

READING REPORT

The great plunder— Volume I: The Birth of the System

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1. General Data

Genre	Historical documentary novel
Period covered	June 1794 – May 1798
Geographic scope	Paris, Flanders (Ghent, Antwerp, Brussels, Mechelen), Northern Italy (Milan, Parma, Modena, Bologna), Rome, Venice, Toulon
Volume	Approximately 86,000 words
Editorial status	Legal deposit April 2026 — e-book and print edition
ISBN	978-2-488999-08-3

2. Synopsis

The novel reconstructs the establishment of the first institutional system of artistic spoliation in modern history: the republican and Napoleonic seizures between 1794 and 1798. A brief prologue shows Grégoire signing the founding report; four chapters unfold its logistical, moral and political consequences up to the departure of the fleet for Egypt.

Chapter I — The Flemish Seizures (1794)

A commission of seven experts (Grégoire, David, Lebrun, Hassenfratz, Faujas, Thouin, Levesque) removes from Ghent the central panels of Van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece, from Antwerp Rubens's Descent from the Cross and Elevation of the Cross, and from Brussels the collections of the Coudenberg Palace. The resistance of the canons is crushed by force. In Mechelen, a Christ on the Cross by Van Dyck is taken despite the documented protests of Huysmans. The convoy makes its way to Paris via Valenciennes. The tension between Grégoire (moral conscience) and David (ideologue of progress) structures the entire chapter.

Chapter II — The Rush on Italy (1796)

The same commission, now joined by Monge, Berthollet and Denon. Map of Italy, priority lists, logistics of the Alpine crossing. Milan: Leonardo's Codex Atlanticus, the Bruegel works at the Ambrosiana. Parma: the Correggios. Modena and Bologna. The armistice compels the defeated princes to surrender contingents of works; the negotiation proceeds by military threat. This chapter amplifies the mechanism of the previous one, substituting Renaissance Italy for Baroque Flanders.

Chapter III — Rome and Venice (1797)

The longest chapter in the volume. Rome: the Vatican, negotiations with Cardinal Doria Pamphilj and curator Visconti. Removal of the Apollo Belvedere, the Laocoön, and the papal antiquities. Venice: San Giorgio Maggiore, the cutting and removal of Veronese's Wedding at

Cana (central scene), the plunder of the Frari, San Sebastiano, the Scuola Grande di San Marco, and the Accademia. The Alpine convoy.

Chapter IV — The Egyptian Project (1797–1798)

Bonaparte returns to Paris, rejects the idleness of the salons, and conceives the Egyptian expedition as a transposition of the Italian artistic-scientific model. Recruitment of the Commission of Scholars. Embarkation at Toulon aboard L'Orient. Final narrative tension: Bonaparte delays the order to depart, delivers a monologue on Alexander the Great, then issues the order to Casabianca. Closing line: "We set sail for Egypt."

3. Narrative Structure

Organisation. Four chapters with numbered sections (I to VIII or IX), preceded by a prologue. A strictly linear geographical and political progression, with no flashbacks. Each chapter reproduces the same dramatic architecture: planning in Paris → journey → confrontation in the field → inventory → return convoy.

Point of view. Third-person omniscient narration with variable focalization. The narrator moves from one character to another without intrusive omniscience. No exhibited interiority: the characters' states are conveyed through their gestures, silences and formulations.

Tempo. Dense and regular. Lengthy, dialectical negotiation scenes alternate with passages of pure logistical movement (short, technical). The artwork descriptions — systematically precise as to dimensions, technique, attribution and date — deliberately slow the narrative and form a documentary counterpoint to the violence of the seizures.

4. Main Characters

Abbé Grégoire

The novel's moral conscience. A Conventionnel, initiator of the founding report, yet tormented by what he has set in motion. His recurring phrase — "It is what we tell ourselves so that it remains bearable" — is the volume's moral leitmotif. He documents, protests inwardly, never resigns. The character of lucid complicity.

Jacques-Louis David

An ideologue without scruples. He deploys the rhetoric of progress, of liberating artworks, of the capital of the arts. Pragmatic to the point of brutality (the arrest of Canon De Vos). The dry counterpoint to Grégoire.

Hassenfratz

The central character of the novel's mechanics. An engineer-logistician, he thinks in dimensions, weights and routes. His narrative voice is the coldest and most precise. He is the one who holds the threads together between chapters.

Lebrun

Expert in collections, art dealer, man of lists. A functional role, but endowed with a keen sense of market value versus patrimonial value.

Van Reyn (Flemish curator, Brussels)

A secondary character who is nevertheless structurally important: he cooperates, documents, and builds archives for the future. The embodiment of passive, archival resistance. His lucidity — "You have taken everything, but everything is written down" — is one of the volume's strongest lines.

Bonaparte

He appears only in Chapter IV, but his silhouette looms over the whole from Chapter II onwards. The Toulon scene — solitary deliberation, comparison with Alexander, the order to Casabianca — is the most literarily accomplished closing scene in the volume.

5. Themes

The Legitimisation of Theft

The novel explores with precision the successive rhetorics that transform pillage into cultural policy: republican universalism, Enlightenment encyclopaedism, juridical treaty. Each register is voiced by a character and immediately contradicted by another.

Bureaucracy as an Instrument of Violence

The commission operates through lists, safe-conducts, voted budgets and reports. The violence is administrative before it is physical. This displacement is at the heart of the novelistic device.

Memory Against Forgetting

Van Reyn, Visconti and Huysmans keep registers. Grégoire sighs but signs. The novel itself is presented as an act of memory: "all the works mentioned were indeed seized."

The Escalation of the System

Each chapter broadens the geography and ambition: Flanders → Northern Italy → Rome and Venice → Egypt and ancient civilisation. The logic of predation globalises itself at the same time as it rationalises itself.

6. Historical Treatment

The novel rests on extensive, verifiable documentation. The artwork entries (dimensions, dates, attributions, locations) are accurate. The historical figures are deployed in accordance with what is known of them. The Treaty of Tolentino (19 February 1797) and its artistic clauses are correctly rendered. The Commission of Scholars for Egypt is faithfully constituted.

The fictional component — dialogues, imagined scenes, minor secondary characters — is clearly signposted in the preliminary note and well integrated into the documentary register.

7. Style

Dry, technical prose, without ornamentation. Short declarative sentences, very few attributive adjectives. The artistic vocabulary is deployed without quotation marks or pedagogical

condescension: triptych, Baltic oak panel, oil on canvas, altarpiece — terms treated as self-evident. The dialogues are the true engines of the action: characters do not speak to express themselves, they speak to negotiate, resist and persuade.

8. General Assessment

Strengths

- Documentary density without pedantry
- Effective polyphonic structure
- Moral tension carried by distinct voices rather than an authorial thesis
- Rigorous chronological architecture
- Fair treatment of local resistance

The escalation from one chapter to the next is well controlled.

Limitations

- Chapter III, the longest, shows a slight repetition of schema (confrontation → refusal → capitulation → inventory) that dilutes the impact of both Rome and Venice.
- The character of Denon, historically important, remains functional in the novel.
- Chapter IV, more biographical in focus, partially breaks with the collective point of view of the first three.

Overall rating: 16/20. A serious work, above average for contemporary French historical fiction. Suitable for Perrin, Passés Composés, or Tallandier as mainstream historical publishers; also defensible at Actes Sud or Gallimard for a literary fiction imprint.

Report prepared by Claude (Anthropic generative AI) from the complete manuscript (bound proof, legal deposit April 2026).