

**GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO:  
POET OF BEAUTY  
AND DECADENCE**

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Gabriele d'Annunzio: Poet of Beauty and Decadence by Rudolph Altrocchi

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**RUDOLPH ALTROCCHI**

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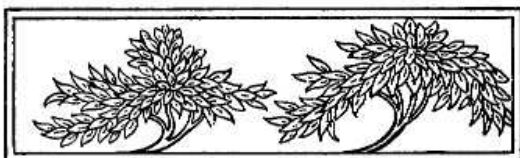
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**THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB**

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oppresso d'amor, di piacere,  
il popol de' vivi s' addorme ...  
O falce calante, qual messe di sogni  
ondeggia a' l tuo mite chiarore qua giù!<sup>1</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> *Canto Novo*, ii, 10.