

PHALLOS

ENHANCED AND
REVISED EDITION



SAMUEL R. DELANY

EDITED WITH AN AFTERWORD BY ROBERT F. REID-PHARR

ALSO BY SAMUEL R. DELANY

FICTION

- The Jewels of Aptor* (1962)
The Fall of the Towers
Out of the Dead City (1963)
The Towers of Toron (1964)
City of a Thousand Suns (1965)
The Ballad of Beta-2 (1965)
Babel-17 (1966)
Empire Star (1966)
The Einstein Intersection (1967)
Nova (1968)
Driftglass (1969)
Equinox (1973)
Dhalgren (1975)
Trouble on Triton (1976)
Return to Nevèrÿon
Tales of Nevèrÿon (1979)
Neveryóna (1983)
Flight from Nevèrÿon (1985)
Return to Nevèrÿon (1987)
Distant Stars (1981)
Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand (1984)
Driftglass/Starshards (collected stories, 1993)
They Fly at Çiron (1993)
The Mad Man (1994)
Hogg (1995)
Atlantis: Three Tales (1995)
Aye, and Gomorrah
(and other stories, 2003)
Phallos (2004; enhanced and revised edition, 2013)
Dark Reflections (2007)
Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders (2012)

GRAPHIC NOVELS

- Empire* (artist, Howard Chaykin; 1980)
Bread & Wine (artist, Mia Wolff; 1999)

NONFICTION

- The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*
(1978; revised edition, 2009)

The American Shore (1978)

Starboard Wine (1984; revised edition, 2012)

Heavenly Breakfast (1979)

The Motion of Light in Water (1988)

Wagner/Artaud (1988)

The Straits of Messina (1990)

Silent Interviews (1994)

Longer Views (1996)

Times Square Red, Times

Square Blue (1999)

Shorter Views (1999)

1984: Selected Letters (2000)

About Writing (2005)

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Phallos is
for Christian Bök,
author of *Eunoia*,
a novel that will drive everybody sane,
and is presented here with great thanks
to Gil Roth,
who lived with far too many versions of
this tale over many too many years, and
gratitude to Lance and Andi Olsen
and Callum James.

This revised edition
is for Ric Best and Louis Navarrete.

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About the Author and Contributors

IN HIS UPSTATE HOMETOWN, Bithynia, New York, a twelve-year-old African American, Adrian Rome, discovers a carton of pornographic magazines and paperbacks in the rear of his older cousin's van. The chimerical cover of one book, *Phallos*, ignites his curiosity, but, before he can read it, his cousin catches him and drives the van away.

Ten years later, in 1994, on finishing college Adrian moves to New York City's Greenwich Village. In his new Charles Street apartment, among some books left on a shelf, he recognizes a copy. Intending to read *Phallos* on his first night in the city, that evening Adrian takes a walk. When he returns, however, the books are gone. Adrian's landlady has been in, and, in an ill-conceived attempt to finish cleaning the place, she's thrown them out, and homeless folk have filched them from the alley's green trash receptacles.

Adrian becomes fixated on owning *Phallos*. He contrives to meet an elderly black man of letters, presumably the author of the anonymous text. He even goes to observe a statue that provided the artist with the idea for the cover. But though, in the course of his adventures at a pornographic movie house, the Columbia, he meets his life partner, a white ex-convict, Shoat Rumblin, the closest he ever comes to reading *Phallos* is a synopsis he discovers on the Internet.

SYNOPSIS OF A GAY PORNOGRAPHIC NOVEL

PUBLISHED BY ESSEX HOUSE PUBLICATIONS,
LOS ANGELES, 1969,
BY RANDY PEDARSON, MOSCOW, IDAHO

Downloaded from a website at
www.threelegs.com/wonkers/~phallos/pornsite.html

“My Three Favorite Gay Male Porn Novels:
The Gaudy Image by William Talsman,
Mr. Benson by John Preston,
and *Phallos*.”¹

Yet there is nothing more fascinating than secret wisdom: One is sure that it exists, but one does not know what it is. In the imagination, therefore, it shines as something unutterably profound. Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*

There is always more surface to a shattered object than a whole.
Djuna Barnes, *Letter to Emily Coleman*

LIKE MANY SUCH NOVELS, *PHALLOS* was published anonymously — in 1969, by Essex House Publications of West Hollywood, responsible for much of that decade’s most literate pornography, straight and gay. An equally anonymous editor’s “Introduction” discusses the text’s history, telling of nineteenth-century manuscript copies owned by Walter Pater, by Lionel Pigot Johnson ...

States that “Introduction,” a copy was rumored to have been in the possession of German classic antiquarian Johann Joachim Winckelmann in 1768 — an item that the nineteen-year-old murderer Arcangeli presumably made off with, along with the golden medals, after garroting the fifty-one-year-old scholar in a pensione just outside Trieste.

Arthur Symons was supposed to have had a copy stuffed into his boot-top (“not above the size of our current edition today”) when, during his October 1908 collapse into dementia, he was arrested

his deranged wanderings on the roads 'round Ferrara and dragged from the streets to a basement cell in the Ducal Palace dungeon, with its wooden bed — and its wood *pillow!* — and its “Judas” slit in the oak door through which the jailors peered in at the mad miscreant.

Earlier that same year Frederick Rolfe (better known today as Baron Corvo) and Professor Richard MacGillivray Dawkins (polylingual Oxford don, redheaded, left-handed) carried a manuscript copy with them to Venice, we are told. It was August; and the supposed purpose of the Venetian “vacation” was to have a deluxe edition of *Phallos* printed by Italian typesetters who presumably would be unable to read the scabrous text, which would then be sold to certain wealthy subscribers in England and on the continent. The two men’s September break-up came because of arguments over both the proofreading of the wretched galleys the non-English speaking typesetters returned and the photographic illustrations they had begun for the project with their adolescent gondolieri, Carlo and Ermenegildo (or “Gildo,” pronounced “Zeeldo” in the Venetian dialect) — and, as was always the case with the impecunious Rolfe, money. Whether the manuscript went to Athens with Dawkins or remained in Venice with Rolfe is not known. Although, as with so many of Rolfe’s projects, the Italian printing came to nothing, *Phallos* was the direct inspiration, says the “Introduction,” for Rolfe’s next novel (written in 1909, published posthumously in 1934), *The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole*.

Historian and aesthete John Addington Symonds discusses *Phallos* in five of his letters (claims of “Introduction”) to sex researcher Havelock Ellis ...

No existing biography of the Napoleon-sized poet Lionel Johnson is extensive enough to mention such a manuscript — given him, the “Introduction” says, by Austin Ferrand — even had he owned one. Nor is any such manuscript mentioned in Benson’s authorized biography of Pater (1906). No one would expect it. But neither — more surprising — is there any mention in the more sensational and unauthorized two volumes with which Thomas Wright answered it a year later (1907). And Denis Donoghue (*Walter Pater*, 1995), with access to Benson’s papers, where the juicy bits had lain entombed for near-on ninety years (Going into an Oxford barber shop, suddenly and unaccountably Pater seized up a young barber’s foot — a youth of nineteen, he wore only slippers — and, before customers and employees, removed the cloth covering to caress instep, toes, and heel for twenty minutes, while apostrophizing on their Hellenic perfection — followed by an invitation to the young man to come, later in the week, to tea. Twenty years on, the otherwise unknown tonsorialist told Benson: “If I’d ’a known ’oo he was, I mean ’im bein’ a genius and all, I’d ’ve taken ’im up on it. But I never even *seen* the gentleman before!”) cites it not.

One understands why no such item is mentioned in Pater’s own account (from the *Westminster Review* for January 1867) of Winckelmann’s murder — a pattern to be replayed across the centuries (older, naïve homosexuals; avaricious, predatory boys), now with the death of composer Marc Blitzstein, now with the murder of art critic Gregory Battcock.

Pater’s essay sits today as the most eccentric contribution to his perennially popular *Renaissance and Its Critics* (1873), though readers seeking both style and substance, from Hart Crane to Harold Bloom, have, with good reason, preferred his *Plato and Platonism* (1893). Nor is it in any other account of Winckelmann’s life — or death.

Although the incidents marking Symonds’ precipitate plunge into syphilitic delirium have been recounted in many literary sketches, Symonds’ own memoirs, put together after his partial recovery, were not readily available — at least in this country — till George Beckson’s 1977 edition. They state that, when the greatest of those English critics of the 1890s was taken into custody, he was barefoot — that, indeed, when our madman attacked his jailors, under their retaliatory brutality (and the studded boots with which they stamped on them once our man was downed), Symonds’ feet bled so badly that

on the jailors' departure, blood jellied half the cell's stone floor.

So much for booted copies.

From Symons (1934) to Weeks (1971) to Benkovitz (1977), Corvo biographers seem unaware of *Phallos*. Nor is it mentioned in Rolfe's *Venice Letters* from those years, first published complete in 1971.

And what of J. A. Symonds — at work on his sonorous five-volume historiography, *The Renaissance in Italy*,² when he become the model for Henry James's "The Author of Beltraffio"? In 1969, the year of *Phallos*'s publication, the third and final volume of Symonds' complete letters also appeared, edited by Herbert M. Shueller and Robert L. Peters. The indices to the three fat Wayne State University Press volumes include no reference to the novel. The Symonds/Ellis friendship has occasioned several published studies. Yes, I've read them. No, none mentions it.

The same "Introduction" speaks of a subscription edition of *Phallos* put out by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, this in the 1920s. As far as I have been able to learn, no such edition exists. Over more than a dozen years now, I've consulted authorities on pornography, from Yale's Beinecke to Lockhaven State's Stevenson Library. None is aware of any mention of *Phallos* before 1969.

Finally, back from three weeks in London at the British Museum, researching something else entirely, my old friend Binky (before he had a single piercing) says there is no listing for *Phallos* in any of the three Henry Spencer Ashbee (the pixyish, if perspicacious, Pisanus Fraxi) volumes — neither in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* of 1877, nor in the *Centuria Librorum Absconditorum* of 1879, nor in the *Catena Librorum Tacendorum* of 1885. Having buried herself nine weeks in the Bibliothèque Nationale for like reasons of research and returned from Paris last winter, Phyllis assures me it is not cited either in the 1861 edition, in the 1864 edition, or in the six-volume 1871–75 expansion of Jules Gay's *Bibliographie des ouvrages relatifs à l'Amour*; nor is it anywhere catalogued in the whole of the *Enfer* — a treble blow that reduces any possibility that *Phallos* dates from the eighteenth century or could have been well-known among the "Other Victorians" of the nineteenth. All this leads me finally and firmly to believe that, at least as it is spelled out in its "Introduction," *Phallos*'s provenance is a hoax.

While a hoax its history may be, the novel's style is rich and vivid — sometimes to the point of turgidity. But though from time to time passages have a rhythm and lilt that move from the middle seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, the diction and (especially) the syntax — lush, gorgeous and even baroque (some of its more recondite vocabulary — "incrassate," "uliginous," "paralogical," "expilator," "diuternity ..." says Binky, surely borrowed from Sir Thomas Browne³) — is much too modern for any such composition date.

PHALLOS BEGINS WITH a Greek epigraph, set on a page apart:

ἔξ ὧν δὲ ἡ γένεσις ἐστὶ τοῖς οὖσι, καὶ τὴν φθορὰν εἰς ταῦτα γίνεσθαι κατὰ τὸ
χρεῶν· διδόναι γὰρ αὐτὰ δίκην καὶ τίσιν ἀλλήλοις τῆς ἀδικίας κατὰ τὴν τοῦ
χρόνου τάξιν.

Part I and the first of the novel's fifty-one chapters (none less than seven and none more than eleven printed pages) begins:

THE GLITTERING SEA; the stony shore; the friable, yellow cliffs; behind them scrub forests with green-gray leaves, where rarely a

tree grew more than a foot, a foot-and-a-half higher than a man, and all threaded by thin, bright, brackish streams; the sunlight through the thatch, dappling the poles of my father's porch, on a house five of whose walls were white-washed stone, making our four rooms minutely grander than some houses closer to the road, though not so fine as others further off. Such memories return from southern Syracuse, where I was born.

Though my mother was a part-Egyptian slave, brought to those hills and freed years before by a rich family in the area, my father's folk had lived in that landscape time out of mind. However strongly the blood of Africa beat behind his thoughtful features, he gave me a Greek name, Neoptolomus, as did many under Rome in those years, in hopes I would aspire to a life more than mere toil for grain, cheese, mutton, and onions. He got me well along in the language, too, for he had a Greek text of the first seven books (you would call them chapters), the first of the three sections — on physics and natural philosophy — of Heraclitus's great treatise, *περὶ φύσεως*. As well, he could recite, in Greek, a dozen of the slave Æsop's tales of animals and ethics. Thus, between them, I learned my first hundred or three hundred words in that language — fire, river, resin, rust, life, copper, fish, bread, wine, site, salt, garlic, honey, song, vision, rain, bird, history, drinkable, discourse, barley, poet, laughter, belief, now, undrinkable, then, gods, treaty, nation, change, grain, cricket, necessity, mountain, astonish, commander, beauty, thunder, all, hear, steersman, nothing, love, freeman, pain, water, good, wet, weep, slave, night, tomorrow, suffer, justice, moon, rest, sorrow, up, down, no, yes, sun, tree, branch, head, hand, clitoris, earth, body, jar, breast, bad, wisdom, city, road, root, cattle, common, dawn, tomb, none, day, when, urine, measure, gold, horse, create, deathless, shit, experience, laughter, destroy, eternal, opposite, blade, on-the-one-hand, shield, on-the-other, wasp, finger, penis, people, eye, peace, battle, journey, pleasure, exchange, strife, star, foot, sleep, sand, rectum, remain, mud, and death — the ocean of ideas and sounds from which the learning of the language itself lifted, like a wave over sand and shells and sea grass, flooding confusion with comprehension, and upon which my name was the merest foam. Often my father said he hoped I'd get to see a bit of the world, as had he, before I settled down to farming, though how I was to do this, at the time I had no notion.

As a child I fished off the rocky coast and herded our own and several other farmers' goats on the cliffs above the sea. In my fifteenth year, while I pastured our flock among isolate cypresses and beside the profusion of sumac, repeatedly I'd meet a Roman gentleman, who, repeatedly — first weekly and soon daily — cajoled me to lie among my charges, bleating raucously around us, and sucked my cock to one and another pleasurable eruptions, while I grunted and whinnied and finally fondled his bald head in thanks. Soon he became my friend. Shortly, through his recommendations, I was working on the estates of several wealthy Romans and some somewhat less wealthy (but far more interesting and friendly) Greeks, who had taken refuge in the neighborhood for political reasons.

I used to make their servants laugh, reciting the Æsop tales, which they understood better than I, even as they taught me their tongue. A bright and curious boy, soon I could speak and write informatively, if without polish, in both Greek *and* Latin.

In my seventeenth summer, a fever took many in my village and sent many more wandering. At August end it killed my father. My grief was intense and total — three days of sobbing exhaustion. On the fourth, when I awoke to hear a bird, to see the sun on the edge of my blanket, to smell the goats passing by the house, even as I realized how much of it had abated, I realized too that much of that intensity had been fear at what might now befall. Three months on, when my mother sickened and died, I realized, however unfairly, that I felt far less strongly than I had before. First, my emotions had been blunted by all the misery around us. Also, the way silver alloyed with gold makes electrum, this bout of sorrow was mixed with relief. For now I had only myself to fend for, which was beginning to seem possible. Yet I wonder if, finally, I was not more affected by that second passing. From time to time, even today, I recall her, turning to face the sun and uttering a little cry ... When as a boy I had questioned it, she'd told me it had been a surge of emotion for her birth land, Egypt, which she would never see again.

While I am endlessly grateful for what my father gave me, my mother seems to have given me that memory alone — the one from my childhood than can still grip my heart and shake it. As well, when I think of the part Egypt, her home, eventually played in my life, it is almost as if her yearning were quietly passed to me at a level far deeper than my father's seemingly more valuable gifts. But these are speculations of my age, not observations of my youth.

Aware of my orphaning and feeling for my plight, a powerful merchant in the area — yes, it was my rich Roman friend of the fellatial mountain idylls, though I had not seen him for most of a year — took me onto his columned estate. Beside his own cushioned and canopied bed — frankly too soft for me to sleep in with any comfort more than an hour — I slept on a padded rug, stitched with red and gold, where a slave changed the straw beneath it each week. Through the summer he kept me for companionship and pleasure, while he entertained a succession of men and women, who, evenings after our supper, talked of great theaters and moving performances at Delphi, Athens, and Epidauros, or, sitting in the villa gardens of a morning, recited bloody speeches from Seneca or comic ones from Plautus.

Once someone recited the "Pervigilium Veneris," whose lines sound like singing even when they are not sung. On other evenings, still others recited equally musical poetry and philosophy from Homer, Sappho, Euripides, Virgil, Horace, Longinus, Plato, Isocrates, Diotima, and Archilochus, and even stretches from Suetonius or magical adventures from Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, as though all these authors were friends they'd known in their youth, and the pieces recited had been recent letters sent them personally.

One elegant woman visitor gave us the passage from Tacitus's *Annals*, about the clumsy, pusillanimous suicide of Seneca and that of the arbiter of courtly elegance, Petronius, both commanded by the emperor Nero; Petronius, learned in luxury, had been first proconsul, then consul, in distant Bithynia, and when, on a visit to Cumae, the emperor's decree that he end his own life reached him, he acceded to his lord's wish by opening his veins in his bath, then binding them up, then opening them yet again, over several days, with his retinue of friends and servants about him, listening to light poetry, and talking of witty and fanciful

things, ordering one slave rewarded and another flogged, so that death came like the natural end to an elegant and civilized life.

The same woman told us she had recently acquired the sixteen volumes of the *libri Satyricon* by this same Petronius, crammed with wonderfully hilarious adventures. On her next visit she would bring one of the choicer books to read to us, as soon as she finished having the whole of it copied, for it was very valuable — as well as critical, with its acid wit, of the Roman upper classes, so that members of the aristocracy *still* wished to see it suppressed. That is why, she opined, Tacitus had not mentioned it. But, alas, she never returned while I was at the villa.

That same day, however, when he found I could speak Greek as well as Latin, one little accountant from Salistia, with a hunched shoulder and an oversized head, placed his hand on my thigh and declaimed Pericles's full funeral oration for the troops dead in the Peloponnesus, as Thucydides had taken it down in shorthand (while sunlight burned through the leaves over us, and other guests looked on, with nostalgic fondness, at my fascination), and I was left with tears in my eyes that day — and a bruised leg where, at the height of his emotions he had gripped me so tightly, while my own emotions had been too high to notice.

(For a year I was convinced great Pericles himself must have been a hunchbacked dwarf.)

Later in bed, my patron shocked me by explaining that Nero had been emperor of Rome not a decade back when I was a child too young to remember, but a whole *century* before — and that it was the cutting quality of his humor and rhetoric alone, which kept Petronius's work dangerous to this day. Pericles had addressed his troops, out on the field of pyres, in the words I had listened to only hours back, even hundreds of years before that! For all these fine remarks and expressions were from men and women dead fifty, three hundred, six hundred, even eight hundred years. And for the first of many times I began to feel myself, there in my patron's summer home, somehow part of an immortal company.

The visitor I remember most clearly, however, was an onyx-black Nubian — much of my master's export and import business were bronzes and terra cottas from Africa — who was, indeed, the tallest man I'd ever met, but who, while he knew some engaging songs and some *terrifying* dances, had little interest in literature. He was almost seven feet! As well, he took the time to explain to me that, in his own home, self-pleasure was nowhere near as private an act as it was with us. Though, for the week of his visit, he confined the practice to his room, often he left his door ajar, and, I confess, I was fascinated and regularly lurked outside to watch him labor over his own considerable flesh. When he saw me, he would laugh and invite me to assist, from which invitation (the first time) I fled, then (the second, having already told myself what a coward and fool I'd been) hesitantly accepted and happily joined him. My patron found my fascination with this randy, broad-nosed, full-mouthed fellow (he was a merchant in the market for Roman-made arms) between fascinating and funny, but seemed comfortable sharing my favors with him during the days of his stay.

The first time my patron took me to Rome, in his retinue of friends, servants, and slaves, once, on a hot day, not thinking, I left my inn room naked, to come down to the street, for, on our arrival the day before, I had seen a gaggle of filthy youngsters playing, naked, in an alley behind the square. But I received shocked and astonished looks from every guest in the inn I passed — I was so naïve at first as to think these were awed notices of my penis's warm-weather heft and stretch — till one of my patron's other servants spotted me, pulled me aside, and told me that, in the city, no one over the age of fourteen, or other than the poorest men and women, ever went about in public with loins uncovered, no matter how hot the day.

I *must* return to my room and don a summer tunic!

While, again upstairs, I pulled one over my head and belted it, I remembered our Nubian guest of a year before, back in Syracuse, and how he would chuckle at my closing of doors behind us, at my urging him to more secluded alcoves in the gardens, or my whispers to pursue our lubricities more privately. Or even how funny he'd found it that I was always exhorting him to be quieter; for while I am someone who growls toward the end of sex, he had been a man who roared.

On that same day, in Rome, I found that blowing your nose on your fingers and wiping them on a wall or a tree trunk or a stone was hopelessly offensive to the Romans, even while the finest aristocrats hiked up their toga hems at street corners to urinate in the gutter outlets. (In Syracuse we did not have pavement, underground sewers, or gutters with outlets that went down to them. We had latrines behind our houses.) So I had to unlearn the doing of one and learn to do the other. But now I had new sympathy for that Nubian stranger, come to a place where custom made such unusual demands on how the body and its ordinary workings must be pursued.

Through a recent marriage by his cousin, my patron was currently a distant relative of Sabina, Hadrian's empress, and something had occurred — in the coils of politics, so I was never sure exactly what — which had considerably improved his fortune. His Roman house, where his sister lived year round, was undergoing renovation: because of the dust, noise, and confusion, during our visit my patron had fixed those of us in his entourage at an inn half-a-dozen streets distant. Several times, along with his servants, slaves, and friends, we strolled past his mansion on one and another sunny morning, to watch *near-naked* workmen clamber over the scaffolding erected before the three-story façade, with its crisscrossing planks, towering against the Roman clouds — the only things about the city one with those of Syracuse.

I'd never seen a house before of three whole stories!

Once, when we walked by, my patron and his steward left us to go within, stopping to joke with a man pushing a barrow, now calling to a foreman loping along some high planks before an upper window. Then they disappeared inside the heavy stones, behind the beams and supports, to check the work's progress, while we continued on to the park my benefactor had suggested we explore for the noon hours, where, after we settled under the trees and opened our picnic hamper, he would join us.

Possibly because, during my own wanderings, I'd passed some street excavations (where I heard accents like my own among the workers — a handful of whom had come from my island, though when, eagerly, I began to talk with one, he turned out a not

very communicative quarry worker's son, who'd never heard of my village on the southern shore, as I'd never heard of his in the central mountains) and another place where more workers hoisted up a new column before another great building (all jabbering in a language not Latin — some Teutonic tongue, I later learned), soon I felt that, in place among its seven hills more than five hundred years, since Aeneas had carried his father Anchises here, the whole grand construction was really as new as morning and had all been built in the past days for my entertainment and wonder.

Oh, I could recount hours of searing homesickness, wiped away by hours of equally searing excitement. Late one night, when I was moody and sleepless, I took myself into the moonlit street. Shortly I was at my patron's building, where, exploring the scaffolding's base, I saw three workmen asleep at the back of the site. When one woke and jokingly called from his blankets that I should join them in their rest, soon I found myself in my first Roman orgy!

It turned out those workmen had no homes of their own — though all three were friendly and generally genial. After the biggest and roughest had taken his pleasure of me, assisted hand, foot, and — yes — mouth (that service so few will admit to and yet so many of us are so hungry to get and to give) by the others, immediately he had fallen asleep again, his back to us, hands thrust down between his thighs. How matter-of-fact the remaining two were about my taking mine of them! Once, waking briefly from that pleasantest of after-climax drowzes, I found the smallest astride the biggest — and roughest. "If you're still heated up, when I'm finished, banquet at his butt hole some, but leave it nice and sloppy with spit — then skewer him!" He grinned down at me in the graying dark. "He pretends to be asleep, but he doesn't mind." He fell again to bucking on the biggest one's back.

So that is what I did.

What truly stays with me, though, is waking later, held between their warm bodies, loosely gripped in sleep by their hard hands. While sunrise and birdsong filtered through the planks, I rose, redonned my tunic, and, delighting in the quiet glory of Roman dawn, walked out past the cart bringing bread, cheese, beer, and raisins. (It is the Roman custom to feed your workers: and beer keeps fresh longer than water.) As the city's very stones began to wake about me, I ambled back to the inn. Mulling on how much rougher and more preemptory all three had been, taking their pleasures of me, I realized, this was different from any sex I'd known.

Yet, for all its difference and, yes, rudeness, I'd liked it as much or more than any I'd yet had!

Eagerly, the next night I was back, only to note immediately the workers slept further apart. As well, the littlest one was gone and a bigger stranger snored in his place. The one who had called me before, though he lay naked and under scaffold-checked moonlight, now squinted up at me and grunted as roughly and as sleepily as I would have expected from the biggest — who dozed a yard away — as if he did not want someone there to hear: "Go home, young prince! We work tomorrow. We're too tired to play tonight. Come back some other time!"

I returned to the inn, confused (I, a prince? Or was that simply a laborer's irony?), rueful — and, yes, embarrassed at their rejection — but chuckling nevertheless at my presumptions. Again in my inn room, I went to sleep, but only after thoroughly enjoying — and even improving upon — the memories they'd provided from the night before.

Still, homesickness was abolished; and I'd begun to understand that, while the sadnesses and joys of travel are both quite real, the intensities behind them, the negative ones especially, were largely loaned by terror. If men like these were scattered through the empire's streets and nights, there seemed nothing in life to fear. As much as when we'd first embarked on the boat from Syracuse, the world and my time in it, now at its neap, broke and sparkled ahead.

Among his many reasons for returning to Rome, my patron wished to procure me a lieutenant's commission in the Roman army, as if I had been a son and not a servant. At least three times on that visit, over the heads of crowds along the street's edge who had gathered to wave, watch, and cheer, I saw regiments parading with horns and drums, banners and horses, metal shields, horse-maned helmets, and bright-tipped spears. Yes, the military dazzled and delighted me! Days on, while birds flew by in loose V's high over our inn's verandah, my patron told me that, yes, in his name, his steward had that morning obtained for me a three-year military sojourn. (Only much later did I learn how unusual that was.) Then it was done: and I was with a lot of very strange men, indeed — now uncomfortably crowded, first in our military barracks, then in a military boat.

Because we were jammed so close, I learned quickly who was willing to engage in sex behind this bale or in that dark corner and who was not. Soon I learned as well that, while a fair number were quite as open as I about their desires, a whole population among them was lazy enough to take whatever was offered sexually, even if it was not their first choice, while another, equally numerous, went to endless lengths — almost always futile — to make sure *no* one knew what they did, some in pursuit of women, some in pursuit of men.

In the mountains of Syria, my squadron oversaw its bit of the *pax romana*, an idyllic passage, once we arrived, where, as soon as I found him, mostly what I did was bugger or receive the oral services of an auburn-haired private named Clivus, with buttocks as neat, high, and cleanly cleft as his genitals were full, firm, and low-hanging. A Gaul by blood, in childhood Clivus had been brought by his parents to the Nile-side city of Hermopolis on the border between upper and lower Egypt, where his father had worked — and eventually died — in Rome's service. His mother still dwelt there. Late afternoons in Syria, often Clivus and I lolled together, under the pines and apart from the other soldiers. There he told me of the serenity of Hermopolis — and its temple, not to the more widely known Thoth, but rather a smaller and marginal shrine at the city's edge, sacred to the nameless god, in which, throughout Clivus's younger years, he'd worshipped. "In Saïs you will hear her wise men tell tales of long-vanished Ur, Chaldea, and Atlantis. In Memphis you will see statues of giants that will open the halls of history. Ah, but in Hermopolis ... !" On his release from the army — his was to come the same season as mine — Clivus hoped to return and indenture himself to a novitiate with the nameless god's shaved-headed priesthood. Off in Syria, among the ferns, as he'd lain

with his head on my belly, I'd listened to his reminiscences, his plans, his projects, and while I'd contemplated the Roman military machine and Roman governmental might, which brought together folk as disparate as we were, so far from our homes, in the coppery sun through the leaves I'd turned his auburn curls on my forefinger and been pensive.

How excited I was when, just weeks before my discharge my Roman sponsor messengered me money and a letter. As soon as I was my own man again, it would please my patron greatly, the letter explained — while the leather-cloaked deliverer, lighter by a sack of coins now hanging from my own waist, ambled off between the tents and trees to await my answer — if, on his behalf, I would journey to that very site of Hermopolis, to the very temple of the nameless god, and be his advocate in the acquisition of some lands across the river in the Nile-side village of Hir-wer, owned by the priests: a clutch of the poorest fishermen's hovels and shacks made from mud bricks and wattle, clustered around a half-fallen temple, once dedicated to Ramses II.

I wrote back (his letter had come from Africa) that of course I would do as he wished — that, indeed, I had already booked caravan passage down to Ephesus. On the day of my release I would be on my way. (What a shame that my friend Clivus had not been able to wait for me, I wrote my patron, for he knew Hermopolis and the temple well; but Clivus had already gone on.) I had to remark that, given the poverty of Hir-wer as he'd described it, the project seemed a bit stupid, if not silly — but in no way should he take my untutored speculation as a sign that I would bend less than my full powers toward carrying out his wishes. The unusualness of it only goaded my eagerness to see the place.

At Ephesus, once home to the Obscure Philosopher, Heraclitus himself, and the city of the rhapsode Ion, who'd argued so eloquently with Socrates, another messenger handed me another letter from my patron. I read it at a table beside an inn in the shadow of Artemis's great library (where the Obscure Philosopher once played dice with the children) — saying that he was pleased by my commitment, that my criticism of his plan only raised his estimation of my commercial acuity, but that he wished to repay an old debt to the temple priests, his true motive. Having finished some business in Tunis, he concluded, in two days he was leaving by boat for Rome.

I, too, was on my way by boat — from Asia Minor to Egypt, my mother's home — but because those were times of limited travel, I had to detour slightly from the straight course to halt for a day at the city of Heracleon in Crete, where peasants tell of the tunnels of King Minos that supposedly still worm their indecipherable ways beneath the earth. How pleased I was, when, after an hour in port, I saw my old patron strolling across the patio of the same inn at which I had chosen to stay. His boat had also stopped here for provisions. We spent a pleasant day — and night — with one another. Odd, I thought: When I'd been fifteen and he thirty-four, he'd seemed so much older than I. But now that I was twenty and an army tour older and he was thirty-nine, we seemed far closer in age than before. Toward dawn, when outside our window the cicadas had grown quiet, I remember asking if he felt he could tell me the nature of the debt his letter had mentioned. But he released me and rolled to his back, chuckling, in that country bed with soft blankets but no sheets (as we would have had in his Syracuse summer home): “Best let this one remain unnamed. We all carry far too many that have to be acknowledged. I tell you, my little Neoptolomus (who are now so miraculously three inches taller than I!), on a clear day — ” his words recalled something Clivus might have said — “from the Hermopolis docks, you can look over the river and see the roofs of Hir-wer, wistfully visible across the Nile's near-mile of water ...”

No, I did not understand, nor could I have mapped out his plans and plottings any more than I could have limned the ways of the long-dead Bull-god who, rumor held, still roamed Daedalus's littered course beneath the town, above which our inn, our wooden floor, our bed now stood — the first bed I'd slept in an entire night. (Three years in the Roman army teaches you to sleep on anything, firm or yielding.) But since those Hir-wer lands were what my benefactor wanted, it was not my place to nay-say him. The next day his boat nosed from Heracleon's harbor for the north, while, half an hour later, mine sailed south.

Five days forward, under rain, I stood on Hermopolis's docks, which sagged and recovered in the southern winds: But Hir-wer was wholly hidden, as if, behind the waves, that shore had sunk in mud or vanished in mist.

There is a page break, and, after this prologue, the second chapter — for me the opening of the novel proper — begins:

TUGGING UP ITS HEAVE AND SLOSH, pushing them down, spindrift wind swung and swirled above continuous discontinuity, flux, and swell, scumbled with foam and nudged by evening's slant-light through all the colors of glass. A bit of wood slid, turning, toward pilings slowly pogoing in shifting skin, then slid away but not so far. Another hump smashed to foam along its crest and, become wave, arched, spooming, repetitious motion marking an orderliness in this oscillate irresponsibility shattering shoreward.

About which, harkening again back to the “Introduction” (surely the last time for many, many pages) and prompted only by the OED, I make one comment: “pogoing” ...? *Not* before 1921 (the invention of the pogo stick⁵).

At any rate.

We are in a storm at the Hermopolis docks on the day of the September equinox (“a turning point a holy for rituals of the east as for any western sacramental”). Despite the wind and rain, the revels

the city's titular deity, Thoth, fill Hermopolis's main streets and squares with processions, chanting, and prayer. (~~"— Thoth, whose totem is the ibis, the inventor of writing and letters, draughts and dice, architecture and astrology; he is the bull among the stars, who, at the behest of Marduk the Sun-god, toppled Babel's grand tower and tore tongue from tongue into the mutually incomprehensible array of human languages, even as his own breath imparted life to all things living, unto quill and calamus. In the warm and rare Egyptian rain, so far no one he's asked has been able to tell Neoptolomus where to find the temple he seeks. ("If a god has no name, what sort of a god can he be?" one man asks him, urging him to join in Thoth's celebration.) Unable to see his true object, however, Neoptolomus has found himself deviled by nameless dissatisfactions, as he walks along the waterfront to wander up the deserted alley or down that empty backstreet.~~

A new city never appears bigger or more confusing than on the day one encounters it.

Perhaps as he had found his patron at Heracleon, here he will run into Clivus, who could not only help him locate the shrine but might even resume their affair, "for already I'd learned, from my Roman friend, when so briefly we'd met on distant Crete, that sex with someone knowledgeable in the desirous workings of your body — and whose desiring turns you know as well as you know the stone patterning your father's hearth — though unlikely ever to reconduct you to passion's heights, can offer extraordinary relief and refuge from the stormy banks of life and lust."

Beside the roaring Nile, Neoptolomus sees a naked youth walking up Hermopolis's rainy docks. Even before Neoptolomus can ask the fellow if he knows of that elusive holy site, the well-hung handsome youngster, perhaps a year or so younger than our narrator, tells Neoptolomus that he is from the city of Bithynia in Asia Minor and makes clear he is of a randy disposition. (All Neoptolomus can remember of Bithynia is that "I'd heard it was very near Syria — where I had spent my last three years — and, of course, that the elegant Petronius had once been proconsul there; as well, it was the home of some dancer Sappho had been smitten with nearly a thousand years before — none of which told me much about the youth standing on the rain-spattered boards before me.") Under the peppering drops, the young fellow explains that, in search of sexual adventure, he has slipped free of an old lover, leaving him behind at the city central celebration:

"But who is he?" I asked.

Droplet-speckled shoulders shrugged. "No one, really." Above his green, green eyes, be-gemmed lashes flickered, as lightning flickered over us. [...]

"Doesn't he satisfy you?"

"Oh, very well. He is elderly, kind, wise, masterful. And handsome. Yet there is always something ... missing, I suppose, at the core of even the most ardent love — something making those of us with a certain restlessness of soul seek further, want more, yearn to explore beyond all we are given."

I chuckled; and, like a grumble from a discontented god, thunder above Hermopolis obliterated it.

[All ellipses not in square brackets are in the original.]

At the youth's suggestion, he and Neoptolomus take refuge in a dockside warehouse, for final. Neoptolomus decides he will have to put aside his patron's commission long enough to take some pleasure from this grim, gray town. Under the ceiling's dripping beams, on a corner pile of straw, they have sex. It goes on for several gloriously explicit pages, indeed, for the bulk of the chapter: we are passionate, near-acrobatic — and exhausting. ("Though I thought it then and have often since, I have never written it down until today: The boy made love like a man condemned to die within the hour, who wished to wrench every gram of ecstasy from the act.") Spent at last, in fragrant straw, with the boy in his arms, Neoptolomus closes his eyes.⁶ Their extreme coupling has been, however, not the

measured sex with Clivus Neoptolomus had been hoping for. Might he be able, Neoptolomus wondered with later conversation, to locate a calmer strain in this impassioned ephebe, “to more-than-touch: grasp, hold, or even determine the outline of what it was that had so far seemed absent in our encounter.” Neoptolomus drifts to sleep ...

Waking to harsh voices arguing in the alley outside (Chapter Three — but whence the need to enumerate ...?), Neoptolomus finds the boy gone. He goes to the warehouse door and steps from the building:

The boards of the low storage houses were stained with lime and rain. Here and there, in a huge sky, smashed silver fell from deep blue. Down a side street before the rushing Nile, sun gilded the wet dock houses. Afternoon gold bladed into the alley. Ships’ masts swayed and palm trees rocked above the shore. The street I stood on ran with orange muds and, to one side, green oil. Making my way through the sucking stuffs, I reached the corner and, a hand against drenched wood, stepped around it —

— where, at the joining of three ways, he finds a dozen ruffians, Roman soldiers, and beggars in altercation. Before he can determine the cause, they run off, leaving one hooded beggar in a rudely ragged robe. Neoptolomus begins talking with him and learns the elderly man is looking for his “prodigious young protégé. Perhaps you’ve even seen him — a green-eyed fellow, as handsome as yourself, somewhere along these docks.”

Is *this* the young man’s older lover ...?

Without admitting he’s bedded the boy within the hour, Neoptolomus engages the man in further conversation. As they talk, though, Neoptolomus realizes, now from the fact that his hands are so clean, now from the elegance of his Latin diction, that this is no waterfront vagabond. Rather he must be a nobleman, even a rich Roman in disguise. “Are you jealous of him?” Neoptolomus asks, daringly.

“Why should I be?” the “beggar” declares — and goes on:

“I glory in his youth, his bravery, and ... yes, his vigorous sex! Once I said to him just idly, mind you, that I would delight in seeing him tied and ravished by one of those huge wrestlers from the long island beyond Asia. Less than a week later, he whispered: ‘Be at such-and-such an inn at such-and-such an hour by the back window,’ and would say no more. When I wandered by the inn at the specified time, and looked between the shutters, with his black braid bound in a loop a-top his half-shaved head, one of those near-spherical easterners carried my friend over his shoulders, into the room, and tossed him, bound at the shins and forearms, to the thankfully cushioned bench. Removing his belt and his weapon, with an outsized member like a gnarled, yellow yam, he abused my poor boy, now one way, now another, till the blood ran from his buttocks along the backs of his thighs. Bound though he was, he was not gagged. But never, to all that black-browed colossus’s tinny curses, gong-like grunts, and metallic invectives, did the boy let a syllable of complaint — till, finally, as I watched them stagger through their violent, even bloody, pleasures, I could not tell whether sympathetic lust or lustful sympathy was the greater of the twin fires within me. Another time, when I told him I would delight to watch him disport himself with a pair of yellow-haired children of the north, again he told me I should linger at the door of a certain shack that would be left a-jar. When I did so, I saw him inside with two gold-haired brothers, their eyes of old ice — and neither above a dozen years of age. Easily they could have been twins. As they poked, wrestled, and kissed, now one, now the other was more eager to impale his youthful prize upon my dark-haired champion’s considerable manhood. Their Latin was heavily accented, uncouth, but inventive. As I observed the boys’ boisterous jokes and jibes, I could not tell if I felt more desire or more delight at their puerile merriments, at their passages of back-arched ecstasy. Still another day, when jokingly I said it would amuse me to see him in the throes of lust with three great Nubian sailors, like the ones prowling the southern docks of the seaside port we passed through, again he instructed me to avail myself of an empty upstairs tavern room. Removing a board from the floor, through which, a night later, as I’d been instructed, I looked into the room below, I saw him already in lust’s transport with three ebon-skinned fellows, the shortest of whom towered him by a head, and one of whom wore bronze rings in his ears you could easily wear on your wrists, and one of whose blocky biceps was bound, vein and muscle, by a chased band of such diameter that, were I to sport it on my head, you’d think me crowned emperor. One black sailor held him on his knees, head between dark fingers, while the other two simultaneously thrust their midnight members within him, of a thickness, the two of them, that together stretched his mouth to pain. From there they went on to every position four men might assume in maintenance of debauchery’s heights. Now and again, as white as yours or mine, an essential gout cascaded teak flesh, flank or thigh, when it was not ejected within the hungering bowels or thirsting throat of my luminous lover, who, moving now between these two or those two muscular darknesses, became a dusky moon amidst their triple night. How could anyone doubt such a boy? Could there be a greater fidelity than his? His exhibitionistic adventurousness and my voyeuristic inquisitiveness are as complementary as much of the uncritical world finds to be male and

female. Why, only yesterday, I told him, ‘What pleasure I’d have in watching you couple with the first foreigner you meet tomorrow on this very dock!’ And again, last night, he told me to visit — today — a dockside warehouse with a chink between its old boards, through which I might see what transpired on the straw heaped within.”

As I realized my recent pleasures were merely an extension of his narration, this beggar coughed (from a shed across the alley, a gull flew up, down, and away), then continued:

“Only sometimes, whether by beggar or by emperor posed, the finest plan goes awry. Alas, it’s happened more than once between us, where I’ve gone to the wrong hovel, the wrong inn, or — as I must have this afternoon — the wrong warehouse. For this time I saw nothing. All his athletically energetic faithfulness was — today — for naught. But then, in the profligacy of eggs laid by fowl or fish or spider, in the amount, the intensity, the variety of the sexual instincts themselves, we know that most of life is a riotous superfluity. Take the lusts that, along through the night journey of nations, weaves like sea-fire between woman and woman, man and man. While it contributes little to procreation, what individual or what society could aspire to civilization without it, whether at peace or at war? What woman would seriously take up arms or art without it? And what man could? At the same time, it supports all that yearns after the name of culture — sculpture, song, poetry, or philosophy. When such men and women do not create the pinnacles of culture themselves, they are sorely needed to appreciate those who do. Without us, society becomes a muddle of needy barbarians, where, whether or not his or her own desires are with the majority, any man or woman with a jot of intelligence or sensibility passes his or her bleak life sunk in the herd’s stupidity. We pray to Jove and Venus and the Great God Pan, but the only gods truly great are that rambunctious pair, Muddle and Need; for their mischief straits all human endeavor, high to low, doubtless determining the actions within Olympus’s very Pantheon. I have yet to decide which is the primal parent of desire.”

His narrative relieved a bit of my worry, though now and again I wondered if it were only some aristocratic delicacy that prompted this old “beggar” to appease my embarrassment. Could my passionate coupling with his energetic paramour have been a mere rhetorical turn in the recomplication of their day’s discourse?⁷

Neoptolomus leaves the “beggar,” deciding that, should he encounter the youth again, he will warn the Bithynian (“reading things only by the most commonplace code, which says that lovers grow jealous when they see a lover entwined with a stranger”) that the elderly man might have observed them — and let the youngster deal with this datum as it deserves.

Wandering from the waterfront, Neoptolomus rounds another corner to see a street brawl underway, beggars, priests, ruffians — and, rushing in from an alley a moment on, again Roman soldiers. Someone shouts. The brawlers break up. On the cobblestones, a knife in his neck, lies ... the naked Bithynian, his green eyes wide.

He is dead.

While Neoptolomus stands, astonished, the “beggar” runs from a side street to the center of the square, recognizes the slain boy and cries out, throwing off his frayed robe — yes, from the top, beneath it, clearly he is a Roman lord: “No! No ... ! Not here — take him across the river, to Hierax!” He begins to shout orders, which the soldiers fall to obeying. With a jagged scar down his face, a great bemuscled fellow snatches up the beggar’s abandoned cloak from the muddy walkway, the man with it over his shoulder, goes to yank the knife from the corpse’s neck. Could *he* be the murderer? wonders Neoptolomus. The former “beggar” cries out: “Why? *Why* —? Oh, my Antinous! I chose you for myself. But why must it have been you?” Neoptolomus is dumbfounded — when a young priest with a shaved head takes his arm.

“Quick! Come, my old friend ... !” It is his army lover, Clivus, now serving in the priesthood of the nameless god! As the soldiers carry the body of Antinous away toward the water, Clivus leads Neoptolomus off. “But didn’t you know? That was the Emperor Hadrian, Pontifex of the Empire of Rome! For six months, now, his imperial flotilla of fifty ships has anchored a few leagues down the Nile from here — but then, you have only just arrived in Hermopolis.”

For a year and a half, from Bithynia to Egypt, the love of Hadrian for Antinous has been a focus of gossip, rumor, and scandal. Both have been consorting with scandalous types at low inns and waterfront dives. Now and again the emperor borrows some ragged vestment to disguise his profligacy. But it no longer fools anyone. Talking of the revenge the murder of the emperor’s favorite

might now bring to Hermopolis, Clivus takes Neoptolomus to the city's edge and the temple of the nameless god. As they enter —

Piled a-top one another to make a corridor whose ceiling I could not see in the upper dark, the wall stones were the height of short men perched on one another's shoulders. With undressed faces gray-black as true beggars' feet gone barefoot in a foul city, the rocks were lapped by mossy tongues, up from the floor. Here and there water trickled beside our shoulders. Ahead, at a turning, on a scrolled iron tripod, fires reeled on the coals within it.

Clivus is afraid the emperor will raze Hermopolis, burn it to the foundations — even the temple — scattering salt on its ashes, as his ancestors had done once at Carthage.

Well, Neoptolomus counters, as they pass among the temple rocks, he can perhaps conclude his patron's business before then. He needs to see the High Priest about some lands across the river — Hir-wer, the town the emperor spoke of. In the main hall, a ritual is in progress, however; and, some sitting, some standing, the worshippers sing their hymn.

There were fewer than I would have thought. Also they seemed far poorer. Some were ragged. Most were naked, as was I (for Hermopolis was not Rome), displaying both their poverty and their humility before the god. Suddenly I saw, among the unclothed, in the shadow of one square temple column, the great bemuscled ruffian from the melee in the street, with his head shaved like one of the priests and the scar dropping across his right eye, staring at me with his left. Catching his gaze, I felt a deeply sexual surge, so that I turned away, wanting to hide my response to him, having already seen him start to rise in the temple's half dark.

Before the altar, the High Priest completed the prayer. As he started down the steps beside the statue on the chapel alter, I pulled away from Clivus to accost him. "My name is Neoptolomus, noble Priest, and I have come on a commercial mission to see about some investments in your properties at Hir-wer — "

But the High Priest interrupts:

"My friend, the temple has suffered a catastrophe today. This very morning, infidels broke into our hold here and raped the sacred *phallos* from the statue of our nameless god. [...] Bandits invaded our hall and, from its sacred socket, removed the deity's golden *phallos*, encrusted with jade, jewels, and copper. They have carried it away. We know not if it be in the city, if it has gone across water, or even if it is unto the desert. Those who changed moneys from foreign lands and those who sold doves have turned up their tables, put them against the walls, and gone home. Here at the temple, howsoever, we can conduct no commerce until its return." [...]

Over the heads of the supplicants, some seated on pews, some kneeling before them, across the hall, on the raised altar, ringed with braziers, I could make it out. [...]

"See him there," another voiced intruded. Thinking it was Clivus, I looked aside, to see it was the one-eyed ruffian who spoke! "Oh, he is a terrible god, with spined wings, one foot human, one clawed like a carrion bird, one hard hand of a huge workman and one with a dragon's talons. His head has horns; his maw holds the tusks of a demon. A god of fertility, death, construction, and abundance, he is also a god of lust."

Again, so as not to see or be seen by the man, I turned to gaze at the god.

Even violated, the statue is imposing; although, Neoptolomus comments, in its raped state, with its vacant genital socket, it seems oddly effeminated — rather, a winged and monster-headed goddess. Acolytes pull a silver gauze before it. "The god will remain thus curtained," the High Priest announces, "until the *phallos* is again in its place." A shadow behind its bright scrim, the statue regains its former virility, Neoptolomus notes, once its violation is veiled.

The High Priest offers our narrator a meal of wine, brined olives, cheese, bread, and figs — and a room in the monastery cellars. (The one-eyed ruffian has moved away.) As the priest gives Neoptolomus over to the acolytes who are to take him to his room, his parting suggestion is that, after some indeterminate time, perhaps, when they are able to retrieve the sacred member, Neoptolomus can proceed with his real negotiations.

In his stone cell, having eaten, Neoptolomus lies on his hard bed, trying to put aside thoughts of the scarred ruffian and wondering if Clivus will visit later that night to resume their army affair. As time

passes, however, Clivus does not come. Still alone, Neoptolomus drifts to sleep.

As dawn breaks through the brazen leaves on the vines about the high granite window, Neoptolomus wakes. Shaking his shoulder, Clivus kneels beside his bed, clearly upset. He has come not to make love — but to warn! The High Priest has found someone with power, wealth, and wisdom enough to retrieve the stolen *phallos* for the temple. He has sold Neoptolomus to the man as a catamite in exchange for his commitment to return the *phallos* to its right and proper place.

“Flee, flee from here before you are taken — ”

Neoptolomus tries to rouse himself. Immediately, however, soldiers and priests invade his cell, push Clivus away, and, chaining Neoptolomus, drag him into the temple courtyard, where, his money all taken, he is handed over to a caravan, clearly made up of brigands — or, perhaps, imperial soldiers in disguise. For, in the cool dawn, with the band, as a distraught Neoptolomus begins his trek across the sands, he realizes the caravan is headed by a man in a rude robe — a beggar’s *cento*, its cut, color, and patches familiar to Neoptolomus.

Though the man is never too near, Neoptolomus recognizes that soiled and ragged raiment.

Could it be the disguised emperor, who is leading these rude fellows on this quest?

Now and again, Neoptolomus overhears comments that certainly sound as if the caravan seeks some treasure — surely the purloined *phallos*.

Could Neoptolomus have been purchased as a replacement for Hadrian’s slain lover? How, he wonders, would *he* be at creating the imperial diversions the emperor had described on the Hermopolis docks? As Neoptolomus trudges along the sand in chains, he decides that worse fates could have befallen him — and that his situation might have some advantages. Thus he is eager to undertake whatever sexual tasks his imperial lover — however incognito — might have for him. That evening after they camp, Neoptolomus’s chains are removed and he is brought into the pavilion of the caravan leader.

The man pushes back his hood to disrobe, however — and it is *not* Hadrian.

Rather it is the scarred and bemuscled fellow who had stared at him in the temple, the robeless, rightful owner, his knife again in its sheath.

Without his dress, I saw, now that I had a chance actually to observe him, he had ornamented himself like the wild man he was: up the back of one ear he wore six silver rings. From the other hung a grooved gold nugget in a much distended lobe. He wore rings through both his teats, so that they had grown, from the all-but-constant stimulation of them, to the size of the first joint of my thumb — indeed larger than the nipples of most women.

Peremptorily the man grasps Neoptolomus, who, disoriented, blurts: “But the *phallos* has been stolen — and you know where it is!”

This halts the ruffian. After a moment, he answers: “Yes. That’s true.” Then, over a welter of wondrously lapidary pages, he seizes Neoptolomus, who resists at first. But his bandit paramour tells him gruffly: “You cost me thirty silver dinars — and a night’s sleep. Come here!” — and ravishes our narrator.

Like the passage describing his love-making with Antinous, I cannot quote it.

But though it is different in mood, detail, and affect, it is possibly even more vivid and intense; and it is quite a sexual set piece.

This is what precedes it:

As he was neither Jew nor Muslim, his prepuce was of an inordinate length and width. It flopped about the rim of his grip when he’d brought himself to climax, while he rooted deep in my face with his tongue or held me to his chest to gnaw the distended teats on his brazen breasts. His hand a-pump between us, there, he’d push me down to lick up his uliginous discharge as it overran the boulder of his fist, suck away any liquid pearls a-linger in his groin, or tongue what dribbled his belly ...

When their coupling (ten pages over two chapters, with half-a-dozen orgasms between them, which starts in the tent, moves out under the stars, then returns within ...) is done, Neoptolomus's own lover, and master turns out to be a committed son of the desert.

This is what follows it.

He — and, indeed, all the other sub-chiefs in his brigand band — had no sense of privacy in intimate matters. One might walk into his pavilion, on any scene between us, asking for advice or orders, and, from the man, however curtly, receive them.

Indeed, during or just after the communal meals we took outside around the evening fire, he and his chiefs gained an exhibitionistic delight in casually demonstrating what one or another youngster — this camel groom, that provisions loader, or, indeed, I — would do for his lord. And I must tell you, there at the fire with the others talking lazily of this and that, I have done as much, in my way, as did Antinous for his emperor.

Still, the basic servicing this rough fellow demands is nothing like the erotic theatrics Neoptolomus had been expecting to engineer.

Besides his scar (which, he told me, even as it disrupted his already coarse and sun-darkened features, had lost him much of the vision in his right eye, though his left, as sharp as a peregrine's, made up for it), his other "deformity" was his huge and slab-like hands. On fingers now thick as hatchet hafts, he'd gnawed the nails, thumb to little, since childhood, so that, while they banded his broad nubs right to left, from leathery cuticle, all teeth-thickened, to crowns ballooning a whole half inch before them, scarred and hardened in sand, he could never allow the nail proper to grow greater than they'd been when, as a child of four or five, he'd commenced the habit.

At first I found them hideous. Then, as he took great delight in sinking one, two, or three fingers, now down into my mouth, now deep up my fundament, I found myself thankful they were not, indeed, the foul talons of some of his fellows, however more prepossessing they were in other aspects than he. After a month, I began to find them, to my fascination, brutally erotic, so that he only had to touch me, or, indeed, bring one sand-hardened finger anywhere near my body, and I was aroused.

Nor did he miss that arousal.

In the evenings, as we ate out at the fire, he on his chair, I naked and cross-legged by him, his bare foot on my thigh, he would hold forth to the men on this or that raid they'd planned, till, at one point or another, absently he might brush his hand across my face, then interrupt his commentary to point out to the others: "Look there, how he loves me! See him, risen as proud as a desert adder!" The others would laugh. I would smile. He would go on. Then some other bandit would try to outdo him with an even coarser joke at the expense of one of our other young men.

Once, during an evening's after-dinner session of braggadocio among the older fellows, the narrator is traded to one of his lord's lieutenants for another youth and spends three rather sexually full days with his new master in a smaller, less opulent, smellier tent. But, in the end he is traded back: "You're much better," his old master tells him, when they are alone. "As pretty as the little fox was, all he did was lie there and whimper when I grabbed him. Now — ! Fall on your knees before me, friend, and lick the salt from my flesh until I am raised to the plateau the gods have given all men and women to ascend to called pleasure ... !" After only a few more days, impelled by a combination of their sexual oddity and directness, Neoptolomus finds himself, to his surprise and even distress,

filling the space of any disappointment in my new lover, who, on my return, had become my old (he smelled like a camel and delighted in thrusting his tongue, at the oddest moments, deep into my mouth like a boar after truffles, while he stimulated himself to climax, and in general made love like a rutting ox), with a bounding tenderness for this scar-faced, steel-armed, granite-thighed, and finally fascinatingly ugly fellow, who, as long as he was sexually satisfied himself, was actually, if roughly, quite obliging. Basically he was pleased for me to do anything and everything with him — as long as I initiated the things I liked to do only in private ... and did them often — though much of our congress, in its heat and intensity (interruptible as it was), was all-but-without words. Above all, I realized, one morning when, for the third time before dawn, he poked me awake to ask if I *wanted* to make love to him as, sprawled on my back across the cushions, I had once more gotten an erection in my sleep, my desert colossus wished to be thought sexually irresistible!

But the desert men are dreadful exhibitionists:

Often I was called in from under the blue, bronze, and mackerel sky, from among the camels and into the tent, where the seven chief brigands met to map out their routes and strategies — and, in one or another twenty-minute break from their negotiations, I

would service my master — or, on a few occasions [... service orally]⁸ his chief lieutenant, who had grown too excited and exercised during the discussion; and so, decided my lord, needed some relaxing, some calming down. All this occurred while the others wandered about or stood and watched, munching dried figs. (I believe more than once his lieutenant feigned such a tantrum because he knew I'd be called in to calm it.) Now and again, others of them would summon their boys in as well.

For all their play with us, there were moments of high jealousy. I have seen a boy out in our encampment with a black eye, or walking with a limp that came from a beating over some presumed sexual infraction.

I never suffered any such, however, because — I can only infer — I had the good sense to make clear to whom my first allegiances lay. Whenever, always at my master's orders, I finished with one man or another, I would return, drop to my knees before him, and kiss his broad and sand-hardened foot, or, if he sat in his chair talking with the other men, crouch at his feet and nuzzle his granite thighs, lick his salty testicles (often he told me how much that pleased him, when I did it in front of his fellows), while he gave my head an acknowledging pat, called me his "little gentile hedgehog," and went on with his conversation.

You call it self-abasement? It was simply common sense. And it achieved the desired end. I survived my desert stay sans injury — at least from him.

While it has its pleasures, the bandit's day-to-day life is without anything approaching intellectual stimulation. (When, one night, Neoptolomus attempts to recite a poem to his master, first he giggles, then chuckles, and finally outright guffaws.) Their several violent encounters with other bandit bands, vividly described, terrify Neoptolomus. (Each may or may not have something to do with the return of the *phallos*.) After his first question to the bandit leader, however, Neoptolomus is unable to get another clear answer from the man. On one such raid, Neoptolomus sees his master coldly cut the throat of an enemy Neoptolomus's own age — reminding him that, after all, the man was, most likely, Antinous's actual murderer. (That night, Neoptolomus has the first of several dreams that will regularly revisit him throughout the novel: he is set upon by a huge creature that seems some form of the nameless god: "part manticore, part minotaur, part chimera ..." — often a terrifying presence but as often an astonishingly tender lover.) On another, the one friend besides his master Neoptolomus has made in the band — another lieutenant's catamite — is wounded mortally and though not yet dead, must be left on the sand without water to die under the sun — because he will be dead in a day or two, anyway. When they pillage a peaceful settlement, Neoptolomus is appalled at the sexual atrocities some of the men in the caravan, both younger and older (including, indeed, his lord) commit on the women. Hours before he had been musing on how civilized his master and the men in the desert, in reality, were. Now he is shocked by what a narrow notion of civilization has called for in his judgment. Perhaps, he goes on to consider, it is the notion of civilization itself, with all the crimes it excuses and disguises, which is shockingly narrow. The bandits' actions seem insufferably barbaric to Neoptolomus and completely unlike the lazy peace-keeping duties he'd performed with his squadron above the idyllic mountain town, when, in Syria, Clivus had been his lover.

The brigand's men respect their brutal leader, however, and he

ran his caravan of expilators and cutthroats with a metallic discipline that often verged on iron cruelty — though, let me say it, to me he was never outrightly cruel. Rather, I found myself the recipient of all the privileges and comforts you might expect with my position: extra food, my own tasks in the camp now and again reassigned by him to others, and more of his companionship than most.

Though only when we were alone, he would ask my advice on this or that about our band, an honor over which I was popinjay proud — natural enough, I suppose, when there were no others.

Occasionally, as, in my daytime djellaba and sandals, we trudged the dunes, I'd muse that, were we in a more domestic surround and not raping, pillaging, and looting across the wastes, this might have been a pleasant relationship, since my master found my attentions both physically and socially a delight and thought me amusing and clever (as long as I did not broach actual poetry) while I — even if we had nothing else in common — found him generous, friendly, passionately masculine, and, by now, scar, smell, and hand, jaw-clenchingly attractive as only the wholly alien can be or become.

At a stop beside a market in Alexandria ("I arrived in Alexandria as a barbarian, without any knowledge of its social laws and formal legislation, up and as alert as a king to an early change

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