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A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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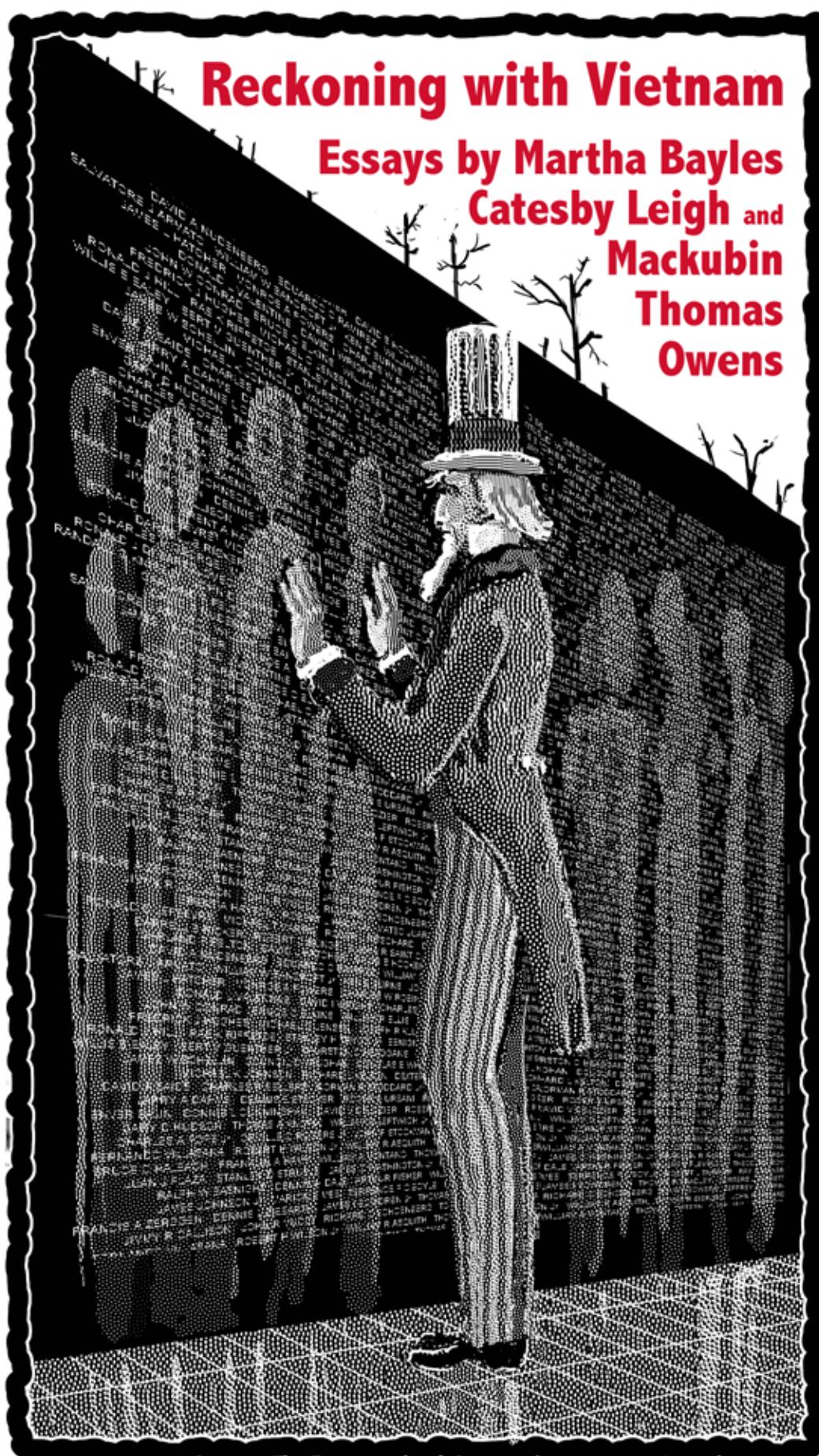
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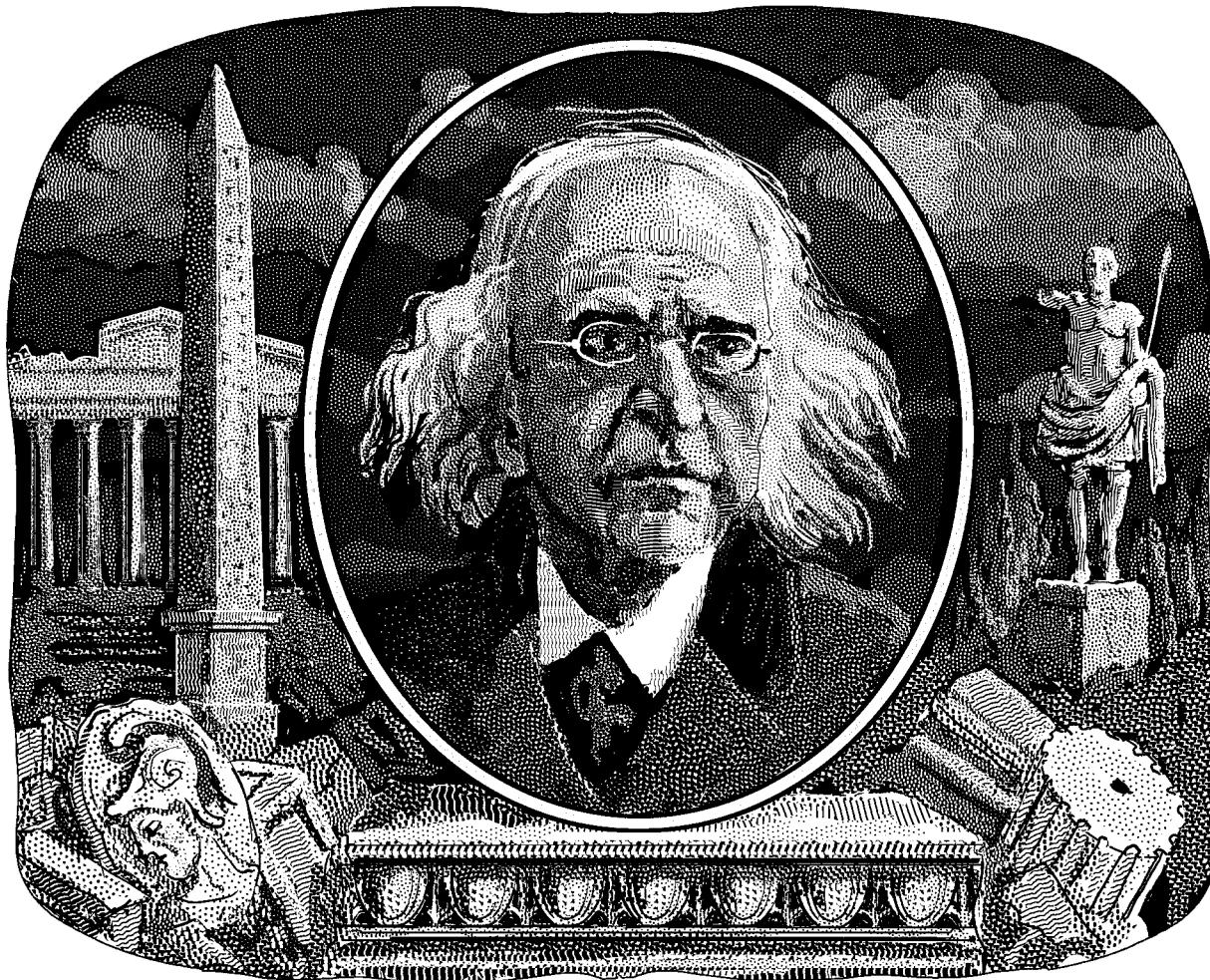
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Essay by Joseph Epstein

HAIL, MOMMSEN



THEODOR MOMMSEN'S FAME DURING his lifetime was such that it earned the awe of even so skeptical an observer as Mark Twain. In one of his newsletters to America, Twain, while in Berlin, describes attending a student dinner when Mommsen arrived in the hall. Twain writes:

Then there was an excited whisper at our table—"Mommsen!"—and the whole house rose. Rose and shouted and stamped and clapped, and banged the beer mugs.... Here he was, clothed in a Titanic deceptive modesty which made him look like other men. Here he was, carrying the Roman world and all the Caesars in his hospitable skull, and doing it as easily as that other luminous vault, the skull of the universe, carries the Milky Way and the constellations.

After earning a doctorate in Roman law, Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903) became a

professor of law and of Roman history, serving for a time in the Prussian and German parliaments. His most significant work of pure scholarship was his editing of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, a multi-volume collection of all the Roman inscriptions found on material objects, an editorial enterprise that was the foundation of modern epigraphy (the study and interpretation of ancient inscriptions). But Mommsen's fingerprints are all over the study of Roman history, from Roman law to the Church Fathers, and more. His bibliography runs to more than a thousand items. In a too brief biographical article the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* calls Mommsen "one of the greatest of the 19th century German classical historians," cites his uniting in his work "jurisprudence and history, philology and archeology," and ends by noting that "he achieved an unequalled grasp of the totality of history." In what must have been his highly limited leisure, Mommsen also fathered 16 children.

His great general work was his three-volume *History of Rome*, running from the putative beginning of Rome in 753 B.C. to the victory of Julius Caesar over his adversaries in 48 B.C. A planned fourth volume on the Roman emperors was never completed. Some say Mommsen failed to complete it because he feared he could never rival Edward Gibbon, whom he much admired and who set his indelible stamp on this portion of Roman history; others because Mommsen felt himself depressed, in his words, by the "leaden dreariness" and "empty desert" of the Roman emperors after the grandeur of the Roman Republic. Mommsen also claimed that, at this stage in his life, he preferred research to writing. He did, nevertheless, publish a fifth volume, *The Provinces of the Roman Empire from Caesar to Diocletian*. Another volume, *The Roman Emperors*, composed out of student notes from his lectures on the subject, was published in English in 1992.

Mommsen won the Nobel Prize in 1902, not for History, in which no prize is awarded,



but for Literature. Despite the nearly scientific scrupulosity with which he wrote history, Mommsen could not have been in the least disappointed to have his work honored for its literary value. Early in *The Provinces of the Roman Empire*, he wrote that imagination "is the author of all history as of all poetry." By aligning the two, history and poetry, he surely meant that documents, inscriptions, accurate chronology alone are never sufficient in themselves to explain the past. Imagination is required to connect the dots, fill in the background, limn the characters of key actors, discover and reveal complex motivation, grasp larger movements.

All these things Mommsen did consummately, always with certain knowledge that a complete picture was never fully available to the historian. He would have subscribed to Lewis Namier's aphorism that "we study history so that we can learn how things didn't happen." Mommsen's work is studded with disclaimers: "cannot be determined"; "we cannot tell"; "conjectures that wear an aspect of probability"; "the information that has come to us gives no satisfactory answer"; "like a distant evening twilight in which outlines disappear"; "our information regarding it comes to us like the sound of bells from a town that has been sunk into the sea."

Daring Summaries

MOMMSEN WAS AMONG THAT SMALL but select line of historians, including David Hume, Edward Gibbon, and Thomas Babington Macaulay, known, in Gibbon's phrase, as philosophic. These historians are philosophic in the sense of being interested in human nature as it plays itself out on the ample fields of political and military affairs, of culture and economics; for them history is centered as much in character as in event. Owing to this interest in human nature and the character of great men (mostly) and women, they themselves have found a prominent and well-deserved place not merely in historiography but in literature.

Ambitious, even risky, generalization attracted them all. Thus Mommsen describes Roman religion—with "the peculiar character at once of shallowness and of fervor," its augurs and Vestal Virgins, yet in which "oracles and prophecy never acquired the importance in Italy which they obtained in Greece"—as a religion better "fitted rather to stifle than to foster artistic and speculative views." But this same religion, he recognizes, lent its imprimatur to the moral nature of Roman law. "At the very core of the Latin religion there lay that profound moral impulse which leads men to bring earthly

guilt and earthly punishment into relation with the world of the gods, and to view the former as a crime against the gods, and the latter as its expiation."

After comparing Roman and Greek religion, he writes:

It is time therefore to desist from that childish view of history which believes that it can commend the Greeks only at the expense of the Romans, or the Romans only at the expense of the Greeks; and, as we allow the oak to hold its own beside the rose, so we should abstain from praising or censuring the two noblest organizations which antiquity has produced, and commend the truth that their distinctive excellences have a connection with their respective defects.

Of course it is against the Greeks that the Romans, in Mommsen and elsewhere, are inevitably compared. "Hellas is the prototype of purely human," he notes in his first volume, "Latium is not less for all time the prototype of national development." Only the Latin Romans attained national unity and ultimately empire, which they commanded for centuries, while the Greeks, endlessly quarrelsome among themselves, could not adhere as a nation apart from such times of national peril as the Persian Wars. "In Latium," Mommsen writes, "no other influences were powerful in public and private life but prudence, riches, and strength; it was reserved for the Hellenes to feel the blissful ascendancy of beauty."

Inward art, Mommsen held, was not available to the Romans. For the Romans art was always of subordinate importance, the artist himself scarcely above the artisan in status. Science—physics and mathematics—were little studied in Rome. "For centuries," Mommsen reports, "there were none but Greek physicians in Rome," and the most sought after teachers tended to be Greeks. He writes: "The Italian is deficient in the passion of the heart, and in the longing to idealize what is human and to give life to things of the inanimate world, which form the very essence of poetic art." In the realm of art, Romans seemed to respond best to irony, comedy, and farce, and consequently did without their own Homer, Euripides, or Phidias.

Yet it was Rome that, as Mommsen wrote, "pursued her purpose with undeviating steadfastness, and displayed her energetic far-reaching policy—more even than on the battlefield—in securing the territory which she gained by enveloping it, politically and

militarily, in a net whose meshes could not be broken." The old saying had it that "If Rome conquered Greece, the Greeks vanquished her rude conqueror by art." Yet, as Mommsen wrote toward the close of his second volume, "Rome was, what Greece was not, a state," and it was because the community, the state, was always primary in Rome, the individual secondary.

As for that state, Mommsen writes:

[T]he imperial period marks a climax of good government, very modest in itself, but never withal attained before or since; and, if an angel of the Lord were to strike the balance whether the domain ruled by Severus Antoninus was governed with the greater intelligence and the greater humanity at that time or in the present day, whether civilisation and national prosperity generally have since that time advanced or retrograded, it is very doubtful whether the decision would prove in favour of the present.

Mommsen's talent for arresting aphorism plays throughout his *History*. A sampler: "To continue an injustice is to commit injustice." "The world, however, belongs not to reason but to passion." "In ancient times it was necessary to be either anvil or hammer." "History has a Nemesis for every sin—for an impotent craving after freedom, as well as for an injudicious generosity." "Political orthodoxy knows nothing of compromise and conciliation." This talent is all the more extraordinary for Mommsen's having written his *History* as a young man (by today's standard); his third volume was published in 1856 before he was 40.

Greatness and Fate

MOMMSEN THE BRILLIANT HISTORICAL portraitist doesn't fully emerge until his pages on the Punic Wars in the 3rd century B.C. First, though, he fills in the background by noting that "the policy of the Romans was always more remarkable for tenacity, cunning, and consistency than for grandeur of conception or power of organization." In Rome, as elsewhere, grandeur of conception, the plans of "wiser, more resolute, and more devoted men...always find themselves hampered by the indolent and cowardly mass of the money-worshippers, of the aged and feeble, and of the thoughtless who are minded merely to gain time, to live and die in peace, and to postpone at any price the final struggle."

Wiser, more resolute, more devoted men do from time to time arise, and in the Punic Wars



notable among them were the two great generals, Hannibal and Publius Cornelius Scipio (later Africanus). Both men are rendered in *The History of Rome* with an admirable artistic distance and detachment. Of Hannibal, Mommsen writes that "every page of the history of the period attests his genius as a general," and "the power which he wielded over men is shown by his incomparable control over an army of various nations and many tongues—an army which never in the worst times mutinied against him. He was a great man; wherever he went, he riveted the eyes of all."

The modern military historian B.H. Liddell Hart awarded the highest possible marks to Scipio Africanus, placing him, as a strategist and tactician, above Alexander, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, and all other military commanders, and staking out the additional claim that he was a man of the highest personal character. Mommsen is less charitably disposed: "But Publius Scipio also, although setting the fashion to the nobility in arrogance, title-hunting, and client-making, sought support for his personal and almost dynastic policy of opposition to the senate in the multitude, which he not only charmed by the dazzling effect of his personal qualities, but also bribed by his largesses of grain... [and] only the dreamy mysticism, on which the charm as well as the weakness of that remarkable man so largely depended... allowed him to awake" others to his belief that among all Romans he was the *primus inter pares*, and this by a long stretch.

The fates, as Mommsen understood, are not cowed by greatness, real or assumed. Hannibal was "constrained at last to remain a mere spectator while Rome overpowered the East as the tempest overpowers the ship that has no one at the helm, and to feel that he alone was the pilot that could have weathered the storm." When Hannibal died in 183 B.C. "there was left to him no further hope to be disappointed." Scipio Africanus' final act was scarcely more rewarding. Earlier Mommsen writes that the senate (the "somewhat boorish fathers of the city") was put off by "his Greek refinement and his modern culture and tone of thought." Even after his impressive military victories, "he too spent his last years in bitter vexation, and died when little more than fifty years of age in voluntary banishment, leaving orders to his relatives not to bury his remains in the city for which he had lived and in which his ancestors reposed." Hannibal and Scipio were two exemplars of Solon's admonition never to say you have had a fortunate life until you have breathed your last.

Some of the liveliest pages in Mommsen are those that end each of his volumes on the

manners and arts of the Romans at different stages in their history. Played against these are those devoted to Roman violence and cruelty. The latter may have set in with the advent of what Mommsen calls "the detestable amusement of gladiatorial combats—the gangrene of the later Rome and of the last epoch of antiquity generally." He recounts the sale at one go, from the seven townships in the Epirus, of no fewer than 150,000 slaves, the largest slave sale in recorded history. The Greeks, he reminds us, treated their slaves as servants, the Romans as property, with all that implies of the savagery implicit in the Latin word *dominus*. Mommsen writes that "it is very possible that, compared with the sufferings of the Roman slaves, the sum of all Negro suffering is but a drop."

Under the rule of Sulla (81 B.C.), Mommsen notes that "the times of mercy were past." The hands of entire male populations of captured towns were sometimes chopped off, women and children sold into slavery. Before

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Sulla the city of Corinth was captured, its male population put to death, all its women and children sold into slavery, the city itself burned, an act Mommsen describes as "a dark stain on the annals of Rome." Corruption was ubiquitous. More imagination was spent on torture than on the arts, and not in Rome alone. When Mithradates captured the Roman general Aquillius in 88 B.C. "molten gold was poured down his throat—in order to satiate his avarice," an act, Mommsen writes, that "alone suffices to erase the name of its author from the roll of true nobility."

Major Players

THE CAVALCADE OF MAJOR PLAYERS in the drama of Rome march past in Mommsen's pages: the Brothers Graachi (Tiberius and Gaius), Marius, Sulla, Marcus Livius Drusus, and lesser figures, the acts of each assessed, their strengths and weaknesses recounted. The endless struggle between senate and people, the *optimates* (aristocrats) and the *populares* (populists),

plays out. Honorable patriotism struggles against short-sighted selfishness, with the former nearly always going down in defeat. Great careers are no longer founded on action in battle but in the Roman equivalent of backroom dealings, or "the ante-chambers of influential men." Soon the Roman army itself will change from a citizen to a professional army. Extravagance—in dining, concubinage, displays of vulgar opulence—is rampant. Mommsen records the story of the Roman aristocrat "who cried over the death of his favorite fish but not over the death of three wives."

Of the ancient historians, Mommsen is high on Plutarch (A.D. 46-120), "one of the most charming, most fully informed, and withal most effective writers of antiquity." Others may have greater depth or stronger talent, "but hardly any second author has known in so happy a measure how to reconcile himself serenely to necessity, and how to impress upon his writings the stamp of his tranquility of spirit and his blessedness of life." Of Tacitus, Mommsen says little, referring to him chiefly in footnotes, where, among other comments, he is critical of his account of the Roman war in Britain. ("A worse narrative than that of Tacitus concerning the war, Ann. Xiv. 31-39, is hardly to be found even in this most unmilitary of all authors.") Later he remarks that Tacitus' "pen was frequently driven by hatred." Livy gets scant mention.

Polybius (200-118 B.C.), like Plutarch a Greek, is the historian who gets the highest marks. Present at the destruction of Corinth and Carthage, he seemed educated, Mommsen writes, "by destiny to comprehend the historical position of Rome more clearly than the Romans of that day could themselves." Mommsen is not without criticisms of Polybius: his treatment of questions "in which right, honor, religion are involved, is not merely shallow, but radically false." His narrative is "correct and clear, but flat and languid, digressing with undue frequency into polemical discussions or into biographical, not seldom very self-sufficient, description of his own experiences." Yet Mommsen closes his pages on Polybius on this high note:

Polybius is not an attractive author; but as truth and truthfulness are of more value than all the ornament and elegance, no other author of antiquity perhaps can be named to whom we are indebted for so much real instruction. His books are like the sun in the field of Roman history; at the point where they begin the veil of mist which still envelops the Samnite and Pyrrhic wars is

raised, and at the point where they end a new and, if possible, still more vexatious twilight begins.

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 B.C.), the first known intellectual in politics, is thoroughly trashed in *The History of Rome*. He is characterized by Mommsen as “notoriously a political trimmer,” “a dabbler,” without “conviction and passion,” and later a coward. “As a statesman without insight, opinion, or purpose, he figured successively as democrat, as aristocrat, and as a tool of the monarchs, and was never more than a short-sighted egotist.” Cicero the writer is shown even less sympathy: “In the character of an author, on the other hand, he stands quite as low as in that of a statesman.” Mommsen writes that Cicero’s correspondence “mirrors most faithfully his character,” which is to say that, “where the writer is thrown back on his own resources...it is stale and empty as was ever the soul of a feuilletonist banished from his familiar circles.” His dialogues “are no great works of art, but undoubtedly they are the works in which the excellences of the author are most, and his faults least, conspicuous.” As for Cicero the great orator, “if there is anything wonderful in the case, it is in truth not the orations, but the admiration which they excited.” That admiration was extinguished by the generation that followed, who “found Cicero’s language deficient in precision and chasteness, his jests deficient in liveliness, his arrangement deficient in clearness and articulate division, and above all his whole eloquence wanting in the fire which makes the orator.” So damaging was Mommsen’s attack on Cicero’s reputation that, according to Anthony Grafton, it did not fully recover until the 20th century.

Mommsen can kill a historical figure with a single sentence. Marcus Aemilius Lepidus he calls “an insignificant and indiscreet

personage, who did not deserve to become a leader either in council or in the field.” The counsel Servius Sulpicius Rufus, was “a very timid man who desired nothing but a quiet death in his bed.” Marcus Cato he calls “the Don Quixote of the aristocrats.” Gnaeus Pompeius, known to his contemporaries as Pompey the Great, was, in Mommsen’s view, far from great: “neither a bad nor an incapable man, but a man thoroughly ordinary, created by nature to be a good sergeant, called by circumstances to be a general and a statesman.”

Master of the World

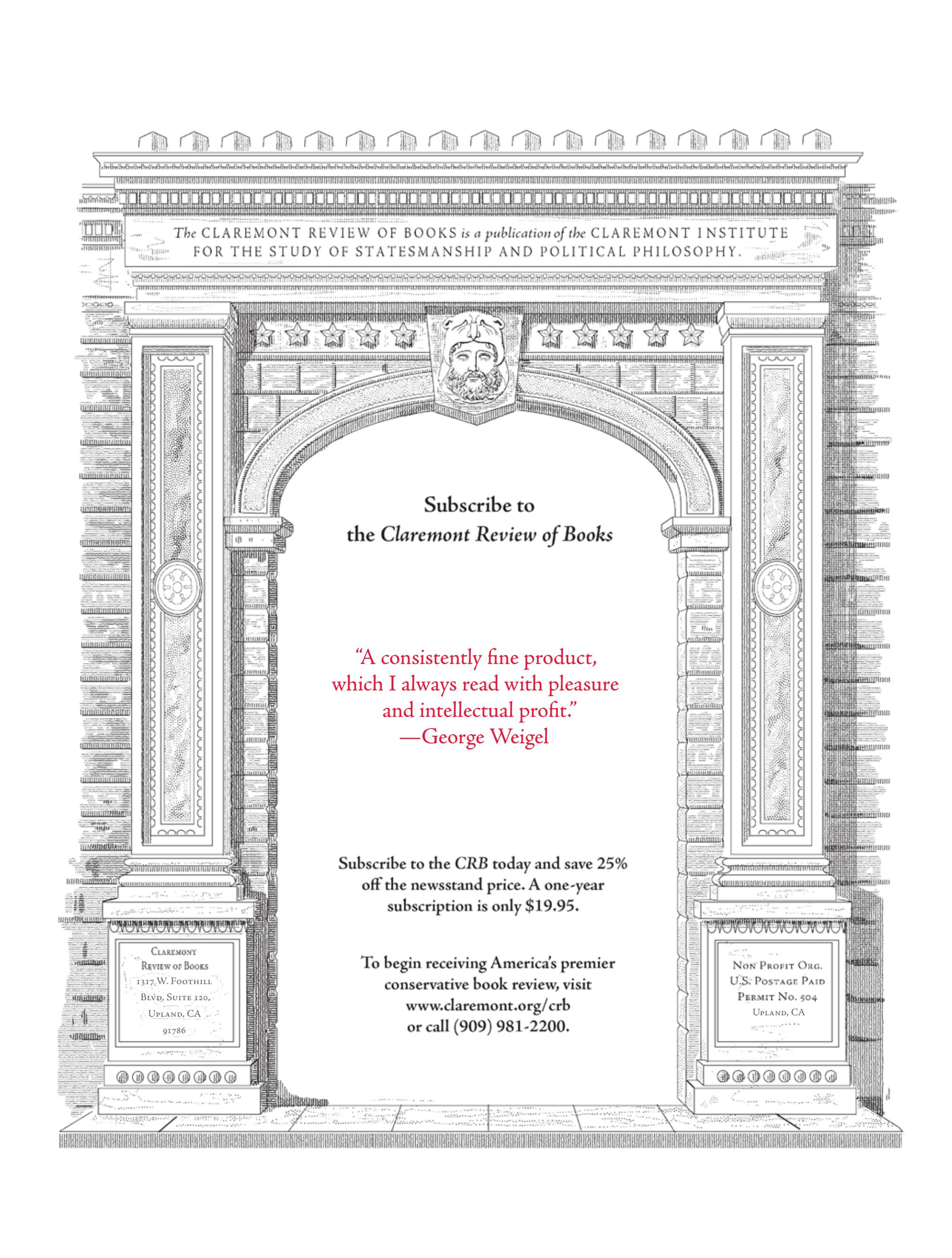
GIVEN MOMMSEN’S HYPER-CRITICAL views of the pretensions of Roman leaders, one is brought up by his—it is not going too far to say—adoration of Julius Caesar. This is the Caesar whose masterly command of his army transferred to it “his own elasticity,” but in whom “the officer was thoroughly subordinate to the statesman.” This Caesar “was monarch; but he never played the king,” a man “who finished whatever he took in hand.” He was “the sole creative genius produced by Rome, and the last produced by the ancient world, which accordingly moved on in the track that he had set out for it until its sun had set.” His was “a nature so harmoniously organized [that if] there is any one trait to be singled out as characteristic it is this—that he stood apart from all ideology and everything fanciful. As a matter of course Caesar was a man of passion, for without passion there is no genius; but his passion was never stronger than he could control.” He was no less than “a master of the world.”

The oddity of this is that, as Mommsen acknowledges, Julius Caesar put paid to the end of the Roman Republic, which at its best the historian much admired. But Mommsen thought the era of the Republic had ended,

and that the future belonged to the empire of Caesar. When queried about whether the American Founders had given the people a monarchy or a republic, Benjamin Franklin famously replied, “A republic, if you can keep it.” The Romans couldn’t keep theirs, though it had a good run, lasting more than 500 years throughout Italy and in the countries on the Mediterranean. Through Mommsen’s magisterial prose, we see “it brought to ruin in politics and morals, religion and literature, not through outward violence, but through inward decay, thereby making room for the new monarchy of Caesar.” Rome under the monarchy lived on another 300 or so years, until finally eroded and undermined by the departure of the Emperor Constantine to Byzantium and the subsequent spread of Christianity.

“It is true,” Mommsen wrote, “that the history of past centuries ought to be the instructress of the present; but...it is instructive only so far as the earlier forms of culture reveals the organic conditions of civilization generally—the fundamental forces everywhere alike, and the manner of their combination everywhere different—and leads and encourages men, not to unreflecting imitation, but to independent reproduction.” In his *History of Rome* Theodor Mommsen brings the past strikingly to life. If its lessons for the present may be limited, through its author’s vivid eye we, his readers, nevertheless achieve glints of freshened understanding of the intricate relation between event and character, and a renewed sense of how richly fascinating the world is and always has been.

Joseph Epstein is an essayist, short story writer, and a contributing editor for the Weekly Standard. His most recent books are Frozen in Time: Twenty Stories (Taylor Trade Publishing) and Wind Sprints: Shorter Essays (Axios Press).



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