

WILLIAM MORRIS AND GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO: KINDRED SPIRITS?¹

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In this essay, my aim is to show how, despite a different national background, William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) and Gabriele D'Annunzio's *The Pleasure* (1889) reveal a common semantic denominator exemplified by an aesthetic cult of Pre-Raphaelite taste. Not only does interior design prove to be an inexhaustible source of pleasure for both of them, but this motif of idealized compensation in the form of decoration had a special social and cultural significance. Not surprisingly, the Red House (1859) manifested itself as the unfolding of Morris's character in deeds and statements, while "the little red house" (1915) by The Grand Canal in Venice epitomized D'Annunzio's power of self-expression. Apart from the nostalgic longing for a lost sense of pleasure governing the nineteenth century, these two monumental works show many signs of internal contact, not to say about the relationship of dialogic sort between the Morrisean "Romantic Medusa" in *The Earthly Paradise* (1868) and D'Annunzio's *femme fatale* of *Il Poema Paradisiaco* (1893), female typologies located in a similar pleasure garden. What is more, Morris's and D'Annunzio's literary imaginations are inseparably tied up with Nietzsche's philosophic formula, a vision of totalizing life, measured primarily by the return to an imaginary beautiful homeland, which sheds light on a complex comparison, allowing a variety of textual representations to be investigated as the outstanding examples of Morris's and D'Annunzio's idealisms.

The extraordinary wholeness of William Morris's individuality is located in a zone of potential conversation with the other, in a zone of dialogic contact. Only by such a simultaneous representation of human typologies can a scholar grasp and appreciate the real essence of literary personalities. To put it in

¹ This article is an expanded version of a paper presented at the 50th-Anniversary Conference of the William Morris Society, Egham, Surrey, UK: 7-10 July 2005.

Benjamin's words: "Along with the broad underlying traits, the trained eye of the connoisseur of men is supposed to perceive finer and closer connections, until what looked like a net is tightened into cloth." (1978: 39) A dynamic authenticity is introduced into the image of Morris, dynamics of tension between various factors of this image; the artist ceases to coincide with himself and consequently ceases to be exhausted entirely by his writings that contain his unique frame of mind. In this cultural interanimation, interaction of ideologies, the Italian Decadent writer Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938) embodies the ideal touchstone to sense the Apolline personality of Morris (1834-1896) who — in contrast with the acknowledged idea of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) as inspiring model² for D'Annunzio — reverses his artistic status of Pre-Raphaelite pupil in the position of design master. Despite the Nietzschean opposition Dionysiac/Apolline,³ as exemplified by the relationship D'Annunzio/Morris, a series of "elective affinities" can be traced between "the defiant archangel" and the "idle singer of an empty day".

Apart from a common quest for stylistic perfection, in terms of highly detailed and synesthetical descriptions, appearing in their poems of Pre-Raphaelite taste, what should be emphasized here is their anarchistic spirit actualized through undermining actions and writings against social authorities. Both Morris's political engagement with his *Socialist League* and

² Besides a common mania for decorative objects, as well as the use and abuse of drugs, what connects D'Annunzio with D.G. Rossetti is the metonymic characterization of their fictional female figures. A case in point is the description of Elena Muti in *The Child of Pleasure*, which transposes the main traits of Rossetti's paintings, such as *Proserpine* and *Astarte Syriaca*. Not only does D'Annunzio declare his aesthetic affiliation with Rossetti through a direct quotation in his novel ("she wore a dress of a curious indefinable dull rusty red, one of those so-called aesthetic colours one meets with in the pictures of [...] Dante Gabriel Rossetti," D'Annunzio 1991: 126), but he also takes inspiration by Rossetti's sonnets to compose the poem "Consolation" included in the lyrical anthology *Il Poema Paradisiaco*. For a detailed analysis of the Pre-Raphaelite influence on the Italian writer, see Woodhouse (2001: 54-58; 147-152).

³ If we apply the Nietzschean typological distinction to Morris and D'Annunzio, it is clear that the master of Arts and Crafts is controlled by the Apolline instinct for beauty, "a dream-state in which the day-world becomes shrouded, and a new, clearer, more comprehensible, more affecting world [...]" (Nietzsche 1999: 45) while D'Annunzio reveals a Dionysiac impulse. Exactly like Rossetti, the Italian Decadent artist "become[s] entirely at one with the primordial unity, with its pain and contradiction," (30) because as Nietzsche explains: "the struggle, the agony, the destruction of appearances, all this [...] seems [...] to be necessary, given the uncountable excess of forms of existence thrusting and pushing themselves into life, given the exuberant fertility of the world-Will; we are pierced by the furious sting of these pains at the very moment when, as it were, we become one with the immeasurable, primordial delight in existence and receive an intimation, in Dionysiac ecstasy, that this delight is indestructible and eternal. Despite fear and pity, we are happily alive, not as individuals, but as the one living being, with whose procreative lust we have become one" (81).

D'Annunzio's patriotic activity (such as the march upon the town of Fiume to secure its capture in 1919) give voice to their fellow men's worries, in line with Nietzschean love of country, a civil mission pertaining only to truly human men, namely overmen. This is what essentially distinguishes Morris and D'Annunzio from the vast majority of people, thanks to their transitional essence, an over-going and a down-going epitomized by Nietzsche's definition "man is [...] a bridge." (1995: 15) At the base of this interpretation lies the "Return Home" experienced by Zarathustra/Morris/D'Annunzio, wanderers in wild remoteness, suffering from home-sickening because "home [they] found nowhere; fugitive[s] [are they] in all cities and a departure at all gates." (121) Under such conditions, the nomadic impulse and consequent multiple movings — on the one hand Morris's house sequence: Red House → Kelmscott Manor → Kelmscott House → Merton Abbey; on the other D'Annunzio's transition: "La Capponcina"⁴ → Arcachon⁵ → The Little Red House ("la Casetta Rossa"⁶) → Il Vittoriale⁷ — acquire increasing importance in the light of Zarathustra's exclamation: "I love him who works and invents to build a house for the overman and to prepare earth, animal, and plant for him: for thus he wants to go under." (15) To put it in somewhat simplified terms, we might say that Morris's and D'Annunzio's "will to power" is here portrayed as a dynamic vision of life that values life in its aspect of *Becoming*. The world of *Becoming* gets

⁴ Between 1898 and 1910 D'Annunzio lived at "La Capponcina", the ancient villa belonging to the Capponi family, located in a town near Florence (Settignano). This house, symbol of the Decadent taste for what is superfluous, was furnished by Florentine antiquarians who recreated a fifteenth-century atmosphere. Of special relevance is the number of people and animals populating such an aesthetic monument: 15 servants, 10 Arabian horses, 38 Russian greyhounds and more than 200 pigeons. This latter aspect can be associated with Morris's fascination for birds, well exemplified by the fabric *Strawberry Thief* featuring the garden of Kelmscott Manor where, as May Morris observes, "there were certainly more birds than strawberries in spite of attempt at protection" (Qt. in Hamilton, Hart, and Simmons 1998: 65).

⁵ In 1910 D'Annunzio was forced to sell "La Capponcina" because of his accumulating debts and moved to a villa in Arcachon by the Atlantic Ocean, thanks to the American painter Romaine Brooks who, fallen in love with him, contributed to the rent.

⁶ In order to avoid Venetian rumours, D'Annunzio took refuge in "The Little Red House", paying a month's rent of 450 lire. The groundfloor was composed of two little sitting-rooms and a living-room; on the first floor there were a bed-room, a living-room furnished in the Rococo style and a studio where he used to write numerous love letters to her neighbour, the countess Annina Morosini, delivered by his faithful gondolier Dante Fenzo.

⁷ D'Annunzio's achievements are commemorated in a museum called "Il Vittoriale degli Italiani" ("the Shrine of the Victories of the Italians"), a magnificent building on the southwest bank of Lake Garda, where he lived between 1923 and his death. Not only does such a sumptuous villa represent the embodiment of his memory and heroism, but it also stands for the politicization of erotics. Now "Il Vittoriale" is a national monument, a complex mixture of military museum, historical archive, library, theatre and mausoleum where it is possible to admire his torpedo boat MAS 96 and his SVA-5 aircraft.

interpreted as an ephemeral preservation and enhancement of the kind of home wherein the Overman can live: “At house and home with me shall no one despair: in my purlieus do I protect every one from his wild beasts. And that is the first thing which I offer you: security!” (325)

The essential truth *Domus sua cuique est tutissimum refugium* was widely employed by the Italian writer and the Pre-Raphaelite artist who deprived their homes of any simplistic lodging value to reveal the fundamental motif of the artistic cradle. If it is true that the Red House (Kent, 1859) manifested itself as the unfolding of Morris’s character in interior design, it is equally true that the Little Red House (1915) by the Grand Canal in Venice stood for D’Annunzio’s power of self-expression. What is characteristic here, is not only the image of an English country house, seen as an artistic coterie, a design laboratory where Morris’s friends (Philip Webb, Burne-Jones, Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddal) gathered to contribute to house decorations, even with female needlework, but also the Venetian lagoonal house rented by D’Annunzio from prince Hoehlhlohe, partly restored and furnished anew for his house parties and piano concerts, not to say of his logistic meetings during the First World War.

This distinctive interrelationship between the Red House — “a catalyst in changing the direction of Morris’s career. [...] the cradle of a craft co-operative which, in 1861, became Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company” (Hamilton, Hart, and Simmons 1998: 41) — and the Italian “doll’s house,” “the canary cage” in the words of D’Annunzio, is explained predominantly by their old-fashioned style, by the link with decorative and architectural elements of ancient times. The internal dialogic quality of such domestic buildings is connected with a phenomenon of past revival, echoing and amplifying the Gothic aesthetic formula in Morris’s case, certainly comparable to D’Annunzio’s passion for ancient houses able to convey historical backgrounds of suggestive relevance to the writer’s creative process.⁸ Therefore, it is not a coincidence, if such a nostalgic feeling is symbolised by a primitive chromatism of mythopeic resonance epitomized by decorative exemplifications of the red colour.⁹ A case

⁸ For a detailed analysis of Morris’s medievalism, see Marroni (2004: 217-225).

⁹ In “Making the Best of It” Morris devotes a paragraph to the decorative use of the red colour: “Red is also a difficult colour to use, unless it be helped by some beauty of material, for, whether it tend toward yellow and be called scarlet, or towards blue and be crimson, there is but little pleasure in it, unless it be deep and full. If the scarlet pass a certain degree of impurity it falls into a hot brown-red, very disagreeable in large masses. If the crimson be much reduced it tends towards a cold colour called in these latter days magenta, impossible for an artist to use either by itself or in combination. The finest tint of red is a central one between crimson and scarlet, and is a very powerful colour indeed, but scarce to be got in a flat tint. A crimson broken by greyish-brown and tending towards russet is also a very useful colour, but, like all the finest reds, is rather a dyer’s colour than a house-painter’s; the world being very rich in soluble reds, which of course

in point is the Little Red House entrance wardrobe where D'Annunzio used to keep a red eighteenth-century cloak, together with the lamp necessary to wander through narrow Venetian lanes at night, with the aim of providing signs of resemblance with the past. Not surprisingly, the external combination of aesthetic elements shows their respective vocation for ancient idealized worlds. Exactly like Morris's and D'Annunzio's red brick-buildings confirming Nietzsche's ideal house — "Deep yellow and hot red: thus my taste wants it; it mixes blood into all colors. But whoever whitewashes his house betrays a whitewashed soul" (1995: 194) — , the red flowering of Italian pomegranates (*Punica granatum*), planted in D'Annunzio's garden, does nothing but evoke the theory of the eternal return:

What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" (Nietzsche 2001: 194)

With Pre-Raphaelite sensibility, the reddish dimension of Morris's house provides for the paradigmatic equation beauty = medievalism = nature, closely connected to the material of the brick able "to preserve [the] character of a building." (Morris, *On Architecture* 161) This aesthetic model plays a highly significant role in *News from Nowhere* (NFN hereafter), pivoting on chromatic isotopies of pictorial relevance. But the evocative power of red¹⁰ and the logic of pleasure that lies with it is not limited to a medieval dimension; it fulfills a preternatural function in line with all visionary experiences because, as Aldous Huxley states in *The Doors of Perception*, "[a]t the antipodes of every mind lay the Other World of preternatural light and preternatural color, of ideal gems and visionary gold." (2004: 114)

are not the most enduring of pigments, though very fast as soluble colours." (Morris, *On Art and Design* 105) For a communist interpretation of the red in Morris's literary imagination see Florence S. Boos (1999: 21-45).

¹⁰ See Carole Silver: "Even the colors are preternaturally intense. They are brilliant hues of stained-glass windows or of Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Morris's use of colors as private symbols begins to manifest itself in the early tales, and red is established, quite traditionally as the color of passion and violence. Green is the color of hope and happiness found in the green garment's of Morris's heroines, the green air of the Hollow Land, and the green rainment and armor donned by Florian and Red Harald in 'The Hollow Land' [...] Morris's palette is also well laden with white, which maintains its associations with purity; purple, for empire and penance; blue for the heavenly and divine; and gold associated with life's brilliance and value" (1982: 6).

Both shores had a line of very pretty houses, low and not large, standing back a little way from the river; they were mostly built of red brick and roofed with tiles, and looked, above all, comfortable, and as if they were, so to say, alive, and sympathetic with the life of the dwellers in them. (*NFN* 8)

It was very handsomely built of red brick with a lead roof; and high up above the windows there ran a frieze of figure subjects in baked clay, very well executed, and designed with a force and directness which I had never noticed in modern work before. (12)

They were all pretty in design, and as solid as might be, but countrified in appearance, like yeomen's dwellings; some of them of red brick like those by the river, but more of timber and plaster, which were by the necessity of their construction so like medieval houses of the same materials that I fairly felt as if I were alive in the fourteenth century. (20)

But however, what with the beasts and the men, and the scattered red-tiled roofs and the big hayricks, it does not make a bad holiday to get a quiet pony and ride about there on a sunny afternoon of autumn, and look over the river and the craft passing up and down, and on to Shooters' Hill and the Kentish uplands, and then turn round to the wide green sea of the Essex marshland, with the great domed line of the sky, and the sun shining down in one flood of peaceful light over the long distance. (59)

[...] a little town of quaint and pretty houses, some new, some old, dominated by the long walls and sharp gables of a great red-brick pile of building [...] so blended together by the bright sun and beautiful surroundings, including the bright blue river, which it looked down upon, that even amidst the beautiful buildings of that new happy time it had a strange charm about it. (124-125)

Highly characteristic of these descriptive passages are the implied primary colours (i.e. yellow: "sun shining", "bright sun"; blue: "the great domed line of the sky", "bright blue river"; red: "red-tiled roofs", "mostly built of red brick", "handsomely built of red brick", "the scattered red-tiled roofs") which highlight the distinctive technical features of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, as well as the full potential of red as emblem of the alchemist fusion between male and female typologies ("her lips as red as the roses," 57 confronts with "his healthy apple-red cheek," 183). In this sense, the red visual encoding possesses its own peculiar consistency and unity and may be read as a mythologic rewriting of Hephaestus and Aphrodite's marriage, a semantic combination of handicraft, smiths, fire working, and beauty, qualifying not only Morris's set of values, but also D'Annunzio's sensorial experiments in furnishing his real and unreal

houses, together with the physiognomic characterizations pertaining to *The Child of Pleasure*.¹¹ (*CP* hereafter)

2. Despite a different national and epistemic background, William Morris's *NFN* (1890) and Gabriele D'Annunzio's *CP* (1889) reveal a common semantic denominator exemplified by an aesthetic cult of Pre-Raphaelite taste. If Morris's aim was "to increase the happiness of men [...] by giving them hope and bodily pleasure," (Morris 2002: 62) D'Annunzio's motto was "Let's protect beauty! [...] Let's protect the dream within us." (1943: 45, my translation) What kind of pleasure connects these two monumental works? To what extent is it possible to maintain a literary creation based on the poetry of things? In terms of edonistic narrative principles, the distinction between *News from Nowhere* and *The Child of Pleasure* is partly analogous, especially for their cult of the beautiful, exemplified by a hypostatization of elegant, precious, dreamy objects ("big-bowled pipe [...], carved out of some hard wood very elaborately and mounted in gold sprinkled with little gems.[...]; something like the best kind of Japanese work, but better," *NFN* 32 = "antiquities of the rarest kind — ivories, enamels, crystals, engraved gems, medals, coins, [...] illuminated manuscript [...]", *CP* 29; "the chair was deep and roomy, and covered with antique leather on which pale dragon ramped in relief," *CP* 196 = "a roomy oak chair, well be-cushioned," *NFN* 45). Once again, to fully understand the basic givens, that is to say the *donnés* of Morris and D'Annunzio's lives, the goals by which they are guided, the pivot around which their novels content is organized, we must take into consideration Zarathustra's apologues: "How rich is the earth in little good

¹¹ If we carefully examine the metaphoric use of red in *The Child of Pleasure*, we will be impressed by the enormous role played by such a device as chromatism: "The harmonious gait of this unknown lady gave Andrea such sincere pleasure that he stopped a moment on the first landing to watch her. Her long train swept rustling over the stairs; behind her came a servant, not immediately in the wake of his mistress on the red carpet, but at the side along the wall with irreproachable gravity;" (*CP* 4) "[The Duchess of Scerni] was tall and thin with extraordinary green eyes sunk in their shadowy sockets. Her dress was black, the bodice open in a point back and front, and in her hair, which was *blond cendré*, she wore a great diamond crescent like Diana. She waved a huge fan of red feathers hastily to and fro as she spoke;" (16) "[Donna Francesca] entered with the lap of her dress and both arms full of great clusters of dewy roses, white, yellow, crimson, russet brown. [...] The infinite gradations of red, from violet crimson to the faded pink of over-ripe strawberries, mingled with the most delicate and almost imperceptible variations of white, from the immaculate purity of freshy fallen snow to the indefinable shades of new milk, the sap of reed, dull silver, alabaster and opal;" (109) "Giulia Arici took Andrea's fancy very much on account of her golden-brown tints and her great velvety eyes of that softly deep chestnut that sometimes shows tawny gleams. The somewhat fleshy nose, and the full, dewy scarlet, very firm lips gave the lower part of her face a frankly animal look;" (186-187) "Through the semi-darkness, [Andrea] became aware of something red – the red crimson of the wall paper and the curtains of the bed [...]" (48) For a detailed analysis of D'Annunzio's chromatism see Gianni Oliva (1992: 32-42).

perfect things, in what has turned out well! Place little good perfect things around you, O higher men! Their golden ripeness heals the heart. What is perfect teaches hope.” (Nietzsche 1995: 293) Thus, the shared phantasmagoria “of magic lantern,” (*CP* 45) “the strange sensation” (*NFN* 36) they experience, generates a distinctive sequence of tapestries and wallpapers, including a configuration of mythological themes. The idea of representing the whole world of mythology on the walls of their fictional buildings is retained:

[...] we entered a hall much bigger than that of the Hammersmith Guest House, more elaborate in its architecture and perhaps more beautiful. I found it difficult to keep my eyes off the wall-pictures [...]. I saw at a glance that their subjects were taken from queer old-world myths and imaginations which in yesterday’s world only about half a dozen people in the country knew anything about; and when the two Hammonds sat down opposite to us, I said to the old man, pointing to the frieze: “Well I scarcely expected to find record of the Seven Swans and the King of the Golden Mountain and Faithful Henry, and such curious pleasant imaginations as Jacob Grimm got together from the childhood of the world, barely lingering even in his time: I should have thought you would have forgotten such childishness by this time.” (*NFN* 86)

The time of ancient epic and fairy tale is profoundly localized, absolutely inseparable from the concrete decorative features of a characteristically mythological representation. In every aspect of wall painting, Morris and D’Annunzio see a mythological event that unfolds into a mythological scene, aimed at providing in images a vehicle for those manifestations of ideological similarities.

Along the walls were ranged various pieces of carved furniture, several large diptychs and triptychs of the Tuscan school of the fourteenth century; four pieces of Flemish tapestry representing the Story of Narcissus hung from ceiling to floors. (*CP* 29)

On each of the pieces of tapestry was a large symbolical figure – Silence and Slumber –two Genii, tall and slender, which might have been designed by Primaticcio of Bologna, guarding the door. (47)

[Andrea] rarely dined at home, but for special occasions – some *recherché* lunch or private little supper—he had a dining-room decorated with eighteenth century Neapolitan tapestries which Carlo Sperelli had ordered of Pietro Dinanti in 1766 from designs by Storace. The seven wall panels represented episodes of Bacchic love, the portières and the draperies above the doors and windows having groups of fruit and flowers. (177-178)

But as Morris's and D'Annunzio's stories reach their climax, "The art of making beautifully all kinds of ordinary things has gone" (Morris, *On Art* 192): "old tapestry, now faded into pleasant grey tones [...] the grey faded tapestry with its futile design" (*NFN* 175) = "The walls were deep red, with here and there a sparkle of gold, giving the impression of a temple or a tomb, a sad and mysterious sanctuary fit for praying in, or for dying." (*CP* 309) This dysphoric descent into the nether regions of life, does nothing but evoke the effects of the imaginative process described by Foucault in terms of ephemeral idealized compensation: "Magic, which permitted the decipherment of the world by revealing the secret resemblances beneath its signs, is no longer of any use [...], analogies [with a past world] are always proved false." (1994: 48)

3. What is most remarkable in *The Earthly Paradise*¹² (1868) and in *Il Poema Paradisiaco*¹³ (1893, *PP* hereafter) is that lies at their heart a relationship of dialogic sort between the Morrisian "Romantic Medusa" and D'Annunzio's *femme fatale*,¹⁴ extratemporal female typologies portrayed as *Sybilla Palmifera*¹⁵ and *Lady Lilith*, whose iconographic connotations reveal a dualistic imagery of love and death. The basic forms of this sexually dangerous characterization can be traced back to Nietzsche: "A real man wants two things: danger and play. [...] The warrior does not like all-too-sweet fruit; therefore he likes woman: even the sweetest woman is bitter [...] for deep down in his soul man is merely evil, while woman is bad." (1995: 66) On both the plane of metaphor and that of mystical, in the individual female sequence, the

¹² Cf. Marucci's *Storia della letteratura inglese*, the chapter "Gli arazzi mitologici," where explanations of Morrisian mythological elements are introduced (2006, forthcoming).

¹³ The 54 poems included in "Il Poema Paradisiaco" reveal a mythological pattern which acquires increasing importance in the figures of Atalanta, Psyche, Helen and Danaë. The first section, entitled *Hortus Conclusus*, contrasts with *Hortus larvarum* (poems devoted to unhappy love stories and bygone lovers) and *Hortus animae* (pivoting on the idea of return to innocence), because its thematic structure actualizes, through a selection of images, the sensual ravishment caused by *belles dames sans merci*.

¹⁴ This connection is also included in *The Child of Pleasure*: "These frivolous and malicious things were uttered by the same voice which, but a few moments, ago had stirred his soul to its very depths; they came from the same lips which, in silence, had seemed to him like them of the Medusa of Leonardo, that human flower of the soul rendered divine by the fire of passion and the anguish of death;" (*CP* 8) "A band of clouds spans the heavens from side to side, ragged, contorted, blacker than the sky, like the tragic locks of a Medusa" (151).

¹⁵ D'Annunzio's obsession for Rossetti's paintings is provided in the character of Clara Green: "She was still young. With her pure and regular profile, her pale gold hair parted and knotted very low on her neck, she looked like a beauty in a Keepsake. A certain affectation of aestheticism clung to her since her liaison with the poet-painter Adolphus Jeckyll, a disciple in poetry of Keats, in painting of Holman Hunt; a composer of obscure sonnets, a painter of subjects from the *Vita Nuova*. She had sat to him for a *Sybilla Palmifera* and a *Madonna with the Lily*." (*CP* 183) Conversely, for the influence of Italian literature on the Rossetti family see Marroni (2002: 113-131).

motif of Medusean hair¹⁶ comes to bear the sole meaning of the perilous principle. In this sense, the Gorgon's head, also described in D. G. Rossetti's poem "Aspecta Medusa", constitutes in itself a closed, aesthetic whole. The mythological symbol is able to unite the defining characteristics of the dangerous and sublime exteriorities we find in the Pre-Raphaelite iconography of women. The full existence, the essence of a woman¹⁷ is realized not by her condition, but by her active force, which manifests itself in "flying," "strangling golden hair,"¹⁸ seen as the unfolding of her evil character. Thus the image of Medusa "so beautiful and dread" (*EP*) selected for comparison from "The Doom of King Acrisus"¹⁹ is worth just as much as "the life in death" connected to D'Annunzio's dominant female lovers in "Woods", "The Yoke" and "Pamphila". The metonymic development from "blond woods" (*PP*) to "golden tresses [...] moved by writhing snakes" (*EP*) does nothing but evoke the Gorgonic mystery which acquires thematic significance with the Nietzschean statement "everything about woman is a riddle," (1995: 66) echoed in D'Annunzio's exclamation "woman is a hortus conclusus." (*PP*) A constant struggle is waged between mortal knighthood and immortal beauty in a well-defined place, that is a pleasure garden figuring in "The Hill of Venus"

¹⁶ Compare Woodhouse when he stresses Medusa's hair in the poem "Naples and Beyond" by D'Annunzio: "'Our soul aspires to nothing more than to a constant restful sadness I know your portentous troubles and the grief which is in you perhaps attracts me more than your sweet mouth and your hair, that mass of Medusa hair, dark as dark fallen leaves, but vital and wild like the writhing snakes of the Gorgon; I fear them rebellious and full of terrible mystery.' The poem continues with particulars of Maria's physical appearance, the red lock of hair which so distinguished her dark hair, for instance, increasing, like a fetish, his infatuation for the woman" (2001: 95).

¹⁷ For a clear analysis of female characters in Morris's novels see Amanda Hodgson (2000: 8-30).

¹⁸ "Soul's Beauty" and "Body's Beauty" by D. G. Rossetti well exemplify such a symbol of eroticism: "Under the arch of Life, where love and death, / Terror and mystery, guard her shrine, I saw / Beauty enthroned; and though her gaze struck awe, / I drew it in as simply as my breath. // [...] This is that Lady Beauty, in whose praise / Thy voice and hand shake still, – long known to thee / By flying hair and fluttering hem, – the beat / Following her daily and irretrievably, / In what fond flight, how many ways and days!" (Rossetti 1999: 314); "The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where / Is he not found. O Lilith, whom shed scent / And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare? / Lo! As that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went / Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent / And round his heart one strangling golden hair." (314) For a detailed analysis of the importance of rippling hair in the Pre-Raphaelites' imagination, see Elizabeth Prettejohn: "A recurring image in the work of Rossetti circle was that of a woman absorbed in self-contemplation, gazing into a mirror or combing her hair. Such activities emphasized the talismanic parts of the female body that were repeated in picture after picture: eyes, lips, hands, rippling hair" (26); "Languor is a principal characteristic of Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*, where the figure gazes into a mirror she seems almost too tired to hold, while her dress slips to reveal the talismanic Rossetti neck, a pale shoulder, and the swelling of an ample bosom. Again the cue seems to have been a literary source linking a woman's sexual power with her hair" (30).

¹⁹ See Florence Boos (1990: 76-82).

and in “Hortus Conclusus.”²⁰ This narrow and reduced idyllic little world made of uncontaminated enclosed gardens whose odorous juicy fruits attract the Overman (Perseus, Walter, D’Annunzio’s lyrical “I”) “amid the dusk [...] striv[ing] in vain” (*EP*), is the read thread running throughout both poems as well as their resolving chord.

The main classical line of literary creation — i.e. “The artistic genius wants to give pleasure” (Nietzsche 2002: 83) — gives expression to an ideological unification which develops in a vital connection between Morris and D’Annunzio; and more than this, it entails a process of cultural exchange and intellectual enlightenment which is an essential feature of the new human image, a man who is harmonious and whole. The “Italian Ariel”’s *imitatio/aemulatio* tendency reinforces Morris’s artistic status of master of pleasure because only “the higher man becomes [master],” (Nietzsche 1995: 286) and even though D’Annunzio idealized his unique aesthetic truth able to “[shear] poetic glory, [...] perhaps the man who will un-nest both is already born.” (Alighieri 2003: 376)

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²⁰ A distinctive feature of the poem “Hortus Conclusus” is the Decadent setting acquiring a symbolist dimension in expressions such as: “high labyrinths”, “triple mystery”, “unheard songs.” At the base of the eight stanzas lies a metaphor – the female lover is a complete mystery to the poet, she is a *hortus conclusus*. Such a proud and introverted woman corresponds to Maria Gravina, D’Annunzio’s lover, who is even compared to a huge solitary statue, able to remind the petrified human beings in Medusa’s garden.

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