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Jacek BOCHEŃSKI, *Divine Julius. Or, How to Become a God in Four Easy Steps*, Trans. T. Pinch, Mondrala Press, Luxembourg 2022, 210 pp., ISBN 9789998793774.

Jacek Bocheński's *Divine Julius* proved a joy to discover and a headache to review; an awkward challenge for a critic who traffics professionally in what Bocheński's narrator dismisses as «junk» and is writing for colleagues sifting daily through the «grayness» of antiquity. This dustbin the narrator rifles through is stuffed with ancient sources on Caesar's life, out of which in true antiquarian fashion he cobbles together his own biography of the great man. There are many ways of doing *Divine Julius* a great disservice: as a classicist, a Latinist, a student of Cicero and the Late Republic; but also, for a reviewer with little interest in dramatizations of classical histories, cynical of the sermonising about the "relevance" of Classics today circulating as Reception Studies, and (most uncomfortably) armed with an amateur knowledge of post-war Eastern European literature and none of the book's original language, Polish.

To do this brilliant little book justice, however, is to recognise how it makes this presumption of knowledge, of faithfulness to the historicity of its source material and subject matter, a central theme of its attack on authority. And this is perhaps the novel's finest achievement since its controversial appearance in Wladyslaw Gomułka's *Polska Ludowa* in 1961: Bocheński's tight-paced, sensationalist retelling of Julius Caesar's career, delivers an ominous exploration of totalitarianism as it infiltrates and transforms a political system, saturating the social, sexual, and psychological lives of victims and perpetrators alike.

So, what is *Divine Julius*? Superficially: a biography of Julius Caesar focused on the headline tensions defining his legacy: his military conquests in Gaul and the Civil War, the clashes with contemporaries Pompey, Cicero, Cato, and his bedroom exploits. The story is deftly composed out of fragments of ancient authors summarised by the narrator, with the occasional direct translations of, among others, Catullan verses and *bons mots* from Cicero's letters. Its syncopated rhythm winds around Caesar, his entourage, and the wider Republican order that he is accused of having so spectacularly crashed, evoking a picture of this society and its protagonists.

Bocheński's storytelling coheres the fragments into a five-part chronicle, each section leaning into an aspect of Caesar's life.

Under "Cruelty", excerpts from Caesar's *Gallic War*, Catullus, and Suetonius, come together into an account of the period from 58 BCE to 52 BCE, from the war with the Helvetii to the surrender of Vercingetorix. Caesar, a duplicitous, merciless, and resourceful proconsul, secures a fine reputation as a military leader. "Benevolence" takes the story to Rome and the political dynamics of the 50s and 40s BCE. The narrator starts with the opening salvos of the Civil War in 49-48 BCE, before launching into a study of the conflicts of those decades, underpinning his characterisation of Caesar as a spectator to the unravelling of the Republic – «Well», he imagines Caesar thinking, «I have no intention of abolishing the Republic or any of her institutions. Let them die their natural death. These old idiocies will be their own undoing». Drawing on Appian, Cassius Dio, Plutarch, Nepos, and Cicero's letters, Part II pits Clodius against Cicero, Cicero against Caesar, Caesar against Pompey in a rapid succession of psychological portraits, verbal exchanges, and anecdotes. Part III stays in Rome, developing the narrative around a catalogue of "facts" resulting from a «pretty exhaustive enquiry into Caesar's love life» – in fact, these are extracted from Suetonius's biography. Finally, "Hate" (Part IV) and the Epilogue "After Plutarch" broaden the timeframe of *Divine Julius*'s political storyline while fixing the spotlight around Caesar's lifelong enmity with Cato.

Divine Julius is not an account of a period or of a life, but first and foremost an impassioned argument orchestrated by the book's protagonist – the antiquarian narrator – about achieving immortality as a political figure. Julius Caesar is picked extemporaneously as an illustration. He personifies in the book a certain way of being towards divinity, his biography offering a study in the strategic recourse to violence, deception, largesse, to dismantle both internal and external opposition on the road to absolute power. Most importantly, Caesar shows how exploiting the creeping indifference and ineptitude of a political and social culture is key to securing its subjection. The novel's rhetorical purpose is carried in the many narratorial asides, which at first glance seem to elide that difference in favour of charting Caesar's inevitable rise to kingship over a spent Republic. These observations remind us of what a particular excerpt of Cicero, Catullus, or

Sallust is illuminating about Caesar's course of action, what each passage is doing. If the narrative binds the fragments, what drives the argument forward is the psychological dimension of the antiquarian's story. It is always clear to the narrator what Caesar – or Pompey, Clodius, Cato, Vercingetorix for that matter – is thinking and (therefore) why he does what he does.

Stepping back from the narrative's tempo, I suspect any reader – particularly one somewhat invested in the historical questions raised by the material – might find this rhetorical inflection jarring. The story is fixed so firmly on the outcome that it misses out on the twists and turns, the roads not taken, in the transition to empire; the oppositions are so clearcut and the protagonists' motivations so singular that the characters appear one-dimensional. Moreover, the narrator betrays in his interpretation of the ancient sources a schoolbook understanding of the period, the sort of great-man historiography that I don't see attracting many fans in Classics or History Departments in Europe or North America. What this functionalism achieves, however, is to draw the focus squarely back onto the real protagonist of the novel, the antiquarian who is staging this historical drama for his reader.

Finally, *Divine Julius* is an event. As the translator helpfully sets out in his preface («Reading *Divine Julius*: Then and Now») and as I learned from Katarzyna Marciniak's article on Bocheński's struggle with the Polish regime, the serialised appearance of *Divine Julius* in 1961, its reception, and republication, created its own mythology[1]. Stories of literary prizes not awarded, editors sacked, the hushed release in book form, censorship-defying reinvention of the novel as an historical essay, the critics' silence. It is impossible to read this book outside its context, as a site of resistance and an artefact of its time with a powerful influence over the generations to come. The author himself does not allow his reader to look all too deeply into antiquity. Anachronisms are legion and used in a studied fashion to blend Bocheński's Poland and Caesar's world, so that, for instance, Caesar's assault on Gaul takes the form of *blitzkrieg*, and the opposition to Caesar is mapped onto the Polish intellectuals' resistance to Gomułka.

[1] K. Marciniak, Veni, Vidi, Verti. *Jacek Bocheński's Games with Censorship*, in D. Morvin, E. Olechowska (eds.), *Classics and Class. Teaching Greek and Latin behind the Iron Curtain*, Ljubljana-Warsaw 2016, 358-387.

Tom Pinch, translator and editor, is not overbearing in nudging the English-language readership towards appreciating this dimension of the story through a restrained use of footnotes. This is also because the antiquarian does not transform Caesar's biography into an allegory with a 1-to-1 equivalence between Soviet politicians and his Roman protagonists – despite some amusing correlations between the hairdos, or lack thereof, of Caesar, Khrushchev, Gomułka, and other members of the *nomenklatura*. *Divine Julius* is not to be decoded in this way; the novel evokes a universe, however narrowly focused on the political Caesar, with which the contemporary reader can make her own connections and draw her own parallels. Ultimately, the story feels oddly familiar, telling the modern reader about ancient things that sound current but that don't neatly map onto the present day. Avoiding the strictly allegorical, Bocheński shaped a story that speaks to the situation in Poland in 1961, as much as it does now to an English-speaking audience in the 21st century.

The antiquarian's treatment of Cicero is a case in point, shining a light on the interplay between the text's various "identities", showing how the narrator uses and abuses source materials, and emphasising what, in my view, is a good reason why readers of this journal might find *Divine Julius* an enjoyable and, dare I say it, salutary pastime.

Before we are introduced to Cicero and the psychological portrait of this distraught figure of the 50s – his «persecution» at the hands of Clodius, exile, return, recantation – before all this, the antiquarian offers far-ranging digressions on his use of sources, the problem with fragments, his amateurish efforts to stitch them together, and the nature of allusions («allusions are not so much about specific events as about the nature of the universe»). It is difficult to see what ties these various digressions together, except perhaps insofar as they set up a framework through which to understand what happened in 58 BCE, «the first important step» in Caesar's «road to power». This begins with a study of the hostility between Clodius and Cicero, presented through an uncommented translation of four letters from that year, two before and two during exile.

Thereafter the antiquarian gets comfortable with his source: he first explains what may have led to his exile («victim to populist agitation») and then decides to follow the thread of Cicero's correspondence to weave his own narrative of the years leading to Caesar's as-

sassination. In the pages that follow, the psychological portrait of Cicero grows in ever bolder interpretive moves. Cicero is a desperate narcissist, a would-be philosopher, an ideologue turned opportunist, chief whip of a pathetic party – the Optimates – in a sort of two-party state, the undignified author of a palinode vowing support for his old opponent Caesar. In Cilicia as governor in 51 BCE, the antiquarian tells us, Cicero becomes a «romantic» and from there he persuades himself to follow Pompey in 49 BCE «just in time to witness his defeat and the defeat of all his ideals».

This biographical sketch is structured around contemporary political and social preoccupations with class, party politics, nonalignment, modern ideas about the self and society, and so on. It is oriented towards a tragic conclusion that was all but scripted in 49 BCE; it also assumes that Cicero was right about how important an actor he was at the time and is inclined to take him all too seriously when he claims that philosophy is a form of rejection of or retirement from politics. This notwithstanding, the overall effect of the narrative is to paint a picture shared by many contemporary classical historians and students of the Late Republic: one that is Cicero-centric, enamoured with the symmetries of partisan conflict, unsure whether to take Cicero at his word (and all too often still doing so), and finding in Cicero the metre by which to judge other characters and draw some "lessons" from history. Alongside his sensitive thoughts on the limits of antiquarianism (the naïve compiling, the completist urge), the narrator's blinkered vision compels us to look again at our own account of the Late Republic, how we have pieced the fragments together, whose story are we telling and why; and, perhaps most importantly, from whom have we unthinkingly inherited this narrative.

It is telling that Bocheński ends Part II with a reflection on Atticus, the non-conformist Epicurean banker, and that he ends the book not with Caesar's assassination on the Ides of March of 44 BCE, but with Cato's suicide at Utica in 46 BCE. Despite getting Cicero so wrong in so many ways, the antiquarian could find no more Ciceronian way of framing the end of the Republic. All along their correspondence, Atticus holds up to Cicero a mirror, compelling him to consider and reconsider his actions. Similarly, Cato's death in the philosophical works of 46-45 BCE marks the end of an era and an act that sets a standard for future Republican lives. Caesar quietly disappears from

the story – into a divine plume of smoke perhaps – leaving the reader with two lingering paradigms: an intellectual beatified by his nonparticipation in the chaos around him and a martyr eternalised by an epoch-defining act of resistance.

Orazio CAPPELLO