

Gabriele D'Annunzio never met an adverb he didn't like. The more recondite the better, these modifiers fill his sentences like the flowers and antiques that stuff the scented boudoirs of his writing. "The year was ebbing away, very gently", *Pleasure* begins, while "The New Year's Eve sun radiated almost imperceptible veiled warmth, infinitely soft, golden, almost vernal . . .". It was not enough for D'Annunzio to build up a story; he also had to decorate it.

Because of his impossibly extravagant personality – dandy, military conqueror, fascist idol, insatiable lover, among others – D'Annunzio's writing regularly spirals from the sublime to the downright farcical, always reflecting its author's cult of personality. His baroque, unapologetically elitist style doesn't help matters: when we read D'Annunzio, we enter into an aesthetic sensibility that no longer exists, except in parody. He tells without showing; alludes to obscure texts; wears his learning heavily; and violates pretty much any style manual you can think of. Yet the writing sparkles. The closer one looks at a novel like *Pleasure*, the more one detects the irony and humour that balance the toe-curling pretensions of the prose and the protagonist, Andrea Sperelli. More importantly, a close reading reveals an astonishing streak of literary innovation that manages to preserve what is most valuable in those same traditions that it refashions.

Like Sperelli's apartment in Rome, *Pleasure* is filled with "beautiful and rare things", from the verbal ("cardinalial", "velarium") to the human (Sperelli's lover Elena dresses in "a long tunic made of otter"). But the prose is much more than a cabinet of curiosities. The novel distills a range of genres and modes – the

In scented boudoirs

JOSEPH LUZZI

Gabriele D'Annunzio

PLEASURE

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eighteenth-century epistolary novel, the poetry of the medieval *dolce stil novo*, movements ranging from Romanticism to Decadentism – all of which are blended into a seamless whole despite its cluttered assortment of artefacts.

Lara Gochin Raffaelli's superb new translation puts "the sex back in *Pleasure*" (as the book's publicity announces), restoring some of the racier parts that the Victorian translator Georgina Harding had prudishly omitted. Raffaelli preserves the florid musicality of D'Annunzio's original Italian, its muscular rhythm, and the precious constructions that can make Italian seem like a foreign language in his hands. She also provides a wealth of helpful notes, crucial for entering into D'Annunzio's museum-like imagination. The author's rapacious erudition draws not only on literature but other art forms, especially opera. As Sperelli waits for Elena to appear in his apartment, D'Annunzio ratchets up the tension with a melodramatic repetition of "then" at every narrative twist and turn; later, Sperelli calls out Elena's name – while making love to another woman named Maria, who replies in

an "exhausted and elated voice: 'You are taking my very life!'"

It is easy to smirk over such excess, but again D'Annunzio's talent rests in being able to give a picture of actual life beneath his novel's self-consciously artificial veneer. For all the talk of the sex in *Pleasure*, there is actually little explicit mention of it. When we do get to the act, D'Annunzio shows a discreet touch that would surprise most over-titillated readers of today: "Then, with a sudden movement, Elena sat up on the bed, pressed [Sperelli's] head between her two palms, breathed her wish onto his face, kissed him, fell back again, and offered herself to him". So much contemporary writing gives us sex without sensuality; D'Annunzio revels in a finer erotic touch. There is even a hint of innocence in some of the book's romantic sentiment: a heartfelt diary entry by Maria describes "the shape of a kiss not planted" by Sperelli, who earlier fidgets in his apartment like an anxious adolescent while waiting for Elena to walk up the stairs. The book is about not just the pursuit of pleasure, but the movement beyond it. D'Annunzio writes of Sperelli and Elena's torrid affair: "The refinement and delicacy of their sentiment and their imagination followed the excesses of sensuality".

The profound self-involvement of Sperelli creates problems with the writing, as the other characters – especially the two women he hunts, Elena and Maria – fall into the quicksand of the male protagonist's ceaseless scheming and self-examination. But just when

you've had all of Sperelli you can stomach, D'Annunzio surprises you. A passage on convalescence and spiritual renewal (after Sperelli nearly loses his life in a duel) is a fine meditation on human rebirth, with its reflections on the changing nature of mind and matter:

Never is the sense of life as sweet as it is after the anguish of pain; and never is the human soul more inclined to goodness and to faith than after having gazed at the abyss of death. Man understands, when healing, that thought, desire, will, consciousness of life, are not life He understands that his real life is, as it were, not one lived by him, it is the combination of involuntary, spontaneous, unconscious, instinctive sensations; it is the harmonious and mysterious activity of living vegetation; it is the imperceptible development of all metamorphoses and all renewals. It is precisely that life within him that carries out the miracle of convalescence: it closes wounds, remedies losses, reconnects broken tissues, mends lacerated flesh, restores the mechanisms of organs . . . [and] rekindles the flame of hope in the heart, opens once more the wings of the chimeras of fantasy.

As with the philosopher he is often linked to, Friedrich Nietzsche, D'Annunzio remains the subject of ongoing controversy over his complicated relation with fascist ideology. As a result, his work has receded into the background behind his towering persona, and discussion of it often becomes a way to illustrate or explain an aspect of his personal or political life. The occlusion of his work by his life is an irony, for he aimed to show how the "ideal artistic fiction" could triumph over the "real event". The real events in D'Annunzio's life were too noisy to ignore, but they shouldn't drown out the voice of his writing.

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa died before *The Leopard* or any other work was published, which left his writings open to the interventions of devoted admirers. The pieces collected here, one memoir, two stories and the first chapter of an unfinished novel, were never conceived as one volume, and Lampedusa says explicitly of the main work, "Childhood Memories", that these are lines "which no one will read". They were written between 1955, when he was completing his great novel, and 1957, the year of his death.

When the novel became an international success, there was interest in any other work of his, but Alessandra Wolff, Lampedusa's widow, had well-intentioned reservations. Eventually the novelist Giorgio Bassani, to whom goes the credit for ensuring that *The Leopard* saw the light of day, produced in 1961 the first edition of these pieces. The first English translation by Archibald Colquhoun, given the title *Two Stories and a Memory*, was made from this edition, but for reasons unknown the translator omitted one of the stories, "Joy and the Law" (admittedly the weakest of them).

There were problems with the first edition, including cuts and passages scored out, perhaps by the author but possibly by the widow, as well as misunderstandings resulting from the fact that Wolff was Latvian, so Italian was not her native language. To complicate matters further, the original autograph versions of some stories used by the Italian publisher have been lost. In spite of these problems, Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi, Lampedusa's adopted son, prepared a critical edition in 1988, after the death of his widow.

Siren voice

JOSEPH FARRELL

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES AND OTHER STORIES

Translated by Stephen Parkin
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This is the work now translated by Stephen Parkin. This handsome book contains a gallery of photographs of the family, an interesting introduction by Ian Thomson, some very useful notes and a biographical pen portrait of the author. Sentences struck out in the Italian have been reinstated and indicated by bold print. With a few lapses when he chooses a discordantly contemporary idiom ("a black cashmere pullover I had paid an arm and a leg for"), Parkin's translation does justice to Lampedusa's elegant, elaborate prose.

The autobiographical "Childhood Memories" will arouse interest in readers who are happy sleuthing for psychological clues to the development of an author who intertwined invention and memory. In a paragraph inexplicably cut in earlier editions, he states that his model and inspiration was Stendhal's *La Vie de Henry Brulard*, which he had previously disliked but came to view as the novelist's finest work. The author was a boy who "loved



The young Giuseppe Tomasi, Palazzo Filangeri Cutò in Santa Margherita Belice; from the book under review

solitude", and as a scion of one of Sicily's noble families, he had a privileged childhood which he presents as an undisturbed idyll. The word "palace" is too dry and unwelcoming for his memories of home life moving from one "house" to another, but he does spend page after page of luscious prose describing the courtyards, the grand rooms, the gardens and even the wallpaper of these grand residences where he lived as though "shut inside a fairy's jewel box".

It is hard to believe that this was the Sicily of

poverty, hunger and the grinding labour of fishermen or sulphur miners described by Giovanni Verga and the *veristi* writers of a previous generation, and it is curious that there are in Lampedusa's memoir so few other human beings, apart from the generations of the family, and none of those cherished domestics who often people aristocratic writings. The prose flows with the allegro and cadences of a Mozart piano composition.

The author moves into other, imagined circles with the brief "Joy and the Law", the tale of a clerk who seems like a refugee from a Dickens novel and who receives an enormous cake as a patronizing Christmas gift, but Lampedusa struggles with a class of society he did not frequent. In "Blind Kittens", the opening chapter of what should have been the sequel to *The Leopard*, he writes with undisguised antipathy of the bourgeoisie, in the shape of the Ibba family, who replace the aristocracy overthrown by Garibaldi's forces. In the new order, the Ibbas had acquired land in Sicily by "cunning, lack of scruple and defiance of the law".

The final tale, "The Siren", found among Lampedusa's papers after his death, is an enigmatic, tantalizing and haunting tale of rare beauty which glints like a finely cut diamond. The two protagonists are Sicilians exiled in Turin and yearning for their island, the one an unimaginative nobleman earning his living as a journalist, the other a senator and ex-professor of Greek who displays the intellectual and patrician mindset of a superior class. In his youth, the professor had an encounter with a mermaid, or siren, and the story as he tells it crackles with erotic tension.