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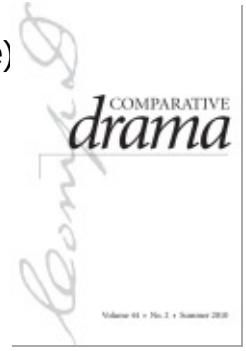

The Spirit of the Chorus in D'Annunzio's *La città morta*

James Nikopoulos

"Eros nella pugna invitto" (O Eros, invincible in strife) begins Gabriele D'Annunzio's tragic drama, *La città morta* (The Dead City, 1898).[1] These are the words that are being read to the blind Anna by Bianca Maria, the beautiful young woman who holds the important position of being the play's primary object of desire. They are the same words that form the play's epigraph, a line from Sophocles' *Antigone*. The result of such literary admixture is convergence. An attempt is made to invoke the spirit of Antigone in the figure of Bianca Maria, to bring together ancient and modern heroine. But the reference also enacts a more complicated convergence, for these are not the words of Antigone but those of Sophocles' chorus. Concerning these opening lines, it has been said that

> The space of modern tragedy is an empty zone where only traces of the ancient clamor of the chorus remain. In this space, the chorus can be expressed only in a quotation … the lone voice of a woman who reads from a book.[2]

This article examines what constitutes these "traces of the ancient clamor of the chorus," focusing its attention on the "clamor" of classical tragedy. For D'Annunzio, whose interest in Attic drama was whetted by his trip in 1895 to see Schliemann's excavations of Mycenae, it was the clamorous aspect of Greek drama that best represented its genius. *La città morta* represents his first attempt to incorporate the ancient spirit, as he saw it, into a modern tragedy.[3] One cannot bring up the clamor of classic tragedy without thinking of the chorus, whose presence first and foremost separates classic and modern drama, at least superficially. To solve the problem of how to incorporate a chorus into a drama of fin-de-siècle Europe, D'Annunzio looked to the *diva* and to what she could accomplish onstage. The result is a chorus of one. She is Anna, the blind older woman

married to Alessandro, the man who is in love with the younger Bianca Maria, who is in turn incestuously desired by her brother Leonardo. She is the figure around which this mangled love story congregates, but she is also D'Annunzio's modern chorus, the conduit through which the characters are presented to a modern audience.

It has been said that the figure in which the most precise psychology of ancient dramaturgy is maintained, the one who represents most evidently the new theatrical vision of D'Annunzio, is that of Anna.[4] Her role was written specifically for the great actresses who dominated European theater in the last decade of the nineteenth century, first brought to the stage by Sarah Bernhardt in the French production and then by Eleonora Duse in the original Italian production. As the blind woman from whom nothing can be hidden, she is both Tiresias and Cassandra. Bianca Maria says of her, "Ella sa tutto, ella comprende tutto. Non è possible nascondere" (60) (She knows everything, she understands everything. It is not possible to conceal; 122). Anna's importance to the whole rests on the duality of her position within the play. As both seer and choral figure, she acts as a type of lynchpin that holds the drama together.

D'Annunzio conceived of Anna's role in his play in light of ideas concerning how the chorus functions in Attic drama. The difficulty of assessing this indebtedness derives from the singularity of each classical chorus and its varying roles to each particular tragedy. *La città morta* may begin with a reference to *Antigone*, but Anna's role as blind prophetess, as part Tiresias and part Cassandra, also brings to mind, among other things, *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Agamemnon*. Thus it is less these specific works than an idea of classical tragedy that inflects *La città morta*. D'Annunzio announces his influences in the first documented reference to the play we have, a letter from 1895. He writes: "At Mycenae I reread Sophocles and Aeschylus, under the Gate of the Lions. The form of my drama is already clear and firm. The title: '*La Città morta*.' "[5] My aim, then, is not to establish a genealogical link between the play and any specific tragedy from classical drama but to examine how D'Annunzio relies on a more generalized idea of the chorus' dramaturgical role to tragedy in forming his play and in particular, the play's main character, Anna.

Nietzsche, therefore, proves relevant. Though most associate Nietzsche's influence on D'Annunzio in light of the idea of the *übermensch*

and its relation to D'Annunzio's male protagonists—in *La città morta* Leonardo will come closest to filling this role—Nietzsche's ideas on Greek dramaturgy in *The Birth of Tragedy* also proved highly influential on the Italian writer. Anna's role must be assessed in light of Nietzsche's reading of Greek tragedy as the merging of the Apollinian and the Dionysian strains in the Greek spirit. In making the argument that Anna takes on the choral role, I am therefore implying that she invokes the Dionysian element, since the chorus, with its musical dithyrambs rooted in the mysterious origins of Greek tragedy as religious expression, represents what Nietzsche saw as the Dionysian spirit of intoxication.

But things are not so simple in *La città morta*. As anyone who has read the play knows, Anna does not come across as a frenzied representation of the primordial Greek spirit. If anything, Leonardo, the poet tormented by his incestuous passion, seems to be reincarnating that role. Therefore, to understand fully how D'Annunzio's interests in Attic tragedy manifest themselves in *La città morta*, we need to consider Anna—the play's most important character—in light of her dramaturgical role as a choral figure while maintaining a critical eye on what the Dionysian element of this role entails. And we must proceed in consideration of the actresses' part in bringing all of this to light. It is the performance, after all, that takes the final step in the spectacle of drama. Just how much the play's productions complemented D'Annunzio's vision of a rebirth of tragedy also needs to be assessed, most importantly, in light of the various interpretations of the play's central character by the actresses who contributed to the role's creation.

First, we will begin with Anna's role as written. It can be likened to that of the coryphaeus, who as the leader of the chorus in ancient drama, "converses with the actors, offering advice, warning, encouragement, instruction, and sympathy, according to the relationship of the group to the individual character."[6] This role shifts as the play progresses. Anna begins the play as the voice of reason. Her ability to sense what lies outside the other characters' sensibilities prompts the young heroine Bianca Maria to seek answers from Anna:

> *Anna*: … Io volevo parlarvi di questo, Bianca Maria.
> *Bianca Maria*: Credete che mio fratello sia veramente malato?
> *Anna*: Egli è forse stanco. Le sue forze sono esauste.… Forse, non dorme. Sapete s'egli dorma? (10)

> (*Anna*: … I wanted to speak to you about this, Bianca Maria.
> *Bianca Maria*: Do you believe that my brother is really ill?
> *Anna*: Perhaps he is only tired. His strength is exhausted.… Perhaps he does not Sleep. Does he?) (24–25)

In this exchange the play unlooses the earliest hints of some form of underlying malady. As Anna's initial function is to initiate the illustration of these hints, her role can be seen as akin to that of the chorus in *Agamemnon*, whose first speech of that play declares that "[y]ou cannot burn flesh or pour unguents, / not innocent cool tears, / that will soften the gods' stiff anger."[7] (The first explicit reference to Aeschylus arrives in the very next scene when Anna compares her blindness to that of a statue, a comparison borrowed from the Aeschylean chorus' lines concerning the longing of Menelaus.) She tells Bianca Maria that she wanted to speak with her about this very subject. Bianca Maria will be the first to vocalize the possibility that there is something wrong with Leonardo, for here Anna's function is not to be the one to tell the audience what is happening; her choral role is merely that of the instigator. She incites and prods. Her response to Bianca Maria's suggestion is the rational one. Perhaps he is tired; perhaps he is not sleeping. The true gravity of Leonardo's affliction must not be let out so early, and for this Anna rationalizes Leonardo's veiled affliction by proposing a quotidian rationale.

The scene continues, and Anna's role in it shifts. "Sembra che sia in lui un segreto" (11), she says (He seems to have a secret himself; 26). Bianca Maria asks her to clarify, but of course, Anna responds that she does not know. This will then prompt her to redirect the object of inquiry toward Bianca Maria. "Forse egli sente che qualche cosa di mutato è in voi, Bianca Maria" (11) (Perhaps he feels that there is a change in you, Bianca Maria; 27). Primarily, this scene works to lay out the background of the drama for the audience, but it is a specific form of exposition that relies on a specific character to lead it. By constantly moving the conversation in a certain direction, Anna functions like an almost Socratic insertion of the author's manipulation of the narrative. She guides Bianca Maria to reveal just as much as Anna would like her to reveal, pulls her back when she finds it necessary, and redirects the conversation when it needs to be taken in a different direction. Up to this point the third element of the love triangle, Alessandro, has been excluded, so Anna conducts the conversation toward

the subject of her husband. She asks Bianca Maria if she has seen him, which initiates another exchange concerning an underlying problem of yet another character, rounding out the exposition as she places the final puzzle piece on the board for the audience to ponder. By now the three basic elements of the tragedy, the love triangle, have been introduced, all under the sway of Anna's guidance.

As the weight of Bianca Maria's grief grows, Anna's role changes. When she begins to tremble Anna consoles her: "Non tremare! Io sono come una tua sorella morta, che ritorni" (23) (Do not tremble! I am like a dead sister of yours returned from the grave; 47). This is a sentiment Anna will repeat almost verbatim in response to Bianca Maria's continued trembling, as she hides her face in the blind woman's lap:

> Non tremare! Io sono come una tua sorella morta, che ti riguarda di là dalla vita. Forse io sono per te come un'ombra.… Tu vedi quel che io non vedo. Io vedo quel che tu non vedi. (23)
>
> (Do not tremble. I am like a dead sister of yours, who watches over you from beyond. Maybe, I am for you like a shadow.… You see what I do not see. I see what you do not see.) (48)

Anna offers sympathy and comfort, while at the same time revealing another dynamic of the play, the sisterly bond between the two women, one that is paralleled by the brotherly bond of Alessandro and Leonardo. Coming so early on in the play, so near the epigraph, such a scene brings to mind the opening scene of *Antigone*, except here a sisterly relationship that places them in juxtaposition to the world around does not dissolve into antagonism.

Anna sees what Bianca Maria does not see, and Bianca Maria sees what Anna cannot. They complement each other in a way that is essential to the structure of the drama, because through the relationship Anna is further emotionally invested in the characters that form the love triangle at the root of the narrative. She is attached to Alessandro through marriage, and presumably love, and to Bianca Maria through a sisterly bond. Despite this sisterly attachment, Anna's role as consoler allows her to remain detached from Bianca Maria. Theirs is the older sister/younger sister relationship which in many ways resembles a surrogate mother/daughter connection. Anna listens to Bianca Maria, but in offering her advice, she assumes a position of authority.

Dramaturgically, the trajectory of D'Annunzio's tragedy relies on Anna's position of authority, in much the same way as the chorus of elderly citizens in *Oedipus Tyrannus* loves and trusts its king but does not exist simply to reaffirm the title character's actions and sentiments. The chorus' inability to understand the reasons for Oedipus's action and their belief that death would have been preferable to blindness is what leads Oedipus to explain his motives for his actions.[8] Without Anna, Bianca Maria's affliction would not have found the proper venue for its vocalization; her character requires Anna in order to allow her to disclose her fears to the audience in a dramatic format.

By the third scene of act 3, Bianca Maria's fears have begun to reach their apex. She once again seeks out Anna as a sisterly figure of both sympathy and advice, but now this need to seek advice has transformed into a form of desperation. Bianca Maria is now ironically willing to blindly follow the blind, as a follower submits to his prophet. "Io metto la mia anima nelle vostre mani, metto le mia vita nelle vostre mani che sono sante.… Ditemi quel che debbo fare!" (100) (I place my whole soul in your hands. I place my life in your hands, that are saintly.… Tell me what I must do! 201). Anna's first act is to calm Bianca Maria down, to perform the now familiar role of consoler: "Non aver paura.… Io sono qui; io voglio salvarti" (100) (Do not be afraid.… I am here, and I will save you"; 201). The switch to the informal, *salvarti*, emphasizes the intimacy of this bond and the importance of this aspect of Anna's role in the play. Her position, however, is quite different from that of a Greek chorus, in whose hands no protagonist places his or her life. Anna occupies a dual position in *La città morta*, simultaneously an insider in the group of characters who enact the drama while also situated outside as an individual distinct from that group.

This duality comes out even more pronouncedly when Anna listens to the long speech Bianca Maria makes in which she describes her suffering and her need to escape the cursed setting of their drama. Anna's response to this is especially interesting when a closer examination is paid to the redirection Anna makes toward her own suffering:

> Non vi tormentate dunque, Bianca Maria, non vi dolete delle cose che sono già compiute, che sono già del tempo. Io ho già messo i miei giorni e i miei sogni fuori dell'anima mia: —i giorni che sono passati, i sogni che si sono spenti. (101)

> (Therefore, do not torment yourself, Bianca Maria, do not complain of things that are already accomplished, that already belong to the past. I have placed my days and my dreams outside my own soul … the days that have passed, the dreams that have vanished!) (202–3)

"Do not torment yourself," she advises, only to switch the emphasis of the scene toward herself: "*I* have placed *my* days and *my* dreams outside *my own* soul." Anna has here inserted her own suffering into the conversation, and by doing so interwoven her own character even further into the fabric of the drama. This is where D'Annunzio modernizes his use of the classical choral element, for in Attic tragedy the chorus remained separate from the other actors. In Anna, this is not the case. She constantly emphasizes her own close relationship with the other characters of the play, especially through the sisterly relationship she reiterates time and again with Bianca Maria. Add to this the simple fact that Anna is married to one-third of the love triangle that lies at the core of the tragedy.

Nietzsche's words from *The Birth of Tragedy* come to mind: "Accustomed as we are to a modern stage chorus … we could not comprehend why the tragic chorus of the Greeks should be older, more original and important than the 'action' proper."[9] D'Annunzio has responded to this remark by inserting his own choral element into the action proper of the drama, effectively infusing all the choral roles Anna plays, from that of consoler and sympathizer, to adviser, to manipulator of the narrative thread, into the events of the drama. Such a dramaturgical move can be seen as a final step in the direction of what Aristotle advocated in his *Poetics*. In it he claimed that "[t]he Chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action."[10] D'Annunzio has taken this advice and brought it to ultimate fruition. This new chorus is not just a group of elderly citizens invested in the events of its city. It is now more intimately involved with and an even greater influence on the destinies of the other characters.

Yet despite her interconnectedness to Bianca Maria and to Alessandro, Anna lives a step removed from the principal characters of *La città morta*. While she is married to one member of the love triangle, technically she is not a part of that which represents the primary story of the drama. Anna's blindness only furthers this delineation, both because it constructs an empty visual space between her and the others and because her own

clairvoyant ability to "see" that which others cannot ascribes to her an element of perception lacking in the rest. As the older woman and the blind seer, Anna represents a mixture of classical figures. When she recounts a dream to Bianca Maria in the very beginning of the play her roles as both a seer and as a woman whose time as a young lover has passed are emphasized: "Una vechiezza improvvisa mi occupava tutte le membra" (7) (A sudden old age seized all my limbs; 18). In recounting this dream Anna dramatizes her premonitions of impending doom, which immediately signals her out as an oracular presence. She then not only harks back to the elders of the city who make up the chorus of both *Antigone* and *Oedipus Tyrannus* as well as that of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, but to the seers of those works as well. She then becomes a conglomeration of Tiresias and Cassandra, both old and young. She is all of these together.[11]

Her role in the play is dual; she is both the blind seer and the chorus. In Greek tragedy, of course, these roles do not merge within a single figure as they do in *La città morta*. Nietzsche jumps into the fray, because he associates Cassandra with the Dionysian spirit—in contrast with Antigone, who represents the Apollinian—and thus he links the spirit of the seer with that of the chorus.[12] The dramaturgical relevance to this association involves the communicative ability of the Dionysian spirit. "Under the charm of the Dionysian … the union between man and man [is] reaffirmed."[13] Anna's role as seer is to vocalize the sense of doom inherent in the text for the audience. This dovetails into her role as coryphaeus, as the one who converses and sympathizes with the other characters while simultaneously helping to ferry the audience across the gap that separates their everyday lives from the intensity of tragedy.

D'Annunzio makes explicit his intentions for Anna in the novel he was writing at the same time as his play. *Il fuoco* (The Flame, 1900) recounts the story of his turbulent love affair with Eleonora Duse. The work's protagonist is the writer Stelio Effrena, D'Annunzio's alter ego, who is working on a play for his muse Foscarina, who represents Duse. *La vittoria dell'uomo*, the play Effrena is writing, mirrors *La città morta*. When asked to describe the character he is writing for Foscarina, Effrena responds with a pitch-perfect summary of Anna: "Ella sarà cieca.… Ella vedrà quel che gli altri non vedranno" (She will be blind.… She will see what the others will not see).[14]

Further into the novel Effrena discusses his protagonist in terms that highlight her dramaturgical role:

> La sua potenza su la scena, quando parla e quando tace, è più che umana. Ella risveglia nei nostri cuori il male più occulto e la speranza più segreta; e pel suo incanto il nostro passato si fa presente. (175)
>
> (Her power in the scene, when she speaks and when she is silent, is more than human. She reawakens in our hearts the most occult pain and the most secret hope; and through her spell our past becomes present.)

The switch to the first-person plural is most telling, because it clearly refers to the audience. This superhuman power Anna contains is not Nietzschean in the sense that the *übermensch* of *La città morta* is most clearly Leonardo, with Alessandro as the poet of the drama occupying a position also partly related to a type of superman. Her superhuman power is a dramaturgical one, her ability to connect the exaggerated pathos of the tragedy to the commonplace pathos of every audience member's life. In this, of course, lies the power of tragedy, and the chorus' role, one of its most important ones, was to help fuse this connection. The chorus "expresses the reaction of its group to situations of high tragedy and thus helps to bridge the distance between the characters on the stage and the average audience in the theatre."[15]

The sentiments D'Annunzio's alter ego expresses in *Il fuoco* find their voice in the second scene of act 3 in *La città morta*. In it Anna confronts Leonardo about his suffering, which is now evident to everyone. The reason behind this suffering remains unknown to all except Alessandro at this point. She says to him:

> So che soffrite. E non soltanto voi soffrite, Leonardo ma tutti soffriamo; e ciascuno di noi cerca di nascondere agli altri la sua sofferenza. (93)
>
> (I know you are suffering. And you are not suffering alone, Leonardo, we all suffer; and each of us tries to hide it from the others.) (187–88)

"We all suffer," she says. In many ways this is the catch line for tragedy's appeal. Anna is bridging the gap between the character on the stage, the tragic character who suffers from an extreme and uncommon affliction, the lure of incest, and the ordinary audience member in the theater. She plays a threefold role in this scene. First, she is to discover the truth of Leonardo's affliction and second, she is to normalize that affliction by ascribing to it some form of universal quality. Here it transforms into the simple refrain of "everybody hurts."

The third function of her character comes about further into the scene, when she switches the emphasis of her discussion over to Bianca Maria, the primary object of her concern throughout the play. "Ella ha bisogno di gioire" (She needs to experience joy; 95), she says.[16] She can now provide the solution to Bianca Maria's sadness, which is to leave this place, but not simply to leave this place as she came to it. The one thing she can do to help Bianca Maria is to remove herself from the equation, to give up her husband to the younger woman. This is what she has decided to do, and this is what enables Leonardo to discover his sister's secret.

This reawakening of "the most occult pain" of which Effrena speaks, which Anna effects, immediately brings to mind Nietzsche's ideas on the Dionysian spirit. According to Nietzsche, the Apollinian Greek is linked in fellow suffering to his fallen Titans and heroes, to the generosity and subsequent torment of figures such as Prometheus, for "despite all its beauty and moderation, [the Apollinian Greek's] entire existence rested on a hidden substratum of suffering and of knowledge, revealed to him by the Dionysian."[17] Anna's function as the character that reveals the play's "substratum of suffering and of knowledge" is her most important, as the play depends on her to communicate to the audience Leonardo's secret as well as the doom that has infringed on the lives of these people as a result. As a seer, she is granted powers of prophecy. As the choral element, she manipulates these powers for the audience, powers that directly link her to the revelatory power of the Dionysian spirit according to Nietzsche.

Yet it bears restating that Nietzsche's Dionysian chorus is primordial, frenzied, and musical. Anna's words hardly resemble the musical character of the satiric chorus. At the same time, Nietzsche is here speaking of the Dionysian spirit and not specifically of the Greek chorus, for not all Greek choruses exemplified this spirit of intoxication to an equal degree. Any comparison of *Oedipus* with *The Oresteia* shows this. Despite the fact that the chorus and the Dionysian spirit are linked according to Nietzsche, Anna's choral manipulations within the drama come across more like the actions of a calm *raisonneur* than of a frenzied participant in an ancient rite. Before addressing this contradiction, though, I would first like to look at another D'Annunzian tragedy as a point of contrast.

Seven years after *La città morta*, D'Annunzio would create a very different kind of drama inspired by Greek tragedy. Set in the unspecified past in an Abruzzo of folklore and deep-seated custom, *La figlia di Iorio* (The Daughter of Jorio) is the story of Mila di Codra, the title character, daughter of a sorcerer, and an enchantress in her own right. Though totally immersed in the traditional preparations of his own impending wedding at the outset of the play, Aligi, the shepherd-artist, falls for Mila. She enters the stage pursued by a raging mob and finds solace in the family home of Aligi as her pursuers try to beat down the door and carry her away. Her own powers to enchant will eventually work their wiles on Aligi's father Lazaro, as well. Unwilling to let his father carry Mila off for his own purposes, Aligi commits parricide. In the final act, Aligi is brought back to his home in fetters in order to stand trial before God and his kindred. His acquittal only comes, however, when Mila returns and admits that she had cast a spell on the young shepherd, which exonerates him completely and brings about her own end. As the Crowd carries her off she screams out the play's final words, "La fiamma è bella! La fiamma è bella!"[18] (The flame is beautiful! The flame is beautiful!)

Whatever parallels exist between *La figlia di Iorio* and *La città morta* are immediately offset by the obvious differences. There are no spirits of dead Greeks here, and the action is far from the cursed Peloponnesus of *La città morta*. Nevertheless, the spirit of ancient tragedy has been invoked in the construction of this play concerning the myths of an archaic Italy. D'Annunzio's dedication refers to *La figlia di Iorio* as, "questo canto dell'antico sangue" (this song of ancient blood; 21). The later play also proves relevant to this discussion, because here D'Annunzio has explicitly written a chorus into his drama. Actually, there are three choruses, the Chorus of Kindred, the Chorus of Reapers, and the Chorus of Wailers. In addition, there is the Crowd of People, which functions like a fourth chorus.

All of the choruses of *La figlia di Iorio* can be seen as dramatically structured crowds. The Chorus of Reapers is the first to speak, and it represents the men in pursuit of Mila; they are the exterior presence always on the precipice of huffing and puffing their way into the first act. In act 2 Aligi compares them to barking dogs, an apt comparison for the voices that can only communicate by barking out bloodthirsty demands. The Chorus of Kindred represents the counterpoint to the

Chorus of Reapers. Its members speak in response to the Reapers, the vocal equivalent of the family's voice of reason, both supplicating to the holy virgin and questioning the rationale behind harboring this woman who brings with her so much woe.

The choruses completely disappear from the play in the second act to make way for the drama between Aligi, Mila, and Lazaro. By the third act the drama has returned to the initial setting of the family home. The father has been killed, and now the Chorus of Wailers enters upon the stage. Its role can easily be predicted according to its name, constantly bewailing the horror of these recent events through cries of pathetic sorrow. Almost every one of these instances of bewailing is concluded with Christian entreaties spoken in Latin. "Libera, Domine, animam servi tui," (83) they recite in just one of these moments. In *La figlia di Iorio* Christian doctrine lives alongside rural superstition, both equally impressive upon the lives of the Abruzzesi.

As a result of its rural structure and archaic atmosphere, this play, much more than *La città morta*, comes closer to the original Dionysian atmosphere of the earliest forms of tragedy.[19] The final act of *La figlia di Iorio*, in which Aligi must answer for his crime, harks back to the final play of Aeschylus's trilogy. The Crowd, which intersperses the words of Aligi and Mila with entreaties to Aligi's mother to "Abbi pietà pel tuo figlio!" (Have mercy for your son! 86) and with demands of "Alle fiamme! Alle fiamme!" (To the flames! 88) once Mila has made her confession, invokes the chorus of the Furies. And though these Italianized avengers are never appropriated into society and turned into kindly Eumenides, it would still be fitting to look to *The Eumenides* as a model for the ending of *La figlia di Iorio*. As the Furies represent the barbaric past of ancient Greece, so D'Annunzio has returned to a primitive Italy of folklore in order to create a drama concerning a mythopoetic Italian past akin to the savage origins of the Furies. This is what D'Annunzio meant when he discussed his dramaturgical intentions in an interview from 1897:

> We would like in this way to recall the rural and Dionysian origins of drama, the nativity of tragedy from the dithyramb, the creative impulse of earthly energies with the return of spring.[20]

The incorporation of a mythic curse into a contemporary tragedy that D'Annunzio accomplished with *La città morta* is different from what he

accomplished with *La figlio di Iorio*. In the latter, the fusion of tragedy with the drama of modern Italy is accomplished through the displacement of the action onto a newly constructed mythic Italian past. Unlike in *La città morta*, the choruses remain distinct from the action proper and eventually take on a religious role by the end of the drama, thereby further linking them to the choral origin of Greek tragedy as D'Annunzio saw it. In *La figlia di Iorio*, the primary role of the choruses is to heighten the atmosphere and to exaggerate the drama surrounding the events of the narrative.

D'Annunzio incorporates the Dionysian spirit into *La città morta* in a much more subtle way, one that would not have received Nietzsche's approval. Though the philosopher understood the difficulties a modern audience might have with a drama that individuates its choral element from the characters, he himself did not adhere to the view that the chorus should be woven into the action proper. Such a strategy represents the beginnings of the death of tragedy, according to him. He claims that the first traces of this can be found in Sophocles, but that the true assassin of the spirit of tragedy was Euripedes, whose use of such vile devices as the prologue and the *deus ex machina* adhered too much to what Nietzsche refers to as "*aesthetic Socratism*, whose supreme law reads roughly as follows, 'To be beautiful everything must be intelligible.'"[21]

According to Nietzsche, the first clue that tragedy had alighted toward self-destruction may be discerned in the presence of the chorus as a vestigial and therefore dispensable remnant of the Dionysian spirit. Such a sign begins to show already in Sophocles, who

> no longer dares to entrust to the chorus the main share of the effect, but limits its sphere to such an extent that it now appears almost co-ordinate with the actors … thus its character is, of course, completely destroyed, even if Aristotle favors precisely this theory of the chorus. This alteration in the position of the chorus … is the first step toward the *destruction* of the chorus.… Optimistic dialectic drives *music* out of tragedy with the scourge of its syllogisms; that is, it destroys the essence of tragedy, which can be interpreted only as a manifestation and projection into images of Dionysian states, as the visible symbolizing of music, as the dream-world of a Dionysian intoxication.[22]

Thus, D'Annunzio's attempt to revive the original Dionysian spirit of tragedy, at least in *La città morta*, relies on the same dramaturgical innovation that Nietzsche claims killed tragedy in the first place.

We must then give D'Annunzio some credit. After all, much of what Nietzsche says in *The Birth of Tragedy* may be cited for flaws.[23] For example,

> [O]ne must recognize the differences that exist between those tragedies in which the dramatic action is meager and appears as though overwhelmed by the choral element, and those which show a full development of dramatic action and the contrasts between the characters, while the choral element remains limited. An admirer of Greek poetry such as d'Annunzio certainly learned of these differences directly from the sources, and the structure of his theatrical works composed between 1898 and 1909 attest to the fact that he took this lesson to heart.[24]

The choral element in *La città morta* is much more subdued than in *La figlia di Iorio*, much more Sophoclean than Aeschylan. Anna's function to the narrative derives from a mixture of classical influences. She moves the story along in the manner of the *andres politai* of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, even if she is not exactly akin to the male citizens of that chorus. Nietzsche's greatest influence on D'Annunzio's drama can be seen in Anna's role as the character who bridges the affective gap of the audience and the pathos of the tragedy on display, for it is indebted to the Nietzschean ideal of the spirit of tragedy, the Dionysian spirit which he writes represents, "the shattering of the individual and fusion with the primordial being."[25] *La figlia di Iorio* attempts to forge this fusion through the invocation of a primordial Italian subconscious. *La città morta* attempts to do this by reanimating the primordial spirit of Greek tragedy in modern characters. The ancient and the modern come together in the setting of Mycenae and the exhumed corpses of Agamemnon and Cassandra, as does the curse of the house of Atreus with the cursed love of Leonardo.

Anna represents another aspect of this fusion, because in her D'Annunzio has created a single character that incorporates the dramaturgical importance of the choral element with the prophetic aspect of the seer. Nietzsche's interpretation of Schlegel's idea of the chorus as the "ideal spectator" relates: "The chorus is the 'ideal spectator' insofar as it is the only beholder, the beholder of the visionary world of the scene."[26] It is this visionary element that communicates the doom of tragedy to the audience. According to Nietzsche, this visionary aspect of tragedy relies on the Dionysian choral spirit of the birth of tragedy, and it is this aspect of his work that proved most influential to D'Annunzio's conception of resurrecting the ghosts of Attic drama.

But how does one re-create this visionary aspect of the Dionysian spirit in a modern form? D'Annunzio attempted to solve this problem partly by making his choral element into a seer. But this, of course, does not completely resolve the issue, for the drama must be able to communicate this aspect across the proscenium. Nietzsche's own idea on how to solve this betrays the early influences of Schopenhauer and Wagner on his thought: "Tragedy perishes with the evanescence of the spirit of music, it is only from this spirit that it can be reborn."[27] D'Annunzio will not be immune from these influences either. In "Il caso Wagner," which appeared in the *Tribuna* of Rome in 1893, he writes: "Today only music can express the dreams that are born out of the profundity of modern melancholy, indefinite thoughts, limitless desires, anxiety without cause, inconsolable desperations."[28]

La città morta is not opera, of course. Thus, it must find its music in the lyricism of its words and in the atmosphere of a theatrical stage production. Creating an atmosphere onstage that would bring to mind both the spirits of the Argolid and the doom of its curses was fundamental to D'Annunzio's dramaturgical goals. Concerning *La città morta*'s production, he writes: "Is it necessary to repeat again that the space of the scene cannot have life if it is not an ideal world?… that the spectator must be conscious of finding himself within a work of poetry."[29] With a play, of course, much of how "the space of the scene" is represented lies outside the author's control.

What D'Annunzio could control, the play's language, he manipulated toward his goal of music. The poetic quality of D'Annunzio's prose is well known, one might even say infamous.[30] Its lushness, the way it gushes over with details, is meant to appeal to the senses. *La città morta* bears all the marks of the typical D'Annunzian prose. It is effusive and expressive in a manner that reflects the language of *Il fuoco*. Italian stage director Beppe Navello recently wrote that "[t]he words pronounced in each scene [of *La città morta*] report every little sensation that arrives from outside: they are the taste, the smell, the sight, the hearing, the touch that speak continuously."[31] Just how much of this poetic quality translated to early audiences we can only speculate. For example, acting as a critic for the *Revue blanche*, F. T. Marinetti criticized the first Italian production for not being able to communicate the "lyric character" of the drama.[32]

Yet that first Italian production on 20 March 1901 at the Teatro Lirico of Milan was plagued with a variety of setbacks. We can never know for sure how much of this lyric quality was lost because of inherent faults in the text or because of problems with the staging. The acoustics, for one, were problematic. As a whole, the show received a mixed response. The audience cheered after the first act but became increasingly impatient as the lengthy play marched on. At the point when Leonardo justifies killing Bianca Maria, the theater reverberated with cries of "Assassino!" Twenty years later the play was staged in the same theater, but the response was overwhelmingly positive. To what could the success of the second Italian production be attributed then? The audience's familiarity with the material cannot be discounted. In 1901, D'Annunzio's play presented subject matter that was novel and morally disquieting to Italian audiences. By the time of the second Italian staging, successful productions of his other theatrical works, *La figlia di Iorio* included, had established D'Annunzio as a successful playwright.

The only consistent object of praise in the early productions of *La città morta* was the performance of Anna. This includes Sarah Bernhardt's interpretation in the original production in Paris as well as Eleonora Duse's performances in 1901 and 1922. One cannot find any review of a production of this play that does not grant chief responsibility for its success to the performance of this role. Even Franco Zeffirelli's 1975 production with Sarah Ferrati as Anna is not immune. One critic calls this production the play's most successful—a view he admits does not correspond to the mostly negative reception the production received in Italy—and attributes much of this success to "the memorable interpretation of Sarah Ferrati, an Anna who illuminated the most hidden and secret aspects of the character."[33] Just how much of these hidden aspects, these Dionysian aspects, is communicated to the audience depends as much on the performance of the actress as it does on D'Annunzio's creation.

Part of the impetus for this creation must be attributed to D'Annunzio's relationship with Duse, his real-life Anna. Duse's presence both as D'Annunzio's lover and as an actress heavily influenced the creation of the character, and therefore, in order to comprehend fully Anna's role in the play one must not discount her involvement. After *La città morta* the

couple would continue to collaborate for the theater. The 1901 debut of *Francesca da Rimini* featured Duse as the title character. She worked so closely with D'Annunzio on the role of Mila di Codra in *La figlia di Iorio* that when D'Annunzio gave it to Irma Grammatica instead, the tumultuous romance that had proved so fruitful professionally for both effectively ended.

Stelio Effrena's relationship with Foscarina in *Il fuoco* helps illustrate the extent of Duse's importance to how D'Annunzio formulated his idea of Anna. To Effrena, "the actress's body is like a palimpsest, a text through which he can glimpse traces of all the passions represented on stage and aroused in the audiences of the past."[34] D'Annunzio's alter ego reads the actress not just as the voice box of his words but also as the medium onto which he will graft his poetry. He relies on her performance as much as he does on his own poetic language in order to present the Dionysian spirit of the chorus. However much of this spirit could not be conveyed through the text itself and would have to be conveyed through the *mise en scène* and the performances. As the character whose spirit represents this primordial spirit, the interpretation of Anna would become the centerpiece of *La città morta*'s productions.

Just how Dionysian Duse's performances of this role were remains open for speculation. Duse was famous for her more subdued acting style, in contrast to the more histrionic Bernhardt,[35] and particularly in contrast to Ermete Zacconi, the great Italian actor who played the role of Leonardo in the first Italian productions. Zacconi's performances were completely exteriorized, whereas Duse's were "neoplatonic and hermetic."[36] In the 1901 production, disapproval of Zacconi's interpretation was almost unanimous. He played the part of Leonardo according to the cliché of the "malato di nervi,"[37] as a spectacle of sickness and sin, whereas Anna, rendered immobile by her blindness, was played according to "a choreography of gestures" that were subtle and varied according to each particular scene.[38] Thus, her role as a coryphaeus influenced the variety of her interpretation, as she modified her gestures according to her shifting roles throughout the arc of the drama.

Though Duse was praised for her performance in the 1901 production, the positive response to her interpretation in 1922 eclipsed that of

the earlier. R. Simoni's review from *Corriere della Sera* praised the new Anna above that of the first staging. Though he recalls the "desperate, fragile, [and] pure accent" of the earlier version, he states that it was also "more ecstatic, more religiously outside of life," than Duse's second handling of the role, concluding that the "more tender humanity [of the second performance] was more appropriate to the tragedy offered to us last night, more meager and denuded of many of her mysterious and brilliant veils."[39] A review in *La Tribuna* of Duse's 1901 performance seems to confirm the view that the earlier interpretation was the less subdued. The Italian must be cited: "La Duse giganteggiò col linguaggio, giganteggiò con l'espressione, gigantaggiò col gesto."[40] Her use of language, expressions, and gesture apparently turned her performance into a spectacle of "gigantic" measure.

Though these reviews clue us in to which of the performances might have displayed more of the choral spirit that D'Annunzio had meant for the role, we cannot determine with certainty which of the two performances proved most attractive to the audience, for the response of a critic does not always mirror that of the crowds. The trend though seems to be a greater appreciation of subtlety over histrionics, of the type of performance that speaks more and more to a theater of realism and less and less to the Nietzschean ideal of the origins of Attic tragedy. Many factors figure into why this might be. One possibility involves the fact that classical actors were masked, and thus the force of their performances could not rely on any type of facial gesture or response. As a result of modern drama's disuse of the mask, intimacy becomes more important. The individualism of the actor's face and personality affects an audience to such an extent that it oftentimes threatens to overcome the other elements of the production. The original Paris production, for example, received applause despite the fact that the audience remained cold to the play, but it was applause directed at the "divine" Miss Bernhardt, and at her alone.[41]

Despite Nietzsche's convictions, a modern audience responds less to the Dionysian spirit than to a semblance of verisimilitude. Today, most nonspecialists prefer the ancillary elements of plot that came later to the form. Notwithstanding the fact that most read these works in translation, and therefore lose much of the poetry, we can account for this partly by the fact that the performative aspect of poetry has greatly diminished

since the origins of classical drama. Poetry is enjoyed quietly rather than enjoyed communally.

In *The Death of Tragedy* Steiner attempts to explain why the tragedy of Racine and Corneille is so untranslatable, partly by pointing to the fact that they shunned that which is universal in drama, that is, action, production values, the elements of a staging that appeal most to the senses.[42] If these aspects of theatrical production represent the most easily translatable, then one should assume that a Dionysian performance would be more universal since it would embellish the poetry of the play through physical gesture and atmospherics and thus leave the drama less dependant on language alone. According to Nietzsche and D'Annunzio, it is this aspect of the drama that is most universal, since it harks back to the archetypes of humanity. But the exteriority of the language's musicality becomes problematic for a modern audience, as does the reliance on the chorus as the primary communicator. The fact that music and poetry stand at such a remove from the events of the narrative destroys any semblance of verisimilitude, and today we are all skewed toward realism.

Ironically though, D'Annunzio's most successful drama was the one that most closely adhered to the Dionysian spirit, *La figlia di Iorio*. Unlike *La città morta*, it is written in verse. It also keeps the choruses separate from the action proper. But *La figlia di Iorio* presents an audience with a chorus of crowds. This is important, because we can recognize the music of frenzy that they enunciate through D'Annunzio's poetry in our ideas of a crowd. Also, the Dionysian element, though exteriorized structurally, is incorporated thematically into the whole. This is a story about a primordial Italian past set in an area of Italy that still connotes ideas of wildness to Italians. Thus its choral spirit is more recognizable than a story about contemporary individuals engulfed in an ancient atmosphere that was foreign to French and Italians alike. The Paris production of *La città morta* proved only a mediocre success partly because it came across as unrealistic and anachronistic.[43]

One must then ask if Duse's subdued performances represent a force running counter to D'Annunzio's intentions for Anna and for the play as a whole. Were her performances successful precisely because she counteracted the Dionysian elements of the play? Reactions such as those to the French production support such a view, but other responses to it

contradict such a claim. For example, the one element of that staging to receive universal praise was Bernhardt's performance, and as I have said, Bernhardt was known for her dramatic flourishes, for a type of acting that though not quite as flamboyant as Zacconi's, contrasted with Duse's more understated style. That two distinctly different takes on the same role could both receive such praise may point to certain prejudices not shared by French and Italian audiences. But the cult of personality that surrounded the two divas was also a powerful force that no doubt affected the reactions of critics and audiences alike.

Responses to the Paris production as a whole complicate things irretrievably, for though many complimented the play for its revival of Greek tragedy, one critic writing for *Le Correspondant* on 25 January 1898 remarked that *La città morta* "goes too far when it pretends to revive the religious spirit and the rites of Dionysus."[44] At the same time, "*L'illustration* expressed the view that *La Ville morte* should have been composed in verse, since poetry, being the language of indefiniteness, would have been more suitable to D'Annunzio's play," thus advocating a stylistic change that could only have further highlighted the same Dionysian aspect of the play that proved so unsavory to many others.[45]

No matter how many reviews of the various earlier and later productions of *La città morta* we collect, the discrepancies in the styles of each production and in their receptions does not allow us to settle with finality just how much of the Dionysian aspect of the play the productions were able to effect. What they do show, though, is just how dependant the language of drama is on its enunciators. Unlike a novel, whose text represents a closed system of forms, the drama is opened and reopened with each performance. *La città morta*'s early critics could never quite agree as to whether the play was poetic and Dionysian enough, or if it relied too heavily on this idea of Greek tragedy.

La città morta appeared onstage in 1933 at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées with Ermete Zacconi once again in the role of Leonardo.[46] Zacconi's performance was so powerful in this production that it completely shifted the center of focus away from Anna. As a result, the play was not well received. With its attention diverted from the more sympathetic Anna, the audience is forced to focus on another D'Annunzian superman, one whose morality had already proved difficult for audiences to swallow. Since

praise for the earlier productions' divas had always been unanimous, such a production distracts from the element of those productions that had always been the most appealing to audiences. One wonders why Zacconi would have been allowed to take up the role of Leonardo, and once again to play him in such a fashion, after the almost unanimous disapproval of his earlier performances, though the fact that he was a huge star in his own right certainly makes casting him again and again seem more reasonable, if not from an artistic standpoint, at least from that of a producer.

Though Zacconi's interpretations were less successful than those of Bernhardt and Duse, the unwaveringly effusive praise the actresses received needs to be reconsidered. That the superstar status they enjoyed indubitably inspired closer scrutiny of their performances must be admitted, but we must also acknowledge that it could easily have blinded their spectators to deficits in their interpretations or have diverted their attentions from other elements of the play. One must also realize that the critics whose comments survive were all men, no doubt also influencing their receptions. We also need to consider the atmosphere in which these productions appeared. The first two productions, both of which received more praise for the performance of the actress in the role of Anna than for the entirety of the play itself, appeared during the era of the *diva*, when an audience would have been more drawn to a play because of Bernhardt or Duse than because it had been written by D'Annunzio. By 1922, D'Annunzio's star had considerably risen, and the play was received much better. Also, could Zacconi's overblown performance of the superman role in 1933 have proved less appealing to a French audience because it came during the years when Italy was absorbed by the hypermasculine culture of fascism? It hardly seems like a stretch.

In a letter to George Hérelle on 24 December 1896, D'Annunzio stated that his four characters in *La città morta* were equally important.[47] As a dramatist in the process of staging his first tragedy, D'Annunzio has to say this. Reading *Il fuoco* certainly contradicts such an idea, as do almost every review to the play's productions. The one fact that can be relied on, upon which most all critics agree, is that this play can only be put on successfully if the performance of Anna is well received. We may locate the reason for this in the way D'Annunzio structured the drama around this character, in the way D'Annunzio attempted to communicate the

Dionysian spirit of tragedy through the eyes of this blind seer. The fact that reactions to the play always center on Anna reaffirms this.

In agreeing with this view, one critic assesses the play rather harshly: "whatever theatrical success *La Ville morte* had was always due to the presence and talent of great actresses and actors rather than to its own merits."[48] Whether or not this is true will always remain subjective. It is not atypical for drama to live or die according to the performance of one role. This is as much the case for *La città morta* as it is for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as it is for *Hamlet*. It has to do with the dependant nature of drama. Every intrusion of interpretation, whether it be by the director, an actor, or the person in charge of lighting, inflects an author's text in a way that will always partially lie out of his or her control, even if said playwright is directing the production. That Zacconi's performance in 1933 could completely shift the center of focus in a play whose focus is so explicitly written into the text implies that an actor's performance has the ability to overwhelm his text. It shows that no matter how much D'Annunzio attempted to infuse the spirit of tragedy into his drama, success or failure of any production of *La città morta* is as out of his hands as a translation of his writing into a foreign tongue.

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Notes

[1] Gabrielle D'Annunzio, *La città morta* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1996), 4; *The Dead City*, trans. G. Mantellini (Chicago: Laird & Lee, 1902), 13. All quotations are from these editions and are henceforth cited in the text by page number. Translations of D'Annunzio's other works are my own.

[2] Paolo Valesio, *Gabriele D'Annunzio: The Dark Flame*, trans. Marilyn Migiel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 46.

[3] The play's early subtitle was *Tragedia moderna*. See the appendix to *La città morta*, 188.

[4] Giovanni Getto, *Tre studi sul teatro* (Roma: Salvatore Sciascia Editore, 1976), 181.

[5] Cited in the play's introduction, ix. D'Annunzio's reading of classical Greek literature during his trip was not limited to these dramatists. Prior to leaving, he asked his friend Georges Hérelles to procure him copies of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, as well as translations of Hesiod and Euripides.

[6] R. W. B. Burton, *The Chorus in Sophocles' Tragedies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 4.

[7] Aeschylus, *Oresteia*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 8.

[8] Burton, 140.

[9] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 65.

[10] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Francis Fergusson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999), 92.

[11] Partly because of this, Valesio sees *La città morta* as "a daring critical interpretation of Oedipus, worthy of taking its place in the gallery of oedipal interpretations before and after Freud" (53).

[12] I am here partially relying on Kaufmann's interpretation of Nietzsche. He reads Nietzsche's idea that Attic tragedy is part Antigone and part Cassandra as a statement that "Sophocles' Antigone is … representative of the Apollinian, while Aeschylus' Cassandra (in *Agamemnon*) is associated with the Dionysian." See 47 n. 2.

[13] Nietzsche, 37.

[14] Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Il fuoco* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1996), 175.

[15] Burton, 3.

[16] My translation. In my opinion Mantellini's version—"She needs pleasure" (192)—brings to mind too many connotations that are not intended in the original.

[17] Nietzsche, 46.

[18] Gabriele D'Annunzio, *La figlia di Iorio* (Milano: Tascabili Economici Newton, 1995), 94.

[19] Anna Meda, *Bianche statue contro il nero abisso: Il teatro dei miti in D'Annunzio e Pirandello* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1993), 84.

[20] Cited in Meda, 83.

[21] Nietzsche, 83–84.

[22] Ibid., 92.

[23] For a repudiation of Nietzsche's idea of the Dionysian aspect of the origins of tragedy see Gerald F. Else, *The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967). Though Else praises *The Birth of Tragedy*, he writes that there is no evidence that tragedy was ever Dionysian other than in the sense that it was performed at the festival of Dionysus. He goes on to argue that there is no reason to believe that tragedy derived from anything ecstatic and presents an argument for tragedy's development out of the rhapsodes' recitations of Homer at the Panathenaic festival beginning in the sixth century.

[24] Vicenzo Terenzio,"*La nascita della tragedia* di Nietzsche e i suoi riflessi in d'Annunzio," in *Verso l'Ellade: Dalla Città morta a Maia, XVIII Convegno Internazionale, Pescara 11–12 Maggio 1995* (Pescara: Ediars-Oggi e Domani, 1995), 28.

[25] Nietzsche, 65.

[26] Ibid., 62.

[27] Ibid., 99.

[28] Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Su Nietzsche* (Catania: De Martinis, 1994), 44.

[29] Cited in Valentina Valentini, *Il poema visibile, le prime messe in scene delle tragedie di Garbiele D'Annunzio* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1993), 21.

[30] D'Annunzio's prose polarized critics during his time. Many critics considered it to be "too soft, too round, too moist … almost too feminine." Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 19.

[31] Beppe Navello, "Pirandello e d'Annunzio: Lingue per la scena o per il fuori scena?" *La lingua del teatro fra d'Annunzio e Pirandello, Atti del Convegno di studi, Macerata, 19–20 ottobre 2004*, ed. Laura Melosi and Diego Poli (Macerata: EUM, 2007), 120.

[32] Cited in Valentini, 155.

[33] Giovanni Antonucci, "*La città morta* e *Fedra*: Storia della fortuna scenica," in *Verso l'Ellade*, 192.

[34] Lucia Re, "D'Annunzio, Duse, Wilde, Bernhardt: Author and Actress between Decadence and Modernity," in *Italian Modernism, Italian Culture between Decadence and Avant-Garde*, ed. Luca Somagli and Mario Moroni (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 88.

[35] See Re for a more detailed discussion of their styles.

[36] Valentini, 76–77.

[37] Ibid., 168.

[38] Ibid., 165.

[39] Antonucci, 191.

[40] Valentini, 166.

[41] Antonucci, 189.

[42] George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Knopf, 1968), 101.

[43] Giovanni Gullace, *Gabriele D'Annunzio in France: A Study in Cultural Relations* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1966), 60.

[44] Ibid., 61.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid., 63, as well as Dorothy Knowles, *La réaction idéaliste au theater depuis 1890* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1934), 469. I am indebted to Professor Daniel C. Gerould for alerting me to this.

[47] Valentini, 170.

[48] Gullace, 63.