

INTRODUCTION

We all strive for our way to the artificial paradises, to the feelings, the odours and the tastes of our childhood and of a world before our time. We can find access in old photographs, in accidentally read names of streets or people, in handwritings on postcards and notebooks, in the levity of a transitory motion or in the distant sound of a summer night's party: all the world's pain and all the beauty concentrated in a chord, in a word, in a moment: *a life, a song, a cigarette*. Melancholy and *Weltschmerz* form the other side of the precious sentiments: one cannot exist without the other. These accesses are transient and individual, serendipitous, unsustainable and idiosyncratic, as their mechanics lie at a depth whose rules we do not understand: they quickly close their gates, lose their charm and become useless to us. Art tries to keep these doors open for a moment longer in order to allow the artist and his audience permanent access to these feelings.

A GLIMPSE OF ETERNITY

The English Romantic poets came up with a term that describes the feeling that sets in when gazing at a terrible and beautiful mountain landscape or at a horrid storm. A sight that makes people shudder by making them aware of their own smallness, while simultaneously presenting them with the feeling of being part of a larger whole: *the sublime*.¹

People have sought their ways at all times: our ancestors in the archaic ritual, the Romans in the mystery cults, the Chinese in the opium dens and the poets of decadence in the hashish and the laudanum. The world is full of ruins of past epochs: We find their traces in the Alhambra and on Mount Lykaion, at the Lake Starnberg and in the Amber Room, in *art nouveau*, in the dance of the dervishes and in the concrete of the brutalists.

[1] This is the same feeling that Kubrick's black monolith evokes inside the hominids' souls, the same feeling the film screen evokes inside Kubrick's soul, and the same feeling Kubrick's films evoke inside our souls.

The seekers have many names: they are called Heliogabal, Gilles de Rais, Des Esseintes and Montesquiou-Fézensac, later Marchesa Casati, George Bataille, Ernst Fuchs, Karl Lagerfeld and Pierre Cardin, and in his *Lichas* cycle MD tries to gain access to a more fundamental truth through a story from ancient Rome at the beginning of the imperial era. He seeks to push his way through to a feeling that is common to all of mankind: an immersion into the *âme universelle*, into the collective soul, into the *anima mundi*. He therefor resorts to a marginal figure of Petronius' notorious *Satyricon*.

THE SATYRICON

In his opus *Satyricon* the ancient writer Publius Petronius Niger, *arbiter elegantiae* ("judge of elegance") in the court of Emperor Nero, created a moral portrait of a late Roman decadent society. For the first time someone is willing to go deeper into the holes, to descend into the alleys, especially the dirty ones, to look more closely and to speak the language of the outcasts: imperial Rome comes to life with all its abysses.

The French author Joris Karl Huysmans places a rare edition of the book in the library of his *décadent* Des Esseintes, who appreciates the oeuvre's qualities and recognizes Petronius as the first modern writer and as a predecessor of the 19th century naturalists. He regretfully notes that he will never grasp the book to its full extent as only a third of Petronius' original text survived to the present day.²

[2] Nowadays the *Satyricon* is mainly known for its *Cena Trimalchiones*, where a debauched and tasteless feast of a freedmen and *nouveau riche* is described in Menippean satire.

APOCRYPHA

This fragmentary transmission has led to a long tradition of *Pseudo-Petroniana*, to apocryphal *Satyricon* texts and to a legion of imitators: Arcane communities that carry on Petronius' work and fill in the blanks. This development is not surprising: it is common to many artists to understand themselves as part of a tradition, to work in the most precise manner with subjects, their reception and adaptation, to descend deeply to the great artists of the past and to line up with them. MD and I share this desire, and *Lichas* is our attempt to become part of that tradition.

WANTED: LICHAS, SON OF A FISHERMAN

Our cycle tells the story of Lichas, a fisherman's son from Taranto, who cultivates the Greek honeybee to attain wealth and ties, who loves the noble Hedyle and the beautiful Tryphaena and who dies in a shipwreck. The description of his death scene remains Lichas' only appearance in Petronius' text, which opens a vacancy and gives us the opportunity to immerse deeper into the character, to give him an inner life and a story: As part of the *Pseudo-Petroniana* we tell the story of the eternal Apiculturist on a large canvas.

WANTED: AN ARTIST

When MD and I started to collaborate and I entered his spheres of studios and colours, I expected to encounter narcissism and arbitrariness, a false compulsion to self-fulfilment known to me from the art world, but I found an artist according to my taste: opposed to the *zeitgeist*, hard working, learning, reading, humble toward the tradition and devoted to the form.

Moreover, there was something special about the *Lichas* cycle: I recognized the work of a young artist who had just found his own style, a fact that gives *Lichas* unusual weight and retrospectively reilluminates MD's early work, which had strongly been subjected to external formal influences. A tang of first dew clinging to the artistic substance during this creative phase makes it a special one.

Under these circumstances I am most willing to become a part of *Lichas* and to join MD in the tradition of the *Pseudo-Petroniana*.

TEXT AND IMAGE: A MUTUAL APPROACH

Parallel to my search for a corresponding literary form, which is obliged to reflect the segmentation of the subject in its words and syntax in order to penetrate through timeless, universal characters to reach the common grounds of truth, MD and I deepened in long conversations about past times and the common desire to understand them and their inhabitants. Our work led us to read the ancient historians, Suetonius and Seneca, Tacitus and Pliny the Elder, the poetry of Ovid, and soon it came to the exchange of our literary influences and we talked about Huysmans, Rilke and Pound,³ read in unison and debated while marvelling at the paintings of Lawrence Alma Tadema and watching films about the imperial era. Fellini and Pasolini: They understood how two Romans talked to each other when they met for the very first time, how they moved, how they changed their minds, how they murdered and how they laughed.⁴ *Caligula* by Tinto Brass: The opening scene with the coin of Caligula's eyes shedding blood remained in my memory and touched me deeply - in this manner I want to write *Lichas*.

During our time together a painter came to town and told us that images can help when language reaches its limits. I understood and I thought to myself that conversely language could help when the image reaches its limits: painting and writing - a mutual approach to eternity.

[3] I recognized a bibliophile, in whose works the influence of literature is omnipresent: a tender and precise reader whose paintings cite the aesthetics of book covers and depict literary allusions often at a refreshing distance from the canon.

[4] It is sometimes strange how these things come together: when MD told me that he found Petronius and *Lichas* through Fellini (and my own path is even stranger), I understood the possibility of leading people with similar interests to one's personal canon through the intertextuality of one's own artistic work. It is futile (and it disgusts me) to please people, but it seems to be one of the more important life-tasks to find the small group of people who resemble you (so I regularly put my business card in certain rare book in the public libraries and write instructions on their pages).