

A THEATRE OF POLITICS: HISTORY'S ACTORS IN GORE VIDAL'S *EMPIRE*

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ABSTRACT: *Gore Vidal's novel Empire, the fifth of his seven novels about American history, depicts a period of American history from 1898 to 1908. The presidencies of William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt are portrayed from a revisionist point of view which is more complex than it may first appear. Himself consistently isolationist in regard to American foreign policy, Vidal nevertheless sympathetically privileges the perspective of John Hay. As Donald Pease has remarked, Vidal has frequently exploited similarities between the past epochs described in his historical novels and the political circumstances at the time in which he was writing, in order 'to promote an awareness of the contrastive usages to which different ruling narratives could put historical events.'*¹ *As he suggests, in Empire (1987) and Hollywood (1999) Vidal implicitly critiques Ronald Reagan's apparent difficulty in distinguishing between the foreign policy of his administration and 'the fantasy world of the movies.'*¹ *In this article, I reconsider Empire some twenty years after its first publication, at a time when the nature of American imperialism is being debated with renewed urgency.*²

In his recent magisterial biography of Isaiah Bowman, entitled *American Empire*, Neil Smith asserts that 'After [September 11] 2001, the American right increasingly celebrates the rise to empire, taking back the triumphant language of the first moment of global ambition a century earlier. History may indeed be repeating itself as farce.'³ Although writing from the perspective of a geographer, Smith situates his biography in relation to the 'more progressive "revisionist" histories of U.S. foreign relations [that] began to appear in the latter decades of the twentieth century', commenting that 'The revisionist insistence on a twentieth-century American "empire" was subversive insofar as it threatened a cherished fiction of American innocence.'⁴ Whilst Gore Vidal has represented the American empire predominantly through the genres of historical fiction and the essay, he shares Smith's premise that - in order to comprehend its present role in the world - we need to know something of its evolution.

One need not exert much effort to find a diverse range of material – both recent and not so recent – concerning the question of whether the United States is or is not an 'empire'. In the July 2007 issue of *AJAS*, Ian Tyrrell remarks that, 'Apart from the economic interpretation of American empire developed by William Appleman Williams in the 1960s, the topic was

largely forgotten for decades until the 1990s. It is now making a comeback [...].⁵ In the December 2007 issue of *AJAS*, Dennis Phillips argues that Williams has been under-estimated in recent decades and that his work warrants the renewed attention that it is starting to receive.⁶ Although Williams has not been entirely ignored until the last few years, for some time, as Donald Pease has asserted, criticisms expressed by Williams and other revisionist historians of the prevailing ‘doctrine of U.S. Exceptionalism ... were removed from the public sphere and relegated to the cultural realm where the agency of imperialism was redesignated as mythological rather than actual.’⁷ Within the ‘cultural realm’, Williams’ influence can be perceived throughout Vidal’s seven novels about American history, collectively entitled ‘Narratives of Empire’, as Dennis Altman has noted.⁸ Indeed, many of Vidal’s works could plausibly have shared the title of Williams’ book *Empire as a Way of Life*. At the core of the ‘Narratives of Empire’ is Vidal’s belief that – as Williams puts it - ‘a sense of history involves comprehending and coming to terms with the consequences of one’s actions.’⁹

According to Dawson and Schueller, ‘1898 marks an important moment for most historians because it exemplifies a shift from continental westward expansion to the control of far-flung territories.’¹⁰ Whereas the United States’ acquisition of overseas territories at the end of the nineteenth century may once have been considered ‘an aberration in the history of an otherwise non-imperial United States’¹¹, the argument is currently increasingly put that the events of 1898 were consistent with previous policies. (Neil Smith’s biography of Isaiah Bowman is, in this sense, representative of the *Zeitgeist* which Vidal, in *Empire*, anticipated.) Nearly fifty years ago, Louis Halle represented the United States as an unwitting, even unwilling, entrant onto the world stage.

Up to 1898 the United States [sic] had cultivated and enjoyed the isolation implicit in the geographical concept of two hemispheres. In 1898 it lost or gave up that isolation by assuming commitments overseas. It entered the arena of European rivalries as a newly arrived world power. [...]

*This engagement in overseas imperialism was so abrupt and unpremeditated, however, and we were so little prepared for it, that our thinking could not adjust itself.*¹²

Andrew J Bacevitch’s sardonic response to such a perspective, published in 2002, is arguably typical of the ‘revisionist’ interpretation of the territorial expansion of 1898. In a chapter entitled ‘The Myth of the Reluctant Superpower’, Bacevitch asserts that there has been a long-standing and

widespread refusal on the part of Americans to acknowledge agency in their nation's relations with other countries.

The United States does not act in accordance with some predetermined logic; it reacts to circumstances. Although the events of 1898 accelerated its ascent to world power, the United States – unlike other nations – achieved pre-eminence not by consciously seeking it but simply as an unintended consequence of actions taken either in self-defense or on behalf of others.

Thus, in 1898 Americans chose war only when the continuing depredations of Spain's General Valeriano ("Butcher") Weyler in Cuba had become intolerable.¹³

Like the 'revisionist' historians, Vidal rejects the notion that the United States' acquisition of Hawaii, Guam, the Philippines and Puerto Rico was, in Halle's word, 'unpremeditated'. In an essay entitled 'The Day the American Empire Ran out of Gas', published whilst he was in the process of writing *Empire*, he asserted that 'our modern empire was carefully thought out by four men', Alfred Thayer Mahan, Brooks Adams, Theodore Roosevelt, and Henry Cabot Lodge. Having been greatly impressed by Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power on History, 1660-1783*, Roosevelt envisioned the United States as having a mission to lead where once England led, and concurred with Mahan's view that a nation needed colonies in order to hold power at sea. 'Roosevelt was much under the influence of Adams and Mahan; he was also their political instrument, most active not so much during his presidency as during the crucial war with Spain, where he can take a good deal of credit for our seizure of the Philippines, which made us a world empire.'¹⁴ *Empire* can be read as an elaboration upon this argument, significant roles in the genesis of the empire also being attributed in the novel to William McKinley and John Hay. The historical protagonists in *Empire* are 'actors' in both senses of the word – history's agents rather than respondents, and cannily self-aware performers in the theatre of national life.

In his analytical survey of the historical novel, Georg Lukacs discusses the roots of the modern novel - particularly historical fiction - in Shakespearean drama.

The example of Shakespeare's great tragedies is particularly instructive, because in them the specifically dramatic character of historical changes, of dramatic historicism, is clearly manifest. As a true dramatist Shakespeare does not try to paint a detailed picture of

historical and social circumstances. He characterizes the period through the actors. (Emphasis in original)¹⁵

Vidal's historical novels overtly indicate their indebtedness to Shakespearean drama by frequent allusions to the history plays and the tragedies. The 'Narratives of Empire' explore three interwoven themes which recur throughout Shakespeare's history plays: the nature of 'report' and reputation; true and false fathers and sons; and the legitimacy or otherwise of political authority. At the end of *Burr*, which in subject matter is the first of the seven novels, the fictional protagonist, Charlie Schuyler, discovers that he is the illegitimate son of Aaron Burr only after Burr's death, when it is too late for him to act upon this knowledge. As Robert Kiernan has suggested, Schuyler's belated discovery of his own identity serves as a metaphor for Vidal's message in *Burr* – I would suggest the message of the other novels in the series also – that the United States has misunderstood its own paternity.¹⁶

In the 'Narratives of Empire', Vidal inter-relates the stories of significant historical figures in political life, influential personalities in the media, and his own fictional dynasty, descended from Aaron Burr. Read in chronological order of their subject matter, the seven novels collectively comprise a thesis about the ways in which American political mythology has been formulated since the War of Independence.¹⁷ The trope of politics as a form of theatre predominates, mastery of the art of 'self-fashioning' being a crucial element in political success. Of the seven novels, only two – *Burr* and *1876* – are narrated in the first-person, through the fictional device of Charlie Schuyler's journal. The other novels are narrated by an omniscient voice, which privileges the consciousness of certain characters at various times. Dennis Altman makes the understandable mistake of referring to John Hay as one of the 'narrators' of Vidal's *Lincoln*,¹⁸ presumably because of Vidal's evident fondness for this character and because his thoughts – unlike those of Lincoln – are represented. If Vidal considered making Hay the narrator of *Empire*, there were obvious reasons to discount the option: Hay died in 1905, some years before the point at which Vidal wanted to conclude the novel; and Vidal wished also to privilege the viewpoint of his other protagonist, Caroline Sanford, an outsider to the political system and the great-grand-daughter of Aaron Burr.

Vidal does not begin *Empire* conventionally, with the events leading up to the war between Spain and the United States. Instead, he pointedly chose to begin the narrative bathetically, on August 13, 1898 – the day after the signing of the armistice which concluded the war. The novel opens in the middle of a house-party in Kent, where John Hay, his wife, and their intimate friend Henry Adams are visiting the retired senator from

Pennsylvania, Don Cameron, and his wife. Another close friend, Henry James, soon appears as well, in the first of two voluble cameos, the other occurring towards the end of the book. As Richard Poirier suggests, Vidal's characterisation of James, written in the style of James himself, 'is an early indication of how Vidal's novel will itself deal with its powerful and famous characters.'¹⁹ Vidal has explicitly placed himself in the tradition of Adams and James, and, as will be discussed later, pays tribute to them in various ways in *Empire*.²⁰ The last piece of dialogue in the novel, however, is spoken by William Randolph Hearst, as if to confirm what has been intimated throughout – that 'history' as crafted by historians will be superseded in the twentieth century by 'history' as invented by the media.

Vidal incorporates the fictional Caroline Sanford and her half-brother Blaise into the plot of *Empire* in order to portray through their eyes the respective worlds of Hay and Hearst - they perform the practical narrative function of intermediaries between the two bases of power, politics and the media. The previous novel in the series, *1876*, concludes a few months after the birth of Blaise. His mother had died whilst giving birth to him, and his father had married Emma Schuyler d'Agrigente with scandalous haste, following which the newly constituted family had moved to France. *Empire* reveals that Emma had died in 1878, not long after giving birth to Caroline. At the beginning of *Empire*, Blaise and Caroline have left France; he to study at Yale, and she to contest in the New York courts her brother's interpretation of their late father's will. Blaise insists that Colonel Sanford had intended his daughter to receive her half of his fortune when she turned twenty-seven, thus giving Blaise himself control of the entire estate until 1905. Caroline interprets the will as allowing her to inherit at the age of twenty-one. As the novel commences, Blaise has left Yale without graduating, to become an employee of William Randolph Hearst. It is Hearst's publications which have succeeded in provoking the three-month war with Spain, the conclusion of which is announced in the opening sentence of the novel. It is through Blaise, a class-mate of John Hay's son Adelbert (Del), that Caroline has been introduced into the Hay-Adams circle.

Vidal had previously left John Hay as a young man in Paris at the end of *Lincoln*. Hay's position in American history is indisputably a remarkable one. He accompanied Abraham Lincoln to Washington from Illinois as his assistant secretary, and later served in American legations in France, Austria and Spain. For several years he was an editorial writer for the *New York Tribune*. He served briefly as assistant secretary of state in the administration of Rutherford B Hayes. He would later spend a decade co-writing a ten-volume 'Life' of Lincoln with the late president's other secretary, J.G. Nicolay. As *Empire* begins, Hay is fifty-nine years of age and serving as the American ambassador to Great Britain. Although already

experiencing symptoms of a terminal illness, he is about to accept McKinley's offer of appointment as Secretary of State. In this role, which he continued under Roosevelt, Hay substantially influenced American foreign policy, with enduring effects. As Hay himself commented in a letter written shortly after the death of William McKinley, it was his 'strange and tragic fate [...] to stand by the bier of three of my dearest friends, Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley, three of the gentlest of men, all risen to be head of the state, and all done to death by assassins.'²¹

That Vidal evidently feels a strong affinity with John Hay may at first seem incongruous. Hay was an enthusiastic proponent of American expansionism, although 'he felt that the Administration ought never to associate itself with such un-American concepts as empire.' (*Empire*, p.331) In *Empire as a Way of Life*, William Appleman William discusses the documents written by Hay which expressed what came to be called the 'Open Door Policy'.

*Hay's objective was to open the way for the endless expansion of the American frontier in the name of self-determination, progress, and peace. His psychological strategy was similar to the one employed by President McKinley in dealing with Spain over Cuba. In that instance, pointing to the domestic unrest generated by that revolution, McKinley announced that Spain's failure to cope with the upheaval was responsible for the turmoil in the United States. Thus if Spain could not control Cuba, America would exercise its right to intervene to preserve its own political tranquillity. [...] Those who question an [...] imperial reading of Hay's policy often point out that the United States never embarked upon a program of acquiring colonies, or even spheres of influence, in the classic European way of empire. [...] The argument is formally correct and yet seriously misleading. On the one hand, American policy-makers never undertook to create that kind of an empire. On the other hand, a map colored to show primary or major economic, political, and military power and influence would reveal the United States as a global power.*²² (emphasis in original)

In *Empire* John Hay attempts to persuade McKinley to annex the Philippines with the argument that it is the duty of the United States, now that the British empire is in decline, to 'Christianize the less developed races of the world.'(p.73) Yet Vidal pre-emptively defends Hay lest the reader assume that he is simply a 'jingo'; his Hay regrets his thoughtless description of the recent war against Spain as 'a splendid little war'. Vidal

himself has adopted a consistently isolationist position in regard to the United States' foreign policy.²³ As Dennis Altman remarks, 'Bitter debate between the characters in *Empire* over the annexation of the Philippines can be seen as prefiguring divisions over interventions in Vietnam and Iraq a century later.'²⁴ Yet, as Richard Poirier subtly observes, 'a fact often lost sight of is that Vidal [...] refuses to treat American imperialism as if it were something that shouldn't have happened.'²⁵

*Vidal is not in any simple way against American "empire". [...] Rather, he opposes the brutal and self-defeating ways of getting and managing an empire [...] Nor is he complaining that America, like other countries, creates fictional apologies for expansion. It is not the fictions themselves, but their proliferation, mechanization, and shabbiness that, in his view, have sickened and corrupted the nation.*²⁶

Empire is as concerned with 'competing fictions' (literal and metaphorical) as with conflicts between nations. Within this context, John Hay and Caroline Sanford function as contrapuntal protagonists, each at times conveying Vidal's own opinions. Early on, for example, Caroline harbours heretical notions about the recent war: 'Why drive poor weak old Spain out of the Caribbean and the Pacific? Why take on far-off colonies? Why boast so much?' (p.25) Yet the reader senses Vidal's closer emotional connection with Hay who, like his author, 'never ceased to delight in the spontaneous hypocrisy of the true politician, always at his most appealing when faced in the flesh by a bitter enemy.' (p.115)

One of John Hay's precursors as ambassador to Great Britain was Charles Francis Adams, who had been selected by Lincoln in 1861. It was in that year that Hay first met Henry Adams, prior to the latter's departure for England to act as his father's secretary. As *Empire* relates, a lifelong intimacy developed between the Hays, the Adamses and the geologist Clarence King, the Hays and Adamses occupying adjoining houses in Lafayette Square from 1884. After Henry's brilliant wife Clover Adams inexplicably committed suicide in 1885, by drinking potassium cyanide, he could never bear to hear her mentioned. She is a palpable absence in his memoir, *The Education of Henry Adams*²⁷, which Vidal regards as a touchstone of the autobiographical genre.²⁸ Adams's memoir ends with the death of John Hay in 1905. Adams himself would live on for a further thirteen years – and feature again in Vidal's next novel, *Hollywood*.

A man devoted to the company of women, Adams discussed in the later chapters of his *Education* their positive influence, and declared that 'Adams

owed more to the American woman than to all the American men he ever heard of.' (p.442) In *Empire*, Adams tells Caroline that "American history is deeply enervating. [...] Enervating because there are no women in it." (p.143) Vidal provides a further reason for the sympathetic relationship between his fictional heroine and the man whom he has described as his country's only major historian.²⁹ Caroline is the grand-daughter of Charles Schermerhorn Schuyler, the illegitimate son of Aaron Burr's. Adams allegedly wrote a book on Burr which he never published.

...something in Burr's character or life had made Henry uneasy; he had decided that Burr was not a 'safe' scoundrel to deal with, and if he were let out of the history books where he had been entombed alongside Benedict Arnold, he might cheat the world all over again. Hay rather suspected that Adams had not destroyed the book but used parts of it for his study of Jefferson. (p.403)

One of Vidal's step-fathers, Hugh Auchincloss, was related to Burr.³⁰ Vidal's relationship to Jefferson's disgraced vice-president is therefore analogous to that of the fictional Blaise's son Peter who, as the protagonist of *Washington, D.C.*, contemplates writing about Aaron Burr. Late in *Empire*, Caroline reads her great-grandfather's memoirs, framed with Charlie Schuyler's narrative (*Burr*) and Schuyler's commentary on the occasion of its centenary (1876), in order to discover her heritage. Caroline intends to show these texts to Henry Adams, although finally she never does. *The Education of Henry Adams* conveys Adams's own feeling of belatedness as the grandson and great-grandson of presidents - the burden of being the heir to generations of greatness. As if on a phantasmal level, Caroline acts as an intermediary between her own author and Henry Adams. Through the metafictional device of Caroline's study of the memoirs, Vidal figuratively defies his own belatedness and speaks to his literary master, having completed him through the writing of *Burr*.

In 1880, Adams's novel *Democracy* was published anonymously, the identity of the author not becoming public knowledge until after his death. The heroine of the novel, Madeleine Lee, a young widow, settles in Washington in order to study power at work in a democracy. She attracts the attention of Senator Silas P. Ratcliffe, who attempts to persuade her that, by marrying him, she would be in an ideal position to 'reform' American politics. Once in the past, as governor of his state, Ratcliffe had fraudulently reversed the results of an election. When another of Mrs. Lee's suitors reveals to her that Ratcliffe had also once accepted a bribe, in return for legislation favourable to a certain company, she rejects the Senator in disgust. Having learned that corruption and politics are inextricably

connected, she abandons her scrutiny of the democratic process and leaves for Europe. As is explained in *Empire*, in the character of Ratcliffe, Adams riskily lampooned James G. Blaine, a leading Republican and vivid rogue, whose corrupt activities Vidal later expounded in 1876.

Vidal had previously used *Democracy* as a model for *Washington, D.C.* and 1876, his most direct borrowing having been the literal translation of one of Adams's characters, the Bulgarian diplomat Baron Jacobi, into 1876. Although she sometimes imagines herself as a Henry James heroine,³¹ Caroline explicitly cites the heroine of *Democracy* as an antitype or ancestor for herself. 'I feel as if you had created me, a second Mrs. Lightfoot Lee, and then left me in mid-chapter', she tells Henry Adams. (p.136) Caroline, however, wishes to achieve power in her own right, in the public sphere.

More than a generation separated Caroline from Henry Adams's Mrs. Lightfoot Lee; now, Caroline decided, it was possible for a woman to achieve what she wanted on her own and not through marriage, or some similar surrogate.
(pp.156-157)

She acquires a failing newspaper, which she manages to make profitable by cynically imitating the 'yellow' journalism of Hearst's publications. Her eccentricity is tolerated because of her reputed great wealth, which at this stage exists more in rumour and hope than in fact. However, partly in order to fulfil her society's demands of a young heiress, and partly because she is fond of him, she becomes engaged to Del Hay. The engagement is brought to an abrupt end in June 1901, by Del's fatal fall from a window. John Hay's letters written in the weeks immediately following Del's death testify simply and movingly to his profound grief, and his need to believe that Del never suffered.

My boy is gone, and the whole face of the world is changed in a moment.

Have you heard how it happened? The night was frightfully hot and close. He sat on the window-sill to get cool before turning in, and fell asleep. He was the soundest sleeper I ever knew. He probably did not wake.³²

As Vidal states in a postscript to *Empire*, 'I have changed the time of Del Hay's defenestration from mid-night to mid-day.' He took this poetic license – placing the death in the midst of a Yale class reunion - in order to put Caroline and Blaise at the scene, which is nonetheless skilfully and poignantly re-imagined in the novel.

Caroline later commences a long-standing affair with a handsome congressman, James Burden Day. (On the day of his election, Day had married the daughter of the judge who had facilitated his success. The Days' hometown, American City, is a gesture of homage to Henry James. In *The Golden Bowl*, the fictional 'American City' is the place where Charlotte Stant is exiled with her husband Adam Verver in order that Verver's daughter Maggie can 'save' her own marriage.) Despite the obstetric ministrations of her French maid, Caroline becomes pregnant. She marries a compliant distant cousin, John Apgar Sanford, and presents her daughter Emma to society, and to her lover, as her husband's child. John agrees to a marriage in name only, in exchange for Caroline's payment of his considerable debts. He continues to act as her lawyer and husband until her twenty-seventh birthday, when she inherits her share of her father's property, and they amicably divorce.

Shortly before Adelbert Hay's death, President McKinley had appointed him assistant private secretary, the same position which his father had filled for Abraham Lincoln. 'As Lincoln had lifted the younger Hay out of the irrelevant mass and placed him squarely in history, so McKinley now lifted the son.' (p.285) Just as Lincoln had functioned as a father-mentor for the young John Hay, to whom he was more attuned than to his own eldest son Robert, so the childless McKinley cultivated Del Hay, having – in Vidal's assessment - a natural affinity with him denied to his father.³³

On September 6, 1901, the anarchist Leon Czolgosz shot McKinley at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. The wounded man immediately expressed concern for his chronically ill wife, and for his attacker. He died eight days later. Whereas coincidental similarities in the fates of Lincoln and John F. Kennedy have been the subject of twentieth century folklore, *Empire* emphasises instead those between Lincoln and the less romantic figure of McKinley. Vidal offers two interpretations of McKinley – on the one hand, that he was a politically cunning but genuinely good man, and, on the other, that he was a mere puppet of Senator Mark Hanna of Ohio³⁴, and other moneyed interests. Greater credence is ultimately given to the former. On January 1st, 1900, Caroline accompanies the Hays to a reception at the White House, where Caroline contemplates McKinley in terms which, by inference, reflect Vidal's own judgement.³⁵

Caroline had already realized that her own criterion for intelligence was both conventional and European. For her, intelligence was, simply, to what degree a mind had been civilized. As a result, she had been in no way prepared for a mind that, innocent of civilization, was still capable of swift analysis and shrewd action. McKinley barely knew of

Caesar and Alexander; yet he had conquered almost as much of the earth as either, without once stirring from the ugly national house with its all-important telegraph-machine and no less potent telephone.

[...] There was, thought Caroline, a lot to be learned about acting from Mr McKinley. (p.206)

As if to reiterate the inextricable relationship between politics and theatre, Vidal's other protagonist's response to the occasion is similar. 'Again, Hay thought of the house – the city, too, and the republic beyond – as a theatre, with a somewhat limited repertory of plays; and types.' (p.203)

McKinley's successor, Theodore Roosevelt, is a more dominant and eccentric character in *Empire*.³⁶ Roosevelt's stampeding of the Republican National Convention in June, 1900, resulting in his nomination for the office of Vice President, occurs at the centre of *Empire*, indicating the pivotal role of this historical event. One of the ironies upon which Vidal plays is that Roosevelt had been undecided for some time as to whether to seek the nomination, as vice-presidents had previously so rarely gone on to attain the highest office. '...he knows that every vice-president's been passed over since Van Buren.' (p.229) In an essay entitled 'Theodore Roosevelt: An American Sissy' – which, like 'The Day the American Empire Ran out of Gas', can be read as a companion-piece to *Empire* – Vidal considers Roosevelt against the contexts of his clan and social class.

*There is something strangely infantile in [an] obsession with dice-loaded physical courage when the only courage that matters in political or even "real" life is moral. Although TR was often reckless and always domineering in politics, he never showed much real courage, and despite some trust-busting, he never took on the great ring of corruption that ruled and rules in this republic.*³⁷

In *The Anarchy of Empire*, Amy Kaplan analyses the 'manifestly theatrical' aspect of Roosevelt's public life – her discussion of Roosevelt, including the 'military fiasco' that was the charge up San Juan Hill, complements Vidal's composite portrait of this president in the essay and *Empire*.³⁸ One of the fictional techniques which Vidal consistently uses in order to deflate venerated historical figures is the humanizing 'close-up' – the unflattering scrutiny of the individual's physical characteristics, by which they are rendered more or less ridiculous. Roosevelt's idiosyncratic mannerisms – the clacking of his large teeth, the restless movements likened to those of a wind-up toy – are repeatedly caricatured. (Sitting behind the president as he delivers his inaugural address on March 4, 1905, 'as always, Hay marvelled

at the way neck became head without any widening at all.' (p.442)) *Empire's* overall assessment of Roosevelt, although persistently mocking in delivery, appears nevertheless to be more positive than negative – again, as conveyed from John Hay's perspective: 'As deeply tiring as Theodore was on the human level, "drunk with himself" as Henry liked to put it, he was the best the country had to offer, and they were all in luck'. (p.400)

At the outbreak of the war with Spain, Roosevelt had resigned his position as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in order to raise a regiment for Cuba. According to W. H. Swanberg, biographer of William Randolph Hearst,

It was [Roosevelt's] enormous publicity as the intrepid leader of the Rough Riders - publicity which he shrewdly exploited - that formed the basis of his brilliant career in politics. Since Hearst brought on the war, it can be said that he also put Roosevelt in Albany as governor [of New York] and in the White House as President.³⁹

Having apparently genuinely believed in the cause of the Cuban rebellion against Spanish rule, and wanting also to win his own war of circulation against Joseph Pulitzer, Hearst had used his newspapers to misinform and provoke the public. As Sidney Lens has put it, 'popular revulsion against Spain' was exploited by those who wanted war. 'The situation in Cuba was bad enough, but it was exacerbated by some of the wildest and most dishonest reporting ever known.'⁴⁰ In Swanberg's judgement, Hearst's coverage of the explosion of the U.S. Cruiser Maine in Havana harbour, which killed two hundred and sixty men - the cause of which was never fully determined - 'stands as the orgasmic acme of ruthless, truthless newspaper jingoism'.⁴¹ Sufficient numbers of his readers were convinced that the Spanish had deliberately blown up the ship that public sentiment compelled the administration to enter the newspapers' war. Commodore George Dewey was promoted to Admiral as a result of his victories in the war, but was not sufficiently astute to exploit his resulting popularity as Roosevelt did.

Three times in *The Education of Henry Adams*, Adams expresses the axiom that a friend in power is a friend lost.⁴² In a typically Vidalian allusion to Shakespeare, Adams in the novel terms his former protegee, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, 'one of nature's Iagos'.

*Hay made his addition to the indictment. "So if Cabot's Iago, McKinley must be his Othello."
"No, no." Adams was firm. "After all, Othello trusted Iago.....No. I see Theodore in the part of Othello. They*

*complement each other. Theodore all action and bluster,
Cabot all devious calculation." (pp.277-278)*

In *The Education*, Adams characterised Roosevelt himself as another friend lost to the corrupting attractions of power.

Roosevelt, more than any other man living within the range of notoriety, showed the singular primitive quality that belongs to ultimate matter - the quality that medieval theology assigned to God - he was pure act. With him wielding unmeasured power with immeasurable energy, in the White House, the relation of age to youth - of teacher to pupil - was altogether out of place; and no other was possible. Even Hay's relation was a false one, while Adams's ceased of itself.⁴³

After the war which made Roosevelt a celebrity, Hearst revealed his own political aspirations, developing a yearning for the Presidency which would endure for more than thirty years. He was elected to Congress, from New York's Eleventh District, in 1902. In 1906, he was effectively prevented from winning the governorship of New York by Roosevelt. The President sent John Hay's successor as Secretary of State, the brilliant Elihu Root, to deliver a speech at Utica on November 1 which, in Swanberg's words, was 'unexcelled as a political hatchet job.'⁴⁴ Most damaging to Hearst was Root's charge that Hearst was responsible for the murder of McKinley. His newspapers had been unrestrained in their attacks on McKinley, and his publication in 1900 of a tasteless quatrain by Ambrose Bierce, which appeared to call for the assassination of the President, had aroused much condemnation and anger when it proved prophetic. After his humiliating defeat in 1906, Hearst declared that he would never run for office again. Nevertheless - hoping that a good result for his party, the Independence League, in the elections of 1908 might lead to victory in 1912 - he decided to use as a publicity coup a weapon which he had held for some years.

One of Hearst's editors had obtained the stolen correspondence of John D. Archbold, vice president of the Standard Oil Company, during 1904 and 1905. The correspondence overwhelmingly indicated that one of Archbold's primary tasks was 'arranging' legislation favourable to Standard Oil. He had made direct payments by cheque to some public officials. Hearst first revealed his possession of the letters in a speech delivered in Ohio on September 17, 1908, after which he released them for publication to all newspapers. To conceal the fact that he had been holding the letters for years, he fabricated a story that the letters had been given to him by a stranger in his hotel room, shortly before the Ohio speech.

In *Empire* it is Blaise Sanford who buys from Archbold's employees a letter from Roosevelt to Archbold, written at some point in the first half of 1904, and which Hearst interprets as Roosevelt's implied request for a campaign contribution from Standard Oil. After Hearst's defeat in the gubernatorial election of 1906, Blaise and Hearst examine all the letters together. Vidal thus construes Hearst's motive for wanting to prove the rule of the oil trust in politics as a desire for revenge upon the man whose career he had made, and who had repaid him by thwarting his own ambitions. Swanberg represents Roosevelt as essentially innocent.

*...he knew Archbold personally and the acquaintance might be misconstrued. After the [presidential] election, he invited Hearst to visit him at the White House, where the two men had a brief talk. The President was said to have asked whether Hearst had any gossip connecting him with Archbold, to which Hearst reassured him. Certainly there was no suspicion of Roosevelt, who had fought Standard Oil steadily during his second term.*⁴⁵

In *Empire*, by contrast, Vidal casts doubt upon Roosevelt's integrity.

What, Blaise wondered for the first time, were the President's relations with Standard Oil? Obviously, there was something that he didn't want known; and it probably had to do with the gathering of money for the 1904 election. (p.481)

Empire concludes with Vidal's re-imagining of the meeting between Hearst and Roosevelt, which took place on November 16, 1908. In Vidal's version, the discussion centres not on the Archbold letters but instead on posterity.⁴⁶ "..."Soon you'll move out of here", Hearst tells Roosevelt,

"and that's the end of you. But I go on and on, describing the world we live in, which then becomes what I say it is. Long after no one knows the difference between you and Chester A. Arthur, I'll still be here." (p.483)

Stephen Harris has remarked that Vidal's Hearst is a distorted embodiment of American individualism – 'an almost caricatural villain.'⁴⁷ On the surface, Hearst appears to be the victor in the confrontation with Roosevelt. In a piece on Vidal which appeared in *Vanity Fair* soon after *Empire* was published, Stephen Schiff shrewdly attributed an autobiographical element to this scene.

*In Empire, Vidal reaches for a redemption no feud or campaign has ever provided him. He has recast the writer of fictions as the true politician, the true creator of history, the true man of action after all.*⁴⁸

Vidal himself ran for political office twice and has described his own, and his grandfather's, unfulfilled ambitions as 'unfinished business'.⁴⁹ Consistent with Schiff's observation, Donald Pease suggests that, 'Following his congressional campaign, Vidal imaginatively transformed his public persona into that of a ruler in political exile who understood how to construct ruling cultural narratives and how to change [their] rules.'⁵⁰ In the penultimate scene in the novel, Roosevelt directly alludes to Vidal's adored grandfather, Thomas Prior Gore, who became Oklahoma's first senator in 1907, to remind the reader that, for Vidal, national history is family history. 'They have [...] in their infinite Western wisdom, sent us a blind boy for one senator...' (p.480)

However, as the historical Hearst did not perceive himself as a man politically finished until the 1930s, the declaration of Vidal's Hearst - that as 'inventor' he will achieve an immortality beyond what is possible for the mere office-holder - might also be read as the self-deceptive palliative of a frustrated politician. Moreover, Vidal ironically undermines the words even before they are inscribed, insofar as Hearst will be unable to forestall his own re-creation by the historians - and the novelists - who will follow him. His claim of a pre-emptive right to create history fails on the text's fault-line - the narrator's statement that 'There would be no witnesses to what might follow'. (p.482) As the novel declares its own author's prerogative to re-invent the 'inventor', so it suggests the trope of history as *mise-en-abyme*, reconstruction within reconstruction. In emphasising the mortality of the various 'historians' which it portrays, *Empire* signals its own finiteness as a representation of history.

The novel does not conclude with Hearst's peroration, but with the narrator's contemplation of the portrait of Abraham Lincoln in the Cabinet room, 'eyes fixed on some far distance beyond the viewer's range, a prospect unknown and unknowable to the mere observer, at sea in present time.' (p.486) Throughout the novel, John Hay is periodically disconcerted by his inability to recollect the physical presence of Lincoln, although he sometimes senses his presence. When the ghost of Lincoln at last appears to Hay - quietly and matter-of-factly, just before Hay's death - it is not unexpected by the reader. It is as if the narrative has been leading inexorably to this point. (p.461) As Stephen Harris suggests, Lincoln 'presides with mute authority over the competitive claims of Hearst and

Roosevelt to sovereignty over history, Vidal clearly see[ing] Lincoln as the dominant figure in American history.⁵¹ In Vidal's view of the United States, 'for better or worse, we still live in the divided house that Lincoln cobbled together for us.'⁵²

However, as has been intimated earlier, the spectre of Aaron Burr also looms over *Empire*. Donald Pease remarks that 'Burr's aspiration to found an American empire afforded Vidal a historical figure who could authenticate his imperialist counter-narrative. Because Burr freely acknowledged political motives that other Americans relegated to a psychosocial censor, he also enabled Vidal to invent an entirely different psychological account of political motives.'⁵³ Burr – represented in Vidal's novel of that name as the president who should have been - has been rewritten in history as a 'traitor', a dangerous ghost, although his more dubious activities were not in fact unconstitutional. Lincoln – also reckless with laws and political institutions 'in his will to absolute executive power'⁵⁴ - has been absolved of any sins by his martyrdom.

As Lincoln's ghost is the predominant formative influence in the life of John Hay, so Caroline Sanford's vision of Burr guides her deliberate self-fashioning.

... where the man Burr had wanted high office – even a crown – his great-grand self-styled son was, after all, unmistakably and completely a woman, and so for Caroline there would be no high office in a nation where only males were allowed to occupy such visible places; yet there was something far better than mere office, and she had got a glimpse of it that evening on the second floor of the Tribune Building in Park Lane; there was, simply, true power. Although money was the source of power in this rude place, what she had seen and heard of Hearst that night had convinced her that the ultimate power is not to preside in a white house or open a parliament while seated on a throne but to reinvent the world for everyone by giving them the dreams that you wanted them to dream. (Empire, p.100)

In response to reviewers of *Empire* who asserted that no woman at the beginning of the twentieth century could have bought a Washington newspaper and made it a successful medium of yellow journalism, Vidal has responded that, 'of course, less than a generation later, a family friend, Eleanor Patterson, did exactly that with great success (her unfortunate marriage to a Polish count gave Edith Wharton much of the plot of *The Age*

of *Innocence*).⁵⁵ However, it is not the issue of whether Caroline's proprietorship of a newspaper is historically realistic or not that makes her, in this reader's view, the problem with the novel.

To date Caroline is Vidal's only female protagonist (if one discounts the dubious Myra Breckinridge). By the end of *Empire*, she has triumphed, and in the sequel, *Hollywood*, she embarks upon a career – as a silent movie actress and producer – with the support of her former competitor, Hearst. I have spent some time considering the basis of my dislike of this character, and have concluded that the reason is a fundamental inconsistency in her characterisation. Ultimately she is too protean a creation. In *Empire* she develops into a survivor with few scruples – her mother's daughter, as people continually remind her. In a Gothic sub-plot, Caroline learns from Blaise's maternal grandmother that her own mother had deliberately persuaded Blaise's mother to conceive, knowing that this would lead to her death. Given that Vidal has periodically expressed a hatred of 'lying' – 'Which is why I do not have a friendly time with journalists'⁵⁶ – it seems odd that readers of *Empire* are evidently expected to be amused by Caroline's gleeful exploitation of the lowest standards of journalism in order to increase the circulation of her newspaper. 'She now knew that nothing written in a newspaper should ever be taken seriously. [...] she exulted in the river's catch of beautiful bodies, often torn, literally, to bits by raging passions. She was now experimenting with abandoned live babies in trash-cans...' (p.182) I find it hard to credit Caroline's subsequent role, in her old age in *The Golden Age*, as a stateswoman and trusted friend of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt.

This qualm notwithstanding, *Empire* remains a useful and entertaining depiction of a definitive decade in American history. Vidal has periodically vigorously defended his novels as historically accurate when challenged by historians. The question of whether or not historical fiction as a genre has didactic 'value' will no doubt continue to be debated. In what remains one of the most insightful and comprehensive articles on Vidal's *oeuvre*, 'America and the Vidal Chronicles', Donald Pease argues that Vidal's novels 'undermine the assumptions constructive of Literature as a discipline separable from History as well as the ruling narratives corroboratory of their separation.'⁵⁷ As he suggests in relation to *Washington, D.C.*, but pertinently to the 'Narratives of Empire' as a whole, 'Vidal foster[s] the recognition of the difference between historical narratives we can collectively choose against a political mythology whose enactments we are otherwise compelled to repeat.'⁵⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ Donald E. Pease, 'America and the Vidal Chronicles', in Jay Parini, ed., *Gore Vidal: Writer Against the Grain*, Columbia U.P., New York, 1992, (pp. 245-277), p. 268.

² Gore Vidal, *Empire*. Random House, New York, 1987. Hereafter, page references will be given in the body of the text.

This article is partly based upon material in my unpublished doctoral thesis, 'The Fiction of History: Gore Vidal, from *Creation* to 'Armageddon?''', University of Oxford, 1990.

³ Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalisation*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2003, p.xvi.

⁴ Smith, op.cit., p. 8.

⁵ 'Confronting the 'E' Word: American Empire and Transnational History', *AJAS*, Vol 26, No. 1, July 2007, (pp.41-53), p.41.

⁶ 'The Tragedy of American Diplomacy: A Tribute to The Legacy of William Appleman Williams', *AJAS*, Vol. 26, No. 2, December 2007, (pp. 89-98), p.89.

⁷ Amy Kaplan, for example, emphasises the contemporary relevance of Williams's writings in her introduction to *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ' "Left Alone With America": The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture', in Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, Duke UP, Durham and London, 1993, pp. 3-21.

The quotation from Pease is taken from ' "America and the Vidal Chronicles", op. cit., p.264.

⁸ Dennis Altman, *Gore Vidal's America*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2005, p.48.

⁹ William Appleman Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life: An Essay on the Causes and Character of America's Present Predicament Along With a Few Thoughts About an Alternative*, OUP, New York & Oxford, 1980, p.113.

¹⁰ Ashley Dawson and Malini Johar Schueller, eds., *Exceptional State: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the New Imperialism*, Duke U.P., Durham and London, 2007, p.3.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Louis Halle, *Dream and Reality: Aspects of American Foreign Policy*, first published in 1959, and by Greenwood Press, Westport, 1973, p.176.

¹³ *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy*, Harvard U.P., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2002, p.7.

¹⁴ 'The Day the American Empire Ran out of Gas', originally published in *The Nation*, January 1, 1986, in *United States: Essays 1952-1992*, Andrew Deutsch, London, 1993, pp.1007-1016, p. 1009.

¹⁵ Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1969, p. 137.

¹⁶ Robert Kiernan, *Gore Vidal*, Frederick Ungar, New York, 1982, p.84.

¹⁷ 'Narratives of Empire' is the collective title used in *The Golden Age*, Little Brown and Company, London, 2000. The series was previously referred to as 'Narratives of a Golden Age'. In order of publication, the novels are: *Washington, D.C.* (1967); *Burr* (1973); *1876* (1976); *Lincoln* (1984); *Empire* (1987); *Hollywood* (1989); *The Golden Age* (2000).

¹⁸ Dennis Altman, op. cit., p.41.

¹⁹ Richard Poirier, *ibid.*, p.232.

²⁰ 'Obviously James and Henry Adams have been influences...', Gore Vidal told Robert J. Stanton in 1977, cited in Robert J. Stanton and Gore Vidal, eds., *Views From a Window: Conversations With Gore Vidal*, Lyle Stuart, Inc., Secaucus, 1980, p.182. 'In the American context, a writer whom I think I resemble in some ways is Henry Adams.' Cited in Charles Ruas, *Conversations with American Writers*, Quartet Books, London, 1984, p.59.

²¹ John Hay to Lady Jeune, September 14, 1901, in *Letters of John Hay and Extracts from Diary*, Volume III, Gordian Press, New York, 1969, p.230.

²² William Appleman Williams, op.cit., pp.128-129.

²³ **Marc Cooper:** Should the U.S. just pack up its military from everywhere and go home? **Gore Vidal:** Yes. With no exceptions. We are not the world's policeman. [...] I think it is time we roll back the empire – it is doing no one any good.' 'The Last Defender of the American Republic?: An Interview with Gore Vidal', in Gore Vidal, *Dreaming War: Blood For Oil and the Cheney-Bush Junta*, Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2002, (pp.183-197), p.195.

See also his comments on American intervention in El Salvador in Gary Conklin's documentary, 'Gore Vidal: The Man Who Said No', Mystic Fire Video, 1982.

²⁴ Dennis Altman, *op. cit.*, p.49.

²⁵ Richard Poirier, 'Vidal's *Empire*', in Jay Parini, ed., *Gore Vidal: Writer Against the Grain*, Columbia U.P., New York, 1992, (pp.230-238), p.235.

²⁶ Richard Poirier, *ibid.*, p.236.

²⁷ First published by the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1918. I refer to the Random House Edition, New York, 1931.

²⁸ 'Between *Les Mots* [by Jean-Paul Sartre] and *The Education of Henry Adams*, I am abashed.' Cited in Charles Ruas, *op.cit.*, p.74.

²⁹ In Gore Vidal, V.S. Pritchett, David Caute, Bruce Chatwin, Peter Conrad, Edward Jay Epstein, *Great American Families*, W.W. Norton and Co., New York, 1977, p.12.

³⁰ 'When I was ten years old my mother married a man called Auchincloss whose mother was a descendant of the Burr family. In fact, the ladies on that side of the family were so proud of the connection that Burr was always part of the names they were known by [...] My half sister has now burdened one of her sons with the name Burr Gore Steers [...] his name sounds like the national food.' Gore Vidal, 'self-interview', 1973, in *Views From a Window*, *op.cit.*, p.112.

³¹ 'After all, had [her brother] not behaved as he had, she might have been simply another transatlantic young heiress of the sort that Mr. James wrote more and more elaborately about.' *Empire*, *op. cit.*, p.333. 'Caroline now felt rather like one of Henry James's older European ladies, ready to launch some terrible bit of information at a dim-witted American ingénue.' (p.369)

³² John Hay to Henry White, June 30, 1901, in *Letters of John Hay*, *op.cit.*, p.213.

³³ In part, Vidal bases his interpretation of the relationship between Abraham and Robert Lincoln on Robert's conversations with Vidal's grand-father, Senator Thomas Pryor Gore. '...my grandfather [...] often talked to me about Robert's bleak attitude toward his father, who, having sent his son to Exeter and Harvard in order to move him up in the world, then found that he had a son with whom he had not much in common.' 'Lincoln, Lincoln, and the Priests of Academe', in *United States*, *op.cit.*, pp.668-700, pp.680-681.

³⁴ Hanna gives a 'definitive performance as King Lear' in enraged response to Theodore Roosevelt's 'stampeding' of the Republican convention of 1900, in order to have himself nominated for Vice-President. (p.232) The same convention provides another Shakespearean allusion when Blaise, conscious of the odour of the confined masses, feels like Coriolanus. (p.230)

³⁵ Vidal's Hearst, too, perceives McKinley as a canny strategist. 'McKinley runs the show, and lets Hanna collect the loot, and take the blame.' (*Empire*, p.223) Hay's assessment of McKinley is kinder: 'Hay tended to agree with Adams that McKinley, whether by accident or design, was the first great president since Lincoln.' (p.70)

³⁶ Bob Carr offers the opinion that 'the young, hyperactive Teddy Roosevelt is in these pages Vidal's most vivid creation.' *My Reading Life: Adventures in the World of Books*, Viking, Camberwell, 2008, p.100.

³⁷ 'Theodore Roosevelt: An American Sissy', first published in the *New York Review of Books*, August 13, 1981, in *United States*, *op. cit.*, pp.723-737, p.733.

³⁸ Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*, Harvard UP, Cambridge, Mass. & London, pp. 99&125.

³⁹ W. H. Swanberg, *Citizen Hearst: A Biography of William Randolph Hearst*, first published in 1961. Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1962, p.168.

⁴⁰ *The Forging of the American Empire: From the Revolution to Vietnam: A History of U.S. Imperialism*, originally published in 1971, Pluto Press, London, 2003, p.170.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.137.

⁴² *Op.cit.*, pp.108, 248, 417.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.417.

⁴⁴ Swanberg, *op.cit.*, p.251.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.313.

⁴⁶ On November 17, 1898, the *New York Times* reported this meeting as having taken place the previous night.

<http://query.nytimes.com/qst/abstract.html?res=980CE5DF113EE233A2575BCIA9679D946997D6CF> (accessed on September 28, 2007)

⁴⁷ Stephen Harris, *The Fiction of Gore Vidal and E. L. Doctorow: Writing the Historical Self*, Peter Lang, Oxford, 2002, pp. 90&91.

⁴⁸ Stephen Schiff, 'What Makes Gore Roar?', *Vanity Fair*, June 1987, Conde Nast, New York, pp.84-89 & 123-124, p.124.

⁴⁹ See Heather Neilson, 'In Epic Times: Gore Vidal's Creation Reconsidered', for a fuller discussion of Vidal's family's involvement in politics. *AJAS*, Vol. 23, No.1, July 2004, pp. 21-33.

⁵⁰ Donald E. Pease, 'America and the Vidal Chronicles', *op.cit.*, p.257.

⁵¹ *Gore Vidal's Historical Novels and the Shaping of American Political Consciousness*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston; Queenston; Lampeter, 2005, p.110.

⁵² 'Last Note on Lincoln', originally published in *The New York Review of Books*, August 15, 1991, in *United States*, *op.cit.*, pp. 701-707, p.707.

⁵³ Donald E. Pease, 'America and the Vidal Chronicles', *op.cit.*, p.270.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.272.

⁵⁵ 'Narratives of a Golden Age', Preface to *Burr*, first published in 1973, Abacus, 1993, pp. v-x, p. ix.

⁵⁶ 'Gore Vidal: Literary Feuds, his 'vicious' mother and rumours of a secret love child', Interview by Robert Chalmers, *The Independent*, Sunday, 25 May, 2008.

<<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/gore-vidal-literary-feuds-his-vicious-mother-and-rumours-of-a-secret-love-child-832525.html?action=Popup>> , accessed 2/6/08.

⁵⁷ Donald E. Pease, 'America and the Vidal Chronicles', *op.cit.*, p.277.

'The characters [of traditional historical novels] may be real-life historical figures whose lives are imagined against an accurately presented background, or they may be fictional creations placed by the author in a historical period to show how they react to their time. Alternatively, there may be a mix of historical and fictional characters present in the novel, with interaction between them.' Thus Sarah L. Johnson in *Historical Fiction: A Guide to the Genre*, which peculiarly omits any mention of Gore Vidal. Libraries Unlimited, Westport, Connecticut & London, 2005, p.15.

The novelist can invent dialogue and impute motive. The fictional narrative can promote a specific point of view, rather than be constrained to aim for objectivity. As Bob Carr relates in *My Reading Life*, Vidal has criticized other historical novelists precisely for not advancing a 'particular point of view'. *op.cit.*, p.198.

⁵⁸ Donald E. Pease, 'America and the Vidal Chronicles', *op.cit.*, p.269.