

INTRODUCTION



“HISTORY IS A NOVEL THAT HAPPENED; A NOVEL IS HISTORY that might have happened.” It would be hard to think of a better epigraph for Jean d’Ormesson’s genre-bending *Glory of the Empire*—a novel that pretends to be a work of history, and often convinces you that it is one—than the one he himself found in an 1861 journal entry by the Goncourt brothers. The nod to the famous diarists is noteworthy: Meticulous historians of the eighteenth century as well as the authors of stylistically daring, vaguely impressionistic contemporary novels, the Goncourts were preoccupied by the same questions—about the boundaries between the past and the present, fact and fancy, history and fiction—that are the focus of d’Ormesson’s book. And, indeed, are the subject of another of his novel’s epigraphs, this one by Jorge Luis Borges: “History, mother of truth—the idea is astonishing.”

“Astonishing” is a good adjective for *The Glory of the Empire* itself. Published in France in 1971 to considerable acclaim, and the first major success for its author, it presents itself as a scholarly tome about the rise of a vast, Byzantium-like empire that is called, simply, “the Empire.” The illusion that it is a work of nonfiction is enhanced by copious footnotes and an extensive bibliography that bristles with the impressive-sounding names of journal articles and books in many languages—all of which, along with their authors, d’Ormesson has invented. This dazzling inventiveness, evident as well in the elaborate history the author has dreamed up for his fictional realm, might seem at first to be the entire point of his work; the knowing allusions to both history and scholarship can make *The Glory of the Empire* look like little more than (as a French friend of mine once put it) an extended *jeu de lycéen*: the clever joke of a high-school whiz kid.

The temptation to take both the book and its author lightly is one that has been encouraged by d'Ormesson himself, a genial celebrity of the French literary world who enjoys hinting that he never really mastered the serious stuff. "I remained rather good in history and literature, but was always little more than a zero in philosophy," he wrote in a 1966 memoir called *Au revoir et merci*, referring to his high-school days in the 1930s at the prestigious École normale supérieure. Indeed, despite a distinguished lineage and an impressive résumé—he was born in 1925, the proud scion of a well-to-do and aristocratic family whom he has memorialized with wit and affection in his 1974 novel, *At God's Pleasure* (he likes to mention an ancestor who defended Louis XIV's disgraced minister Fouquet, saving the latter's head if not his great château, Vaux-le-Vicomte); was the director of the center-right newspaper *Le Figaro* and a prolific novelist and journalist; and, since 1973, has been a member of the Académie française—despite all this, d'Ormesson's autobiographical writings are filled with blithe references to his intellectual shortcomings. "I was, alas, an excellent mediocrity," he laments apropos of his school days; "my life was a little bit useless, like my writing," he comments somewhere else. Above all, he claims to be chagrined by his failure to master the "queen of sciences." "Like a man who can possess every woman with the exception of the one he wants, I did a little history, a little German, a little French, but only philosophy, which wouldn't have me, fascinated me."

D'Ormesson has surely been too hard on himself. To be sure, many of the pleasures provided by *The Glory of the Empire* are those afforded by popular literature and popular history both: In and of itself, the "history" that d'Ormesson invents, filled with all the high drama, grand gestures, and memorable characters you get in everyone from Herodotus to Arnold Toynbee, makes for a gripping page-turner. And yet, forty-five years after its first publication, what strikes you about *The Glory of the Empire* is what you could call its philosophical dimension: a clear-eyed vision of history and the pitfalls of writing history that a thinker of more strident ideological and intellectual pretensions might never have achieved.

That the author was "good in history" is abundantly clear in the tale of his fictional empire, which, with its ambitious princes and conniving queen

mothers, pitched battles and labyrinthine negotiations, great savants and sleekly treacherous favorites, improbable victories and cataclysmic defeats, will remind readers of the histories of so many empires: Byzantium above all (a choice that suggests no little sophistication on the author's part; Rome would have been the more obvious choice) but also Periclean Athens, Egypt during the New Kingdom, Rome, Mesopotamia and Persia, Alexander the Great's continent-spanning hybrid dominion, and the bossy mercantile realms of Phoenicia, Venice, and Holland.

The Empire, like so many others, begins in the dim mists of legend—this one about two warring brothers who founded two perpetually warring cities, one called Onessa, its symbol the Eagle and its ruling family the Venostae, and the other called, simply, “the City,” symbolized by the Tiger and ruled by a clan with the Byzantine-ish name of Porphyry. Eventually, inevitably, the two are united to become the foundation of a great nation, which, through a combination of warfare and diplomacy (as with the Roman Empire), expands to include much of the known world. This paradigmatic pattern of imperial metastasis is presided over by a series of colorful chieftains, generals, kings, and overlords (and their ladies, wives, mothers, and concubines), culminating in the great emperor Alexis of the Porphyries, the exemplar of all monarchs and the principal hero of d’Ormesson’s grand narrative.

The gripping tale of the Empire’s rise—to say nothing of the religion, social customs, art, and architecture with which d’Ormesson has endowed his fictional realm—often produces an amusing tingle of déjà vu. There is, for instance, a dash of the declining Athens in the City (“liberty and luxury verged on vice and weakness”) and a soupçon of Sparta in hardscrabble Onessa. (“Virtue [shared] the throne with cruelty and caprice.”) Pomposa, the suave mercantile rival to those two main city-states, is a little bit of Venice with some Corinth, Tyre, and Amsterdam thrown in. The language of the Empire is, as at Byzantium, Greek, a choice that allows the author to gleefully coin a number of Greek-ish names, including those of a gaggle of philosophers called Hermenides, Philontes, and Paraclitus. As Rome’s Virgil did, the chief poet of the Empire, Valerius, composes a great verse epic about the founding of the nation (*The Birth of the Empire*) whose most dramatic episode is an ill-fated encounter between the founding hero and a doomed lady love.

The effect of d’Ormesson’s witty riffs on real history is sometimes that of having passed through the looking glass into a parallel, fun-house universe in which familiar elements reappear in distorted form. In *The Glory of the Empire*, for instance, Rome is a burned-out star, eerily recognizable but not quite the one we know:

Rome had really only one resource left, though it was an important one: this was the high priest, at the same time ruler and prince, who bore the illustrious title of archpatriarch. A great builder of temples and bridges, he was the link between heaven and earth, the incarnation here below of the supernatural forces that made—and unmade—kingdoms. Everything in this world depended on him. . . . He ruled not by force, but by trust, persuasion, reverential fear. He disposed of men and events not because he had an army, but because he knew words. . . . He was above kings and princes, even when they rebelled against his strange magnificence and his mysterious prestige.

This “Rome,” you realize after a moment, is not the Roman Empire but something rather more like the Catholic Church, the pope here transformed into that “archpatriarch” but otherwise largely recognizable, at least with respect to his historical role. (The clue—a wink on d’Ormesson’s part—is the phrase “A great builder of . . . bridges”: the real-life pope’s title, *pontifex*, means “bridge builder” in Latin.)

D’Ormesson populates his invented geography with figures who are also likely to remind readers of characters they have already encountered from literature or history—or both. The Venostae prince who becomes the empire-builder Basil the Great—crude but brilliant, stout and one-eyed—is an avatar of the Macedonian king Philip II, the rough-edged but visionary father of Alexander the Great. An ambitious queen consort named Theodora, who, we are told, began life as a temple prostitute, pointedly recalls the real-life sixth-century Byzantine empress Theodora, a low-born woman who is said to have specialized, during her louche early years, in performing reenactments of the mythic Leda’s rape by a swan. The fierce and nomadic Oighurs, ruled by leaders known as Kha-Khans and always a

factor in the elaborate strategic calculations of both the City and Onessa, suggest at once the Scythians who harassed the Assyrians and Persians, and the Pechenegs who, centuries later, devastated the Byzantines.

D'Ormesson's magpie approach to his sources is most evident in his portrait of the great emperor Alexis, an idealized conflation of real historical figures and notable types from literature and mythology. On the one hand, Alexis recalls the apostate Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaton (he is an avid sun worshipper); has the famous longing attributed by ancient historians to Alexander the Great ("In everything he felt a yearning to go further"); is an epileptic, like Julius Caesar; and features the virtues of a number of the "good" Roman emperors, notably Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius. (He is, we are told, a "moralist and philosopher.") On the other hand, he is a Prince Hal type, whose debauched youth—his sexual antics as a libertine in Alexandria, the anonymous historian who is the ostensible narrator of *The Glory of the Empire* informs us, earned him a place in erotic history ("They appear as 'Alexis Positions I, II, III, IV, V, and VI' in the famous classifications of erotic positions established by Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and Kinsey")—yields first to a period of monastic withdrawal and, afterward, to a dignified manhood. An everyman figure, in other words, whose progress is ultimately a universal one. (Well, almost: At one point Alexis goes into seclusion in order to study—what else?—history, "so dreadful and so marvelous.")

If Alexis is a little too good to be true, d'Ormesson is well aware of it. Like many a historical figure who has been mythologized over time, the Empire's greatest ruler is "first and foremost the symbol and reflection of our own hopes and dreams." This is just one of a series of provocative asides about the way in which the yearning for a well-shaped narrative rich in comforting meaning ("fiction") can impinge on how we view the events of past ("history")—a dynamic of no little significance for novelists and historians both.

The novel's exploration of the relationship between fact and fantasy is nowhere more provocative—or exhilarating—than in one particular technique d'Ormesson uses to lend a deadpan verisimilitude to his grandiose

fiction: his brilliantly erudite and witty interweaving of the Empire's story into the fabric of real-world history and culture. "Naturally," the narrator drones on at one point, "it would be impossible to get an accurate impression of the role and place of Alexis without rereading Cervantes, Shakespeare, Goethe, Chateaubriand, and especially Dante."

A splendid example of this technique, on which the persuasive power of d'Ormesson's novel rests and which gives it, too, a rare quality of intellectual delight, is the way in which the author invents a dense cultural history for a fabled love affair between two characters from the early history of the Empire: Heloise, a haughty princess of the decadent City's royal line, and Arsaphes, the "barbarian" warrior who falls in love with and eventually wins her affections, thereby infusing the old elite with vigorous new blood. (Another familiar motif from history.) How does d'Ormesson make this "famous" amour feel real to his reader? He begins by blithely inserting his fictional lovers into a catalog of notorious romantic pairs, most of whom readers will be familiar with:

History offers several examples of famous couples in which the woman is worthy of the man and vies with him in nobility: Ahasuerus and Esther, Alexis and Theodora, Hero and Leander, the other Heloise and Abelard, Justinian and the other Theodora. But none of their stories outdoes that of Arsaphes and Heloise.

Two of these five couples are invented: Heloise and Arsaphes, the subjects of this passage, and Alexis and his consort, Theodora. (Note how the real-life Theodora here becomes "the other Theodora," just as Abelard's real-life lover becomes "the other Heloise.") D'Ormesson then goes on to enumerate the great works of world literature that, we are assured, have treated the "famous" love of Arsaphes and Heloise. Like many a fiction based on the past, the narrator of the Empire's history asserts, the literary masterpieces about Arsaphes and Heloise tell us less about history "than about the preoccupations of the dramatists and their audiences: in Polyphilus, the role of fate and the gods; in Corneille, the struggle between honor and passion; in Anouilh, the dignity of rejection." Polyphilus is an invented character, a

Sophocles-like playwright from the heyday of the Empire; but Corneille and Anouilh are, of course, real, as authentic as the thematic preoccupations attributed to them here. (D'Ormesson also likes to insert his fictional characters into actual literary works: "Dante . . . gives [Alexis] a place . . . at the bottom of the Malebolge . . .")

D'Ormesson pushes his joke about the literary afterlife of Heloise and Arsaphes even further, by having his narrator go on to focus in detail on one of the masterworks based on the love of his invented couple: a tragedy by Pierre Corneille entitled *Arsaphe et Héloïse*. The premiere of this play, we are told, was a total disaster, which "marked the final fall from favor of the aging poet. Madame de Sévigné and Saint-Simon, the one with emotion, the other with cold disdain, both refer to the play's hopeless failure." After quoting at length (and very amusingly: d'Ormesson is a brilliant mimic) from Madame de Sévigné's letter decrying the play's failure ("I am in despair and have been weeping like a fool since yesterday . . . I am enamored of *Arsaphes and Heloise* and want everything to yield to the genius of Corneille") and from the duc de Saint-Simon's florid diary entry concerning the fiasco ("M. le Prince told Monseigneur, who again told Mme. de Saint-Simon . . . that most people, that is to say the fools, had condemned the play"), d'Ormesson produces his pièce de résistance: an excerpt from *Arsaphe et Héloïse* itself, from which *The Glory of the Empire* then proceeds to quote at length in French. In order to allow readers of the English translation access to the pleasures of d'Ormesson's masterful pastiche of Corneille, his translator, Barbara Bray, "quotes" instead from what we are told was the "famous rephrasing" of Corneille's lines by the English poet and playwright John Dryden:

HELOISE

I begged, sir, that you'd speak with me no more,
 Your presence mines a courage weak before.
 That converse which should be the soul's delight
 Can only worsen Eloisa's plight.
 And if she suffers, how is it with you?
 What pain's the less for being one of two?

...

ARSAPHES

Let all die with me, madam. What care I
Whose footsteps tread the earth wherein I lie?

This excerpt will suggest both the delicious wit of d’Ormesson’s original and the ingenuity of Bray’s English translation, which never fails to find ways to carry over even the most complex of d’Ormesson’s cultural in-jokes.

But as the story of the Empire moves forward, it becomes clear that history and historiography themselves are the true subjects of d’Ormesson’s amused and amusing fantasy. For the author of *The Glory of the Empire* has invented not only the Empire but its history and historians, present in a vast apparatus of scholarship that, we are to believe, has grown up about it since ancient times.

Here again, the author has slyly inserted the Empire and its history into mainstream European intellectual history (“Gibbon’s *Rise of the Empire* remains the best study of the Empire’s origins”); here again, his prodigious learning makes for entertaining pastiches of real authors. The historians he riffs are both ancient—there are many quotations from an antique multi-volume history of the Empire by a figure called Justus Dion, who is strongly reminiscent of the third century AD historian Cassius Dio, the author of an eighty-volume history of Rome—and modern, from Arnold Toynbee to Michel Foucault. D’Ormesson has a particularly good eye for stylistic foibles: He gets just right the orotund periods of certain nineteenth-century historians (“But that twisted body housed a will of iron”; “a dazzling beauty as virtuous as she was fair”), to say nothing of the excesses of contemporary academic historians. His jabs at the effortfully playful titles of articles and lectures that were all the rage during the 1960s are particularly funny. (One article from an anthropological journal, cited in a note about a favorite of Alexis’s called Jester—both the article and the journal are, naturally, invented—is called “Jester, Trickster, Hamster.”) There are, too, amusing swipes at the pretensions of certain national schools of history,

each with its own well-known prejudices and predilections, and at the personal foibles of historians, whose private agendas, d'Ormesson knows, sometimes masquerade as scholarly interest. The author hits both targets in a single, memorably amusing footnote about an early monarch and his high priest: "The theory that there was some emotional, and even homosexual, relationship between Basil and Thaumias has been vigorously maintained, especially in England and the United States. See Algernon Queen, *The Sexual Background of a Historic Friendship* (Oxford University Press, 1954)..."

The hall-of-mirrors effect produced by d'Ormesson's interweaving of the real and the invented is deliciously—and pointedly—disorienting. A description of the emperor Alexis's ascetic seclusion in the East before his assumption of the throne, for instance, contains a footnote referencing a work (which the author has invented) by the real twentieth-century French historian Roger Caillois:

Roger Caillois, in *Le Mythe et l'homme* [Myth and Man]... speaks of the period of "occultation" or eclipse that the hero always goes through prior to his time of trial and eventual triumph.... As examples he gives Dionysus at Nysa... Oedipus before he met the Sphinx... Vautrin in prison, and, in real life, Alexis's retirement to the East.

We are meant to believe that Caillois has formulated his notion about "occultation" based on readings of myth, literature, and "real" history such as that of the emperor Alexis; but of course, it is d'Ormesson's reading of Caillois and other historians and scholars that has allowed him to give Alexis and his story a shape that is persuasive precisely because it adheres to traditional narrative contours first detected by those scholars—for instance, the idea of a "period of 'occultation.'" It comes as no surprise that Jorge Luis Borges makes an appearance in the pages of *The Glory of the Empire* as well as in its epigraph (his "Lottery in Babylon," we are told, was inspired by an episode in Alexis's life). There is more than a little of Borges in the dizzying play between the real and the unreal that characterizes d'Ormesson's novel about history.

Indeed, although the richness of d'Ormesson's faux-historical narrative and the amusing ingenuity of the techniques by which he makes it seem real would be enough to make *The Glory of the Empire* tremendously entertaining, a more serious point lies behind the narrative gamesmanship. Early in his account of the Empire's history, d'Ormesson's narrator observes that every historical fact, every object of anthropological and sociological study, can be used to suit the purposes and interests of historians:

For a long time the history of the Empire was confined to anecdotes, genealogies of princes, roll calls of priests and victors at the games, and lists of battles and peace treaties. Bossuet reads in it the finger of God, Voltaire the struggle between man's folly and the slow rise of reason. Its welter of color and crime provided romanticism with a favorite occasion for the resurrection of the past. It was not until the arrival of the modern school that historians began to perceive, beneath the pomp and the blood and the hymns, both the everyday life of the common people and the often complicated system of rites and beliefs that governed it. Then the wave of interest in ordinary existence, in the preoccupations of classes so long ignored . . . was replaced by a new phase of broad theoretical visions, comprehensive systems, total interpretations. One after the other, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and structuralism each inspired important works of sociology, cultural anthropology, comparative religion, linguistics, and semiotics, while at the same time researchers tirelessly sought for man and his workaday cares beneath the brilliant trappings of camp and court life. And so each day brought a further descent into the depths of concrete existence and a further ascent toward the heights of abstraction.

Here d'Ormesson the erstwhile student of history and self-declared mediocrity offers what is, in fact, a deep truth: that, as his narrator observes in the book's final pages, "no historian does anything but give birth to his own universe." Which is to say, all historians are, in a way, also novelists: telling the stories they find interesting in the way that suits their tastes, predilections, and personalities. This aperçu reaches an amusingly self-

reflexive climax at the end of the book, where the author refers to “the greatest of the historians of the Empire”—himself, the novelist.

To its bracing insights about historiography *The Glory of the Empire* adds a point about the nature of history. As you make your way through the long and tortured tale of the Empire’s emergence, through the minute descriptions of its religion and culture, its conveniently complementary schools of philosophy, one vaguely Eastern, the other Western (“The first maintained that the universe was immaterial like air and fire, that it was infinite . . . the second declared that the world was like earth and water, that it was finite”), the art and architecture that are a little bit of everything, Greek and Roman and Byzantine and Italian but also Levantine and Asian, the great emperor who is at once a libertine and an ascetic, a warrior and a sage, the chronologies that juxtapose events from history both ancient and modern, the rises that are, as the narrator keeps insisting, simultaneously falls (“Hardly was the City born, hardly had it begun to shine in the history of maritime powers and merchant republics, than it began to die”), it is hard not to feel that the history of the Empire, alive though it might be with copious and irresistible particulars, is, in the end, the history of everything: at once a mega-history and a meta-history, packing into the story of this one fictional civilization the stories of every civilization, every monarch, every religion, every work of art, every conspiracy, every triumph, every defeat that ever was.

For one thing history makes clear is that, whatever the variables, human nature never changes. That, in the end, is the true subject of all real histories, as it is of d’Ormesson’s fictional one. At a certain point in his early memoir, d’Ormesson suggests that his (no doubt exaggerated) sense of his mediocrity, his weary condemnation of a “vain ambition in the service of nothing,” has at least had the advantage of making him alert to the pretensions of others—making him suspicious of “conviction itself.” (“I don’t much like when people believe overmuch in what they say.”) This world-weariness leads him, in turn, to a perception of the nature of History, which, he says, inevitably excites a certain “cynicism”:

We have seen only that doctrines, institutions, empires, and churches crumble only to reconstitute themselves in new avatars:

rebels become bourgeois, anarchists fall into line, revolutionaries grow rich, fascists convert, the signatories of manifestos turn around and join the enemy, the adversaries of order and institutions go tramping around, on Thursdays, along the banks of the Seine . . .

“It is,” d’Ormesson writes at the end of this catalog, “the total movement which is truth.”

Because the total movement never changes, because history is, in the end, a vast “web which never alters despite an infinite range of motifs and variations,” d’Ormesson’s book—which, for all its lush narrative and intellectual pleasures, is not in the end without a certain philosophical dimension—can illuminate that truth as delightfully and provocatively today as it did four decades ago. “How clear the designs of history,” his narrator exclaims at one point, “all ready to be inscribed in books . . .” Indeed. As I write this, the armies of Europe are preparing to do battle with a caliphate; Jerusalem holds both violence and the sacred in a tight embrace; demagogic leaders of large democracies are reassuring edgy citizens with racist and xenophobic tirades. One has no need of a Barbara Bray to translate the phrase that, in the end, sums up the perception about the shape of history’s “design” that animates this playfully provocative and ultimately profound novel: *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.*

—DANIEL MENDELSON

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