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Ekphrasis and Narrative, or the Ideological Critique of Artworks: Alma-Tadema, Ennio Flaiano and the Legacy of Heliogabalus

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1. INTRODUCTION: ENNIO FLAIANO, ALMA-TADEMA, AND HELIOGABALUS

Ennio Flaiano (1910-1972), Italian screenwriter and journalist, is best known for his work with Federico Fellini as co-writer of screenplays such as *La dolce vita* (1960) and *8½* (1963). He was also the author of a number of collections of satirical short stories and articles. His talent was recognized throughout his lifetime, and as early as 1947 Flaiano was awarded the esteemed Premio Strega for his novel *Tempo d'uccidere* (Longanesi), which is set during the Italian colonial war in Ethiopia in 1935-36.

Flaiano's novella "La penultima cena" was included in a collection of short stories from 1928 entitled *Le ombre bianche*. The collection can be read as a fierce satire of both the entertainment industry and society of the 'dolce vita' Rome of the time (cf. Ruoizzi 2012, 241-53). As are most of the other stories in the volume, "La penultima cena" is set in Rome, at a party held in an upper-class setting. The party takes on the guise of an ancient Roman feast, reenacted in modern times. This fictional scene is based on the host's copy of Alma-Tadema's well-known painting, *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888) (*Fig. 1*)¹.

¹ *The Roses of Heliogabalus* was the result of a commission from Mr John Aird – who would later become Sir John Aird, 1st Baronet from his successes as a civil engineering



Fig. 1 – Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, 1888, 131, 8 × 213, 4 cm, oil on canvas, Pérez Simón's private collection.

Alma-Tadema's painting depicts one of the legends surrounding Emperor Heliogabalus². The painting shows the moment of the feast in which the Emperor suffocates his guests with rose petals dropped from the ceiling. The episode was first recorded in a mid-sixth-century history of the lives of Late Roman Emperors, the *Historia Augusta*, in the chapter dedicated to Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus (203-222) who, because of his worship

contractor (most notably for the first Aswan Dam in 1898-1902) – to Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema in 1888 for the price of four thousand pounds. Today the painting is part of the Juan Antonio Pérez Simón collection. Because of the unfashionability and resulting low values of Alma-Tadema paintings between 1920 and 1960, *The Roses of Heliogabalus* was put up for sale in London by M. Newman Ltd and Christie's, but no buyer was found. Previously, Alma-Tadema's kiss of death had been Roger Fry's obituary in *The Nation* in 1913. Following his critical downfall, Christie's bought the painting for 100 guineas. It was eventually sold to Alma-Tadema collector and US TV personality Allen Funt in New York (Barrow 2001, 197).

² A review of the painting published in the *Daily Telegraph* on 5 May 1888 identifies the specific episode (Barrow 2001, 200-1, note 231).

of Elagabal, the Syro-Roman sun god, was also well known as Heliogabalus. The reliability of the biography is dubious as it is clear that the chapter's author, Aelius Lampridius, exaggerates some of the Emperor's eccentricities. Indeed, Edward Gibbon does not mention the feast in the chapter dedicated to Heliogabalus in his *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-89), and even notes that many of the stories of the vices and excesses which surround the figure of Heliogabalus were probably overstated by Lampridius (Gibbon 1977, 128). Part of the original extract from *Historia Augusta* reads: "Oppressit in tricliniis versatilibus parasites suos violis et floribus, sic ut animam aliqui efflaverint, cum erepere ad summum non possent"³ (XXI, 5).

The various excesses recounted in *Historia Augusta* have bestowed a somewhat nefarious fame on Heliogabalus for the crimes he purportedly committed in order to satisfy his sexual desires. The deadly feast depicted in Alma-Tadema's painting had become a common subject in both literature and art beginning with the Romantic and Decadent movements.

In 1863 Théophile Gautier published an article entitled "Fêtes d'Héliogabale" in the literary magazine *Moniteur universel* which included a description of Heliogabalus from his short story "Une nuit de Cléopâtre" in 1838 (Gautier 2002, 767). Later, in 1884, Joris Karl Huysmans would describe Heliogabalus in his popular novel *À rebours* (four years before the Alma-Tadema painting) during a discussion on the prose of Tertullian, who lived during the reign of Heliogabalus:

Il recommandait, avec le plus beau sang-froid, l'abstinence charnelle, la frugalité des repas, la sobriété de la toilette, alors que, marchant dans de la poudre d'argent et du sable d'or, la tête ceinte d'une tiare, les vêtements brochés de perreries, Èlagabal travaillait, au milieu de ses eunuques, à des ouvrages de femmes, se faisait appeler Impératrice et changeait, toutes les nuits, d'Empereur, l'élisant de préférence parmi les barbiers, les gâte-sauces, et les cochers de cirque. (Huysmans 1981, 102-03)

With great coolness, he recommended sexual abstinence, frugal meals, and moderation of one's toiletry, while he himself walked in the powder of silver and golden sand, his head encircled by a tiara, and his clothes enriched with gemstones. Elagabalus worked, amid his eunuchs, doing typically feminine chores,

³ "In a banqueting-room with a reversible ceiling he once overwhelmed his parasites with violets and other flowers, so that some of them were actually smothered to death being unable to crawl out to the top" (Magie 1979, 1489).

called himself Empress and switched Emperors [partners] every night, choosing from among his barbers, chefs and charioteers. (My translation)

References to Heliogabalus appear in some poems just a few years after Alma-Tadema's painting was first exhibited. In *Leaves of Grass* (1891-92), Walt Whitman correlates roses and death in the seventh stanza of "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd". The connection between death and roses is directly represented by Heliogabalus' roses:

(Nor for you, for one alone,
Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,
For fresh as the morning, thus would I chant a song for you
O sane and sacred death.

All over bouquets of roses
O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies,
But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,
Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,
With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,
For you and the coffins all of you O death.) (Whitman 1982, 1982)

The same correlation between death and roses is found in the poetic work of German Stefan George, who chose *Algabal* (Paris, 1892) as the title for a book of his own poems published four years after the first painting was first exhibited:

Auf die schleusen!
Und aus reusen
Regnen rosen
[...]
Die begraben. (George 1892, 19) ⁴

These are just a few examples of the pairing of roses and death in 19th-century literature. Although the association was not new, Alma-Tadema's work plays a fundamental role in presenting a traditional symbol of passionate love as death's flower, even if his use of roses seems to have been tied to chromatic

⁴ The following English translation is drawn from George 1974, 5051: "Open the sluices / Floodgate looses / Roses, flaunted [...] / Drowning under".

reasons rather than fidelity to the myth⁵. Indeed, the manner in which Alma-Tadema symbolically commingled death and roses in relation to the myth of Heliogabalus was quite original. The version in the *Historia Augusta* does not make any mention of roses, but rather speaks of “violets and other flowers” that overwhelm the Emperor’s guests, using violets as a traditional symbol of death. Instead, it is likely that the painter drew his inspiration from a peculiar ancient Roman ritual. During *Rosaria* or *Rosalia*, an ancient Roman festivity which took place between May and June, tombs were covered with roses and decorated with garlands. As an offer to the Manes, Roman deities of the afterlife, these decorations symbolized the transience of life. Regardless, in all artistic references to the feast of Heliogabalus subsequent to Alma-Tadema’s painting, roses have been used⁶.

Within the context of 19th-century Italian literature, a young Gabriele D’Annunzio seems to also have been inspired by Alma-Tadema. Though there is no evidence of D’Annunzio having ever seen or even heard of *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, the subject of roses is a central motif in *Il piacere* (1889), a novel written at the same time that the Alma-Tadema painting was being exhibited in London. Furthermore, D’Annunzio’s first three novels, *Il piacere*, *L’innocente* (1891) and *Il trionfo della morte* (1894) were later republished by the author as a collection entitled *Romanzi della rosa*, the rose here being elected as a symbol of sexual pleasure (cf. Pieri 2001).

In the century that followed, the 1934 book by Antonin Artaud, *Héliogabale ou l’Anarchiste couronné*, would represent contemporary literature’s main contribution to the “myth” of Heliogabalus, though the author neither includes the episode of the roses in his fictional biography nor lists *Historia Augusta* among his sources (Artaud 1979). Closer to the date of the composition of “La penultima cena”, Alberto Arbasino composes another highly experimental book in which fragments of *Historia Augusta* are intermingled with contemporary references to Italian culture and society. He both denounces the traditional middle-class novel and offers an alternative experi-

⁵ “In the winter of 1888 Alma-Tadema was working on his well-known painting *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, which depicts the emperor Heliogabalus suffocating his guests in countless rose petals. The story goes that, while he was painting this picture, the artist had fresh rose petals brought every week from the French Riviera to his studio in chilly London. We do not know if the story is true, although the explosion of color in this painting suggests that it is” (Verhoogt 2007, 502).

⁶ See Piccioni 2014, for a survey of the leitmotif of roses and death across art and literature, especially in relation to the legend of Heliogabalus.

mental model of literary writing⁷. It was probably this book that inspired Flaiano's short story. Flaiano makes direct reference to Heliogabalus' roses in the *Corriere della sera* on 1 March 1969, the same year in which the first edition of Arbasino's *Super Eliogabalo* was published. Flaiano's article would later be included in another posthumous collection, *La solitudine del satiro*, published in 1973 and comprised of articles that had been left out of *Le ombre bianche* in 1972. The following extract from this article is later rephrased in "La penultima cena", and plays an important role in the genesis of the short story:

Eliogabalo invitava i suoi amici a un'orgia d'amore. Sui tappeti e i cuscini di un salone le coppie si allacciavano, si scambiavano, sovrapponevano, enfatizzando il piacere per compiacere il sovrano, che aveva diciotto anni. Il sovrano, sul suo largo trono-letto, circondato da cinedi e cortigiane (egli era in realtà sposato con un centurione), tratteneva invece il suo piacere. E regolava quello degli altri. Petali di rose piovevano dal soffitto, lanciati da schiavi fiorai. La pioggia aumentava, i petali cadevano sempre più fitti, poi a mazzi. Qualcuno dei partecipanti aveva la sensazione di una trappola, aggrottava le sopracciglia, tentava di sollevarsi, un blocco di un quintale di rose lo schiacciava sul pavimento. Tra le urla e lo spavento, altri blocchi cadevano. I lussuriosi laggiù non sfuggivano alla morte, per ferite o soffocamento. Eliogabalo esemplava per il suo piacere quella che è la condizione dell'amore sensuale: che dapprima delizia e infine uccide per la sua stessa intensità, la quale si sviluppa secondo una progressione geometrica, e chiede a se stesso sempre nuove forze e immaginazioni, fino al punto critico di rottura. Risulta però che Eliogabalo si riteneva un moralista, aveva crisi mistiche, era fedele agli Dei, dei quali del resto faceva parte nella sua qualità di imperatore. Era insomma un quaresimalista che invece di minacciare le pene dell'inferno le dimostrava. Ma non fu capito. Trovò la morte in una rivolta di cortigiani. Oggi, con le sue idee, farebbe il regista. (Flaiano 1996, 677-78)

Heliogabalus invited his friends to an orgy of love. Couples intertwined on the carpets and cushions of a hall. They interlaced, exchanged partners, and laid upon one another, emphasizing their pleasure in order to please the king, who was eighteen years old. Instead the sovereign, on his wide throne-bed, surrounded by catamites and courtesans (he was actually married to a centurion),

⁷ This is the Italian translation by Arbasino of the above-quoted Latin passage in *Historia Augusta*: "Fece ricoprire di viole e di altri fiori profumatissimi certi suoi parassiti nei loro triclini ribaltabili, sicché esalarono l'anima tutti quelli che non seppero arrampicarsi alla superficie" (Arbasino 2001, 76).

held back his pleasure. And he regulated the pleasure of the others. Rose petals rained down from the ceiling, launched by florist-slaves. The rain increased, the petals fell more and more densely, then in bunches. Some of the participants had the feeling of a trap, they grimaced, trying to rise, but a mass of roses, a quintal, crushed them to the floor. Among the screams and fright, other piles fell. The lustful people were not able to escape death, either by injury or suffocation. For his own pleasure, Heliogabalus exemplified the sensual love condition, which initially delights and by its very intensity ultimately kills, developing according to a geometric progression, requiring ever new forces and imagination until reaching the critical point of rupture. However, it is said that Heliogabalus considered himself a moralist. He had mystical crises. He was faithful to the gods. In his role as emperor he was part of them. In short, he was a Lenten preacher that showed hell instead of threatening it. But he was not understood. He was killed by the rebellion of his courtiers. Today, with his ideas, he would be a film director.⁸

The description is very similar to the experience undergone by the characters in Flaiano's "La penultima cena". The legend of the roses enters the plot via an actual feast modelled after Alma-Tadema's *The Roses of Heliogabalus*. Progressively, the painting comes to pervade the entire feast narrated in Flaiano's short story. And more importantly, the use of the image in the plot construction lends itself to a theatrical fictionalization of the Roman world, a mechanism to which Flaiano alludes in his characterization of Heliogabalus as a modern day film-director.

2. *THE ROSES OF HELIOGABALUS'* FEAST: *MISE EN ABYME* AND EKPHRASIS IN FLAIANO'S "THE PENULTIMATE SUPPER"

Before the feast starts, a nameless narrator is given a tour of the house where the dinner party is taking place. The host takes him to a room and shows him a work of art that the narrator identifies as a reproduction of an Alma-Tadema's painting⁹:

⁸ Translations from Flaiano's passages are mine. An English translation by Anton Ivanov will be published in the second issue (*Ennui*) of the literary journal *Vestiges*.

⁹ Concerning the reproductions of Alma-Tadema's paintings during his life and beyond, see Verhoogt 2007: "With Alma-Tadema [...] the distance between 'reproducible art' and 'original art' does not seem to have been very great. The essential factor was probably not so much that a work was original or reproducible, but that it was original

La padrona di casa [...] mi precedette in un piccolo salone. Attraversandolo, tanto per ristabilire che non ero poi l'ultimo sciocco, indicai un quadro che campeggiava solo su una parete e dissi: "Oh, ma è un Alma-Tadema" [...] Non un originale, precisò la dama, ma una buona copia d'epoca e in formato ridotto, un metro per due, circa [...] Parlai ancora del quadro, che rappresentava un'orgia alla corte di Eliogabalo. Petali di rose cadevano dal soffitto sui corpi dei commensali distesi e allacciati nei letti del triclinio. Mi effusi su Alma-Tadema: uno di quei pittori vittoriani che usavano modelli napoletani e li fotografavano nudi a Pompei, per poi mettere un po' di verità storica nelle loro composizioni. E riuscivano invece a esprimere la repressa sensualità vittoriana, dolciastra, professorale, quella stessa che poi sarebbe finita nel cinema muto e a colori sull'antica Roma. (Flaiano 1997, 1261-62)

The landlady [...] led me into a small room. Crossing it, just to show that I was not the stupid one at the rear, I pointed to a painting that hung alone on a wall and I said, "Oh, but it is an Alma-Tadema" [...] Not an original, the lady pointed out, but a good copy from the period, downsized to about one meter for every two [...] I talked again about the painting, which represented an orgy at the court of Heliogabalus. Rose petals fell from the ceiling on the bodies of diners lying in the beds of the triclinium. I went on about Alma-Tadema, one of those Victorian painters who used Neapolitan models and photographed them nude in Pompeii, just to put a little of historical truth in their compositions. In the end, they were able to express the repressed, sugary, and professorial Victorian sensuality, the same one that would end up in silent and colour movies made about ancient Rome.

The painting represents a conversational opportunity for the narrator to make a first step towards fitting in at the dinner. By displaying his artistic knowledge, he hopes to be held in high esteem by his host and, consequently, to be well received by the other guests. Although the narrator's reference to the photographs of Neapolitans cannot be related to Alma-Tadema himself, who never took photographs of Italian models directly but rather used pictures taken by others (such as Wilhelm Von Gloeden and Wilhelm Plüschow), the relationship established by the narrator between Alma-Tadema's Victorian style and silent era cinema is important, in particular in light of the above-mentioned 1969 article by Flaiano. The short film *Héliogabale ou L'Orgie romaine* (1911) by Louis Feuillade introduces the leitmotif of raining roses in cinema; in addition, as the film is hand-painted, the chromatic effect seems to

and reproduceable" (505).

directly evoke the vibrant colors in *The Roses of Heliogabalus*. Alma-Tadema's paintings would later inspire the film sets of the producer and director Cecil B. DeMille. The introduction of Technicolor was largely employed in his Hollywood epics, such as *The Ten Commandments* (1923, 1956; cf. Swanson 1977, 43). In this context, we can also read Flaiano's short story as a sort of "screen-play", set in motion by the movement of the roses in Alma-Tadema's painting. Indeed, the description of *The Roses of Heliogabalus* injects the plot with an almost cinematic temporal and narrative movement.

Most importantly, the painting functions as a sort of framing device in which the narrative background is mirrored. The feast painted in Alma-Tadema's *The Roses of Heliogabalus* acts as a *mise en abyme* of Flaiano's "La penultima cena", in the sense of an enclave having a relationship of similarity to the work which contains it, as Lucien Dällenbach proposes (Dällenbach 1977, 18). As *The Roses of Heliogabalus* depicts an ancient Roman scene, the painting is an anticipation of the fictional event that is being narrated, a synonymous, yet contemporary, Roman feast, recreated by the upper class society of the city:

Andammo nel vasto salone dov'era preparata la mensa. La parte centrale era occupata da un tavolo lungo e basso, già coperto di fiori e vassoi, bottiglie e bicchieri. Lungo le pareti contai dodici divani con molti cuscini, le luci erano tenui, di colore giallo di Napoli, e lasciavano vasti campi alle ombre [...] E il mio ospite: "Sono anch'essi convitati, miei carissimi amici e amiche, solo che a loro è toccato per sorteggio il ruolo dei servi. Comincia a capire? Può trattarli male, se vuole, essi hanno solo il dovere di badare alla nostra felicità per tutto il tempo della cena, e dopo. Non possono rifiutarsi a nulla. Se qualcosa non va, si faccia sentire, non tema di offenderli". "Schiavi?". "Se preferisce. Ma schiavi che hanno accettato liberamente di esserlo e che la prossima volta potranno farla da padroni. Niente antica Roma, solo un tuffo nella libertà dei rapporti. Lo consideri dal lato terapeutico, si rilassi". Indicavo i divani: "Un triclinio" dissi. "Ne ha l'aspetto, l'organizzazione lo richiede. Ma un antico triclinio presupponeva un padrone, dei clienti e degli schiavi, inamovibili [...] Qui tutto si svolge sul piano della libera rappresentazione e finisce all'alba. Inutile dire" e qui mi guardò fisso "che lei dimenticherà tutto all'alba". (Flaiano 1997, 1263-64)

We went into the large hall where they had laid the table. The central part was occupied by a long, low table, already covered with flowers and trays, bottles and glasses. I counted twelve sofas along the walls and many pillows. The lights were soft, a yellow typical of Naples. They left vast fields of shadows [...] And my guest, "These dear friends are also guests, but by draw they must perform

the role of servants. Do you understand? You can treat them badly if you want. Their sole duty is to look after our happiness for the whole dinner, and after. They cannot refuse anything. If something goes wrong, make yourself heard, and have no fear of offending them". "Slaves?" "If you prefer. But slaves who have freely accepted to be so, and that next time may be masters. No ancient Rome here. Only an adventure into a free reconfiguration of relations. Consider the therapeutic side, and just relax". I pointed to the sofa: "A triclinium", I said. "It has the appearance. The organization requires it. But an ancient triclinium presupposed a master, clients and slaves, immovable [...] Here everything takes place on the level of free representation and ends at dawn. Needless to say", and he stared at me, "you will forget everything at first light".

The narrator notices a triclinium, a sort of ancient Roman couch. He has already mentioned the triclinium in his description of Alma-Tadema's painting, which also appears in the episode narrated in *Historia Augusta*. Through these associations, the reader is shown that *The Roses of Heliogabalus* displays an inner connection with the narrative space. The same backdrop for the painting is recreated for the feast. Starting from this single element, the entire Roman world of *The Roses of Heliogabalus* is drawn out, such as the separation between masters and slaves, which stands for the actual division of upper-class guests from the rest of bourgeois class.

The narrative returns to the painting another time. This second mention not only creates a circular structure, but also enables the development of a broader *ekphrasis* than that provided by the first allusion to the painting. This very *ekphrasis* is distinctly expressed in the middle of the feast:

"Come va? Tutto bene?". "Benissimo. C'è un miglioramento. Non ho sentito cadere petali di rose". E guardai il soffitto. "Le rose di Eliogabalo?" [...] "Vuol dire che raggiungeremo presto il punto critico, la fase di rottura? Non crede che l'abbiamo aggirata affrontando la questione con semplicità d'animo? Come bambini?" [...] [Rodolfo] Ebbe la cattiva idea di ordinare a due servi che portassero quel quadro [...] "Eliogabalo" cominciò Maria "è quel tale che vedete sul triclinio del fondo, mentre leva in alto la sua coppa. Attorno a lui, i suoi fedelissimi [...] Aveva diciotto anni quando si sposò con un centurione delle guardie, credo [...] Usava invitare i suoi amici a orge d'amore. In basso, sdraiati su lettini, le coppie si allacciavano, si scambiavano, si sovrapponevano, enfatizzando un poco il loro piacere, per lusingare il sovrano. Dal soffitto, come vedete, piovono petali di rose, a mazzi. E adesso continui lei". Feci un gesto per dire che non c'era altro da aggiungere [...] Intervenne Rodolfo: "[...] Sì, dal soffitto piovevano petali di rose, però man mano la pioggia aumentava. Già nel quadro è ec-

cessiva [...] Immaginate su, come nel soffitto di un palcoscenico, schiavi macchinisti che gettano questi petali [...] Sulla destra del quadro, due invitati debbono già aver subodorato qualcosa. Uno, il biondo con la barba, certamente un germanico, si solleva e guarda verso l'imperatore; l'altro [...] non è convinto, guarda verso di noi, cioè verso l'obiettivo per chiedere proprio a noi che cosa sta succedendo. Sul fondo, a sinistra, una giovane suona il flauto, forse per coprire il rumore che i pacchi di petali fanno cadendo [...] A sinistra, in basso, i corpi, già quasi tutti ricoperti, di alcuni commensali. Il gioco era questo: quei lussuriosi non sfuggivano alla morte per soffocamento, perché tra poco cadranno quintali di rose. E finalmente Eliogabalo ...". "Che orgasmo difficile!" esclamò la principessa Biancospini. Tutti risero. (Flaiano 1997, 1273-74)

"How are you? Is everything alright?". "Very well. There is an improvement. I don't hear petals of roses falling". And I looked at the ceiling. "The Roses of Heliogabalus?" [...] "Do you mean that we will reach the critical point soon, the phase of rupture? Don't you believe that we have bypassed it by addressing the question with ease of mind? Like children?" [...] He [Rodolfo] had the bad idea of ordering two servants to bring that painting [...] "Heliogabalus" Maria began, "is the fellow you see on the triclinium in the background, while he raises up his cup. Around him, those most loyal to him [...] He was eighteen years old when he married the centurion of his guards, I think [...] He used to invite his friends to orgies of love. At the bottom, lying on small beds, the couples intertwined, exchanged partners, laid upon one another, emphasizing their pleasure in order to please the king. From the ceiling, as you see, it's raining rose petals, in bunches. And now you continue". I made a sign to say that there was nothing to add [...] Rodolfo cut in. "[...] Yes, from the ceiling it rains rose petals, but slowly the rain increased. Already in the painting it is excessive [...] Imagine how, like from the ceiling of a stage, slaves working as stagehands throw these petals [...] On the right of the picture, two guests must already have suspected something. One, the blond man with a beard, certainly Germanic, rises and looks towards the Emperor; the other [...] has some doubts. He looks at us, that is, towards the lens just to ask us what's going on. Far off, on the left, a young man plays the flute, perhaps to cover the noise that the petal bunches make as they fall [...] To the left, below, the bodies of some diners are already nearly covered. This was the game: those libertines did not escape death by suffocation, because soon tons of roses would begin falling. And finally Heliogabalus ...". "What a difficult orgasm!" said princess Biancospini. Everyone laughed.

This passage can be envisaged as a rewriting of the first lines of Flaiano's earlier article. The evocation of Heliogabalus' roses here sets an evident *ekphrasis* of Alma-Tadema's painting in motion within the narrative, triggered

by a dialogue between the narrator, the host Rodolfo and another participant present at the gathering. This time around, the characters do not restrain themselves from describing Alma-Tadema's scene in all its details and hues. They produce a narrative description of the action that the painter has fixed into a single painted image. On the one hand, Rodolfo calls attention to two particular characters in the scene, elucidating their fear and explaining that they are aware of their precarious condition. On the other hand, he points out the posture of the Emperor who is raising his cup in anticipation of the imminent death of his commensals. Especially this second mention reveals the Emperor's pleasure as the point of view for the construction of the entire scene and the character with whom Rodolfo identifies himself. But, in some way, the creator of the feast's game adopts the perspective of the Emperor only to stage a temporary fiction where the principle of pleasure can be consumed by the upper class in a safe place. We are going to see how the narrator argues against this kind of use of art as a cultural shelter from the rest of society.

3. EKPHRASIS AS AN IDEOLOGICAL BATTLEFIELD FOR SOCIAL CLASSES

In *Museum of Words* (1993), James A. W. Heffernan made a well-known attempt at defining *ekphrasis* – the verbal representation of visual representation – which embodies a rather elastic meaning and encompasses a number of shifting applications from the time of Neoclassicism up through Postmodernism. At the beginning, *ekphrasis* appeared as “the unruly antagonist of narrative, the ornamental digression that refuses to be merely ornamental”, but then gradually began to add degrees of nuance and shade which served to make “explicit the story that visual art tells only by implication” (Heffernan 1993, 5). It is only from the time of Romantic poetry that *ekphrasis* becomes an autonomous literary genre and can no longer be considered a fragment included in a larger literary work. This change most likely resulted from the way the visual arts came to be accessible to everyone with the advent of modern museums and galleries. Thus, Heffernan claims that recently “the *ekphrastic* poetry of our time completes the transformation of *ekphrasis* from incidental adjunct to a self-sufficient whole, from epic ornament to free-standing literary work” (Heffernan 1993, 137). Similarly, I claim that *The Roses of*

Heliogabalus is not merely a part of the décor in Flaiano's story, nor is its description within the text simply an expendable digression, but rather that it constitutes the artistic scenario for a theatre, if not a cinema script, in which the modern-day Roman guests find their own order of symbols and meanings. The Victorian picture is the source for an appropriation of past life revisited within the contemporary. Their theatrical performance, with its apparent levity and inoffensive comedy, seems innocent, a mere game. Nevertheless, the sacrifice of one of the guests is called for: that of the narrator, who represents the opposing middle-class world.

Near the end of the story, the narrator is ordered to stand facing the assembled guests and explain the meaning of Heliogabalus' perversion. The protagonist is invested with the responsibility of first giving meaning to the painting and then indirectly judging his host's re-creation of the ancient Roman feast. The passage from Flaiano's 1969-article about the relationship between Heliogabalus and morality is actually reproduced in the text word for word:

“Ma sentiamo la morale della favola! Avanti la dica!” disse la padrona di casa rivolta a me [...] Cominciai sorridendo, quasi per scusarmi: “La morale? Bene, vogliamo dire che Eliogabalo esemplava per il suo piacere quella che è la condizione dell'amore sessuale? Che dapprima delizia e infine uccide per la sua stessa intensità, la quale si sviluppa secondo una progressione geometrica? E chiede a se stesso sempre nuove forze (petali di rose) e immaginazioni, fino al punto di rottura?”. Ci fu un mormorio di disapprovazione. Il maître intervenne: “Se ho ben capito”, disse “questo Eliogabalo era un predicatore, un quaresimalista che invece di minacciare le pene dell'inferno, le dimostrava. Ma lei crede all'inferno?”. Si rise ancora. Il marito di Domizia aggiunse: “Ma non fu capito. Infatti, lo ammazzarono. E fecero bene. Un moralista di meno”. (Flaiano 1997, 1275)

“Let's hear the moral of the story! Go on, tell us”, the landlady said addressing herself to me [...] I began smiling as a sort of apology: “The moral? Well, do we mean that Heliogabalus exemplified for his own pleasure that which is the very condition of sexual love? Which at first delights and, in the end, kills by its same intensity, which develops according to a geometrical progression. This pleasure always requires of itself new forces (rose petals) and imagination until it reaches its breaking point”. There was a murmur of disapproval. The maître interjected: “If I've understood correctly”, he said, “this Heliogabalus was a preacher, a Lenten preacher who instead of threatening hell, showed its pains. But do you believe in hell?”. Everyone laughed again. Domizia's husband added: “But he was not understood. In fact, they killed him. And they did well. One less moralist”.

From his point of view, Rodolfo insists on the theatrical neutrality of their recreated Roman feast and claims an aesthetic superiority which supersedes any moral qualms provoked by the original Roman legend:

“Non voglio farvi una lezione di storia, ma quando i Romani, raggiunta la loro crassa ricchezza, si decisero a trarre dalla vita quei piaceri che ritenevano etruschi, o greci, o orientali, cioè immorali, li portarono alle estreme conseguenze, proprio per distruggerli, inconsciamente. Questo a noi non accadrà [...] Le nostre cene sono un rito culturale di liberazione, diciamo anche di purificazione, basato sull’eguaglianza dei sacerdoti”. [...] “C’è sempre un pericolo” dissi. “Che la classe piccolo-borghese, con la melensaggine che sempre la distingue, non prenda tra poco di adottare i vostri riti e farli suoi”. (Flaiano 1997, 1275-76)

“I don’t want to give you a lesson in History, but when the Romans reached their crass level of opulence, they decided to draw from life those pleasures that they believed to be Etruscan, or Greek, or Oriental, in other words, immoral. They pushed those pleasures to an exaggerated extreme, in order to destroy them really, at least unconsciously. This will not happen to us [...] Our dinners are a cultural rite of liberation, also of purification we could say, based on the equality of priests”. [...] “There’s always the danger”, I said. “That the petty-bourgeoisie, in line with the inanity that consistently characterizes it, will soon demand to take your rituals and make them their own”.

The narrator replies to Rodolfo with a comparison between Ancient Rome and the current middle classes. A distinctive feature of middle-class culture is the tendency to convert any cultural product, even one taken from the ancient world, into an accessible form of current consumption. The use of an Ancient Roman epic as a subject for the film industry has already been noted. It seems that the narrator implicitly asserts that the middle classes can appropriate the reproduction of the feast because of their tendency to adapt cultural products and practices to a common level of consumption. The possible intrusion of the external world into the elitist feast threatens to interrupt the uniqueness of the elitist group. Though the host of this upper-class dinner seeks to maintain and protect the seclusionary nature of his theatrical game, it is also true that this sort of elitist seclusion is not invulnerable to the other they disapprove. The guests of “La penultima cena” could also be compared to the figure of the dandy, who can be envisaged as a “theatrical being, abjectly dependent on the recognition of the audience he professes to disdain” (Adams 1995, 22). From a Marxist point of view, the difference between the upper classes and the mid-

dle classes is a difference in degree and not in kind. In other words, they both consume the experience they live. Only the former is more exclusive, but again bourgeois nonetheless. The narrator appears as the historical conscience that brings into the small community of dandies the awareness about the weakness of their rites of conservation and separation from the world, which make use of arts in the sense of exclusive aesthetic experiences, not involved in the bourgeois transformation of arts into cultural products. This intrusion by the middle classes has already occurred through the presence of the narrator. The narrator spoils the theatrical game with his consciousness and reaffirms that the two worlds are closer than these dandies might imagine. Finally the game of the small group appears only to be an individual solution, an ideal exercise against bourgeois morality, but based on a decadent and aesthetic seclusion, a life temporary disconnected from the bourgeois age that cannot alter the degree of their participation in it.

As the comments of the narrator show the intrusion of the external world into the shelter, the disapprobation towards him increases. Shortly after his comment on morality, the narrator diverts the conversation to literature. This appears to be a breach of the host's rules for the feast:

“Basta”, disse Domizia svegliandosi “bando alle malinconie. Ritorni la gioia, beviamo, quant'è bella giovinezza, non sapete che la peste è in città?”. Devo dire che ancora per mia colpa, per citare Boccaccio, il discorso cadde sulla letteratura. “Ah, ah!” urlò Rodolfo “pegno, pegno!” [...] “Oh, no, mio caro amico”, disse Rodolfo “l'inchino va fatto dal poggiolo, lo esige il rito” [...] Sotto cominciava, degradando verso la strada, una fitta vegetazione. Tra i rami vedeva il largo panorama del porto coi suoi fuochi e su in alto una luna già mangiata, impassibile [...] M'inchinai ancora, stavolta un poco più solennemente. Non feci in tempo a risollevarmi che mi sentii di colpo spingere alle spalle. Persi l'equilibrio, brancolai e caddi a testa in giù [...] Mi fermai dopo qualche interminabile istante su una larga siepe di pitosforo, e sull'erba tenera [...] reagii ridendo sciocamente, nella convinzione che il gioco continuasse e che si aspettassero da me una reazione sportiva, conviviale [...] Stavo per rialzarmi, quando un pacco venne a cadere proprio ai miei piedi e la voce di Rodolfo diceva secca: “Ecco i tuoi petali di rose, stronzo”. (Flaiano 1997, 1276-78)

“Enough”, Domizia said waking up “no more melancholy. May joy return to us, let's drink, youth is so beautiful. Don't you know that the plague is in town?”. I must confess that, in citing Boccaccio, the conversation turned to literature because of me. “Ah, ha!” Rodolfo shouted out, “Dare, dare!” [...] “Oh no, my dear”, Rodolfo said, “the rite demands that you bow down from the balcony”

[...] A thicket, which started beneath, thinned out toward the road. Among the branches I could see the wide panorama of the harbour and its fires, and overhead an already eroded moon, impassive [...] I bowed again, this time a little more solemnly. I had not yet had time to lift myself up when I suddenly felt someone shove me from behind. I lost my balance, and I groped and fell head first [...] I landed after an interminable moment on a large hedge of pitosporum, and tender grass [...] I reacted with a ridiculous giggle, in the belief that the game was continuing, and that the guests expected a sportsmanly, light-hearted reaction [...] I was about to get up when a package fell right at my feet and Rodolfo's rude voice said: "There are your petals of roses, asshole".

The plot ends with the abrupt expulsion of the narrator from the community. The allusion to Boccaccio's *Decameron* is the apparent cause of his expulsion, but this merely constitutes a pretext for ejecting the narrator. The real motive is his claims against the theatrical game.

However, this removal of the narrator is highly significant for the narrative itself. In the last sequence, the narrator falls into the host's trap, he is kicked off the high terrace and tumbles into the undergrowth below. Rodolfo provides a tragicomic interpretation for the narrator's downfall. The fall represents a realistic and diegetic reproduction of the scene in Alma-Tadema's painting, but it conveys quite another meaning altogether. First introduced as an *ekphrastic* description, Heliogabalus' rose petals symbolically reappear in the last scene as the narrator's personal effects are thrown down at him after his fall from the terrace. One of the painting's main elements, the roses revisit the short story as a constant theme that changes both the mode of discourse (either descriptive or diegetic) and significance (either literary or symbolic). Finally, the roses lead the narration to return to the external reality, to the same place that the narrator was occupying at the beginning of the story, when he first saw the fires by the seaside, an allusion of the "plague" of ordinary life affecting the whole of society ¹⁰:

E laggiù, verso il porto, brillavano soltanto quei grandi falò. Un motociclo scendeva, si fermò a pochi passi, la guardia notturna stette lì a scrutarmi. "Buona

¹⁰ "Via Oltremonte domina la città, è il balcone del quartiere più elegante, rammentava la parte europea di una città orientale, nitida e deserta [...] Ma verso il porto, forse nella zona industriale, molti falò arrossavano la coltre di nuvole" (Flaiano 1997, 1261); "Via Oltremonte overlooks the city. It is the balcony of the most elegant district. It reminds one of the European part of an eastern city, limpid and deserted [...]. But towards the port, perhaps in the industrial area, many bonfires reddened the blanket of clouds".

notte” dissi subito [...] “Che cosa sono quei grandi falò, laggiù?” [...] “Tutto. Mobili, vestiti, cadaveri. Sono i fuochi del servizio d’igiene”. (Flaiano 1997, 1278-79)

And down there, towards the harbour, only those big bonfires shone. A motor-cycle was coming down. It stopped a few steps away from me and the night-watch man stood there, examining me. “Good night”, I said immediately [...] “What are the big bonfires over there?” [...] “Everything. Furniture, clothes, bodies. They are sanitation fires”.

The fires burn the remains of what appears to be a contagious epidemic. The dead bodies alluded to in this passage remind us of the plague in Boccaccio’s tale. The narrator’s previous reference to the *Decameron* establishes an indirect analogy. In Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, the young characters leave the city to avoid the plague and thereafter tell stories to pass the time; in a more practical way, the guests at the banquet in Flaiano’s short story look for shelter from the fires outside. In Flaiano’s narrative, they attempt to create a theatre from Alma-Tadema’s artistic representation in order to escape the infection from the external life. As in Boccaccio where there is an “offstage” – the group of young people who find shelter in a villa – which serves as the larger frame story for the different tales, in Flaiano Alma-Tadema’s work provides an off-stage area, in which an alternative life tries to develop from both the past time (ancient Rome) and the past art (Victorian painting). This double temporal variance has to be broadly considered.

The participants have turned *The Roses of Heliogabalus* into a separate theatre in order to escape from bourgeois eyes and middle-class aesthetic by recovering past rites, symbols and cultural references. The modern feast aspires to be a utopian space preserved from the dangers of the secular world, a nostalgic solution facing contemporary times. On the contrary, the city’s harbour, a night worker with whom the narrator speaks, and the references to a sanitation facility are all markers of the danger represented by the historical present and the large mass of common people, with their functional and commercial uses of aesthetic and arts. If this opposition in terms of description appears only briefly at the very end of the short story, the end reveals nevertheless that Alma-Tadema’s painting remains chained in some way to the historical presence of the outside world. In the end, Alma-Tadema’s roses, in the guise of the personal belongings of the narrator, refer to the external reality.

Since Mitchell's "pictorial turn", this sort of relationship between different systems of representation has been pervasively discussed¹¹. The interpretation of painting as synchronic and spatial and poetry and narrative as temporal and diachronic – as Gotthold E. Lessing argued in *Laocoon* (1766) – no longer holds. Images also conceal temporality, as Georges Didi-Huberman shows in *Devant le temps* (2000). Didi-Huberman finds an "anachronism" that inherently belongs to images¹². The anachronism of a Roman feast already exists in Alma-Tadema's painting of Heliogabalus' feast. Anachronism is clearly revealed through the contrast of the historical account of the feast of Heliogabalus with the stylized, sensual forms of Alma-Tadema's painting. Any scene painted using the rules of perspective and the color of nineteenth-century painting would already be anachronistic in relation to the Ancient Roman subject.

Flaiano's *ekphrasis* itself opens the original image up to a new mode of historical distance. The narration creates a backdrop for the actual feast that, despite being modelled on *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, has lost any connection with both the Roman and the nineteenth-century contexts related to the painting.

In this respect, the narrator attempts to give another temporality to the recreated feast by his comments during the second *ekphrasis*. He reintroduces the historical present – *his* present, which reaffirms the insurgence of the ordinary chronology within the separated space-time of the feast. By using the artistic image as a model for escaping ordinary life and reversing the current order of temporal background, the elitist partygoers believe they can protect themselves from the looming presence of history. But the presence of the narrator also means the addition of *his* present to the description, because he brings his own perception to his commentary on *The Roses of Heliogabalus*.

¹¹ "One polemical claim of Picture Theory is that the interaction of pictures and texts is constitutive of representation as such: all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no 'purely' visual or verbal arts, though the impulse to purify media is one of the central utopian gestures of modernism" (Mitchell 1995, 5).

¹² "L'anachronisme serait ainsi, en toute première approximation, la façon temporelle d'exprimer l'exubérance, la complexité, la surdétermination des images" (Didi-Huberman 2000, 16); "The anachronism would be, in a first approximation, the way by which time expresses the exuberance, the complexity, and the overdetermination of images" (My translation).

The “pictorial turn” has taught us that *ekphrasis* and narrative can collaborate to create fictional worlds. Here, Flaiano uses *ekphrasis* as a rhetoric strategy to create a fictional space, as a *mise en abyme* of the whole narrative of the short story, but also as a critique, a verbal description that involves not only the narrative within the artwork, but also a commentary and a reflection on it. On the one hand, the fictional motion of an image through the narration of the feast is a revisiting of Heliogabalus’ myth. The pictorial element of the roses transforms from *ekphrasis* into a narrative action which develops from within the villa until reaching the external reality. On the other hand, *ekphrasis* is also used to express the personal reading of the narrator, a stranger from the outside. As a representative of the middle class, the narrator expresses the ideology of his class in his observations of the painting. His reading claims that a narrative construction drawn from *ekphrasis*, and even *ekphrasis* itself, are not immune to the ideological implications created by the verbal adaptation and transformation of images and paintings.

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ABSTRACT

Just before his death in 1972, the Italian writer Ennio Flaiano wrote a short story entitled "La penultima cena" (The Penultimate Supper) in which Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's painting *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888) is referenced and the "myth" of Heliogabalus itself comes to play a fundamental role in the construction of the narrative. Though the scene recreated by the charac-

ters in Flaiano's short story may be interpreted as a *mise en abyme*, through the transformation of Alma-Tadema's original image using different modes of writing – in particular narrative dialogues and ekphrasis – Flaiano actually critiques an elitist and anti-historical use of art in literature. Building on a reference that the narrator makes to the *Decameron*, the article shows how the ekphrasis hosts an ideological conflict that opposes the narrator's interpretation of Heliogabalus's feast to the one reproduced and staged during a fancy dinner held by members of Rome's high-society.