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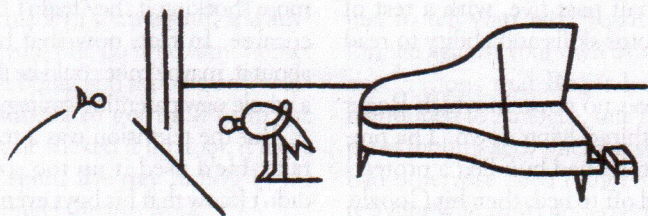
JAN. 9, 2012

THE NEW YORKER



BRUCE MCCALL

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

Rome and us.

BY ADAM KIRSCH

In a famous passage in “Civilization and Its Discontents,” Sigmund Freud compares the mind to a city with an ancient history:

Now let us make the fantastic supposition that Rome were not a human dwelling-place, but a mental entity with just as long and varied a past history: that is, in which nothing once constructed had perished, and all the earlier stages of development had survived alongside the latest. This would mean that . . . where the Palazzo Caffarelli stands there would also be, without this being removed, the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus. . . . Where the Coliseum stands now, we could at the same time admire Nero’s Golden House. . . . And the observer would need merely to shift the focus of his eyes, perhaps, or change his position, in order to call up a view of either the one or the other.

This kind of stereoscopic vision, Freud writes, is impossible when it comes to a physical place like Rome. It is only in the mind that past and present coexist, since it is a fundamental belief of psychoanalysis that there is no true forgetting, that every experience leaves a discoverable trace. But, if Rome is a perfect image of the psyche, that is because it is one of those rare cities, like Jerusalem or Paris, which exist just as much in the mind as in the world. As a result, the way historians write about Rome has something in common with the way an analyst interrogates a dream. Every portrait of the city, one might say, is partly a self-portrait.

That has always been especially true in America, a country whose institutions—from the Senate to the Capitol—are explicitly modelled on those of the Roman Republic. To read the Fed-

eralist Papers—in which Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay wrote under the Latin pseudonym Publius—is to enter into a running debate about Roman history, in which the Roman example is one to be alternately emulated and shunned. For if the Republic flourished, starting in 509 B.C., and brought most of the Mediterranean world under Roman sway, it finally gave way, five centuries later, to the autocracy of the Empire. Discussing the dangers of a standing army, Madison observes that while the Roman legions conquered the world, “the liberties of Rome proved the final victim to her military triumphs.”

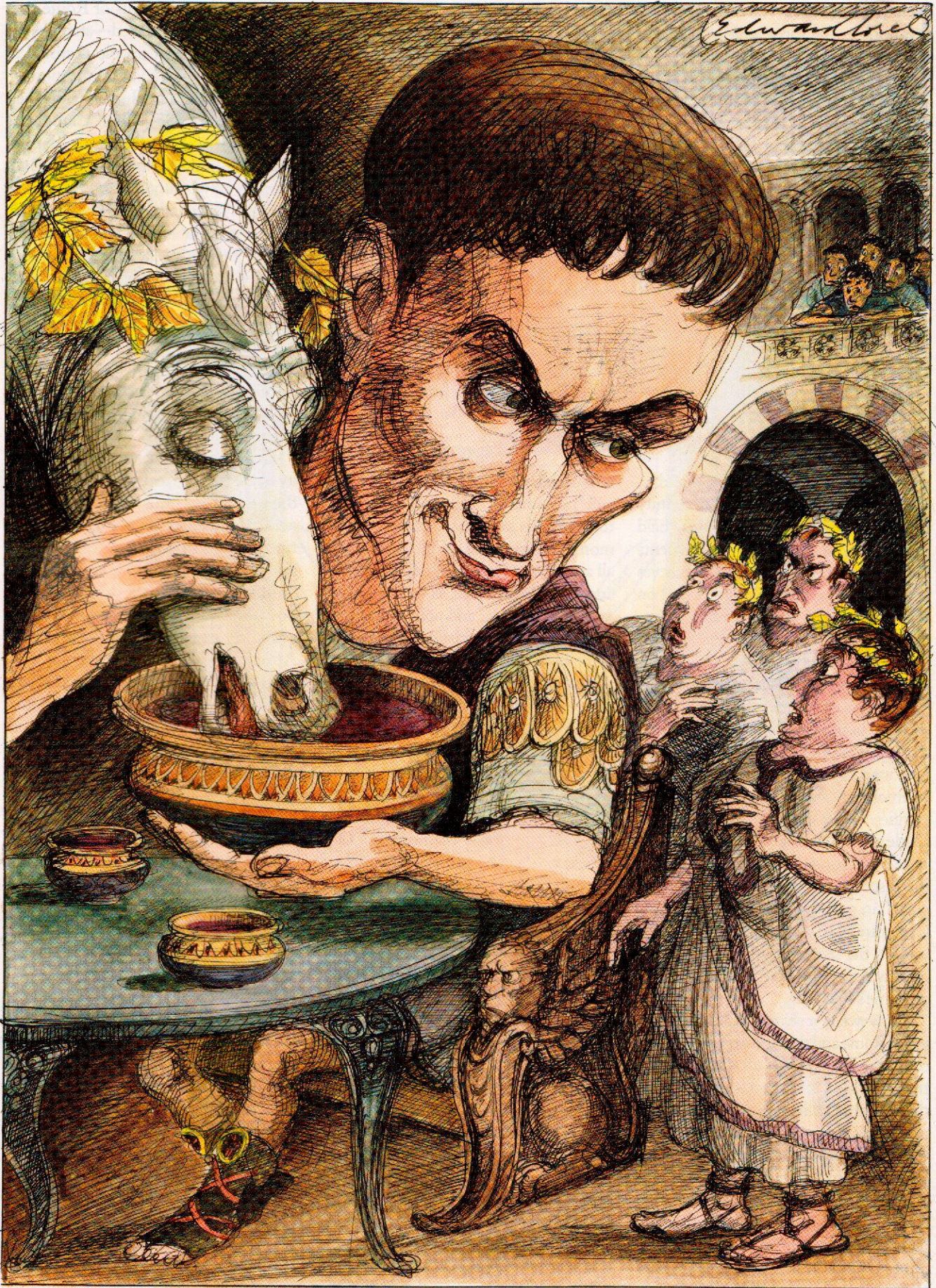
After the Second World War, it was common to wonder if America’s national-security state represented the imperial phase of our history. But today, in a post-9/11, recession-battered country, what transfixes the imagination of American writers is the end of the Empire—the “decline and fall” that Edward Gibbon made the central moral of the whole Roman experience. In 2007, Cullen Murphy, in his book “Are We Rome?,” concluded that the resemblances are close enough to make us worry: “What draws us now is something . . . elemental and emotional: the brutal reminder of impermanence. That, and from time to time an anxious flicker of recognition—the eagle in the mirror.” Deborah Eisenberg’s story “Twilight of the Superheroes,” an astringent parable of America’s post-9/11 reckoning, ends with an inhabitant of New York remem-

bering a Roman image from a school textbook:

This one’s a photograph of a statue, an emperor, apparently, wearing his stone toga and his stone wreath. The real people, the living people, mill about just beyond the picture’s confines. . . . Are the people hidden by the picture frightened? Do they hear the stones working themselves loose, the temples and houses and courts beginning to crumble? . . . Closing his book Lucien hears the thrilling crash as the bloated empire tumbles down.

If anyone ought to be immune from this kind of apocalyptic hypnosis, one might think, it is Niall Ferguson, the conservative historian who has spent the past decade urging America to take up Britain’s old role as beneficent empire. Yet in his new blockbuster, “Civilization,” Ferguson’s antennae for the Zeitgeist lead him to ruminate darkly on the ways that America is following in Rome’s doomed footsteps. Gibbon’s “The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,” Ferguson writes, “tells the story of the last time the West collapsed. Today, many people in the West fear we may be living through a kind of sequel. When you reflect on what caused the fall of ancient Rome, such fears appear not altogether fanciful.”

Such writers are carrying on the centuries-old tradition of seeing America in, and as, Rome. The comparison is necessarily a loose one, but it preserves the customary understanding of the Roman Empire as a peak of human civilization, a fragile accomplishment that could all too easily be undermined by its own hubris. But this season brings a number of new works on Roman history that focus not on the glories of Roman culture but on its notorious brutalities. The perspective is, in its own way, just as unsettling as any apocalyptic fantasy of decline and fall. What if the true meaning of Rome is not justice but injustice, not civilization but institutionalized barbarism? What if, when you look back as Freud did at the Eternal City—a sobriquet that Rome had already earned two thousand years ago—you find at the bottom of all its archaeological strata not a forum or a palace but a corpse? [. . .]



Roman historians painted Caligula as deranged, but his unpredictable actions may have had a political purpose.

This willingness to see Roman civilization as essentially barbaric has an ironic side effect: it leads historians to be skeptical about the most outlandish examples of that barbarism, the “bad emperors” whose colorful depravity has always been fodder for moralists. Aloys Winterling, in his new biography, “Caligula” (California; \$34.95), seeks to rehabilitate one of the most infamous Roman emperors, commonly believed to have been deranged. He begins with a recitation of the charges that historians have levelled against Caligula, who reigned from 37 to 41 A.D.: “He drank pearls dissolved in vinegar and ate food covered with gold leaf. He forced men and women of high rank to have sex with him, turned part of his palace into a brothel, and even committed incest with his own sisters. . . . He considered himself superhuman and forced contempo-

raries to worship him as a god.” Yet the title of Winterling’s introduction is “A Mad Emperor?,” and it becomes clear that his answer to the question is no.

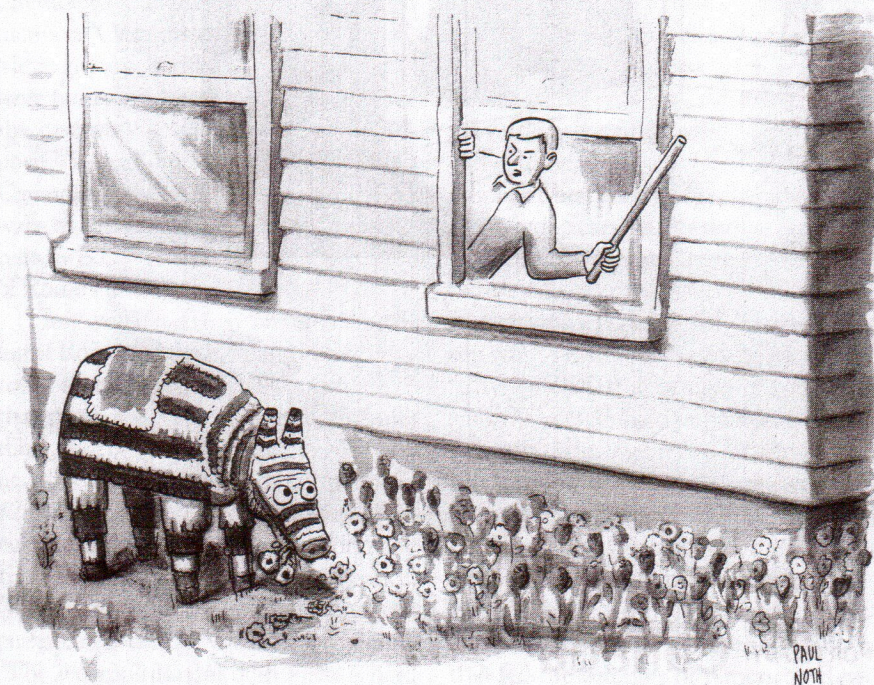
All the sources—especially Suetonius, whose “Twelve Caesars” is the basis for this catalogue of horrors—may portray Caligula as a raving madman, but Winterling puts this treatment in the context of classical history writing, which had a habit of charging those who had fallen from power with outrageous villainies. “The accounts of Caligula surviving from antiquity pursue the clearly recognizable goal of depicting the emperor as an irrational monster,” he writes. “They provide demonstrably false information to support this picture of him and omit information that could contradict it.”

To understand what Caligula was really up to, Winterling insists, we must understand the political culture of the early Roman Empire. When Augustus Caesar established the Empire, he was widely beloved for putting an end to generations of devastating civil wars. At the same time, however, Rome’s senatorial aristocracy could not easily let go of the Republican traditions that gave them a privileged place in the state. Augustus finessed this situation by wielding power quietly: he lived on a modest scale, treated other senators as peers, and allowed the

façade of the Republic to cover the reality of autocracy.

But Caligula, who, at the age of twenty-four, became the third Roman emperor, was unable to maintain this delicate balance. What embittered Caligula, Winterling argues, and has ruined his historical reputation, was the enmity of the senators, who chafed against his rule and plotted to end it. Instead of meeting this opposition with suavity, as Augustus had, Caligula turned a withering, bitter sarcasm on Rome’s aristocracy, and was intent on humiliating them and reminding them of their servitude. “His aim,” Winterling writes, “was to destroy the aristocratic hierarchy as such and expose it to ridicule.” Seen in this light, some of Caligula’s pranks become more understandable. Notoriously, for instance, he wanted to make his favorite horse, Incitatus, a consul—on the face of it, an insane thing to do. But Winterling suggests that this was never a serious plan, merely a way to mock the aristocrats, for whom the consulship was the crown of a career in politics: “To equip the emperor’s horse with a sumptuous household and destine it for the consulship satirized the main aim of aristocrats’ lives and laid it open to ridicule.”

Caligula’s madness, in other words, was a deliberate exercise in political showmanship. This principle allows Winterling to explain another baffling episode in Caligula’s biography, when he supposedly declared war on the English Channel. According to Suetonius, the emperor was in Gaul planning a campaign in Germany when he changed his mind and marched his legions to the French coast, facing Britain. He set up his artillery facing the ocean, and “no one knew or could imagine what he was going to do.” Then he abruptly ordered the troops to collect seashells as booty from their “victory” over the waves, and gave them the bonus payment customary after triumphs. For Winterling, this story sounds insane only because it was distorted by the historian. What probably happened, he writes, is that Caligula was planning a genuine invasion of Britain, when his troops—fearful of going to a place that at that time was terra incognita, outside the bounds of the civilized world—mutinied and refused to go any farther. In this scenario, Caligula’s order to collect shells was another form of



“You’re not too big for me to use this!”

elaborate sarcasm, a way of humiliating the soldiers “who had assembled at the edge of the sea but refused to fight.”

Winterling grants that “there is no knowing what actually happened in any detail,” but he prefers this explanation to the one Suetonius offers, which is that Caligula was simply psychotic. After all, “if Caligula was mad,” Winterling asks, “why wasn’t he removed from public view, and placed under the care of a physician—just as was done when rulers in later European history became mentally ill?” It sounds like a reasonable enough argument—until you remember, for instance, that Hitler’s orders were followed until the very end, even when they were plainly mad and cost millions of lives, including those of his own soldiers. From Stalin to Mao to Idi Amin, the twentieth century surely gave plenty of proof that psychotic leaders are not necessarily “removed from public view,” and can sometimes infect whole populations with their madness. At certain times, and the Roman Empire may be one of them, reasonableness is not a reasonable approach to history. [. . .]