

Heliogabalus; or, the Crowned Anarchist

Antonin Artaud , Alexis Lykiard (Translator)

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Translated into English for the first time, this novelized biography of the 3rd-century Roman Emperor Heliogabalus is simultaneously Artaud's most accessible and his most extreme book. Written in 1933, at the time when Artaud was preparing to stage his legendary Theatre of Cruelty, Heliogabalus is a powerful concoction of sexual excess, self-deification and terminal violence. Reflecting its author's preoccupations with the occult, magic, Satan, and a range of esoteric religions, this account of Heliogabalus' reign invents incidents in the Emperor's life in order to make the print of the author's own passionate denunciations of modern existence.

Heliogabalus is Artaud's greatest and most revolutionary masterpiece: an incendiary work that reveals both the divine cruelty of the Roman Emperor and that of Artaud himself. -- Stephen Barber

Heliogabalus; or, the Crowned Anarchist Details


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From Reader Review Heliogabalus; or, the Crowned Anarchist for online ebook

John says

This is one of I believe two novels that Artaud wrote. It's about the Roman emperor Heliogabalus, whose reign was noted for degeneracy and excess to the point where his generals eventually murdered him for it. Artaud makes the argument that his corruption and excess were so extensive and pure that in themselves they constituted a work of art transposed into the real world.

Laginestra says

Per la precisione si tratta della biografia più estrema vomitata su carta. Dalla torbida concezione del futuro imperatore romano alla sua entrata sodomitica nell'urbe, fino ad arrivare alla miserabile morte nella cloaca massima: dallo sperma agli escrementi, tutto è liquidamente imbrattante ed eccessivo, nella prosa di un genio. Un capolavoro. Non scherzo.

A says

Whilst reading this, I considered for the first time the difficulty Artaud's writing must pose for the translator. Not because I read/speak French and am thus certain of the difficulty, but because there is a particular thorniness in the language in nearly every translation I had read, a consistent sort of thorniness that leads me to believe it's a matter of the source and not poor translation. If you go into this book unfamiliar with Artaud's work, you might find some bits difficult. I'm reminded of when I first read "Van Gogh: The Man Suicided By Society," reading that first sentence several times, trying to parse it (while simultaneously savoring its rotting beauty).

Translation aside, I wavered between 3 and 4 stars, since I was not sure it compared as well to other works by Artaud I have read. So we'll say 3.5? This is not exactly a novel and not exactly a history. As with most of his prose, it's split between passages of brutal, visceral, and dreamlike body imagery and then more theoretical passages built off this. The source here is historical and Artaud takes great delight in describing the religious rituals and picking apart the life and progeny of Heliogabalus. Clearly a lot of research was put into this, and primarily from sources close to the period. He's not so much interested in direct transmission of events as he is in relating the events to his general ideas, particularly in envisioning Heliogabalus as an anarchist intent on destroying the Roman Empire from within. The pagan rituals and alchemical symbols bear relation to his ideas on theatre as cruelty and so forth, but this is something that makes more sense if the reader is familiar with Artaud's work in a broader context. Connections could also be drawn to his writings on the Tarahumara. Always the idea of performance as ritual, of symbols drawn into the material realm, thereby transforming it into something truer and purer (transmutation, if you will). But Artaud is essentially a monist, and this transmutation must come first by the stripping of boundaries and limitations. Therefore: no stage, no text, only gesture.

It's hard for me not to ramble over the thing, as I always find his way of seeing so interesting, even when I don't entirely agree with it. It's almost as if the intensity of it is enough, as if his single-minded focus on this one idea were all that mattered. In the end, it's not my favorite (still "Theatre and Its Double," or maybe "The

Peyote Dance," or maybe "Jet of Blood" for the lulz). But very interesting and worth a read if you like crazy French Surrealists with a penchant for plague and blood imagery.

Troy says

This book alternates between turgid/dense and fast/insane. I read it because I recently read Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense* and in that book Deleuze consistently talks about Lewis Carroll, the Stoics, and Artaud. I haven't read Artaud since I read *The Theater and Its Double* which I honestly don't remember very well, even though I remember I loved it. Anyway, I see why Deleuze loves this book; a lot of Deleuze's thought, and a lot of writing style, is encapsulated by Artaud.

The first part of this book sets up Artaud's thoughts on Heliogabalus, the utterly debauched teen Roman Emperor. The second book dives deep into Artaud's world-view, and the book at this point slows down to frozen latex. It's here that Artaud prefigures Deleuze with his talk of levels, the reality of principles, Love, the Will, religion, numerology, etc. But the last section of the book sings. It's here that we get a sense of why Artaud thinks the debauched emperor Heliogabalus was an anarchist. Artaud explains how the boy was both an anarchist and creating poetry and theater. He was an anarchist because he was out to destroy the stratification of Roman society and the plurality of Roman religion. According to Artaud, he attempted to do that through destruction of what is sacred, and one of his prime weapons was sex.

It's not a perfect book, and some of it is both boring and deeply slow going, but the end is worth it. The end is a brilliant take on art, anarchism, destruction, and creation.

Kieran says

This bitch was punk as fuck

Terence says

Voice Claudia also describes the history of a potential, and probable, active-trait male in her territory. He declared himself a living god-emperor, and through marriage to Bene Gesserit Livia produced several generations of active-trait males. One appears to have been the first known Abomination, a man who heard "voices" and claimed to be both male and female, but whose actions were so perverse that Voice Claudia refuses to describe them. ("Bene Gesserit History," *Dune Encyclopedia Tr*, p. 121)*

I begin this short note on Antonin Artaud's *Heliogabalus* with a quote from a fictional encyclopedia of a fictional future history because this novel puts me most in mind of the Bene Gesserit's obsessive search for the *kwisatz haderach*, the person who would bridge the gap between Male and Female. Especially based on this quote:

All the same, Heliogabalus the pederast king who wanted to be a woman, was a priest of the

Masculine. He achieved in himself the identity of opposites, but did not achieve it without harm, and his devout pederasty had no origin other than an obstinate and abstract conflict between Masculine and Feminine. (p. 72)

Having now read Artaud's version of *The Monk* and this, I feel confident in writing that I am *not* a fan of French Surrealism. I fear that I am far too bourgeois to feel much except distaste in the author's worldview. That said, I understand why Artaud feels such rage and why he responds as he does. I don't think it's a compelling response but there are nuggets of interest (like the aforementioned conflict between Male and Female principles).**

* The reference here is to Caligula (AD 37-41), of course, and not to the hapless child elevated to the throne by his grandmother and mother in AD 212 but I think the characterization applies equally.

** I emphasize that this is entirely a personal opinion. If some – and from the reviews, there are – find meaning in Artaud, that's fine, and I would recommend *Heliogabalus* to them.

Güney Erkurt says

roma imparatoru heliogabalos'u (varius avitus bassianus) gayet subjektif olarak ele alan ve gerçekten sert bir üslupla yaz?lm?? artaud kitab?. bir erselik olan genç imparatorun ancak 4 y?l süren k?y?c?, savruk ve ahlak d??? iktidar?nda anar?ist bir güdülenme bulundu?u iddias?ndad?r artaud. ona göre heliogabalos, o günün bütün dini, toplumsal ve siyasi etik de?erleriyle alay etmekteydi. önemli devlet görevlilerini pozisyonlar?ndan al?p yerine alelade insanlar? (arabac?, bahçevan gibi) at?yor, roma'ya gelir gelmez bütün erkek senato üyelerinin i?ine son verip yerine kad?nlar? meclise dolduruyor, penis uzunluklar?na göre senatörlere pozisyonlar veriyor, toplu had?m ayinleri düzenliyor, dönemin bütün tanr?lar?n? tek bir tanr?da birle?tiriyordu...

"heliogabalos'un bütün ya?am?, eylem halinde anar?idir. zira dü?man kutuplar olan erkekle kad?n?, bir ile iki'yi, bir araya getiren birlikçi tanr? elegabalus çeli?kilerin sonu, sava??n ve anar?inin -ama sava?la- ortadan kald?r?lmas?d?r; ayn? zamanda bu çeli?ki ve düzensizlik ülkesinde anar?inin uygulamaya konmas?d?r. ve anar?i de, heliogabalos'un vard??? noktada, gerçekleş?mi? ?iidir."

Stephen says

Straripante di concetti, paradossi, documenti, descrizioni, nomi e storie. Un'opera complessa, gravida di elementi, che richiede lo stesso studio da parte del lettore quanto quello di chi l'ha stesa. Difficile dire di più senza scadere nelle citazioni o nel banale.

Juan says

Me volvió loco. La que va.

Tim Pendry says

Now this is a curiosity - one part flummery, one part insanity and one part genius. It is an account of sorts of the decadent teenage androgynous Emperor Heliogabalus.

Not that the average reader (in which category I include myself) will have an earthly idea what this is all about (given the limits of a modern education) until you remember that it is best not read but DECLAIMED out loud in a theatrical manner and that it has to be seen as the last flowering (written in the 1930s) of a forty year cycle of French decadent writing (and part of a much longer cycle of French artistic sensuality).

Surrealism, orientalism, obscenity (though not quite as outrageous as the publisher might like us to think), an incipient fascist mentality - it's all in there. It helps to know something of the Anatolian cult of self-castration and of Cybele but you can look that up in Wikipedia.

There are insights in the text about extreme anarchy but the book is part of a political-cultural death cult which re-emerges periodically amongst artistic types as a response to the mundane and the modern in many cultures and at many times - it is the type of thing you might write if you were suffering from radical ennui and raging hormones. It is no accident that Artaud's circle included the High Priestess of French sexuality, Anais Nin.

The publisher refers to it as the 'most accessible' of Artaud's books - the mind boggles at what the others must be like ...

una_sussa says

"Quanto a Eliogabalo, egli ha il gusto della regalità, l'incoscienza di un demente precoce, l'assenza di scrupoli di un monomane e l'ingenuità senza macchia di un adolescente di quattordici anni. Tutti gli intrighi di Giulia Mesa non avrebbero mai raggiunto nulla se essi non avessero avuto per base la personalità d'Eliogabalo, se questo mostro che la Storia ha vomitato non avesse avuto in sé le dimensioni di un mostro, cosciente delle proprie crudeltà. Un bel mostro che si vuole re. Che ha l'orgoglio del sangue solare e un'acuta coscienza dei riti che si praticano intorno al sole! Tutte le guerre che i popoli si sono fatte, popoli gettati gli uni contro gli altri in armi, e in armi per delle idee, convien pensare che Eliogabalo le porti in sé, non come un riflesso o una immagine, ma come un'energia che vien divorata e che mostra la sua attività. Eliogabalo è un devoto che esercita la propria religione. E se l'esercita con demenza è perché questa religione stessa è demente, perché essa è il contraccolpo umano, la riproduzione della guerra, che gli dèi in armi hanno dovuto farsi una volta nel caos. Tutto ciò può sembrare folle, o puerile come tutto ciò che è folle. A questa guerra nessuno crede. Una guerra per i principi è già molto rara, ma una guerra di principi, levati gli uni contro gli altri, e che si batterebbero come degli Esseri, è leggenda o follia. "

aya says

This book was very difficult for me, but difficult good. Sometimes hard to sort the gibberish from the gems, but there were some amazing nuggets. Because it's not a straightforward biography, we get a real sense of the psychology and dichotomies within the child god emperor, but not any detailed chronology.

Laurence Leduc-Primeau says

Livre marquant. Vaguement incompréhensible. Quelque part entre le délire et la recension historique. Beaucoup de voyages possibles à l'intérieur de ces pages; des couleurs et des images très fortes.

Jay says

Antonin Artaud, on his birthday September 4

Phantasms, nightmares, prophecies, mysticisms and the surreal;

Antonin Artaud takes us with him on his quest to see beyond the Illusion of the world, to transcend appearances. We his readers are born along on his adventures like a saint's medal around his neck, surely a saint of misfits and lost causes, seeking dreams and true visions. Our faith is that of readers, that our author will find the plot of our stories, that the ride will be worth our time. I hope so still.

His works of neoplatonic theology inspired and gave direction to the founders of Surrealism; works given force and depth by his lifelong struggle with madness. He could have said with Renfield, "I'm not a mad man; I'm a sane man fighting for my soul".

Satanic Authorities of various kinds tried to silence him and to steal his transformative power of vision; being kept in a straightjacket, cast into solitary dark pits, and tortured with electroshock and ritual drowning cannot have improved his condition. Psychiatry has never fully emerged from its historical roots in the medieval European Christian belief that abnormalities were the result of sin and demonic possession, and cures were intended to drive the devils out through mortification of the flesh and monastic disciplines.

What is normal, and who decides? Authorized power is the precondition of its abuse, and of the tyranny of the state and the dehumanization of individuals.

Beyond the inarticulate howls and grunts which were an attempt to rediscover our original language in the sounds of nature, the provocations of his Theatre of Cruelty reinterpreting Nietzsche's aesthetics, the dissonant cacophony of his music inspired by the Balinese Gamelan percussion orchestra, and the unsettling dreamlike imagery of his cinematic art, lies Plato's Allegory of the Cave and the mission of his work, to paraphrase the words of Ahab in Melville's Moby Dick, "to break through the mask of our material existence and seize the Reality it conceals".

That the quest of Ahab was also his is quite evident; whether he was able to leave us a map of the journey to the Infinite is another matter, proven only in the doing.

Read therefore his seminal manifesto *The Theatre And Its Double*, and his great novel *Heliogabalus; or, the Crowned Anarchist*. Of his works, the essays which have shaped art, literature, stage, and the cinema include *Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society*", and "Theatre and Science", and of his films, *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, with its magnificent Catholic symbols and themes as well as the parallel subversion of them must rank as a classic achievement.

But also important are the letters he wrote from Ireland, apocalyptic visions in which he foresaw the Occupation of Paris, and for which he was once again committed to an asylum, where he remained throughout the Second World War.

Antonin Artaud was a kind of saint, a mad prophet and outcast who refused to abandon his Quixotic quest to liberate us from our normalcy and the iron grip of Authority. And with the fragments of his works, his message remains; we are the negative spaces of the dark mass of the Unseen, shadow puppets living shadow lives, yet reaching always toward the eternal Reality beyond.

Vit Babenco says

“A thing named is a dead thing, and it's dead because it is set apart...”

Antonin Artaud tells the story of Heliogabalus as if he writes an alchemical treatise and in the first section: “The Cradle of Sperm” he depicts the transformation of sperm into a human being as is he is describing a transmutation of lead into gold... For him all metamorphoses are possible – the matter turns into spirit, the form becomes content.

“Principles are only of value to the mind, and to the thinking mind; but outside the mind that thinks, a principle is reduced to nothing...”

In the world and in the universe everything is interlocked: stars and fates, witchery and science, paganism and collective unconscious, divinity and Freudianism, astrology and Christianity, history and the present, life and death. So a thing can be compared with any other thing and one may draw parallel lines between any mythologems and any phenomena... And **Antonin Artaud** boldly follows this trail, transmuting salaciousness into poetic language. His *Heliogabalus* is a tale about a madman told by another madman, the fantastic ejaculation of a poetical mind.
