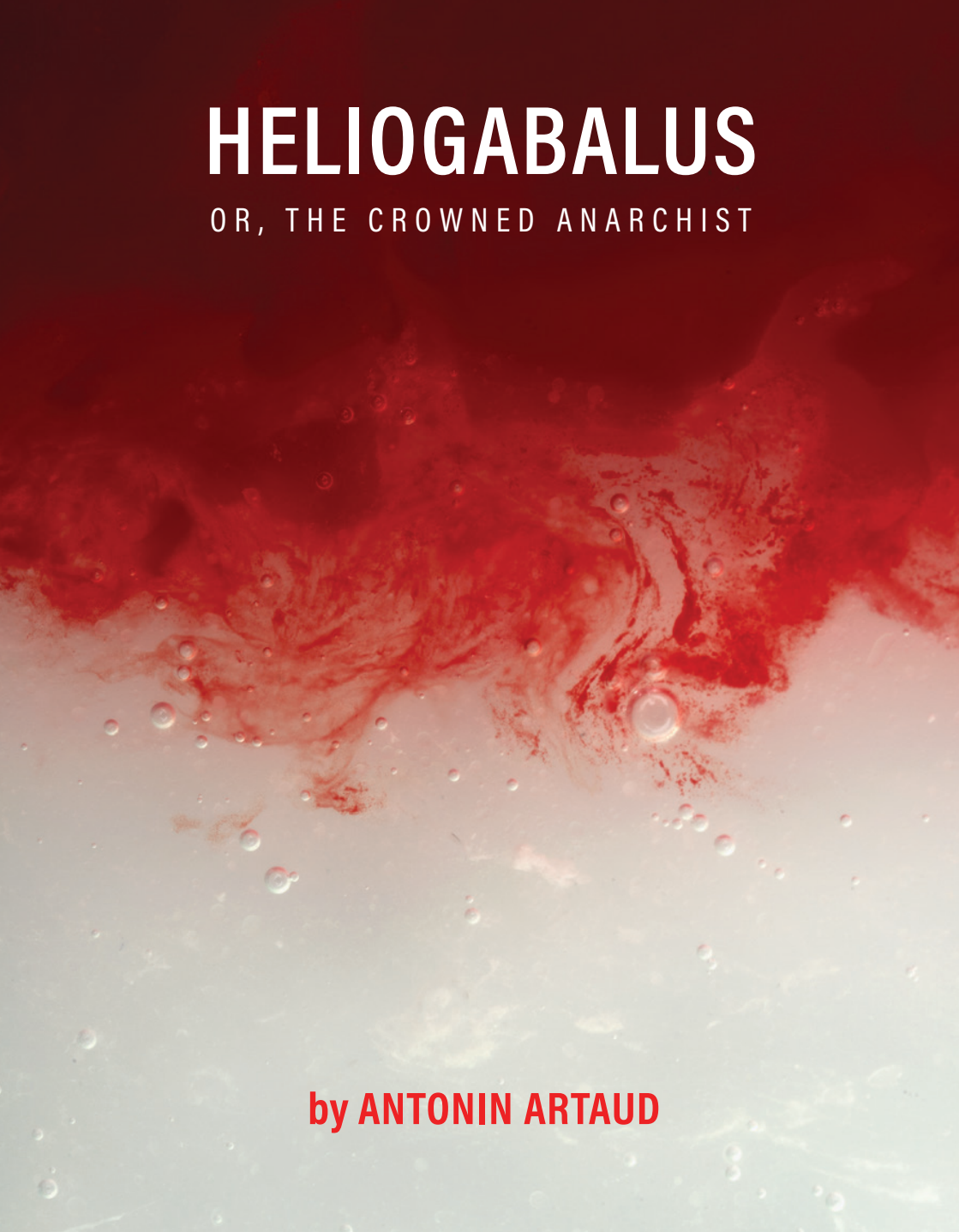
HELIOGABALUS

OR, THE CROWNED ANARCHIST



by ANTONIN ARTAUD

HELIOGABALUS

OR, THE CROWNED ANARCHIST

INFINITY LAND PRESS

This book is supported by the Institut français (Royaume-Uni)
as part of the Burgess programme.

INSTITUT FRANÇAIS
ROYAUME-UNI

INFINITY LAND PRESS 2019

www.infinitylandpress.com

ISBN 978-1-9160091-1-0

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced
without the prior permission of Infinity Land Press Ltd.

Book design by Karolina Urbaniak

HELIOGABALUS

OR, THE CROWNED ANARCHIST

by Antonin Artaud

Translated by
Alexis Lykiard

with an introduction by
Stephen Barber

Artworks by Martin Bladh
Photographs by Karolina Urbaniak

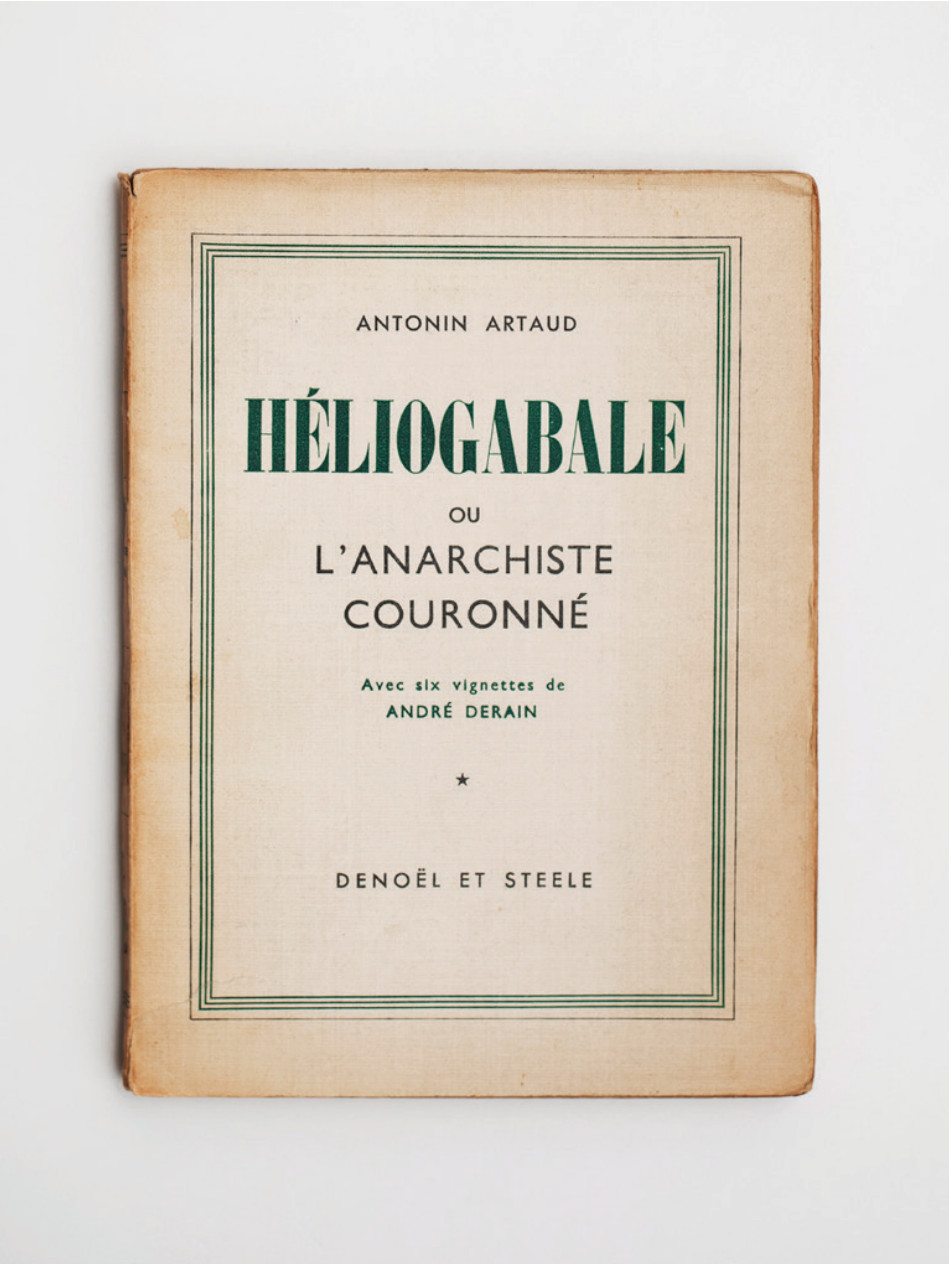
Antonin Artaud
at the time of writing *Heliogabalus*

CONTENTS

1. Introduction
by Stephen Barber

2. Heliogabalus or,
the Crowned Anarchist
Translated by Alexis Lykiard

3. Heliogabalus Letters
Translated by Stephen Barber



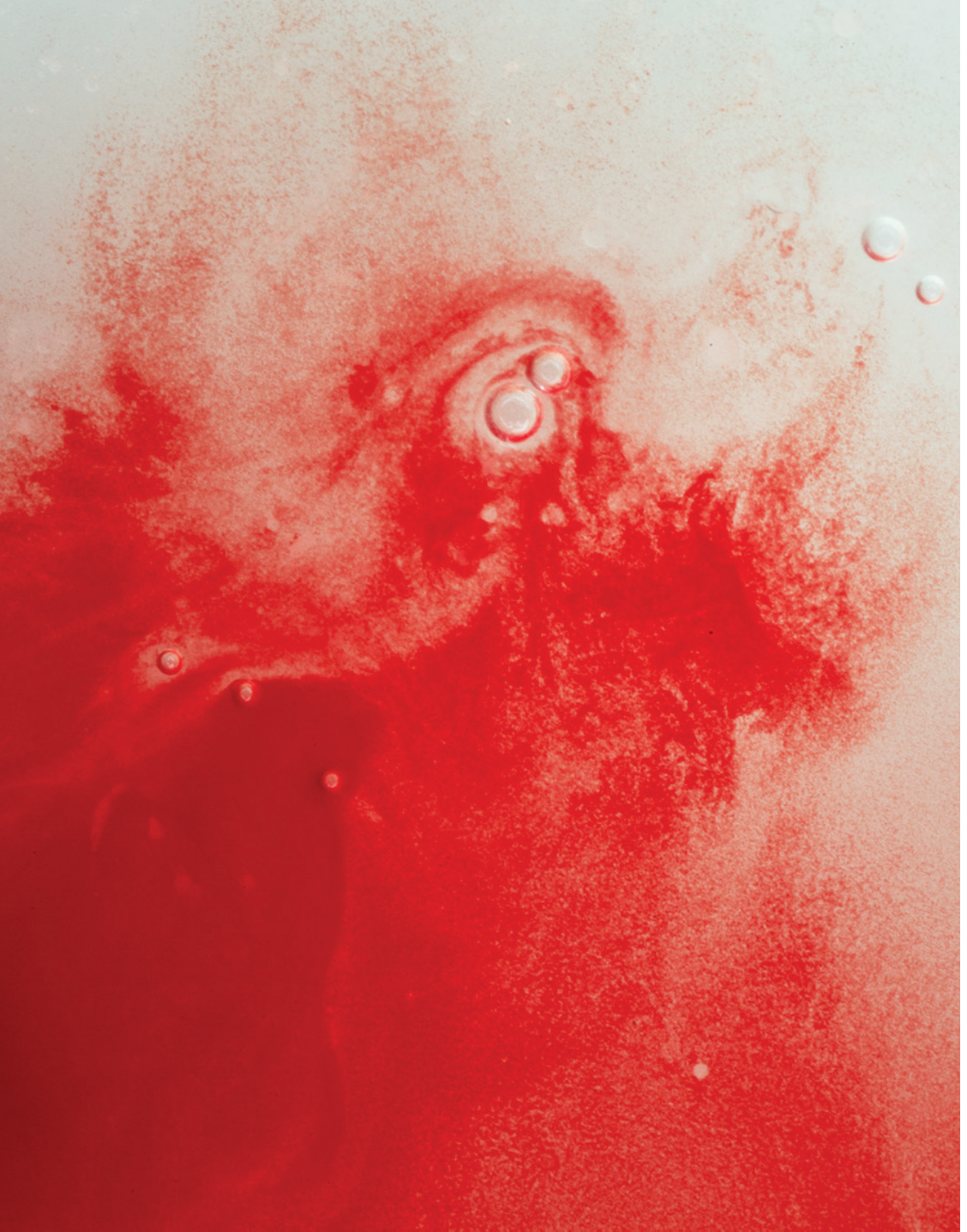
Héliogabale ou l'anarchiste couronné, Denoël & Steele, 1934

INTRODUCTION

by Stephen Barber

The acts of excess and aberration of the Roman Emperors have provoked richly obsessional responses from innumerable writers and artists over the centuries. In the twentieth century, that fascination (now shared too by filmmakers) emerged at moments of profound upheaval and social disintegration: in Germany during the 1910s, in France during the 1930s, and in Japan during the 1960s - and worldwide, in the contemporary moment.

The grandiose and arbitrary abuse of unlimited power, the overriding infinite desire for immediate sexual ecstasy and oblivion especially through violence and subjugation, and the nonchalant eradication of entire populations, are now ever-more familiar preoccupations. Of all the Roman Emperors, it is the figure of the anarchist child-god Heliogabalus(along with the crazed Caligula and the matricidal Nero), with his ephemeral and implosive reign of gold, blood, semen and excrement,



HELIOGABALUS OR, THE CROWNED ANARCHIST

I dedicate this book to the manes of Apollonius of Tyana, Christ's contemporary, and to any remaining truthful Illuminati in this fleeting world;

And in order to underline its profound unreality, its spirituality, its futility, I dedicate it to anarchy and to the war for this world;

I dedicate it finally to the Ancestors, to the Heroes in the classical sense and to the spirits of the Great Dead.

1.

THE CRADLE OF SPERM

If there was around the corpse of Heliogabalus, tombless, its throat cut by his police force in his palace latrines, a heavy flow of blood and excrement, there was around his cradle a heavy flow of sperm. Heliogabalus was born in an era when everybody slept with everybody; and it will never be known when or by whom his mother was actually impregnated. For a Syrian prince like him, consanguinity came from the mother's side; – and as regards mothers, around this newborn son of a charioteer was a pleiad of Julias; – and whether or not practising when in power, all these Julias were highclass whores.

The father to them all, to the female wellspring of this river of rape and infamy, must, before he became priest, have been a coachman, since otherwise it would be incomprehensible – the zealousness which Heliogabalus, once enthroned, put into being buggered by charioteers.

The fact remains that History going back from the feminine side to the origins of Heliogabalus shelters inevitably behind this bare and senile cranium, this waggon and this beard which comprise our impressions of the face of the elderly Bassianus.

That this old fossil served a cult doesn't condemn the cult, but those imbecilic and spewed-up rites to which the contemporaries of the Julias and of Bassian, and the Syria of the newborn Heliogabalus, finally reduced the cult.

The cult dead, however, and reduced to mere remnants of gestures, to which Bassianus devoted himself, it will be noted that the moment the infant Heliogabalus appeared on the steps of the temple of Emesa, it resumed via articles of belief and vestments its energy of pure gold, of astonishing and refined light, and once again became miraculously active.

In any case, this forefather Bassian, propped up in bed as on crutches, engenders by a casual partner the two daughters, Julia Domna and Julia Moesa. He fashions them and does so with success. They are beautiful. Beautiful and ready for their dual roles of empress and whore.

By whom did he sire these girls? To date, History gives no answer. And we'll admit that it is of no importance whatever, obsessed as we are by the four medallion heads of Julia Domna, Julia Moesa, Julia Soemia and Julia Mamaea. For

if Bassianus had two daughters, Julia Domna and Julia Moesa; Julia Moesa in turn had two daughters: Julia Soemia and Julia Moesa; Julia Moesa in her turn had two daughters: Julia Soemia and Julia Mamaea. And Julia Moesa, married to Sextus Varius Marcellus was, however, doubtless impregnated by Caracalla or Geta (son of her sister Julia Domna) or by Gessius Marcianus, her brother-in-law and husband to Julia Mamaea; or perhaps by Septimius Severus, her stepbrother-in-law; she gave birth to Varius Avitus Bassianus, later named Elagabalus, or son of the summits, false Antoninus, Sardanapalus and finally Heliogabalus, a name seemingly the happy grammatical contraction of the most high denominations of the sun.

With hindsight one sees this doddering old highpriest Bassianus, at Emesa on the banks of the Orontes with his two daughters, Julia Domna and Julia Moesa. – They're already a strapping great pair, these two girls spawned from a crutch with a male sex at its tip. Although made at length from sperm at the outermost reaches attained by his sperm on days when the parricide ejaculates, – I say parricide and it will soon be seen why, – they are both well-built and bulky; bulky, meaning, full of blood, skin, bone and a certain molten substance that underlies the colouring of their skin. The one, tall and leaden-complexioned, with the sign of Saturn upon her brow, Julia Domna, resembles a statue of Injustice, Injustice overcoming

fate; – the other, small, skinny, ardent, explosive, violent and yellowish as a liver ailment. The former, Julia Domna, is a sex with probably some brains, the latter a brain in which sex isn't lacking.

The year this story begins, roughly 960 during the collapse of Latium – of the separate development of this race of slaves, merchants, pirates, encrusted like crab-lice on the Etruscan earth; race that never had any spiritual viewpoint but sucking the blood of others; that never had any idea save defending its treasures and coffers through the moral precepts previously mentioned; this year 960 or thereabouts, which corresponds to 179 AD, Julia Domna, the grandmother, would have been eighteen and her sister thirteen.

And they were, it must be said, thus of marriageable age. But Julia Domna resembled a moonstone and Julia Moesa sulphur, sun-dried.

As to whether both were virgins, I wouldn't like to swear to it, and their menfolk should be asked that, namely Septimius Severus re the Moonstone; and as for Sulphur, Julius Barbacus Mercurius.

From the geographical point of view there had always been this barbarian fringe around what is usually called the

Roman Empire, and within this Roman Empire must be placed Greece, which invented, historically, the notion of barbarism. And from this point of view we are, we people of the Occident, the worthy sons of this stupid mother, since for us the civilised are ourselves and all else – this shows up our universal ignorance – is identified with barbarism.

However, it must be said that all the ideas which enabled the Roman and Greek worlds not to die immediately, not to sink into a blind bestiality, came from precisely this barbarian fringe; and the Orient, far from bringing in its disease and unease, allowed contact to be maintained with Tradition. Principles aren't found, don't invent themselves; they protect themselves, they spread; and there are few more difficult operations in the world than to maintain the notion – at once clear, yet absorbed within the system – of a universal principle.

All this is to note that from the metaphysical viewpoint, the Orient has always been in a state of reassuring ferment; that it's never thence that things worsen; and that, on the day the magic ass's skin of principles shrinks seriously out there, the face of the world will shrink also, everything will more or less be lost; and that day no longer seems to me far off.

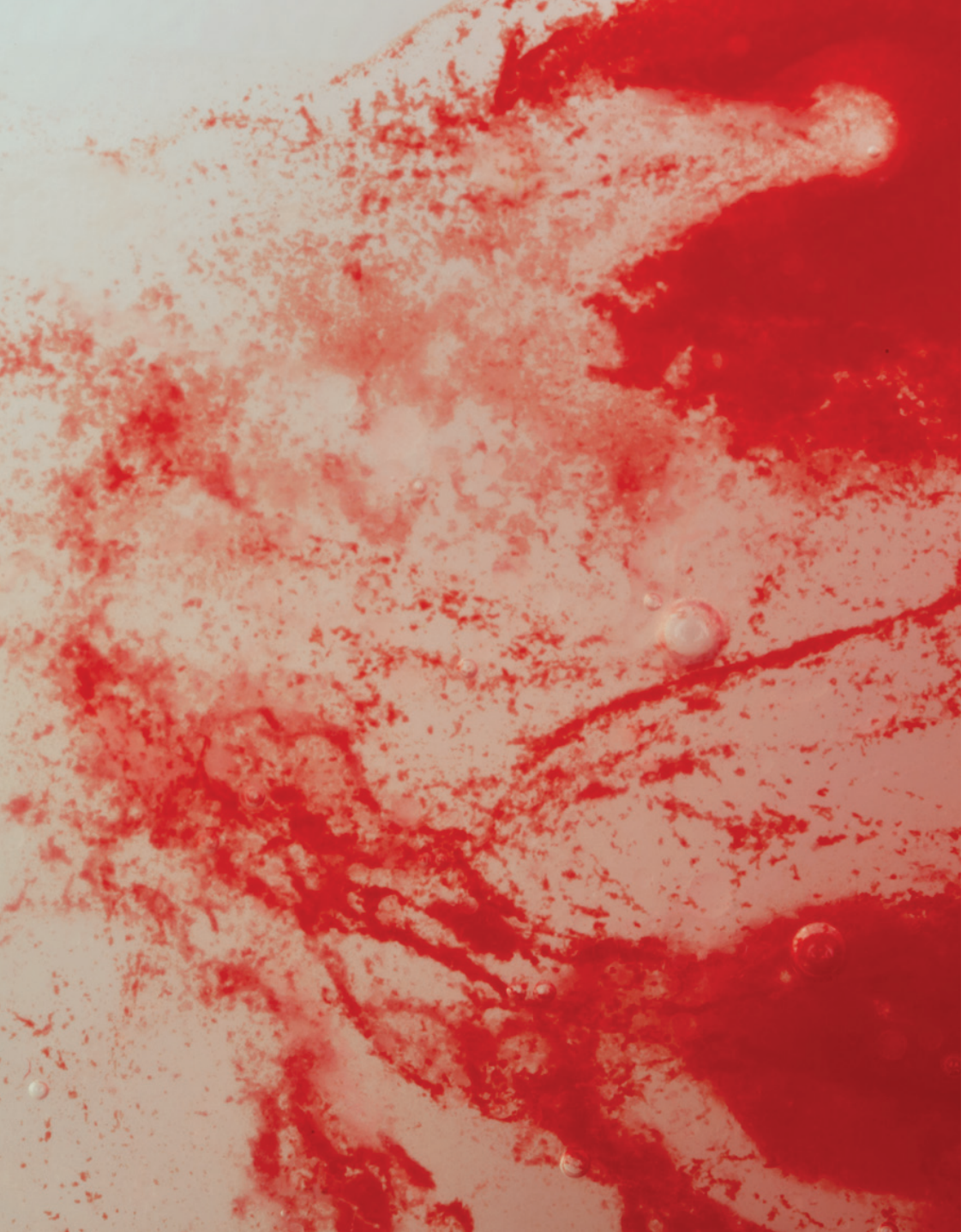
In the midst of this metaphysical barbarism, this sexual excess which, even through blood, persisted in rediscovering

important disintegration of the empire of Alexander the Great, by declaring itself independent.

From mother to son, the priests of Emesa, who for a thousand years or more came from the Samsiceramids, handed down the kingdom and the bloodline of the sun. From mother to son, since in Syria, consanguinity derived from the mother's side: it was the mother who served as father, who had the paternal social attributes; and she who, from the standpoint of generation itself, was considered the primogenitor. I stress PRIMOGENI*TOR*.

It means mother is father; that it's the mother who is the father, and the feminine which engenders the masculine. And this must be reconciled with the masculine sex of the moon, which prevents those who worship it from ever becoming cuckolds.

Nevertheless, in Syria, and especially amid the Samsiceramids, it is the daughter who joins the priesthood whereas the son joins nothing. But to return to the Bassiani, of whom Heliogabalus is the most notable and Bassianus the founder, there is an appalling hiatus between the lines of the Bassiani and of the Samsiceramids; and this hiatus is marked by a usurpation and a crime, which without interrupting it, divert the lineage of the sun.



HELIOGABALUS LETTERS

Translated by Stephen Barber

Only five letters by Antonin Artaud concerning his work on *Heliogabalus* survive, all from the period April 1933 to June 1934: three to Anaïs Nin, one (only a draft) to an unknown recipient, and one to Jean Paulhan. The first three letters date from the period when Artaud was writing the book, and the final two from the time of its publication. In the letter to Paulhan, Artaud is responding to Paulhan's question (after reading a copy of the book sent to him by Artaud) in a letter to Artaud of 28 May 1934: 'Is it *true*, and do you care whether it's true - what I mean is whether the part of the book that deals, of course, with truth is strictly and inflexibly true, or not? - that's what I really want to know.'

To Anaïs Nin

Paris, 15 April 1933.

Dear Madame,
I've been thinking a lot again about all you said to me concerning my lecture. I came out of it with a sense of disaster but I certainly don't think the same thing now, by a long way. I've now had a lot of responses and I know that, in the end, it had its effect. But I also know what I wanted to do and what a colossal new fermentation of ideas I had intended to achieve, once I'd put myself into it. And I believe that what I did finally inspired unease, it shook people up, but without satisfying them, and without leading their minds to *where* they thought I wanted to lead them. You saw what I was trying to do, but you saw it *between* my words and not through them. - I'm astonished that, to judge by the manuscript you gave me, you seem to have the conception of subtle, almost secret states of being which I only ever fully achieve through incredible nervous sufferings that I don't intend to bring about.

I'm extremely curious to know what this kind of knowledge you have corrresponds to, in the way the physical organs touch the depths of the mind.

I'm sorry it's taken me a long time to write to you but I have some urgent work to deliver to a publisher for a book on *Heliogabalus* which I've just decided to write. I'm working on it incessantly, and all day I'm occupied by library research. That's why I haven't so far telephoned you.

For this work on Heliogabalus I'm researching Chaldean Astrology (true astrology) and I'd be very happy to have the chance to discuss all that with Mr Guiler when I see you next.

Please remember me to him. With my devoted best wishes,
ANTONIN ARTAUD
42, Rue Rouelle
Paris XV

BIOGRAPHIES

Antonin Artaud

Antonin Artaud's work has a world-renowned status for experimentation across performance, film, sound, poetry and visual art. In the 1920s, he was a member of the Surrealist movement until his expulsion, and formulated theoretical plans across the first half of the 1930s for his 'Theatre of Cruelty' and attempted to carry them through. He made a living as a film actor from 1924 to 1935 and made many attempts to direct his own film projects. In 1936, he travelled to Mexico with a plan to take peyote in the Tarahumara lands. In 1937, preoccupied with the imminent apocalypse, he travelled to Ireland but was deported, beginning a nine-year asylum incarceration during which he continued to write and also made many drawings. After his release in 1946, he lived in the grounds of a sanatorium in Ivry-sur-Seine, close to Paris, and worked intensively on drawings, writings and sound-recordings. He died on 4 March 1948. His drawings have been exhibited on several occasions, notably at the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna in 2002 and at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris in 2006.

Alexis Lykiard

Alexis Lykiard (born 1940) is a British writer of Greek heritage, who began his prolific career as novelist and poet in the 1960s. His poems about jazz have received particular acclaim, including from Maya Angelou, Hugo Williams, Roy Fisher, Kevin Bailey and others. He is also known as translator of Isidore Ducasse, Comte de Lautréamont, Alfred Jarry, Antonin Artaud and many notable French literary figures. In addition, Lykiard has written two highly praised intimate memoirs of Jean Rhys: *Jean Rhys Revisited* (2000) and *Jean Rhys: Afterwords* (2006).

Stephen Barber

Stephen Barber's books have been acclaimed as 'brilliant, profound and provocative' by *The Times* newspaper in the UK, and he has been called 'a writer of real distinction' and 'the most dangerous man in Europe' by *The Independent* newspaper. *The Sunday Times* newspaper hailed his books as 'exhilarating and disquieting'.

He is the author of many fiction and non-fiction books, including studies of Antonin Artaud, Pierre Guyotat, Jean Genet and Eadweard Muybridge. Among his recent books are *England's Darkness* (SunVision Press) and *Berlin Bodies*

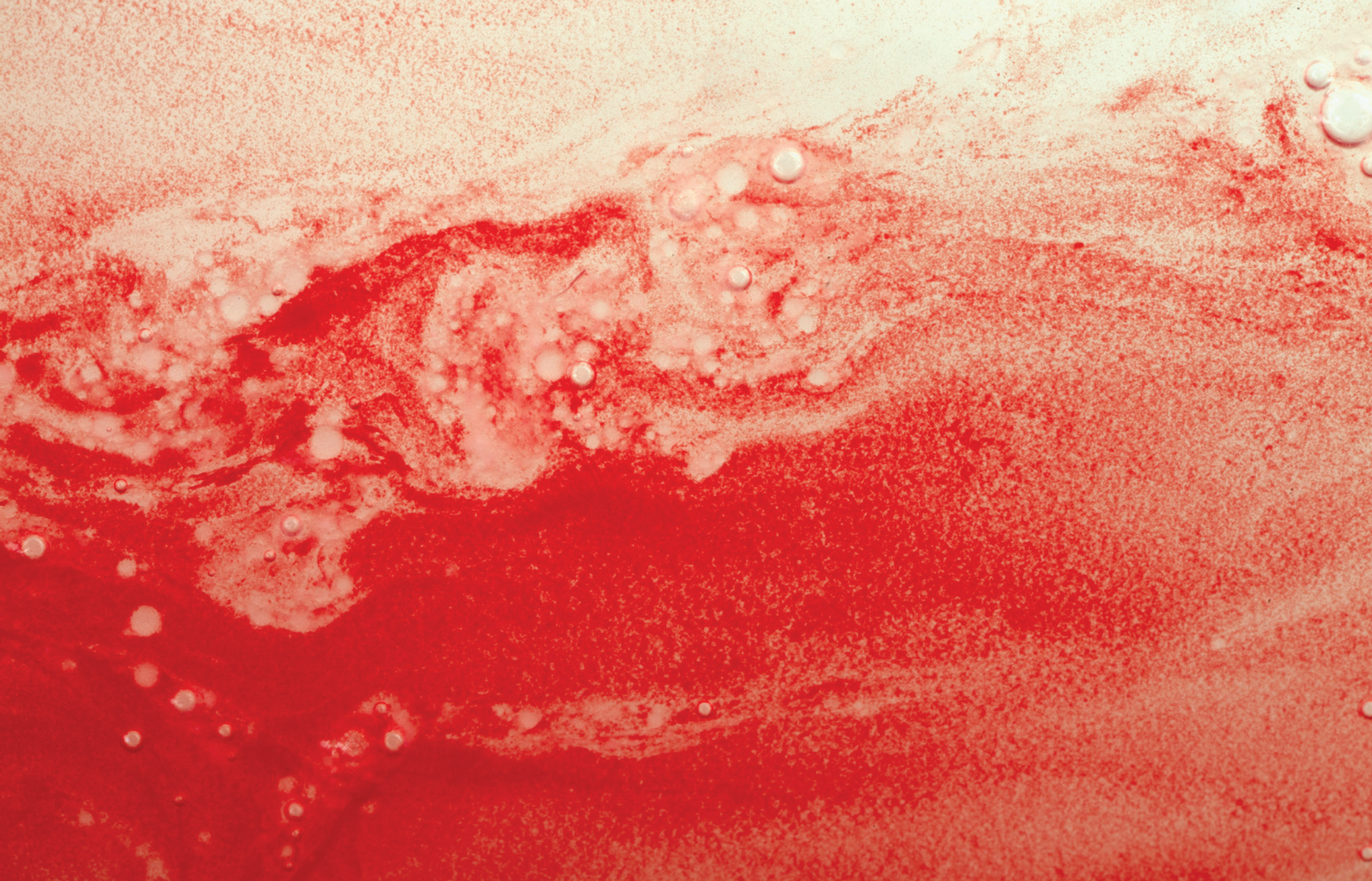
(Reaktion Books). He has also collaborated on books with the poet Jeremy Reed and the photographer Xavier Ribas. His books have been translated into many languages and have won numerous prizes and awards. He is currently a professor of art and film at the Kingston School of Art, Kingston University, London.

Martin Bladh

Martin Bladh is a Swedish-born artist of multiple mediums. His work lays bare themes of violence, obsession, fantasy, domination, submission and narcissism. Bladh is a founding member of the post-industrial band IRM, the musical avant-garde unit Skin Area and co-founder of Infinity Land Press. His published work includes *To Putrefaction*, *Qualis Artifex Pereo*, *DES*, *The Hurtin' Club* and *Darkleaks - The Ripper Genome*. He lives and works in London.

Karolina Urbaniak

Karolina Urbaniak is a visual artist and co-founder of Infinity Land Press. Urbaniak's published work includes *To Putrefaction,* 2014, *Altered Balance – A Tribute to Coil,* 2014/15, *The Void Ratio*, 2015, *Artaud 1937 Apocalypse*, 2018 and *Deart Mort Tod - A European Book of the Dead,* 2018. Her recent multimedia projects include the soundtrack for *Darkleaks - The Ripper Genome* and the audio/visual installation *On The New Revelations of Being* inspired by the work of Antonin Artaud. She lives and works in London.



Antonin Artaud's *Heliogabalus* is simultaneously his most extreme, revolutionary and deranged book, and likely now also to prove his most influential in the contemporary moment with the publication by Infinity Land Press of this first complete English-language translation, by Alexis Lykiard.

Dating from the period when Artaud was preparing his legendary 'Theatre of Cruelty' experiments, *Heliogabalus* anatomises and recreates the sperm and blood-constellated life of the infamous Roman emperor who was assassinated by his own guards at the age of 18 after four years spent relentlessly deriding and disintegrating the empire's power. Artaud asserts that 'The entire life of Heliogabalus is anarchy in action... fire, gesture, blood, cry... Fanatical, a real king, a rebel, a crazed individualist.'

Artaud explicitly wrote his account of Heliogabalus's acts as an embodiment of himself and of his own insurgency in art. Three years after the book's publication, he was incarcerated in a lunatic asylum, emerging only shortly before his death in 1948.

This edition includes an introduction by Stephen Barber and his translations of all of the surviving letters written by Artaud about his work on *Heliogabalus*.

INFINITY LAND PRESS