

Julian

Gore Vidal

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Historical narrative is often confusing. It involves a compendium of bare events, chronicling victories and defeats, in a seemingly random manner, constituting a veritable Brownian motion with no sense or overriding purpose. Thus it is hard to get engaged, hence hard to retain anything in memory, as each event devoid of arresting details and inherent drama, becomes just another fleeting abstraction. On the other hand, if you read a narrative, say in the form of a novel, with human interest and drama, set within the framework of a particular historical period, you feel the need to also read a factual account, just to get the sequence right. That sequence is of course just a short segment of the random Brownian motion of historical events you may otherwise just read about and acknowledge, but with a proper story, it now becomes concrete, part of the way the world happened to be, and thus significant.

Gibbons treatise on the sustained decline and fall of the Roman Empire, is in spite of its arresting language, often just long tedious stretches of transportation, when the fortunes and misfortunes of succeeding generals and emperors are being dutifully relayed. The names of people involved, are just but names, devoid of flesh, and thus why should you care?

Thus when alerted to the fact that Gore Vidal once wrote a novel on the Roman Emperor Julian, I jumped at the opportunity to get some flesh on the bones, to see at least one short period of the prolonged Roman history in arresting detail, and hence be able to read Gibbon with greater understanding and motivation. I must admit that the novels of Graves, potboiling efforts notwithstanding, were able to supply me with an engaging narrative bringing the dry facts of the early Roman emperors to life. After having finished those two volumes, I was sorry that he had not extended his project, at least in order to include the story of Nero, the most notorious of them all. Vidals effort, no doubt inspired by Graves may at least compensate for what Graves never deigned to do.

An author writing a historical novel puts himself into a straight-jacket. It is true that history gives him a plot, and a ready-made plot usually saves the author from the work of construction and sets him free to exercise his imagination. But there is a difference between a mere theme on one hand and historical contingencies on the other, unless the author, like the case of Shakespeare, only makes history into an excuse ready to be malleable to the inner contingencies of an evolving story. Vidal on the other hand sees his work as one of interpolation, not one of extrapolation. Thus it is imperative that historical facts should be respected and not subject to wilful deformation. Thus the writer is less swept by a story than checked by it, and his task reduces to one of ornamentation, not entirely unlike that of a child presented with a coloring book. The problem that faces Vidal is that the palette at his disposal is very limited. We simply do not know very much of the mundane everyday life of the period, because most of it was never deemed worthy of documentation. This means that he is unable to breath the kind of life only

the telling detail can transmit, because he would rather be caught dead than transport his own experience and be ridiculed as an anachronist. A fairy-tale skims this particular problem, because fairy-tales are abstract and thus universal over time; but a novel has other ambitions than that of a tale, its ambition is to present a slice of life. Secondly he has a hard time to bring the characters to life. It is true that Julian appears as a very sympathetic emperor, whether this was true or not is up for speculation, but given the competition it may seem not to be hard, on the other hand given the temptations of power, it may be considered a miracle. On the other hand Vidal is objective enough also to show Julians intermittent shortcomings. Still, just as in the case of the everyday detail, we know very little of the inner lives of people living a millenium and a half ago, and although their memoirs may be provide some guidance, they are necessarily written in a particular style, that although transparent to contemporaries, remains opaque to us. Thus it is hard not to accuse his characters of being American actors, donning the necessary garments and provided with the appropriate props, yet only playing at, rather than actually being.

Still the novel provides some interesting ideas. The most startling being to put the emerging Christian religion on par with its contemporary pagan ones, and thus muddling the distinction between primitive paganism and an enlightened Christianity transcending its time. To everyone brought up in a Christian tradition, regardless of being a believer or not, this appears inevitably somewhat shocking. The shock can of course be refreshing and stimulating, or down-right offensive, depending on your point of view. Also towards the end of the novel, the campaign into Persia makes it finally to take off ground. While Vidal never was able to instil in the narrative a tangible sense of presence, while describing Julians campaigns defending the Gallic provinces, Persia on the other hand presents an intriguing otherness with its deserts and oasis, splendid palaces and gardens and its extensive network of irrigation canals. Persia, an independant entity on the Roman border, never conquered, nor subjugated, constitute a mystery, an ancient bridge between the West and the East.

Returning to Gibbon, one gets the facts straight, or rather confirms that Vidal did so, and in fact used it as his frame, on which his elaborations were indeed limited. I find also in Gibbon the haunting Persian presence, thus nothing added by Vidal, but only imported wholesale.

Still the perusing of an extended novel, by dint of hours committed, also does fix in memory what otherwise would have been missed. It does make a difference between flashing by through a country or reducing the pace, although essentially the same things are being presented to the passive eye.

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