
The Thriving Virulence And Well-Heeled Deviation

Gore Vidal: *Matters of Fact and of Fiction: Essays 1973-1976*;
Random House; New York, 1977.

by Otto J. Scott

There is something nearly inexpressibly dreary about this collection of articles recycled from *The New York Review of Books* and *New Statesman*. They reveal a great deal about the author; too much, in fact, for decency. A sense of embarrassment rises, similar to the sensation of watching an actor in an X-rated movie who smiles into the camera throughout his gyrations.

Yet the book is valuable, in a macabre sort of way, for its glimpses into a set of people and their attitudes usually as closed and mysterious to the everyday world of normal persons as the painted catamites of Hollywood & Vine, or the hideous cellars of Greenwich Village. In discussing the *Memoirs* of Tennessee Williams, for instance, this passage occurs:

"I don't remember whether or not I ever told Tennessee that I had actually seen but not met him the previous year. He was following me up Fifth Avenue while I, in turn, was stalking yet another quarry, I recognized him: he wore a blue bow with polka dots. In no mood for literary encounters, I gave him a scowl and he abandoned the chase just north of Rockefeller Center. I don't recall how my own pursuit ended. . . ."

Mr. Scott is attracted to both fairness and historical research which enables him to see his contemporaries in proper dimensions.

That glimpse of street-walking is sandwiched, however, between rhapsodic descriptions of the reviewer, Vidal, and his recollections of various parties and encounters in Rome shortly after World War II, which is described as a "golden dream." A little later Vidal smiles again at the reader, and says, "Incidentally, I am mesmerized by the tributes to my beauty that keep cropping up in the memoirs of the period." Those, we are free to infer, are tributes from persons who most often express their lofty sense of aesthetics in the art of graffiti.

His comments about other writers are less admiring, with the exception of Mary Renault. Her recreations of a bisexual Pagan world lead to some predictable sighs over a vanished Eden, and bitter asides on an evil Christianity. For the rest, writers are apt to get short shrift and no mercy from Vidal (one hesitates to call him Mister). Solzhenitsyn was by "nature destined to write manuals of artillery," Herman Wouk is too Jewish to write about upper class "goyishers," the teachers who toil over novels are "hacks" who produce books to be taught and not read—and only the Italian author Italo Calvino is worthy of a full-article panegyric.

In time, these reminiscences of Vidal squeezed between comments on other writers, times and events, add up to a series of strip-teases of a remarkable sort; of a person who has forgotten—or who has closed his eyes—to the fact that the

eyes of the world are unwinking and penetrating. There is also a gathering sense that Vidal has reached the stage that overcomes certain types of actors, or other public figures, who begin to become exaggerations of themselves. The role overtakes, and the writer—in this instance—merges into performer.

That becomes horridly evident in the last section, which contains the articles on "fact." These range from the times of President and Mrs. U.S. Grant to Howard Hunt, ITT and Robert Moses. President Grant has not been well treated by American historians, who—at least in this century—seem to find it hard to forgive this nation for its history. But to call U.S. Grant, a man who would have been a Caesar in Rome, and his wife—"these two odd little creatures"—is to fall into a back-of-the-stairs assessment once too often. Vidal also describes Charles Sumner, a true grotesque, as "brilliant." Such judgments, displayed as a part of a tedious article on the Grants, inspired by the General's intelligent *Memoirs* and the somewhat silly effort of his widow, do not exhibit any historical insight into an era still very near our own. For President Grant crushed Sumner as contemptuously as a man squashes a bug, and will remain a great historical figure long after Vidal ceases to be a footnote of our times.

But Vidal's treatment of General Grant, like his assessment of ITT is so much a part of the Radical Camp school

that it does not surprise, nor inform, nor entertain. Attitudes that are fashionable at the expense of intelligence simply bore.

What is truly surprising is an article that appeared at the end of last year, in *The New York Review of Books*, titled "The Art and Arts of E. Howard Hunt." Unlike Vidal, I never heard of Mr. Hunt until the Watergate scandal surfaced, but in this article he interrupts the narrative, for the thousandth time for a personal note. He tells us that Mr. Hunt obtained a Guggenheim Foundation grant in a year when both Truman Capote and Vidal himself received rejections. He then traces Mr. Hunt's career as a writer, CIA official, etcetera with hatred, and concludes with some truly scabrous implications that imply the CIA, or former President Nixon, might have had some

connection with the shooting of Mr. George Wallace. At the time this appeared in print, Mr. Hunt was in prison, his wife was dead, his reputation shattered and his career destroyed, his possessions stripped by lawyers. He was, in other words, fair game for those who attack the fallen.

The same hating and lynch-like spirit suffuses Vidal's comments about Mr. Nixon. One is reminded of the passages that describe social demoralization in Charles Diehl's classic *Byzantium: Greatness and Decline*, and in particular two passages. The first, on pages 144-145, describes how the mob mutilated and murdered the fallen Emperor Andronicus Comnenus, and the second, on pages 147-148, describes a successful courtier, of the same eleventh century period. "He was," says Diehl of Michael Psellus,

"learned, talented and versatile . . . a writer of the first order, full of humour and verve . . . but he intrigued with the worst. It was said of him that he was a professional journalist, who knew that his pen was a weapon . . . It is certain that he preferred charges against his old friends when so ordered . . . that he yielded without protest to the revolution . . . He was mean, cowardly and corrupt; a perfect example of the Byzantine courtier, in whom a contemptible nature was combined with a first-class brain."

In reading Vidal's articles, one is impelled to wonder if, in our present times of social demoralization, we are not producing—and elevating to undeserved eminences—the same sort of unscrupulous talents, whose efforts may dazzle some and nauseate many more. ■

The Establishment's Taste

"Gore Vidal as an essayist accomplishes what so many Victorian novelists set out to do—to entertain and to edify. He is always funny and often witty. His paradoxes at their best rival Oscar Wilde's best . . ."—*Harper's Magazine*.

" . . . whatever his subject . . . it is nearly always he who is the subject you find the most interesting . . ."—Stephen Spender, *The New York Times Book Review*.

"He is a moralist whose subject is hypocrisy and the clichés which provide the public with short cuts to self-congratulation . . ."—*The New York Review of Books*.

"His self-possession, intelligence and wolfish wit are everywhere visible . . ."—*Newsweek*.

"Not since Thomas de Quincey's chronicles of halcyon days with Wordsworth and Coleridge has there been such a hilarious wedding of criticism and remembrance . . ."—*Village Voice*.

" . . . a fascinating exercise . . ."—*Publishers Weekly*.

"Recommended."—*Library Journal*.

A Sad and Maladroit Fiesta

Morris Dickstein: *The Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties*;

Basic Books; New York, 1977.

by Christopher Manion

When I told a friend who raised her children during the sixties that this book was a cultural history of that period, she replied: "It must be pretty short." And she would have been right, had the author written just that. Instead, Morris Dickstein, who was there, wants to tell us "what it felt like" to grow up in the sixties, which he entered as an undergraduate at Columbia, fresh from an orthodox Jewish background, to become a graduate student at Yale and a teacher at Columbia as the period wound down. It would appear that he never got over a hundred miles away from New York, and it shows.

The Education of Morris Dickstein might be the title of the real book which is neither cultural history nor mere criticism; rather than combine the two approaches, an admittedly challenging task, the author presents us with considerations of literature surrounded by—and orbiting around—politics. Much of the critical material seems to be previously published work from *The New York Times Book Review* and *Partisan Review*. But at the center and around the edges, it is possessed of one simple message: the fifties, which nurtured everything bad — repression, McCarthyism, the Rosenbergs, grey flannel suits and the Cold War—were fol-

lowed by everything Dickstein had learned to love: liberation in literature, in sexual norms, in politics and the imagination. Allen Ginsberg, one of Dickstein's favorites, called it "magic politics"—"poetry and theatre sublime enough to change the national will and open up consciousness in the populace." Dickstein points out that this may be found wanting in practical possibilities, but "preserves its appeal as a vision."

Magic, of course, implies the forcing of a spirit—good or evil—to break the natural order of events when it is cornered by the right formula. The notion is not new to history. Hegel, for whom Dickstein expresses a certain affinity, dabbles in magic when "solving" the "riddle of history." And Friedrich Schiller, in his inaugural lecture as a historian at the University of Jena just prior to the French Revolution, calls on his listeners to create "artificial links" to connect otherwise meaningless events of the past, links forged by the writer's imagination and inspired by the demands of present-day events. Then, he goes on, we can make the reader believe what we want him to believe (and what he would otherwise reject) by means of an "optical illusion" which will make him feel better. Dickstein's modern sages call it relevance.

This does not imply that Dickstein and Ginsberg, would actively attempt to deceive, only that visions such as theirs, however acquired, often collide with reality so forcefully that they can be preserved only by "magic"—willful alteration of perceived reality by the invocation of slogans, ideological diatribes, or repression of conflicting evidence; such

visions are then accepted as "second realities" which replace the real thing so effectively that further repression becomes either unconscious or unnecessary. The painstaking process of investigation is dominated by, or replaced by, an unabashed embracing of the vision. It is the light of his own vision, then, that Dickstein wants to shed on developments which have left "some people feeling puzzled or confused."

Dickstein's illumination amounts to a two-toned appeal to the good old "black-and-white" which even his favorite writers would eschew as "too simplistic for the complex problems of today." He envisions the fifties much as a contemporary civilized being might imagine the Neanderthal period. For all its critical trappings, this is a fundamentally political book, and Dickstein hails the political turn which all religion and literature took in the sixties. The evil fifties mentality gives way to the bountiful sixties mentality which overcomes the repression like D.H. Lawrence's "new shoots of life springing up and slowly bursting the foundations." And one must realize that the sixties is just a state of mind, that this process can happen any time, anywhere. If you went to Columbia in the late fifties, you were already there. If you agree with Dickstein's political views, you're *still* there. It's kind of a private *Magical Mystery Tour*. Once you are able to wake up and assess the reality with fairness of mind and heart, you may find a lot of rubbish and dirt. But that's another story.

But there is good news: For those who want an insight into the handful of rock musicians and the few dozen writers

Christopher Manion, a graduate of Notre Dame and an officer of the Rockford College Institute, is a guitarist who witnessed firsthand the rise and fall of the Woodstock generation.