition to his own prior classification, while making claims for a more committed and more internationally relevant model of Italian literature in the context of European modernity.

Keywords: d'Annunzio; fin-de-siècle Italy, *Il piacere*; decadence; regeneration

Introduction

In May 1889 Gabriele d'Annunzio published his debut novel *Il piacere*, edited by Treves in Milan (d'Annunzio, *Pleasure*). The novel is divided into three main sections and narrates the erotic adventures of the aesthete and hedonist Andrea Sperelli in the aristocratic milieu of late nineteenth-century Rome. *Il piacere*, which focuses explicitly on Sperelli's games of seduction with the female protagonists Elena Muti and Maria Ferres, immediately attracted attention among Italian *fin-de-siècle* critics. As d'Annunzio wrote in a letter to his publisher Emilio Treves (29 July 1889), the main Italian magazines of the time published at least 40 reviews in the first two months after its publication (d'Annunzio, *Lettere ai Treves* 79). Most of these *fin-de-siècle* reviews discussed the novel within a paradigm of national decadence. The paradigm is representative of the critical discourse in the first decades after Italian unification in 1861 that was conditioned by the strong awareness that post-unification Italy did not live up to the glorious

¹ This work was supported by the Research Foundation – Flanders under Grant 3G055118 and the Academia Belgica.

expectations of the Italian unification process (Croce; Duggan; Adamson). This dissatisfaction became even more pronounced as Italy's backwardness clashed with the ambition to be a modern and leading European nation. The critical response to this *fin-de-siècle* crisis was twofold: on the one hand, literary criticism gave expression to fears of definitive degeneration and decadence (Evangelista, "Decadence and Regeneration"; Garosi); on the other hand, more forward-looking critics started to promote belief in the possibility for a renewed and more glorious beginning (Boezio). Both responses were closely related to the debate on national character and the paradigm of 'making Italians' (Bollati; Patriarca; Adamson) as the perceived degenerate and vicious character of the 'modern Italian' was considered to be a threat to the new-born nation's development, whereas a reform of the national character was seen as the *sine qua non* for future glory.

d'Annunzio's *Il piacere* was immediately interpreted as a novel that did not contribute to this reform of Italian character and society. Instead, according to *fin-de-siècle* criticism, the novel embodied their darkest vices and displayed a model of behavior that was harmful to its Italian readership. Piero Chiara recalls the general tone surrounding the publication as fevered: "The fuss was great and the scandal enormous" because Andrea Sperelli "embodied the author's hedonism and sensuality and realized all his dreams" (Chiara 65). For this very reason, perhaps, *fin-de-siècle* criticism classified d'Annunzio as "the initiator and most illustrious [exponent] of the present degeneration, both moral and social" (Baldazzi 11). Enrico Panzacchi, for instance, warned readers of the periodical *Lettere e arti* against the aestheticizing impulses that he felt d'Annunzio's *Il piacere* shared with Italian Renaissance culture; the culture that, according to the nineteenth-century Italian intelligentsia, had generated the centuries-long decline that the Risorgimento had endeavored to reverse (Panzacchi 1-3). As I will argue, the novel's *fin-de-siècle* reception within the framework of national decadence is largely informed by

d'Annunzio's prior classification, after the publication of his poetry collection *Intermezzo di rime* in 1883, as a degenerate, immoral and, thus, anti-national writer. This prior classification framed the interpretation of the author's debut novel within the framework of national decadence, while, as I will show, *Il piacere* itself actually displays a drive towards a literature of regeneration. The novel ambiguously staged a clash d'Annunzio's prior classification as an expression of national crisis and the new ethos directed towards national rebirth he explicitly assumed with regard to the novel (displayed ethos) (Korthals Altes 72). The prior classification, however, the one constructed by *fin-de-siècle* criticism, determined the dominant interpretation and the novel was received as an expression of national decadence. This reading of the novel in terms of decadence, still replicated by some literary critics, does not sufficiently grasp its cultural and political relevance: with *Il piacere*, d'Annunzio actively tried to distance himself from the critical topoi surrounding his work in the wake of the *Intermezzo di rime*. In doing so, he thematized the need for moral regeneration rather than a celebration of the immoral aesthete, while making claims for a more committed and more internationally relevant model of Italian literature, a model of which *Il piacere* itself became the first manifestation.

d'Annunzio and Italy's Decadence

d'Annunzio's classification as a decadent writer was established in 1883 during a polemic surrounding the publication of *Intermezzo di rime*, when the influential literary critic Giuseppe Chiarini stigmatized the sexual component of the collection as a form of literary decadence deriving from the moral decadence of d'Annunzio himself (Merci; Nemegeer, "Decadenza nazionale"). Chiarini's stigmatization was embedded in the debate on the state of the Italian nation, and in particular in a reflection on the formative function of literature and on the corrupting and effeminizing effects of uncontrolled sexuality on the

national character, a widespread topos in European nationalisms (Mosse). After Italian unification, prominent commentators such as Pasquale Villari and Francesco De Sanctis underlined Italy's generalized state of decadence. These thinkers emphasised the incompleteness of the Risorgimento not so much in political as in moral terms, stating that "the work of nation-building understood as a regeneration of Italian character, was just starting and, if the years of 'regenerated' Italy were an indication at all, it would take a very long time to be completed" (Patriarca 60). This idea weighed on the generations of writers and literary critics working in the decades following national unification. Indeed, for them, the nation posed both an aesthetic and political challenge as they were endowed with the responsibility of stimulating the Italians' regeneration by shaping their consciousness and by inspiring civil and modern behaviour (Re 72). This behavior had to align with the virile models of behavior constructed by European nationalisms that saw hypersexuality as an unmanly and anti-national vice. Indeed, citizens who were not able to dominate their passions were not only perceived as 'abnormal', but also as a concrete risk to the nation's fortunes (Mosse). In Italy, Guglielmo Ferrero proposed such an analysis in *L'Europa giovane. Studi e viaggi nei paesi del Nord* (1897), establishing a link between the Italians' moral weaknesses and their "hyper-sexuality" (Patriarca 91). He argued in particular that Latin men "spent a vast amount of time trying to seduce women" and that such "sexual excess produced nervous degeneration" (Patriarca 92), making them thus less adapted to face the challenges of modernity. Chiarini's criticism levelled against d'Annunzio's sexuality and indolence in 1883 echoed these topoi for he fashioned the poet as the epitome of Italian younger generations who, instead of devoting themselves to the national cause, corrupted themselves by hyper-sexuality, so hindering the nation's development (Chiarini). Moreover, Chiarini argued that d'Annunzio's eroticism determined his deviation from the healthy norms that should be respected by

the literature and citizens of modern Italy in order to suppress national decadence. The polemic established as such an image of d'Annunzio as a decadent and immoral writer who embodied the corruption of the nation's moral conscience (Nemegeer, "Decadenza nazionale").

In the wake of this polemic, d'Annunzio opposed his classification as decadent. When commenting on the question in the summer of 1884, d'Annunzio did not contest Chiarini's observations regarding the effeminizing effects of idleness and sexuality, but he projected this period of his life into the past. Representing himself as a self-overcoming decadent, d'Annunzio suggested that *Intermezzo* was a document of a momentary deviation that he had already defeated (d'Annunzio, "Per un fatto personale"). In other words, d'Annunzio did not confute the idea that hypersexuality was harmful, that it was corrupting and threatened the development of the Italian people. This idea is further confirmed by the subsequent evolution of d'Annunzio's thoughts in his later nationalist propaganda, which revolves precisely around the need to preserve virility against the corruption of sexuality (Becker; Borelli; Nemegeer and Santi). d'Annunzio's reactions in 1884 are interesting because the author proposed an idea of the decadent artist that aligned with the widespread Italian reading of artistic decadence as an expression of moral and historical decadence, which was proposed, for instance, by Chiarini in 1883.

d'Annunzio thus incorporated the critical tradition's moral parameters and, between 1885 and 1888, he repeatedly tried to subvert his association with national decadence and to establish a more positive authorial image. A further detachment from his prior classification can be found in the Roman newspaper *La Tribuna* (10 June 1885) in which d'Annunzio reviewed the work of Félicien Rops, stating that the Belgian painter excelled "in corruption, [...] in voluptuousness, in the intensity of lasciviousness" (d'Annunzio, *Scritti giornalistici* 418). Tracing a genealogy of this kind of art,

d'Annunzio dated its origins to Baudelaire: "the flowers of his art are *flowers of evil*, flowers that blossom, nourished by the rottenness of contemporary life" (d'Annunzio, *Scritti giornalistici*, 419). Then, displaying a clear critical detachment, d'Annunzio argued that Rops was an artist who did not try to exorcise decadence, but who sought instead to cultivate it and immerse himself in its depths: "He is one of those who call themselves *decadents* and who love and study *decadence* and want to remain in *decadence*" (d'Annunzio, *Scritti giornalistici* 419). Refusing to be associated with such decadence, d'Annunzio expressed his dissent whenever the opportunity was offered: for instance, in 1888, he devoted a series of articles to the problems of the Italian Navy, stressing his disappointment that he might be considered as an exponent of Italian decadence by highlighting his faith in Italy's imminent rebirth.

I am not a preacher of Italian decadence, nor do I profess public pessimism; on the contrary, I have an unshakable faith in the destiny of the nation and I firmly believe in the words of a great Italian poet [Giosuè Carducci] whose voice has the virtue of raising a tremor throughout Italy at every turn: "No more malice or violence of things will lower that flag which from the shame of the gallows rose to the light of the Capitol" (d'Annunzio, *Prose di ricerca* 1931)

Thus, d'Annunzio tried to assert a new personal image, that of the progenitor of a cultural elite that prepared and promoted the nation's imminent rebirth. These attempts to renegotiate his own image by associating himself with the values of national rebirth did not, however, convince Italian *fin-de-siècle* critics. Indeed the critical discourse surrounding *Il piacere* expressed similar moral reservations to those surrounding the *Intermezzo*. Critics focused primarily on the narration's corrupt subject, the immoral protagonist and the corrupting potential of the novel itself (Baldazzi 11). Such a reading automatically presumed that the protagonist's ideals were shared by the author, leading

to the projection of the protagonist's immorality onto d'Annunzio himself. This projection is evident in Giulio Massimo Scialinga's judgment, published in *Fortunio* (21 July 1889). Scialinga contended that the real madman of the novel was not so much Andrea Sperelli as d'Annunzio himself, since the protagonist's behavior was merely the reflection of the author's immorality and inept understanding of his own era (Scialinga). In short, in 1889, Italian criticism continued to identify d'Annunzio with decadence and excluded him from the canon of morally and socially committed art.

Il Piacere: d'Annunzio vs. Sperelli (and his own earlier Decadence)

d'Annunzio himself, meanwhile, continued to oppose this association when he published *Il piacere*, persisting in his attempt to leave his previous classification behind, adopting an ethos surrounding the novel's publication that could be termed 'moralist'. This moralist ethos served to distance him from the reading of his work as decadent and to suggest a more positive direction of his work, committed to national rebirth. For instance, on 12 January 1889, he wrote to his editor Emilio Treves: "My book is [...] written with an extraordinary severity of art and, therefore, it has no pages that could 'seem pornographic'. On the contrary, it is a great and strong renunciation of many of my past intentions" (d'Annunzio, *Lettere ai Treves*, 59). Four months later, on May 5th, d'Annunzio replied to Treves' request to remove the well-known anti-patriotic phrase pronounced by Andrea Sperelli about the Battle of Dogali (1887), namely "All for four hundred brutes, who died brutally!" (d'Annunzio, *Pleasure* 261), rejecting the request by highlighting the moral distance separating him from his protagonist. Indeed the author argued that the sentence in question was pronounced by Sperelli, and not by himself, who, on the contrary, had written a patriotic ode for the victims at Dogali. Moreover, as the novel studied Sperelli as "a moral monster" and the anti-patriotic sentence was "very significant" for the protagonist's character, d'Annunzio insisted to leave the text as such

(d'Annunzio, *Lettere ai Treves* 74-75). This letter followed one from March 30th in which d'Annunzio had already stressed that *Il piacere* was “a highly moral book” and, moreover, in the same month the novel was announced in the *Fanfulla della Domenica* as “a subtle and conscientious study of contemporary mores” (d'Annunzio, *Lettere ai Treves* 64).

Evidently, d'Annunzio intended to distance himself from the character of Sperelli, but his contemporaries did not grasp his intent and projected the character and ideals of the novel's protagonist onto its creator. One of the few dissident voices at the time was the literary critic Ugo Fleres who, in the Florentine periodical *Vita Nuova*, stated that he did not doubt that d'Annunzio wanted Andrea to be “corrupt [and] rich in sensibility [...] to arouse the reader's indignation” (Fleres, “26 maggio” 4). It seems that, at least from this perspective, Fleres grasped the essence of the novel in which, as today's most progressive readings have confirmed, d'Annunzio morally detached himself not only from Andrea Sperelli but from the entire aristocracy he represented (Martignoni; Cantelmo; Baldi). Even in more recent times, however, critics continue to resort to the *fin-de-siècle* tendency to confuse author and character as they contest the sincerity of d'Annunzio's detachment from the immoral libertine Sperelli. These critics bestow the novel with a value that corresponds to d'Annunzio's classification as a decadent writer. The idea of d'Annunzio's insincerity clearly emerges in Goudet's (1976) assessment that d'Annunzio “fakes for social reasons an outraged moralism against his hero's excesses” (44). In addition, Barilli (1993) observes, much to his dismay, that the author himself confounded the actual relation that bound him to his projection as he pretended to judge him with detachment in the name of public morals (44-45). Moreover, Tellini (1998) states that d'Annunzio's work “does not allow the practice of distancing between the narrator and the characters' subjectivity” and that, for this reason, *Il piacere* cannot be

read as “a detached radiography of moral perversion”. (236). Finally, Gardini (2011) describes Sperelli as projection of the author’s “ideal of life”, suggesting that, through his character, d’Annunzio celebrated “social disengagement, consumerism, and fetishism” and displayed “a dangerous example of class parochialism” (XVI).

It should be noted that, despite the clear critical need to distinguish d’Annunzio from Sperelli, this misunderstanding is also a consequence of the ambiguity arising from the interplay between d’Annunzio’s media and political strategies. The author’s intellectual experience is determined by the progressive commodification and democratization of literature, the development of the bourgeois public and the consequent need for an author to be recognisable to a wider public. In this context, in the 1880s, the author navigates with varying degrees of success between two fundamental poles: firstly, the literary market which required the author to be ‘modern’. This implies that, on the one hand, the author had to integrate himself in the European literary space, the so-called republic of letters (Casanova); on the other hand, he had to confront himself with the emerging mechanisms of the “nascent cultural industry” (Turchetta 190). d’Annunzio succeeded in attracting the public’s attention, in creating his own visibility by exploiting scandal and controversy as media strategies (Luperini 13-22). Secondly, the pole of national commitment that required the association of the values of rebirth to his own persona and work. These two poles may seem in contradiction, but they were not: *Il piacere* staged an interpretation of d’Annunzio’s intellectual experience that played precisely with the ambiguity generated by the interaction between his media and political strategies. The author’s explicit strategy was to differentiate himself from Sperelli, yet at the same time, he intended to create a certain ambiguity – for instance, through the insertion of references to his own experience in post-unification Rome in the novel – as

he understood the promotional potential of gossip if the public believed Sperelli to be his total alter ego.

Despite this ambiguity, the novel suggests that it is not wrong to invest the text with an ideological value that endorses d'Annunzio's displayed ethos. As the author stated in the novel's preface, dedicated to Francesco Paolo Michetti, *Il piacere* examines "not without sadness, so much corruption and so much depravity and so much vain insidiousness and falseness and cruelty" (d'Annunzio, *Pleasure* 4). The dedication to Michetti is motivated by the fact that d'Annunzio composed *Il piacere* in his friend's 'convent' in Francavilla al Mare. As it is suggested by Alani Rosa Hicks-Bartlett, d'Annunzio depicts Michetti in the preface as his personal pedagogue, i.e. as the intellectual and spiritual guide who facilitated his healthy transformation that enabled him to compose, finish and publish the novel (Hicks-Bartlett 384). However, Hicks-Bartlett does not grasp that this transformation is directly linked to the personal parable the author invented in the wake of the *Intermezzo* presenting himself as a converted decadent who is ready to affirm himself as a protagonist of Italian rebirth. This perspective is further confirmed by the fact that in the preface the author points out that the book was written "in the tiredness of the long and heavy exertion" (d'Annunzio, *Pleasure* 3), stressing his own industriousness against the accusations of degeneration. Indeed, at the end of the Nineteenth Century, d'Annunzio's entourage frequently insisted upon the author's character as a zealous worker. In an interview with Francesco Pastonchi in 1899, for example, we read that the author "has put respite to his senses" and "spends long months working" (Pastonchi 70-71).

If one accepts d'Annunzio's displayed ethos, which, as I have pointed out, the author coherently developed through various statements, *Il piacere* reveals itself as a book of social criticism and even as "a political breviary" (Di Mauro-Jackson 527). The novel

takes part in the construction of the national hero, the search for new heroisms or “a *role model* for the Italians” that is a common theme of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italian literature (Jossa VIII). Within this process, d’Annunzio takes a satirical stance toward the protagonist and toward the Italian upper classes after unification. This angle is further confirmed Andrea Sperelli’s initial characterization as “the ideal type of the young Italian gentleman of the nineteenth century” (d’Annunzio, *Pleasure* 34). This characterization does not imply that the character represented d’Annunzio’s ideal future leader of the Italian nation. Sperelli’s characterization instead clearly relied on the proposition made in *Il giorno* (1763), in which Giuseppe Parini presented a satire of eighteenth-century Milanese nobility through the story of a *young gentleman* [*giovin signore*]. Such a reading of the character was also suggested by d’Annunzio himself in 1921 when, talking to Filippo Surico about Parini, he declared that Sperelli is his “modern “«*giovane signore*»” (Surico 610). Furthermore, the idea that the novel is critically engaged not only at the level of character, but also with the social and historical environment in which the story is embedded, can be further deduced from d’Annunzio’s repeated emphasis on the representativeness of the characters of the late nineteenth-century aristocracy. For instance, the novel describes an account of an auction as “a ladies’ quarrel in the nineteenth century” (d’Annunzio, *Pleasure* 54), while near the end of the novel the text alludes to the “elegant corruption at this turn of the nineteenth century” (d’Annunzio, *Pleasure* 220). All these elements legitimize the hypothesis that the novel does not only study the character of Sperelli, but that it fashions him as the prototypical figure of Roman fin-de-siècle aristocracy (Cantelmo 121).

The novel, therefore, proposes a historical analysis and as such it assumes a national value. In *Il piacere*, d’Annunzio dissected his own era by exploring the decadence of late nineteenth-century mores and, in doing so, he aimed to arouse an

emotional reaction from his reader who, disgusted by the corruption in the text, should reject the social milieu and the human types represented. Indeed a fundamental communicative strategy of d'Annunzio's corpus, both in his narrative work and his political and civil writings, is the appeal to emotions (Cantelmo 27). An emotional reaction to *Il piacere* can be detected in a second article by Ugo Fleres, published on June 2nd, in which the critic stated that, during his reading of the novel he observed the "sluggish libertinism of a heart and a mind" and that this experience left him with "a certain nausea" (Fleres , "2 giugno" 2). As Di Mauro-Jackson has suggested (2017), d'Annunzio identified the protagonist with decadence and, indeed, the author portrayed a decadent and corrupt reality to try to exorcise decadence itself by producing a literary text that sought to inspire social regeneration through the reaction of its readers. This aspect was, however, not grasped by d'Annunzio's contemporaries, who projected their distaste for Sperelli onto the author. *Fin-de-siècle* critics, therefore, identified the ethos of both character and author with decadence.

Yet, d'Annunzio takes account of, critically interprets and offers a stratified exploration for the decadence of his own time. This decadence is presented as a transitory phenomenon, a condition that has to be overcome and countered to prepare for a new glorious era. For this reason, the whole novel is permeated by a funerary atmosphere indicating precisely this contextual crisis. The novel's incipit provides a good illustration of this point: Andrea Sperelli is portrayed in his home, the Palazzo Zuccari in Trinità dei Monti, where he is awaiting his ex-lover Elena Muti. The entire incipit immediately plunges the reader into a sunset atmosphere:

The year was ebbing away, very gently. [...] Andrea Sperelli was awaiting a lover in his rooms. [...] Light entered the room softened by curtains of red brocade with pomegranates, leaves and mottos embossed in spun silver. As the afternoon sun struck the windowpanes, the flowered design of the lace

curtains cast its shadow on the carpet. [...] In the room, that warm russet light and the frozen dusk entering through the windows would vie with each other for a while. (d'Annunzio, *Pleasure* 7-8)

The very same atmosphere continues in the following pages, for instance, when Andrea Sperelli approaches the window in the hope of seeing Elena Muti arrive. When Sperelli looks out of the window toward Trinità dei Monti, twilight dominates the square:

Many people were walking beneath the trees in front of Villa Medici. Two women sat on the stone bench before the church, waiting over some small children who were running around the obelisk. The obelisk was entirely crimson, struck by the setting sun, and it cast a long, oblique, slightly turquoise shadow. The air was growing icy cold, the more the sunset approached. (d'Annunzio, *Pleasure* 16)

The idea of decline is even more foregrounded in the description of the protagonist who is not only defined as belonging to “that special class of ancient Italic nobility” which is destined to disappear “beneath today’s gray democratic flood”, but also as “the last descendant” of his family line (d'Annunzio, *Pleasure* 33-34). Sperelli is therefore a sterile character whose *casato* is destined to die with him. In addition, it should be noted that the novel has a circular structure, opening and closing with an image of sunset. When, at the end of the novel, Andrea Sperelli is frustrated by the auction of Maria Ferres’ house, he decides to take refuge in his own home and the reference to the red color of the sunset returns, leaving the readers with the image of a world in complete dissolution:

Almost nothing remained in the rooms. From the curtainless windows, the blushing splendor of sunset entered; all the clamor of the street below entered. Some men were still detaching some wall-hangings from the walls, uncovering the vulgar flowered wallpaper on which holes and tears were visible here and there. [...] Andrea fled. In Piazza del Quirinale, before the royal palace, a brass band was playing. The ample waves of that metallic music spread through the burning air. The obelisk, the fountain, the colossi,

towered in the red glow and took on a purple tint as if penetrated by an impalpable flame. [...] Andrea fled, almost out of his mind. He turned into Via del Quirinale, walked down past the Four Fountains, brushed past the gates of Palazzo Barberini, which cast glints of light from its windowpanes, and finally reached Palazzo Zuccari. The porters were unloading the furniture from a cart, shouting. Some of them were already carrying the armoire up the stairs, with difficulty. He entered the building. As the armoire took up the entire breadth of the staircase, he could not overtake it. Very slowly, he followed it, step by step, into his house. (d'Annunzio, *Pleasure* 326-327)

Scholarship has discussed the ending of the novel extensively and tends to agree that it is imbued with a funerary atmosphere, especially the image of Andrea Sperelli following the porters who carry the armoire into his house. Mazzacurati (1974) interprets the novel's finale as an allegory of a threefold funeral, namely "of a love, of a social illusion, of a way of existing and conceiving the intellectual function" (264). According to Macchia (1989), the finale sanctifies the definitive failure of the protagonist, whose collection of precious objects links him to an illusory and outdated world, a fact of which Sperelli becomes aware "only at the end, [...] following his mobile, slowly as in a funeral accompaniment" (13). Finally, Barberi Squarotti (1989) has discussed the "the vulgar flowered wallpaper", which becomes visible once the last precious tapestries have been torn away; a symbol of Sperelli's failed life that reveals the illusory character of his aestheticization of reality. Once the veil of beauty has been removed, what remains is only "desolation, dust, abandonment, vulgarity" (16). As regards the porters, moreover, Barberi Squarotti describes the scene as both "grotesque" and "funereal": Andrea "as in a funeral" follows the coffin "as it climbs the stairs of his house, resigned to the power of the funerary symbol" (17).

The novel thus opens and closes on images of sunset and death, sanctioning the failure of the anti-hero, Andrea Sperelli's, way of life and revealing the inability of the

Italian aristocracy to adapt to the changing social and political context of post-unification Italy: the aristocracy is experiencing a moment of profound crisis and is incapable to adapt to the new world. This inability is epitomized in the tendency to aestheticize reality and take refuge in the pleasures of sexuality. In particular, this escape into pleasure repeatedly generates “a new degradation” as the aristocrat, as d’Annunzio writes, “corrupting himself, [...] corrupted” (d’Annunzio, *Pleasure* 98). In offering a glimpse of this disease of pleasure, the novel becomes the “*Breviarium arcanum* of elegant corruption at this turn of the nineteenth century” (d’Annunzio, *Pleasure* 220). The effects of uncontrolled sexuality are exposed through the study of Sperelli who exemplifies the type of man who lives with and through his lies, who has lost all “*moral strength*” and who, therefore, is unable to “regain his self-control” (d’Annunzio, *Pleasure* 35-36). Moreover, he is also poorly adapted to the late nineteenth-century political context as is attested not only by the sentence about Dogali quoted above, but also by Sperelli’s ineptitude in dealing with the new classes, shown towards the end of the book when Sperelli feels suffocated by his encounter with the junk dealers at the auction of Maria Ferres’ house.

Throughout the novel, however, death also evokes the beginning of a rebirth (Barberi Squarotti). This aligns with an idea that I have already emphasized, namely that d’Annunzio explores the decadence of his time as a period of crisis with the aim of pointing towards the possibility of rebirth. The theme of dying and being reborn is definitely one of the unifying elements in d’Annunzio’s corpus. Indeed, d’Annunzio’s entire cultural (and political) trajectory precisely revolves around the need to overcome decadence in favor of rebirth and, in this light, Guido Baldi has argued that the novel *Vergini delle Rocce* (1895) marks a crucial shift in the representation of the hero: it introduces the figure of the virile hero in opposition to the inept, decadent protagonists of

the earlier novels (1). The theme permeates d'Annunzio's corpus to such an extent that Carlo Calcaterra, in his commemoration of d'Annunzio in 1938, interpreted it as the cornerstone of the author's life and work:

It is thus beautiful and great that in this solemn hour, in which Death seems to close the Poet in his tomb, and, on the contrary, strengthens his creative will, we recognise that without the flame of regeneration, lit and nourished by him, perhaps the Italy of Italians would not be what it is today. Death for him too is resurrection, as for the heroes he sang. (Calcaterra 122)

It should, moreover, be remembered that the pervasiveness of Catholicism in Italian culture and society ensures that the Christian symbolic and metaphorical system of death and rebirth is immediately recognizable to the average reader. Indeed, even the Italian Risorgimento, despite its essentially secular character, abounded with allusions to historical and moral resurrections, in short, to the idea of "national regeneration as opposed to the degeneration of the Italians" (Forlenza and Thomassen 7–9). Furthermore, as Sara Boezio has pointed out, "the century's turn was regarded as a moment with the potential for a much-awaited and hoped-for regeneration, either in the form of an *ascension* (in evolutionary terms) or a resurrection (in moral terms)" (82). In this context the focus on regeneration was precisely developed through a confrontation with degeneration and this dialectic determined the apocalyptic and palingenetic character of *fin-de-siècle* literature. Death and rebirth, degeneration and regeneration are thus two sides of the same coin in the Italian and in d'Annunzio's imagination.

At this point, it is necessary to understand to what extent *Il piacere* offers a regenerative perspective. In this light it should be noted that Sperelli, despite all the flaws that determine his status as an *anti-hero*, is potentially a *hero* for he has the excellence of a poet. The regenerative dimension of the novel, I argue, is to be found precisely in its reflection on and practice of literature. According to Baldi, in the textual passages that

contain poetic reflections, the distance separating d'Annunzio from Sperelli is minimized. As an artist, I add, Sperelli is potentially a hero as he possesses the necessary artistic virtues through which, indeed, d'Annunzio explores the seductive power of artistic creation on the human spirit. This is evident in the case of Maria Ferres who, when conversing with Andrea Sperelli, feels “a slight spiritual exaltation” that satisfies her “irresistible need to open her intellect and her heart to a breath of higher life” (d'Annunzio, *Pleasure* 153). Another example is when Maria describes in her diary the sensation of inebriation that she experiences while consulting Andrea's drawings and studies, i.e. this feeling of art that “leaves such a strong, enduring, tenacious impression in the soul” (d'Annunzio, *Pleasure* 181). The problem is that Sperelli does not functionalize his gift in the right ways. What d'Annunzio criticizes in Sperelli is not his aestheticism in and of itself, but rather his way of practicing a “false aestheticism” that subordinates the power of artistic beauty to the gratification “of the lowest erotic impulses” (Baldi 39). For this reason, Sperelli's aestheticism becomes “a vice, sickness, decadence” and ultimately leads to his “defeat and self-marginalization” (Baldi 39). In other words, Andrea Sperelli has all the artistic potential to be a hero, yet does not enact it publicly, but only in the sphere of carnal seduction. Indeed, Sperelli embodies the kind of aesthete, heir of romantic and aristocratic elitism, who does not actively engage with social reality but flees from it by plunging himself into his idiosyncratic aesthetic and erotic illusions, which further attest to his ineptitude in crafting an active role for himself in modern Italy.

In this respect, the character had a certain autobiographical dimension as d'Annunzio staged through Sperelli his own decadent profile as it was constructed by his critics in the wake of the *Intermezzo* and from which he began to distance himself from 1884 onwards. Indeed, just as Chiarini delineated the profile of a corrupt and effeminate

d'Annunzio in 1883, so d'Annunzio delineated a profile of Sperelli as “spoiled and effeminate” in 1889 (d'Annunzio, *Pleasure* 15); just as Chiarini quoted the names of Giulio Romano and Pietro Aretino to criticize *Intermezzo* and d'Annunzio's sexual corruption, so d'Annunzio associated Andrea Sperelli with the very same names:

Pity – said Musèllaro – that you aren't at the dining table of a sixteenth-century duke, between a Violante and an Imperia, with Giulio Romano, Pietro Aretino, and Marc Antony! (d'Annunzio, *Pleasure* 226)

As a critic, I study all human facts and sentiments represented by the word, as well the magnanimity of Dante and Petrarch as Aretino's infamies; but as a man, I wish my time (since desiring for the past does not help) poets who resemble rather the lovers of Beatrice and Laura than the author of the sonnets illustrating Giulio Romano's panels. (Chiarini 79)

This indicates that d'Annunzio questions the dominant narrative surrounding his own persona in Italy at the time through *Il piacere*. So, d'Annunzio drew on the very topoi of *fin-de-siècle* critical discourse and, in doing so, he did not only try to distance himself from Andrea Sperelli, but also, through the protagonist, he distanced himself from his profile constructed by previous criticism. Thus, the above cited passages shed further light on the ambiguities of the editorial and political operation that d'Annunzio carried out with *Il piacere*: the author returned to the personal parable he invented in 1884. On the one hand, as I mentioned, he wanted the public to confound himself in some way with Sperelli; on the other hand, in his social reflection, the author distanced himself from the protagonist. Hence, the overlap only concerned a past-d'Annunzio (the one of the *Intermezzo*), while the present-d'Annunzio distanced himself from the immoral protagonist and, implicitly, from his past-self. This reading is further suggested by the poem ‘Al poeta Andrea Sperelli’ that d'Annunzio published as the last poem of the poetry collection *La chimera* (1889). In the poem, d'Annunzio “pretends to address the hero of

his novel *Il piacere*”, but actually addresses himself as he proclaims his own triumph over the “aesthetic-aphrodisiac Chimera, [...] the personification of carnal and aesthetic obsession” (Tosi, “Tentazione simbolista” 141). So, whereas d’Annunzio’s first attempts at distancing himself from his classification as a decadent were made in the periodical press of the time, which had a leading role in the elaboration of the ideological and cultural discourse of the Italian *Ottocento* (Greene; Garosi, “La letteratura della crisi”), in 1889 he extended his attempt to counterbalance this critical stereotype into his poetry and the fictional dimension of his novel.

Towards a Rebirth of Italian Literature

d’Annunzio countered his earlier critical classification and, in doing so, he carried out an implicit reflection on the national hero in post-Risorgimento Italy. This reflection is the lynchpin of the novel, yet the heroic model that *Il piacere* is delineating is not the one embodied by its protagonist. Instead, it is embodied by the novel’s creator: d’Annunzio himself. In this respect the dedication to Michetti mentioned above assumes an ulterior relevance: in his novel d’Annunzio studies the life of the aesthete Andrea Sperelli who, trapped by pleasure, is unable to triumph over his own decadence and fails to actualize his “divino pregio del dono [poetico]” (d’Annunzio, *Il piacere* 144) for the good of the nation, unlike d’Annunzio himself who has overcome his own decadence (the one portrayed in *Intermezzo*) and written *Il piacere* through his industriousness and tireless effort. As such, my interpretation enriches the one proposed by Hicks-Bartlett, who argues that the dedication to Michetti establishes an ambiguous relationship between the author and the protagonist: on the one hand, it traces an analogy between them as they both need(ed) a transformation to liberate themselves from decadence (Hicks-Bartlett 387); on the other hand, what separates them is that d’Annunzio has been able to detach

himself from corruption – and I add – by reconnecting himself to the arts and by writing *Il piacere*, while Andrea lacks the moral strength to reach such a permanent change.

d'Annunzio is, thus, convinced that regeneration will arise precisely from the arts. This is outlined in his staging of the duality between death and rebirth between the end of the first book and the beginning of the second one. Here, Sperelli is seriously wounded in a duel, after which a period of convalescence begins. This period represents “a purification and a rebirth” and stages Sperelli’s gradual renaissance, “almost with another body and another spirit, like a new man” (d’Annunzio, *Pleasure* 123). The temporary death of “desire” and “base lust” reconnects Sperelli to the arts and leads to a momentary interior and personal regeneration (d’Annunzio, *Pleasure* 125-132). This regeneration is guided by art, especially humanistic and renaissance art, as well as d’Annunzio’s own creations, since Sperelli’s progressive rebirth proceeds through a series of literary quotations from the work of Petrarch, Lorenzo de’ Medici and d’Annunzio himself, all of which work to temporarily renew Sperelli’s will, in that particular moment no longer “as useless as a badly tempered sword, dangled as at the side of a drunkard or a paralyzed man” (d’Annunzio, *Pleasure* 96). Hence, although Sperelli’s personal regeneration ultimately fails as he resumes his old habits as an aesthete and seducer upon his return to Rome, d’Annunzio discloses the idea that literary creations have the power to renew man and to contribute to the formation of his character. This generates a series of incongruities between d’Annunzio and Sperelli: by writing *Il piacere*, d’Annunzio criticizes Sperelli’s aestheticism and eroticism for not engaging with reality and for concealing his ineptitude. In so doing, the novel shows the authorial will to impact society, allowing d’Annunzio to overcome decadence by criticizing his own decadence in *Intermezzo*, embodied in Sperelli, and carrying out a reflection on the Italian artist of the late Nineteenth Century,

presenting a type who he suggests must die, i.e. Sperelli, and another that must manifest itself in the early Twentieth Century, i.e. d'Annunzio.

If Sperelli resurrects his lost poetic halo from the mud by distancing himself from society and plunging himself into an erotic-compulsive aestheticism (Somigli 13), d'Annunzio criticizes this act by writing a novel that is integrated into mass society, that speaks to the nation. Thus, d'Annunzio presents himself as a hero and does so by contrast, namely by representing a negative character from whom he distances himself. d'Annunzio could still be like Sperelli, but he is not as he has taken the next step: he has written *Il piacere*, a novel that is integrated into the communication process at a national level. Indeed, as Cantelmo has argued, the novel speaks in the first place to the reader of the Roman aristocracy who recognizes and identifies with the story not only because of the referentiality of the context, but also because in the novel d'Annunzio reuses passages that were already known to his readers, recycled from his journalistic contributions in the main Roman newspapers of the time. The novel does not, however, speak only to the aristocracy, it also (and maybe above all) speaks to the bourgeoisie as the scope expands from the Roman aristocratic context to the (bourgeois) nation as a whole. As Isnenghi points out: the Italian province “crawls with aspiring Andrea Sperelli” who look at the book’s protagonists as “models of emancipation” (Isnenghi 351). The way in which a negative hero can become a model of emancipation reveals an ambiguity inherent to the novel that criticism has not sufficiently addressed: d'Annunzio leverages the bourgeois desire to identify with the aristocracy, yet the bourgeoisie does not only aim to emulate the upper class, but also to take its place. The representation of Sperelli as a less-than-perfect hero, embodying the imperfection of the class to which he belongs, makes the aristocracy more accessible to the lower class, i.e. it allows the rising bourgeoisie to dream not so much of becoming Sperelli, but of taking his place, by virtue of their

bourgeois superiority. In other words, the provincial bourgeoisie's aspirations of upward mobility become more concrete as the decay of the upper classes offers grounds for their revanchist demands.

Furthermore, the novel also speaks to the European reader. Today it is no longer valid to argue that d'Annunzio "was the first author who introduced foreign currents into Italian poetry and the novel" (Tosi, "Incontri" 862), not only because of the transnational character of the Risorgimento, but also because post-unification culture was much less provincial than the vulgate would have us believe. However, d'Annunzio obviously played a leading role in modernizing, i.e. Europeanizing, Italian culture at the turn of the century. In *Il piacere*, d'Annunzio takes the first steps in elaborating the theme of national rebirth that then becomes the cornerstone of his work. The theme of national rebirth is not only present in the sense discussed earlier, but also in d'Annunzio's insertion of the novel into trends of European culture. d'Annunzio drew on the European aesthetic codex of his time and, indeed, Annamaria Andreoli has identified in the novel intertextual relations with the works of Joris-Karl Huysmans, Joséphin Péladan, Paul Bourget and the Goncourt brothers, i.e. the group that she defines as "the new *fin-de-siècle* catechism" (Andreoli 1105). As such, the novel's geographical scope is extended through the integration of, among others, topoi of *fin-de-siècle* French and English culture, thus ensuring a European audience for the book and projecting Italian literature into European modernity. As a matter of fact, it is not a coincidence that André Gide, in a survey on Italian literature promoted by the Florentine periodical *Il Marzocco*, observed that d'Annunzio "has done Italy the enormous service" of attracting "to Italy the attention of all Europe" (Gide 4). The French author adds that d'Annunzio's work has "powerful roots in all European literatures" and that his "example will serve the literary youth, showing them that Italy can still produce, forcing Europe to understand that it can still listen [to

Italy]” (Gide 4). It should be noted that in his discussion of *Il piacere*, Stefano Evangelista emphasizes Gide’s specifically Parisian perspective, which potentially colors his positive assessment of d’Annunzio: the French author “believed that d’Annunzio was *forced* to look abroad due to the impoverished state of nineteenth-century Italian literature” (Evangelista, “Cosmopolitanism and Literary Modernity” 322), however this interpretative filter does not undermine the fact that d’Annunzio’s novel about the Roman nobility becomes not only national, but truly European in scope, turning d’Annunzio in Italy’s most Europeanizing poet (Russo 349), and “a writer – a novelist in particular – with international reach” (Cantelmo 154).

From this angle, the novel’s references to the Italian Renaissance present an element of fascination for European readers. Indeed, *Il piacere* exhibits “the exaltation of national glory that is frequent in *belle époque* literature, full of the pride of the great European nations for their traditions” (Paratore 119). d’Annunzio thus uses the novel to reposition Italian culture in the European context as he inserts European models into a decisively Italian work that celebrates Italian Renaissance heritage. If Italian Renaissance culture is central to *Il piacere*, it is precisely because the topoi of European culture are integrated into a discourse emphasizing their subordination to national (primarily Renaissance) culture. It is not by chance that the novel refers to the cosmopolitan behavior of the protagonist’s Renaissance ancestors, who were at the center of European cultural and economic exchanges. Here, there is a further incongruity: on the one hand, Sperelli has had a cosmopolitan education through his “lengthy travels with his father” (d’Annunzio, *Pleasure* 34), but he uses this cosmopolitan education and his knowledge of foreign languages almost exclusively for worldly pursuits, i.e. games of seduction; on the other hand, d’Annunzio uses his extensive cosmopolitan culture to write *Il piacere* and present himself as an innovator, not only because he integrates foreign trends into a

national novel, but also because he represents the Renaissance as a central moment in the evolution of European thought (Nemegeer, “Rinascita nazionale”).

Conclusive notes

Before concluding, it must be emphasized that I do not share Evangelista’s astonishment about two fundamental tensions he individuates in *Il piacere*: on the one hand, the tension between the intention to project post-unification Italy into European modernity, i.e. to integrate Italian literature into the economy of exchange in the European republic of letters, and the nostalgia for a pre-unification past that risks being suppressed by late 19th-century socio-political developments and processes of modernization, which, moreover, threaten the model of the aristocratic aesthete like Sperelli; on the other hand, the tension included in d’Annunzio’s twofold ambition to publish works that are both cosmopolitan in outlook and representative of a distinctively Italian modernity (“Cosmopolitanism and Literary Modernity”, 321-322). Firstly, my reading suggests that the socio-political critique of *Il piacere* is not so much directed at modernization and to modern progress as such as at the protagonist’s inability to adapt to this evolving context and to conceive a more socially committed and internationally relevant model of literature that is capable of promoting the traditional values of Italian culture in the context of European modernity. Secondly, Evangelista’s remarks seem to be based on a false opposition between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, an opposition that is irrelevant for d’Annunzio in 1889. On the contrary, the two components are particularly complementary and the author consciously moves in both directions as he is convinced that the Italian rebirth must necessarily pass through the European context, ultimately modifying European modernity in line with the Italian values propagated by his own work. Indeed, in the wake of *Il piacere*, d’Annunzio will take a more explicit turn towards militant nationalism and one of the main objectives of his cultural nationalism will be to

move Italy from the periphery to the very center of European modernity, infusing the latter with the spirit of *Italianità* (Nemegeer, “Rinascita nazionale”). The first signs of this operation can already be detected in *Il piacere*.

However, the critical discourse surrounding *Il piacere* shows that the novel was not immediately perceived as a work of personal and national regeneration. Indeed, as I have shown, d’Annunzio’s prior classification as a decadent writer has conditioned the interpretation of the textual and paratextual elements of his novel, determining its critical *fin-de-siècle* reception as a work of decadence and not of regeneration. From this perspective, despite the novel’s extraordinary relevance within d’Annunzio’s oeuvre, and late nineteenth-century Italian culture more generally, the novel partially misses its target. Although the negative judgment does not constitute an obstacle for the young writer’s editorial success, nor for his fortune abroad, d’Annunzio’s rejection of Andrea Sperelli’s disengagement and ineptitude does not immediately generate a substantial reconsideration of d’Annunzio’s role as a nationally engaged writer in the Italian *fin-de-siècle* imagination. The paradigm is so persistent that it re-emerges throughout d’Annunzio’s career. In 1921, for instance, even though d’Annunzio had become a hero for his efforts in the Great War and the Fiume Exploit, he still felt the need to reject accusations of having been a corruptor for the umpteenth time and to highlight, instead, his own profile as an animator of the nation:

I consider myself a legitimate *maestro*; and I want to be and I am the *maestro* who, for the Italians, sums up in his doctrine the traditions and aspirations of the great blood from which he was born: not a seducer, nor a corrupter, but a tireless animator who excites spirits not only with written works but with his days spent lightly in the exercise of the hardest discipline. (Surico 620).

Works cited

- Adamson, Walter. "Italy." *The Fin-de-Siècle world*, edited by Michael Saler, Routledge, 2015, pp. 167–184.
- Andreoli, Annamaria. "Il piacere (note al testo)." Gabriele d'Annunzio, *Prose di romanzi*, vol. I, edited by Annamaria Andreoli and Niva Lorenzini, Mondadori, 2005, pp. 1105-1239.
- Baldazzi, Anna. *Bibliografia della critica dannunziana nei periodici italiani dal 1880 al 1938*, Cooperativa scrittori, 1977.
- Baldi, Guido. *Le ambiguità della decadenza*, Liguori, 2008.
- Barberi Squarotti, Giorgio. "Il parato di carta", *Il Piacere. Atti del XII convegno. Pescara – Francavilla al Mare* (4-5 maggio 1989), edited by Edoardo Tiboni, Centro Nazionale di Studi Dannunziani, 1989, pp. 7–13.
- Barilli, Renato. *D'Annunzio in prosa*, Mursia, 1993.
- Becker, Jared. *Nationalism and Culture: Gabriele d'Annunzio and Italy after the Risorgimento*, Peter Lang, 1995.
- Boezio, Sara. "Regenerating at the Turn of the Century: Ibsen's, Tolstoy's, and Zola's Metaphors of (Re)birth in *Fin-de-Siècle* Italy." *The Poetics of Decadence in Fin-de-Siècle Italy*, edited by Stefano Evangelista et al, Peter Lang, 2018, pp. 49–89.
- Bollati, Giulio. *L'Italiano: il carattere nazionale come storia e come invenzione*, Einaudi, 1983.
- Borelli, Elena. *Giovanni Pascoli, Gabriele d'Annunzio, and the Ethics of Desire: between Action and Contemplation*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.
- Calcaterra, Carlo. "Commemorazione di Gabriele d'Annunzio. Discorso pronunciato dal Prof. Carlo Calcaterra nell'Aula Magna (4 marzo 1938-XVI).", *Annuario dell'anno accademico 1938-39 – Regia Università di Bologna*, 1939, pp. 116–122.
- Cantelmo, Marinella. *Il piacere dei lettori. D'Annunzio e la comunicazione letteraria*, Longo Editore, 1996.
- Casanova, Pascale. *La république mondiale des lettres*, Seuil, 2008.
- Chiara, Piero. *Vita di Gabriele d'Annunzio*, Mondadori, 2020.
- Chiarini, Giuseppe. *Alla ricerca della verecondia*, A. Sommaruga, 1884.
- Croce, Benedetto. *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915*, Laterza, 1928.
- d'Annunzio, Gabriele. "Per un fatto personale." *Domenica Letteraria*, 20 July 1884, p. 2.

- . *Lettere ai Treves*, edited by Gianni Oliva, Garzanti, 1999.
- . *Scritti giornalistici*, vol. I, edited by Annamaria Andreoli, Mondadori, 2003.
- . *Prose di ricerca*, vol. II, edited by Annamaria Andreoli and Giorgio Zanetti, Mondadori, 2005.
- . *Pleasure*, translated by Lara Gochin Raffaelli, Penguin Books, 2013.
- Di Mauro-Jackson, Moira. "D'Annunzio's *Il Piacere*: a Generational Gaze on New Values." *Forum Italicum*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2017, pp. 525–548.
- Duggan, Christopher. *The Force of Destiny; a History of Italy since 1796*, Houghton Mifflin, 2007.
- Evangelista, Stefano. "Introduction: Decadence and Regeneration in Fin-de-Siècle Culture." *The Poetics of Decadence in Fin-de-Siècle Italy*, edited by Stefano Evangelista et al, Peter Lang, 2018, pp. 1–21.
- . "The Remaking of Rome: Cosmopolitanism and Literary Modernity in Gabriele d'Annunzio's *The Child of Pleasure*." *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2017, pp. 314–324.
- Fleres, Ugo. "Il Piacere. Romanzo di Gabriele d'Annunzio.", *Vita Nuova*, 26 May 1889, pp. 3–5.
- . "Il Piacere. Romanzo di Gabriele d'Annunzio.", *Vita Nuova*, 2 June 1889, pp. 1–2.
- Forlenza, Rosario., and Bjorn Thomassen. *Italian Modernities: Competing Narratives of Nationhood*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Gardini, Nicola. *Per una biblioteca indispensabile. Cinquantadue classici della letteratura italiana*, Einaudi, 2011.
- Garosi, Linda. "La letteratura della crisi: riflessioni e riformulazioni nelle riviste italiane di fine secolo." *The poetics of decadence in fin-de-siècle Italy*, edited by Stefano Evangelista et al, Peter Lang, 2018, pp. 23–47.
- Gide, André. "Inchiesta su l'arte e la letteratura." *Il Marzocco. Periodico settimanale di letteratura e d'arte*, 9 January 1898, p. 4.
- Goudet, Jacques. *D'Annunzio romanziere*, Olschki, 1976.
- Greene, Vivien, "Bizantium and Emporium: Fine secolo Magazines in Rome and Milan: Fanfulla della Domenica (1879–1919); Cronaca Bizantina (1881–86); Il Convito (1895–1907); Cronaca d'Arte (1890–92); Vita Moderna (1892–5) and Emporium (1895–1964).", *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist*

- Magazines, Volume III, Europe 1880–1940. Part 1*, edited by Peter Brooker et al, Oxford UP, 2013, pp. 536–559.
- Hicks-Bartlett, Alani Rosa. “Deceptive Art, Bad Education, and the Letter to Michetti: Classical Intertexts and Artistic Failure in D’Annunzio’s *Il Piacere*.” *Comparative Literature*, vol. 71, no. 4, 2019, pp. 381–407.
- Isnenghi, Mario. *Gli italiani in guerra*, UTET, 2008.
- Jossa, Stefano. *Un paese senza eroi: l’Italia da Jacopo Ortis a Montalbano*, Laterza, 2013.
- Korthals Altes, Liesbeth. *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation: the Negotiation of Values in Fiction*, Nebraska UP, 2014.
- Luperini, Romano. *Il Novecento: apparati ideologici, ceto intellettuale, sistemi formali nella letteratura italiana contemporanea*, Vol. I, Loescher, 1981.
- Macchia, Giovanni. “Lirica e mondana Roma del Piacere.” *Il Piacere. Atti del XII convegno. Pescara – Francavilla al Mare* (4-5 maggio 1989), edited by Edoardo Tiboni, Centro Nazionale di Studi Dannunziani, 1989, pp. 7–13.
- Martignoni, Clelia. “Le strutture narrative.” *Il Piacere. Atti del XII convegno. Pescara – Francavilla al Mare* (4-5 maggio 1989), edited by Edoardo Tiboni, Centro Nazionale di Studi Dannunziani, 1989, pp. 69–90.
- Mazzacurati, Giancarlo. *Forma & ideologia*, Liguori editore, 1974.
- Merci, Alessandro. “Alla ricerca della inverecondia: una polemica letteraria intorno all’Intermezzo di rime dannunziano.” *Griseldaonline*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1–23.
- Mosse, George L. *Nationalism and Sexuality. Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*, Wisconsin UP, 1985.
- Nemegeer, Guylian. “Umanesimo, Rinascimento e rinascita nazionale in Gabriele d’Annunzio.” *The Italianist*, 2022, 10.1080/02614340.2022.2101219.
- . “Decadenza nazionale nella ricezione fin-de-siècle dell’Intermezzo di Rime di d’Annunzio.” *Romance Notes*, forthcoming.
- Nemegeer, Guylian, and Mara Santi. “Gabriele d’Annunzio’s Notturmo, the Book of the Italian War: Political Commitment, National Regeneration and Its Ideological Roots.” *Forum Italicum*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2021, pp. 710–40.
- Panzacchi, Enrico. “Litterarum intemperantia. Il piacere – Romanzo di Gabriele d’Annunzio.” *Lettere e arti*, 8 June 1889, pp. 1–3.

- Pastonchi, Francesco. "I nostri letterati – Gabriele d'Annunzio." *Interviste a D'Annunzio (1895-1938)*, edited by Gianni Oliva, Rocco Carabba, 2002, pp. 69–73.
- Paratore, Ettore. "Le visioni di Roma nel Piacere." *Il Piacere. Atti del XII convegno. Pescara – Francavilla al Mare (4-5 maggio 1989)*, edited by Edoardo Tiboni, Centro Nazionale, 1989, pp. 111–124.
- Patriarca, Silvana. *Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic*, Cambridge UP, 2013.
- Re, Lucia. "Nazione e narrazione: scrittori, politica, sessualità e la 'formazione degli italiani, 1870-1900.'" *Carte Italiane*, vol. 2, no. 5, 2009, pp. 71-108.
- Russo, Luigi. *Dal Manzoni al Gattopardo. Ritratti e disegni storici*, Sansoni, 1981.
- Scalinger, Giulio Massimo. "Il Piacere di Gabriele d'Annunzio.", 21 July 1889, pp. 1–2.
- Somigli, Luca. *Legitimizing the Artist. Manifesto Writing and European Modernism, 1885-1915*, Toronto UP, 2003
- Surico, Filippo. "Ora luminosa. Le mie conversazioni letterarie con D'Annunzio nell'ospitalità di villa Cagnacco a Gardone Riviera.", *Interviste a D'Annunzio (1895-1938)*, edited by Gianni Oliva, pp. 577–627.
- Tellini, Gino. *Il romanzo italiano dell'Ottocento e Novecento*, Mondadori, 1998.
- Tosi, Guy. "La tentazione simbolista in D'Annunzio (1890-1893)." In *D'Annunzio e la cultura francese. Saggi e studi (1942-1987)*, vol. I, edited by Maddalena Rasera, Rocco Carabba, 2013, pp. 141-157.
- . "Incontri di d'Annunzio con la cultura francese." *D'Annunzio e la cultura francese. Saggi e studi (1942-1987)*, vol. II, edited by Maddalena Rasera, Rocco Carabba, 2013, pp. 855–940.
- Turchetta, Gianni. "d'Annunzio, l'inverecondia e il mercato letterario." *Scrittore e lettore nella società di massa: sociologia della letteratura e ricezione. Lo stato degli studi*, edited by Giuseppe Petronio, Elvio Guagnini and Ulrich Schulz-Buschhaus, Edizioni Lint, 1991, pp. 181-200.