< Alma-Tadema, Ennio Flaiano and the Legacy of Heliogabalus : the Bourgeois Morality of *Ekphrasis* >

Abstract

The main interest of the short story *La penultima cena* ("*The Second Last Supper*", 1972) by the Italian writer Ennio Flaiano (1910-1972) lies in the role played within the story of the Lawrence Alma-Tadema painting, *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888). Firstly, I will introduce the historical episode the painting is based on and its literature. Then, I will focus on how the feast recreated by the characters and narrated by Flaiano is constructed around an *ekphrasis* of the Alma-Tadema painting according to a system of *mise en abyme*. Here, the host of a banquet styled in the manner of Heliogabalus' feast is met by a modern man in the form of the narrator, the former being too futile and empty a copy to be a worthy successor to the legend of Heliogabalus. My thesis is that the anachronistic meaning present in the original image is lost through its *ekphrasis* into the text in order to point out the distance of this imaginary fiction from an external and removed history.

Riassunto

Il maggior interesse della novella *La penultima cena* (1972) di Ennio Flaiano risiede nell'apparizione al suo interno di un famoso dipinto di Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Roses of Heliogabalus*. Dopo aver introdotto l'episodio e la sua letteratura, mi soffermerò sul modo in cui il banchetto romano ricreato dai personaggi venga esplicitamente costruito come *ekphrasis* del dipinto di Alma-Tadema, secondo un sistema di *mise en abyme*. La tesi del saggio è che esista un

portato anacronistico nell'immagine originale che non viene salvaguardato dall'*ekphrasis* e che permette soprattutto di sottolineare, in ultima analisi, la distanza tra il discorso della storia e ogni processo di costruzione fittizia del contemporaneo. Nella *Penultima cena* la figura di Eliogabalo incontra l'uomo moderno nelle vesti di narratore, ma soltanto come la sua ulteriore, ennesima copia e troppo futile e vuota per poter essere una degna erede della leggenda di Eliogabalo.

Keywords

Ennio Flaiano; Alma-Tadema; Ekphrasis; Anachronism; Mise en abyme

Parole chiave

Ennio Flaiano; Alma-Tadema; Ekphrasis; anacronismo; mise en abyme

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). However, he was the author of a number of collections of short stories and articles, the most outstanding feature of which is his satirical tone. His talent was recognized throughout his lifetime, and as early as 1947 Flaiano was awarded the esteemed Premio Strega for his only traditional novel, *Tempo d'uccidere* (Longanesi), which is set during the Italian colonial war in Ethiopia in 1935-36.

I will start with a close reading of the short story by Flaiano, *La penultima cena*, included in a collection of short stories entitled *Le ombre bianche* (1972). Rome is a frequent setting for a

number of other Flaiano texts, and *La penultima cena* is no exception, recounting a party held in an upper-class social setting. *Le ombre bianche*, in fact, can be read as a fierce satire of both the entertainment business and society in general in the context of the Roman *dolce vita* of the time. (cf. Ruozzi 2012, 241-53 on this topic). The distinctive attribute of *La penultima cena* is that the theme of the party is an ancient Roman feast set in modern times. Moreover, the presence of a reproduction of the well-known painting by Alma-Tadema, *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888), which depicts one of the imperial feasts of Heliogabalus, is closely related to the depiction in the plot of the elaborately simulated Roman feast.

As the Roman Emperor Heliogabalus is at the core of both the story and the painting, it may be useful to quickly outline the history of his portrayal in traditional literature and historiography up until the time in which Flaiano wrote. But let us begin with the painting itself. Mr John Aird, who would later become Sir John Aird, 1st Baronet due to his successes as a civil engineering contractor, most notably for the first Aswan Dam in 1898-1902, commissioned a large painting from Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema in 1888 for the price of four thousand pounds. The result was *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, which is reproduced here in Fig. 1[1].

[1] Today the painting is part of the Juan Antonio Pérez Simón collection. The unfashionability and resulting low values of Alma-Tadema paintings between 1920 and 1960 meant that when *The Roses of Heliogabalus* was put up for sale in London by M. Newman Ltd and Christie's, no buyer was found. Christie's bought the painting in for 100 guineas. It was eventually sold to Alma-Tadema collector and US TV personality Alan Funt in New York (Barrow 2001, 197).

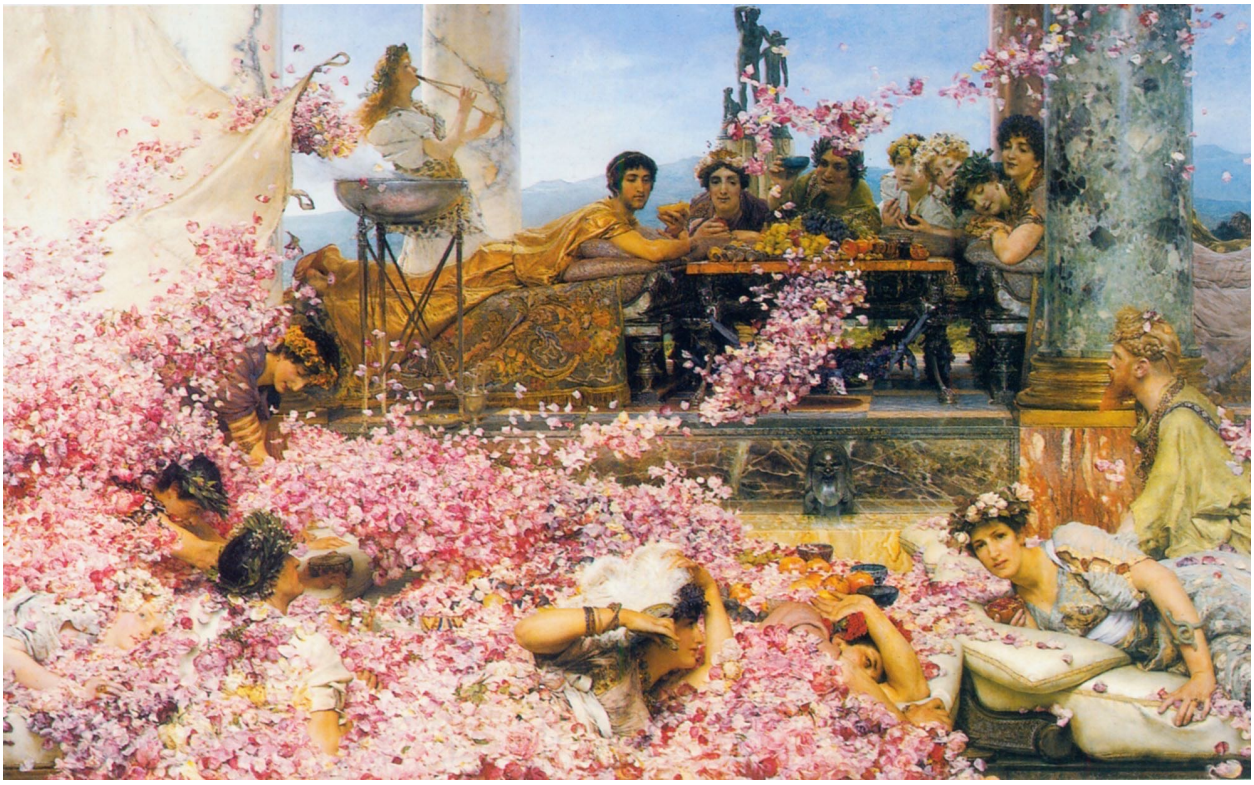

Fig. 1 - Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, 1888, oil on canvas, Pérez Símón's private collection.

The subject matter selected by Alma-Tadema is the depiction of a legend concerning the Emperor Heliogabalus. As is well-known, one of the major preoccupations of Pre-Raphaelite art and in Alma-Tadema's work particularly, is Classical Rome and its history. When Alma-Tadema drew this episode from the life of Emperor Heliogabalus, the subject was immediately identified in a review of the painting published in the *Daily Telegraph* on 5 May 1888 (Barrow 2001, 200-1, note 231).

The episode of the roses appears in the celebrated collection of lives of Late Roman Emperors entitled *Historia Augusta*, written in the mid-sixth century, and in the chapter on Emperor

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus (203-222), better known as Heliogabalus due to his devotion to the Syro-Roman sun god Elagabal. This part of *Scriptore Historia Augusta* is a largely unreliable record of Heliogabalus' reign and certainly overly exaggerates some of his eccentricities. For this reason Edward Gibbon does not mention the episode in the chapter dedicated to Heliogabalus in his major work, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-89), and even makes note of the fact that many of the stories of the vices and excesses which surround Heliogabalus have probably been overstated by Aelius Lampridius, the author of Heliogabalus' biographical entry in *Historia Augusta* (Gibbon 1977, 128). Therefore, the reading of the original extract from *Historia Augusta*, as far as this episode makes up the legend from the life of Antoninus Heliogabalus, is pivotal:

> Oppressit in triciliniis versatilibus parasitos suos violis et floribus, sic ut animam aliqui efflaverint, cum erepere ad summum non possent.[2] (XXI, 5)

The excesses depicted in *Historia Augusta* have bestowed upon Heliogabalus a somewhat nefarious fame for the crimes he committed to satisfy his libido. In particular, when Flaiano writes *La penultima cena* ("The Second Last Supper") this episode had been a common subject in both literature and art since the Romantic and Decadent movements of the nineteenth century.

---

[2] "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).

Similarly to other anecdotes about the Late Roman Empire, the tyrannical and foolish figure of Heliogabalus had already become a seductive subject matter for artists.

For instance, Théophile Gautier published an article entitled "Fêtes d'Héliogabale" in the literary magazine *Moniteur universel* on 11 July 1863 and also included a description of Heliogabalus in the short story *Une nuit de Cléopâtre* (1838)[3]. Even Joris Karl Huysmans describes Heliogabalus in his popular novel *À rebours* in 1884 (that is, four years before Alma-Tadema's painting) when he discusses the prose of the Latin Tertullian, who also 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 pierreries, 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, 1023)

Even later, with immediate effect only three or four years after the success of Alma-Tadema's painting, a large number of poems were written that made reference to Heliogabalus. It means

---

[3] "Le spectacle du monde antique est quelque chose de si écrasant, de si décourageant pour les imaginations qui se croient effrénées et les esprits qui pensent avoir atteint aux dernières limites de la magnificence féerique, que nous n'avons pus nous empêcher de consigner ici nos doléances et nos tristesses de n'avoir pas été contemporain de Sardanapale, de Teglath Phalazar, de Cléopâtre, reine d'Égypte, ou seulement d'Héliogabale, empereur de Rome et prêtre du Soleil. Nous avons à décrire une orgie suprême, un festin à faire pâlir celui de Balthazar, une nuit de Cléopâtre. Comment, avec la langue française, si chaste, si glacialement prude, rendrons-nous cet emportement frénétique, cette large et puissante débauche qui ne craint pas de mêler le sang et le vin, ces deux pourpres, et ces furieux élans de la volupté inassouvie se ruant à l'impossible avec toute l'ardeur de sens que le long jeûne chrétien n'a pas encore matés?" (Gautier 2002, 767).

that, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the changing aesthetic has found a way to express the feelings and the philosophy of the period through the character of Heliogabalus. For instance, in *Leaves of grass* (1891-92), Walt Whitman depicts a correlation between roses and death in the seventh stanza of *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*. This common relationship between death and beauty which was applied to the Heliogabalus story was typical of the western age of aesthetics:

> (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)

Concurrently, the same correlation of death and roses is also found in the poetic work of German Stefan George, who chooses *Alagabal* (Paris, 1892) as the title for a book of his own poems which were published only four years after Alma-Tadema's painting was exhibited:

> Open the sluices
> Floodgate looses
> Roses, flaunted…
> Drowning under. (George 1974, 5051)

Finally, as far as Italian literature is concerned, the young Gabriele D'Annunzio seems to have been inspired by the Pre-Raphaelite movement of which Alma-Tadema was part. In fact, even though there is no evidence of D'Annunzio having heard of or seen *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, the subject of roses is a central motif in *Il piacere* (1889), a novel written at the same time as Alma-Tadema's painting was being exhibited (cf. Pieri 2001).

However, in this chapter, I would like to end on a point about Alma-Tadema's use of the symbolic value of roses and death in the story of Heliogabalus. *Historia Augusta* refers to "violets and other flowers" that overwhelm Emperor's guests until they die and roses are not specifically mentioned. Thus, it is Alma-Tadema who has specifically introduced roses as the type of flower which is implicated in Heliogabalus' crime, that is, the traditional symbol of passionate love, and this flower has been imposed as the Emperor's criminal weapon throughout the rest of the Heliogabalus legacy.

In the century that followed, the 1934 book by Antonin Artaud, *Héliogabale ou l'Anarchiste couronné*, represents twentieth-century literature's most important contribution to the "myth" of Heliogabalus, though the author does not include the episode of the roses in his fictional biography nor does he even quote *Historia Augusta* among his sources (Artaud 1979). However, closer to the date of the composition of *La penultima cena*, the Italian Alberto Arbasino

composes another highly experimental book in which fragments of *Historia Augusta* are intermingled with contemporary references to Italian culture and society. It both denounces and offers an alternative model of text for the traditional bourgeois novel[4]. It is probably this book that inspires Flaiano's short story. In fact, the first edition of Arbasino's *Super Eliogabalo* dates from 1969, and Flaiano makes direct reference to Heliogabalus' roses in the Italian edition of the daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera* on 1 March 1969. This article would later be included in another posthumous collection, *La solitudine del satiro*, published in 1973 by Rizzoli made up of articles that had been left out of *Le ombre bianche* when it was published in 1972. Here is an extract from the article that was rephrased in the text of *La penultima cena*, playing an important role in its genesis:

> Eliogabalo invitava i suoi amici a un'orgia d'amore. Sui tappeti e i cuscini di un salone le coppie si allacciavano, si scambiavano, soprapponevano, 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

[4] 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).

> 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)

At present, we can reveal in advance that a very similar discourse will be entered into by the characters of *La penultima cena* in place of this journalistic speech. We will see that this legend enters the plot as an actual feast and is also at the same time patterned on Alma-Tadema's painting *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, a copy of which features in the story. Thus, the *ekphrasis* of the painting pervades the feast narrated in Flaiano's short story. The anachronistic use of this image in the construction of the plot permits the narrator to emphasize the theatrical fictionalization of the modern world, as the comment in the passage above claims in envisaging a utopian career as a film-director for a modern day Heliogabalus.

2. *The Roses of Heliogabalus*'s Feast: from *mise en abyme* to *ekphrasis* in Flaiano's *La penultima cena*

Having introduced the legend, let us read an excerpt from the beginning of Flaiano's short story. Before the feast starts, a nameless narrator is given a tour of the house in which the dinner party takes place. The narrator quickly comes across a painting that will have particular relevance to the feast:

> 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, 126162)

This painting, which depicts a bacchanalian feast of the Roman Emperor Heliogabalus, is an accurate copy of the original *The Roses of Heliogabalus* painted by Alma-Tadema. Firstly, the painting represents a conversational opportunity for the narrator to make the first step towards social integration into the dinner. Thanks to his comments and his display of artistic knowledge, he will be held in high esteem by his host and, consequently, be well received by the other guests. Then, it becomes apparent that the painting functioned as a sort of framing device in which the narrative background is mirrored on itself.

For this reason, related to the story, I consider that the feast painted in Alma-Tadema's *The Roses of Heliogabalus* acts as a *mise en abyme* of Flaiano's *La penultima cena* right from the outset, if "est mise en abyme toute enclave entretenant une relation de similitude avec l'œuvre qui la contient" (Dällenbach 1977, 18). In particular, as *The Roses of Heliogabalus* depicts an ancient

Roman scene, this painting then reveals what it is going to happen in the fictional situation that is being narrated, the same Roman feast reconstructed by an anonymous upper class society:

> 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)

During the forthcoming depiction of the feast, the narrator makes particular note of a triclinium, which is a sort of ancient Roman couch. The narrator has already noted the presence of a triclinium in his description of Alma-Tadema's painting, and it also appears in the episode narrated in *Historia Augusta*. Through these associations, the reader realizes that *The Roses of Heliogabalus* conceals an inner connection within the narrative space. The same backdrop for the painting is recreated for the feast. In this way, the *mise en abyme* of the painting causes the effect

of the "recursive" of the image of Heliogabalus' roses within the literary text. Starting from that single element, the feast is described and the entire Roman world related to *The Roses of Heliogabalus* is drawn out. In other words, the current reconstruction of an ancient feast mirrors the visual representation of what is happening within the painting, and concurrently the motionless feast portrayed in the painting is developed and transformed into a narrated sequence of actions. In short, the Roman feast bridges the divide between the two media of representation. In addition, the narrative returns to the painting a second time, and this circular structure of the story permits the development of a larger *ekphrasis* than the first allusion to *The Roses of Heliogabalus*. 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?» . . . 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, sdraiate 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 eccessiva . . . 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, 127374)

The passage is a rewrite of the first lines of Flaiano's earlier article, and the roses of Heliogabalus evoked by the narrator here propel a real *ekphrasis* of Alma-Tadema's *The Roses of Heliogabalus* through the words of the host Rodolfo and another participant. 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 compressed into a single pictorial image. For example, Rodolfo distinguishes two particular characters from the scene and elucidates their fear, and then explicates the final awareness of their precarious condition. At the same time, he points out the posture of the Emperor who is raising his cup in anticipation, and then continues the story from the time point of Alma-Tadema's image using all the elements to develop the narration of the tale, from when the roses start to fall, the macabre purpose of which the characters are initially oblivious, until their imminent death.

As is well-known, James A.W. Heffernan in *Museum of Words* (1993) attempts to define *ekhprasis* – 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 to Postmodernism.

In the beginning *ekphrasis* appeared as "the unruly antagonist of narrative, the ornamental digression that refuses to be merely ornamental" and then gradually began to add degrees of nuance and shade functional to making "explicit the story that visual art tells only by implication" (Heffernan 1993, 5). However, it is only from the time of Romantic poetry that *ekphrasis* becomes an autonomous literary genre and is no longer a fragment included in a larger literary work. This change resulted from the way the visual arts came to be represented to a public audience when modern museums and galleries came into existence. Thus, Heffernan claims that more 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).

I concurrently claim that in Flaiano's narration the piece of art is not merely an element of the decor nor is its description in the text simply an expandable digression, but *The Roses of Heliogabalus* is constituted as a sort of "autonomous museum" in which the modern day community of Roman elitist guests find their own scheme of symbols and meanings, and their attempt to isolate and preserve their exclusive culture through a type of "bringing to life" of the image. Performing the depicted scene, with an apparent levity and some inoffensive comedy, seems innocent, at least until a sacrifice of one guest is required: that of the narrator, the representative of the bourgeois world and its lumbering expansion.

3. The Power of Anachronistic Image, or the Bourgeois Morality of *Ekphrasis*

Near the end, the narrator is asked to provide a moral for the scene. He tries to refuse, but unsuccessfully. He is ordered to stand facing the assembled guests and explain the meaning of Heliogabalus' perversion. Thus, the protagonist is invested with the responsibility of giving meaning to the painting and, indirectly, of judging his host's re-creation of the ancient feast. In other words, the narrator is made the guardian of the symbolic nature and value of the entire feast by the other participants and, above all, by the host himself:

> «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)

Firstly, in this passage every element of Flaiano's 1969 article is present, but the text regarding the relationship between Heliogabalus and morality is actually reproduced word for word in the short story. In contrast with the narrator, the host Rodolfo tries to distance his modern feast from any consideration of morality. According to him, the actual feast avoids any moral consideration

in the name of the fictional re-creation of the imperial one. He again insists on both the theatrical and fictional neutrality of his re-created Roman feast and its aesthetic superiority over the common sense of morality, or even the principles of morality in both Ancient Rome and modern times. It is his reference to this overstated morality that leads the narrator to a comparison with bourgeois society. Rodolfo speaks:

> «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 pretenda tra poco di adottare i vostri riti e farli suoi.» (Flaiano 1997, 127576)

The narrator replies to Rodolfo and acknowledges the successful process of the aestheticization of this feast with the defence of an elitist background. The modern feast aspires to the utopian ideal of a fictional space stemming from aesthetic principles. The distinctive feature of middle-class culture is the tendency to convert any cultural product of the ancient world or any ancient social class into an accessible form of consumption within the bourgeoisie. Even the dandy is a selected posture that accounts for this process, as the dandy appears as imitation of the aristocratic lifestyle by the same middle-class people, and, in order to conceal his origins, the dandy exaggerates in its artificial imitation of the manners of a bygone aristocratic class.

Therefore, the feast must make some exclusion to fulfill the requirements of a snob aesthetic, so the plot ends with the direct exclusion of the narrator, who now represents both a sense of bourgeois morality and the secret of Alma-Tadema's painting, and consequently the original Roman Feast. For these reasons, this expulsion of the narrator from the feast is highly significant to the narrative itself: as the participants of Heliogabalus' feast, both narrator and narration (for which the latter also represents literature as a possible historical discourse) are sentenced to death.

In fact, shortly after his comment, the narrator diverts the conversation towards literature. He is seemingly punished for his references that are too cultural for this sort of social occasion according to Rodolfo's rules. He has to consent to being the brunt of a prank by Rodolfo to do penance for his literary comment. The narrator is asked to "prostrate" before the moon on the edge of the terrace of the villa:

> «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». Mi precedette di qualche passo e si fermò dopo una decina di metri, dove finiva l'erba del prato e un basso muretto segnava il limite della proprietà. Sotto cominciava, degradando verso la strada, una fitta vegetazione. Tra i rami vedevo 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 scioccamente, 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)

The narrator's literary reference is the direct cause of his expulsion. The allusion to Boccaccio's *Decameron* represents a breach of the feast's interdictions that have been established by the host. However, for the moment, literature constitutes only a pretext to condemn the narrator and ban him from the feast. The real motivation is his above-mentioned revelation on the meaning of the feast. His evocation of bourgeois society signifies danger for the contemporary elite. Inevitably, the narrator becomes an outcast from the society of contemporary elitists. In the last sequence the narrator falls into the host's trap and is kicked off the high terrace and tumbles into the undergrowth below. The downfall of the narrator is commented on by Rodolfo with a tragicomic interpretation. This fall makes the feast an exact continuation of that of the painting of Heliogabalus.

First introduced as an *ekphrastic* allusion, Heliogabalus' roses now reveal themselves to be more than a mere artistic reference. Their description is converted completely into the narrative discourse as the rose petals symbolically reappear in the last scene as the narrator's personal effects flying down after he falls from the terrace. Continuing the *ekphrasis*, this entire narrated scene gives real movement to the motionless roses of Alma-Tadema's painting. The main element of the *ekphrasis*, the roses giving meaning to description, appear now in a diegetic realization. In conclusion, the roses revisit the text as a constant theme that changes the mode of

discourse, either descriptive or diegetic. At the same time, the *ekphrasis* contributes to the recycling of this key element, conferring a variable shape on the originally depicted roses.

Since "pictorial turn", the relationship between different systems of representation has been pervasively discussed and it is probably unnecessary to recall all of its premises here[5]. The interpretation of painting as synchronic and spatial art as opposed to poetry (and narrative) being temporal and diachronic art, as was argued by Lessing in his *Laocoon* (1766), no longer holds. Images also conceal temporality, as Georges Didi-Huberman shows in *Devant le temps* (2000). In particular, Didi-Huberman finds an "anachronism" that belongs inherently to images[6]. But this sort of anachronism cannot be stretched to include the artificial process of the fictionalization of an ancient Roman feast in our current era. The anachronism of a Roman feast is already exists in Alma-Tadema's painting of Heliogabalus' feast. First and foremost, anachronism is clearly revealed through the contrast of the historical account of the feast of Heliogabalus with the stylized Pre-Raphaelite forms of Alma-Tadema's art. For instance, a scene depicted using the rules of perspective and the colours of nineteenth-century painting is already anachronistic in relation to the representation of the depicted subject, stemming from the ancient Roman world. Conversely, the modern Roman feast narrated in *La penultima cena* can be considered outdated

---

5 "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 gesture of modernism" (Mitchell 1995, 5).

6 "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); "L'image est donc hautement surdéterminée au regard du temps. Cela implique de reconnaître dans une certaine dynamique de la mémoire le principe fonctionnel de cette surdétermination" (Didi-Huberman 2000, 19).

at most, because it aims at recreating a bygone world of distinct classification between citizens and servants, the emperor and his people, that no longer applies to the modern bourgeoisie at the time in which Flaiano's short story is set.

Flaiano's *ekphrasis* opens the original image to a new mode of textual presence. As pointed out, the text progresses from a literary representation of a visual scene to a narrative action of a previous literary representation. However, the narration creates a background that, although modeled on the painting *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, has lost any relationship with both the Roman and twentieth-century ages, past and present.

Moreover, another anachronism appears at the end of the text as product of a reversal. The return to the outside world from the feast and the villa seems at odds with the narrator's perception, as his senses seem irremediably changed by his time spent at the feast. In particular, if the *ekphrasis* turned into narration provokes the narrator's expulsion from the feast, the main interest lies in the fact that the *ekphrasis* substitutes the narrator's diegetic role. The protagonist undergoes a sort of ejection from the status of the narration itself. Even though the *ekphrasis* completes the representation of the fictional world of the story, the same *ekphrasis* shuts the narrator out of his fictional background.

In the last passage of the text we certainly no longer face a realistic representation. The *ekphrasis* has so strengthened the aesthetic reality of the feast that an assumption of an external reality as the source of the representation is no longer required. Accordingly, the narrator no longer seems

essential to the plot. The protagonist is confined to the same place that he was occupying at the beginning of the story, when he first saw the fires by the seaside[7]:

> 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 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)

Two spaces are delimited: the space of the feast and the outside, where the narrator falls and where he returns. The coincidence at the end and at the beginning of the narrator's position in the space, that is, outside the villa, demonstrates a stable and unique process of sense. In accordance with the progression of the tale, the narrator and the dandy, the host, clearly belong to different worlds. In any case, the two backgrounds separate the set of the artistic representation into another universe, which has no story to develop except some elements of everyday life. The city's harbour, a night worker to whom the narrator speaks, and the references of a cleaning department are all markers of the ordinary and bourgeois world. Inevitably, the representation of this world clashes with the fictional feast delineated by the *ekphrasis*.

In this way, the fires are a continuation of the deluge of the roses. As the rose episode means a death sentence for the guests, likewise the narrator's being pushed away means the end of his fictional life as a replicate character at Heliogabalous' feast.

---

[7] "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).

However, those fires also mean the return to time and history within the text and, above all, to its register: literature. In fact, the fires burn the remains of what appears to be a contagious epidemic. Accordingly, the dead bodies alluded to the passage remind us of the pestilence in Boccaccio's tale. The narrator recollects the background of the *Decameron* by Boccaccio and establishes an indirect analogy. If in Boccaccio's *Decameron* the young characters leave the city to avoid the pestilence and thereafter tell stories to pass the time, the modern dandy in Flaiano's transcription wants to directly act out a story, a play, and a theatre.

Finally, the upper class guests experience the *ekphrasis* of an ancient Roman feast, but they ignore the power of any anachronistic image to give the experience of history. As in Boccaccio there is an "offstage" – the group of young people who find shelter in a villa – in which the different stories are contained, so in Flaiano there is the Heliogabalus scene, a painting that functions as an offstage area and delimits the space, and time, wherein the fiction of the theatre grows and elitist people can rescue themselves from the looming presence of history.

Similarly, the dandies created by Flaiano look for shelter from the fires outside. The guests in the villa turn *The Roses of Heliogabalous* into an image in which they escape from the social reality, especially connoted as being bourgeois, and recreated through the narration of a different, separate, but evanescent, moral code. Accordingly with this interpretation, the narrator of Flaiano's story is expelled from the community of other "narrators", which are quite similar to the several narrators which make up the group in the *Decameron* in order to interweave a shared narration: a private fiction at their service, an alternative story compared to the effective historical evolution.

As a result, Flaiano's narrator is the one who loses the power of creating fictional worlds, which are entirely owned by that community. The contradictory cohabitation within the narrative of his short story results from the pending conflict between two moral models. Ultimately, Flaiano's narration seems in accordance with the intellectual struggle between the heritage of the dandy's aesthetic and the bourgeois spirit that has already conquered the rest of the cultural world, but which has actually passed through the paradoxes of its own crisis. The bourgeois narrative no longer has control of its traditional images and cannot adapt them to the social purposes and ethical values in the way that the bourgeois aesthetic was able due to its well-known historical ability to embezzle cultural fragments from different social classes. Concurrently, by forcing the selected image of Heliogabalus to fit into a contradictory present, the dramatisation of the elitist hosts must proceed through consecutive separations, of which the most visibile is the denial of the anachronistic nature of that image. That is, from the point of view of the possibility of a narration, the unveiling of the disastrous compromise realized between fiction and history by contemporary society in the time of Flaiano.

Works Cited

Arbasino, Alberto. 2001. *Super-Eliogabalo*. Torino: Adelphi.
Artaud, Antonin. 1979. *Héliogabale: ou l'Anarchiste couronné*. Paris: Gallimard.
Barrow, Rosemary. 2001. *Lawrence Alma-Tadema*. London: Phaidon.
Dällenbach, Lucien. 1977. *Le récit spéculaire: essai sur la mise en abyme*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2000. *Devant le temps: histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images*. Paris: Éd. de Minuit.
Flaiano, Ennio. 1996. *Opere, 1: Scritti postumi*. Ed. by Maria Corti and Anna Longoni. Milano: Bompiani.

———. 1997. *Opere, [2]: 1947-1972*. Ed. by Maria Corti and Anna Longoni. Milano: Bompiani.

Gautier, Théophile. 2002. *Romans, contes et nouvelles, I*. Ed. by Pierre Laubriet. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Paris: Gallimard.

George, Stefan. 1974. *The Works of Stefan George Rendered Into English. Second, Revised and Enlarged Edition*. Trans. by Olga Marx and Ernst Morwitz. The University of North Carolina Press.

Gibbon, Edward. 1977. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Vol. 1 (180395 A.D.). 3 vol. The Modern Library. New York: Random House.

Heffernan, James A. W. 1993. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Huysmans, Joris-Karl. 1981. *À rebours*. Ed. by Rose Fortassier. Lettres françaises. Paris: Imprimerie nationale.

Magie, David, trans. 1979. *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae*. Vol. 2. 3 vol. Loeb classical library. Cambridge (Mass.) London: Harvard University Press / W. Heinemann.

Mitchell, W. J. T. 1995. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. University of Chicago Press.

Pieri, Giuliana. 2001. “D’Annunzio and Alma-Tadema: Between Pre-Raphaelitism and Aestheticism”. *The Modern Language Review* 96 (2): 36169. doi:10.2307/3737344.

Ruozzi, Gino. 2012. *Ennio Flaiano, una verità personale*. Roma: Carocci.

Whitman, Walt. 1982. *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*. Ed. by Justin Kaplan. The Library of America. New York: Literary Classics of the United States.