

# Gabriele d'Annunzio

## The New Poet and His Work

By Eugene Benson

*“ Sovran maestro d'ogni melodia ”*

### I

THE new romance and the new prose come to us from Italy. After the attempt, first in France, then here, to make prose a richer means of expression, it is interesting to see what has been done in Italian.

It is one thing to limit language, as in a leading article, to the mere understanding, that is, to the business style; it is another thing to make it correspond with, and express, the whole range of emotion and thought of a poet.

The pedestrian step of the rank and file of writers, doubtless, is the proper result of discipline; fit for daily use; it leads one forward from fact to fact; but it is not wise to confine all movement of mind and heart to its pace and form.

The concise phrase showing the greatest economy of words, and the most effective use of them for a given purpose, is not an illustration of all the resources of language. For a whole order of sensations and ideas—those of the poet and the artist, that is to say

say the interpreters and illustrators of life—the language of a great soldier, or a great moralist, is inadequate. There is the ever-recurring search for and sign of new forms of expression. The reserved and parsimonious masters of the word are displaced to make room for the givers of the magnificent ; magnificence is as much a part of greatness of style as it is a part of greatness of character. The splendour of the true is the beautiful. In art, form is not cut down as for a thing of speed only, but it is a generous thing to give full expression, not to stint it. The symbol of style is not the Greek runner with everything superfluous for his purpose eliminated, but rather one would accept the idea of music, with its vast and varied harmonies, its searching note, as indicating in a better way the richest expressional power. And it is to make prose like music that the new style is attempted.

Carlyle, uncouth and wilful, yet flashing his own Rembrandt-like light on one feature ; Ruskin, intemperate, insular, arbitrary, yet with a splendour of style all his own, made us welcome Matthew Arnold, who led us to form our expression, as he in part had done, after the clear, grave and restrained masters of French style. Our prose became cold and somewhat barren ; it stiffened ; it lost its free movement. Swinburne and Pater, the one with an opulent phrase, the other with a choice phrase, at once delicate subtle and alluring, touched a newly-awakened sense of beauty, but touched only a few readers. Yet so far, they liberated us from the stricter prose reactionists, who, like Stendhal, made it a point of good sense as of virtue not to attempt the splendid rhetoric of the great masters. Yet the new prose and the new romance failed to appear ; at least, they came not with all their means of expression in perfect use, with perfect choice of word, with that life quickening them without which they are extravagant and ineffective.

In spite of all that has been done in modern prose, if the plain straight tale is all we ask for, we must go back for the best of the kind. Story for story, we may still prefer the Book of Daniel to the Book of Flaubert, and Susannah, the delicate woman, simply and charmingly presented, is more engaging than the much elaborated *Salammbô*.

Voltaire's opinion that the Bible stories are masterpieces, is not discredited by our later tales, though with our modern literature there comes in a new element, pagan, chivalric, refined; the worship of woman, the cult of beauty. The most brilliant examples of it are still Italian. And it is not only the woman, but the lady, who is enthroned in the new art.

The new prose and the new romance are the work of Italy's new poet, Gabriele d'Annunzio, who, in *le Vergine delle Rocce*, seeks to make prose do all that poetry has done, that is, yield itself to every breath of emotion, pliant to every sensation. He would make it like Shelley's verse. And it is claimed that he has enlarged the domain of language. The uses to which he has put his prose imply a less trammelled life than that which our moralists accept. His style is the result of an unfailing sense of beauty, of a passion for, and power to express life, without which it would be but a wordy and incontinent thing, flaccid, nerveless, swollen, ineffective and fatiguing.

We may prefer the etchist point to the brush, but the brush of a Titian or a Rubens gives us richer sensations of beauty than the acid-bitten style of the daily dreadful.

It is fit that from the land of leisure and of art should come the new romance and the new prose, and it is proper that it should be the gift of the new poet of Italy, whose lyric achievement is perfect and unquestioned; whose artistic needs and aristocratic preferences forbid him to submit to business aims and democratic ideals.

ideals. The old stirring romance of adventure, with every page appealing to the dramatic sense, or at least to our love of action, which enthral the average reader, seems but made for busy men and for coarse brains. The imaginative art of the new romance has nothing in common with it; the poetic and artistic expression of the new romance really exacts a more cultivated mind, or at least one upon which all the refinements of thought and expression are not lost, but give to it a distinct pleasure. If you depreciate this kind of pleasure, you stop short with the robust, but miss the finer flowers of the "Garden of Words."

In the new romance, the taste for literature and art is fully met. The phrase in it is a thing of beauty, a constant joy; it takes us into a charmed world, where the ideal transfigures the real; but it does so without weakening our sense of actuality; it rather enriches it, rooted in it, as it is; very different from the spurious, the vague, the formless attempts at imaginative art.

Without some knowledge of Italian genius and culture, d'Annunzio's last Romance is hardly likely to be understood, nor is there anything like it in any language but his own. To tell the mere story of it would be but to give a skeleton, and ask you to imagine the sumptuous, the voluptuous beauty of a living woman, proud and simple and unashamed in all the grace and charm of her seductiveness. The method of criticism which divests a tale of its language is fit only for the dull who have no sense of language, and to whom a phrase is like a vestment that may be removed, not a vital part of the thing, as it is in d'Annunzio's narrative.

Claudio Cantelmo, the hero of his story, is of an ancient and illustrious race. After spending his youth according to the devices of his heart, he retires to his estates to recover himself.

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His only neighbours are a strange and secluded family, of which the two princes of Castromitano were friends of his youth. The three Virgins of the Romance are the three sisters, very beautiful, who—with their mad mother, the Princess Aldoini, and their father, Prince Luigi, embittered and saddened by exile—become so deeply interesting to the hero and to the reader. They appear and disappear as in a magic mirror. Vividly as they are presented there is little of the shock of action; the dramatic movement is so suave, it is as though they came and went according to some rhythmic law, to the sound of music, graceful, harmonious, beautiful. There is an air of high breeding, of melancholy, of reserve, as in Poe's *Ligeia*, as in his *Fall of the House of Usher*; there is the sense of latent passion, of malady, of mysterious destiny; but the reader is kept this side of the dangerous edge of circumstance; reflection takes the place of action. One follows their personal life at intervals not only to be led by curiosity to know their fortunes, but to get the most brilliant expression of a beautiful mind. For the obvious sense of the hero's situation, involving his choice of a wife, has yet a richer interest. The writer touches the profoundest elements of life with such high Italian dignity and grace that he is never betrayed into anything unworthy his fine art, and he shows complete deliverance from the rank company of realism; he is poetic; his work is a work of art, as art has been understood in Italy before it was infected with the baser things of its decadence.

It is in this new Romance that d'Annunzio appears with something like a new faith. Released from the revolting realism and the questionable types of several of his former books, he puts forth a new Declaration of Independence, not for the many but for the few. He at least will resist mediocrity instead of writing to please it in conformity with its tastes. He has seen that the sense of style

style is rare, that the many are incapable of recognising it ; for the many are only curious about life, and dull about art. The problem for the real artist is to inform art with life, and make art give shape to life, which is in fact its highest office—for the art of life is more than the art of painting, or music ; it is the result of all art acting on the stuff of our days as they come and go. And yet we call artists, only those who, mastering the technique of some art, produce beautiful works, yet live sordidly, mindless that the great artist is like Goethe, who makes a beautiful and harmonious whole of his life.

Now that d'Annunzio appears to have "dominated the inevitable tumults of his youth," and walks in the paths of art and beauty with a pure and serene mind, made free by the truth, we are to recognise him as master, not only of his art, but of himself. He emerges from his sense-bound experience with a high philosophy of being. In a magnificent tribute to Socrates, "the Master," he repeats the immortal narrative of Phædo, the beloved disciple. Few pages of modern literature are comparable to his account of the Platonic dialogue. It is in *le Vergine delle Rocce* that you can read anew the impressive story of the last moments of Socrates, even to the caressing gesture of the serene philosopher, who pauses in his discourse on death, and the soul, and immortality, to touch with a playful hand the beautiful hair of Phædo. The Platonic narrative is reproduced, freshened and quickened to serve anew as the note of "music" for which d'Annunzio himself is striving. He strikes a philosophic note ; he shows a Pagan sense of beauty. The book opens with a solemn, almost Sacerdotal, intonation. The carnal muse of the new poet seems absent, and we are led to expect the development of his theme guided by the antique lover of wisdom, with a full expression of the higher life of the senses and the soul. It holds nothing vulgar or common, and it aims to  
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express the beautiful, in evoking the three ideals of conduct, the three ideals embodied in the three virgins; the ideal of religious life, of filial devotion, of impassioned love of beauty, as it is in the three sisters in their reserved and hidden life, for the moment subject to the dominating egotism of the masculine will, embodied in the hero of the story.

There may be some disappointment if you take d'Annunzio's Romance expecting in it the English pattern for domestic use. It is representative of the Latin or Pagan genius, that is, not the genius of morality, or of what Matthew Arnold called Conduct, but the genius of life and art, in a land of never failing beauty.

Much of his former prose is given to record the excesses of passion in types both degenerate and repugnant, though portrayed and expressed with mastery. But many of his shorter stories are quite enchanting, filled with the loveliness of spring, with the purity of dawn. He shows us the Italian peasant of the Abruzzi, and gives us descriptions of a part of Italy but little known; primitive, antique, curiously interesting. The orange orchards, the olive slopes, far down the Adriatic; millions of roses, festal processions and the incredible fanaticism and passion of religion of the Abruzzi *contadini*;—measureless life under the most *subjugating* influences, not so much described as felt and depicted by him, while again and again his marvellous prose is illuminated by the word of the poet, as in *Les Cloches* and *Annales d'Anne*—translated into French by E. Héréelle. There is in them the magic and the charm of nature. *Les Cloches* of d'Annunzio may be compared with *Les Cloches* of Victor Hugo, in *Notre Dame*, to the advantage of the Italian prose writer, for his expression is richer, more artistic and convincing.

As to his theory of art, it appears that dulness alone is forbidden to the artist; that art without life is a dead thing, life without

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art, brutal. With a sense that shrinks before nothing, he treats whatever comes to his hand, or rather whatever interests him, with perfect composure; with perfect sincerity—the infallible sign of the true artist, as of the true poet. He will not affect a shame or a repugnance he does not feel when, like a surgeon, curious and impassive, he deals with a subject. Only the specialist will sympathise with, or approve of, this impartiality for, this indifference to, what we call disagreeable or agreeable. I confess Italian hardihood is always a surprise, and one is induced to think the race lacks *delicacy* in things moral and physical. Italian insensibility to smell, for instance; Italian indifference to that disgusting display of *viscera* which adds to the sanguinary horror of the butchers' shops of Rome—shock the more fastidious sense of the colder North. As to the sense of smell, one must think that the nasal nerve is more robust in the Italian. That organ does not sniff the offence in the way, nor nose the rat on the stairs, nor the corpse behind the arras. The Italian ignores villainous odours. Yet extreme sensibility to all that is most delicious in nature is shown on many a page of d'Annunzio's prose. How often with him one is in a perpetual spring of new born scents, in a land where the very air becomes an accomplice to seduce the senses! and properly so, for Italy is also the land of heavenly odours, the land of flowery perfumes. Where, as in Italy, is the very air inebriating with orange blossoms, with roses, with laurel-bloom sweeter than honey? Hazlitt boldly said that he preferred Italian dirt to Dutch cleanliness; thinking decay and corruption signs of the richer life: the compost of it in Italy feeding, as it does, a deeper vegetation, and, as some think, a richer humanity. The Italian accepts it all; is used to it; the foreigner, with the quicker sense revolts at it.

We wonder that a writer of the highest artistic gifts deals with  
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diseased and degenerate types, showing the same fervour and interest that he does when he deals with health and beauty. Under the pretext of science or truth, he serves a bad turn to art ; he confounds beauty and the normal life with all life ; affects to be god-like, superior to matter, and handles the unclean and the clean, forgetting that the first business of the man and the artist is to discriminate between good and bad. The error of not choosing the better part will correct, or rather it has corrected itself, since the writer has turned from the romance of the street to the romance of the garden.

It is in d'Annunzio's new romance that we see his choice is determined by a higher ideal of life than in his former prose, that the things not nice of realism are abandoned, left buried with the *débris* of their day ; their corruption dooms them to be forgotten. Pestiferous literature has short lease of life. If one goes to *L'Innocente* and *Giovanni Episcopo* to learn more about d'Annunzio, one is in danger of taking his exuberant fiction for fact. They but show the rank " dressing " of his former days. Most readers stop at that, unmindful of, or without seeing, the perfect flowers of beauty grown out of it. It is true that the heroes of his earlier romances are not only slaves to animal functions, but they are more dangerous than animals : they are fatal to the very women they love ; they have the taint and the action of madness. They are not so aspiring as Milton's lion " pawing to get free his hinder parts " ; at the best they are but like dolphins showing their backs above the element they delight in ; they have no more moral sense than a water snake ; they have something of Borgia, of Cellini, of Aretino, of Casanova ; they are stiffening and repugnant to our sense of rectitude, for they illustrate not rectitude but excess. The experiences d'Annunzio has written of, with consummate gifts of expression, in *L'Innocente* and in *Giovanni Episcopo*, are usually

usually confined to clandestine books, and are seldom presented in literature, seldom invested with art, at least outside France and Italy. To match it you must go to that native of Roman Gaul, the satirist of Nero, who alone is rivalled by the later Pagan, feeling responsible not for the story he tells, but for how he tells it, and determined to tell it in all its details with unmitigated truth. He shows the utmost unconcern as to what you may think of it. You have the right to say you do not like his choice of subject.

When Goethe was reproached for the injurious effect his *Werther* had upon weak people, he said: "If there are mad people for whom reading is bad, I can't help it. The consequences do not concern me." The old Pagan felt himself to be like nature, working inevitably, in no way responsible for results, which are the individual's affair. So d'Annunzio writes with the conscience of an artist, but without the sensitiveness of a moralist; certainly without the restraints which regulate and sometimes silence expression when there is question of a personal experience which, as Hamlet says, it is not honest to set down in plain phrase. In Italy the matter is not so considered.

D'Annunzio's phrase as a prose writer is supple and opulent; his word is vivid; his feeling intense; he is always serious. He lacks playfulness. Without a sense of humour, seldom or never with the purpose of a humourist, without the sport of wit, he yet holds one fascinated by his word as he tells his tale; while he tells it he charms one with the music, the splendour, the colour and the grace of his language, and one wonders at the sustained flow and harmony of his periods. The secret of his style is that it is ever informed by an imaginative mind, shaped by a never failing sense of art. He seems denied lordship over laughter and tears. *That* belongs to the poet, and the dramatist, and the story-teller of simpler aims and humbler sympathies than the aristocratic and fastidious

fastidious artist. He is like a musician who writes—the melodious element prevails ; he is like a painter who paints—colour prevails ; he is like a worker in marble or metal—form prevails. He is a writer who, like George Sand, like Gautier, like Swinburne, has measureless power and a supreme sense of beauty to express his sense of life and art. Individual and intense, he looked isolated, like Baudelaire, with questionable tendencies and preferences. He seems to have escaped the abasement of the unclean, stained ; but not transformed by the thing he worked in when dealing with the baser experiences of life.

While Baudelaire is close, severe, terse, d'Annunzio is open, pliant, and abundant. Now and again you get from his poetry a note, not disavowed, from Shakespeare, from Shelley, from Baudelaire, from Walt Whitman, from Tennyson. The Northern novelists have led him to treat of crime and punishment. With all these elements from the ferment of our modern moral and intellectual life, he has remained himself, a new talent, a personal talent, enriched, not dominated by others, maker and master of his own expression, renewing for us purely Italian types of life and art. Finally the poet has triumphed over the realist. It is in his later prose, and in his later verse, that he shows the inevitable change brought about by time and suffering. It holds a mystic element. He uses the Natural as the symbol of the Spiritual.

The poet is triumphant.

## II

The poet has manifested himself more varied in style than the prose writer. He began with a sense of clean-cut classic form, objective, Pagan, unacquainted with the maladies of the introspective mind, and he produced masterpieces of Greek-like beauty  
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that at once raised him above the felicitous *dilettante* of classic art ; he turned from that, as from a thing accomplished, to reach after the refinements of the Provençal, and he attained at once in *l'Isottéo* an elegance, a lightness, a romantic charm, a laughing melody and grace of language, beyond anything of our time ; and last, in his *Poema Paradisiaco*, behold another transformation. The artificial, complicated, sensual poet of mediæval and renaissance gallantry is the suave, simple, *intime* poet of home affections—won back, as to a spring of pure water, after many and strange wanderings.

It is because of all this Protean and beautiful work that he is regarded as the first artist of Italy since '71. He is the new poet of his race, not of national aspiration or political aims, but of the eternal life of eternal Italy ; of what in it endures while Republics, Empires, Religion, come and go, or are transformed in that land of open sensuality, pagan from first to last, excessive in its passion of life and art, and rich and splendid in the expression of it all.

It is interesting to contrast the noble and unfortunate Leopardi, the poet of unappeased passion, of great memories, the proud poet of despair, with the new poet who has gratified every passion and slacked his thirst for every pleasure. Like Leopardi, the sombre lover of death, d'Annunzio, the poet of pleasure, exhausted and at the end of sensation, woos the pale mother of all woe and all peace. Proved to the uttermost, the intellectual life and the sensual life leave both men restless for the triumph of death ; and all this perilous stuff is worked off in expression, in fiction, in novels and verses, which are the *artist's* means of self-deliverance.

Leopardi moaned his anguish for the perishing individual doomed to an enforced renunciation ; moaned for his country, prostrate and enslaved, renewing no grandeur and quickening no heroism, till roused by his indignation, moved by his tears ; d'Annunzio,

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more fortunate in his youth than the earlier poet, yet gave to sense what the other gave to mind, the strength and passion of his best years. With supple and jewelled phrase, with language expressive of every seduction of the senses, of every enchantment of beauty, he celebrates the burning pleasures of his youth, his pride of life, his passion for art. Both are pagan; the intellectual penetration of both men pitiless and unhesitating, sparing no illusion. The one is involved, profound, enwrap, like Michael Angelo's *Night*, in a dolorous dream; the other, like some desperate alchemist, dissolves one by one the jewels of his youth, intent to test or sacrifice the very substance and quality of his being. How are we to understand two such poets? Are we to turn away from them as aliens, subject to tyrannies which we know not, or which we have resisted? Must we go to Clough and cold water, admit no acquaintance with flesh, escape dense life only to harass ourselves with introspective verse, which at best is but a proof of an active intellectual apparatus; or are we to step back to the chaste muse of our greater poets and rest with their simpler and more restrained expression? The age has to produce its own poetry. It is not enough that the gods and the demi-gods have lived. We must have the expression of our own life, and poetry is the first and final expression, the expression that survives. D'Annunzio's verse shows what it is for Italy in Italy to-day.

Christianised or Puritanised as we have been, the pagan element has only temporary possession with us. Though it has appeared allied with a music and an art not unworthy of the gravest as well as the lightest of Latin poets, serious with a studied and a premeditated sensuality, it has remained a thing more for hot-house Englishmen than for the out-of-door man who makes his race prevail, backed by the portentous matron who will none of the roses and languors of the foreigner.

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The new pagan in Italy does not find himself in contradiction to his time and race when he sings of the raptures of youth and pleasure, unconscious of the stays and checks of our severer muse. His surrender to the life of the senses is complete. But however frantic his experience, he is serene and untroubled in his expression of it. The molten metal, the burning elements of his life, are cast into a shape of beauty which one must admire if one has a sense of form, a sense of art, and not merely that "sense of sin" which shadows life and dictates most criticism. No wonder we are so often found incapable of looking at a thing of art as a kind of deliverance and redemption from the grossness of matter.

The new poet has the advantage of the old moralist; for in the very creation of art out of what the moralist must censure as experience, he makes something beautiful, which is his delight and consolation. He makes something that enchants us. Triumphant, he shows his Venus in marble, he shapes the god in clay.

The new poet, with his phosphorescent style, that at times suggests corruption and smells of it, comes with the curiosity or the *savant* and the emotion of the man; he leaves no experience of life untried or at least unimagined. He follows a passion; he sounds a motive; absorbed, he seems all but criminal with the criminal. He shows the flux and reflux of life in human nature. If the great tide of it carries out or leaves stranded things that revolt and pain us, we, at least, can show our taste by not occupying ourselves with the more dreadful accidents of the hour and the more unsightly *débris* of the season. Yet, if that is there, there is much more in the prose of the poet.

The new pagan having read all literature, questioned all religions, used up his youth, has one thing left, one thing of great price, which the mere *débauché* has not known: he has the  
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consolations of art, and, with it, the higher worship of beauty. Art is his creation, and with that he enchants us and beguiles himself. When he treats of the sin of Moonlight and May, when he describes his "Venus of sweet waters" in the heat and mystery of the noonday, we are enchanted with beauty; and we feel with him the trouble and ecstasy of youth. When he addresses his old nurse, or returns to his home and walks in the garden with his mother, or addresses his sister with words of touching sweetness, we learn that the sacred charities of the heart are known and felt. He is noble and patriotic when he pours out the rolling music of his funeral ode to the dead admiral. We recognise that he is master of every melody, and, if a pagan still, a pagan to whom the solemnities of life have come, and who gives himself to the experience appropriate to his years. But yesterday, living according to the law of his members, concerning himself, like the French novelists of the day, with the sensual side of life, with things of sight, and sound, and touch, and smell; describing the experience, not of the soul or the mind, but of the flesh, and in no way ashamed of any condition of it in life or death. The Frenchman, the Italian, the Spaniard, in a word, the Latin, studies a corpse, paints it, or a nude living body, curious of form; and for that he is as constant as we are for the domesticities of life. Imagine the different results in art.

Both from Baudelaire and from d'Annunzio we get the *de profundis* like a far-off note, recalling the pains and anxieties of the opium eater. The frenzies of passion that lead the heroes of his romances to murder or suicide, in the poet himself evoke a cry of despair. The ever reappearing paganism of youth gives place to the spiritualism of the new man, born out of suffering, and we hear the cry of a living soul after the confessions of the sensualist. It is this evolution which separates d'Annunzio from the objec-  
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tive and pagan artists of the Italian renaissance like Poliziano, for example, close as he seems to him by his serene plastic sense ; it is this which attaches him to Petrarch and Tasso, in his later verse ; still a pagan, yet with sorrow, and all her family of sighs and tears, become conscious that the life of the senses is not the be-all and end-all of existence. The new pagan is touched by something he cannot define, something that escapes *form*, yet permeates it. So d'Annunzio becomes in poetry what Chopin is in music, a "sovereign master of every melody." With the refinement of a Provençal, with the serenity of a Greek, he sang of delightful romantic and classic things, of gardens and *fêtes*, and all that belongs to the life of elegance.

He has a sixteenth-century face, like a portrait by Clouet : fine, sensitive, intense ; implying close acquaintance with the uncommon. Like a later Leonardo, he is a lover of the beautiful hands of women ; like him, he is learned in the mysteries of their touch ; like him, he is a student of their smile ; no grace or seduction of their being is lost upon him. Like the painter of the *Sacred and Profane Love*, he illustrates the beauty, he expresses the significance, of flesh. But little past thirty, his productiveness during the last twelve or thirteen years is remarkable. He began with a thin volume of verse : *Intermezzo in rime* ; then wrote *Il Piacere* in prose ; then in verse *l'Isottò* ; *La Chimera* ; *Elegie Romane* ; *Odi Navali* ; *Poema Paradisiaco*. Without mentioning all his prose romances, brilliant as they are in many respects, and foreign to English taste, the most acceptable is the last one : "the golden book of spirit and sense," the *Tre Vergine delle Rocce*.