



Book review: Zoltan Istvan's *The Transhumanist Wager*

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“Scorned by over 500 publishers and literary agents around the world,” says *The Transhumanist Wager*’s back page blurb, “[Zoltan Istvan’s] philosophical thriller has been called ‘revolutionary’ and ‘socially dangerous’ by readers, scholars, and religious authorities.” Well, surely that ought to whet your appetite!

Whatever scorn it received before publication, this self-published novel has evidently achieved some commercial success and earned its author a mix of plaudits and notoriety. It has also picked up one of the 2014 “International Book Awards,” though these are, to put it mildly, dubious awards with no profile in the publishing industry.

Maybe a large number of publishers and agents were wrong, and it wouldn’t be the first time such a thing has happened. That makes for a compelling narrative, of course: “Here, friends, is a life-changing, game-changing, philosophically explosive work that found a readership despite the caution and conservatism of publishers, agents, and other cultural gatekeepers!”

Unfortunately, that narrative is almost totally false in the case of *The Transhumanist Wager*. There’s a small grain of truth to it, admittedly, in that Istvan actually does promote a radical philosophical and political worldview, which I’ll come back to. Perhaps it’s one that will attract adherents, thereby changing some minds and lives. The bad news, alas, is that those hundreds of publishers and agents had a point. *The Transhumanist Wager* does not succeed as a novel, and its flaws could not be repaired easily.

At his best, Istvan produces workmanlike journalistic prose, as when he evokes the terror and fascination of modern warfare:

War always touches the essence of a person no matter how many times it’s witnessed. As a participant, it remains perpetually novel. The smoke, fires, and explosions never seem

to stop or burn out. The sight of bodies torn to shreds, children orphaned, and buildings in ruins are penetrating and humbling – it’s life, elevated and unmasked. The slumbering alligator in our brain awakes and tries to take over. Tragedy mixes with the summoning of a better life. (p. 46)

Even here, there’s a certain familiarity to the message and a touch of laziness – if you look for them, you’ll find a couple of small grammatical errors. Istvan often seems to strain too hard for too vague an emotional effect, while writing prose that would be more compelling if it were more precise. In particular, it doesn’t help that near-meaningless words such as “amazing” and “incredible” are overused throughout by the narrator and the characters, evidently to assure us of the technological wonders that might come from an unregulated superscience of the future.

Still, Istvan seems competent enough at the level of journalistic reportage. Much of his verbal looseness could easily have been fixed by an additional layer of copyediting. More worryingly, he shows none of the distinctive skills of a novelist. He handles flashbacks confusingly, displays little control of narrative viewpoint, frequently writes awkward dialogue, and could generally learn more about advancing a story and its themes through character and directly realized action, rather than by way of exposition and editorializing. Far too much of the text reads more like extensive plot summary than depiction of events as they unfold and are experienced by the characters. At the same time, he often appears not to trust readers to draw inferences; there’s a distracting tendency to spell things out.

To take a small example, at one point the main character orders his high-tech “soldierbot” to unhand a captive. The narration then proceeds: “Immediately the metal hand released the crippled foot, responding to its commander’s voice” (p. 251-52). In context, the last five words are unnecessary. That’s forgivable, as an isolated example, but often whole sentences or even paragraphs could be cut with no loss to reading comprehension.

On a larger scale, few of the characters are presented with any complexity, and the villains are especially one-dimensional. Istvan seems unwilling to let us work out for ourselves that they are contemptible, but instead labors the point with emotive language or even direct narratorial denunciations. One villain in particular, the vain and emotionally manipulable Gregory Michaelson, is seldom allowed simply to *say* anything: we are frequently told after his words of dialogue something along the lines of “he squawked,” “he whined,” or “he whimpered.” This kind of thing can be used to establish a comic tone, but that doesn’t seem to be the goal in this very serious novel of ideas.

Taken together, these flaws in execution sometimes make the book hard to read, and they will limit its potential audience. I expect that it will gain enthusiastic responses only from people who are already primed for sympathy with its philosophical ideas. As promised, I’ll turn to those, although they can’t be discussed in isolation from the structure and tone of the novel and its portrayal of characters who are presented as authorial mouthpieces.

In particular, the main character, Jethro Knight, plays a similar role to John Galt in Ayn Rand’s 1957 novel *Atlas Shrugged*. To summarize the plot of *The Transhumanist Wager* in a couple of sentences, Knight obtains the help of an elderly transhumanist mentor and a billionaire Russian entrepreneur to commence a massive seasteading project – constructing a small country, Transhumania, that floats on the high seas beyond the jurisdictions of existing nations. He aims to foster “incredible,” “amazing” advances in technology, with a longer term agenda of achieving global rule.

Knight has a philosophy and a plan that are presented uncritically. Near the end of the book, he makes a speech fifteen pages long, standing as a kind of transhumanist manifesto (it appears to carry the author's complete endorsement). Knight is shown as a kind of visionary superman, able to endure extremes of peril and abuse thanks to his indomitable rationality, preparation, and self-belief. Viewed unsympathetically, his speeches and deeds are those of a murderous fanatic and egomaniac, but he is coded throughout the novel as entirely admirable, just as the villains – his various religious and political opponents – are coded as utterly despicable. One of the few complex characters, Knight's lover and eventual wife, Zoe Bach, is killed relatively early in the action, leaving us with a Manichean struggle between visionary good and theocratic evil.

Knight's philosophical system, which he calls Teleological Egocentric Functionalism, is based on a desire for personal immortality and omnipotence. To the extent that he sees mutual advantage in doing so, he cooperates with others who are on similar paths, but he takes a proudly heartless attitude to anyone who acts as a hindrance. Thus, the vision of the book goes far beyond opposition to theocratic and other irrational constraints on scientific research. We are asked to admire someone with a comprehensive view of the world that he is prepared to impose universally even if it requires atrocities and massive acts of cultural vandalism. While some readers might cheer on Knight's efforts if they're sufficiently impressed by his ideas, most of us would find his attitudes and plans utterly chilling.

Indeed, Knight could have been more interesting as a villain than as a hero. He's given the motivation to do atrocious things in pursuit of a lofty cause, while displaying a certain integrity and nobility. That makes for the kind of villain for whom we can feel some sympathy and admiration, perhaps even the kind who does terrible things out of utilitarian necessity. If it helps, think of Ozymandias in Frank Miller's 1986-87 *Watchmen* comics series. When presented as a hero, by contrast – all nobility, vision, and righteousness – Knight is insufferable. It is faintly possible, I suppose, to interpret *The Transhumanist Wager* as making a more subtle point: that its hero eventually overreaches and turns into something more like an anti-hero or an anti-villain, prompting questions as to how he *should* have acted to pursue his goals. The book might be redeemed, to an extent, if reinterpreted like that and used as a basis for discussion, but it would go against the rhetorical grain of the narrative, and particularly its triumphant conclusion.

I dread to think that general readers might envisage transhumanism as the callous and potentially totalitarian enterprise that *The Transhumanist Wager* makes it appear. More generally, there is a danger in regarding any cause as all-important and overwhelmingly urgent. That is the sort of attitude that can harden an attractive idea or a valuable social movement into an ideology, with accompanying authoritarianism and ruthlessness.

While I expected to enjoy *The Transhumanist Wager*, I found it unskilled as a novel and worse than that as a manifesto. It might be hyperbole to call the book "dangerous," since there's little likelihood that it will attract an effective following or inspire violent acts. Nonetheless, it exalts a conspicuously unattractive protagonist, offering him as a role model with no reservations or criticisms that I can discern. I do share its author's dislike of theocracy, though not his apparent disdain for the human legacy of art and culture.

The Transhumanist Wager may inspire some useful debates among transhumanists and others concerned with future of humanity, but I can't wish it any influence on their thinking. I certainly hope it won't be taken by outsiders as an accurate picture of transhumanism as a philosophy or a social movement.