

critical notice of:

Imperium

(forthcoming)

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"The covers are too far apart." --Ambrose Bierce (book review)

"This book fills a much needed gap in the literature." --unknown book review

The invention and exhaustion of literary form by a single author in a single work is a singular event. Of course, some critic could be found to dispute the claim that any given author, in one and the same book, both invented and exhausted a genre: 'Borges is really just O. Henry gone to the movies', and so on. Some authors accomplish this feat, whereas others become widely acclaimed to have accomplished this feat and have established their priority in the public consciousness, even though, perhaps, some critic could prove that they did not have absolute priority in the temporal sense.

I am therefore, in the foregoing non-temporal sense, going to assert that the work of which this is the review is one such work, embodying, as it does, the invention, the mastery, and also thereby the exhaustion, of a particular genre, and that this merits our attention. The work in question is not scholarly, it is fiction; nonetheless, it is the product of a scholarly mind, and the genre of which it is the exhaustion merits our attention as scholars. No doubt some twit at All Souls will someday write the third most tedious dissertation in academia because he has turned up a paragraph, a sentence, a word perhaps, from Tertullian or Anaximander or Lao Tsu, and claim *him* to have been the true originator of the idea. But it is worse to be tedious than wrong.

Ordinarily, a book review affirms the merit of a work of fiction for its use of language, its story, its characters, its characterizations, its forceful appropriateness to current events, the masterly handling of grand schemes and the finely wrought detail--all that sort of thing. None of which is what merits attention about this book, *Imperium*.

Ordinarily a book review reader expects to read in a book review a summary of the plot up to but not including the denouement. I shall disappoint you forthwith: the chap goes berserk and is murdered in the end. So much for the denouement. As for the plot, I am at liberty to characterize it but not summarize it (for reasons soon apparent) as a gossamer of such subtlety and rarefaction that it vanishes beneath one's very gaze. More than this I need not divulge.

At least, not yet. For, you see, the reviewer has not yet read the book.

Dear reader, do you suppose I have the temerity to read a book for you if you could just as well read it yourself? That is why this review exists, for you can *not* read it yourself. *Imperium* is unreadable.

One might think there would be nothing whatever to say about an unwritten novel. One might have thought Sartre's *Being & Nothingness* should have been half as long as it was.

But to know that it is an unwritten novel is at least to know something--it is not an unwritten autobiography, for example, nor a travel-log, nor a piece of journalistic hack, nor a review. And if I add that it is an unwritten historical novel and that the author is a certain Mark Engel of California, you know as much about this book as you do about any other book you have not read, Weininger's *Sex Character*, for example.

'Oh, but it's been done before!' do I hear you cry? Of course--*Karamazov* was only the prologue to another novel which Dostoievski never wrote. Lots of novels were never written by D.H. Lawrence alone. But what is interesting about *Imperium* is not simply its not having been written. What merits our attention here is that this novel consciously, intentionally, deliberately, absolutely, forbids itself to be written.

The reader--or shall I say the reader-to-be--becomes acquainted with this novel over a period of years, at first only uncertainly, as a bit of gossip, through hearsay. One does not *know* that such a novel exists. Through tortuous wanderings, chance contacts with not altogether reliable persons, assignations, clandestine meetings--or through friendship with the author himself--one enters its charmed circle, is subtly pulled into its web. One is tantalized by fragmentary glimpses, as in dreams, which seem to portend portentous portents: '*the Emperor Commodus*'... One struggles to recall what is really known of him, and when one discovers, driven to *Encyclopedie Britannica*, that it comes to virtually nothing, one sees the infinite possibility of it: he is undifferentiated wax, capable of becoming anyone and everyone in the hands of the author. One hears, perhaps at several removes already (one can never be quite certain), of passages, characters, characterizations, wondrous events, betrayal, abandonment, unjust punishment, unrequited love and wasted opportunity--of things which make us cry "sound and fury, signifying nothing." But still the author retains his essential impassivity: nothing is committed to the written word, everything remains provisional, conceptual, revisable. One cajoles him, goads him, pleads with him, dares him, ridicules him, threatens him--all to no avail.

One supposes that it is mere obstinacy that this man, who claims to be a writer, does not write.

It dawns on one that it is not the physical result of writing which concerns us here, not the putting of ink to paper at all, but the primeval act of story-telling qua story-telling. It is the weaving, not the woven fabric, which one is allowed to glimpse--and, perchance, take part in. Writing in its true form, Plato wrote, is inscribed upon the soul. But few readers, or readers-to-be, have eyes for this genre, for they expect something quite different. They expect a finished product, a brutish physical object, in a word, a *thing* to read. They have not the eyes to see what necessarily precedes--logically, temporally, culturally, metaphysically--the mere passive reception by a reader: namely, *the primordial act of composing*. In primitive societies, the art of story-telling is a highly developed skill with the social status approaching that of prophet or holy man; but what could be our modern equivalent? For we have lost the spiritual bond which links man to world through narrative: to wit, the campfire.

Eventually the expectant reader is forced, in his solipsistic immediacy, to confront this nebulous trail he has laboriously followed to no end as the novel itself, as pure inception: the expectant reader is finally forced to confront what the author himself must be going through, having conceptualized the whole thing but unable to decide which word to start off with. Perforce, the author would edit a definitive edition of Carlyle rather than commit a single word of his own.

Imperium boldly challenges us to understand the act of writing no longer, as hitherto, in its brute factuality: pencil scratching paper--for that misses the point. It has missed the point for 10,000 years. Our very thinking about writing has been distorted by our inheritance of this bastard word *writing* which seems to repeat to us inexorably *the thing which is to be read*: the book, the word, the letter, the hieroglyph, the graffito in a cave near Bordeaux. Already by the time of Epictetus--"If you wish to be a writer, write"--the error was entrenched in human thought. The act invariably devolves onto the object which is a result of the act. Eventually it becomes axiomatic--deducible as a Categorical Imperative--that in the absence of the object, the act may be assumed not to exist, to have existed, to have any right to exist, at all. Its existence becomes problematic, not because it is intangible, but because it has no Dewey Decimal Number.

As Wittgenstein said, all language struggles to say one and the same thing, namely, that which cannot be said. And that means, by precisely not saying it--it may not be sloppily not said. That is why only an unwritten work can express it. But, of course, the author must work at not writing it, not merely neglect to write it. Every word will have been sweated over and revised as if it had been written.

Writing is now understood--that is, for the reader who transcends his expectation of that-which-is-to-be-read, who becomes instead the reader-to-be--in its pure conceptualization, as the presencing of whatever comes into presence, linguistically speaking. The actual words, whatever they are, in which it might come to expression, are irrelevant--for we are suddenly pitched into the coming-into-expression of itself itself. Not the mere thing in being, but the yet-to-be of its not-yet-being.

At last we are free of logorrhea. And it is significant that it is in literature that this is accomplished and not, for example, in philosophy or literary criticism. For were we to transcend logorrhea analytically, we should first have to marry Wittgenstein to Heidegger and assert that language is the bewitchment of our intelligence by the devolution of presencing into what is just-past-present. Which would be to say that language is a conspiracy of saying that we mean what we say we mean. (Would that we could! or, at least, that Derrida could.) But this dubious analytical attempt is obviated by never actually writing the novel, by the novel's development requiring that it never be committed to the brutal factualization of de-conceptualization, of ink and paper, "the murderous alphabet" (Wallace Stevens). It remains, instead, as pliant as the ever-momentaneous slipping of Time across the razor blade of the Now.

But why a novel? And why Commodus? Simple. A novel would sell better; and Commodus is perverse enough to attract lots of attention, perhaps even screenrights. Commodus is the hypostatized *reductio* of our own perversity: a mad emperor on the word processor--he re-writes the world and erases it the next instant. The electronic ephemerality of modern consciousness ... his 'values' whirring on a magnetic disc which

he cannot decode without a 'device', the inner workings of which he does not himself comprehend. Possibly, Commodus is not perverse enough--certain liberties would have to be taken with history.

But given a writer who went to Harvard Law School on a lark, reads Suetonius in Latin and Sextus in Greek, has recurring fantasies of the emperor with his harem of sex slaves, and so on and so forth--given that, I say, how could a historical novel based thereon *not* be so pedantic as to be merely footnotes of the historians without the text, or a facile rehash of Reage's *Story of O as a Roman Emperor*? The author has set himself an impossible, Sisyphean, task. Unless--and this is the biscuit--it were never written, never subjected to the embalming of actual verbiage. The perfect novel, in other words, is anal retentive. (The review, therefore, essentially scatological.)

This, of course, is a literary device. But it is a literary device of a higher logical type. It is literature as device. For the reader-to-be is drawn into the web not in the usual way of wondering what will happen to the protagonist, how the 'problem' will get resolved, how the 'obstacle' will be overcome, how the 'tension' will release itself, how Girl will get Boy despite the ominous presencing of Girl No. 2 (or some more modern variation set in San Francisco or Amsterdam), etc.--all cheap tricks have been transcended here.

Here, the author sinks his hooks directly into the reader-to-be himself, *through* the reader-to-be himself, not merely through the (hoped-for development of the) sympathy of the reader with the author's characters. For the readers-to-be--i.e., the author's friends and relations, guests, visitors, former professors, acquaintances, lawyer, physician, reviewer, screen-writer-to-be, anyone, in short, who comes within the charmed circle--are kept mercilessly and relentlessly in piqued suspense: 'Will I become a character in *Imperium*?' 'Will Commodus (or his sex slave) be based on me?' 'Will his nemesis meet ultimate doom through cryptomnesia?' And so on and so forth. One becomes overtly self-conscious in the presence of an author, as with a Catholic priest, a Freudian analyst, a narcotics agent, for one never knows whether casual remarks may be taken amiss, or simply taken--appropriated, put on public display.

When a reviewer lauds an author's ability to rouse a reader's 'personal interest' in his characters through the author's "profound commitment to his characters", as Salmon Rushdie fatuously wrote in the London Sunday Times of Wm. Wharton's nonetheless excellent *Dad*, the esteemed Mr. Rushdie was writing lamentable bosh. For it remains--and until *Imperium*, necessarily remained--an *impersonal* interest. The author's characters were always the *author's* characters, howevermuch sympathy they evoked in a reader; as soon as they were entombed in the concrete of actual words, hard and fast, black and white, immutable perfidies, they lost the fluid and living possibility of becoming the reader-to-be himself. Herein lies the truly personal level of interest, commitment and suspense, for the reader-to-be of the novel-in-process as purely anal retentive conceptualization of presencing in its presencing as *dasein*. That is, in the unreadable novel.

All great fiction asks a great question. Karamazov: 'If God is dead, isn't everything legal?' Etc. That is self-evident. The converse, however, is not self-evident: whether all great questions have great fiction to pose them. This is due to the fact that not all of the great novels have been written yet. What the diligent reviewer can say with precision about this novel is only that certain questions are definitely not raised therein, and this, I

think, shows, more than anything else about the book, the author's unfiltered discretion and taste. He is ever unwilling to allow trivialities a whit more attention than they deserve. The overall effect of this is to lend his style a crystal lucidity of such transparently limpid clarity that, as one says, one can see right through it.

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Imagine for a moment that you are 16 years old. Your father is Marcus Aurelius, the most powerful man on earth. Your siblings have all croaked or been bumped off. Your father belatedly realizes that he had better start grooming you for the position of most-powerful-man-on-earth. But he can't be bothered to do it himself--he is too busy fighting barbarians and writing his memoirs on the Teutonic Front--so he sticks the job on a load of has-been Stoics. These guys espouse a stern but moribund moral doctrine, rather like, let us say, Roman Catholicism today, and they attempt to impress upon you, above all else, your responsibility as most-powerful-man-on-earth and the need for you to practice forbearance in all you do. (Naturally, it is out of fear for their own wretched skins, should you succeed to imperium and go berserk, that these mental babysitters try to impress upon you this stern but, as anyone could see for himself, moribund doctrine of forbearance). Let us imagine, further, that you have a couple of scalawag friends with no scruples and an enlarged sense of fun: they spend whole afternoons devising elaborate practical jokes, involving hilarious loss of life, property, and senatorial reputation, which would positively fail of execution without 'divine intervention' and a good grip on the treasury. They revive that grand old Spartan spectacle, the flogging of the boys: who dies last wins. This, naturally, involves booking the Coliseum in advance, plus the numerous incidental expenses of public frivolities (concessions, parking for 10,000 chariots, inducements for senators' sons, etc.). And now, a telegram arrives from Germany-to-be: the old geezer has finally kicked off. You are suddenly the most powerful man on earth. Nobody but nobody can tell you to eat your spinach any more. What would you do? Lapse into smarmy meditations on the nature of man and world, like your father did? You'd *rebel*, that's what! Have some fun. Go berserk. Get yourself a harem of sex slaves. Fight gladiators in the arena.

That would be Gore Vidal's Roman emperor novel. Facile. Pedantic. Pornographic. Readable. We shall not deign to review it.

* Note: Epictetus, *Discourses*, Book II Chapter 18.

Disclaimer: the author wishes to implicate his former professors, Herr Professor Doktor Goff and S. Paul Kashap, Department of Philosophistry, University of California, Santa Cruz. A book titled *Imperium*, but not Mr. Engel's, appeared after this review was written.