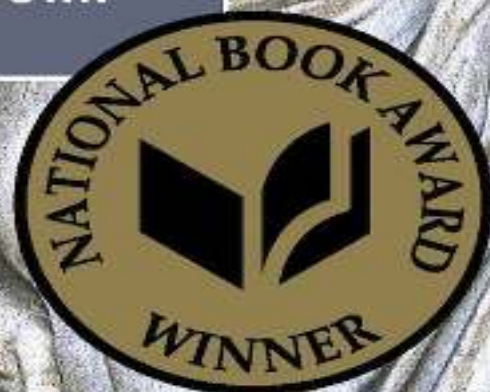




AUGUSTUS
JOHN WILLIAMS

INTRODUCTION BY
DANIEL MENDELSON



JOHN WILLIAMS (1922–1994) was born and raised in northeast Texas. Despite a talent for writing and acting, Williams flunked out of a local junior college after his first year. He reluctantly joined the war effort, enlisting in the Army Air Corps, and managed to write a draft of his first novel while there. Once home, Williams found a small publisher for the novel and enrolled at the University of Denver where he was eventually to receive both his B.A. and M.A., and where he was to return as an instructor in 1954. He remained on the staff of the creative writing program at the University of Denver until his retirement in 1985. During these years, he was an active guest lecturer and writer, editing an anthology of English Renaissance poetry and publishing two volumes of his own poems, as well as three novels, *Butcher's Crossing*, *Stoner*, and the National Book Award—winning *Augustus* (also published as NYRB Classics).

DANIEL MENDELSON was born in 1960 and studied classics at the University of Virginia and Princeton, where he received his doctorate. His essays and reviews appear regularly in *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Times Book Review*. His books include *The Loss of a Virgin*, *A Search for Six of Six Million*; a memoir, *The Elusive Embrace*; and the collection *Waiting for the Barbarians: Essays from the Classics to Pop Culture*, published by New York Review Books. He teaches at Bard College.

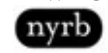
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INTRODUCTION

Compared to John Williams's earlier novels, *Augustus*—the last work to be published by the author, poet, and professor, whose once-neglected *Stoner* has become an international literary sensation in recent years—can seem like an oddity. For one thing, it was the only one of his four novels to win significant acclaim during his lifetime: Published in 1972, *Augustus* won the National Book Award for best fiction in the following year. (Williams was born in Texas in 1922 and died in Arkansas in 1994, after a thirty-year career teaching English and creative writing at the University of Denver.) More important, the novel's subject—the eventful life and history-changing career of the first emperor of Rome—seems impossibly remote from the distinctly American preoccupations of the author's other mature works, with their modest protagonists and pared-down narratives. *Butcher's Crossing* (1960) is the story of a young Bostonian who, besotted with Emersonian transcendentalism, goes west in 1873 to explore the “wilderness” where, he believes, “the central meaning he could find in all his life” lies; there he participates in a savage buffalo hunt that suggests the costs of the American dream. *Stoner* (1965) traces the obscure and, to all appearances, unsuccessful life of an assistant professor of English at the University of Missouri in the early and middle years of the last century—a man of desperate and humble origins who sees the Academy as an “asylum,” a place where he finds at last “the kind of security and warmth that he should have been able to feel as a child in his home.” (Williams later repudiated his first novel, *Nothing But the Night*, published in 1948, about a dandy with psychological problems.)

It would be difficult to find a figure ostensibly less like these idealistic and, ultimately, disillusioned minor figures than the real-life world leader known to history as Augustus—a man whose many and elaborate names, given and taken, augmented and elaborated, acquired and discarded over the eight decades of his tumultuous and grandiose life stand in almost comic contrast to the simple disyllables Williams gave those two other protagonists. Both, as readers will notice, share the creator's name—William Andrews, William Stoner: a coincidence that makes it almost impossible not to seek some element of autobiography in the early novels.

No such temptation exists in the case of *Augustus*. The emperor who gave his lofty name to a political and literary era was born Gaius Octavius Thurinus in 63 BC, the year in which the statesman Cicero foiled an aristocrat's attempt to overthrow the Roman Republic (a system of government which Augustus himself would administer the coup de grâce three decades later). The offspring of one Gaius Octavius, a well-to-do knight of plebeian family origins, he was raised in the provinces about twenty-five miles from Rome. While still a teenager, the sickly but clever and ambitious young man sufficiently impressed his maternal great-uncle Julius Caesar to be adopted by him; he was thereafter known as Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus (“Octavian”).

In 44 BC, following Caesar's assassination and his subsequent deification by decree of the Senate, the canny nineteen-year-old, eager to capitalize on his dead relative's prestige and thereby enhance his standing with Caesar's veterans, referred to himself as Gaius Julius Caesar Divi Filius (“Son of the Divine”). By the time he was twenty-five, having avenged Caesar's murder by vanquishing Brutus and Cassius at Philippi, the new Gaius Julius Caesar had shrewdly maneuvered himself to the center of power in the Roman world as one of three military dictators, or “triumvirs.” (Another was Mark Antony, with whom he would eventually quarrel.) At this point the “Gaius” and “Julius” disappeared to be replaced by “Imperator”: a military title used by troops to acclaim successful leaders, and the root of the English word “emperor.”

Within another decade this Imperator Caesar Divi Filius had successfully wrested absolute control

of the vast Roman dominions from his one remaining rival, Antony, whom he defeated at Actium in 31 BC and who committed suicide a year later, along with his paramour, Cleopatra. (As the emperor gave the order to murder Cleopatra's teenaged son Caesarion—a potential rival, since the youth's father had been Julius Caesar himself—he remarked that “too many Caesars is no good thing.” Master of the world at thirty-three, he then set about consolidating his power, craftily legitimating his autocratic rule under the forms of traditional republican law, and establishing the legal, political, and cultural foundations for empire that would persist, in one form or another, for the next fifteen centuries. And, indeed, beyond: The current structure of the Roman Catholic Church derives directly from Augustus's political creation.

One title that this astonishingly adept figure never used was *rex*, “king”—a word much loathed by the Romans, some of whom killed his great-uncle partly out of fear that he wanted to be one. Shrewdly, the master of the world referred to himself as *princeps*, “first citizen.” In 27 BC, ostensibly in gratitude to the new Caesar for ending a century of civil bloodshed and establishing political stability at home and abroad, the Roman Senate voted him an unprecedented additional title that had suggestive religious associations: *augustus*, “the one who is to be venerated.” It is the name by which he has come to be known by history—one that bore no resemblance whatsoever to the one he was born with.

No resemblance to his former self: It is here that the hidden kinship between *Augustus* and its two predecessors lies. A strong theme in Williams's work is the way that, over time, our sense of who we are can be irrevocably altered by circumstance and accident. In his *Augustus* novel, Williams took great pains to see past the glittering historical pageant and focus on the elusive man himself, one who more than most, had to evolve new selves in order to prevail. The surprise of his final novel is that its famous protagonist turns out to be no different in the end from this author's other disappointed heroes—which is to say, neither better nor worse than most of us. The concerns of this spectacular historical saga are intimate and deeply humane.

The life of the first emperor is an ideal vehicle for a historical novel, a genre that is most successful when scholarly adherence to the known facts is balanced by imaginative insights into character and motivation. Augustus is a figure about whom we know at once a great deal and very little, and who therefore invites both description and invention.

The biographies and gossip, recording and conjecturing began in the emperor's own lifetime. One work, the ancient equivalent of an authorized biography, was composed by a contemporary of Augustus's who appears as a character in Williams's novel: the philosopher and historian Nicolaus of Damascus, whose CV included a stint as tutor to the children of Antony and Cleopatra. The emperor himself composed an official autobiography, the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (“Deeds Accomplished by the Divine Augustus”), clearly intended as a form of political propaganda: Inscribed on bronze tablets affixed to the portals of his mausoleum, it was reproduced in inscriptions throughout the empire.

If we are to believe Tacitus, writing a century after Augustus's reign, the obscurity of the emperor's nature and motives was already a subject of discussion among his contemporaries. In his *Annals*, the historian paraphrases a debate that took place at the time of the emperor's death, at the age of seventy-six, in 14 AD:

Some said “that he was forced into to civil war—which one can neither plan nor execute on upstanding moral principles—by the duty owed to a father [i.e., Julius Caesar], and by the necessities imposed by the state, in which at the time the rule of law had no place . . . and that there was no other remedy for a country at war with itself than to be ruled by one man. The state he founded went by the name of neither a kingdom nor a dictatorship, but of a principate [a state

presided over by a 'first citizen'] . . . there was law for the citizens and due respect shown to the allies; the capital was made magnificent by his embellishments; only in rare instances did he use force, and then only to effect a larger stability.”

And yet:

It was said, on the other hand, “that duty toward a father and the exigencies of state were merely put on as a mask: it was in fact from a lust for domination that he had stirred up the veterans by bribery, had, while still a very young man, raised a private army, tampered with the Consul’s legions . . . he wrested the consulate from a reluctant Senate and turned the arms that had been entrusted to him for a war with Antony against the republic itself. Citizens were proscribed and lands divided . . . Undoubtedly there was peace after all this, but it was a peace that dripped blood.”

The emperor may, indeed, have cultivated a certain opacity as a means of maintaining control: if his nature and motives were hard to guess, so too would his actions be. Small wonder that his official seal was the enigmatic, riddling Sphinx.

How to write about such a figure? In *Augustus*, the question is slyly put in the mouth of the Nicolaus who was commissioned to write the First Citizen’s biography. “Do you see what I mean,” the confounded scholar writes after a meeting with Augustus, whose notorious prudence he cannot reconcile with an equally notorious penchant for gambling. “There is so much that is not said. I almost believe that the form has not been devised that will let me say what I need to say.” This is an in-joke on Williams’s part: The form Nicolaus dreams of—which is of course the one Williams ended up using—is the epistolary novel, a genre that wasn’t invented until fifteen centuries after Augustus when Diego de San Pedro wrote *Prison of Love* (1485), generally regarded as the first example of the genre. And yet its roots go right back to Augustus’s reign: The Roman poet Ovid—also a character in *Augustus*, providing gossipy updates on the doings of the imperial court—composed a work called *Heroides* (“Heroines”), a sequence of verse epistles by mythical women to their lovers. (The world’s litterateur’s taste for gossip ultimately doomed him: It’s likely that his involvement in a scandal involving the emperor’s family was the cause of his exile to a bleak settlement on the Black Sea.)

The epistolary form, so long associated with romantic subjects, is in fact ideally suited to Williams’s project. The portrait his novel creates, refracted through not only (invented) letters but also journal entries, senatorial decrees, military orders, private notes, and unfinished histories, is once satisfyingly complex and appropriately impressionistic, subjective. (In his choice of genre Williams was undoubtedly influenced by Thornton Wilder’s 1948 novel *The Ides of March*: In it, the events leading up to the assassination of Julius Caesar are presented through fictional letters and documents that are intermixed with citations of actual works by real-life figures, such as the poet Catullus, a contemporary and acquaintance of Caesar, and the first-century AD historian Suetonius. In *Augustus*, the authors of the invented epistles and documents are, with very few exceptions, real-life characters, and Williams, who was impatient with historical fiction that merely “updated” the past, clearly relished the opportunity to impersonate some well-known figures. He was determined, he wrote in a note while working on *Augustus*, “not [to] have Henry Kissinger in a toga.”

Here, then, is the wit and also the preening of Cicero, the orator who, despite his opposition to Julius Caesar, was allied at one point with the young Octavian, whom at first he dangerously underestimates. (“The boy is nothing, and we need have no fear . . . I have been kind to him in the past, and I believe that he admires me . . . I am too much the idealist, I know—even my dearest friends do not deny that.”) Here too is the worldly Ovid, his report to his friend Propertius on a day at the

faces in the emperor's box nicely filigreed with self-conscious poeticisms. "The sun was beginning struggle up from the east through the forest of buildings that is Rome . . ."

Even those figures who left few traces of their writing style appear fully fleshed and, as far as the historical record permits us to know, true to life. Maecenas, the canny, well-born patron of the arts and intimate of Horace, Vergil, and Augustus—who ridiculed his friend's effete writing style—is presented as an aesthete whose fussing ("much has been said about those eyes, more often than not bad meter and worse prose") conceals a nice hint of steel; it is hard to imagine the emperor suffering lightweights gladly. Augustus's ambitious third wife, Livia, mother of his eventual successor Tiberius, comes across as coolly pragmatic and no more excessively conniving than most of the people around her: a far more persuasive character than the Grand Guignol poisoner of Robert Graves's *I, Claudius*. ("Our futures are more important than ourselves," Williams's Livia matter-of-factly writes her son, demanding that he divorce his beloved wife in order to enter into a dynastic match with Augustus's daughter, Julia, whom he loathes.) And Williams invents excerpts from a now-lost memoir by Marcus Agrippa—Augustus's great friend from youth, the author of his military victories, his eventual son-in-law, and the father to his heirs—to give the tersely prosaic, "official" version of events: "And after the triumvirate was formed and the Roman enemies of Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus were put down, there yet remained in the West the forces of the pirate Sextus Pompeius, and in the East the exiled murderers of the divine Julius . . ." (Williams knows how to deploy the persuasive stylistic tic: to Agrippa he gives the habit of beginning his sentences with "and.") A possible criticism of the earlier novels is that the author occasionally works so hard to make the writing "beautiful" that it sometimes works against believability; in particular, Andrews's *Butcher's Crossing* often expresses himself in a high style at odds with his callow youth. The ventriloquism imposed by *Augustus's* epistolary form saves Williams from this vice. It is his most rigorous work.

One particularly shrewd choice he made in writing *Augustus* was the decision to withhold the emperor's own voice until the end, where we get to hear it at last in a long (again: fictional) letter from Augustus to Nicolaus of Damascus, which constitutes the novel's third and final section. Not surprisingly, the emperor's account of his past doesn't square with many of the suppositions and speculations that have preceded it. For instance, it now emerges that what a friend had understood to be the young Octavian's cry of grief and confusion on hearing the news of Caesar's assassination was—at least as the aged emperor would now have his correspondent believe—an expression of "nothing . . . coldness," followed by a feeling of triumph: "I was suddenly elated . . . I knew my destiny." As to underscore the unbridgeable distance between what is perceived and what is true, between the official and unofficial, public and private narratives of our own lives, Williams intersperses the climactic fictional mini-autobiography with italicized excerpts of the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*. Where does the truth of a life lie? For Williams, whose interest not merely in history but in historiography—the study of how history gets written—distinguishes this novel, the question is rich with irony. After reading Nicolaus's authorized biography (and reflecting on his own official autobiography) Williams's Augustus wryly comments that "when I read those books and wrote my words, I read and wrote of a man who bore my name but a man whom I hardly know."

To the shrewd historical novelist, the challenge posed by that unknowability is also an advantage. Like the best works of historical fiction about the classical world—Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Wilder's *The Ides of March*, Graves's *Claudius* novels, Mary Renault's evocation of fifth-century Athens in *The Last of the Wine*—*Augustus* suggests the past without presuming to re-create it.

For to have attempted simply to re-create the past would have left no room for the serious literary concern at the heart of *Augustus* and the author's other works. In a 1985 interview, Williams described

what he saw as the common theme of both *Stoner* and *Augustus*: “I was dealing with governance both instances, and individual responsibilities, and enmities and friendship . . . Except in scale, the machinations for power are about the same in a university as in the Roman Empire . . .” The effect of power (and of struggles for power) on individuals is, in fact, a theme of the episode in *Augustus* that first captured Williams’s imagination and would set the novel in motion. Not long after the publication of *Butcher’s Crossing*, the author first heard the story of the devastating scandal that had rocked both the empire and the imperial family: In 2 BC the emperor was forced to exile his beloved daughter and only child, Julia, to a tiny island called Pandateria. One of the charges was adultery—violation of the strict morality laws her father had instituted as part of his campaign to renew old-fashioned Roman virtues in his new state. (By that point the emperor’s daughter, trapped in a hateful marriage to Tiberius, was notorious for her flagrant affairs.) Another was treason: There are strong indications that some of the men whom she took as lovers were part of a faction opposed to Tiberius’s succession.

In this tale of a spirited woman whose passions brought her into disastrous conflict with her obligations, Williams perceived a compelling theme: what he called “the ambivalence between the public necessity and the private want or need.” It is one that his Julia, one of the novel’s subtlest and most arresting characters—intelligent, ironic, rebellious, worldly, philosophical—tartly comments upon in the Pandateria journal Williams invents for her. “It is odd to wait in a powerless world, where nothing matters. In the world from which I came, all was power; and everything mattered. One even loved for power; and the end of love became not its own joy, but the myriad joys of power.” It is no accident that *Augustus* falls into two main sections: the first recounts the emperor’s unlikely triumphant rise to power, whereas the second, anchored by Julia’s journal entries, maps the disintegration of his family and personal happiness, largely as the result of his machinations to perpetuate his power through ill-conceived dynastic marriages that eventually encourage factionalism and, most likely, murder. Which is to say, part one is about success in the public, political sphere and part two about failure in the private, emotional sphere—the latter being a potential cost, Williams suggests, of the former.

The conflict between individuals and institutions is a theme we can also see working in *Stoner*—the book, it’s worth remembering, that Williams wrote immediately after learning of the Julia story, the contours of which *Stoner*’s narrative to some extent inverts. For its thwarted hero repeatedly, stoically submerges his private wants to the obligations in which, as happens to us all, he has become enmeshed and which end up constituting his life. There is an unhappy marriage alleviated too briefly by an affair with a sympathetic graduate student; there is fatherhood. (Williams is particularly good on the tenderness of father-daughter relationships, both here and in *Augustus*.) And there is the middling career, delicately supported by a few cautious allies and open to threats from one or two enemies he has inevitably made in the course of things. A remarkable set piece of the novel is a scene that takes place during a Ph.D. oral examination at which Stoner tries to prevent an unprepared and cheating protégé of a rival professor from passing: He succeeds at first, but the rival becomes the head of the English department and thereafter works, on the whole successfully, to thwart Stoner’s career and happiness over many years. (In *Augustus*, a character called Salvidienus—a bosom friend of the emperor’s youth who ultimately betrayed him—observes that “every success uncovers difficulties that we have not foreseen, and every victory enlarges the magnitude of our possible defeat.”)

And yet Williams’s work cannot be reduced to a series of parables about individuals struggling with, and within, institutions. For one thing, to read *Stoner* as an academic genre novel, as many do—“novel of university life,” as the Irish novelist John McGahern admiringly wrote—is too limiting; it provides no room for the work’s subtle psychology and complex ethics. (Its one significant failure is the representation of Stoner’s harridan of a wife: Engineered to make Stoner miserable, she is f

nastier than she needs to be.) For another, such an approach can't account for *Butcher's Crossing*, which the strictures of society and its institutions are almost wholly absent; it is, if anything, the absence that creates some of the dreadful outcomes in that novel, which charts the characters' descent during and after the buffalo hunt, into a pre-civilized, asocial stupor ("their food and their sleep were the only things that had much meaning for them").

The theme at play in all three of John Williams's mature novels is in fact rather larger: it is that, as Stoner puts it to the mistress he must abandon for the sake of his family and his job, "we are of this world, after all." All of Williams's work is preoccupied by the way in which, whatever our character may be, the lives we end up with are the often unexpected products of the friction between us and the world itself—whether that world is nature or culture, the deceptively Edenic expanses of the Colorado Territory or the narrow halls of a state university, the carnage of a buffalo hunt or the proscriptions of the Roman Senate, a dirt farm in Missouri or the opulent courts of Antioch and Alexandria. At one point in *Augustus* a visitor to Rome asks Octavian's boyhood tutor what the young leader is like, and the elderly Greek sage replies, "He is a man like any other. . . . He will become what he will become out of the force of his person and the accident of his fate."

An inescapable and sober conclusion of all three novels is that the friction between "force of person" and "accident of fate" becomes, more often than not, erosion: a process that can blur the image we had of who we are, revealing in its place a stranger. Just before Andrews leaves for the buffalo hunt, a kindly whore he wants but cannot bring himself to bed—his loss of innocence will take another form, during and after the hunt—warns the soft-skinned and handsome young man that he will change and harden. This prophecy comes quite literally true at the height of the slaughter of the buffalo: "in the darkness Andrews ran his hand over his face; it was rough and strange to his touch. . . . he wondered how he looked; he wondered if Francine would recognize him if she could see him now." Similarly, Stoner understands at the end of his life that whatever his ideals may have been, they have yielded to chance and necessity, which made him other to what he had hoped: "He had dreamed of a kind of integrity, of a kind of purity that was entire; he had found compromise and the assaulting diversion of triviality. He had conceived wisdom, and at the end of the long years he had found ignorance. And what else? he thought. What else?"

So too Williams's *Augustus*, whose many names, the last one sharing no common element with the first, reflect with particular vividness the processes of unexpected evolution and irreversible erosion so fascinating to this author. In *Augustus*'s concluding letter to Nicolaus, Stoner's word "triviality" tellingly reappears, as the dying emperor ruefully becomes aware of "the triviality into which our lives have finally descended." What occasions this thought is *Augustus*'s weary realization that the peace and stability for which he has long struggled may not, after all, be what the Roman, or indeed any, nation wants: "The possibility has occurred to me that the proper condition of man, which is to say that condition in which he is most admirable, may not be that prosperity, peace, and harmony which I labored to give to Rome." He has founded his empire, in other words, on a misconception.

This painful concluding irony is typical of Williams. It bears a strong resemblance, for instance, to the awful end of *Butcher's Crossing*, when the buffalo hunters return at last to civilization after the slaughter only to find that, during the months of their absence, the bottom has dropped out of the market for buffalo hides—which means that all their labor, all the slaughter, the deprivations and sacrifices have been in vain. In *Augustus*, the irony is painfully underscored in a brief coda that takes the form of the last of the many documents the author so imaginatively invents: a letter written forty years after the emperor's death by the now elderly Greek physician who had attended him on his deathbed. The letter is addressed to the courtier and philosopher Seneca, and in it the writer, having weathered the reigns of the cruel Tiberius and the mad Caligula, celebrates the advent of a new emperor who "will at last fulfill the dream of Octavius Caesar." That emperor is Nero.

And yet Williams didn't see his heroes as failures; nor should we. In the long interview he gave a few years before his death, he remarked that he thought Stoner was "a real hero":

A lot of people who have read the novel think that Stoner had such a sad and bad life. I think he had a very good life. He had a better life than most people do, certainly. He was doing what he wanted to do, he had some feeling for what he was doing, he had some sense of the importance of the job he was doing. He was a witness to values that are important . . . You've got to keep the faith.

"Keep the faith": These characters may have grown away from the selves they thought they would be but what they come to understand is that the lives they have made *are* "themselves"—the dwelling they must inhabit, and must find the courage to inhabit alone. This knowledge is tragic, but not necessarily sad. At the end of the affair that threatens the modest (and largely frustrated) life he has painstakingly, confusedly created, William Stoner gently tells his lover, Katherine, that at least they haven't compromised themselves: "we have come out of this, at least, with ourselves. We know that we are—what we are." William Andrews returns from the buffalo hunt dimly aware that his dream of oneness with Nature was a glib fantasy, and that the lessons he took away from his encounter with the wild were different from the ones he imagined he'd be learning—the latter being the "fancy lies" of a younger, seasoned partner contemptuously dismisses: "there's nothing. . . . You get born, and you nurse on lies, and you get weaned on lies, and you learn fancier lies in school . . . and then maybe when you're ready to die, it comes to you—that there's nothing, nothing but yourself and what you could have done." As with Greek tragedies, both novels expose the process by which "what you could have done" is gradually stripped away from a character, leaving only what he did do—which is to say, the residue that is "yourself." It comes as no surprise to learn that Williams had considered using a quotation from the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset as an epigraph for *Stoner*: "A hero is one who wants to be himself."

In the last pages of Williams's final novel the Emperor Caesar Divi Filius Augustus becomes the deeper kind of hero. Here, finally, he stoically embraces the truth that Will Andrews's colleague sourly complained about: that to confront one's self, stripped of pretense and illusion, is the climax to which every life inevitably leads, however great or humble. "I have come to believe that in the life of every man, late or soon, there is a moment when he knows beyond whatever else he might understand and whether he can articulate the knowledge or not, the terrifying fact that he is alone, and separated and that he can be no other than the poor thing that is himself." This is the conclusion to which many good biographies and some of the best works of fiction also lead. "The poor thing that is himself" is hardly the way that most of us would think about the first Roman emperor. It is the achievement of Williams's novel that we are able to do so by its end, and to think of that end as a satisfying one.

—DANIEL MENDELSON

AUTHOR'S NOTE

It is recorded that a famous Latin historian declared he would have made Pompey win the battle of Pharsalia had the effective turn of a sentence required it. Though I have not allowed myself such liberty, some of the errors of fact in this book are deliberate. I have changed the order of several events; I have invented where the record is incomplete or uncertain; and I have given identities to a few characters whom history has failed to mention. I have sometimes modernized place names and Roman nomenclature, but I have not done so in all instances, preferring certain resonances to mechanical consistency. With a few exceptions, the documents that constitute this novel are of my own invention—I have paraphrased several sentences from the letters of Cicero, I have stolen brief passages from *The Acts of Augustus*, and I have lifted a fragment from a lost book of Livy's *History* preserved by Seneca the Elder.

But if there are truths in this work, they are the truths of fiction rather than of history. I shall be grateful to those readers who will take it as it is intended—a work of the imagination.

I should like to thank The Rockefeller Foundation for a grant that enabled me to travel and begin this novel; Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, for affording me a period of leisure in which to continue it; and the University of Denver for a sometimes bemused but kind understanding which allowed me to complete it.

PROLOGUE

Letter: Julius Caesar to Atia (45 B.C.)

Send the boy to Apollonia.

I begin abruptly, my dear niece, so that you will at once be disarmed, and so that whatever resistance you might raise will be too quick and flimsy for the force of my persuasions.

Your son left my camp at Carthage in good health; you will see him in Rome within the week. I have instructed my men to give him a leisurely journey, so that you might have this letter before his arrival.

Even now, you will have started to raise objections that seem to you to have some weight—you are a mother and a Julian, and thus doubly stubborn. I suspect I know what your objections will be; you have spoken of these matters before. You would raise the issue of his uncertain health—though you will know shortly that Gaius Octavius returns from his campaign with me in Spain more healthy than when he began it. You would question the care he might receive abroad—though a little thought should persuade you that the doctors in Apollonia are more capable of attending his ills than are the perfumed quacks in Rome. I have six legions of soldiers in and around Macedonia; and soldiers must be in good health, though senators may die and the world shall have lost little. And the Macedonian coastal weather is at least as mild as the Roman.

You are a good mother, Atia, but you have that affliction of hard morality and strictness which has sometimes disturbed our line. You must loosen your reins a little and let your son become in fact the man that he is in law. He is nearly eighteen, and you remember the portents at his birth—portents which, as you are aware, I have taken pains to augment.

You must understand the importance of the command with which I began this letter. His Greek is atrocious, and his rhetoric is weak; his philosophy is fair, but his knowledge of literature is eccentric to say the least. Are the tutors of Rome as slothful and careless as the citizens? In Apollonia he will read philosophy and improve his Greek with Athenodorus; he will enlarge his knowledge of literature and perfect his rhetoric with Apollodorus. I have already made the necessary arrangements.

Moreover, at his age he needs to be away from Rome; he is a youth of wealth, high station, and great beauty. If the admiration of the boys and girls does not corrupt him, the ambitions of the flatterers will. (You will notice how skillfully I touch that country morality of yours.) In an atmosphere that is Spartan and disciplined, he will spend his mornings with the most learned scholars of our day, perfecting the humane art of the mind; and he will spend his afternoons with the officers of my legions, perfecting that other art without which no man is complete.

You know something of my feeling for the boy and of my plans for him; he would be my son in the fact of the law, as he is in my heart, had not the adoption been blocked by that Marcus Antonius who dreams that he will succeed me and who maneuvers among my enemies as slyly as an elephant might lumber through the Temple of the Vestal Virgins. Your Gaius stands at my right hand; but if he is to remain safely there, and take on my powers, he must have the chance to learn my strengths. He cannot do this in Rome, for I have left the most important of those strengths in Macedonia—my legions, which next summer Gaius and I will lead against the Parthians or the Germans, and which we may also need against the treasons that rise out of Rome. . . . By the way, how *is* Marcius Philippus, who you are pleased to call your husband? He is so much a fool that I almost cherish him. Certainly I am grateful to him, for were he not so busily engaged in playing the fop in Rome and so amateurish in plotting against me with his friend Cicero, he might play at being stepfather to your son. At least you

late husband, however undistinguished his own family, had the good sense to father a son and to find advancement in the Julian name; now your present husband plots against me, and would destroy the name which is the only advantage over the world that he possesses. Yet I wish all my enemies were so inept. I should admire them less, but I would be safer.

I have asked Gaius to take with him to Apollonia two friends who fought with us in Spain and will return with him now to Rome—Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa and Quintus Salvidienus Rufus, both of whom you know—and another whom you do not know, one Gaius Cilnius Maecenas. Your husband will know at once that the latter is of an old Etruscan line with some tinge of royalty; that should please him, if nothing else about this does.

You will observe, my dear Atia, that at the beginning of this letter your uncle made it appear that you had a choice about the future of your son. Now Caesar must make it clear that you do not. I shall return to Rome within the month; and, as you may have heard rumored, I shall return as dictator for life, by a decree of the Senate that has not yet been made. I have, therefore, the power to appoint a commander of cavalry, who will be second in power only to me. This I have done; and as you may have surmised, it is your son whom I have appointed. The fact is accomplished, and it will not be changed. Thus, if either you or your husband should intervene, there will be upon your house a public wrath of such weight that beside it my private scandals will seem no heavier than a mouse.

I trust that your summer at Puteoli was a pleasant one, and that you are now back in the city for the season. Restless as I am, I long for Italy now. Perhaps when I return, and after my business is done in Rome, we may spend a few quiet days at Tivoli. You may even bring your husband, and Cicero, if he will come. Despite what I say, I am really very fond of them both. As I am, of course, of you.

I. The Memoirs of Marcus Agrippa: Fragments (13 B.C.)

. . . I was with him at Actium, when the sword struck fire from metal, and the blood of soldiers was awash on deck and stained the blue Ionian Sea, and the javelin whistled in the air, and the burning hulls hissed upon the water, and the day was loud with the screams of men whose flesh roasted in the armor they could not fling off; and earlier I was with him at Mutina, where that same Marcus Antonius overran our camp and the sword was thrust into the empty bed where Caesar Augustus had lain, and where we persevered and earned the first power that was to give us the world; and at Philippae where he traveled so ill he could not stand and yet made himself to be carried among his troops in a litter, and came near death again by the murderer of his father, and where he fought until the murderers of the mortal Julius, who became a god, were destroyed by their own hands.

I am Marcus Agrippa, sometimes called Vipsanius, tribune to the people and consul to the Senate, a soldier and general to the Empire of Rome, and friend of Gaius Octavius Caesar, now Augustus. I write these memories in the fiftieth year of my life so that posterity may record the time when Octavius discovered Rome bleeding in the jaws of faction, when Octavius Caesar slew the faction as a beast and removed the almost lifeless body, and when Augustus healed the wounds of Rome and made it whole again, to walk with vigor upon the boundaries of the world. Of this triumph I have, within my abilities, been a part; and of that part these memories will be a record, so that the historians of the ages may understand their wonder at Augustus and Rome.

Under the command of Caesar Augustus I performed several functions for the restoration of Rome for which duty Rome amply rewarded me. I was three times consul, once aedile and tribune, and twice governor of Syria; and twice I received the seal of the Sphinx from Augustus himself during his grave illnesses. Against Lucius Antonius at Perugia I led the victorious Roman legions, and against the Aquitanians at Gaul, and against the German tribes at the Rhine, for which service I refused a Triumph in Rome; and in Spain and Pannonia, too, were rebellious tribes and factions put down. By Augustus I was given title as commander in chief of our navy, and we saved our ships from the pirate Sextus Pompeius by our construction of the harbor west of the Bay of Naples, which ships later defeated and destroyed Pompeius at Mylae and Naulochus on the coast of Sicily; and for that action the Senate awarded me the naval crown. At Actium we defeated the traitor Marcus Antonius, and so restored life to the body of Rome.

In celebration of Rome's delivery from the Egyptian treason, I had erected the Temple now called the Pantheon and other public buildings. As chief administrator of the city under Augustus and the Senate, I had repaired the old aqueducts of the city and installed new ones, so that the citizens and populace of Rome might have water and be free of disease; and when peace came to Rome, I assisted in the survey and mapping of the world, begun during the dictatorship of Julius Caesar and made as last possible by his adopted son.

Of these things, I shall write more at length as these memories progress. But I must now tell of the time when these events were set into motion, the year after Julius Caesar's triumphant return from Spain, of which campaign Gaius Octavius and Salvidienus Rufus and I were members.

For I was with him at Apollonia when the news came of Caesar's death. . . .

II. Letter: Gaius Cilnius Maecenas to Titus Livius (13 B.C.)

You must forgive me, my dear Livy, for having so long delayed my reply. The usual complaint—~~retirement seems not to have improved the state of my health at all.~~ The doctors shake their heads wisely, mutter mysteriously, and collect their fees. Nothing seems to help—not the vile medicines I am fed, nor even the abstinence from those pleasures which (as you know) I once enjoyed. The gods have made it impossible for me to hold my pen in hand these last few days, though I know how diligently you pursue your work and what need you have of my assistance in the matter of which you have written me. And along with my other infirmities, I have for the past few weeks been afflicted by an insomnia, so that my days are spent in weariness and lassitude. But my friends do not desert me, and life stays; for those two things I must be grateful.

You ask me about the early days of my association with our Emperor. You ought to know that only three days ago he was good enough to visit my house, inquiring after my illnesses, and I felt it polite to inform him of your request. He smiled and asked me whether or not I felt it proper to aid such an unregenerate Republican as yourself; and then we fell to talking about the old days, as men who feel the encroachment of age will do. He remembers things—little things—even more vividly than those whose profession it has been to forget nothing. At last I asked him if he would prefer to have sent you his own account of that time. He looked away into the distance for a moment and smiled again, and said, “No—Emperors may let their memories lie even more readily than poets and historians.” He asked me to send you his warm regards, and gave me permission to write to you with whatever freedom I could find.

But what freedom can I find to speak to you of those days? We were young; and though Gaius Octavius, as he was called then, knew that he was favored by his destiny and that Julius Caesar intended his adoption, neither he nor I nor Marcus Agrippa nor Salvidienus Rufus, who were his friends, could truly imagine where we would be led. I do not have the freedom of the historian, my friend; you may recount the movements of men and armies, trace the intricate course of state intrigues, balance victories and defeats, relate births and deaths—and yet still be free, in the wide simplicity of your task, from the awful weight of a kind of knowledge that I cannot name but that grows more and more nearly apprehend as the years draw on. I know what you want; and you are no doubt impatient with me because I do not get on with it and give you the facts that you need. But you must remember that despite my services to the state, I am a poet, and incapable of approaching anything very directly.

It may surprise you to learn that I had not known Octavius until I met him at Brindisi, where I had been sent to join him and his group of friends on the way to Apollonia. The reasons for my being there remain obscure to me; it was through the intercession of Julius Caesar, I am sure. My father, Lucius, had once done Julius some service; and a few years before, he had visited us at our villa in Arezzo. He argued with him about something (I was, I believe, asserting the superiority of Callimachus’s poetry to Catullus’s), and I became arrogant, abusive, and (I thought) witty. I was very young. At any rate, he seemed amused by me, and we talked for some time. Two years later, he ordered my father to send me to Apollonia in the company of his nephew.

My friend, I must confess to you (though you may not use it) that I was in no profound way impressed with Octavius upon that occasion of our first meeting. I had just come down to Brindisi from Arezzo and after more than ten days of traveling, I was weary to the bone, filthy with the dust of the road, and irritable. I came upon them at the pier from which we were to embark. Agrippa and Salvidienus were talking together, and Octavius stood somewhat apart from them, gazing at a small ship that was anchored nearby. They had given no sign of noticing my approach. I said, somewhat loudly, I imagine: “I am the Maecenas who was to meet you here. Which of you is which?”

Agrippa and Salvidienus looked at me amusedly and gave me their names; Octavius did not turn, and thinking that I saw arrogance and disdain in his back, I said: “And you must be the other, who

they call Octavius.”

Then he turned, and I knew that I was foolish; for there was an almost desperate shyness on his face. He said: “Yes, I am Gaius Octavius. My uncle has spoken of you.” Then he smiled and offered me his hand and raised his eyes and looked at me for the first time.

As you know, much has been said about those eyes, more often than not in bad meter and worse prose; I think by now he must be sick of hearing the metaphors and whatnot describing them, though he may have been vain about them at one time. But they were, even then, extraordinarily clear and piercing and sharp—more blue than gray, perhaps, though one thought of light, not color. . . . Then you see? I have started doing it myself; I have been reading too many of my friends’ poems.

I may have stepped back a pace; I do not know. At any rate, I was startled, and so I looked away, and my eyes fell upon the ship at which Octavius had been gazing.

“Is that the scow that’s going to take us across?” I asked. I was feeling a little more cheerful. It was a small merchant ship, not more than fifty feet in length, with rotting timbers at the prow and patched sails. A stench rose from it.

Agrippa spoke to me. “We are told that it is the only one available.” He was smiling at me a little; I imagine that he thought me fastidious, for I was wearing my toga and had on several rings, while the others wore only tunics and carried no ornaments.

“The stench will be unendurable,” I said.

Octavius said gravely, “I believe it is going to Apollonia for a load of pickled fish.”

I was silent for a moment; and then I laughed, and we all laughed, and we were friends.

Perhaps we are wiser when we are young, though the philosopher would dispute with me. But I swear to you, we were friends from that moment onward; and that moment of foolish laughter was a bond stronger than anything that came between us later—victories or defeats, loyalties or betrayals, griefs or joys. But the days of youth go, and part of us goes with them, not to return.

Thus it was that we crossed to Apollonia, in a stinking fish-boat that groaned with the gentle wave, that listed so perilously to its side that we had to brace ourselves so that we would not tumble across the deck, and that carried us to a destiny we could not then imagine. . . .

I resume the writing of this letter after an interruption of two days; I shall not trouble you with detailing of the maladies that occasioned that interruption; it is all too depressing.

In any event, I have seen that I do not give you the kind of thing that will be of much use to you, so I have had my secretary go through some of my papers in search of matters more helpful to your task. You may remember that some ten years ago I spoke at the dedication of our friend Marcus Agrippa’s Temple of Venus and Mars, now popularly called the Pantheon. In the beginning I had the idea, later discarded, of doing a rather fanciful oration, almost a poem, if I may say so, which made some odd connections between the state of Rome as we had found it as young men and the state of Rome as the temple now represents it. At any rate, as an aid to my own solution to the problem that the form of the projected oration raised, I made some notes about those early days, which I now draw upon in an effort to aid you in the completion of your history of our world.

Picture, if you can, four youths (they are strangers to me now), ignorant of their future and of themselves, ignorant indeed of that very world in which they are beginning to live. One (that is Marcus Agrippa) is tall and heavy-muscled, with the face almost of a peasant—strong nose, big bones, and a skin like new leather; dry, brownish hair, and a coarse red stubble of beard; he is nineteen. He walks heavily, like a bullock, but there is an odd grace about him. He speaks plainly, slowly, and calmly, and does not show what he feels. Except for his beard, one would not know that he is so young.

Another (this is Salvidienus Rufus) is as thin and agile as Agrippa is heavy and stalwart, as quick and volatile as Agrippa is slow and reserved. His face is lean, his skin fair, his eyes dark; he laughs

readily, and lightens the gravity which the rest of us affect. He is older than any of us, but we love him as if he were our younger brother.

And a third (is it myself?) whom I see even more dimly than the others. No man may know himself nor how he must appear even to his friends; but I imagine they must have thought me a bit of a fool that day, and even for some time afterward. I was a bit luxuriant then, and fancied that a poet must play the part. I dressed richly, my manner was affected, and I had brought along with me from Arezzo a servant whose sole duty it was to care for my hair—until my friends derided me so mercilessly that I had him returned to Italy.

And at last he who was then Gaius Octavius. How may I tell you of him? I do not know the truth, only my memories. I can say again that he seemed to me a boy, though I was a scant two years older. You know his appearance now; it has not changed much. But now he is Emperor of the world, and I must look beyond that to see him as he was then; and I swear to you that I, whose service to him has been my knowledge of the hearts of both his friends and enemies, could not have foreseen what he was to become. I thought him a pleasant stripling, no more, with a face too delicate to receive the blows of fate, with a manner too diffident to achieve purpose, and with a voice too gentle to utter the ruthless words that a leader of men must utter. I thought that he might become a scholar of leisure, or a man of letters; I did not think that he had the energy to become even a senator, to which his name and wealth entitled him.

And these were those who came to land that day in early autumn, in the year of the fifth consulship of Julius Caesar, at Apollonia on the Adriatic coast of Macedonia. Fishing boats bobbed in the harbor and the people waved; nets were stretched upon rocks to dry; and wooden shacks lined the road up to the city, which was set upon high ground before a plain that stretched and abruptly rose to the mountains.

Our mornings were spent in study. We rose before dawn, and heard our first lecture by lamplight; we breakfasted on coarse food when the sun shone above the eastern mountains; we discoursed in Greek on all things (a practice which, I fear, is dying now), and spoke aloud those passages from Homer we had learned the night before, accounted for them, and finally offered brief declamations that we had prepared according to the stipulations of Apollodorus (who was ancient even then, but of even temper and great wisdom).

In the afternoons, we were driven a little beyond the city to the camp where Julius Caesar's legions were training; and there, for a good part of the rest of the day, we shared their exercises. I must say that it was during this time that I first began to suspect that I might have been wrong about Octavius's abilities. As you know, his health has always been poor, though his frailness has been more apparent than mine, whose fate it is, dear Livy, to appear the model of health even in my most extreme illness. I, myself, then, took little part in the actual drills and maneuvers; but Octavius always did, preferring like his uncle, to spend his time with the centurions, rather than with the more nominal officers of the legion. Once, I remember, in a mock battle his horse stumbled and he was thrown heavily to the ground. Agrippa and Salvidienus were standing nearby, and Salvidienus started at once to run to his aid; but Agrippa held him by the arm and would not let him move. After a few moments Octavius arose, stood stiffly upright, and called for another horse. One was brought him, and he mounted and rode the rest of the afternoon, completing his part in the exercise. That evening in our tent, we heard him breathing heavily, and we called the doctor of the legion to look at him. Two of his ribs were broken. He had the doctor bind his chest tightly, and the next morning he attended classes with us and took an equally active part in a quick-march that afternoon.

Thus it was during those first days and weeks that I came to know the Augustus who now rules the Roman world. Perhaps you will transform this into a few sentences of that marvelous history which we have been privileged to admire. But there is much that cannot go into books, and that is the loss with

which I become increasingly concerned.

III. Letter: Julius Caesar to Gaius Octavius at Apollonia, from Rome (44 B.C.)

I was remembering this morning, my dear Octavius, the day last winter in Spain when you found me at Munda in the midst of our siege of that fortress where Gnaeus Pompeius had fled with his legions. We were disheartened and fatigued with battle; our food was gone; and we were besieging an enemy who could not rest and eat while we pretended to starve them out. In my anger at what seemed certain defeat, I ordered you to return to Rome, whence you had traveled in what seemed to me then such ease and comfort; and said that I could not bother with a boy who wanted to play at war and death. I was angry only at myself, as I am sure you knew even then; for you did not speak, but looked at me out of a great calm. Then I quieted a little, and spoke to you from my heart (as I have spoken to you since), and told you that this Spanish campaign against Pompeius was to settle at last and forever the civil strife and faction that had oppressed our Republic, in one way or another, ever since my youth; and that what we had thought to be victory was now almost certain defeat.

“Then,” you said, “we are not fighting for victory; we are fighting for our lives.”

And it seemed to me that a great burden was lifted from my shoulders, and I felt myself to be almost young again; for I remembered having said the same thing to myself more than thirty years before when six of Sulla’s troops surprised me alone in the mountains, and I fought my way through them to their commander, whom I bribed to take me alive back to Rome. It was then that I knew that might be what I have become.

Remembering that old time and seeing you before me, I saw myself when I was young; and I took some of your youth into myself and gave you some of my age, and so we had together that old exhilaration of power against whatever might happen; and we piled the bodies of our fallen comrades and advanced behind them so that our shields would not be weighted with the enemy’s hurled javelins; and we advanced upon the walls and took the fortress of Cordova, there on the Mundian plain.

And I remembered too, this morning, our pursuit of Gnaeus Pompeius across Spain, our bellies full and our muscles tired and the campfires at night and the talk that soldiers make when victory is certain. How all the pain and anguish and joy merge together, and even the ugly dead seem beautiful; and even the fear of death and defeat are like the steps of a game! Here in Rome, I long for summer to come, when we will march against the Parthians and the Germans to secure the last of our important borders. . . . You will understand better my nostalgia for past campaigns and my anticipation of future campaigns to come if I let you know a little about the morning that occasioned those memories.

At seven o’clock this morning, the Fool (that is, Marcus Aemilius Lepidus—whom, you will be amused to know, I have had to make your nominal coequal in power under my command) was waiting at my door with a complaint about Marcus Antonius. It seems that one of Antonius’s treasurers was collecting taxes from those who, according to an ancient law cited at tedious length by Lepidus, ought to have their taxes collected by Lepidus’s own treasurer. Then for another hour, apparently thinking that allusive loquacity is subtlety, he suggested that Antonius was ambitious—an observation that surprised me as much as if I had been informed that the Vestal Virgins were chaste. I thanked him and we exchanged platitudes upon the nature of loyalty, and he left me (I am sure) to report to Antonius that he perceived in me some excessive suspicion of even my closest friends. At eight o’clock, three senators came in, one after another, each accusing the other of accepting an identical bribe; I understood at once that all were guilty, that they had been unable to perform the service for which they were bribed, and that the briber was ready to make a public issue of the matter, which would necessitate a trial before the assembly—a trial that they wished to avoid, since it might

conceivably lead to exile if they were unable to bribe enough of the jury to insure their safety. I judge that they would be successful in their effort to buy off justice, and so I trebled the reported amount of the bribe and fined each of them that amount, and resolved that I would deal similarly with the bribers. They were well-pleased, and I have no fear of them; I know that they are corrupt, and they think that I am. . . . And so the morning went.

How long have we been living the Roman lie? Ever since I can remember, certainly; perhaps for many years before. And from what source does that lie suck its energy, so that it grows stronger than the truth? We have seen murder, theft, and pillage in the name of the Republic—and call it the necessary price we pay for freedom. Cicero deplors the depraved Roman morality that worships wealth—and, himself a millionaire many times over, travels with a hundred slaves from one of his villas to another. A consul speaks of peace and tranquillity—and raises armies that will murder their colleague whose power threatens his self-interest. The Senate speaks of freedom—and thrusts upon me powers that I do not want but must accept and use if Rome is to endure. Is there no answer to this lie?

I have conquered the world, and none of it is secure; I have shown liberty to the people, and they flee it as if it were a disease; I despise those whom I can trust, and love those best who would most quickly betray me. And I do not know where we are going, though I lead a nation to its destiny.

Such, my dear nephew, whom I would call my son, are the doubts that beset the man whom the gods would make a king. I envy you your winter in Apollonia; I am pleased with the reports of your studies and I am happy that you get along so well with the officers of my legions there. But I do miss our talks in the evenings. I comfort myself with the thought that we shall resume them this summer on our Eastern campaign. We shall march across the country, feed upon the land, and kill whom we must kill. It is the only life for a man. And things shall be as they will be.

IV. Quintus Salvidienus Rufus: Notes for a Journal, at Apollonia (March, 44 B.C.)

Afternoon. The sun is bright, hot; ten or twelve officers and ourselves on a hill, looking down at the maneuvers of the cavalry on the field. Dust rises in billows as the horses gallop and turn; shouts and laughter, curses come up to us from the distance, through the thud of hoofbeats. All of us, except Maecenas, have come up from the field and are resting. I have removed my armor and am lying with my head on it; Maecenas, his tunic unspotted and his hair unruffled, sits with his back against the trunk of a small tree; Agrippa stands beside me, sweat drenching his body, his legs like stone pillars; Octavius beside him, his slender body trembling from its recent exertion—one never realizes how slight he is until he stands near someone like Agrippa—his face pale, hair lank and darkened by sweat plastered to his forehead; Octavius smiling, pointing to something below us; Agrippa nodding. We all have a sense of well-being; it has not rained for a week, the weather has warmed, we are pleased with our skills and with the skills of the soldiers.

I write these words quickly, not knowing what I shall have occasion to use in my leisure. I must get everything down.

The horsemen below us rest; their horses mill around; Octavius sits beside me, pushes my head playfully off the armor; we laugh at nothing in our feeling for the moment. Agrippa smiles at us and stretches his great arms; the leather of his cuirass creaks in the stillness.

From behind us comes Maecenas's voice—high, thin, a little affected, almost effeminate. "Boys who play at being soldier," he says. "How unutterably boring."

Agrippa—his voice deep, slow, deliberate, with that gravity that conceals so much: "If you had it your power to remove that ample posterior from whatever convenient resting place it might encounter

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