



Anatomy of the Superman: Gabriele D'Annunzio's Response to Nietzsche

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores D'Annunzio's reception of Nietzsche—particularly his sociopolitical theory and idea of the *Übermensch*—as dramatized in his novel *Le Vergini delle rocce* (*The Maidens of the Rocks*). D'Annunzio's attitude towards Nietzsche was complicated and contradictory, varying from fascination and rivalry to rejection and negation: rather than a philosopher or master, he saw Nietzsche as a poet and soulmate. Like many writers and artists of *fin-de-siècle* Europe, D'Annunzio too was attracted by Nietzsche's elitist social theory and *Übermensch*, of which he presents his own version especially in *Maidens of the Rocks*. In the novel, the young aristocrat Claudio Cantelmo aspires to overcome himself. However, the fact that Cantelmo fails to achieve his dream of fathering a New King of Rome, reveals D'Annunzio's deep skepticism about contemporary Italy as well as his own "decadent" soul.

KEYWORDS

D'Annunzio; Nietzsche; *Übermensch*; elitist social theory; decadence

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Nietzsche's Spell

According to Ernst Behler, Nietzsche's extraordinary success in European intellectual life can be divided into two phases. While from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1950s the "poet philosopher's" success was primarily literary, interest in Nietzsche's philosophy—thanks mainly to Walter Kaufmann's studies and translations—started to grow only after 1945. Nietzsche's popularity indeed owed much to his poetic imagination and new philosophical discourse that erased the boundaries between philosophy and literature. His impact on European literature and art was widespread, running from the Russian and French Symbolists to Walt Whitman, George Bernard Shaw, and André Gide. In Germany at the end of the nineteenth century almost every author had at one time or another encountered Nietzsche's works, including Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Stefan George, Frank Wedekind, Herman Hesse, and Rainer Maria Rilke. Similarly, composers such as Richard Mahler, Frederick Delius, and Richard Strauss also came under Nietzsche's spell and translated it into music.¹

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Although Behler mentions Gabriele D'Annunzio among the poets who "elevated Nietzsche to the rank of a prophet,"² D'Annunzio's attitude towards the German philosopher was not that simplistic. In this essay, I discuss D'Annunzio's reception and

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interpretation of Nietzsche, and focus particularly on D'Annunzio's sociopolitical theory and idea of the *Übermensch* as dramatized in his 1896 novel *The Maidens of the Rocks*.

Fraternal Souls

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It is uncertain when D'Annunzio came to know Nietzsche, and whether he ever actually read Nietzsche's works,³ though some sources show that by the early 1890s he was already familiar with Nietzsche's oeuvre. According to Mario Bernardi Guardi, Nietzsche's name appeared in Italy for the first time in D'Annunzio's article "La bestia elettiva" ("The Beast Who Wills"), published in *Il Mattino* in 1892.⁴ From then on, as some have argued, D'Annunzio became the leading propagator of Nietzsche's ideas in Italy.⁵ However, some of D'Annunzio's earliest remarks about Nietzsche are somewhat confused.

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In the summer of 1893, D'Annunzio published a long three-part article in *La Tribuna*, "Il Caso Wagner," dedicated to Nietzsche's homonymous book published five years earlier. In *The Case of Wagner*, Nietzsche announced his rupture with Wagner, whom he had previously admired and praised.⁶ He also showed his capacity as a music critic, and recorded his reflections on art and its relationship to humanity's health. According to Nietzsche, Wagner and his music were symptomatic of the decadence of modern culture: both Wagner's style and modern culture lacked integrity, manifesting an anarchy of atoms in which life no longer dwells in the whole (40–42).⁷ Wagner, he stated, was nothing less than "The artist of decadence," who "spoils our health," adding that "Wagner increases exhaustion—therefore he attracts the weak and exhausted to him." Rather than a man, Wagner was "a disease," "contaminat[ing] everything he touche[d]" (33–34). These negative qualities culminated in Wagner's preoccupation with hysteria:

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I place this point of view first and foremost: Wagner's art is diseased. The problems he sets on the stage are all concerned with hysteria; the convulsiveness of his emotions, his over-excited sensitiveness, his taste which demands ever sharper condimentation, his erraticness which he togged out to look like principles, and, last but not least, his choice of heroes and heroines, considered as physiological types (—a hospital ward!—): the whole represents a morbid picture; of this there can be no doubt. *Wagner est une névrose*. (34)

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In contrast to Nietzsche, D'Annunzio was a great admirer of Wagner, which is why his attitude towards Nietzsche already in "Il Caso Wagner" is rather peculiar.⁸ Apart from presenting Nietzsche's aristocratic ideology, D'Annunzio characterized him as "one of the most original, and one of the boldest spirits of the end of the century." His books are "written in a biting and powerful style," in which "paradoxes alternate with sarcasm, and the turbulent invectives with exact formulas." As examples of Nietzsche's "bizarre" works, D'Annunzio mentions *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Gay Science*, which shows how well informed he nevertheless was about Nietzsche's works.⁹ Furthermore, even though he does not mention the *Birth of Tragedy*, both in his play *La Città morta* (1896; *The Dead City*) and in his novel *Il Fuoco* (1900; *The Flame of Life*), the reflections about art and in particular Greek tragedy bear close similarities with Nietzsche's.¹⁰

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In 1900, D'Annunzio's close friend and art critic Angelo Conti published *La Beata riva. Trattato dell'oblio* (The blessed shore: A treatise on oblivion), written as a dialogue between Ariele, representing Conti, and Gabriele, representing D'Annunzio. Although both Ariele/Conti and Gabriele/D'Annunzio deny the originality of Nietzsche's theories,

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which they say he inherited mainly from the Greek sophists, they entirely recognize Nietzsche's importance to European culture. For Ariele/Conti, Nietzsche was above all the propagator of a life-affirming philosophy and bard of joy: "In these last years, the love of existence and the frenzy of pleasure have given birth to the highly praised theory: the philosophy of life of Friedrich Nietzsche."¹¹

Similarly, in the poem "Per la morte di un distruttore" (1900; For the death of a destroyer), commemorating Nietzsche's death, D'Annunzio presents Nietzsche as a mentor who urged humanity to enjoy life: "Run, run/to the joy that awaits you." Nietzsche taught people to use their will: "He said: 'I teach the human heart/a new willpower'; "He said: 'I teach man, not the love of neighbor, but of the one further away,/ of the apex he chooses for himself./Let the man be his own star,/his own law and the avenger/of his law'." However, regardless of his obvious interest in, if not admiration for Nietzsche, D'Annunzio explicitly denied Nietzsche's influence on his works. For D'Annunzio, as the poem suggests, Nietzsche with his life-affirming philosophy was not a spiritual guide, but a soulmate:

I said: "He is my equal./This hard Barbarian who drank/a full cup of the burning Campanian wine/and inebriated of power/and of freedom, he crossed/the harmonious seas/longing for the land/where the man in the divine sky/solemnly walked next to the god/and they both were Hellenes;/he is my brother."¹²

It would seem that D'Annunzio's life, from the very beginning, was an unconscious fulfillment of Nietzsche's ideas, which is why the philosopher could teach him nothing.¹³ In *La Beata riva* Gabriele says: "but the ideas of mine, similar to those of the German philosopher, I have drawn from the bottom of my own nature. You will find their germs in my first poems, in the book of my adolescence."¹⁴ Benedetto Croce, as his 1903 essay shows, was apt to agree: "D'Annunzio once declared that he was Nietzschean before Nietzsche, and without knowing it. For me this seems to be true, because rather than a philosophy, Nietzsche represents a temperament; a feeling rather than a System. And many features of this temperament were intrinsic in D'Annunzio and had become known in *Il Piacere* and in his other works."¹⁵

In addition to a life-affirming philosophy, Nietzsche and D'Annunzio shared another fundamental attitude—"a tragic sense of life." At a certain point in *La Beata riva* Gabriele says to Ariele: "You, candid and serene soul, have you ever thought that tragedy is the essence of my life? When I got to know the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, I was practically indifferent towards a theory that did not offer me anything except some lyrical moments, in a circle of beautiful images. What touched me in Nietzsche was the fact that I got to know a tragic soul, similar to mine, fraternal to my soul." Nevertheless, for D'Annunzio, in the first place Nietzsche was not a philosopher, but a visionary poet. ~~Gabriele continues:~~ "You know how much I appreciate Friedrich Nietzsche's works, but you don't know the reason. Nietzsche is not a philosopher, but a poet, and as a poet he has the capacity to see visions in which the greatest mysteries of nature and life appear unveiled."¹⁶

Gabriele in *La Beata riva* and D'Annunzio in "Per la morte di un distruttore" saw Nietzsche not as a master but as a soulmate; not a philosopher but a poet. What they also shared was a tragic sense of life. However, there were yet other attitudes that they shared, beginning with Nietzsche's social criticism and his concept of the *Übermensch*.

The Aristocratic Realm

Nietzsche began to be widely known and read in Europe after the onset of his insanity in 1889. In addition to artists and writers, his ideas also appealed to a wide range of people from diverse political positions. According to Tracy Strong, even though Nietzsche's thought is not incontestably political, it provided material for different social theories. His first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), deals with Greek tragedy as the union of two principles attributed to two deities, Apollo and Dionysus. The Apollonian principle emphasizes order, static beauty and clear boundaries. Its opposite, the Dionysian attitude is characterized by frenzy, excess, and the collapse of boundaries. By merging these two opposing perspectives, Greek tragedy could confront the ultimate question on the meaning of life. Yet *The Birth of Tragedy* also deals with the formation of social and political identity, in other words, with the question of what it means to be Greek. For this reason, according to Strong, it is the most obviously political of Nietzsche's books.¹⁷

Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None (1883) is probably Nietzsche's best-known work. Much of the book consists of Zarathustra's speeches on philosophical themes that are central to Nietzsche's thought and that he further develops in his later works. Apart from the *Übermensch* (to which I shall return), another prominent theme is the importance of the will, which is also a central in *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1886). Partly following Schopenhauer, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche claims that will is more important to human beings than knowledge and that the "will to power" is the bedrock of life. It is also through the figure of Zarathustra that Nietzsche first introduces his elitist world-view, which he later clarifies in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Zarathustra contends that human beings are not equal. In the section "The Tarantulas" he denounces egalitarianism as incompatible with the doctrine of the *Übermensch* and with life in general:

With these preachers of equality will I not be mixed up and confound. For thus speaketh justice UNTO ME: "Men are not equal."

And neither shall they become so! What would be my love to the Superman, if I spake otherwise?

On a thousand bridges and piers shall they throng to the future, and always shall there be more war and inequality among them: thus doth my great love make me speak!¹⁸

In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche, as noted, further elaborates and clarifies many of the themes already briefly and often metaphorically introduced in *Zarathustra*. Here he criticizes the philosophers for regarding themselves as seekers of truth, while they have merely sought to impose their moral outlook on nature, and read into it what they wanted to find. But for Nietzsche, morality has changed over time, which is why he proposes a new way to practice philosophy based on a physio-psychological reconsideration of conventional morality. He also further develops his elitist world-view and explicitly denounces contemporary democratic and egalitarian movements. In "What is noble?" (chap. 9), Nietzsche emphasizes the importance of an aristocratic society: "EVERY elevation of the type "man," has hitherto been the work of an aristocratic society and so it will always be." The aristocrats he refers to were originally barbarians, who, thanks to their superior mental powers, have become the noble class of society. Thus, the

aristocracy is the aristocracy of spirit and consists of “complete men”: “At the commencement, the noble caste was always the barbarian caste: their superiority did not consist first of all in their physical, but in their psychical power—they were more COMPLETE men.”¹⁹ 170

From this Nietzsche moves to morality, which, he claims, varies in different social classes. Moral values originate either in a ruling class, conscious of its powerful position, or among the ruled, “the slaves and dependents of all sorts.” The two classes approach morality in different ways: “The noble type of man regards HIMSELF as a determiner of values.” He is the “creator of values.” Nietzsche identifies two basic types of morality, master-morality of the rulers and slave-morality of the ruled, in each of which concepts such as ‘good’, ‘evil’ and ‘bad’ have different meanings: “According to slave-morality... the ‘evil’ man arouses fear; according to master-morality, it is precisely the ‘good’ man who arouses fear and seeks to arouse it, while the bad man is regarded as the despicable being.”²⁰ 175 180

In “The Natural History of Morals” (chap. 5), Nietzsche turns to the morality of contemporary Europe which he characterizes as “HERDING-ANIMAL MORALITY.” The roots of the Europe’s moral malaise are to be found in the democratic ideology, inherited from Christianity, which he sees as “a degenerate form of political organization, but as equivalent to a degenerating, a waning type of man.” Finally, due to the democratic and socialist movements, Nietzsche hypothesizes the universal degeneracy of mankind: 185

The UNIVERSAL DEGENERACY OF MANKIND to the level of the “man of the future”—as idealized by the socialistic fools and shallow-pates—this degeneracy and dwarfing of man to an absolutely gregarious animal (or as they call it, to a man of “free society”), this brutalizing of man into a pigmy with equal rights and claims, is undoubtedly POSSIBLE! He who has thought out this possibility to its ultimate conclusion knows ANOTHER loathing unknown to the rest of mankind—and perhaps also a new MISSION!²¹ 190

Nietzsche’s vision of cultural degeneracy came at a time of growing popular support for anti-democratic and anti-parliamentary movements that had sprung up in response to the social turbulence of *fin-de-siècle* Europe. It was inevitable that in this political climate Nietzsche’s critique would strongly appeal to a wide range of groups, from social democrats, anarchists, feminists, the Wandervogel movement, the political right, to French and American conservatives, and later on the National Socialists in Germany.²² In Italy, the first decades after the proclamation of the Kingdom in 1861 were characterized by a variety of problems that generated scepticism about the country’s future. Under the premiership of Agostino Depretis, domestic politics were dominated by the *trasformismo* model of government, which further served to undermine the credibility of democracy.²³ On the international level, Italy’s early colonial attempts were unsuccessful (not least because of the unpreparedness of the army), and consequently its aspiration to gain international recognition as a modern state also failed. Italy’s unification was largely considered “incomplete,” because it failed to create a truly national spirit. The ~~middle class leaders, who were~~ supposed to build the new nation, replaced the noble ideals of the *Risorgimento* with economic and utilitarian values. Their peace was nevertheless threatened by the working class, now claiming its rights and spreading social unrest. All in all, industrialization, urbanization and the birth of mass society marked the beginning of a new era that in the eyes of the elite could only appear vulgar. This, indeed, is how D’Annunzio represented the situation on various occasions, and especially in *The Maidens of the Rocks*. 195 200 205 210

Nietzsche's critique of Western culture appealed particularly to the Italian generation born in the years 1860–70, who condemned the *Risorgimento* as incomplete and as having betrayed its promise of improving the international standing of Italy.²⁴ Nationalistic aspirations surfaced immediately after the Unification, grew ever stronger over the following years, gradually transformed into the intellectual nationalism championed by writers and poets, and culminated between 1907 and 1910 in the organized militant nationalism which paved the way for the Fascism in 1919.²⁵ Not unlike the aspirations of the generational mainstream, D'Annunzio's dream was also the creation of an internationally powerful Italy. Already in 1888 he started publishing in various newspapers nationalistic ideas, enhanced by a rhetoric of political heroism.²⁶ In his articles he expressed revulsion towards Italy's political system, but also developed a vision of the country's power and glory that would be based on a strong navy.²⁷

And then, in 1892, "La bestia elettiva" appeared in *Il Mattino*.²⁸ To begin with, the article is a polemical answer to the criticism of the indifference of contemporary writers to Italy's socio-political reality, but it soon turns into an elitist manifesto that bears clear similarities with Nietzsche's social reasoning.²⁹ D'Annunzio fully and clearly denounces the ethical and political decadence of the contemporary world, and sets down his aristocratic ideology. He describes the state of the world as "the twilight of the kings," given that the contemporary royals are nothing more than "diligent functionaries, timorous of getting dismissed, or entirely devoted to their childish manias or to their mediocre vices."³⁰ However, democracy and universal suffrage were not a remedy to this royal malaise, but mere ridiculous utopias.

For D'Annunzio, humans are the products of Nature that lacks any sense of fairness. Whereas history shows that only the rights of the strongest prevail, equality and justice shrink into empty abstractions. Thus, D'Annunzio stresses the importance of freedom for a righteous social order. Humanity, he argues, will always be divided into two "races": The "plebs" lack any inner sense of freedom and are consequently destined to remain slaves. Since they believe only in one type of progress, namely in improving their physical well-being, democracy is reduced to "a fight of egoism," which is why "[i]t is the triumph of the middle-class, of the Philistine, of the Tartuffe, of the presumptuous donkey, of the nitpicking who acts like a wisacre, of the idiot who believes to be equal to the genius, of all the mediocrity and all the wretchedness."³¹

D'Annunzio sees the democratic state as a precarious construction, and he thus predicts its approaching decline. Soon a new oligarchy, the other "race," will replace "the limp heirs of the ancient nobility," seize the state and destroy the dream of equality and justice for its own advantage. This new oligarchic realm of force reveals the paramount and universal law of nature; it is an "autocracy of consciousness" and consists of free men, whose sole value lies in their strong personalities. They are the governing force and the affirmation of freedom; and they are elevated solely by the energy of their own will; they will destroy the Christian morality of the "slavish herd" and ultimately posit themselves beyond good and evil.³²

The *Übermensch*

In the *fin de siècle* period the interpretation of Nietzsche throughout Europe was mainly personal, superficial and ideologically oriented. His texts, according to Strong, are written in such a manner that if one seeks what they "really mean," one ends up

projecting one's own identity onto them.³³ Thus terms such as "will to power," "free spirit," or "slave ethics" lent themselves to various ambiguous speculations, and Nietzsche's true face was often obscured by mere myth. Whilst most of his ideas were either simplified or neglected, the greatest emphasis was placed on the *Übermensch*, the meaning of which was largely lost in the post-Nietzschean mythography. The idea of the *Übermensch* had begun to spread in the popular imagination as early as 1889 and young people in particular saw *Zarathustra* as a new gospel that replaced the God-Man of an outdated Christian religion with the *Übermensch* as Man-God.³⁴

The *Übermensch* is the theme of the first speech in "Zarathustra's Prologue."³⁵ As the protagonist of a Bildungsroman, Zarathustra represents the modern, sensitive individual who tries to overcome the nihilism resulting from the crisis of values following the collapse of the Christian world-view. Despite this, the *Übermensch* is discussed relatively little in the book, and in more imagistic than explanatory terms. Nietzsche presents the *Übermensch* as the ideal for humanity, as "the meaning of the earth," "a lightning" and a "frenzy," a superior being, compared to which man would appear as an ape.³⁶ As a solution to nihilism and "the death of God," the *Übermensch* is the alternative to the life-denying Christian dogma and the creator of new life-affirming values.³⁷

The *Übermensch* aspires to greatness, but Zarathustra does not specify what actually constitutes the enhancement of humanity. It is not clear whether the *Übermensch* is a set of the most desirable traits or represents an ideal. It is equally unclear whether the *Übermensch* is an attainable condition, an evolutionary goal in a Darwinian sense, or he who can affirm eternal recurrence.³⁸ Robert Solomon, for instance, defines him as an attitude to life rather than as a metaphysical projection or possible product of biological evolution.³⁹ Zarathustra, however, contrasts the *Übermensch* with the last man of egalitarian modernity; this last man is an apathetic creature who has no great passion or commitment, who is unable to dream, whose sole purpose is to earn his living and keep himself warm. Whereas he only searches for personal comfort and happiness, he is incapable of the desire that is required to create beyond oneself, including having children.⁴⁰

As ambiguous as the *Übermensch* may be, his echo is present in every one of D'Annunzio's novels, each of which is an investigation of a man's dream of inner growth. From Andrea Sperelli in his first novel *Il Piacere* (*The Child of Pleasure*) to Paolo Tarsis in his last *Forse che sì, forse che no* (*Maybe, maybe not*), all the protagonists seek to overcome themselves. D'Annunzio explicitly introduces the figure of the *Übermensch* for the first time in the novel *Il Trionfo della morte* (*The Triumph of Death*).⁴¹ In the dedication of the novel to the painter Francesco Paolo Michetti, he pays tribute to Nietzsche: "We listen to the voice of the great Zarathustra, oh Cenobiarca; and prepare in art with secure confidence the birth of a Superman."⁴² While the plot revolves around Giorgio Aurispa and Ippolita Sanzio's unhappy love, the novel offers a psychological study of the modern, cultivated, upper-class man, embodied by Giorgio Aurispa, and of his desire to overcome himself.⁴³

Aurispa is a paradigm of the decadent aristocracy D'Annunzio implicitly criticized in *The Child of Pleasure* and thereafter explicitly condemned in "La bestia elettiva." He is inconsistent and insecure, feeble and oppressed, irresolute and infirm. His existence is nothing more than "a mere flux of sensations, of emotions, of ideas, without any substantial ground."⁴⁴ Along with D'Annunzio's early protagonists, Andrea Sperelli in

the *Child of Pleasure*, and Tullio Hermil in *L'Innocente (The Intruder)*, Aurispa is an unstable being, or in the words of Antimo Negri, a Heraclitean, a “multidimensional man.” As such, he even enjoyed some fame in European literature, for, among others, Robert Musil’s Ulrich in the *Man Without Qualities* bears obvious similarities with him and with other of D’Annunzio’s fictional characters.⁴⁵ 305

However, Aurispa lends an ear to Zarathustra and is captivated by his healing and reinvigorating message. For him Zarathustra is “the new voice that with such sour sarcasm flouted debility, irritability, the morbid sensibility, the cult of compassion, the gospel of renunciation, the need to believe, the need to humiliate oneself, the need to redeem and to be redeemed, all the ambiguous spiritual needs of the epoch, all the ridiculous and miserable effeminateness of the old European soul, all the monstrous flourishes of the Christian syphilis in the decrepit races.” It is a voice that “affirmed life”—a voice that preached the power of force and glorified creativity, inequality and energy: 310 315

[It] considered pain as discipline of the strong ones, that repudiated each faith and especially the faith in Moral, that proclaimed the justice of inequality, that exalted the terrible energies, the feeling of power, the instinct of fight and predominance, the excess of generating and fecundating powers, all the virtues of the Dionysian man, of the winner, of the destructor, of the creator.⁴⁶ 320

These qualities of the *Übermensch* recur even more explicitly in Claudio Cantelmo, the protagonist of *Maidens of the Rocks*, though Nietzsche is never mentioned in the novel.⁴⁷

Cantelmo’s Projects 325

In January 1895, D’Annunzio published the first installment of *Le Vergini delle rocce* in the Roman art journal *Convito*, which included both D’Annunzio and Angelo Conti among its contributing artists and writers. *Convito* was one of the most prominent organs for the mounting criticism of an Italian society vulgarized and corrupted by the new bourgeois money-based values. As a reaction, the aim of the journal was to “exalt the indestructible power of Beauty”—as D’Annunzio wrote in the journal’s first issue.⁴⁸ 330

Written in the first person, *Le Vergini* is an analysis of contemporary society and especially the Italian aristocracy’s pitiful decay, presented through a short period in the life of a young Roman aristocrat, Claudio Cantelmo. Cantelmo leaves the corrupted city of Rome and escapes to the countryside, to his family’s ancestral land, where he meets his old friends, the aristocratic family Montaga-Capece. In line with the ideological programme of *Convito*, Cantelmo is extremely elitist, and his reasoning on the subject echoes the ideas D’Annunzio had presented in “La bestia elettiva.” Thus, Cantelmo thinks that 335 340

The world is the representation of the sensibility and the thought of a few superior men, who have made it what it is, and in the course of time broadened and adorned it.

In the future they will still farther amplify and enrich it, and the world as it today appears, is a magnificent gift granted by the few to the many, from the frees to the slaves: by those who think and feel to those who must work.⁴⁹ 345

Cantelmo's socio-political polemic is metonymized in the representation of Rome. After Italy's unification, the "infected city" (72), as he calls it, was prey to huge urban changes that at the turn of the century were supposed to transform the peripheral papal town into a modern capital of Italy's unified kingdom. With its "hideous" new buildings that were rising like "a cancer" and remodelling the urban landscape, the city was the main stage for the social changes that took place in Italy.⁵⁰ For Cantelmo it seemed that "a wind of barbarism, [was] blowing on Rome" (65). The realm of idealism was turning into one of commerce: a sort of madness of the profit was spreading, and "the struggle for gain was fought with an implacable spite and frenzy, without any restraint" (66). In this period of social climbing, meanwhile the old aristocratic families were declining one by one, along "the princely paths of the Villa Borghese, [ran] the glossy carriages of the newly-chosen of fortune, from whom neither barber, tailor nor bootmaker had been able to take away the ignoble imprint" (66). 350 355

During this social upheaval, Cantelmo craves to join the spiritual elite and to contribute to history: "And I recognized consequently the highest of my ambitions, in the desire to bring likewise some ornament, to add some new value to this human world that is eternally increasing in beauty and in grief" (17–18). Following "the first tumults of youth," he ponders whether he can give a new direction to his life by the power of his will, "if life could become a different pursuit than the accustomed accommodation of faculties to suit the continual varying of cases" (17). Setting off in the footsteps of both Christ and Nietzsche's Zarathustra, he retires to the countryside—just like Sperelli in *Il Piacere* and Aurispa in *Trionfo della morte*. The Roman countryside incites him "to follow the full bent of [his] manhood and force, to assert [his] inward sovereignty" (40), and he strongly feels his "progressive and voluntary individualization towards an ideal Latin type" (32). To accomplish his inner development, Cantelmo follows the teaching of Socrates. 360 365 370

In contrast to Cantelmo's chosen guide, Nietzsche criticized Socrates as one of the founders of Christianity and thus of the slave morality.⁵¹ In *Twilight of the Idols* he announces that he will "revaluate all the values" and demolish the old "idols" of philosophers and moralists, the "eternal idols which are here struck with a hammer as with a tuning fork." The book opens with an attack on Socrates, the demigod of philosophy. In the first chapter "The Problem of Socrates," Nietzsche describes both Socrates and Plato as "symptoms of degeneration, tools of the Greek dissolution, pseudo-Greek, anti-Greek." Forcefully, though rather irrationally, he accuses Socrates of being "plebeian and ugly," and therefore decadent. This conclusion is further confirmed by "the overdevelopment of his logical ability" and his characteristic thwarted sarcasm. Socrates' main flaw was his blind faith in reason, which he had turned "into a tyrant." Yet the logical weapons he developed were only a form of self-defense for those who had no other arms.⁵² 375 380

Cantelmo's interpretation of Socrates is completely different, which, along with the choice of Socrates rather than Nietzsche as his spiritual guide in his revolt against reality, is further evidence of D'Annunzio's ambivalent attitude to Nietzsche. Cantelmo sees Socrates as the man who was capable of discovering the source of human power (21). He was indeed "most excellent in the art of elevating the human soul to the extreme heights of its vigor" (18). Thus, for Cantelmo, Socrates' greatest merit are his disciples: the tyrants Critias and Charicles; the hedonistic philosopher Aristippus of Cyrene, who held that the goal of life was to seek pleasure; and the skilful statesman, "the marvellous violator of law," Alcibiade (21). What further attracts Cantelmo to Socrates is the 385 390

relationship between his ideas, his surrounding reality, and his individualism: Socrates “did not place his ideal beyond the daily practice, beyond necessary realities.” Instead, he deduced his own laws from the prevailing political situation, and separated himself from both the Athens of the Thirty Tyrants and from the democratic state, “the tyranny of the people” (19). 395

Cantelmo juxtaposes Socrates, not Nietzsche, with Christ. He glorifies Socrates because of his life-affirming values—“The Greek had always loved life, and loving it, taught also that it should be beloved” (21). What he expects Socrates to teach him is the art of enjoyment—to feel “also the fascination of frail beauty, of distinguishing common, daily pleasures with a certain aim, and of recognizing the value that the idea of death confers upon the charm of earthly things” (22). Socrates thus teaches Cantelmo to search for his virtues, to perfect them, and ultimately to trust his own daemon (18). 400

This was the period that saw growing interest in the new scientific theories of heredity. Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859, was followed by Gregor Mendel’s laws of heredity in 1863, and by Francis Galton’s principles of eugenics in 1883. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche emphasized the meaning of heredity for the philosopher: 405

People have always to be born to a high station, or, more definitely, they have to be BRED for it: a person has only a right to philosophy—taking the word in its higher significance—in virtue of his descent; the ancestors, the “blood,” decide here also. Many generations must have prepared the way for the coming of a philosopher; each of his virtues must have been separately acquired, nurtured, transmitted, and embodied; not only the bold, easy, delicate course and current of his thoughts, but above all the readiness for great responsibilities, the majesty of the ruling glance and condemning look, the feeling of separation from the multitude with their duties and virtues, the kindly patronage and defense of whatever is misunderstood and calumniated, be it God or devil, the delight and practice of supreme justice, the art of commanding, the amplitude of will, the lingering eye which rarely admires, rarely looks up, rarely loves.⁵³ 410 415

It is significant that D’Annunzio in both *Trionfo* and *Maidens of the Rocks* also speculates on the question of heredity. In *Maidens of the Rocks* Cantelmo carries within himself the inheritance of his forefathers, and as he says to Prince Luzio, head of the Capece-Montaga family, “The blood of all my ancestors is in me” (234). His inheritance is the “ancient barbarian forces” he can profit from in his self-development (27). Cantelmo’s family includes glorious soldiers, brilliant statesmen, cultivated scientists and patrons of the arts. A distinct characteristic is also disobedience and rebellion against the king, and strong individuality, as each Cantelmo tends “to communicate with himself alone, to separate himself, to decide well upon his own person and his own power” (248). Given his heritage, he chooses his fifteenth-century ancestor Count Alessandro Cantelmo as his daemon. 420 425

Alessandro imposes on Cantelmo three duties. The first duty is to develop himself, “to conduct [his] being with upright method to the perfect integrity of the Latin type.” The second is to “bring together the purest essence of [his] spirit and reproduce the most profound vision of [his] universe in a sole and supreme work of art.” Whereas each life is the sum of preceding lives, and in Cantelmo are conserved his ancestors’ virtues, his third duty is “to preserve the ideal richness of [his] race and [his] own conquests in a child, who, under the paternal teaching recognizes them and sets them in good order in himself to become worthy of aspiring to the operation of possibilities still more elevated” (62). 430 435

For Giorgio Aurispa, Zarathustra, as noted earlier, is the prophet of a new dawn. He pushes humanity towards the future where a superior human being will appear. The strongest desire of humanity is thus to bring about the birth of the Superman.⁵⁴ 440
 Cantelmo, along the same lines, also wishes to father a son who will incarnate the highest virtues of his ancestral family. To this end he wishes to marry one of the virgin daughters of the Montaga-Capece family—Anatolia, Massimilla or Violante. As he explains to Prince Luzio:

The highest example of conscience can appear only at the climax of a race that in the course of time has elevated itself through a continuous accumulation of forces and works: at the zenith of a lineage in which the most beautiful dreams, the most valiant sentiments, the most noble thoughts, the most imperious pleasure, may be born and preserved through a long order of centuries. (242–43) 445

As he says, for “a people of most remote royal origins,” settled in Italy, living means to “affirm oneself,” to continuously expand, and continuously fight and win: “There was no respite to the formidable instinct that agitated the members of this race” (244). Yet “the virtue” has not yet surfaced, and would come true only in the future in “a supreme apparition” (245). That Cantelmo’s one and only reason for choosing a wife is to father a son recalls Nietzsche’s point that animals, unlike humans, “consider the female the productive being.”⁵⁵ And thus, by restoring its lost ancient glory, this “new King of Rome,” in Cantelmo’s vision, would solve Italy’s sociopolitical problems. 450 455

Defeat

Scholars have identified in D’Annunzio’s life and works several characteristics that bear similarities with Nietzsche’s ideas such as his grand idea of himself as a man and artist; his equally sublime ideas of art and its creative powers; the cult of vitality and sensuality and the principle of freedom; the cult of beauty; and his anti-Christian, elitist and aristocratic ideals culminating in the Superman.⁵⁶ 460 465

In *Le Vergini*, Cantelmo’s Supermanly characteristics consist of his cult of power, and the aristocratic conception of the world along with his disgust for the masses and for the parliamentary system. However, D’Annunzio’s Superman also exhibits another characteristic, namely the fact of defeat.⁵⁷ In one way or another, defeat is a persistent theme in all D’Annunzio’s novels; especially in *Il Trionfo*, *Il Fuoco* and *Le Vergini*, all three male protagonists ultimately fail in their goal to overcome themselves. In *Il Trionfo*, Giorgio Aurispa develops a theory of human perfection and thinks that “the ideal type of humanity was not far in the future... but could only manifest on the top of the waves, in the most elevated beings” (256). Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, as the only solution and as a sign of surrender, Aurispa kills both himself and his beloved, who, he believes, has turned into his enemy. *Il Fuoco* presents a fragment of Stelio Èffrena’s life in Venice. The protagonist is a writer who measures himself against Wagner and wants to become his Latin counterpart. The novel nevertheless ends without any sense of closure, and Èffrena does not achieve the construction of the Roman theatre. Only in D’Annunzio’s last novel, *Forse che sì, forse che no* (1910, *Maybe, maybe not*) it appears possible to think that, with technology, Paolo Tarsis may succeed in developing into a superior being. Tarsis is a young pilot who finds himself in a destructive love 470 475 480

relationship with Isabella Inghirami. At the end, however, after Isabella becomes insane, he takes his airplane and flies to Sardinia. Making an emergency landing on the beach he hears the words “Son, there is no god, if not you.”⁵⁸ But in *Le Vergini*, in contrast, where the figure of the Superman is the least ambiguous, Cantelmo’s defeat is also the most complete, or should we say banal. 485

When Cantelmo decides to fulfil his three duties, he suddenly becomes insecure. His daemon indicates to him two obstacles, the crowd and woman. People contaminated by the masses become “sterile like mules” (63), so he must avoid them. Yet equally dangerous is the spell of a woman, and for this reason he must never “let a woman take [him].” Rather, he must always be capable of saying “I took her, not she me” (64). 490 This lesson, however, makes Cantelmo’s defeat ever greater.

In *Trionfo*, Aurispa fails to father the Superman, because his love affairs all prove incurably sterile (296). He is therefore his own obstacle. In *Le Vergini*, instead, after having carefully evaluated the three virgins of the Montaga-Capece family, Cantelmo finally proposes to Anatolia, the one whose “body could nurture a superhuman germ” (11). But, because of her “inviolable vow,” because of “a necessary sacrifice” that she cannot decline, Anatolia rejects him. Instead of participating in the sublime procreation of a Superman, she will dedicate her life to her miserable family, to an old father, to her demented mother, and to the two brothers, both on the brink of madness (280–83).⁵⁹ Cantelmo’s heroic dream is ultimately destroyed by the squalid family life of a decadent aristocracy, and as a consequence, he will not father the new King of Rome who could save Italy from its decay.⁶⁰ 495 500

These conclusions, or nonconclusions, suggest that D’Annunzio, at least prior to the publication of *Forse che sì*, did not believe that the ideal of the Superman could be realized in Italy. Given Nietzsche’s ever growing popularity, D’Annunzio may have chosen the Superman as a fashionable theme to experiment with in his literary works. 505 And yet the defeat of his fictional Supermen reveals his deep skepticism about modern society, which possibly explains why, instead of becoming a devotee of the *Übermensch*, D’Annunzio remained an inveterate decadent.

Notes

1. Behler, “Nietzsche in the Twentieth Century,” 281–322. 510
2. *Ibid.*, 282.
3. Salinari, *Miti e coscienza*, 74. Tosi writes that before 1898 none of Nietzsche’s works was translated into Italian; the only article about him before 1894 was an anonymous review of *The Birth of the Tragedy*. He argues that like the second-generation French Symbolists, D’Annunzio came to know Nietzsche through French studies and anthologies. See Tosi, “D’Annunzio scopre Nietzsche,” 489–511. See also Décaudin, *La Crise des valeurs*, 46. Similarly, according to Balducci, D’Annunzio’s copious quotations of Nietzsche in the fifth book of *Trionfo della morte* were taken from a French anthology. See Balducci, “Note,” 409. On Nietzsche’s fortunes in Italy, see Garin, “Nietzsche in Italia,” 104–8; Stefani, *Nietzsche in Italia*; Michelinì, *Nietzsche nell’Italia*; Piga, *Il mito del Superuomo*, 75–83. 515 520
4. Guardi, “La filosofia del Superuomo,” 178.
5. On D’Annunzio and Nietzsche, see, in particular, Battaglia, “Un superuomo troppo umano,” 97–114; Valenti, *D’Annunzio lettore di Nietzsche*; Mariano, “La genesi del Trionfo,” 143–94; Hinterhäuser, “D’Annunzio e la Germania,” 439–62; Spackman, “Nietzsche, D’Annunzio,” 141–58; Schnapp, “Nietzsche’s Italian Style,” 247–64; Valesio, “The Beautiful Lie,” 163–83; 525 Mazzotta, “Nietzsche e la politica del *Fuoco*,” 295–303.

6. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, 20. Hereafter page references are cited in the text.
7. See also Magnus and Higgins, "Nietzsche's Works," 52–53.
8. D'Annunzio's greatest tribute to the German composer is *Il Fuoco* (*The Flame of Life*, 1900). On D'Annunzio and Wagner, see also Paratore, "D'Annunzio e Wagner," 67–82; Chiesa, "Riccardo Wagner nell'opera," 17–62. 530
9. D'Annunzio, "Il Caso Wagner," in *Scritti giornalistici II*, 234–35.
10. Salinari argues in *Miti e coscienza* that apart from his behaviour and morality, namely the Superman's aristocratic and individualistic conception of life, D'Annunzio also adopted Nietzsche's view of Greek antiquity and Attic tragedy, which are fundamental to *La Città morta* (80–81). On Nietzsche and D'Annunzio's *Il Fuoco*, see also Mazzotta, "Nietzsche e la politica." 535
11. Conti, *La Beata riva*, 60, 59. Conti contributed significantly to the diffusion of aesthetic and idealistic tendencies in Italy from Plato to Socrates, Pater and Wilde. He was also the foremost mouthpiece of *fin-de-siècle* Symbolism and Mysticism. His main ideas appear in the essays *Giorgione* (1894) and *Beata riva* (1900). D'Annunzio met Conti in the 1880s, when he came into contact with the artists known as the "cenacle of Caffè Greco" in Rome, of which Conti was a central figure. See Gibellini, "Introduzione," ix–xxii; Oliva, "La cultura dell'estetismo romano," 113–34; Ricorda, *Dalla parte di Ariele*. On Italian aestheticism, see also Oliva, *I nobili spiriti*. 540
12. The poem appeared in *Il Giorno* on September 19, 1900, a couple of weeks after Nietzsche's death. In 1903 it was included in the collection *Elettra*, and is now in D'Annunzio, *Versi d'amore e di gloria II*, 344–56. 545
13. See also Salinari, *Miti e coscienza*, 79–80; Battaglia, "Un Superuomo troppo umano," 110–11.
14. Conti, *La Beata riva*, 60. "The Book of Adolescence" was D'Annunzio's second collection of poems, *Canto novo* (1882, *The New Song*). 550
15. Croce, "Gabriele D'Annunzio," in *La letteratura della nuova Italia*, 32. *Il Piacere* (1889, *The Child of Pleasure*) was D'Annunzio's first novel.
16. Conti, *La Beata riva*, 63, 48.
17. Strong, "Nietzsche's Political Misappropriation," 128. According to Strong there is no correct political interpretation of Nietzsche, because he does not have a "real" political doctrine: "His thought is fundamentally aesthetic and only grief (epistemological, moral, and, it is held, therefore political) will come from reading him politically" (132); *Ibid.*, 133–34. However, I argue that Nietzsche did have a social, elitist theory, and therefore he explicitly criticized contemporary politics, namely socialism and democratic movements. 555
18. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 151; See also Magnus and Higgins, "Nietzsche's Works," 39–45; Strong, "Nietzsche's Political Misappropriation," 120, 138. 560
19. See Nietzsche, esp. chap. 5, "The Natural History of Morals," in *Beyond Good and Evil*, 80–101, 172–73.
20. *Ibid.*, 176, 175, 178.
21. *Ibid.*, 98, 99, 101. 565
22. Strong, "Nietzsche's Political Misappropriation," 127–30.
23. Agostino Depretis (1813–87), leader of the historical Left party, served as prime minister a number of times between 1876 and 1887 and adopted the policy of *trasformismo* to exclude extreme elements of the Left and Right in forming a centrist coalition government. Ultimately, *trasformismo* stood for the dissolution of the Right and Left parties, and their joining a parliamentary majority, which, however, was not based on stable political programmes, but around contingent problems and above all prominent figures. 570
24. Guardi, "La filosofia del Superuomo," 180–81.
25. On Italian nationalism, see, for example, Gaeta, *Il nazionalismo italiano*.
26. These articles appeared in the collection *L'armata d'Italia* (*The fleet of Italy*), and are now in D'Annunzio, *Prose di ricerca II*, 1923–86. 575
27. D'Annunzio successively translated these nationalistic aspirations in his poems titled *Odi navali* (*Naval odes*, 1892–93). Now in D'Annunzio, *Versi d'amore e di gloria I*, 703–24.
28. D'Annunzio, "La bestia elettiva," in *Scritti giornalistici II*, 86–94. For the English translation, see Schnapp, "The Beast Who Wills," in Harrison, ed., *Nietzsche in Italy*, 265–78. 580

29. On the similarities with Nietzsche, see also Battaglia, "Un superuomo troppo umano," 103. Battaglia adds that in "La bestia elettiva" D'Annunzio transforms Nietzsche's philosophy into a political theory, and substitutes Nietzsche's atemporal philosophy with a temporal political programme. He so misrepresented Nietzsche that according to Battaglia he did not consider Nietzsche's philosophy, but his myth (107). Similarly, D'Annunzio misuses Nietzsche's key concepts of activism (104–5). In "Nietzsche's Italian Style," Schnapp also argues that D'Annunzio translated Nietzsche's thinking into a concrete social programme (252). In contrast, I believe that not only is D'Annunzio's social theory similar to Nietzsche's, but that it is also no less political than Nietzsche's. 585
30. D'Annunzio, "La bestia elettiva," 87. 590
31. *Ibid.*, 91, 92, 93.
32. *Ibid.*, 91–94.
33. Strong, "Nietzsche's Political Misappropriation," 119–147, 140.
34. On the myth of Nietzsche in *fin-de-siècle* France, see Décaudin, *La Crise des valeurs*, 46–48.
35. According to Battaglia, Nietzsche developed the concept of the *Übermensch* over a decade. It can be traced in the Free spirit in *Human, All Too Human* (1878); in Prince-Free-as-a-Bird in *The Gay Science* (1882); in Zarathustra in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883); and in the Superior free spirit in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). See Battaglia, "Un superuomo troppo umano," 106. 595
36. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 33, 35.
37. On the *Übermensch* in *Zarathustra*, see especially Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teaching*. 600
38. Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teaching*; Magnus and Higgins, "Nietzsche's Works," 40–41.
39. Solomon, "Nietzsche *ad hominem*," 186.
40. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 37–38. See also Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teaching*; Magnus and Higgins, "Nietzsche's Works," 40.
41. In *Miti e coscienza del decadentismo italiano* Salinari called *Trionfo* the sensual manifesto of the Superman; *Le Vergini* being the political manifesto and *Il Fuoco* the literary manifesto, 82. 605
42. D'Annunzio, *Trionfo della morte*, 8. 'Cenobiarca' was D'Annunzio's nickname for Michetti.
43. Alatri, *Gabriele D'Annunzio*, 130, 134. See also Paratore, "Il Trionfo della morte," 11–28.
44. D'Annunzio, *Trionfo della morte*, 294, 296.
45. Negri, "Il 'superuomo' di Nietzsche," 389–407. 610
46. D'Annunzio, *Trionfo della morte*, 294, 295. These poorly translated passages (<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/54272>) were not included in the English translation, as all references to Nietzsche were censored.
47. On the Superman in *Le Vergini*, see also Guardi, "La filosofia del Superuomo," 192–94; Schnapp, "Nietzsche's Italian Style." In *La beata riva* Gabriele says: "If C. Cantelmo has greeted Nietzsche's invocation with enthusiasm, it has only happened because the voice who wrote *The Birth of Tragedy* sounded to him a faithful echo of Parmenides', Empedocles', Aeschylus' and Plato's Greece, towards which his soul leaned with impetuous desire and with the passion of a prayer, like towards a lost homeland" (34). Thus, according to Conti/D'Annunzio, the only thought deriving from Nietzsche in *Le Vergini* is Nietzsche's interpretation of ancient Greece. 615
48. See D'Annunzio's article that presents *Il Convito*, a manifesto entitled "La parola di Farsaglia" (The word of Farsaglia), now in D'Annunzio, *Prose di ricerca I*, 419–42. *Convito* was published irregularly between 1895 and 1907. See, e.g., Sormani, *Bizantini e decadenti*, 36–40. 620
49. D'Annunzio, *Maidens of the Rocks*, 17. Hereafter page references are to the English translation and are cited in the text. In his "Translator's Introduction," Schnapp also points out that "La bestia elettiva" provides a structural matrix for the novel (267). 625
50. For D'Annunzio's representation of modern Rome, see Härmänmaa, "Furious Dogs, White Cancer," 199–210.
51. Strong, "Nietzsche's Political Misappropriation," 140; Solomon, "Nietzsche *ad hominem*," 182–83. 630
52. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, xvii–xviii, 2§, 3§, 4§, 10§, 6§.
53. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §213.
54. D'Annunzio, *Trionfo della morte*, 296.

55. Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, 128; Behler, "Nietzsche in the Twentieth Century," 294. 635
56. Salinari, *Miti e coscienza del decadentismo*, 29–105; Battaglia, "Un superuomo troppo umano," 105; Valenti, *D'Annunzio lettore di Nietzsche*; Hinterhäuser, "D'Annunzio e la Germania"; Bernardi Guardì, "La filosofia del Superuomo."
57. Both Salinari and Baldi emphasize the centrality of defeat in D'Annunzio's oeuvre. See Salinari, *Miti e coscienza del decadentismo*, 105; and Baldi, *L'Inetto e il Superuomo*. 640
58. D'Annunzio, *Forse che sì, forse che no*, 360.
59. Curiously, also in *Il Fuoco* Donatella Arvale has a demented father to whose care she must dedicate herself, and thus renounce her relationship with Èffrena (138).
60. See also Baldi, *Le ambiguità della "decadenza"*, 263–64.

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