

Jean Lombard, Louis Couperus and Gustave Adolf Mossa

Three artistic interpretations of Varius

By Caroline de Westenholz

I have been asked to speak on three subjects: the novel *l'Agonie* (*Agony*), by the French writer Jean Lombard, about the life and times of Varius; the novel *De berg van licht* (*The Mountain of Light*), by the Dutch author Louis Couperus, on the life of the emperor; and the watercolour *Lui* (*Him*), by the French artist Gustave Adolf Mossa, in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Nice, which shows Varius behind his dressing table, preparing for the dance.

As most of you won't be familiar with any of my subjects, I propose to tackle them in chronological order, beginning with Lombard, whose novel dates from 1888, moving on to Couperus, whose book was published in 1905-1906 and ending with Mossa, who produced his watercolour in the year 1906. Apart from their subject matter, the three art works have in common that they all originated on the Côte d'Azur.

L'Agonie, by Jean Lombard

Jean Lombard (1854-1891) was a self-taught writer who started his life as a labourer in the jeweller's trade and a union man. He was born in Toulon, went to school in Algeria and spent most of his life in Marseilles. Contemporaries describe him as a fiery man, full of ideas and equipped with the energy to execute them.

From an early age, Lombard was a fervent socialist. In 1879, Lombard became secretary general of the Marseilles labourers congress at which the French socialist party was founded. As of that year onwards, he could no longer find a job in the jeweller's trade and turned to writing. He became editor of various literary magazines.

In Marseilles, Lombard put himself up as a labour candidate but he was never elected. His disgust with the political practice of his day made him turn full time to writing. In 1889 he settled in Paris where he enjoyed a brief but moderately successful literary reputation after the publication of two historical novels, *l'Agonie* (1888) and *Byzance* (1890).

Lombard died in Paris, at the age of thirty-seven, in desperate poverty, leaving an illiterate but devoted wife and three small children.

Ten years after Lombard's death, both *Byzance* and *l'Agonie* were re-printed – in that order -, the latter with an introduction by Octave Mirbeau, himself writer of the thoroughly decadent *Jardin des supplices* from 1899 (published in English, by Dedalus, under the title: *Torture garden*, in 1995).

History has not been kind to Jean Lombard. He was forgotten quite soon after he died. French literary surveys hardly mention him at all. In his *Histoire de la littérature française contemporaine de 1870 à nos jours* (1947, in 2 volumes), René Lalou devotes two lines to Lombard, stating that his historical novels are honestly illegible, 'des cacographies'. It must be said that *l'Agonie* indeed is very difficult to read. Lombard's lack of classical education does not help. In the very first sentence of the book, the reader already stumbles over two self-invented Latin nouns.

Yet his contemporaries were not so negative. 'Monsieur Lombard has spent an enormous talent on the brutal and unreserved description of nameless orgies, monstrous debaucheries, boundless outrages, filthy vices in which the priest of the sun who ruled the Empire, his mother Soemia, and their favourites and pretoriens indulged,' as one review

ran in 1889.¹ In his preface to *l'Agonie*, Octave Mirbeau calls his style barbarian, disordered, polychrome. He complains about the writer's lack of taste and of measure, but at the same time, he says: 'His style has great allure, it has superb sonorities to it – (...) it has the strong odour of blood and savages.' In his introduction to the reprint to *Byzance* (of 1901) Paul Marguérite mentions Lombard's abuse of neologisms and 'barbarian' turns of phrase. He called Lombard a painter who evoked 'golden dreams and a delirium of blood'.

Lombard did fascinate certain surrealists, such as Apollinaire and Breton.²

Reprint 2002

The year 2002 – 111 years after Lombard's death – saw a re-print of *l'Agonie*. It was published by Séquier, Paris, in a series, entitled: La Bibliothèque Décadente.³ The book has never been translated into English; all translations which follow here, therefore, are my own.

The new reprint is an annotated version of the novel, presented by Marie-France David. It contains facsimiles of the original illustrations by Auguste Leroux. In the back of the book is a dictionary of quasi-antique words, which is very helpful for the modern reader. Also, this edition gives a list of neologisms and certain particulars of grammar and syntax. This is succeeded by a detailed chronology of Lombard's life, about which little was known up to now, and a number of reviews of the novel by such contemporary critics as Jean Lorrain, Camille Mauclair and Octave Mirbeau. The differences between the original 1888 edition and this reprint are carefully pointed out. Finally, the annex gives fragments of *Adel. La révolte future*, Lombard's socialist poem (1888); and extracts from various articles of his on socialism.

Interesting is the claim that Lombard's two historical novels, *l'Agonie en Byzance*, were meant to have been part of a trilogy; a third novel, *Les Chrétiens*, appeared long after the writer's death (in 1903), with an introduction by Lombard's friend, Louis-Xavier de Ricard. It is not quite clear whether the latter has perhaps finished that novel. All the same, shortly after his death in 1891, *Le Figaro* announced the performance of Lombard's drama *Les Chrétiens* in the Théâtre de l'Art. Part of a text for the novel must therefore have existed already, at that time.

Interesting for our purpose is the fact that David, in her introduction, sums up a number of less well known French publications, of around 1900, on Varius Elegabalus.

This reprint is a very valuable source for all students of decadentist literature and for those of the 'Nachleben' of our friend Varius in particular.

What concerns us most here is: how does Jean Lombard treat Varius in his book?

Varius in Jean Lombard's view

L'Agonie starts with Varius's entry into Rome and ends with his ignominious death. True perhaps to the socialist principles of its author, however, Jean Lombard's book is more dedicated to the crowds in multicultural Rome of the third century than to the story of the emperor. In this concentration on the different types of inhabitants of Rome the book seems for all the world a bit like a nineteenth century *Asterix*.

¹ 'M. Lombard a dépensé un immense talent à décrire brutalement et sans réserve les orgies sans nom, les monstrueuses impudicités, les stupres effrénés, les vices immondes auxquels se livraient alors et le prêtre du soleil qui gouvernait l'Empire et sa mère Soemia, et ses favoris et ses prétoriens', *Polybiblion*, October 1889, after Mario Praz, *The romantic agony*, London 1970 (1st ed: 1933), p. 434, note 186

² Jean Lombard, *l'Agonie*, Paris 2002, presented by Marie-France David, p. 8; 'Il fascina Breton qui le fit découvrir à Julien Graque.' See also: *Dictionnaire des littératures de la langue française*. Parijs, 1987, Vol. E-L

³ Lombard 2002 ; see note 2

The emperor is hardly characterised at all. We are told he is young, beautiful, God and Man, and priest of the Sun. He comes to life only later in the book, when depicted in the process of committing atrocities. Typical is for instance the following passage, which follows a description of the rape of a child:

‘Finally, Elegabalus showed himself to the Strangers, which the Pretorians let in (to his bedroom, CW). And while they filed past, under the eyes of his relations, they saw him stretched out on his bed, with humid traces of the rape on his robe of purple silk; a tiara on his head, black lines around his terrible, bored eyes; his fine features drawn. His skin had been polished with pumy stone, a phallus hung around his neck, he wore golden rings on his fingers. His purple shoes, at the bottom of the bed, were covered in big diamonds, his highlighted hair was powdered with ambre. Black slaves fanned him with flabellums of peacock feathers, while in a corner, under the icy glance of the Magicians, the child cried in a sinister fashion.

They said nothing more, the Strangers! Shocked, they disappeared, the pretorian sword in their hands, while Elegabalus, with a careless, nonchalant gesture, ordered the victim to be taken away.⁴

The accompanying illustration shows Elegabalus sprawled naked on his bed.

The main theme of the book

Jean Lombards novel is focussed on two themes: the imposition of the cult of the Black Stone and the Apocalypse in the form of the fall of Rome at the end of Elegabalus’s reign, which is a prelude to the former development – or is meant to be so.

The chief story line throughout the novel is the relationship between Attilius, a ‘primicerius’ or chef de corps of Elegabalus, and his lover Madeh, a released slave of Syrian descent, with whom Attilius hopes to accomplish his religious ideal: the realisation of the ‘future androgyne’, a four footed creature (p. 302) that procreates of its own accord (p. 222). Madeh is devoted to the cult of the Black Stone, which in Lombard’s eyes, is a cult of homosexuality:

‘For her (i.e. the cult of the Black Stone), yes, he, Attilius, was prepared to battle with the gods, all over the earth; and by the consistent pursuit of the male sex by the male sex, he would neutralize the female sex or rather, human bisexuality, and in this way help the creation, in the heart of Things, of the ANDROGYNE, the creature that only needed itself because it contained both sexes, and he would establish the unity of Life where there had been duality.’⁵

Strangely, it is this Madeh, who, much more than Varius, is described, in detail, as a divinely beautiful boy. Madeh is meant to be an ephebe, as beautiful as a girl, and this inspires Attilus’ fierce passion for him: ‘This passion for Madeh, this solitary, furious and yet tender attachment, which turned the beautiful, languid Syrian into the most opulent of

⁴ ‘Enfin, Elegabalus se montra aux Etrangers, que les Prétoriens laisserent pénétrer. Et, défilant sous le regard des familiers, ils le virent étalé sur son lit, avec, sur sa robe de soie pourpre, des traces humides du viol: la tête tiarée, les yeux cerclés de noir, terribles, ennuyés; les traits fins, tirés. Sa peau était polie à la pierre ponce, un phallus pendait sur sa poitrine, ses doigts portaient des bagues d’or, sa chaussure pourpre était, au cou-de-pied, sertie de gros diamants, ses cheveux aux mèches fines restaient poudrés d’électrum. Des esclaves nègres l’éventaient avec des flabellums faits de plumes géantes de paon, pendant que, dans un coin, sous le regard glacé des Mages, l’enfant pleurait sinistrement. Ils ne disaient plus rien, les Etrangers! Effarés, ils disparurent, la glaive des Prétoriens aux reins, pendant qu’Elegabalus ordonnait qu’on enlevât la victime, d’un geste d’insouciance et d’inconscience.’ Lombard 2002, p. 181

⁵ ‘Pour elle, oui, lui, Attilius, livrerait par toute la terre un combat aux dieux et, par la poursuite acharnée du sexe male par le sexe male, il inutiliserait le sexe femelle ou plutôt la bisexualite humaine, et ainsi aiderait a la création, au sein des Choses, de l’ANDROGYNE, l’être qui se suffit a lui-meme parce qu’il referme les deux sexes, et établirait l’unité de la Vie là où sa dualité s’étalait.’ Lombard 2002, p. 55

women, perfumed, be- ringed and bathed in milk and clear oils – wasn't this true love that Nature could never repudiate?'⁶

Apparently, the socialist Lombard could not bring himself to apply any of these aesthetic attributes to the Emperor Varius.⁷

Next to this main theme there is, in Lombard's novel, a battle between two groups of Christians in third century Rome: the 'oriental' Christians under the guidance of the Persian Zal and Gheel, and the 'occidental' ones who follow the old-testamentarian prophet, the Helvetian Maglo, and his helper Atta. The orientals see Varius, who is tolerant towards other religions, as a protector. The occidentals acknowledge only the corruption of his reign and wait for the paroxysm of this decadence. Together with Mammaea they scheme and plot to kill Elegabalus.

In Lombard's interpretation, therefore, there are parallels between early Christianity and the cult of the Black Stone; in both cases, the practitioners are anxiously awaiting the coming of the Messiah, be it a new Christ or the future androgyne. The androgynous Messiah, who features at the beginning as well as at the end of times, was a well known feature of several gnostic religions in Varius' times.⁸ In Europe, it was picked up by the medieval mystic Jacob Boehme.⁹

Towards the end of *l'Agonie*, the pagan and Christian views have begun to fuse; for instance, when Attilius says to his Madeh:

'You, you see, are the Christ, the symbol of the T, the immortal Vesta, Osiris, Zeus, all! You are the god who appeared at the creation of things, who disappeared in order to reappear the day that will see Rome (slide in) to Nothingness ... now that she reinforces herself, the sexes no longer procreate, and humanity will die of it. The hour will sound when a new humanity will replace the old one, and you will continue the blueprint of Life, you, Madeh!'¹⁰

Unfortunately, this mission is doomed to fail. In the third volume of the book, Madeh falls in love with Attilius' sister Attilia; in doing so, he betrays the ideal of male love and fails the cult of the Black Stone. And of course, in Lombard's interpretation, Varius himself betrays the very mission of his cult; for him, sensual delights are but the amusements of a spoilt brat.

This failure sets the entire apocalypse in motion, ending with Varius being murdered.

The failure of the quest to realise the perfect androgyne constitutes, in my view, the 'agony' of the title. All that is left, is death and destruction, Lombard seems to say.

In the course of the book Varius fades more and more into the background, to such a degree, that his eventual demise becomes a kind of footnote to the general story.

⁶ 'Cet amour pour Madeh, cet attachement solitaire et furieux, et attendri aussi, qui faisait du bel et languissant Syrien la plus opulente des femmes parfumées et baignées en du lait et de l'huile claire, n'était-ce pas de l'amour vrai que la Nature ne répudierait jamais?' Lombard 2002, p. 206

⁷ In Lombard's novel, Varius remains firmly bisexual (see f.i. Lombard 2002, p. 184)

⁸ See f.i. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (ed.), *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, Amsterdam 2005; and G. Quispel (ed.), *De hermetische gnosis in de loop der eeuwen*, Baarn 1996 (1st edition 1992)

⁹ See Hanegraaff 2005

¹⁰ ' – Toi, vois-tu, tu es le Kreistos, le symbole du T, la Vesta Immortelle, Osiris, Zeus, tout! Tu es le dieu, à l'origine des choses venu, disparu pour reparaître le jour qui verra Rome dans le Néant, car maintenant elle s'y enfonce, et les sexes ne procréeront plus, et l'humanité en mourra. L'heure va sonner ou une humanité nouvelle la remplacera, et c'est toi qui continueras la trame de la Vie, toi, Madeh!' Lombard 2002, p. 476. Elsewhere in the novel, Lombard speaks of a Black Kreistos on the Ethiopian T.' Lombard 2002, p. 207

Sources

Next to nothing is known about Lombard's sources. As a self taught erudite, he probably read the ancient authors in French translation; all the horrors of Elegabalus's reign as described by Lampridius feature in his novel. Also, Lombard must have been aware of the Platonic concept of an original androgyne, which was cut in half - considering his description of the androgyne as a fourfooted being with two heads.

French nineteenth literature paved the way for Lombard's Varius. The story of the effeminate Madeh who is loved both by a man and by a woman reminds us of both Balzac's *Séraphita* and Théophile de Gautiers *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (both from 1835); the difference is that Attilius and Attilia are brother and sister. A direct influence may have been Gustave Flaubert, who had set the canon for a historical novel with his *Salammbô* (1862). Lombard may have known Flaubert's *Rome et les Césars* (1839). Also, Varius is mentioned in Flaubert's *Education sentimentale* (1845).¹¹

A very importance influence on the book must have been the series of amazing novels published, as off 1883, by the self styled magician Joséphin Péladan (better known as the Sâr Péladan) under the collective title *La décadence latine* (*Latin decadence*). The two basic ideas of the series are that the androgyne is the creature of the future and that civilisation, corrupted by materialism and lack of faith, is heading towards destruction. These two ideas found their way straight into *l'Agonie*.

The sadism as practised by Lombard's Varius reminds one of the writings of Marquis de Sade.

Strange is Lombard's interpretation of the Cult of the Black Stone. The androgynous Messiah of the future is characterised by the colour black, according to *l'Agonie*. Already in the second chapter of the book Attilius talks of 'the white Christ of the Christians, which, he knew, was black..' (p. 44). The cult of the Black Stone is associated with a black flower, with a black cup and petals, the shadow of which looks like a beheaded phallus. 'This colour black was the colour of the superior God, who incessantly threw forms of life into Time and Space, while He stayed immobile like the Night, the Shadow, or like Nothingness.' (p. 207). And further along: 'This sensation of Black the world had found in the black race, from now on masters of Asia and Europe, and in the black Christ, his arms fixed to the Ethiopian T. He was the live coagulation, corrupted by the white Christ, entirely new representative of a humanity that supressed the Androgynous god, from which it descended, for the establishment of the bi-sexuality to which it remained attached was better represented by the white god!'¹² Implicit in this victory of the cult of the Black Stone seems to be the notion that the Orient was to be victorious over the West.¹³

These views remind one of the *Aethiopica* of the Greek writer Heliodorus from Emesa, Syria, probably published in the third century.¹⁴ It is a love story which informs us

¹¹ 'L'amour romain... se ramifiant à toutes les folies, s'élargissant dans toutes les lubricités, tour à tour égyptien sous Antoine, asiatique à Naples avec Néron, indien avec Héliogabale, tartare et byzantin sous Théodora, et toujours mêlant du sang à ses roses, et toujours étalant sa chair rouge sous l'arcade de son grand cirque où hurlaient les lions, où nageaient les hippopotames, où mouraient les chrétiens.' Flaubert, *Education sentimentale*, after Mario Praz, *The romantic agony*, London 1970 (1st ed: 1933), p. 190-191

¹² '... une fleur noire, au calice noir, aux sépales noirs, don't l'ombre, en phallus découpée, enfumait son cerveau. Mais cette couleur noire était celle du Dieu supérieur, incessamment jetant dans le Temps et l'Espace de formes de Vie qui s'animaient d'autres couleurs, se désassimilaient, prenaient des sexes et des distinctions, tandis que Lui restait immuable comme la Nuit, l'Ombre et le Néant. La sensation du Noir, le monde l'avait dans la race noire, jadis maîtresse de l'Asie et de l'Europe, et le Kreistos noir, les bras sur le T éthiopien, en était la vivante concrétion corrompue par le Kreistos blanc, représentation tout nouvelle d'une humanité repoussant le dieu Androgyne...' Lombard 2002, p. 207

¹³ - 'L'Orient sera supérieur à l'Occident, la Pierre-Noire vaincra tout et de sa victoire naîtra l'ANDROGYNE, enfin!...' (aldus Attilius). Lombard 2002, p. 46

¹⁴ For a modern translation see: Heliodorus, *An Ethiopian Romance*, translated with introduction by Moses Hadas, Philadelphia 1957

about a cult of the sun, the moon and Dionysus, which involves human sacrifices, in ancient Ethiopia. In effect this quasi innocent story is a glorification of a dark-skinned race and an obscure sect. In 1880, had been translated into French.¹⁵ Did Lombard read this book?

Gnosticism, cabbalism and related esoteric cults flourished in nineteenth century France, especially after the publications of Eliphas Levi – and in his wake, those of the Sâr Péladan.¹⁶

The main question Marie-France David asks herself in the introduction to *L'Agonie* is: why would this former labourer, militant socialist and anarchist: Jean Lombard, suddenly have trekked to Paris, two years before he died, in order to publish his two classical novels, *l'Agonie* and *Byzance*? Why did this self proclaimed enemy of decadent prose turn to the precious artistic language of Huysmans?

In order to answer these questions, David traces three motives in the novel: the quest for androgyny as connected with the cult of the Black Stone; the Apocalypse, in biblical sense; and the motive of 'blood' that dominates the third part of the book.

According to David, the androgyne is the ultimate uni-sexual being, that does not even know a difference between male and female anymore. The resurrection of this creature will lead to the new, egalitarian society. The irrevocable destruction of the world is accompanied by a generous flow of blood; the androgyne is the perfect embodiment of LIBERTÉ, EGALITÉ and FRATERNITÉ. This, David maintains, is the connection between Lombard's socialism and his decadentism. She does not, however, explain the obvious failure of the quest in the book; nor does she shed any light on Attilius' gnosticism as described above.

There is no doubt that Lombard's socialist colleagues saw parallels between the decadent Rome of Elegabalus and contemporary France. 'The world is an immense brothel with debauchery firmly in charge. Paris, at the heart of France, synthesizes admirably with three memorable cities: Rome, Sodom and Babylonia,' wrote a fellow believer in 1888. Yet there was a difference: 'pour Rome, ce fut la FIN; pour nous, ce sera la REGENERATION,' this commentator continued.¹⁷

Conclusion

As far as the story of Varius goes, *l'Agonie* must be considered a failure. Elegabalus, as offered by Jean Lombard, 'is indeed a monster without grandeur and without noblesse, which is deeply inaccurate', wrote Louis Jourdan, himself author of *La dernière nuit d'Héliogabale*: 'a sad parvenu, coldly vicious. Not a single aesthetic care explains his unforgettable exploits. The writer committed all the mistakes that bad historians did before him; but he was more to blame to have so lacked in all clairvoyance and to have fallen, head down, into all the traps of coarseness... He died of it; may God have his soul... and his book!'¹⁸ Louis Didier writes in his *La destinée* (1900): in Lombard's eyes, Varius is not a reflection on the spleen and elegance of the excesses of this epigone of Nero's.¹⁹

¹⁵ See f.i.: Longus and Héliodore d'Emèse, *Les romans grecs... (...) Les Ethiopiennes d'Héliodore, ou Théagène et Chariclée*, traduits par Louis Humbert, Paris 1880

¹⁶ See Hanegraaff 2005; and Christopher McIntosh, *Eliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival*, London 1972

¹⁷ Louis Villatte, 'Littérature socialiste', in *Le Décadent*, 3d year, no. 24 (1-15 December 1888), after Lombard 2002

¹⁸ See: Louis Jourdan, *La dernière nuit d'Héliogabale*, Paris 1889

¹⁹ Luis d'Herdy (ps. of Louis Didier), *La destinée*, Paris 1900, quoted in the introduction to Lombard 2002, p. 25

More than other contemporary novel, *l'Agonie* is an allegory of decadence and the ensuing apocalypse. The last chapter is a vertibale orgy of blood.

Lombard is indeed not concerned with refined 'taedium vitae'. The theme of the Apocalypse is certainly predominant in the novel. The Gospel of John is quoted in the beginning of the book and, allegorically, in chapter XI of the third volume. When Varius' magicians have performed a child sacrifice, the trumpeteers of the Last Judgment seem to appear in the sky:

'The day died and the flames of evening set East and West, south, north, horizon and zenith on fire. And strange things happened: swords crossed, pikes were lifted silently, a wave of blood rose, a whole furore of carnage took place, as if behind a flamboyant curtain. Close by, extraordinary trumpets sounded, and in their disintegrating imagination, this didn't happen by their side but up in the sky itself, the trumpets carried by monstrous hands and empowered by some god's formidable breath.'²⁰

Scenes such as these inspired the decadent writer Jean Lorrain to call *l'Agonie* a 'grandiose fresco': '... a fracas of arms, remains of piled up chariots full of screaming prisoners, whiffs of rare scents, the colour of rust and blood, the stink of sewers and corpses, such is the book: grandiose and savage, splendidly monotonous - that is how the plebeian Jean Lombard has reconstructed and reinstated the spoilt civilisation of Rome under Elegabalus.'²¹

In this, *l'Agonie* fits into a tradition of apocalyptic French literature perhaps started by René Leconte de Lisle, who like Lombard, turned to literature out of disappointment with politics. In Leconte de Lisle's views, the end of times was at end, in the sense of the Kali Yuga of the Hindu's – and there was certainly no rosy coloured communist paradise to come.²² This 'apocalypticism', so to say, was taken on by Barbey d'Aurevilly (who maintained our race had arrived at its last hour), Paul Verlaine ('Je suis l'empire à la fin de la décadence'), and of course by Joséphin Péladan, who exhausted the theme in his series *La Décadance Latine*.²³

In his book, Jean Lombard could not bring himself to marry the characteristics of the legendary Varius to the High Priest of the cult of the Black Stone: the later Emperor of Rome. In order to describe them, Lombard had to invent a secondary character. In the novel by the Dutchman Louis Couperus, those characteristics: effeminate beauty, total devoutness to his cult and to its high priest, and finally, a fatal tendency to sexual ambiguity, are described as typical of Varius himself. In my next lecture I will discuss Couperus' portrait of Varius in *De berg van licht*.

²⁰ 'Le jour se mourait en des flamboiements de soir incendiant l'Orient et l'Occident, le sud, le nord, le bas de l'horizon et le zénith. Et des choses étranges y passaient, des entre-croisements de glaives, des levées silencieuses de piques, une marée de sang qui bondissait, toute une fureur de carnages se mouvant comme derrière un rideau flamboyant. Les trompettes extraordinairement sonnaient près d'elles, et ce n'était pas, pour leur imagination désagrégé, à leur côté mais dans le ciel même, empoignées pas des mains monstrueuses et recevant le vent formidable de quelque dieu.' Lombard 2002, p. 430. About the interpretation of John as a Jewish Christian who saw visions of the destruction of a Satanic order that had the Roman political establishment at its centre, see now: Frederick J. Murphy, *Fallen is Babylon. The Revelation to John*, Cambridge 1998

²¹ Jean Lorrain, in *Le Journal*, 25 November 1901, after Lombard 2002, p. 515

²² The Kali Yuga is meant to be the last of four world periods, at the end of which, the whole of the universe ceases to exist. After a considerable periode of time, creation will start again. It is known that Leconte de Lisle was one of the first French writers to be inspired by the translation, by Eugène Burnouf, of the Upanishads, dating from 1840-1860. 'l'Orientalisme, avec les travaux de Burnouf, commence seulement à pénétrer les milieux cultivés.' J.P. de Beaumarchais, Daniel Couty en Alain Reu, 'René Lecomte de Lisle', in : *Dictionnaire des littératures de la langue française*. Parijs, 1987, Vol. E-L, p. 1351

²³ After Praz 1970, p. 386-397. Praz also mentions the philosophy of Schopenhauer, Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, the Russian novel and the plays of Maeterlinck: '...doing no more than create an impression of delicious death agony'

Shedding light on The Mountain of Light

Louis Couperus novel *De berg van licht*

By Caroline de Westenholz

In 1905-1906 the Dutch novelist Louis Couperus published a novel on the life of the emperor Varius, called: *De berg van licht*.²⁴ As this book has, regrettably, never been translated into English I shall refer to it here by an imaginary but literal title: *The Mountain of Light*. To an English audience, this title of course evokes an immediate association with the famous Koh-i-Noor, the extraordinary diamond which was presented to Queen Victoria in 1850.²⁵

When one googles the phrase 'Mountain of light', one hits upon the website of Yusuf Islam, formerly called Cat Stevens, which certainly has nothing to do with our present subject. Yusuf Iakom's *Life of the Last Prophet. The Mountain of Light* leads us even further astray (1995). Recently, George MacDonald Fraser published a novel under virtually the same title: *Flashman and The Mountain of Light*. A potential translator will, therefore, have to look further afield.

Louis Couperus

Louis Couperus (1863-1923) is arguably the greatest Dutch novelist. Cosmopolitan, dandy and aesthete, this most untypical Dutchman has long been labeled decadent at home. During his long, fertile writing life he produced no less than forty-eight books, in genre ranging from psychological novels such as *The Books of the Small Souls* quartet, featuring the irrevocable decline of an old, The Hague family, and the Jamesian epic *The Inevitable* (which, incidentally, has just been republished in English, by Pushkin Press); or on a different note, books inspired by dark and unknown powers in the Dutch colonial past, such as *Old People and the Things that Pass* and *The Hidden Force*. He wrote fairy tales, columns in daily newspapers, and finally, he created historical novels such as *The Mountain of Light*, or *Iskander* (about the life of Alexander the Great).

Running motive through *all* Couperus's books is the 'silent force' of the power of fate, which eats his characters as if from within, and inevitably leads to their (possible) destruction. In this respect, it is worth noting that Couperus, who spent four years of his childhood on the island of Java, believed firmly in reincarnation. It is strange that his work has never been studied in the framework of the concept of *karma*, the Indian variety of 'fate' which basically means: every event in life is the result of one's own actions, in this or in previous existences. 'Even a chance encounter is the result of karma', says a character in Haruki Murakawi's novel *Kafka on the shore* – something which Couperus, to my mind, would have agreed with. Indeed, when asked by a Dutch radio reporter to what contemporary writers I would compare Couperus's work, I once answered: Japanese literature. His work is pervaded by a similar sense of lurking doom which runs consistently through the work of Ishiguro, Murakawi, not to mention earlier ones like Mishima, Kawabata, Soseki, Endo, etc.

Back to *The Mountain of Light*.

From the outset, Couperus' objectives were clear. He had been dreaming about the subject for years: '... from the first moment, I saw the ruins of Rome,' he wrote in a

²⁴ *De berg van licht, Volledige Werken Louis Couperus deel 24, Amsterdam / Antwerpen 1993*

²⁵ See: W.S. Wart, 'The Koh-I-noor Diamond', at www.jewelryexpert.com/articles/Koh-i-Noor-Diamon.htm

prospectus for the novel (his first visit to Rome dates back to 1893).²⁶ '(...) But I always thought, during all those years: I am not an erudite, 'historical novels' are not my forte... Yet the idea would not leave me anymore, and it came back to me all the time... (...)'

In 1900 Couperus and his wife settled in Nice, the capital of the Côte d'Azur. One year later, Lombard's book *l'Agonie* was reprinted. Quite possibly, Couperus picked up this novel in a local bookstore. French was the second language for the upper class citizens of the chic and cosmopolitan town of The Hague, where Couperus had grown up; reading that language obviously posed no problems for somebody of his background.

'Then I read Jean Lombard's *l'Agonie* (...)', the prospectus continues. 'While reading that, I thought: now I will *certainly* not write my book: it *has* been written already and more beautiful than I could do it... But *after* having read that, I thought: no; Lombard renders a novel of Rome in that period, and *not* the novel of the emperor; not the *soul* of the young little priest, who could dance so beautifully. And this is how it came about that I wrote this book and rendered that soul, as well as I could.'²⁷

This is the essence of Couperus' interpretation: he created a psychological novel, more than an historical one. In Couperus' view, Varius was a delicate, exotic plant who turned poisonous when transplanted into foreign (i.e. Roman) soil. The emperor thus became more a *tragic* than an evil character.

Quite possibly, Couperus had been working on his subject ever since the year 1900. In the meantime, he published several other books, but in January 1905, he travelled to Rome in order to do research for his historical novel.

'Sources were Herodian and Lampridius; Herodian mainly gives a short story; Lampridius many details', the aforesaid prospectus continues. 'Both disapprove, criticize, without any psychological analysis. But Lampridius' details (many of which may be true) are of interest and hide the "soul". Behind the dry summing up of different features I detect the soul of the young little emperor: Asiatic (...), very devout, almost drooling, initiated into the Mysteries of the Magicians and the secret sciences of the Kabbala; a feminine soul in an extraordinarily beautiful male form..'

Also, Couperus saw young Varius as an artistic soul: 'He was a genius, and artist in everything he did. He is the last reflection of Antique Beauty and Antique (Egyptian-Chaldean) Wisdom. Who tells us, that the quintessence of his religion isn't purer than that of Christianity?'

As suggested by Couperus himself, the Kabbala supposedly was one of the sources of Varius' religion (and implicitly, of Couperus' research). To this may be added ancient Gnosticism.²⁸ Between 1883 and 1893 the author had been profoundly interested in contemporary esoteric cults,²⁹ which flourished in the late nineteenth century in The Netherlands.

De berg van licht was written within one year and published in three volumes in 1905 and 1906.

²⁶ F.L. Bastet (ed.), *Amice, brieven van Louis Couperus aan zijn uitgever, ingeleid en van aantekeningen voorzien door F.L. Bastet*, vol. II (1902-1919), 's Gravenhage 1977, letter 405a: text for prospectus for the novel, (p. 72-74)

²⁷ Ibid. For a comparison between the two see P. Valkhoff, 'Ontmoetingen tussen Nederland en Frankrijk', *De Gids* 1936 (I), p. 357-372; reprinted in P. Valkhoff, *Ontmoetingen tussen Nederland en Frankrijk*, The Hague 1943, p. 237-251

²⁸ F.i.: '...veiled, full of occult Kabbalistic secrets, which the Magicians carefully hid away...'; '... the Upper Being of our Gnosis...' '...the wisdom of Gnosis and Kabbala, which had only just been revealed to him....'

²⁹ As he stated himself in André de Ridder, *Bij Louis Couperus*, Amsterdam 1917, p. 22

The book revels in baroque descriptions of the excesses of Elegabalus' reign. It paints extensive Roman orgies, bloody child sacrifices, decadent theme banquets and sexual extravagancies. Especially the third volume is written with what one critic called a 'demonic drift'.³⁰ It was condemned by its Dutch contemporary critics and was only recognized a masterpiece long after the author's death.

In 1916, the novel was translated into German. Reportedly, Lucchino Visconti read the book in that language and wanted to turn it into a film.³¹ Unfortunately for Couperus, this never happened!

A recent translation once again enjoyed a moderate success in Germany.³² *De berg van licht* is, as said, still waiting to be translated into English.

All quotations which follow are based on my own translations.

Genesis of the book

The first time the young Louis Couperus's attention was drawn towards the figure of Varius was most probably in the novel *Ariadne. The Story of a Dream* by the English writer Marie-Louise de la Ramée, better known as Ouida (1839-1908). In *Ariadne* the sculptor Marius exclaims: 'The most beautiful man the world ever saw was Elegabalus'.³³

Towards the end of his life Couperus acknowledged, in a column, a number of authors that had influenced him when he was young, and first came Zola and Ouida ('bien étonnés de se trouver ensemble').³⁴ *Ariadne* dates from 1877, and Couperus confesses he read it when he was fifteen – so that is one year after it came out.

In 1888, Couperus published a poem entitled 'Sardanapulus' which, although it doesn't mention Varius explicitly, describes the disastrous fate of an Eastern potentate whose palace is put on fire.³⁵

In 1893 Couperus travelled to Rome, the first of many visits. Varius features in a 'Letter from Rome' (published in January 1894), in the context of a description of Caracalla's baths: 'Nowhere more than in those incredible baths rises the phantasmagoria of a sublime decadence in clearer outline: (..) the bathers, the decadents, (..) who bathe themselves seven times daily in highly complicated use of cremes and smells, (...) in order to discuss some epicurism with the philosophers, who are reading in the library on the floor above, or, lazily, look out over the wrestlers in the palaestra, or watch the race courses in the stadium, for a brief moment only, just when the emperor has arrived...Caracalla (...), or Elegabalus, who was of such feminine beauty, that the soldiers fell in love with him, and proclaimed him as their emperor, as soon as he appeared from the temple...'³⁶

Finally, there is Gustave Flaubert. In 1916 Couperus said in an interview: 'Flaubert is a great and beautiful example, in seriousness and documentation and truth and, above all, in form - as he will be to anybody who plans to write an historical novel, but he is not an example as far as psychology goes; for we, the younger generation, have advanced a lot in that respect, and I believe I gave much more subtle and more complete psychology in *The*

³⁰ See: Theo Bogearts, *De antieke wereld van Louis Couperus*, Amsterdam 1969

³¹ According to Dutch film maker Frans Weisz at a vernissage in the Louis Couperus Museum, The Hague, in 1998

³² *Heliogabal, der Sonnenkaiser. Historischer Roman*, translated into German by Christel Captijn-Müller and Heinz Schneeweiß, Berlin 1998

³³ Frédéric Bastet, *Louis Couperus, een biografie*, Amsterdam 1987, p. 166

³⁴ 'Intieme impressies V', in: Proza II, *Volledige Werken Louis Couperus*, deel 49, Amsterdam / Antwerpen 1996, p. 595-601

³⁵ 'Sardanapolis', in: *Orchideeën. Volledige Werken Louis Couperus* deel 2, Amsterdam / Antwerpen 1988, p. 136

³⁶ 'Brief uit Rome', in: *Reisimpressies, Volledige Werken Louis Couperus* deel 8, Amsterdam / Antwerpen 1988, p. 24

Mountain of Light than Flaubert did in *Salambo*.³⁷ Jaap Goedegebuure, professor of Dutch literature, has called *The Mountain of Light* a counterpart to *Salammbô*: cult of the sun in the former, cult of the moon in the latter book; devoutness of the priestess Salammbô in the one, ditto of the priest Bassianus – the young Varius – in the other.³⁸ The influence of Flaubert comes as no surprise. In 1894 Couperus first mentioned Elegabalus; in that same year he began his translation of fragments of Flaubert's *The temptation of Saint Anthony* (published in 1896). Also, one presumes he may have read Flaubert's *Rome et les Césars* (1839).

As of 1900, as said, Louis Couperus and his wife lived in Nice. In the beginning of the last century, this cosmopolitan French town went through a late phase of decadentism, not in the last place because of the presence of the writer and boulevardier Jean Lorrain (1855-1906). Around 1885, in Paris, Lorrain had received the nickname Elegabalus;³⁹ also, he was called the Petronius of the decadents.⁴⁰ He settled on the Riviera in the same year as Couperus did – in Lorrain's case, because of his poor health. In 1901 Lorrain published *Le vice errant. Les Noronsoff*, in which book the ambience of the chief character, the last descendant of an ancient Russian family, is compared to that of the Roman emperor.⁴¹ It is known that Couperus admired Jean Lorrain's Côte d'Azur novels.⁴²

The year 1901 not only saw the re-print of Jean Lombard's novels. Also, the work of Dimitri Merejkowsky (1865-1941) received some publicity, in Nice, especially the third volume of his trilogy *Christ and Anti-Christ: Julian the Apostate* (1896), which, like Lombard's *Byzance*, was a novel on the decline of the Byzantine Empire.⁴³ We know Couperus read both. Finally, he read the historical novels of the Nobel Prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1916). *Quo Vadis* (1895), a story of Christian persecution in Rome at the time of Nero, even reached the Nice stage. In 1902, it was performed in the theatre with the famous Edouard the Max as Petronius and created a true vogue.⁴⁴

Couperus mentioned all these writers in his correspondence with his publisher's. When he actually started on *The Mountain of Light*, he explicitly announced: 'It will be a book, genre *Quo Vadis*...' ⁴⁵

In the Nice Bibliothèque Municipale Couperus probably consulted Jean Réville, *Les religions à Rome sous les Sévères* (1886) which in turn mentions the article by François Lenormant in the magazine *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* (1881),⁴⁶ concerning the nature of the god Elegabal in ancient Syria. Réville mentions a god of the mountain, or a god who resides on a mountain – which is as Couperus describes him (El-Gabal); Lenormant quotes inscriptions which mention a fire divinity, the god of the black stone (Gibil). Probably the two have amalgamated in the course of time, says this writer.

Réville's book certainly justifies Couperus' view that Varius was supposedly a very devout boy.

³⁷ De Ridder 1917, p. 33

³⁸ Jaap Goedegebuure, *Decadentie en literatuur*, Amsterdam 1987, p. 83-84

³⁹ See: Philippe Jullian, *Jean Lorrain ou le Satyricon 1900*, Parijs 1974, p. 58

⁴⁰ Philippe Jullian, *Decadente dromers, symbolistische schilders uit de jaren 1890*, Bussum 1969, p. 192 (translation of: *Esthètes et magiciens*, Paris 1969)

⁴¹ Jean Lorrain, *Le vice errant. Les Noronseff*, Paris 2002, chapter 2: 'Chez Héliogabale', p. 41-48

⁴² On Couperus in Nice, what he read and whom he knew, see Caroline de Westenholz, *Een witte stad van weelde. Louis Couperus in Nice 1900-1910*, Boskoop 1996 (Couperus Cahiers III) and id., 'Een bacchante onder de steden', in: Dirk Leyman (samenstelling), *Nice, muze van azuur*, Amsterdam 2004, p. 130-146

⁴³ *Le petit Niçois*, 1 January and 6 February 1901. The French title was: *Julien l'Apostat. La mort des dieux*

⁴⁴ *l'Éclairer de Nice*, 15 January 1902. De Max in the part of Petronius was later portrayed by the Dutch society painter Antoon van Welie (in 1910). See Camille Mauclair, *Un peintre Hollandais contemporain. Antoon van Welie*, Paris 1924

⁴⁵ Bastet 1977, letter 390 d.d. 28 January 1905 (p. 59-60)

⁴⁶ François Lenormant, 'Sol Elegabalus', *Revue de l'histoire du religion*, t. III (1881), p. 310-322

The translation of the ancient sources which Couperus is known to have consulted may have been the book by Georges Duviquet: *Héliogabale, raconté par les historiens grecs et romains*, from 1903.⁴⁷ This book includes also the interpretations of later historians such as Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, Zosimus, Orosius, Zonares and several of the Church Fathers.

Finally, there is a number of antique sources which can have made Couperus envisage the cult of Elegabal *by analogy*. First of all, there is Lucian of Samosate's *De dea Syria* (ca. 150). This book describes the temple, cult and service of the 'Syrian Goddess' Atargatis (who is on a par with Aphrodite or Venus) in the town Hierapolis, not too far from Emesa. Lucian mentions the ample decoration of the said temple, ecstatic dances, offerings of large amounts of sacrificial animals, and the use of incense. Secondly, there is Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*, the french translation of which we already mentioned in connection with Jean Lombard.⁴⁸ Interesting in connection with Louis Couperus is the use of the name Hydaspes, the Ethiopian king, who is the high priest of the solar and lunar cult. In Couperus' book, the same name: Hydaspes, is used for the high sun priest of Emesa, who serves as a sort of 'guru' to the later emperor Elegabalus. The Couperus family library contained a french translation of the *Aethiopica*, so it is likely that he knew that book.⁴⁹

Structure and style

The Mountain of Light is a novel in three parts. The first volume starts in Emesa, where Bassianus, as Couperus calls him, is High Priest of the Sun. It ends with his triumphal entry into Rome.

The second volume describes the reign of Elegabalus. In the beginning, he is still admired by his subjects, at the end he has fallen from grace.

The third volume describes the rising of the masses, the murder of the emperor and the crowning of his half brother Alexander Severus.

Contrary to the more dynamic first and third parts, the second part is the most static one of the novel. Due to a temporary decline in the pressing flow of events, the stream of time is less forceful here. Part II does contain the peripeteia in Elegabalus' life, in the form of the encounter with Hierocles, a charioteer of 'Homeric beauty', with whom Varius falls irrevocably in love. Slowly, public sympathy then begins to ebb away. The description of the wedding ceremony between the emperor and Hierocles shows, for the first time, an alienation between the ruler and his subjects. After that, the tensions gradually mount, especially with the increasing coolness towards Alexianus and his mother Mammaea and Elegabalus' crazy plans to equate the marriage to Hierocles with one to the Vestal virgin, Aquilia Severa. All these events lead, as we know, directly to the emperor's eventual fall.

The Mountain of Light begins on the eve of Bassianus' proclamation as emperor by the Syrian and Phoenician armies. Essential, in Couperus' view, is the devoutness of the young priest. This devotion to his religion goes hand in hand with his sensuality; in the course of the story, both develop into hysterical dimensions.

⁴⁷ *Héliogabale, raconté par les historiens grecs et romains*, avec un préface de Rémy de Gourmont, Parijs 1903

⁴⁸ See: Heliodorus, *Aethiopica* (*Theagenes et Charicleia*), ed. G.H. Hirschig, in *Erotici Scriptores*, Paris (Didot) 1936; or for a modern translation: Heliodorus, *An Ethiopian Romance*, translated with introduction by Moses Hadas, Philadelphia 1957

⁴⁹ *Chefs d'oeuvre de la littérature grecque*, Paris 1841, containing: *Les romans grecs: les pastorales de Longus ou Daphnis et Chloé* (traduction d'Amyot; refondue par Paul-Louis Courier), *Les Ethiopiennes d'Héliodore ou Theagenes et Charicleia* (traduction de Quenneville). Collection of the Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde (Leiden University Library). With thanks to dr. Anton van der Lem

The first chapter of the first volume is the exposé of the book. It starts with an atmospheric description of the night sky over Syria, featuring the Milky Way as the Path of the Chief God. The tone is triumphal. The second paragraph sets out to describe the luxurious tropical nature of the gardens around the temple. It is full of foreboding. The agave plants are like black or white swords poking up into the night, the peacocks screech in an uncanny way, the 'yelling screams of the lustful Syrian roses' speak in perfect synaesthesia of mad intoxication.

Goedegebuure, whose excellent analysis I follow here, has remarked that the first paragraph points ahead to Elegabalus' triumphal entry into Rome, and hence to his rise to power, and the second to the reversal of his fortunes, and hence to his sinister decline.⁵⁰

Also, this first chapter explains a number of essentials. First there is the specifically Syrian variety of Gnosticism, such as practised by the high priest and magician Hydaspes, who is the young Varius' 'guru'. Hydaspes reads the boy's future in the stars. Again, a sense of immense foreboding is displayed, which actually frightens the young priest. Finally, a brief survey of the history of Varius' family tells us all about his Roman ancestry and likely future as an emperor.

So all the elements are there: the past, the present and the beckoning future – with as its centre a golden boy, who seems destined for something bigger than himself.

The start of the novel contains a number of motives that prefigure the events to come. The announcements take place on different levels of the text: indirectly, in descriptions of nature, and symbolistically, generally spoken as well as in the sense of the specifically stylistic system of norms of the period. Couperus explicitly uses symbolic techniques: neologisms, syntactic change of the usual order of words in a sentence, synaesthesia, rich alliteration and assonance.

The many references to the future or the past that run through the novel like *Leidmotiven* are essential to the continuity and unity of the story, all the more so since a succession of relatively isolated scenes would otherwise raise questions about their connections. A structural analysis revealed eighteen phases, fourteen of which have been scenically constructed. These episodes have the character of tableaux, and their static build-up is probably inherent in the choice of their subject: a series of rather voluntarily chosen anecdotes, borrowed from historians, or more generally, from decadentist concepts of literature. In the latter, beautiful, but stiff attitudes take precedence over dramatic dynamism. It is noteworthy that both Lombard and Stefan George, in his poem *Helegabal*, also gave their elaborations of the Elegabalus theme such a tableau-like character. All three writers may have borrowed this build-up from Flaubert's *La tentation de Saint Antoine*.

Another element that contributes to the unity of Couperus' book is the strong concentration on the chief character which, as said, turns *The Mountain of Light* into a psychological novel. There are numerous places where the narrator tries to give a reason for the way Varius' character develops. Couperus inventively used three legendary characteristics: his bi-sexuality, his piety and his extravagant love of beauty. These three have been combined to a whole complex of motives that guarantees a wholesome and acceptable image.

Apart from details from historical sources, Couperus also used a number of motives from decadentism. To mention a few: antique Rome as one huge brothel; the struggle between the culture of the East and that of the Roman West which leads to the surrender of the latter; and, one of the most important ones, the death wish of Elegabalus – to die in beauty – which turns into its opposite, when he is murdered in the slave quarters. This motive, and the turn of events at the close of the novel, is representative for the

⁵⁰ Jaap Goedegebuure, *Decadentie en literatuur*, Amsterdam 1987

decadentist inclination to elaborate on elements of reality which were ugly or morally objectionable.

The soul of the emperor

So how did Louis Couperus see 'the emperor's soul', and did he succeed in describing it, as he set out to do?

Lukkenaer and Das have categorized in which ways Couperus departed from his historical sources.⁵¹

Contrary to his sources, Couperus constantly mentions Varius' *age*. In the course of the novel Varius quickly grows up, or rather, degenerates. In the beginning of the second volume Varius has already changed: 'Then he had been High Priest as well as a careless child; now, several months later, all but sixteen, his mystical androgyny, earnest and devout as it had been in Emesa, seem to have developed, in hurried blossoming, into a very striking perversity.' And a bit further; 'His mystical aureole had faded, however ravingly devout he still was to his Sun.' (p. 149)

Couperus' Varius is a very *talented* young man. His grandmother Moesa, who dotes on him, praises everything he does: 'He had taste; his orange coloured robe was beautiful... He had many talents: he exercised his Latin, and spoke that language with grace and purity; everything he did or thought, was gracious, artful, talented, genial and divine.' (p. 98) Elsewhere we are told he is a great orator as well (p. 307).

Contrary to his antique sources, Couperus stresses the *histrionic talents* of his Varius. In this way, his androgynous behaviour is psychologically explained:

He was '...mainly a spoilt child, who played the part of the Emperor of Rome, Imperator of the World.' (p. 149) This acting quality of Varius is something Couperus comes back to at several occasions: 'Was he hysterical, unhappy about Alexianus, was he devout, was he as happy as a child, was he perverse? Was he all that or was he nothing and nothing more than a mime, who easily acted the part? From the Man-Virgin onwards he played them all: Venus, Rheia Kubele, a carriage driver, a priest, an emperor and he played them all with perfect art. Perhaps his soul was nothing but a mirror, reflecting all the shine around...' (p. 213)

Also, his *jealousy* towards his half brother Alexianus is there right from the beginning of the story.

Couperus' Varius is *not cruel* by nature. Rape does not feature in Couperus' interpretation. Also, he does not sacrifice children in order to torture the parents. Baby sacrifices that occur in the book are all in the framework of religious actions, when the magicians need to read the future in the baby's guts: 'But suddenly, as if in one movement, the big hands of the Magicians pressed the child down to the plate, with its small head, legs and arms. Like lightning, the golden knife flashes and, with a secure cut across the trembling stomach, slaughters the child. One cry, and blood fountains up into the air, spraying thinly and invisibly over the red cloaks; from a black beard dangles a live ruby, that slowly trickles down...' (p. 233)

Varius does have a *temper*, but we are told he is only really cruel when he is drunk (p. 308). The famous scene in which Varius has his guests suffocate in a shower of roses does feature in the book. It is described as one's of Varius' caprices. This shows Couperus at his most baroque:

'And it was as if the datura's sounded the bell hymn of their heavy witch's odours; as if the tuberoses drained the poisonous aroma's of their souls, in thick drops of venom; as if daffodils, daisies, violets, dying, oppressed and trampled upon, screamed out their

⁵¹ Elly Das en Pim Lukkenaer, 'Bronnen van "De berg van licht", *Hermeneus* 61^{ste} jg. nr. 4 (oktober 1989), p. 242-248

tendernesses, which in this despair, degenerated into one magic power of intoxication, for two embracing, drunken women, covered over, overcome, over-scented, over-intoxicated, faded, goggling, and died together, with gurgling hiccups... A bit further down a boy rose, laughing like a madman, hit out into the air and collapsed lifeless into a heap of black violets, in which he drowned as if in a velvet bath...' (p. 317)

Couperus' Varius is *not a masochist* either. Dio Cassius maintained that he was proud to show that his lover had beaten him up; in Couperus' interpretation, Varius tries to hide his blue marks.

In Couperus' view, Varius *falls truly in love* with Hierocles, who is cruel and coarse, and only after power. Even Varius himself realises that his love is not reciprocated; he who is adored by everybody, is not loved by his spouse. His meeting with Hierocles is his fatal moment.

The greatest difference with the historical sources, however, is Couperus' elaboration of Varius' *religion*.

This aspect I would therefore like to study more closely.

The dance

Initially, Couperus wanted to write a noveletta about the dance of Elegabalus only. In this he may have been influenced by a poem by Henri Corbel, called 'The dance in the temple of the sun', and published in a volume called *Sonnets Romains*, in 1898. As this poem is little known and was very difficult to come by, I will read it out to you:

'La danse au temple du soleil

The dance in the temple of the Sun

L'empereur a quinze ans qui s'en fut de Syrie:
Son premier ordre à Rome est, sur le Palatin,
D'élever à Phoebus un temple très hautain
Pour rallumer son culte éteint en Italie.

The emperor was 15 when he left Syria;
His first assignment in Rome, is to mount, on
the Palatine, a very proud temple to Phoebus
In order to relight his extinct cult in Italy.

Là, sous les lambris d'or, suivi de la curie,
Le visage fardé, tout vêtu de satin,
Elegabale, en la candeur du clair matin,
Célèbre un sacrifice au dieu de sa patrie.

There, under the golden ceiling, followed by
the curia, dressed in satin and with painted
face, Elegabalus celebrated an sacrifice to the
god of his country, in the frailty of the clear
morning.

Paré de bracelets, front mitré, souriant,
Au son des instruments apportés d'Orient,
Qu'agitent les vieillards aux barbes parfumées,

Covered in bracelets, a mitre on his head,
smiling to the sound of Eastern instruments
that werer shaken by old men with scented
beards;

Le roi du monde, acclamé du peuple indulgent
En robe longue ainsi que les rober d'almées,
Bondit avec fureur sur la parvis d'argent.'

Dressed in a long robe, and surrounded by
Eastern dancers, thus skipped the king of the
world, as accaimed by the indulgent crowd,
with furore on the silver temple square.

Why was Couperus so fascinated by this dance? I think the answer lies in the fact that he considered Varius's religious quest the essence of his existence – and in this religion, the dance around the Black Stone played an essential part.

What, according to Couperus, was this religion of Varius?

The cult of Elegabalus

In the first chapter of the first volume, Varius – whom Couperus calls Bassianus - is the High Priest of Elegabalus, 'he, who is enthroned on the Mountain of Light.' (p. 20). Elegabalus is a Sun God, and the Sun is the primary, life giving force.

In the first chapter the gnostic teaching of his guru Hydaspes is outlined. Standing on the top terrace of the temple of the Sun in Emesa, looking up at the starry night sky, Hydaspes says:

'Hear my child... we strive back to the Light, out of which our soul, a spark, ticked away into the space of eternity, until she fell, in ever deeper humiliation, and reddened to an unclean flame, and materialized to a soul of gold, for gold is materialized light and the soul of Light hides in it, humiliated: that is why Gold is the worldly symbol of the highest, the richest, and the mightiest, and the lightest...'

'Yes, you already explained that to me, Hydaspes.'

'Our soul strives back to her origin; the golden soul here on earth, if she has not gone into total decline, strives back towards her Origin; that soul wants to return to the Light.. Unconsciously, within the ignorant; consciously, and more and more, within those, my child, who were initiated and who know. Within us, she strives consciously....' (p. 27)

'You want to know how I would wish to see you, in the silent secret of you soul, if you became emperor.

Yes...

I would wish you to strive back to the Origin, which was sexless...

Before IT...

Thought Creation and Birth, and contained both sexes in itself...

But to reach the mental condition of the sexless Light...?

The Elect Soul must first strive back to that more human form: that of androgyny.

I understand.

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

I understand...

That was how our first Father...

Adam...

Adam-Heva...

Yes that was how... when he lived in Paradise, at the border of the river Euphrates. Adam-Heva he was, our Father; Man and Virgin, double sexed and double single... But just like the Light, sexless, split into Male and Female, so Adam-Heva – o impenetrable secret! – and after deep grief about his own nature, split into two: into Adam, into Heva...

Into Man and into Virgin...

(...)

So the Elect Soul strives back to androgyny.

I understand...

To the form of the Male-Virgin...

The Double Single... O Bassianus, would you be the Elect Soul... I saw so many, but no-one, who made me think so surely: he IS the Soul Elect... For she must be earnest and frivolous, the Soul; a soul of devotion and one of love, a soul of exstasy and voluptuousness both, a soul of initiated wisdom and a soul of naive frivolity; that is how the Elect Soul has been predicted, in a body like a precious vase full of beauty; slim the ephebe like limbs, but round its shoulders and its chest, thin its waist and wide its hips, with legs powerful, but feet airily swift; the face cleanly cut and flawless, the eyes already radiating with the desired light... Bassianus, o my Bassianus, are you not like that? Not too female, not too male, both sexes fused together in utter harmony...' (p. 29)

In order to help him with his quest Hydaspes gives Bassianus a ring with the sign of Abraxas:

'...the name of the Highest God, which only we are allowed to pronounce: Abraxas; the Upper Being of our Gnosis, who has been revealed by oral tradition only, in the most sacred of mysteries ...(...); my child, keep this stone and this talisman... it may be the last thing I give you.' (p. 77)

According to a dictionary of symbols, the Abraxas symbol consists of a Roman soldier with the head of a cockerel and two snakes for legs. In his left arm, he carries a shield in his left arm, and he holds a whip in his right hand. The Abraxas is a lucky charm and it heralds a new dawn or age to come.⁵² Evidently, this is Hydaspes' hope for Elegabalus' reign. Like in Lombard's novel, the Couperian androgyne (i.e. Elegabalus), is meant to be the creature of the future: '...the double sexed form, the soul of the Man-Virgin, the Single-Double, Adam-Heva, who was and will be in you... o my Antoninus...' so it says in a letter from Hydaspes which Elegabalus receives at the end of the second volume (p. 253).

It is interesting to note that in Lombard's novel, Elegabalus fails his quest because of his bi-sexuality; in *The Mountain of Light*, he fails because of his homosexuality.

All the same, and despite himself, Hydaspes sees the future – as if he read the karma of Bassianus's soul:

'He loved Bassianus with the mystic-sensual urge of his Asiatic nature, which, however much focussed on the Invisible, felt sensuality run through his barmy blood like a warm stream; and he loved him with an immense melancholy, because, he saw, beyond any doubt, in the stars and in Bassianus's own eyes, how relentless Fate was prying for this delicious child, as for a fiercely desired prey. He saw, in one penetrating flash, that this child – this flower of a soul, blossoming out into the air which was her own, could enchant to such a degree, that it would touch even the coarsest senses... that this soul, when transplanted and shooting out under different skies, would unfurl in wild confusion and the slaking of her aromas would waft clouds of poison... And while he stared down onto the child, he knew, that it would be like that, and that nothing could be done, because the almighty gods had already decided...' (p. 81)

When he becomes emperor, Varius remains very devout, in Couperus' view. He does his utmost to live up to the quest Hydaspes imposed on him.

Striving towards unification with the godhead, by the cultivation of a bi-sexual attitude, the emperor loses the balance between male and female as soon as he falls in love with Hierocles. As from this moment, the comparisons with an accursed flower become more and more frequent. The violent end of the book is presaged in the image of the sword, like the agave flowers in the beginning. The screaming of the peacocks is a continuous announcement of evil. This starting motive is echoed at the end of part I, where it is combined with Hydaspes' presentiment of fate. When Couperus literally repeats the words with which he started his story, the circle is closed.

Sensuality and the devout

In Couperus' view, human sexuality is essential in the cult of Elegabalus. On various occasions in the novel Couperus stresses the bond between sensuality and the devout:

'Doesn't the Sun command joy and life, doesn't the Sun call for the celebration of nature, in order for the essence to be released...' (p. 138)

⁵² See: Wolfgang Bauer, Irmtraut Dümötzer, Sergius Golowin, *Lexicon der Symbole*, Wiesbaden 1985, p. 47-48

Couperus deliberately opposes this thoroughly heathen view to the so different ones of rising Christianity. In a conversation with pappias Zephyrinus, the Christian bishop, Elegabalus says, for instance:

'The Black Stone is a sacred symbol, but no more than that – said between us, High Priests as we both are; you have another symbol: the Cross; a little odd, I think, an instrument of punishment for criminals and slaves, but it is possible that the meaning of the symbol escapes me; I am sure, that you do not get the meaning of our symbol, the phallus, the Black Stone, the sacred vitality of Nature...' (p. 161).

It is, however, not only fertility which forms the sacred element of this cult. The very release inherent in the unbridled celebration of passion entails *sacred redemption*, in Couperus' view:

'This is how Rheia Kubele, the goddess, how Attis, the human being, how Venus and Adonis had loved: it is how the immortals had always loved mortal beings, seemingly overcome by their passions, possibly, in their very passion approaching the End goal of the World... The Magicians called it: Perfection into Light itself... (...) Happy were those, who could wallow in their senses, in order to free themselves from earthly bonds...' (p. 297).

The sacred redemption is achieved in a religious ceremony. The end of Varius' dance is the climax of the ritual:

'The people shouted, furiously. Locked between the countless columns, behind the lightly armed guard, powerless in their yearning, hands were stretching, throats were shouting the name of the compassionate god. (...) Between the stretching hands of the maidens the Mediator descended, and became Man; his ephebe's member, small but erect after the movement of the dance, visualizing, pinkish-white; but his chest swelled up into a maiden's bosom, silver-white, and between the stretching hands of the Magicians, the Mediator became a Virgin. And it was as if all the hands of the Earth were stretched out towards his compassion, for thousands of hands from the moaning, groaning and screaming crowd clawed at him to become their master, handkisses were thrown in his direction, and the sword fighter Gualterius bellowed, very loud and very audible:

'Sweetheart, that you are!!'

(...)

'At the foot of the Stone, from the sanctuary below, a golden bed rose up, and the Mediator sank back into its golden cushions. His body symbolized the Altar of Mercy. The exultant dance of the girls and the jubilant hymn of the Magicians celebrated the Happiness of the Earth, its redemption and grateful ecstasy. The Black Stone began to radiate... At the tip of its cone, it began to radiate, so blindingly bright, that it sent out heavenly flashes. The Crowd trembled in sensual disgust and mystical fear... The Stone radiated, radiated more brightly, and the powerlessly yearning Masses saw in that superblinding flashing radiation the double Kiss, which the compassionate Mediator received from the Earth: Magicians bowing over his feminine mouth; female dancers over his male organ...' (p. 68-69)

Elsewhere, I have pointed out that such shameless religious frenzy does indeed have an historical precedent in the cult of Shaivism in ancient India – which has its Western counterpart in the Greek mystery cult of the god Dionyzos.⁵³ Shiva, the god of creation as well as of destruction, was venerated in the form of an erect stone or phallus. Both Shiva and Dionyzos were, incidentally, the patron gods of dance and the theatre.

⁵³ See: Caroline de Westenholz, 'Heilig sensualisme in De berg van licht. Heleogabalus en de vlam van de lust. Couperus en het Shivaïsme', *Arabesken. Tijdschrift van het Louis Couperus Genootschap* 12, nr. 23 (May 2004), p. 4-15

It goes without saying that Couperus's pagan views were quite shocking for the small, bourgeois, protestant nation which received this baroque and hyper decadent tale in the years 1905-1906. But since he was much translated in his lifetime, his views were well known in the world of international letters. The now unfashionable writer L.P. Hartley (1895-1972), for instance, once wrote in *The Saturday Review* (in a review of another of Couperus's historical novels, *The Comedians*, which also takes place in ancient Rome): 'His attitude is Pagan and his people live like pagans, happy in the sunlight, familiar with the idea of death, yet oppressed always by a horror of the unknown. (...) The sympathy is part of his mind and can be traced throughout his novels.'⁵⁴ It is a pity that Hartley could never read *The Mountain of Light*.

Conclusion

Following Goedegebuure in his analysis of *The Mountain of Light*:

Despite his use of historical sources and contemporary techniques, Couperus has written a book in which the underlying theme of all his work – the imperative power of fate – is predominant. He has succeeded in creating a psychological novel in which the demise of the chief character seems inevitable; from the very start of the book, all the signs point in that direction. His Varius develops, for all the world, like the typical blinded hero of a Greek tragedy.

Other Dutch literary critics have judged *De berg van licht* from different angles. I will briefly inventarize a few different points of view.

- THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL VIEW: Here, Elegabalus is meant to be an impersonation of Couperus, who, as a closet homosexual, sublimated his own feelings.⁵⁵ One critic has gone as far as to say Couperus used Roman antiquity as his 'homosexual brothel'.⁵⁶ On the other hand: others claim that Couperus projected his own personality in the character of Gordianus, a typically moderate, wise, epicurist Roman.⁵⁷
- THE MORALISTIC VIEW: in the wake of his interest in naturalism in the beginning of his career - his debut novel, *Eline Vere* (1889), was the first naturalistic novel in the country -, Couperus supposedly used the scandalous story of the life of Varius as a morally rejectionable example.⁵⁸ This view has been strongly contested.⁵⁹
- THE ESOTERIC VIEW. Klaas Popma was the first one to point out the huge debt to ancient gnosticism in Couperus' novel – and in Couperus' work in general. He claims that Couperus, instead of being an aestheticist, was first and foremost the theologian of a semi-gnostic religion of 'dimming, fading and degenerating'. Maarten Klein has done further research in this direction, and so have I.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ L.P. Hartley, 'New fiction. The Comedians', *Saturday Review* vol. 142, nr. 3694 (14 augustus 1926), p. 183-184

⁵⁵ H.W. van Tricht, *Louis Couperus. Een verkenning*, Den Haag 1960, Bastet 1987

⁵⁶ J.P. Guépin, 'De oudheid van Louis Couperus', in: *Hollands Maandblad* 11 (1969), p. 261/262, Aug./Sept., p. 50/54, reprinted in id., *De tweede wet van Guépin*, Amsterdam 1974

⁵⁷ Which is repudiated by the fact that Gordianus didn't feature in the first draft of the text. See H.T.M. van Vliet, *Eenheid in verscheidenheid, over de werkwijze van Louis Couperus*, Amsterdam/Antwerpen 1996, p. 222

⁵⁸ W.J. Lukkenauer, *De omrankte staf. Couperus' antieke werk deel 1: van Dionysos t/m Herakles*, Dissertation University of Leiden 1989, Luc Dirikx; and *Louis Couperus en het decadentisme. Een thematologische confrontatie*, Dissertation University of Gent 1993

⁵⁹ F.i. by Van Vliet 1996, p. 193

⁶⁰ K.J. Popma, *Beschouwingen over het werk van Louis Couperus (1863-1923)*, Amsterdam 1968, p. 157, and: Maarten Klein, *Noodlot en wederkeer. De betekenis van de filosofie in het werk van Louis Couperus*, Maastricht 2000

Research from this last point of view is, otherwise, still in its infancy. Until recently, the esoteric was largely treated with suspicion in academic circles, if not with outright contempt; every explanation for Varius' religion was supposedly provided by the scriptures of the much reviled Madame Blavatsky.⁶¹

Now, however, Amsterdam is the second city in Europe that boasts a chair in the studies of hermeticism and related esoteric currents. I have recently picked up contact with professor Wouter Hanegraaff for a joint project to start studying the work of Louis Couperus from Popma's point of view. Before he wrote *The Mountain of Light*, Couperus did, after all, publish a whole series of books with an esoteric flavour: *The Hidden Force* (on black magic in the former Dutch East Indies, in 1900); *Babel* (inspired by freemasonry, in 1901); *Across Thresholds of Light* (theosophic tales, in 1902); *God and Gods* (a gnostic cosmology, in 1903); and *Dionysus* (a biography of the god of the Ancient Mysteries, in 1904).

The above is a first draft of my ongoing investigation.

In connection with the Nachleben of Varius in general, the esoteric angle gives an intriguing twist to our subject, too. Seen through the eyes of the last alchemist, Fulcanelli, the fascination with the story of the legendary sun priest of Emesa through the ages - and especially with the marriage of the Sun and the Moon such as supposedly executed by the emperor - represent the ultimate execution of the Great Work of alchemy: the realisation of the Philosopher's Stone.

Says he:

'In order to close, on a less austere note, this study of the secret language designated under the name of *hermetic or solar cabala*' - as you probably know the alchemists used very hidden and secretive symbols to hide their heretical views -, 'we will show how far historic credulity can go, when a blind ignorance prompts us to attribute to certain individuals that which only belonged to allegory and legend.'

Fulcanelli goes on to explain that the name Heliogabalus means Horse of the Sun, 'the one which carries the science of the solar cabala' (cabala, with a 'c', being the secret language of the alchemists and not that of the Jewish scriptures, which one spells with a 'k'); the black stone, in alchemical sense, represents the first matter, subject of the art drawn from the original chaos, *primum ens*, formed by nature - and so on.⁶²

Fulcanelli, in other words, dismisses the entire historiography of the Nachleben of Varius to the realms of phantasy.

⁶¹ Much reviled: especially by Guépin 1969

⁶² Fulcanelli, *The dwellings of the philosophers*, translated by Brigitte Donvez en Lionel Perrin, s.l. 1999, p. 469. Translation of: *Les demeures philosophales et le symbolisme hermetique dans ses rapports avec l'art sacré et l'ésoterisme du grand-oeuvre*, Paris 1964 (1st edition: 1930). Goedegebuure 1987 mentions a possible connection with alchemy

Gustav Adolf Mossa (1883-1971):

Lui, a portrait of Varius

By Caroline de Westenholz

Earlier I mentioned the fact that Nice, capital of the Côte d'Azur, underwent a late phase of decadentism in the first decade of the twentieth century. I spoke about the presence of the Parisian writer Jean Lorrain, who spent the last six years of his life in the town. Equally important was the local French artist Gustave Adolf Mossa.

Gustav Adolf Mossa (1883-1971) was the son of the painter Alexis Mossa (1844-1926), a talented water colourist who rendered the beauty of the landscape around his home town. He became the first curator of the Musée des Beaux Arts in Nice, and in 1873, he invented the local *corso carnavalesque* (or Carnaval parade).

Nice around 1900 was a cosmopolitan town, which, during the season (from the beginning of December until the end of April) received the crème de la crème of the European aristocracy and in their wake, all the courtiers, artists, writers, theatre companies, opera singers of Europe. The main attractions, apart from the divine winter climate, were the Carnaval with its Veglione and Grande Redoute, masqued balls in the opera and in the Casino of Nice; the extensive musical life of the Riviera, be it in opera's and concert halls or in the many private salons; and soon after the turn of the century, the Ballets Russes in Monte-Carlo.

Gustav Adolf grew up in this atmosphere. He came to love the Carnaval: 'Carnaval', he once wrote, 'reminds me that I am its painter and the worthy monarch promptly commands me to design projects of floats for his next tight rope pageant.'⁶³

As of 1900, Art Nouveau made its appearance on the Riviera: in posters in the streets, in architectural follies, in interior decorating. It was in this context that Mossa junior started his career.

He attended the *Ecole des Arts Décoratives* in Nice, but his main education he received from his father. He began to paint in Alexis' studio.

Mossa senior also taught his son about classical mythology; Alexis Mossa could read ancient Greek. Two voyages through Italy (in 1902 and 1903) and the active pursuit of a great interest in literature completed Gustav's education. In 1900 father and son visited the Universal Exhibition in Paris, where Gustav Adolf discovered symbolism and art nouveau.

Mossa is mainly known for his symbolist oeuvre, which was created between 1904 and 1911. It combines the precision of a miniaturist with an original rendering of ancient myths and legends: the Graeco-Roman world, the Germanic universe, or the Judeo-Christian epics. Symbolist painters such as the Nabi's, Redon and Moreau in France, Böcklin and Hodler in Switzerland, Klimt and Schiele in Austria, Ropps and Knopff in Belgium, Toorop and Thorn Prikker in The Netherlands, Beardsley in England, had, by then, made their mark. Nice was late to arrive on the symbolist scene, but Mossa did so with a vengeance.

Mossa junior was a great reader. Writers such as Barbey d'Aureville, Baudelaire, Anatole France, J.K. Huysmans and Mallarmé provided much of his reading material. He illustrated Flaubert's *Salammbô*. Also, Mossa admired of Jean Lorrain; it has been said that Lorrain's oeuvre was a 'dangerous model' for the artist.⁶⁴ The late classical authors, such as Juvenal and Suetonius also provided a welcome source of inspiration. Mossa was deeply interested in music, especially in the opera's of Richard Wagner; the *Ring der*

⁶³ See Jean Roger Soubiran, *Gustav Adolf Mossa 1883-1971*, Nice, p. 48

⁶⁴ Soubiran 1985

Nibelungen was performed in the Nice opera in 1901-1903. Gustav was also a playwright, with an especial interest in the work of William Shakespeare. In 1905, he finished a one act play called *Pierrot s'en va*, a prelude for a series of images of the clown. It is said Mossa identified with the character.

Mossa was deeply interested in the themes and Leitmotiven of decadentism. To name but a few: orientalism, spiritism and satanism, love of masques and masquerades, androgyny or hermaphroditism, an extravagant love of jewelry and precious stones, a juxtaposition of the themes of love and death. Indeed, the morbid sensibility of decadentism, with hints of sadism and perversion, shines in every single one of Mossa's symbolist paintings. As his biographer, Jean Roger Soubiran, writes: he started his career turning the sacralisation of myth which had characterised the first generation of symbolist painters into caricature.⁶⁵ This was especially true for his biblical subjects, which all border on the sacriligious.

It is generally agreed that Mossa reached his mature style around 1905.

When Mossa began his career, Nice did not have a museum, but there was the yearly Société des Beaux Arts. In 1902 and 1903, Mossa's first exhibitions there took place there. These were reported in the local newspapers. Not all reviews were equally positive; some journalists disapproved of Mossa's decadentism and urged him to go back to realism, but the artist was unperturbed. In 1905, Mossa's first one man show was mounted in the rooms of the local newspaper *l'Eclaireur de Nice*. For this exhibition, Mossa chose the frontispiece of *A rebours* by J.K. Huysmans: 'I must rejoice beyond the bounds of time... though the world may shudder at my joy, and in its coarseness know not what I mean'.⁶⁶ Reviews of the exhibition compared Mossa to 'the mysterious Aubrey Beardsley', who died in neighbouring Menton only seven years previously.⁶⁷

As off 1903 Mossa's designs for Carnival floats began to appear in the streets of Nice.

Le Vice (the vice) is a typical example of Mossa's particular brand of decadentism. It shows an androgynous youth with a feminine, made up face, an almost pregnant looking stomach and male genitals, a snake curled around his neck, a couple of pink roses around his lower waist, and an enigmatic smile on his face. He is pictured striding along a beach as he holds a net full of naked bodies. The whole image has a weird sense of sweetness and quasi-innocence, which is of course belied by the weird double-sexedness of the protagonist. Has he collected the bodies in order to torture them and kill them? The three skeletons depicted at the edge of the net seem to suggest so. Jean Forneris, former curator of the Musée des Beaux Arts in Nice, informs us that the scene is inspired by writers such as the Sâr Péladan (*Le Vice Suprême*) and Jean Lorrain (*Le Vice errant*)⁶⁸ – both of which we already came across in our discussion of Lombard and Couperus.

In 1906 Mossa painted the watercolour *Lui*, a portrait of Elegabalus, preparing for his dance. A frail, feminine-looking boy stands before his dressing table, powder puff in one hand, looking glass in the other. In the arcades in the background, the audience, all men decked out in evening dress, are waiting to see his performance. The right hand corner of the watercolour displays the following text: "'Et alors, il contrefaisait la voix et les cris des jeunes filles auxquelles l'on fait violence," Suétone, *Vie d'Héliogabale*.' ('And then, he imitated the voice and the cries of the girls that he had raped.') This quotation is of course

⁶⁵ Soubiran 1985, p. 46

⁶⁶ After Jan van Ruysbroeck. J.K. Huysmans, *Against nature*, translated by Robert Baldick, London 1959

⁶⁷ 'Le mystérieux Aubrey Beardsley, seul, approcha de tant de volupté tragique, du goût de sang, de la tache horrible sur les fleurs du rêve...' Soubiran 1985, p. 54

⁶⁸ Jean Forneris (ed.), *Gustav Adolf Mossa, l'oeuvre symboliste: 1903-1918*, catalogue exhibition Pavillon des Arts, Parijs, 19/6-27/9/1992, Paris, 1992. See also: *Gustav Adolf Mossa 1883-1971, Numéro spécial de Nice Historique*, Nice, 1996, no. 2-3

not correct: Suetonius' *Lives of the twelve emperors* does not contain a biography of Varius. The text in question comes from the chapter on the emperor Nero. This is the only time Mossa depicted Varius, who was in his view, an equally decadent Roman emperor. The watercolour is in the possession of the Musée des Beaux Art Jules Cheret in Nice.

The Suetonian text gives the frail, slender figure of Elegabalus a sinister turn. In another watercolour inspired by Suetonius, called *Rubria* (from 1907) we see an oriental looking man in a cape in flagrante delicto; his victim is dressed like a bride. It is a portrait of Nero, in the process of raping a Vestal virgin, called Rubria.

Lui is preceded by a watercolour, called *Le foetus* (dating from 1905) of a woman behind her dressing table, powder puff in hand, her husband all dressed up in the background. Once again, the quasi-innocent subject gets a nasty taste when we discover the giant bottle with a foetus in the foreground. Apparently, it was inspired by a line from Barbey d'Aurevilly, from his book *Diaboliques*: 'The major Ydow had his son's heart embalmed in order to be able to take it everywhere he went, and he had piously put it into a crystal urn, which was normally placed in a small cupboard in his bedroom.'

Lui (him) is a counterpart of *Elle (her)*, which shows a naked woman sitting on top of a mountain of miniature naked bodies, like Gulliver sitting on top of the little people. *Elle* has been inspired by Juvenal; the relevant text is displayed on the nimbus that runs around her head: HOC VOLO SIC JUBEO/SIT PRO RATIONE VOLUNTAS (this is my choice, as is my order, that will take the place of reason). The Soubiran catalogue refers to a pact between two characters in the book *La Vénus à la ferrure* by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch.

Together, *Lui* and *Elle* form a couple, typical of the period: the homme fragile and the femme fatale, the androgynous, effeminate man and the fatal woman, who, like a praying mantis, devours men after sex. *Elle* wears a necklace with daggers and phallic symbols dangling from it, a cat lurks between her thighs, three skulls and two ravens decorate her coiffure – again that fatal combination of eroticism and death that was so popular amongst the decadentists.

Strangely, the watercolour *Lui*: the portrait of Varius was painted in the year that Louis Couperus published the second volume of *The Mountain of Light*.

The young sun priest as depicted by Mossa reminds one in more than one respect of Varius as described by Couperus in his novel. He is young, frail, beautiful and very androgynous; his make-up is silvery white; his reddish hair is obviously curled. He wears a short tunic and a decorative, bejewelled belt. Several passages in *The Mountain of Light* come to mind, when studying this watercolour.

Varius preparing for his dance:

'He came, his paleness rosily tinged by his bath. He pushed the serving women left and right, so that they tripped – one fell over – and like a naughty child, he plonked down in front of the table of mirrors. Already, Statyra had warmed the curlers; no-one but she knew how to crimp his hair, lightly, fluffy, and without burning it. She crimped four locks on each temple; the locks in the neck she curled rounder and fuller; they fell down over his shoulders. It was very important, and everybody watched; when Statyra had next had powdered humid gold over the locks, so that they seemed gilded, Semiamira said: - And now I must get dressed...' (p. 38)

An even more relevant parallel between Mossa's drawing and Couperus' text is the watching crowd in the background of the watercolour. Throughout the novel, Couperus writes the word 'Crowd' with a capital letter. Professor van Vliet has remarked that in this

way, the moving 'crowd' almost becomes a liquid mass, to be likened to the 'sea of blood' that Hydaspes sees in the beginning of the book and the bloody river Tiber at the end.⁶⁹

In Mossa's drawing the crowd is of course quite static. It is an all male crowd, decked out in evening dress, and standing there, watching, behind the arcade of Varius' dressing room, in what seems to be a courtyard. Couperus describes it as follows:

'Outside, the thuds of the gongs reverberated, very high and very low, very shrill and then dull, and they drove the faithful to the temple. The Crowd streamed towards the Gates of the Sun, in order to find a good place, in front, and up to the High Priesterly buildings and the Court of Women, that was surrounded by a guard of lightly armed Roman soldiers, to warn off curious peeping. There were creams of laughter and happy cheering, for the threemonthly Exercise of the Sacerdotium was a great feast.' (p.41)

A crowd scene a few pages further along in the novel makes one think even more of Mossa's watercolour:

'Pushing, pushing in each other's backs, they stood like stacked together and could no longer move, as if turned into a mosaïque of fixated, staring faces, full of patience to wait yet hours longer, before the Pageant would enter and the curtains, heavy as bronze, would open. Out of that mosaïque of patient heads, as if from a higher floor, the shafts rose up, and too many were the shafts, according to those, who, pressed against a shaft, were in danger of being crushed...' (p. 47)

Naturally, we must not take these comparisons too literally. First off, Mossa could probably not read Dutch. Couperus had the habit to read his manuscripts out loud to his family, but it does not seem very likely that he did so in French, to his friends. Of course there was much talk about a French translation of *The Mountain of Light*, at the time of the genesis of the book – we can follow the issue in Couperus' correspondence to his publisher's – but this translation never materialised.⁷⁰ Finally, we must bear in mind that Couperus never mentioned rape in his novel.

It has not been possible to prove that the two artists: Couperus and Mossa, actually knew each other. It is known that Couperus was a member of the Cercle Artistique, the local artist's society, as of the end of 1901. We don't know for certain whether Mossa was, too – all records of the society from before 1910 seem to have been lost – but it does not seem very likely that he would not have been. The above parallel between the two works of art can therefore remain no more than a suggestion.

In any case it remains interesting that on the Côte d'Azur, in the Belle Epoque, Varius was treated by three artists, in three different ways. Jean Lombard followed ancient historiography and depicted the emperor mainly as a monster; Louis Couperus and Gustav Adolf Mossa followed the more exalted nineteenth century views. In the fin de siècle, the combination of beauty, innocence and the most atrocious vice had a special attraction of its own. In this period, Varius became a beautiful, perverted child. Louis Couperus turned him into the tragic hero of a modern psychological novel. The decadentist view is best represented by Gustav Adolf Mossa's watercolour portrait of the boy.

⁶⁹ H.T.M. van Vliet, *Eenheid in verscheidenheid, over de werkwijze van Louis Couperus*, Amsterdam/ Antwerpen 1996, p. 193

⁷⁰ See H.T.M. van Vliet, *Louis Couperus en L.J. Veen. Bloemlezing uit hun correspondentie*, Amsterdam/ Antwerpen 1992 (1st edition: 1987), letter 69, d.d. March 1905, p. 99. See also p. 207

