

NEW  
TRANSLATION  
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P E N G U I N  C L A S S I C S

GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO

*Pleasure*

## PLEASURE

GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO (1863–1938) was the most influential and controversial Italian author of the twentieth century and a prominent figure in European Decadent literature. Born in Pescara, Abruzzo, to a wealthy bourgeois family, he was a brilliant student who acquired a solid humanistic cultural base—Latin, Greek, ancient literature, Italian, French, German, and English. He published his first book, a collection of poems, at the age of sixteen, and over the course of his life he wrote several novels, collections of poetry, and plays.

During his long public career, D'Annunzio played a central role in many of the major historical events of his day, working not only as a writer but also as a journalist, a fighter pilot, and a politician. His nationalistic rhetoric and charismatic leadership of the Italian Regency of Carnaro helped set the stage for Mussolini's fascism. D'Annunzio died in Gardone Riviera, at his estate on Lake Garda, having greatly influenced the literature and politics of his time.

LARA GOCHIN RAFFAELLI is an honorary research associate at the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

ALEXANDER STILLE is a frequent contributor on Italy to *The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times*, and *The New Yorker* and the author of several books, including *The Sack of Rome*. He lives in New York.

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Pleasure

*Translated with a Foreword and Notes by* LARA GOCHIN RAFFAELLI

*Introduction by* ALEXANDER STILLE

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*Dedicated with love, appreciation, and respect to the memory of Professor Nelia (Cornelia) Cacace Saxby, who taught, mentored, and unceasingly inspired me from 1986 to 2010 and died far too young long before I could learn a fraction of what she knew*

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## Foreword

This translation project began in April 2009,<sup>1</sup> when I decided to teach Gabriele D'Annunzio's novel *Il piacere* in translation, for a module of the "Aspects of Eros from Sappho to Cyber" course offered by the Classics section of the School of Languages and Literatures at the University of Cape Town, South Africa.

Set mainly in Rome, *Il piacere* was published in 1889 and found great success with the Roman public, despite the publisher's initial alarm at the many scandalous passages in the book.<sup>2</sup> It is considered the first Italian Decadent novel and to this day is regarded as a classic of Italian literature.

It was translated into English in 1898 with the title *The Child of Pleasure* by Georgina Harding, who followed the example of the French translation, *L'enfant de volupté*, carried out by Georges Hévelle under D'Annunzio's supervision and published the year before.

With only a few days left to the beginning of lectures, I discovered that the English version had been heavily bowdlerized by Miss Harding, who cut out any allusions of a sexual nature or indeed of any nature that could offend Victorian sensibilities. It was clear that I could not teach, in a course commonly referred to as "Sex," a book with no sex in it. I had no alternative but to begin translating all the "sexy bits" from the original Italian, and to give these to my students on a separate document to integrate into Harding's version. At the end of the course, since I had compiled a substantial mass of translated text, and because of the interest students had shown in the book, I thought it would be a good idea to republish the book with my sexy bits added. At that stage, my idea was simply to take Harding's text and reintegrate my translated sections where they were missing.

In translating *Il piacere* into English, Georgina Harding was advised by Arthur Symons to follow the structure of the French translation. This radically changed the structure of the original novel in Italian. Symons wrote the introduction to the translation and also translated all the sonnets into English. But, John Woodhouse notes, it was Harding who made all the decisions to excise aspects of the text on her own. Woodhouse and George Schoolfield have dedicated much attention to the extensive changes Harding made in her translation. Schoolfield counts twenty-five major omissions<sup>3</sup> and writes, "The English translation omits a great many passages that would have shocked a late Victorian reader's sensibilities; on the flyleaf of the copy in Yale's Sterling Library, an unknown hand has written: "Beware of translations by Victorian ladies."<sup>4</sup> Woodhouse points out that it was understandable that "the sanitized version offered to the Victorian reading public would omit voyeuristic descriptions of the naked Elena being seduced by the libidinous Andrea; also understandably excised was any characterization of the sadistic and perverted tastes in literature and art of the noble Englishman, Heathfield."<sup>5</sup> Woodhouse ascribes some of the cuts to the translator's "usual modesty";<sup>6</sup> others he sees as being amusing examples of the "bourgeois manner" with which she renders the Italian. But beyond the sensibilities of the Victorian mentality, why would it be so important for Georgina Harding to make these cuts? There are numerous articles that discuss the strength of the censor's office in Britain (and the United States) in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which prevented many literary and theatrical works from being published or performed.<sup>7</sup>

Without the cuts Harding made, the novel would not have met with the approval of the British censor and hence would not have been permitted to be published.<sup>8</sup>

So what did the book look like without the sex? And how was it perceived in Britain and the United States in the form to which Harding reduced it? While removing any reference to anything lubricious, Harding also removed much or most of the analytical and philosophical contemplation of poetry, art, and other intellectual notions from the novel. Woodhouse observes that *The Child of Pleasure*, “heavily bowdlerized,” “omits any kind of serious reflection on serious subjects” and hence reduces the novel to the level of “sentimental fiction.”<sup>9</sup> While this brought D’Annunzio’s work into line with the “literary fashions favoured by the majority at the time,”<sup>10</sup> it inevitably conditioned the way it was rated by literary critics of the era.

One critic, G. B. Rose, who was able to read *Il piacere* in Italian, underscores the attitude that prevailed toward foreign authors such as Zola and Balzac, as well as indigenous ones such as Bernard Shaw, who were subject to the same degree of censorship. That Rose read D’Annunzio in Italian is significant; it allowed him to fully appreciate the beauty of D’Annunzio’s style. Having read the complete, unexpurgated version of the novels, however, he is well aware of the dynamics among the literary establishment in the English-speaking world:

By reason of his immodesty as well as because the graces of his style cannot be reproduced in another language, he can be understood and appreciated only in his own tongue. Imagination fails to depict the indignation of Mr. Comstock<sup>11</sup> should one of these books fall into his hands. Some of d’Annunzio’s novels have been translated into English, but the reader need not imagine that he gets in them the brilliant colors, the graceful forms or the subtle perfume of these poisonous flowers.<sup>12</sup>

Of *Il piacere*, Rose observes: “That he had no superior among his fellows became apparent upon the publication when a very young man of his ‘Piacere’ (Pleasure).”<sup>13</sup>

The republication by so many publishing houses of Miss Harding’s original text during the 1990s and after has not been met with approval by the literary establishment. John Woodhouse, one of the foremost Anglophone scholars of D’Annunzio, said: “His merits as a creative writer were being judged by critics and littérateurs in Britain only from what they were able to read of him in translation. Very few could read him in Italian. That problem has continued until the present day, compounded most recently by the unscrupulous actions of the publishing house Daedalus,”<sup>14</sup> which reissued *The Child of Pleasure* unchanged as soon as its copyright expired in 1988. At least three other publishing houses currently reproduce and republish Harding’s excised version.

The decision I finally made regarding the translation was a result of reflection on *The Child of Pleasure* in its present form. Given how much D’Annunzio’s novel had been changed by Miss Harding, simply reintegrating my translations would not contribute in any effective way to scholars without Italian who might wish to read *Il piacere* in English. *The Child of Pleasure* is not simply *Il piacere* in English with bits missing. Harding’s changes altered the character, the content, and the significance of the original novel, so that it could no longer be seen as an exemplar of psychological introspection and analysis, representing a dichotomy between art and sexuality, salvation and perdition. It is D’Annunzio’s urtext that is of value, not Georgina Harding’s sanitized and purged version. If Italians have the privilege of being able to read *Il piacere* in its original form, why should those who do not speak Italian be deprived of this possibility? For this reason, I decided to produce a new translation of *Il piacere* that faithfully followed the original in every detail. I chose the title *Pleasure*, which is a direct and accurate translation of the title, succinctly expressing the essence of the novel, which is centered entirely on the quest to experience ever greater and more transcendent



forms of pleasure, whether as an aesthetic principle or a physical sensation. It is this pursuit of pleasure, of attempting to move beyond pleasure, that ultimately leads to ruin, exemplifying the Decadent theme of ultimate moral dissolution.

I also decided to make this translation an annotated critical edition, which explains the abundance of endnotes. There are several scholarly critical editions of *Il piacere* in Italian, but these are inaccessible to readers who do not know the language. In my translation, I have retained text in Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, German, and so on in the original language and provided translations thereof in endnotes. Where text that is originally Latin, Greek, French, or another foreign language has been translated into English within the body of the work, that is because D'Annunzio himself translated it into Italian. I have attempted to remain true to D'Annunzio's rendering of names, such as where he Italianized first names. Where there are misinterpretations of the text or of meaning, I take full responsibility. I did not annotate every cryptic term or classical allusion; I felt I should leave some homework to those wishing to explore the abundant classical and mythological, cultural and literary background from which D'Annunzio drew so heavily.

Readers will note that there is an abundance of words beginning with capital letters in this translation (such as "Soul," "Spirit," "Good," "Autumn," and "Talisman"), which may seem superfluous to the modern eye. I have attempted to follow D'Annunzio's original text closely and therefore have retained the majority of his capitalizations, because they generally indicate lofty ideal personifications, words expressed in ode or with irony, or deeply symbolic words denoting layers of meaning.

In 1897, not long after the beginning of D'Annunzio's literary career, G. B. Rose wrote of him:

The harmony of his verse has continually gained in richness, while its meaning has become clearer as he has won a fuller mastery over the instrument that makes his music. His prose has gained in strength, in flexibility, in warmth and brilliancy of coloring . . . Whether he is to be merely a baleful comet or a fixed star in the literary heavens cannot yet be determined; but if he continues his progress toward higher ideals and perfection of form his position must soon be established.<sup>15</sup>

D'Annunzio's unflagging popularity and influence in the twenty-first century, as his novels are taught in universities around the world, are a testament to his skill as a poet and a novelist. *Pleasure*, the first of his novels, remains to this day the object of debate, study, and discussion among scholars, students, and critics. A translation is never the equal of the original, but it is hoped that this new one will be of value to English-speaking followers and lovers of D'Annunzio, that it affords pleasure in the reading, that it allows understanding and insight into this seminal Decadent work, and that it in some small way permits readers an intimation of the literary and poetic skill of this great writer.

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## Introduction

Gabriele D'Annunzio was among the first authors to consciously fashion himself into a media celebrity. When he published his first book of poems, at the age of sixteen, in 1879, he sent in a false account of his own death to a local newspaper in order to generate publicity and create the image of tragic youth.

The creation of his persona was D'Annunzio's principal vocation in life and art. He regarded life itself as a work of art, a credo he shared with some of his late-nineteenth-century contemporaries. "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life," wrote Oscar Wilde, with whom D'Annunzio had much in common. In his first novel, *Pleasure*, published in 1889 when D'Annunzio was only twenty-six, he created an exceptionally complex game of life and art imitating each other in infinite regression, like a pair of opposing mirrors in which it is impossible to distinguish the object from the reflection.

While still a teenager, D'Annunzio moved from a Tuscan boarding school to Rome and set about taking the new capital of Italy by storm. He was eager to assert himself as a brilliant young poet, to win a place of renown among the wealthy noble families of Rome, to seduce its most beautiful women and scandalize its public. The protagonist of *Pleasure*, Andrea Sperelli, is an alter ego of the young D'Annunzio: a poet and refined aesthete, a dandy, a seducer, a slave to beauty and pleasure, utterly immoral and yet curiously appealing. And in the wake of *Pleasure*'s spectacular and scandalous success, Sperelli became for an entire generation a type that many chose to imitate—as Goethe's Werther was for readers of the Romantic era, or Jay Gatsby for the Jazz Age. Modeled on the real D'Annunzio, Sperelli in turn became a model for others as well as for D'Annunzio himself, since others saw D'Annunzio through the lens of his fictional creation, who conferred stature and erotic allure on the young writer.

Having imbibed some Nietzsche, D'Annunzio saw himself as a kind of superman and was not content with mere literary fame. Observing the growth of modern democracy (which began in Italy with unification in 1870) and mass politics, he saw politics as a natural theater for the projection of his personality and the expression of his greatness. "The world . . . must be persuaded that I am capable of anything," he wrote during his first electoral campaign in 1897, in which he presented himself as "the candidate of beauty." D'Annunzio later played a crucial role in whipping up public support for Italy's intervention in World War I, haranguing crowds in Rome and urging them to storm the palaces of the cowardly politicians who were hesitating to commit Italy to the path of war and greatness. During the war effort, D'Annunzio, although now well into middle age, participated actively in combat, specializing in spectacular acts of derring-do, including flying over the enemy capital of Vienna to drop leaflets from a small propeller plane. In another mission, he lost an eye and was nearly killed. These exploits were accompanied by the simultaneous chronicle of countless love affairs—tragic stories of countesses and princesses leaving their husbands and children only to be abandoned by D'Annunzio when he tired of them, of women risking and losing everything, and attempting suicide for the great poet.

D'Annunzio published his last novel in 1910 and issued relatively little in the remaining twenty-

eight years of his life, having become consumed increasingly by his role as a public figure and national hero. He emerged from World War I a major leader of Italian nationalism. Referring to Italy's "Mutilated Victory," he led public opposition to the Treaty of Versailles, which awarded Italy less territory than many had hoped. In 1919 he led several thousand veterans on an illegal military mission to occupy the port of Fiume, a city on the Dalmatian coast that had been part of Austria-Hungary but was designated an independent city because of its multicultural and multilingual population. The occupation of Fiume, in defiance of international treaties, represents the first breach in the peace that was supposed to have followed the war to end all wars. D'Annunzio's legionaries were a mix of nationalists, patriotic-minded socialists, syndicalists—the same unstable mix of left and right that filled the ranks of the early fascist movement, which was starting at about the same time. In fact, during the Fiume occupation, which lasted about a year, D'Annunzio invented a lot of the pageantry and rituals that later became part of fascism. Some have referred to D'Annunzio as the John the Baptist of fascism, paving the way for Mussolini. He had a genius for political rhetoric and theater but none of Mussolini's tactical abilities. Mussolini appears to have feared D'Annunzio, recognizing him as one of the few figures charismatic enough to challenge his leadership. As a result, Mussolini helped support his extravagant lifestyle in his princely villa on Lake Garda. D'Annunzio was simultaneously honored as a kind of unofficial poet laureate of fascism and spied upon. He lived out his declining years still pursuing his erotic fantasies, but now with the help of drugs and prostitutes.

D'Annunzio became so closely associated with exasperated nationalism and fascism that his very real status as one of Italy's major writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has become obscured. The Italian writer Alberto Arbasino wrote that D'Annunzio is "the proverbial body hidden in the basement, one of the most cumbersome of all literature, of all countries, vilified, trampled, neglected." D'Annunzio's place in the pantheon of great Italian poets is widely acknowledged, but it is easy to forget that such major twentieth-century authors as James Joyce and Marcel Proust were great admirers of D'Annunzio's novels. It is thus extremely valuable to return to D'Annunzio's literary contributions, starting with his extraordinary first novel, *Pleasure*.

Lara Gochin Raffaelli has performed a real service by restoring *Pleasure* to an English-speaking public, or rather giving it to us, in effect, for the first time. The frank eroticism of *Pleasure* was so shocking at the time of its publication, especially in the prudish English-speaking world, that the novel was butchered almost beyond recognition to pass muster with British censors when it appeared as *The Child of Pleasure* in Georgina Harding's translation of 1898. The Victorian Harding had managed, in effect, to take the sex out of a novel in which sex is a central, if not the central, preoccupation. "Today, tomorrow, until death," D'Annunzio wrote, "the work of the flesh is in me the work of the spirit, and both harmonize to achieve one sole, unique beauty. The most fertile creatrix of beauty in the world is sensuality enlightened by apotheosis." Harding, for example, removes in its entirety the first chapter of the book, in which Sperelli awaits his former lover Elena, and relives their passionate affair in his mind. Elena has the "slightly cruel habit" of tearing the petals off the flowers that Sperelli has carefully arranged for their trysts and scattering them across the rug where the two of them evidently make love. D'Annunzio provides a memorable description of the nude Elena's feline body becoming increasingly excited as she stokes the fire in Sperelli's Roman palace, and of her imperious habit of making Sperelli tie her shoes after they make love: "Nothing could compare with the grace of the posture that she would assume every time, lifting her skirt slightly and putting forward first one foot and then the other, so that her lover, kneeling, could tie the laces of her shoe,

which were still unfastened.”

One of the many striking things about reading *Pleasure* is its obsessive interest in things, in the buying and possessing of beautiful objects, of furniture and décor, drapes, bowls, bric-a-brac. Sperelli is obsessed with surrounding himself with beautiful things and is always careful to compose the room with objects as he conducts his love affairs. The objects themselves bear a kind of erotic charge that becomes bound up with the erotic bond between the two lovers.

For him, all those objects among which he had so many times loved and taken pleasure and suffered had taken on something of his sensitivity. Not only were they witness to his loves, his pleasures, his moments of sadness, but they had participated in them . . . And because he sought out these things with skill, like an aesthete, he naturally drew from the world of objects a great part of his exhilaration. This delicate actor could not comprehend the comedy of love without the backdrops.

In one of the many extraordinary scenes in *Pleasure*, Sperelli in effect wins over Elena at a public auction in which they are both bidding on beautiful objects being sold off from some venerable Italian collection. When Elena turns to him and says, “I advise you to buy this timepiece,” Sperelli senses that something has changed between them. “Is she advising me to buy it *for us*?” he wonders. As they hand the objects they have purchased back and forth, an erotic charge passes between them.

In Elena’s aristocratic hands, those precious materials seemed to acquire value . . . It seemed that a particle of the amorous charm of that woman passed into them, the way some of the qualities of a magnet pass into a piece of iron. It was truly a magnetic sensation of pleasure, one of those intense and profound sensations that one feels almost only at the beginning of a love affair.

This scene is, frankly, much more interesting than the famous seduction scene in *Madame Bovary* in which Flaubert has Emma grant her favors to Rodolphe while we hear a cattle auction outside the window.

The world that D’Annunzio describes is the Rome of the nineteenth century, only recently the capital of Italy, with one foot in the old papal Rome, a sleepy, provincial, but extravagantly beautiful city dominated by the old aristocracy, and a newer world of lawyers, politicians, and a rising bourgeoisie. D’Annunzio—the lover of beauty—sides clearly with the first over the second.

Sperelli is a member of that dying breed of Italian aristocracy, which still has a feeling for refinement and beauty. And yet D’Annunzio, although from a family of minor nobility, was one of the thousands of provincials who descended on the new capital to make his fortune. In fact, D’Annunzio helped support himself in his first years in Rome in a quintessentially new profession, journalism, contributing hundreds of pieces to various lively, gossipy illustrated magazines that were part of a new mass culture made possible by high-speed printing presses. D’Annunzio wrote, among other things, about fashion and high society, which helps explain the novel’s extremely fresh, minute descriptions of Roman life. He helped chronicle the aristocratic world he was anxious to be a part of, but in writing about it he participated in a process in which the nobles and their precious possessions became objects of consumption.

D’Annunzio describes an amazing scene in which the princesses and countesses of the Roman nobility contribute to a charitable fund-raising event by offering for sale objects they have touched. Some sell cigarettes they have lit in their own mouths, one sells glasses of champagne from which she has sipped, others sell pieces of fruit they have bitten sensuously into—which men purchase for the pleasure of placing their lips on something that has been in a beautiful woman’s mouth. One princess

even performs the stunt of selling cigars she has placed under her armpit: “—Every act of charity is blessed, the marchioness decreed. —I, with all my biting of fruit, managed to gather about two hundred *luigi*.”

Of course, the objects that Sperelli is most interested in possessing are women. *Pleasure* is a fascinating psychological novel about the mind of a seducer, with D’Annunzio clearly using himself as subject. One of the things that makes *Pleasure* so interesting is that D’Annunzio is pitilessly frank in his analysis of his alter ego, Sperelli: “The basis of his power lay in this: that in the art of love, he had no repugnance for any pretense, for any falseness, for any lie. A great part of his strength lay in his hypocrisy.”

Part of Sperelli’s charm for women is his ability to make each one feel, in spite of much contrary evidence, that she is the only woman he has truly loved and will ever love: “He spoke to her in a low voice, kneeling, so close that it seemed he wanted to drink in her breath. His ardor was sincere, while his words sometimes lied.” D’Annunzio understands that eroticism is very much an affair of the mind and a matter of perception. He describes the way in which his conquest of Elena suddenly raises his status in the eyes of other women in the Roman aristocracy:

The contagion of desire is a very frequent phenomenon in modern societies. A man who has been loved by a woman of singular esteem excites the imagination in other women; and each one burns with desire to possess him, out of vanity and curiosity, competing with the others. The appeal of Don Giovanni is more in his fame than in his person.

At one point, when he is courting another woman, Maria, while also trying to win back Elena, Sperelli attends a concert with Maria and then notices Elena looking at them both, a gaze that is not lost on Maria either. Sperelli senses that a little jealousy may push the reluctant Elena back into his arms, while having a similar effect on Maria. “He was therefore on his way toward a double conquest,” D’Annunzio writes. As Sperelli imagines this “double conquest,” the two women become melded in his mind and transformed into a third:

How strange, Elena’s tones in Donna Maria’s voice! A crazy thought flashed into his head. That voice could be, for him, the element of an imaginative work: by virtue of such an affinity, he could fuse the two beauties in order to possess a third, imaginary one, more complex, more perfect, more *real* because she was ideal . . .

For D’Annunzio the erotic life and the life of the literary imagination are one and the same, and imaginary reality is the most real.

Although only twenty-six at the time of the novel’s publication, D’Annunzio firmly resisted any attempts on his publisher’s part to cut or soften *Pleasure*. Curiously, the passage that his publisher was most worried about was not an erotic one but a brief cryptic allusion to a painful contemporary political event: the slaughter of Italian troops at the hands of Ethiopian soldiers at Dogali, an inglorious moment in Italy’s inglorious effort at African colonization. Politics hardly figures at all in *Pleasure*, and we experience the defeat at Dogali (which occurred just before D’Annunzio wrote the novel) in the form of a noisy rabble that slows down Sperelli’s carriage. Sperelli dismisses the event by saying, “All for four hundred brutes, who died brutally!”

When his publisher suggested the line would offend patriotic sentiment, D’Annunzio reacted with apparent outrage: “That phrase is spoken by Andrea Sperelli and not by Gabriele D’Annunzio, and it fits well in the mouth of that monster.”

Sperelli was thus a perfect foil for D'Annunzio, a character he could both inhabit and disown as needed, hero and monster.

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Perhaps with D'Annunzio in mind, Luigi Pirandello, a writer of a very different kind, wrote, "Life either you live it or you write it. I have never lived it except by writing." This was a division D'Annunzio did not accept: he lived writing and wrote living, a dynamic and explosive combination that lasted for about twenty years, until his public life crowded out his writing.

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Pleasure

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To Francesco Paolo Michetti

This book, composed in your house as a welcome guest, comes to you as an offering of thanks, as an *ex-voto*.<sup>1</sup>

In the tiredness of the long and heavy exertion, your presence was as fortifying and consoling to me as the sea. In the disgust that follows the painful and captious contrivance of style, the limpid simplicity of your reasoning was an example and a correction for me. In the doubts that followed the effort of analysis, not infrequently was your profound judgment a source of light to me.

To you who study all the forms and all the mutations of the spirit as you study all the forms and all the mutations of things, to you who understand the laws that govern the internal life of man, the way you understand the laws of design and color, to you who are as much an acute connoisseur of souls as you are a great creator of paintings, I owe the exercise and the development of the noblest among the faculties of intellect: I owe the habit of observation, and I owe, especially, the method. I am now, like you, convinced that there is one sole object of study for us: Life.

We are, in truth, very far from the time in which, while you were in the Sciarra Gallery intent on penetrating the secrets of da Vinci and Titian, I was extending a salutation to you of nostalgic rhyme

to the Ideal that has no sunsets,  
to Beauty which knows no pain!

However, an oath taken in that period was indeed fulfilled. We returned together to our sweet fatherland, to your "vast house." There are no Medicean tapestries hanging on the walls, nor women assembled at our Decameronian gatherings; nor Paolo Veronese's<sup>2</sup> cupbearers or greyhounds strolling around the tables, nor supernatural fruits filling the crockery that Galeazzo Maria Sforza ordered from Maffeo di Clivate. Our desire is less presumptuous: and our lifestyle more primitive, perhaps also more Homeric and more heroic, if one may count the meals, worthy of Ajax,<sup>3</sup> taken alongside the resounding sea, interrupting the fasts of one's labors.

I smile when I think that this book where I examine, not without sadness, so much corruption and so much depravity and so much vain insidiousness and falseness and cruelty, has been written amid the simple, serene peace of your house, between the last starlings of the harvest and the first pastoral of the snow, while my pages grew together with the precious life of your small son.

Certainly, if there is any human compassion and any goodness in my book, I render thanks to you and your son. Nothing inspires tenderness and uplifts one as much as the sight of life unfolding. Even the vision of dawn cedes its place to that wonder.

Here, then, is the volume. If, while reading it, your eye skips on ahead and you see Giorgio holding out his hands to you and smiling at you with his rounded face, as in Catullus's divine strophe, *semihiente labello*,<sup>5</sup> you must interrupt your reading. And may the small rosy heels before you press down on the pages where all the misery of Pleasure is represented; and may that careless pressure be



symbol and an augur.

Hail, Giorgio. Friend and teacher, great thanks.

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FROM THE CONVENT: JANUARY 9, 188

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# FIRST BOOK

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## CHAPTER I

The year was ebbing away, very gently. The New Year's Eve sun radiated almost imperceptible veiled warmth, infinitely soft, golden, almost vernal, in the sky above Rome. All the roads were crowded, as on Sundays in May. On Piazza Barberini, on Piazza di Spagna, a multitude of carriages were rushing back and forth; and from the two squares the mingled and constant noise, rising up Trinità de' Monti to Via Sistina, reached the rooms of Palazzo Zuccari somewhat dulled.

The rooms were slowly filling with the scent emanating from fresh flowers in vases. Thick, fat roses were immersed in certain crystal goblets that rose, slender, from a sort of gilded stem, widening into the shape of a diamond lily, similar to those that appear behind the Virgin in the tondo by Sandro Botticelli at the Galleria Borghese. No other form of goblet equals in elegance such a form: the flowers in that diaphanous prison seem almost to become spiritual, resembling rather a religious or loving offering.

Andrea Sperelli was awaiting a lover in his rooms. Everything around him revealed special loving care. Juniper wood burned in the fireplace and the small tea table was ready, set with majolica cups and saucers from Castel Durante decorated with mythological scenes by Luzio Dolci, ancient forms of inimitable grace, with Ovidian hexameters written in blue-black cobalt<sup>1</sup> italic script below the figures. 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 lacquered curtains cast its shadow on the carpet.

The clock of Trinità de' Monti sounded three thirty. There was still half an hour to wait. Andrea Sperelli rose from the couch on which he had been lying and went to open one of the windows; then he walked around the apartment; then he opened a book, read a few lines, closed it again; then he looked around for something with a dubious expression. The anxiety of the wait stabbed him so acutely that he needed to move about, to engage in some activity, to distract his internal suffering with physical action. He bent toward the fireplace, took the tongs to revive the fire, and placed a new piece of juniper atop the burning pile. The pile collapsed; the coals rolled, scintillating, down to the metal plate that protected the carpet; the flames split into many small bluish tongues that vanished and reappeared; the embers emitted smoke.

Then a memory arose in the waiting man's mind. In front of that very fireplace Elena had once loved to bask before dressing, after an hour of intimacy. She possessed much skill in heaping great pieces of wood on the andirons. She would take the heavy tongs with both hands and lean her head back slightly, to avoid the sparks. Her body on the carpet, in this slightly difficult task, in the movements of her muscles and the flickering of the shadows, seemed to radiate beauty from every joint, every fold, every hollow, suffused with an amber pallor that brought to mind Correggio's *Danäe*. And indeed her limbs were somewhat Correggian, her hands and feet small and supple, almost one could say, arboreal, as depicted in statues of Daphne at the very beginning of her fabled metamorphosis.

As soon as she had completed her task the wood would flame up and emit an immediate radiant

glow. In the room, that warm russet light and the frozen dusk entering through the windows would vibrate with each other for a while. The aroma of the burnt juniper made one slightly dizzy. Elena seemed to be overcome by a sort of childish frenzy at the sight of the blaze. She had the slightly cruel habit of scattering the petals of all the flowers in the vases onto the carpet at the end of every tryst. When she returned to the room after having dressed, pulling on her gloves or closing her fan, she would smile in the midst of that devastation; and nothing could compare with the grace of the posture that she would assume every time, lifting her skirt slightly and putting forward first one foot and then the other, so that her lover, kneeling, could tie the laces of her shoe, which were still unfastened.

The place was almost completely unchanged. From every object that Elena had looked at or touched, flocks of memories arose, and the images of that distant time came tumultuously to life. After almost two years, Elena was about to cross that threshold again. Within half an hour, certainly, she would come, she would sit in that armchair, lifting her veil from her face, panting slightly, as she had once done; and she would talk. All those objects would once again hear her voice, maybe even her laugh, after an absence of two years.

The day of the great parting was precisely March 25, 1885, outside Porta Pia, in a carriage. The date had remained indelible in Andrea's memory. Now, waiting, he could evoke all the events of that day with infallible lucidity. The vision of the Nomentano landscape unfolded itself now before him in an ideal light, like one of those dreamscapes in which things seem to be visible from afar by virtue of a radiance that emanates from their shapes.

The closed carriage rolled along with a steady sound, the horses moving at a trot: the walls of the ancient patrician villas passed before the windows, glowing white, almost oscillating with a constant and gentle movement. Now and then a great iron gate would appear, through which one could see a driveway flanked with high box hedges or a clump of greenery inhabited by Latinate statues or a long portico covered in foliage, through which the rays of sun glinted palely here and there.

Elena was silent, wrapped in her full otter-skin mantle, with a veil over her face and her hands enclosed in suede. He inhaled with delight the subtle odor of heliotrope that arose from her costly fur coat, feeling against his arm the shape of hers. Both believed themselves to be far from others, alone, but suddenly the black carriage of a prelate would pass by; or a herdsman on horseback, or a throng of purplish clerics, or a herd of cattle.

Half a kilometer from the bridge she said:

—Let us get out.

In the countryside the cold and clear air seemed like springwater; and as the trees were undulating in the wind it appeared, as with an optical illusion, that the undulation transmitted itself to all things.

She said, embracing him and stumbling on the harsh terrain:

—I am leaving this evening. This is the last time . . .

Then she remained quiet; then she spoke again, haltingly, about the necessity for her departure, about the need for the breakup, with a tone full of sadness. The furious wind tore the words from her lips. She carried on talking. He interrupted her, taking her hand and seeking with his fingers the flesh of her wrist through her buttons:

—No more! No more!

They walked on, struggling against the insistent gusts of wind. And he, near the woman, in that profound and grave solitude, suddenly felt enter into his soul, like the proud sentiment of a freer life, an excess of strength.

—Don't leave! Don't leave! I still want you, always!

He bared her wrist and pushed his fingers into her sleeve, tormenting her skin with an agitated

movement that harbored the desire for greater possession.

~~She turned upon him one of those looks that inebriated him like glasses of wine. The bridge was nearby, red-hued, in the light of the sun. The river seemed immobile and metallic along its entire sinuous length. The rushes curved over on the banks, and the waters bumped up gently against several poles stuck into the clay, perhaps to hold fishing lines.~~

Then he began to goad her with memories. He spoke to her of their early days, of the ball at Palazzo Farnese, of the hunt in the countryside of Divine Love, of their morning trysts in Piazza di Spagna along the shopwindows of the goldsmiths or along Via Sistina, peaceful and elegant, when she came out of Palazzo Barberini followed by peasant women offering her roses from their baskets.

—Do you remember? Do you remember?

—Yes.

—And that evening, with the flowers, in the beginning; when I came with all those flowers . . . You were alone, near the window: you were reading. Do you remember?

—Yes, yes.

—I came in. You barely turned around; you greeted me with harshness. What was wrong with you? I don't know. I placed the bouquet on the little table and I waited. You started talking about futile things, unwillingly and without pleasure. I thought, disheartened: *Already she doesn't love me anymore!* But the scent was strong: the whole room was already full of it. I can still see you, when you grabbed the bouquet with both hands and buried your whole face in it, inhaling. Your face, when you lifted it again, was bloodless, and your eyes seemed strange as if from a kind of intoxication . . .

—Carry on, carry on! said Elena, with a faint voice, leaning over the parapet, spellbound by the fascination of the rushing waters.

—Then, on the couch: Do you remember? I covered your chest, your arms, your face with the flowers, oppressing you. You kept on coming up through them, offering me your mouth, your throat, your closed eyelids. Between your skin and my lips I felt the cold and damp petals. If I kissed your neck, you shivered throughout your body, and held out your hands to keep me away. Oh, then . . . You had your head pressed back in the cushions, your chest hidden by roses, your arms bare to the elbows and nothing was more loving or sweeter than the slight tremor of your pale hands on my temples . . . Do you remember?

—Yes. Carry on!

He continued, his tenderness growing. Drunk on his own words, he almost lost consciousness of what he was saying. Elena, with her back to the light, was leaning toward her lover. Both could feel through their clothes the indecisive contact of their bodies. Beneath them, the waters of the river moved, slow and cold to the eye; the great slender rushes, like thatches of hair, curved themselves in it at every gust and floated with ample movements.

Then they spoke no more; but, looking at each other, they heard a constant sound that persisted indefinitely, taking with it a part of their being, as if something sonorous was escaping from the intimate recesses of their brains and expanding to fill all the surrounding countryside.

Elena, straightening up, said:

—Let's go. I'm thirsty. Where can one ask for some water?

They headed then toward the Romanesque inn on the other side of the bridge. Some carters were unfastening their packhorses, swearing loudly. The light of the setting sun struck the human and equine group with intense force.

The entry of the two aroused no sign of wonder among the people in the inn. Three or four feverish men, taciturn and yellowish, stood around a square brazier. A ruddy-skinned cowherd slumbered in a

corner, still gripping his extinguished pipe between his teeth. Two scrawny and squinting youths played cards, glaring at each other during the intervals with an expression of brutal fervor. And the innkeeper, a plump woman, held a baby in her arms, rocking it ponderously.

While Elena drank the water in the glass, the woman showed her the baby, lamenting.

—Look, my lady! Look, my lady!

All the limbs of the poor creature were miserably thin; its purplish lips were covered in whitish spots; the inside of its mouth was covered with what seemed to be milky clots. It seemed almost as if life were already fleeing from that small body, leaving some matter upon which mold now grew.

—Feel, my lady, how cold his hands are. He can't drink anymore; he can't swallow; he can't sleep anymore . . .

The woman sobbed. The feverish men looked on with eyes full of immense exhaustion. At the sound of her sobs the two youths made a gesture of impatience.

—Come, come! Andrea said to Elena, taking her arm after having left a coin on the table. And he drew her outside.

Together they returned toward the bridge. The Aniene River flowed on, lit now by the fiery sunsets. A scintillating line passed through the arch; and in the distance the waters took on a brown but glossier color, as if slicks of oil or tar were floating on its surface. The rugged countryside, like an immense ruin, was tinted all with violet. Near the Eternal City the sky grew increasingly red.

—Poor creature! murmured Elena with a profound tone of compassion, hugging herself tightly to Andrea's arm.

The wind grew enraged. A flock of crows flew past high up in the enflamed air, cawing.

Then, suddenly, a kind of sentimental exaltation filled the souls of the couple, in the presence of solitude. It was as if something tragic and heroic entered their passion. The highest point of their sentiment blazed under the influence of the tumultuous sunset. Elena stopped.

—I can't go on anymore, she said, panting.

The carriage was still far off, immobile, where they had left it.

—Just a little farther, Elena! A little farther! Do you want me to carry you?

Andrea, taken by an unstoppable lyrical impetus, abandoned himself to words.

“Why did she want to leave? Why did she want to break the enchantment? Weren't their *destinies* bound together, by now, forever? He needed her in order to live, her eyes, her voice, her thoughts . . . He was completely penetrated by that love; all his blood was adulterated as if by poison, with no remedy. Why did she want to flee? He would wind himself around her, he would first suffocate her against his chest. No, it could not be. Never! Never!”

Elena listened, her head bent, struggling against the wind, without answering. After a while, she lifted her arm to make a sign to the coachman to approach. The horses pawed the ground.

—Stop at Porta Pia, the lady cried, mounting the carriage together with her lover.

And with a sudden movement she offered herself to his desire. He kissed her mouth, her forehead, her hair, her eyes, her throat, avidly, rapidly, without breathing any longer.

—Elena! Elena!

A fiery scarlet glow entered the carriage, reflected by the brick-colored houses. The trotting sound of many horses came closer.

Elena, leaning on the shoulder of her lover with immensely sweet submission, said:

—Farewell, love! Farewell! Farewell!

As she straightened up, to the left and to the right ten or twelve scarlet-clothed horsemen passed at a rapid trot, returning from foxhunting. One of them, the Duke of Beffi, passing very close by, arched

up to see inside the carriage window.

Andrea did not speak anymore. He now felt his entire being becoming faint, falling into an infinite depression. The puerile weakness of his nature, the initial upliftment having ebbed away, now brought him to the need for tears. He would have liked to bow down before her, humble himself, arouse the woman's pity with his tears. He had a confused, dull sensation of dizziness; and a sharp chill assaulted the nape of his neck and penetrated the roots of his hair.

—Farewell, Elena repeated.

The carriage was stopping under the archway of Porta Pia so that he could alight.

In this way, hence, while waiting, Andrea saw that far-off day once more in his mind's eye; he once more saw all the gestures, heard all the words. What had he done as soon as Elena's carriage had disappeared in the direction of the Four Fountains? Nothing extraordinary, in truth. Even then, as always, as soon as the immediate object from which his spirit drew that type of fatuous exaltation distanced itself, he had almost immediately regained his tranquillity, his everyday consciousness, his equilibrium. He had mounted a public carriage to return home; there he had put on a black suit, as usual, not omitting any elegant detail; and he had gone to lunch at his cousin's, as on every other Wednesday, at Palazzo Roccagiovine. Everything in his external existence exerted upon him a great power of oblivion, kept him occupied, aroused him to the swift enjoyment of worldly pleasures.

That evening, in fact, contemplation had come to him quite late, namely, when returning to his home he saw shining on a table the small tortoiseshell comb forgotten there by Elena two days before. Then, in compensation, he had suffered all night and with many tricks of the mind he had intensified his pain.

But the moment was nearing. The clock of Trinità de' Monti sounded three forty-five. He thought with profound trepidation: *In a few minutes Elena will be here. What shall I do when receiving her? What words shall I say to her?*

The anxiety in him was real, and love for that woman had truly reawoken in him; but the verbal and plastic expression of feelings in him was, as always, so artificial and so far from simplicity and sincerity that he resorted, by habit, to rehearsing even the most profound emotions of the soul.

He tried to imagine the scene; he composed some sentences; he looked around to choose the most propitious place for their talk. Then he even got up to see in a mirror if his face was pale; if it was appropriate to the circumstance. And his gaze in the mirror lingered at his temples, at his hairline, where Elena used to place a delicate kiss *then*. He opened his mouth to admire the perfect shine of his teeth and the freshness of his gums, remembering that once, Elena had liked in him, above all, his mouth. His vanity, which was that of a spoiled and effeminate youth, never neglected any effect of grace or form in a love affair. He knew, in the practice of love, how to draw from his beauty the greatest possible enjoyment. This felicitous aptitude of body and this keen search for pleasure indeed won him the hearts of women. He had in him aspects of Don Juan and of a cherub: he knew how to be both the man of a Herculean night and the shy, ingenuous, almost virginal lover. The basis of his power lay in this: that in the art of love, he had no repugnance for any pretense, for any falseness, for any lie. A great part of his strength lay in his hypocrisy.

*What shall I do when I receive her? What words shall I say to her?* He became confused as the minutes fled past. He did not yet know in what kind of mood Elena would come to him.

He had encountered her the previous morning along Via de' Condotti, while she was looking at shopwindows. He had returned to Rome a few days earlier, after a long, obscure absence. The sudden encounter had provoked in both an intense emotion; but as they were out in public they were forced to be courteously reserved, ceremonial, almost cold. He had said to her, with a serious, slightly sad air,

looking her in the eyes: —I have so many things to tell you, Elena. Will you come to me, tomorrow? Nothing has changed in the *buen retiro*.<sup>2</sup> She had answered simply: —Fine, I will come. You can expect me at about four. I also have something to tell you. Now leave me.

She had accepted the invitation immediately, with no hesitation whatsoever, without placing any conditions, without seeming to give any importance to the matter. Such readiness had at first aroused in Andrea a vague worry. Would she come as a friend or as a lover? Would she come to renew their love or to shatter every hope? In those two years, whatever had passed through her soul? Andrea did not know; but he still felt the sensation caused by her gaze, in the street, when he had bowed to greet her. It was still the same gaze as always, so sweet, so profound, so flattering, from beneath her infinitely long eyelashes.

There were still two or three minutes to go until the appointed hour. The anxiety of the waiting man grew to such a pitch that he thought he would suffocate. He went to the window again and looked toward the steps of the Trinità. Once, Elena used to climb those stairs to their assignations. Placing her foot on the last step, she would hesitate for a moment; then she would rapidly cross that section of the square in front of the Casteldelfino house. One would hear her slightly undulating footsteps resonate on the paving, if the square was silent.

The clock struck four. The sound of carriages could be heard from Piazza di Spagna and from the Pincian Hill.<sup>3</sup> Many people were walking beneath the trees in front of Villa Medici. Two women sat on the stone bench before the church, watching 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 sunset approached. The city below was tinged with gold against a pale sky on which the Monte Mario cypresses were already traced in black.

Andrea gave a start of surprise. He saw a shadow appear at the top of the small flight of stairs that runs alongside the Casteldelfino house and descends to Piazzetta Mignanelli. It was not Elena, but a woman who turned into Via Gregoriana, walking slowly.

*What if she doesn't come?* he mused doubtfully, drawing back from the window. And drawing back from the cold air, he felt that the tepid warmth of the room was softer, the aroma of the juniper and the roses more intense, the shadow of the drapes and the door curtains more mysterious. It seemed that in that moment the room was completely ready to welcome the desired woman. He thought about the sensation that Elena would feel upon entering. Certainly she would be won over by that sweetness so full of memories; she would immediately lose every notion of reality, of time; she would believe herself to be back in one of their habitual trysts, never to have interrupted that sensual affair, still to be the Elena she had once been. If the theater of love was unchanged, why should love have changed? Certainly she would feel the profound seduction of the things that had once been beloved.

Now a new torture commenced in the waiting man. The senses, heightened by the habit of contemplative fantasy and of poetic dreaming, invest objects with a sensitive and changeable soul, like the human soul; and they perceive in everything, in shapes, in colors, in sounds, in perfumes, a transparent symbol, the emblem of a sentiment or a thought; and in every phenomenon, in every combination of phenomena, they believe they can conjecture a psychic state, a moral significance. Sometimes the vision is so clear that it produces a sense of anguish in those spirits: they feel they are suffocating from the fullness of life revealed to them, and they are alarmed by their own phantasms.

Andrea saw his own anxiety reflected in the appearance of the things around him; and as his desire dispersed uselessly in the wait and his nerves became weaker, so it appeared to him that the almost erotic essence of those things also vaporized and dissipated into futility. For him, all those objects



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