Forbidden Fruit
Civil Savagery in Christian Kracht’s Imperium

“Ich war ein guter Gefangener. Ich habe nie Menschenfleisch gegessen.” *I was a good prisoner. I never ate human flesh.* These final words of Christian Kracht’s second novel, 1979, represent the last shred of dignity retained by the German protagonist, who is starving to death in a Chinese prison camp in the title year. Over and over, Kracht shows us a snapshot of what happens to the over-civilized individual when civilization breaks down. Faserland’s nameless narrator stands at the water’s edge, preparing to drown rather than live with his guilt and frustration; even the portrait of Kracht on the cover of his edited volume *Mesopotamia* depicts Kracht himself in a darkened wilderness, wearing a polo shirt and carrying an AK-47. In each of these moments, raw nature inspires the human capacity for violence and self-destruction as a sort of ironic antidote to the decadence and vacuity of a society in decline.

Kracht’s latest novel, *Imperium*, further explicates this moment of annihilation. The story follows the fin-de-siècle adventures of real-life eccentric August Engelhardt, a Nuremberger who wears his hair long, promotes nudism, and sets off for the German colony of New Guinea in hopes of founding a cult of sun-worshippers and cocovores (i.e., people who subsist primarily on coconuts). Engelhardt establishes a coconut plantation near the small town of Herbertshöhe, where he attempts to practice his beliefs in the company of a series of companions of varying worth and, finally, in complete solitude.

Since *Faserland*, Kracht’s work has examined the consequences of our faith in aesthetics over morality – our tendency to view and value the world and its inhabitants in aesthetic, rather than moral, terms. One can find a similar meditation in the television series *Mad Men*, in which we witness the rise of advertising and its troubling effect on humanity: what sells, what looks appealing, becomes more important than what is actually right or good. The physical and visual trump the internal and the felt. As a result, the people involved lose sight of their own value as individuals as well as their connection to, and empathy with, those around them.

This time, Kracht’s narrative focuses on an ascetic figure, a zealot who rejects worldly concerns in favor of near-starvation and nakedness on a remote island far from his decadent homeland. When, suffering from leprosy, Engelhardt slips into insanity, he decides that human flesh is in fact the holiest nourishment, closest to God (rather than the coconut), and eats his own severed thumb, along with several digits from his native assistant Makeli. The implication is that this may not have been the first human flesh he has eaten during his time on the island, and thus Engelhardt, unlike the self-destructive protagonist of 1979, is no good
prisoner of his own civilization, but rather reverts to utter savagery as a means to survive. Though the real Engelhardt died in 1919, Kracht tellingly lets him live on, as tenacious as a cockroach, until after the end of World War II, when he emerges to discover that the world has now been captured by a new Imperium: the United States, purveyor of Coca-Cola, t-shirts, and the Hollywood version of a true-life adventure story. The final scene of the novel is nearly identical to the first, but is in fact a description of the first scene of a movie based on Engelhardt’s life.

Multiple ironies spiral through this narrative: the vegan who converts to cannibalism, the rejecter of civilization who becomes the subject of a Hollywood film. Even the novel’s cover, a Tin-Tin-esque illustration of an island scene with a skull as memento mori in the foreground, conveys Kracht’s typical wry treatment of an ultimately tragic story that nonetheless devolves into absurdity. Perhaps deliberately to provoke the likes of Spiegel reviewer Georg Diez, Kracht pointedly compares Engelhardt to Adolf Hitler and even suggests that this is really Hitler’s story: “So wird nun stellvertretend die Geschichte nur eines Deutschen erzählt werden, eines Romantikers, der wie so viele dieser Spezies verhinderter Künstler war, und wenn dabei manchmal Parallelen zu einem späteren deutschen Romantiker und Vegetarier ins Bewusstsein dringen, der vielleicht lieber bei seiner Staffelei geblieben wäre, so ist dies durchaus beabsichtigt und sinnigerweise, Verzeihung, in nuce auch kohärent.” This rather flippant comparison crops up repeatedly throughout the novel; Engelhardt even burns some of his own books as leprosy destroys his brain. It rankles Diez that Kracht might have dared “to invent a Hitler without swastika and without the Holocaust,” so much so that he examines Kracht’s published correspondence with David Woodard, an American composer with some very eccentric right-wing opinions, and judges Kracht to be “the doorman of right-wing thinking.”

Certainly Kracht is no leftist, and there may be truth to the disturbing impression one gets from his exchanges with Woodard. And yet including Germany’s Nazi future in Engelhardt’s story really is a coherent means with which to craft a complex treatment of German history since the fin-de-siècle. After all, while Engelhardt may at times be sympathetic, those traits he shares with the Nazi-era Hitler – anti-Semitism, misanthropy, brutality, madness – do not appear until he is suffering from the advanced stages of leprosy; in other words, these traits are symptoms of a hideous disease. As a stand-in for German culture as a whole, Engelhardt survives both wars by retreating into a wilderness and losing himself, only to emerge, irrelevant and strange, into a world, which is all too eager to forget or revise the past. Like the settlement in the novel, which must spontaneously move to another location, brick by brick, practically overnight, the new world has shifted without him, and he
must figure out his place in it all over again. In this way, Kracht captures the chaos and, indeed, absurdity of German history these past 100 plus years.

It is perhaps unfortunate that Kracht’s own questionable relationship to radical ideas threatens to obscure the possibilities of his fiction. To mention Hitler with a smirk, to write an entire book about German colonialism, is to thumb one’s nose at the strict decorum which threatens to silence all discussion of the many skeletons in our collective historical closet, and indeed the potential evil inherent to humanity in general. *Imperium*, in all its brutality, is an important book. It leads us back to a time, much like this one, when global conflict threatened to undo the elaborate fretwork of our culture, and attempts to save it dissolved into unimaginable savagery. An unpleasant picture, no doubt, but worth a look.

MOLLY KNIGHT
*Wake Forest University*


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