

History and the Possibility of Wisdom in Jean D'Ormesson's *La Gloire de l'empire*

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Is history the mother of wisdom? This question was posed most provocatively in Jorge Luis Borges's celebrated story "Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*." For Cervantes, writing around 1600, this notion was just a platitude of the day. However, when Pierre Menard takes up his pen in the twentieth century, the idea is shockingly optimistic and at odds with the spirit of the age.

Jean D'Ormesson uses this quotation from Borges as one of the four epigraphs to his most celebrated novel *La Gloire de l'empire* (*The Glory of the Empire*) published in 1971.¹ It won the Grand Prix of the Académie Française and was the chief reason for D'Ormesson's election to the Académie in 1973 at the age of forty-seven as its youngest member. The novel was translated into English (minus some of the charts) by Barbara Bray in 1974.² D'Ormesson's next two novels (his fifth and sixth)—*Au Plaisir de Dieu* (1974) and *Dieu, Sa Vie, Son Oeuvre* (1980)—are also important meditations on history and experiments with the historical novel, but they have not attracted the attention of academic critics even in a time of renewed interest in history. Although *Au Plaisir de Dieu* was rendered into English in 1977 as *At God's Pleasure*, his other books were not translated. Thus the American public has not renewed acquaintance with his work over the last dozen years.

La Gloire de l'empire is basically a chronological narrative with inserted reflections on the growth, achievement, and decline of a world empire. Nevertheless, it is an imaginary history, the account of a city state in the eastern Mediterranean which grew to stretch across much of Europe, Asia, and North Africa. The novel sings the praises of the Empire's greatest ruler, Alexis, who goes into retirement after a reign of fifty-five years, and it offers much information about the Empire's cultural life. As an expert on the Byzantine Empire, D'Ormesson has availed himself of his knowledge of that culture. However, the Empire is not a disguised or allegorized picture of any actual political state.

D'Ormesson treats the Empire as if it has been the constant subject of art, literature, historical investigation, and conversation. He cites such works as Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures of the Language of the Empire* and Otto Rank's *Der Mythos des Todes des Helden*, which one would have some trouble finding in libraries! He implicates himself in this comedy as well by referring to the special issue on the Empire of *Diogenes*, a prestigious journal which he has served as editor. D'Ormesson claims that information on the Empire can be

¹ Jean D'Ormesson, *La Gloire de l'empire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

² Jean D'Ormesson, *The Glory of the Empire*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Knopf, 1974). All subsequent references are to this edition and given in parentheses in the text.

found in Ceram's *Gods, Graves, and Scholars* and many other books—in which we may have missed the references at first glance.

Nor should one forget the great treatments of subjects from the Empire's history, such as the plays on the subject of Arsaphe and Héloïse by Pierre Corneille and Jean Anouilh (the former of which is quoted at length). D'Ormesson also reminds us of the great moment in Dante's *Inferno* when "the archangel Michael and Virgil come at the Almighty's express command to snatch [Alexis] the unfortunate sinner from eternal torment and bring him, together with Trajan, Justinian, and Saint Benedict" to Paradise (352). Rabelais, Voltaire, Marx, and Freud all had their say about Alexis, as did Chateaubriand, one of D'Ormesson's great interests and the subject of his 1982 biography *Mon Dernier Rêve sera pour vous*.

Genealogies, maps, time lines, illustrations, and photographed reconstructions all attest to the huge scope of the novel, which D'Ormesson claims he wrote in order to integrate the novelist and the social scientist which existed in him in a schizophrenic tension.³

Of five major reviewers, four were decidedly impressed by the novel's scope. Only Jean Didier-Wolffromm saw the book as far too long for its message—an overinflated joke.⁴ There was no agreement among the reviewers as to the overall meaning of the novel. For Pierre de Boisdeffre *La Gloire de l'empire* is almost a masterpiece, one which tries to reach universal history by getting all the history of the world into one book.⁵ Jean Gorez speaks of the novel as universal history in a somewhat different sense. He writes that "Alexis is each one of us when we dream of being strong enough to conquer and noble enough to refuse to enjoy our conquests."⁶ Other reviewers took different approaches. Sonja G. Stary believes that D'Ormesson has created a new form of the *nouveau roman*.⁷ Camille Bourniquet, on the other hand, feels the novel's message is similar to the one we get from Tacitus.⁸

Considering this variety of responses, what are we to make of *La Gloire de l'empire*? Is this history the mother of any wisdom? Does it reveal something about the human past, despite the fact that the Empire did not really exist? In contrast, does it illuminate our own present—its hopes, preoccupations, and problems? Or rather does it tell us nothing, existing only as a novelistic *tour de force*, brilliant and often wildly funny but ultimately insubstantial as a reflection on history? The novel can be taken in any of these ways. However, they all lead to the message that history cannot tell of any progress. Even if history actually does communicate something about our past, we find only a somber message.

D'Ormesson has several ways of problematizing his novel's seriousness as a meditation on history: intertextuality, satire on historical debate, and self-re-

³ Jean D'Ormesson, *Le Vagabond qui passe sous une ombrelle trouée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978) 119.

⁴ Jean-Didier Wolffromm, *Rev. of La Gloire de l'empire, Magazine Littéraire* 57 (Oct. 1971): 20-21.

⁵ Pierre de Boisdeffre, *L'Île aux livres: Littérature et Critique*. (Paris: Seghers, 1980) 257-61.

⁶ Jean Gorez, *Rev. of La Gloire de l'empire, Bulletin des Letters* 333 (Dec. 1971): 367-69.

⁷ Sonja G. Stary, *Rev. of La Gloire de l'empire, French Review* 46 (Feb. 1973): 665-66.

⁸ Camille Bourniquet, *Rev. of La Gloire de l'empire, Esprit* N.S. 422 (Feb. 1972): 300-01.

flexivity. In the French original *La Gloire de l'empire* is labeled simply "roman" (whereas in the English translation it is subtitled "a novel * a history"). There are many reasons to ground it with reference to previous novels. At one point Alexis is compared to King Arthur, and so one may think of *La Gloire de l'empire* as following from Malory in the tradition of stories of the rise and fall of Camelot. In addition, it takes part in the imaginary-worlds tradition of writing following in the wake of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. After all, an adviser named Gandolphus plays a crucial role in the history of the Empire.

There is a web of intertextual references to other novels and characters, real and imaginary. Hadrian VII, subject of a novel by Baron Corvo, has a crucial role in the novel. There is a brief reference to Pope Joan, figure of legend and heroine of a nineteenth-century Greek novel by Emmanuel Royidis. A nod is also given to Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*, since each book sympathetically describes a heroic emperor.

History is often satirically seen as a series of polemical arguments which tend to lead nowhere, as we find in one footnote: "Several authors categorically deny that Alexis was initiated into the cult of the sun, and regard the various texts used in support of that theory as apocryphal. Their strongest argument is that sun worship had died out by Alexis's time. A good deal has been written, much of it polemical, on whether it might have survived in various religious centers. Jacques Benoist-Mechin . . . is working at present on a volume to be called . . . *Alexis or the Dream Crowned* . . . in which he hopes to resolve the problem once and for all" (362). Despite the hopes of M. Benoist-Mechin, the novel as a whole leads us to conclude that the debate will not be resolved and that the polemics will continue—especially since Alexis is suspected of being the "Justus Dion" who wrote the first history of the Empire.

The constant appeals to non-existent scholarly works place *La Gloire de l'empire* in direct descent from various stories in Borges's *Ficciones*, and like much fiction in the wake of Borges, it is also a self-reflexive novel. At one point in Chapter 24, "The Power and the Glory," the novel refers to a footnote which sends us back to that very page of the novel. This humorous device suggests not only that the author is obsessive, but also that history can never struggle its way out of self-referentiality and reveal to us anything about the world.

Despite all the problems these strategies may cause in our reading *La Gloire de l'empire* as a history, the novel tells us at various points that history reveals something about ourselves, something which falls between knowledge of the past and solipsism. In other words, although we are continually reading ourselves into the past, we should not despair, for we can at least come to a deeper realization of our contemporary concerns. History, like art, religion, and culture, plays an important role in preserving human life (356). It "raise[s] a frail barrier in the minds of the living against the abysses of death, passing time, oblivion" (356).

The story of Alexis can still function as a prototype for historical writing because, in D'Ormesson's view, the dead have no life except in us. If we stopped thinking about Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, Virgil and Dante, there would be nothing left of them, and it would be as if they had never existed. The

same would be true about Alexis if we failed to remember him. Thus Caesar has no more innate reality for us than the fictional Alexis. The dead exist only in our consciousness apart from any possible objective reality, as do Vautrin, Natasha Rostova, and Swann.

The idea of history here has a certain closeness to the narratological view of history which has come into prominence in the last twenty years, particularly around the writings of Hayden White in *Metahistory* (1973) and *Tropics of Discourse* (1978). Indeed, D'Ormesson pushes us in this direction with two more of his epigraphs. One is taken from the Goncourt brothers: "History is a novel that happened; a novel is history that might have happened." The other is from Justus Dion: "The future belongs to God, but the past belongs to history. God can do no more with history, but man can still write it and transfigure it."

The reviewers did not attempt to locate *La Gloire de l'empire*, written between 1967 and 1971, in the context of the debate over interpretation in history which was going on at the time. This issue has been admirably summarized by Hayden White in his essay "Interpretation in History," from *Tropics of Discourse*, which first appeared in 1972-1973.

According to White, contemporary theorists working within historiography have looked at history's epistemological status from two major positions. One group, represented by Carl G. Hempel (working from Karl Popper's writings), takes a positivistic view of explanation: "historians explain past events only insofar as they succeed in identifying the laws of causation governing the processes in which the events occur."⁹ In order for history to ascribe to scientific status it must identify the laws that determine historical change.

The other major position is a narrativist one which claims that historians explain events by "finding the story which lies buried within or behind the events and telling it in a way that an ordinary educated man would understand" (White 54-55). The narrativists claim that, through the techniques of verification and disconfirmation, history still contributes scientifically to our knowledge about the world.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, as a critic of historiography, disagrees with both of these views. For him, "historical accounts are *nothing but* interpretations," and he believes that "the formal coherency of any historical narrative consists solely of a 'fraudulent outline' imposed by the historian upon a body of materials which could be called 'data'" only in the vaguest sense (White 55). Furthermore, history has no specific object of study, and it is never able to extricate itself from mythological explanation. For Lévi-Strauss, White concludes, explanations "represent products of decisions to ignore specific domains in the interest of achieving a purely formal coherency of representation" (White 57). Thierry Maulnier echoed this line of thought in his speech welcoming

⁹ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) 54.

D'Ormesson to the Académie Française, commenting that all history is mythical up to a certain point.¹⁰

Despite this sense of history as a narrative which tells us about our own projections, the novel is full of partisan views concerning the past. A very obvious ideological position is in operation here: there are individual cycles of rising and falling achievement in the past, but in the overall scheme there is no human progress. The reviewers did not pick up on this issue.

D'Ormesson himself refers to such historians and metahistorians as Hegel, Marx, and Toynbee, as well as the more radical Lévi-Strauss and Foucault. Nevertheless, the narrator is a conservative person, someone who does not want to debate the more radical claims about history advanced by structuralists and post-structuralists. His idea of damage control is to reduce the quarrel to the related but more circumscribed issue of the dangers of cultural relativism.

The biases of the historian come out most clearly at the beginning of the last chapter in a passage on accidental necessity reminiscent of *War and Peace*: "History is accidental necessity. It is made up entirely of hasards, coincidences that hang by a thread, armies suddenly held up by storm or snow, negligent or ingenious generals, unlooked-for conversations, unexpected encounters or death, plots successful or foiled, outlaws who escape and runaways who are caught, temperaments and inspirations that miraculously correspond to the needs and hopes of a place or age" (354). There seem to be two problems here. If history is made up of hasards and coincidences, how can these be said to correspond to the "needs and hopes of a place or age" unless the argument is that certain ages have an investment in an irrationalist view of history. Second, the novel as a whole has resolutely taken what Nietzsche calls the monumental view of history in the typology elaborated in the second of his *Untimely Meditations* (a work cited by D'Ormesson), "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life." As Gorez noted in his review, more important to this novelist are the noteworthy deeds of great men than the actions of the masses or socio-economical currents.

Concentrating on these great figures leads the narrator to a certain conclusion about the taking of power: "There is something dispiriting about the march of history. That web which never alters despite an infinite range of motifs and variations: the same struggle for power under ever-different masks; the vain triumphs, the declines and falls; the ever-recurring myths; the straining towards a future that, though it always eludes the grasp, never ceases to exert its pressure and makes its demands; the turning wheel which changes yet does not change; the hopes always disappointed, the victories foredoomed to failure—whether the picture they paint of man expresses his greatness or his weakness, we shall never know" (56). In this vision of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* can be found a justification for the imaginary history itself. If history repeats the same patterns without any significant historical specificity, then the pattern can be abstracted and told in an imaginary history.

¹⁰ Jean D'Ormesson and Thierry Maulnier, *Discours prononcés dans la séance publique tenue par l'Académie Française pour la réception de M. Jean D'Ormesson le jeudi 6 juin 1974*. (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1974) 29.

Alexis abdicates not because of old age but because of his reflections on history. He becomes an actor in the same old story which has already been told: "That was what was called history. Men and events formed a great infernal wheel where the only choice was between being victim or victimizer. The best moment in history was when the victim slowly arose and struck down the victimizer. Then he became the victimizer himself, and there was nothing left but to await new victims who would strike him down in their turn" (331). The narrator feels compelled not only to present but to justify Alexis's feelings. No one can rule without violence. D'Ormesson has recourse to Hegel's sense of a grand design to keep from accusing Alexis of butchery. He misquotes from the *Phenomenology of Mind*: "The stone is innocent and Alexis is guilty. But he is absolved, because he represents the necessary work of universal history and the very form of the new world" (282). The narrator's love for the world empire also seems to be consistent with his belief in the work of the state. He is quite willing to read history in a strongly teleological strain. For example, he writes, "It was for the Empire of Alexis that there had been hatred between the two sons of the first prince of Onessa" (306). Here *post hoc* becomes *propter hoc*.

The narrator's attitudes toward the great hero and the state, causality and irrationality, give us the message that the past is so bleak that there is little reason to consider the possibility of a truly referential history to be a reason for rejoicing. In fact, if we decide either that history is self-reflexive and tells us nothing or that it projects our present concerns as narrative patterns, we may perhaps feel better. D'Ormesson suggests that no collective effort can lead us to progress. For a person who has gone on record as believing in liberal democracy and who has served UNESCO for many years, the conclusion is a surprising one. The only wisdom history can give us is that of a weary resignation.