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The Literary Achievement of Louis Couperus in His Greco-Roman Novels,
with Special Reference to *De Berg van Licht*¹

In his vigorously argued but also pessimistic *The Western Canon*, Harold Bloom observes: "The historical novel seems to have been permanently devalued... this subgenre [historical fiction] is no longer available for canonization... History writing and narrative fiction have come apart, and our sensibilities seem no longer able to accommodate them one to the other."² Bloom's diagnosis seems premature to me. One does not even have to reach back to works of historical fiction that achieved world recognition much earlier in this century — such as Sigrid Undset's trilogy *Kristin Lavransdatter*, Thomas Mann's trilogy *Joseph and His Brothers*, Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil*, Pär Lagerkvist's *Barabbas*, Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*, and Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*: the literary scene since the sixties, too, even as one enters the so-called post-modernist age, shows that historical fiction is still very much alive and well and includes works of superb conception and execution: witness, for instance, Margaret Atwood's recent, phenomenally successful *Alias Grace*.

Among the historical fiction produced over the past century, works with a Greco-Roman setting hold pride of place. *The Memoirs of Hadrian* is recognized as a literary masterpiece.³ Broch's *The Death of Virgil*, although far more difficult and less accessible to the average reader, must be recognized as a brilliant experiment in stream of consciousness

poetic prose.⁴ Gore Vidal's *Julian* — which made it to first place in the *New York Times*'s best seller list in 1964 — deservedly won great critical acclaim.⁵ More recently, since the eighties, there have been the splendidly researched and sophisticated novels of Colleen McCollough set in the late Roman Republic and converging on the world-historical figure of Julius Caesar (so far: *The First Man in Rome*, *The Grass Crown*, *Fortunes Favorites*, and *Caesars Women*), while Lindsey Davis (*Bronze Shadows* and *Venus in Copper*) and Steven Saylor (*Roman Blood* and four subsequent novels up till now), with their detective novels set in the Late Roman Republic and Early Empire, have brought new vitality and popularity to this type of fiction.

In English literature, the historical novel with a Greco-Roman setting achieved its first efflorescence in the nineteenth century: four outstanding examples are Edward Bulwer-Lytton's three-volume *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), far too long, overly sentimental and melodramatic, and often turgid in style, but not without passages of powerful narration and vivid description; Charles Kingsley's *Hypatia* (1850) and Lewis Wallace's *Ben Hur* (1880), both of greater literary merit, with the latter in fact achieving minor canonical status (one thinks of the two opulent movie adaptations); and finally, Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1882), distinguished for its introspective and philosophical tenor. In English literature of the twentieth century,

the British-South African novelist Mary Renault (1905-1983) holds undisputed sway in this subgenre with her novels set in the ancient Greek world, starting with *The Last of the Wine* (1956) and ending with *Funeral Games* (1981: the third novel of what might be called her Alexander the Great trilogy).⁶

In the non-English speaking world, a similar pre-eminence should be accorded to Louis Couperus although, unfortunately, his works of prose fiction set in the Greco-Roman world are far less well known internationally, only two of them, *The Comedians* and *Xerxes*, having been translated into English. This assessment is justified both on quantitative and qualitative grounds: not only did Couperus produce a large number of romances, historical novels, and collections of stories set in the Greco-Roman world, an output at least comparable to that of Mary Renault; even more important, these are not works of low-brow fiction, but are characterized by the same unmistakable Couperean rich verbal style and empathetic, analytical, and ironical perspectives that distinguish his best works of prose fiction with contemporary settings.⁷ To substantiate this judgment, this paper will offer an appreciation of what I consider to be Couperus' masterpiece, *De Berg van Licht*, which is based on the tumultuous life and career of the teenage Roman emperor Elagabalus (203-222; reigned 218-222) and which aroused a storm of controversy — the biggest that ever enveloped Couperus — in The Netherlands after its publication in 1906; but I will cast brief glances at other works as well. Appended to this paper are my translations, each with a brief introduction providing context, of seven striking passages.⁸

For his fictional reconstruction of the short-lived reign of the eccentric and flamboyant Elagabalus, Couperus did not have first-rate

ancient historiographical sources to work with. For example, the *Historia Augusta*, a collection of imperial biographies which, in its extant form, covers the Roman emperors from Hadrian to Carinus and Numerianus (117-284), is notoriously unreliable and not infrequently moves in the realm of pure fiction.⁹ Much of Couperus' inspiration had in fact come from nineteenth century, mostly French, interpretations and fictionalizations that celebrated the cult of pagan beauty and sensuality.¹⁰ However, Couperus' portrayal of Elagabalus' psyche and character, and indeed the thematics of the novel as a whole, are far more complex and profound than anything his predecessor decadents and neo-pagans had produced.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the novel is Couperus' depiction of Elagabalus' sexuality. *De Berg van Licht* elaborates, in abundant and colourful detail, upon the young emperor's reputation for a particularly transgressive passive homosexuality and an equally scandalous tranvestism. Here Couperus — who, although married, was homosexual himself — took a great risk vis-a-vis his critics and reading public, especially since the novel abstains from any omniscient-narrator style moralizing. Not surprisingly, there was immense outpouring of hostile criticism, especially from conservative Catholic and Calvinist quarters, as Lukkenauer has well documented in his full-length study of Couperus Greco-Roman prose fiction up to 1913.¹¹ The vehemence of the polemics may have led Couperus to be somewhat more cautious in the future. Two later novels, where there was good potential for in-depth exploration of homoeroticism and homosexuality in Greco-Roman antiquity, are more restrained. *The Comedians*, with its brilliant portrayal of Roman theatre in the Early Empire,¹² at most only hints in this

direction. In Couperus' last novel set in classical antiquity, *Iskander*, the homoerotic element in the relationship between Alexander and his life-long comrade Hephaestion is sketched with great delicacy; and even the more overt infatuation of Alexander with the Persian eunuch Bagoas is not developed into a full blown romantic affair, let alone an explicitly physical relationship. By contrast, in the second novel of her Alexander trilogy, *The Persian Boy*, Mary Renault — writing, of course, in a far more liberal age — presents the Alexander-Bagoas relationship as becoming an intensely erotic and physical one, and at the end places Bagoas at the bedside of the dying Alexander.¹³

However, it is the religious aspect, clouded though it may be by Elagabalus' sensual excesses, that constitutes the principal psychological and thematic kernel of *De Berg van Licht*. This was certainly also Couperus' intention, as was made clear in the brochure that his wife Elisabeth wrote to advertise the novel.¹⁴ Elagabalus' androgyny, is — according to the teachings he receives from his guru, the Magus Hydaspes — only an earthly manifestation of the fulness of the One, the Supreme, Ineffable God, who also is beyond gender. Thus, he must use his unique androgyny — the fact that he is the universal Man-Woman incarnate — as a springboard to return himself to the asexual Source of all reality, the utterly Transcendent God, whose supreme cosmic manifestation is the sexless Light. His promotion, as emperor of Rome, of the cult of the Syrian Sun-God Baal (from whom he takes his adoptive name, Elagabalus) is a sacred duty to his subjects, and he must use his almost surreal androgynous beauty and the ecstatic power of his dancing in worship of Baal to convert them to a passionate devotion to the Sun-God that will lead, in turn, to the adoration of the One. Thus, Couperus has

wedded a deep religious idealism to Elagabalus' psycho-sexuality. Here he was profoundly inspired by the Theosophical thinking and speculation of his day — of Madame Blavatsky, for instance — to which he was intensely attracted for much of his life, and in which he found a vindication of his own homosexuality.¹⁵ Theosophy has its intellectual and religious roots in the Neoplatonism and Gnosticism of the later Greco-Roman world, in particular the first four centuries of the Christian era, and so Couperus' use of Theosophical ideas and motifs is quite apposite from a historical point of view — these were indeed in the air in the age of Elagabalus.¹⁶

The tragedy of Elagabalus is that his religious idealism cannot save him from the disastrous effects of his immaturity of character and from the corruption of power. At first, when we meet him as a boy in the Syrian town of Emessa, a major centre of the cult of the Sun-God, which is presided over by his grandmother Julia Maesa, the high-priestess, his religious idealism is uncorrupted, spoiled and petulant though his behaviour may be at times. His acclamation as Roman emperor, engineered especially by his scheming grandmother, is really the beginning of his downfall: an utter political unworldliness, a narcissistic need for adulation, especially from the Roman masses, and a complete license to indulge his escalating transgressive sensuality as manifested in a flamboyant transvestism and passive homosexuality ultimately lead to his ugly demise as he and his mother are lynched by the enraged Praetorian Guard and the Roman mob in the slaves latrines of the imperial palace.

But *De Berg van Licht* is more than a "psychological study" or a "tragedy of fate," terms suggested by the contemporary critic J.E.W. Kuiper.¹⁷ In the final analysis,

Elagabalus, for all his willfulness, is little more than an unknowing puppet of his scheming and ruthless elders, above all the unprincipled Julia Maesa, and even his ambitious guru, Hydaspes. The grand passion of nearly all of them is lust for power, and this indictment applies to the entire dominant elite of the Roman empire who lord it over the fickle, brutalized masses. Only the Epicurean-inclined Roman senator Gordianus, later to be briefly emperor himself, who is drawn into the melancholy reflections uttered by the narrator at the very end of the novel, is relatively free from this craving. Thus, in *De Berg van Licht*, we see an entire society corrupted, above all in its upper classes, by the greed for power, which distorts all relationships and institutions — government, the military, family, friendship, and even religion — and so vitiates an entire civilization. Despite the scenes of horror in *The Comedians* (notably the scene in which a slave is crucified on the stage in order to enact the fate of the semi-legendary robber Laureolus), Couperus' later great novel set in the imperial age draws a more benevolent picture of ancient Rome: by contrast, in sheer sadistic ghastliness, there is nothing to surpass in Couperus the scene in which Elagabalus and his mother Soaemias are lynched. Lukkenauer, in his in-depth discussion of *De Berg van Licht*, is therefore on solid ground when he, in effect, places this novel, which touches powerfully upon the moral-ethical, political, and religious foundations of a civilization, in the great tradition of the realistic novel of the West.¹⁸

We must employ nuance when we speak of the narrator's (or Couperus') identification with the novel's central character.¹⁹ The empathy is most certainly there, but it is combined with an analytical perspective, and even irony, which allow the ultimately fatal weaknesses of Elagabalus' character to stand out clearly,

even if at the end the reader is invited, thanks to Couperus' superb narrative, descriptive and dramatic powers, to experience terror and pity over the youth's wretched death (see my translation no. 7). At best, irony blends with empathy, as it does in all of Couperus' great fiction. The supreme example in *De Berg van Licht* is, I submit, the scene, both solemn and comic, of the highly public wedding of Elagabalus to the charioteer Hierocles (see my translation no. 4).

De Berg van Licht must be considered a masterpiece of historical fiction, darker in vision (ironically enough, given the title and the dominating motif of Light — see my translation no. 1) and certainly more melodramatic than his three other great Greco-Roman historical novels, *The Comedians*, *Xerxes*, and *Iskander*. In one crucial respect, it can be most readily compared with *Iskander*, which is also, on one level, a fictional study of the deterioration of character of a larger-than-life historical figure. The psychology underlying *Iskander* is perhaps more subtle — Alexander deteriorates, but he does not develop the grotesqueries of character and behavior of an Elagabalus;²⁰ but the stark extremes of the story of Elagabalus' tumultuous short life and career, narrated with high-riding verbal bravura by Couperus, but not divorced from analytical, even ironical perspectives, and infused with serious religious and political-ethical themes, make for an unforgettable reading experience.

NOTES

¹ This paper was read to the CAANS Learned Societies meeting at Brock University in 1996; some material has been added.

² Harold Bloom, *The Great Canon*, New York, San Diego and London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994, 21.

³ On the inspiration behind this great work, see Charlotte Hogsett, "Scholarship and Vision in Marguerite Yourcenar's *Mémoires d'Hadrien*," *Classical and Modern Literature*, 1:3 (1993), 203-215.

⁴ Despite some criticisms, Theodore Ziolkowski recognizes Brochs literary achievement in his *Virgil and the Moderns*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, 203-222.

⁵ Gore Vidal, *Palimpsest: A Memoir*, New York: Random House, 1995, 204.

⁶ On the historical fiction of Mary Renault up to 1969, see Bernard F. Dick, *The Hellenism of Mary Renault*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press / London and Amsterdam: Feffer & Simons, 1972; and also David Sweetman, *Mary Renault: A Biography*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1993.

⁷ Couperus' major works of Greco-Roman fiction are the mythological romances, *Psyche* (1898), *Dionyzos* (1904), and *Herakles* (1913); the satirical romance, *De Verliefde Ezel* ("The Ass in Love," 1918, inspired by the second century AD Latin novel of Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*); a collection of short stories, *Antieke Verhalen* ("Stories from Antiquity," 1911) and a novella, *Antiek Toerisme* ("Tourism in Antiquity," 1911); and finally, the four great historical novels, *De Berg van Licht* ("The Mountain of Light," 1906), *De Komedianten* (1917, translated as *The Comedians*), *Xerxes of de Hoogmoed* (1919, translated as *Arrogance, the Conquests of Xerxes*), and *Iskander* (1920). Very good on the Greco-Roman fiction are Frédéric Bastet's magisterial biography, *Louis Couperus: Een Biografie*, Amsterdam: E.M. Queridos Uitgeverij B.V., 1987 (third printing, 1989) and W.J. Lukkenaer, *De Omrankte Staf: Couperus' Antieke Werk*, part I, (University of Leiden doctoral dissertation) Katwijk: ALL IN B.V., 1989 (this goes only as far as *Herakles*; part II has not — as yet? — appeared). It is interesting to note that, because of an unusual set of circumstances in connection with the secondary schools he attended in the Dutch East Indies and The Netherlands, Couperus started his study of the classical languages rather late by the standards of his day, not until his late teens in fact, and was taught them by his father; he became quite proficient in Latin, but his facility with ancient Greek remained very modest.

⁸ The text I have used is Louis Couperus', *De Berg van Licht*, Utrecht and Antwerp: Veen Uitgevers

(Amstelpaperbacks), 1981; and the page references will be to this. A new critical edition of the complete works of Couperus has recently been published: Louis Couperus, *Volledige Werken*, general editor, Karel Reijnders, Utrecht: Veen Uitgevers, 1987-1996.

⁹ Anthony Birley's translation of the *Historia Augusta* as far as the reign of Elagabalus, under the title of *Lives of the Later Caesars* (Penguin Classics, 1976), provides an excellent introduction to current scholarship on the *Historia*.

¹⁰ Bastet, 323-324.

¹¹ Lukkenaer, 73-78.

¹² For a fine appreciation, see Elizabeth Visser, "Couperus' *Komedianten* en het Rome van Domitianus," *Hermeneus* 50 (1978), 162-169.

¹³ For a comparison, among others, of the treatment of the Alexander-Bagoas relationship and of homoeroticism and homosexuality in general in *Iskander* and *The Persian Boy*, see my forthcoming article, "Alexander the Great in the Historical Fiction of Mary Renault and Louis Couperus: A Study in Contrasting Portrayals," *Studies in Honour of Margaret Thompson*, ed. A.P. Booth and L. Finette, in *Cahiers des Etudes Anciennes*, 1997 or 1998.

¹⁴ Bastet, 318-319.

¹⁵ On the profound influence of Theosophy on Couperus' philosophy of life and writings, including and especially his Greco-Roman works, Lukkenaer offers in-depth background (see his index *passim*).

¹⁶ There is no evidence that Couperus had any first-hand familiarity with ancient Neoplatonic and Gnostic writings. For a good overview of the currents of religiosity in the Roman empire during the Severan dynasty (193-235), to which Elagabalus belonged, including the prominence of the various cults of the Sun-God, see Michael Grant, *The Severans*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, ch. 12, "Paganism and Christianity." On ancient Neoplatonism, see R.T.W. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972. The somewhat feminist slant of Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels*, New York: Random House, 1979, sometimes mars, from a textual-exegetical point of view, her interpretation of certain Gnostic doctrines, but her book remains one of the best introductions to Gnosticism (which was a largely Christian phenomenon).

¹⁷ Lukkenaer, 79-80.

¹⁸ This is clear from his entire approach to *De Berg van Licht*. As he puts it at one point (p. 92 — in my translation): "Anyone who wishes to see in Couperus exclusively the apolitical aesthete, deprives himself / herself of the major political and social preoccupations which can be demonstrated in his work."

¹⁹ Lukkenaer, p. 79, cites the view of Lodewijk van Deyssel, one of the critics who makes such a too-ready identification.

²⁰ See my article referred to in note 13.

APPENDIX: translations of seven passages from *De Berg van Licht*. For the names of historical persons, I have used the forms employed in English-language scholarship: thus Soaemias rather than Couperus Semiamira.

1. (p. 1) *A description of the night sky over the Syrian town of Emessa, centre of the cult of the Sun-God, where Elagabalus (at this point still called Bassianus) has spent most of his childhood. The motif of Light is launched impressively in this opening paragraph of the novel.*

In the sultry late-summer night, in the broadly expansive sky of cloudless nocturnal monochrome, myriads of crystal stars were twinkling over Emessa; and between the more brilliant stars the depths of heaven were filled with a finer, more powdery light, while encircling these in turn were dotted, in unapproachable abundance, stars smaller than the sun-giants but still larger than those of powdery fineness; as though the gods had become intoxicated with this star-wealth and had strewn it far and wide in a drunken vertigo of radiance. And across this opulent sky the grand, richly flowing Milky Way loomed white, not so much like a veil but as a banner of glory, a triumphal way for the Supreme God, dusted with light and piled with stars so numerous that the feet of any god who might travel it would surely sink deep in the golden sand.

2. (pp. 26-27) *An exchange between Hydaspes and the boy Bassianus on the metaphysical and primordial significance of androgyny.*

"You will want to know how I desire you to be

in the silent mystery of your soul, should you become emperor..."

"Yes."

"I would desire that you should be striving back to the Source that was without sex."

"Before It..."

"Thought of Creation and Birth, and locked within itself both sexes."

"But in order to reach the state of soul of the sexless Light?"

"The Elect Soul must first strive back to that more human-like form: the form of bi-sexual being."

"I understand."

"The Elect Soul must strive back to the androgynous soul of the Man-Woman."

"I understand."

"So was our primal Father."

"Adam."

"Adam-Heva."

"Yes, so he was — when he dwelt in Paradise on the Euphrates."

"Adam-Heva he was, our Father; Man Woman he was. But just as the sexless Light split within itself into Man and Woman, so Adam — O unfathomable mystery of why — after convulsive agonies throughout his being, to his distress, split into Adam and Heva."

3. (p.177) *Elagabalus' pathological need for adulation, the adoration of the Roman masses for their pretty boy-emperor, and the ever-lurking threat of mob violence are most effectively described in this passage. Antoninus is Elagabalus' dynastic name.*

The crowd shouted with joy; coarse hands threw passionate kisses up to him. Then the emperor gave an order. Slaves came carrying baskets

with roses brought out from the banquet, and the emperor threw down the flowers, laughing. Beneath him, they fought for the roses which his hands had strewn, and they ate the roses. But the emperor gave another order, and the slaves brought him large numbers of colourful kerchiefs — *oraria*, which one could wave around at the circus, and with both hands Antoninus scattered them. And suddenly, forgetting his melancholy altogether, he burst into a merry child-like laughter at the airy, slow fluttering of the cloths which descended like butterflies into the stretched-out clawing hands, cramped with maddened eagerness, of the mob below. They trampled each other to grab a kerchief; there were knife-stabbings, and flood flowed; anyone who fell was trampled to pulp, and bones cracked. The emperor did not notice it; he laughed, a god enveloped by the white, bluish and ruby incandescence of the festively lit palace, filled with joy over the happiness of the mob.

4. (p. 223) *This passage describing the wedding-procession of Elagabalus' very public "marriage" to the charioteer Hierocles is a masterpiece of Couperian prose, with solemnity and parody perfectly balanced.*

Look, there came the priestly colleges: the college of Isis, carrying Anubis; the college of Rhea Cybele, dancing in wild transport and driven by ecstasy to ceaseless, although feigned, self-mutilation; and the people saw the red blood flow. Then came the *Pontifex Maximus*, the Vestal Virgins, all the Roman *flamines* and *sodales*, the six hundred members of the Senate, preceded and surrounded by lictors, and the litters of matrons, floating, as it were, on the luminous vapours; and then finally, in the midst of the whirling dancing girls, the Magi crying out to *Sol Invictus*, the haughty priests of the Sun, and the children of the Sun — the emperor Antoninus, the god Elagabalus; no rather, the empress Antonina, the goddess Elagabala, borne high, reclining quite motionless on a couch, on cushions of yellow silk glittering with saffron-gold, leaning on one elbow, the chin thrust into his bejewelled fingers; the empress Antonina, the goddess Elagabala, the epiphany of the Everlasting God in woman's form, grave in her womanhood,

modest in her maidenhood, and dignified in her imperial majesty, radiant as a goddess in her royal vestments on this high-feast day; a long *stola* of white silk, embroidered all over with pearls, its folds draped close around his body by the wardrobe attendants, reached as far as and between his feet, where it hung free hemmed all around with a fringe of pear-shaped pearls. The crowd stood agape, staring breathlessly at the emperor and all his pearls. They knew his vestments with their countless pearls were worth two million sesterces; and so the rough-hewn heads of the plebs clustered together to see Antoninus as a woman and a bride, and to see the pearls which covered his bridal vestments.

5. (p.260-261) *The hardening and deterioration of Elagabalus' features, the result, in part, of his dissipation, are vividly described.*

Although the features of his beardless and ivory-white face had remained quite delicate, like those of a woman, the soft molding of his forehead and cheeks had sharpened to a more angular maleness which no longer harmonized with these fine features; and anyone looking at him closely would see blue fatigue circling the underside of his eyes, the hollowness lining his cheeks, while his lips were more tightly pressed together and his chin more pointedly defined, as if, alas, the dream-haze of his youth had been wiped away. Even though his eyes, with their violet girlish glances, still exerted their allure as before, they had changed: in them now lurked a melancholy and a strange bitterness which those thin lips never seemed to utter. And in his body, too, in his physical maturing to the manhood contained within his soul, a sharper disharmony had begun to manifest itself, visible to anyone who remembered him from the past, from scarcely two years ago, when no excesses seemed to hold him captive, and when, after an orgy, he could appear in the Baths of Caracalla the next morning, fresh as a flower.

6. (pp. 299-300) *An orgy, presided over by Elagabalus, who is pathetically desperate for sexual attention, is winding down.*

More intruders, the dregs, mostly criminals and thieves, who had been swarming around the

brightly lit palace all night, had penetrated inside, and were hesitating now, overwhelmed. But the emperor, stretching out his arms, cried with a shrill high voice for the second time: "Come! Come to me all of you!" His voice held a pleading, a desperate longing to be desired, loved, and worshiped. At the outermost tables the criminal rabble plundered the table-services: silver and golden *amphorae*, weighing a hundred pounds each, they carried off, all the while screaming with laughter over the obscene depictions on the spouts and handles. But Antoninus, because they did not come, understand, dare, or want to, had descended from his *sigma*-throne, pushing aside the Magi, also drunk by now, and the exhausted priests. He stepped on the unconscious children, and walked through the *triclinium*. Everywhere the drunken guests lay sprawled. Antoninus tripped over the body of the senator who had been smothered by the flowers. Farther on, in a pool of blood, was lying a monstrous huge lion, its head cut off. He walked past upset tables and pierced *sigma*-chairs, of which the extruding down-stuffing was mixed with spilled food and wine. He passed on between two pillars, where a Babylonian tapestry had caught fire in the flame of the floor lamps and was half-consumed, a shouldering, smoky rag but still hanging heavy. And so he approached an inner portico, where small cubicles had been screened off with tapestry-curtains suspended from rings. Here a grand brothel had been prepared for those who were still inclined to modesty and did not want to flaunt their pleasures in public on the reclining couches. Antoninus tore aside the tapestries. Cries of annoyance rang out from the matrons and senators who had retired there, matrons with stable boys and gladiators, senators with senators. But finally Antoninus found an empty room and, standing high on the threshold, he cried as shrilly and loudly as he could, beckoning enticingly in the direction of the mob out there making their way inside: "Come!

Come to me all of you! I am the Light that shines for all! I am the Man and the Woman, and I give myself anywhere... for an *aureus*, for fifteen sesterces, for three *asses*, for nothing! For nothing! Oh come to me, come to me all of you!"

7. (pp. 389-390) *The horror and terror of the lynching of Elagabalus and his mother is somewhat relieved by what one might term the young man's brief beatific vision just before his death.*

In the few seconds of breath still remaining to the terrified, shivering child already dying with terror in the asphyxiating embrace of his screaming mother, a sudden yearning flashed through him for the thunderstorm with its lightning-poison which he had failed to keep with him, and for the Tower of Jewels in the *Palatium* where he had wanted to die in beauty. And then in this flash of yearning, while he felt already the vengeful fury of the mob breathing at him in pestilential foulness, more foul than the nauseous exhalations of the slaves' excrement in this enclosure, a radiant figure loomed before his eyes, and he saw Hydaspes who gazed at him with large, entranced eyes and reached out both hands towards him. This was the last he saw, for he swooned with grief and terror in the asphyxiating embrace of Soaemias, no longer hearing his mother's cries. Ten, twenty spears transfixed his body to hers and were then pulled out. The bodies fell apart, streaming with blood. Oh now to revile him! To roll without squeamishness the body of the child and the whore through the stinking heaps of excrement, to stuff their mouths with it, to defile their faces and bodies with the filth until all human complexion was gone, and then to drive a sharp hook first into the stomach — but this tore open — and then into a loop of rope slung around his feet, and to drag and drag him through the excrement out of the latrines. Here, here he is, the whore's child!