

**Eros and Thanatos: the Murderous Struggle of Pain and Desire in Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Triumph of Death* and in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist***

What can Gabriele D'Annunzio, Italy's most controversial poet, novelist and playwright, possibly have in common with a contemporary Danish film-maker such as Lars von Trier? The answer could be that they both developed a lifelong delight in breaking conventions and rules. D'Annunzio's novels and poems riddled with sensuality, and his unruly lifestyle and political ideas earned him much scorn and despise by the public and by the Catholic Church. Von Trier's films are marked by unusual manipulations of sound and image, by hand-held cameras and improvised dialogue, and by real sex and art stills inserted into the narrative which have proved to be disturbing for some of the viewers. A lot of the analogies between these two artists, however, spring from their search for spiritual or heroic transcendence, and from the way in which they underline the fact that evil is inherent to human nature as a pre-existing condition. Both D'Annunzio's and von Trier utilize their own pain and repeatedly discover that it is impossible to address evil without perpetuating it. Thus, in their works, human nature is revealed as dark, broody and often utterly perverted, especially when dealing with the question of relationship between the two sexes. As an example, I will be using *Trionfo della morte/Triumph of Death*, one of D'Annunzio's best known

novels which is part of the *Trilogia della rosa/Trilogy of the Rose*, and *Antichrist*, von Trier latest and much criticized movie.

In *The Virgin Mary's Cult and Re-emergence of the Goddess*, Geoffrey Ashe discusses at length the question of the *Eternal-Womanly*, or, to put it in Goethe's words, the *Ewig-Weibliche*; that is the question of how in the world, before the rise of any verified gods, human beings worshipped goddesses. As he points out that the early Stone Age gave us no proven images of male deity, while it gave us figurines with gross breasts and bellies as exaggerated tokens of motherhood. In passing from pre-history to the oldest recoverable rituals and myths, the *Eternal-Womanly* is one at her apogee, although we find her under many names and aspects: sometimes she is represented as a maiden, sometimes as a mistress, and, at times, as a world-matriarch of immeasurable age. This imagery flowered without dispute into a goddess-centred religion<sup>i</sup>. Thus, when the myth and folktale of Eve in the Old Testament and of Mary the Virgin in the New, are discussed, it becomes apparent that these stories were not there put on record for the first time. Christian thinkers imposed their own theological structure upon these subjects. The subjects reflect the contrast between the age of sorrow and distress (the age of Eve) and the age of the holy life-giving Mother (the age of Mary). Eve, once called "the mother of all living" after the fashion of the great mother-goddesses, eventually became the "woman of death" as compared with Mary, "woman of life"<sup>ii</sup>.

The onus placed upon the Eve figure forms a narrative thread which gathers weight throughout Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Triumph of Death* and Lars von Trier's

*Antichrist*, presenting, nevertheless, some complex and twisted angles in the adaptation of the story. D'Annunzio re-works the traditional Adam and Eve relationship according to his own intellectual system; he uses it as a scaffolding upon which to build an emotional plot for the novel. Ippolita, the heroine in *Triumph of Death*, is an independent, defiant and earth-bound woman who takes no part in any life-process, she is in fact sterile. Ippolita is more than just D'Annunzio's fictional creation: in her we find echoes of Francesca da Rimini in Canto V of Dante's *Inferno*, she bares the face of Lucrezia Borgia, she would dance like Salome' and could be seen flying at the side of the devil with Bulgakov's Margarita. Ippolita drives Giorgio, the male protagonist, to psychological dysfunction by usurping his masculine authority which makes him "inept" for his traditional patriarchal role in society. That is the reason why D'Annunzio has often been accused of misogyny. Greek literature considered misogyny to be a disease, an anti-social condition, in that it ran contrary to the perception of the value of women as wives, and of the family as the foundation of society. Some feminist theory suggests that misogynists think in terms of mother/whore dichotomy, where they hold that women can only be "mothers" or "whores." In all three novels that form D'Annunzio's *Trilogy of the Rose*, there is a clear distinction between the mother as the giver of life and the *consolatrix unica*, and the lover/whore who is the source of disruption and the inflictor of pain. Ippolita represents also the incarnation of the sexual desires of her lover who yields to her disarming allure and destructing power.

At the last Cannes festival, Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* was handed an ad-hoc prize for "most misogynist movie" by the Jury. In this film, a couple known as She and He journey to their remote cabin in a forest in search of Eden. The couple is

attempting to get over the loss of their toddler son who fell out of a window to his death while they were having sex. One may add that She, in this movie, resembles in some ways von Trier's *Medea* and the story of the brutal hanging of her children, highlighting, at this point, a key autobiographical theme, namely that children are being sacrificed for the selfish desires of adults. According to Freudian psychology, the mother/whore complex often develops when the sufferer is raised by a cold and distant mother, something that, incidentally, happens to be the case for this film director. "My mother didn't give me a childhood. She was magical to me of course, but she did not take care of me. If I were to say, will I die tonight, she would say "Perhaps."<sup>111</sup> That is what Lars von Trier stated in one of his interviews. In *Antichrist*, the mother/whore dichotomy is marked by a bloody denouement involving both male and female castrations and physical torture, as in the forest/ Eden, the wife/Eve descends into nymphomania, insanity, gruesome violence, and self-mutilation. Nevertheless, to say that *Antichrist* is merely a screed against womankind is as simplistic a conclusion as the criticism received by the *Triumph of Death*. Von Trier creates an atmosphere of brooding malaise through a visualization of the dark heart of human nature. In the woods things get very strange very fast; the couple fall asleep to an ominous rain of acorns on the roof and constantly find themselves confronted with animals eating their own young. Like Giorgio in *Triumph of Death*, He, in the *Antichrist*, tries to master the mystery of female's psyche; moreover, he endeavors to pit reason against the irrational with cognitive therapy. Von Trier made the film after his own experience of a nervous breakdown that debilitated him for about six months. In addition, this film contains a clear indication of his disdain for cognitive therapy as a way to alleviate the *angst* of existence. Von Trier unveils

throughout the movie his profound distrust for therapists who claim that they can establish a connection between thoughts and psychological pain, and for those who believe that they can appraise the accuracy of those thoughts creating anxiety, In *Antichrist*, He convinces She to become his patient, but her resentment towards his therapeutic exercises materializes in their natural surroundings. Therefore, Eve's Garden of Eden turns to darkness, bringing to mind some of the circles of Dante's *Inferno*.

In *Triumph of Death*, D'Annunzio combines in Ippolita an image of the serpent of Genesis by conceiving her as “snella e lunga piena di serpentine eleganze /thin and tall and elegant like a snake<sup>iv</sup>”, with that image of Eve, the biblical temptress, which we know so well. There is a conjunction of *Eros* and *Thanatos* forces in this novel as life and death seem to be in continuous dialogue. In D'Annunzio's case, the influence of his background culture should not be underestimated, since much of his works contains evidence of his inherited notions of literary traditions and folklore of his native Abruzzo, a region where the death rituals and ancient beliefs are alive to this day. One of the most influential elements on his obsession with the love/death dichotomy would have been the development of a “popular” *genre* known in Abruzzo with the name of *Verbumcaro*. The Abruzzese *Verbumcaro* was a form of *tenzone*: a fictional debate that took place between the living and the dead. This tradition, according to the folklorist Giovanni Pansa, was in existence in several places in the region and was performed on its streets until recent times. Here is how the author accounts for it:

Due cantastorie, per lo più ciechi, siedono a conveniente distanza sul limitare di due case; uno rappresenta il morto, l'altro il vivo; ovvero, l'uno l'anima e l'altro il corpo. L'anima rimprovera al corpo i suoi trascorsi peccaminosi, gli rinfaccia i piaceri della carne, le delizie della vita nascosta<sup>v</sup>./Two story tellers, often blind, sit facing each other between two houses; one represents the dead, the other represent the living; that is to say that one man symbolizes the body, the other

symbolizes the soul. The soul reproaches the body for his past sins, for the pleasure of the flesh, for his lust for carnal life.

Since Ippolita, in Giorgio's eyes, desires to attain full knowledge of sexual life and of all the feminine power that she can gain from it at his expense, the *Verbumcaro* is reflected in Giorgio's spiritual struggle against Ippolita's sensuous predominance. Giorgio's discomfort stems from knowing that his love offers him no possibility of escaping moral decadence:

La preoccupazione di piacermi, di soddisfarmi, di piegarsi volentieri ad ogni mio capriccio è in lei palese. In questi due anni d'amore, ella è giunta a poco a poco a limitare la mia attività materiale nelle cose dei sensi; è giunta ad acquistare quasi il privilegio delle carezze. Ella par felice quando può da sola in me inerte provocare una voluttà intensa<sup>vi</sup>./It was obvious how she wanted to please me, to satisfy me, to give in to my every little whim. In these past two years of loving, she has managed to limit my material abilities to the purely sensual ones; she has managed to gain the exclusiveness of all my caresses. She seems happy only when she can give me intense ecstasy.

Giorgio recognizes the supremacy of his lover and his physical and emotional experience of her is transformed into a piercing pain which is redolent of a falling victim for the allure of a predator. Indeed, Ippolita like other Dannunzian fictional women, appear to be, to use Charles Klopp's words, "the product of D'Annunzio's sexual fantasies rather than the depictions of autonomous feminine personalities."<sup>viii</sup> Like Eve who seizes the fruit that will endow her with potency, Ippolita seeks to get the better out of her lover by grasping emotional control from his hands. With that corrupting, but overwhelming passion, the woman debilitates her lover, making him dependent and turning him into an object. This type of sexual experience contributes to the man's sense of self-torment which grows to disproportion throughout the novel. The psychological pain is exacerbated by the male protagonist's awareness of the impossibility of fully

possessing the “other” in the relationship, which is something that lovers regret, and by the realization that there cannot be real communication between the two sexes. Giorgio grows increasingly aware of the illusory side of human relationships; for this reason, he begins to respond to the demands of his inner self which seeks eternal tranquillity of the spirit:

Oltrepassarono il luogo tragico, in silenzio. In ambedue persisteva il pensiero di quella morte, dolorosamente; e la loro tristezza era visibile. Egli disse: “Beati i morti perchè non dubitano più.”<sup>viii</sup>/They silently walked past the tragic place. Both of them were painfully thinking of death; their sadness was visible. He said: “Lucky is the dead as he doubts no more.

This psychological and spiritual isolation propelled by self-torment and self-inflicted pain leads Giorgio to resolve the idea of annihilation as the only possible solution. Giorgio renounces his ties with other entities beyond the limits of his own ego and plunges off a cliff towering above the Adriatic, dragging with him his imploring lover. After a brief season of passion and hope, Giorgio and Ippolita are fated to disappear and re-emerge in more legendary light, transfixed into the eternity of memory which has defeated reason. In *Antichrist*, it is indeed reason which is annihilated while a criminal folly takes place and an unchecked nature of human bestiality comes alive. Analogies have been made between this Danish film and the much discussed and controversial Pasolini's *Salo`*, mainly due to the fact that both films are multilayered, sadomasochistic, cruel beyond description and impenetrable in their nature. Unlike D'Annunzio's *Triumph of Death*, the gender confrontation between man and woman that takes place is not intended as a confrontation between two separate entities. Von Trier sees the nature of man as dualistic. The female force of nature is within the man himself and can stir up some devastating forces resembling the one of a mythological and blood-thirsty harpy. The “She” that “He” confronts lives within him, and in order to return to his

oneness he must kill his ego. The women we see walking past the male protagonist in the last scene are not outside of him but within him, and help to create an un-misogynistic ending for the film since they are made to be the symbol of redemption through the sacrifice of the female protagonist. Like D'Annunzio, however, von Trier sees sexuality as a corrupting force which drags mankind into insanity, sadism, and bestiality which inhabits human nature as a result of an ancestral chaos which condemns us at birth; thus castration in the film is used as a means of spiritual purification.

It is obvious that symbols are deeply woven into the fabric of *Antichrist* and *Triumph of Death*, and in both works nature takes on a major role. In the film, nature is taken as a locus of pain and its evil precedes man before history, reason and civilization. The menacing atmosphere of the Eden created by von Trier obliterates the purity which Eden is traditionally attributed. It is, in fact, perceived as a pre-contaminated locus; the forest represents the mystery and the dark abyss of the subconscious. The three names: despair, grief and pain, appearing in the initial scenes of the film are present in the child's room before he falls out of the window. These three emotional conditions are conceived as the three angry beasts which force Dante to turn back as he attempts to climb toward the light on the hill. In *Triumph of Death*, the natural element is associated with the sea and it is contemplated as a tableau of death and the transience of life itself by Giorgio. In the abyss of the sea the hero chooses to drown his own emotional abyss, leaving behind his chaotic urban world. The male figure is depicted as tending towards order, in search of the logic and the rational elements of life. It incarnates the Lacanian paternal law that governs all forms of social exchange. On the opposite end we find the woman figure that symbolizes chaos, nature, the irrational, the primitive, the temptress so hated by Christian thought since the

days of the Church Fathers. She is the mythological Siren who compelled sailors with her enchanting music and voice to shipwreck on the rocky coasts. The waters, in *Triumph of Death*, are to wash away Giorgio's exacerbated anguish caused by his inadequacy and by the ephemeral character of love; that is to say that eternal anguish springing from man's unquenched desires.

In conclusion, here are two artists, born in different times at the two poles of Europe; they could not be further away in their background and upbringing, yet they can be brought together by a universal language: the language of pain. The pain inflicted on us by the *angst* that springs directly from the unanswered questions of existence. Gabriele D'Annunzio and Lars von Trier took literary and cinematic allegory to their logical conclusion and reminded us that they can be, and what is more, they should be, complex, subtle, dialectical, real and open to multiple readings. In all their extremes the stories they chose to tell us have parallels in that of others and in the story of human existence. One may even argue that Arthur Symons' s review of the *Triumph of Death*, written in 1898, can be adequately applied to *Antichrist* in spite of its time:

Here are a man and a woman: I can scarcely remember their Christian names, I am not even sure if we were ever told their surnames; and in this man and woman I see myself, you, everyone who has ever desired the infinity of emotion, the infinity of surrender, the finality of possession.... The lovers of the Triumph of Death might well be ourselves, evoked in some clouded crystal, because they have only so much of humanity as to have the desires, and the dangers, and the possible ecstasies, and possible disasters, which are common to all lovers who have loved without limitation and without wisdom<sup>ix</sup>.

i G. Ashe, *The Virgin Mary's Cult and Re-emergence of the Goddess*, (New York: Arkana, 1976).

ii For this comparison see: M. Brackenbury Crook, *Women and Religion*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p.152.

iii See: Karin, Badt: "Most Hated Director at Cannes: Lars von Trier as Antichrist or Shaman?" in *The Huffintgon Post*, Posted: May 29, 2009.

iv G. D'Annunzio, *Prose di romanzi*, (Milano: Mondadori, 1988), p.808.

v G.Pansa, *Miti, leggende e superstizioni dell'Abruzzo*, (Bologna: Arnaldo Forni Editore, 1978)p. 353.

vi G. D'Annunzio, *Prose di romanzi*, (Milano: Mondadori, 1988), p.807.

vii C. Klopp, *Gabriele D'Annunzio*, (Ohio State University: Twayne, 1988), p.122.

viii G. D'Annunzio, *Prose di romanzi*, (Milano: Mondadori, 1988)p.646.

ix A. Symons: "D'Annunzio in English" in *Saturday Review*, Volume 1, 1898, pp.18-24.