

Gore Vidal's Historical Novels

Michael Murphy

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (English) at
Concordia University

February 2007

© Michael Murphy, 2007



Library and
Archives Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file *Votre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-28843-6
Our file *Notre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-28843-6

NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.


Canada

ABSTRACT

Gore Vidal's Historical Novels

Michael Murphy

Published between 1967 and 2000, the seven historical novels that constitute Gore Vidal's *American Chronicles* series fictionalize major events in U.S. history, beginning with the Revolutionary Wars in the eighteenth century and ending, effectively, in the early 1960s.

A number of critics have characterized the *American Chronicles* as aesthetically and thematically conventional in the age of postmodernism and the context of what Linda Hutcheon has argued is its hallmark literary manifestation, historiographic metafiction. Considered alongside typical historiographic metafictions such as Don DeLillo's *Libra* and E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, the *American Chronicles* seem old-fashioned inasmuch as they take a comparatively non-problematic approach to the issue of the historian's ability to know the past; avoid pronounced formal experimentation; and advance a systematic and relatively straightforward periodization of U.S. history in support of the partisan 'platform' Vidal has outlined in his long and prolific career as a commentator on U.S. politics. However, the epistemological and stylistic traditionalism of Vidal's series must be understood within the context of his view that the historical novel should not principally serve the serious American writer as an occasion for philosophizing about historiography, but should enable him to construct a popular, artistically credible, and relatively definitive version of the nation's past whose political implications for the present will influence readers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express hearty thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Marcie Frank. This project has benefited immeasurably from her invaluable guidance, and I am very grateful for all her help.

I would also like to thank Caitlin Murphy for her generous contributions to the editing process.

CONTENTS

Chapter

One.	THEORIES AND PRACTICES OF CLASSICAL AND POSTMODERN HISTORICAL FICTION	1
Two.	HISTORICIZING THE “SERIOUS” NOVEL: <i>BURR AND 1876</i>	22
Three.	THE UNION, MYSTICAL AND MYSTIFYING: <i>LINCOLN AND LIBRA</i>	44
Four.	THE AMBIGUOUS BIRTH AND UNCONFIRMED DEATH OF MODERNISM: <i>EMPIRE AND RAGTIME</i>	67
	WORKS CITED	88

CHAPTER ONE
THEORIES AND PRACTICES OF CLASSICAL AND
POSTMODERN HISTORICAL FICTION

In attempting to articulate what a historical novel is, theorists have had to grapple with subsidiary questions such as “how do historical novels differ from non-historical novels?” and “how do they differ from narrative histories?” Closely related to such questions of definition in theories of the historical novel is the issue of the attitude that a work takes toward the past or, in other words, the relationship of the author’s (and readers’) present to the past age that the work ostensibly represents. Historical fiction’s pre-eminent theorist, the Hungarian Marxist critic Georg Lukács, devotes a great deal of attention to this dimension of historical novels and, in fact, positions the present-past relationship as the cornerstone of his definition of the genre.

More recent attempts to define historical fiction within a postmodern context have concentrated not so much on the attitude of the fictional work toward the particular history it represents but toward history *per se*. In this vein, postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon argues that historiography more so than history has become the true subject of historical novels in the second half of the twentieth century, and that writers of historical fiction—and, indeed, fiction in general—in this period have shown a marked tendency to “simultaneously use and abuse” conventional structures of history-writing and storytelling to make the point that the writing of a historical work is a process of “invention” similar to that of the composition of a novel.¹

¹ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 64-5.

Lukács, in *The Historical Novel* (1937), argues that great historical novels dramatize a Marxist philosophy of history; on the other hand, Hutcheon, whose *A Poetics of Postmodernism* appeared in the late '80s, perceives in the work of contemporary novelists persistent doubts as to the ability of narratives (be they fictional or historical) to tell us what really happened in history and a concomitant tendency of invoking historical narrative only to problematize it. Lukács commits to a particular mode of historical explanation (Marxism), ascribing to it epistemological superiority over other possible modes, and deriving from it a prescription for the writing of true or authentic historical novels. For her part, Hutcheon argues that, by centering historiography, "historiographic metafiction" like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* center epistemology rather than historical explanation. In *Metahistory* (1973), Hayden White argues for the reasonableness of such a choice: "The best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral."² The impossibility of taking sides; the impossibility of *not* taking sides: this is a central dilemma of the postmodern age and certainly a major preoccupation of postmodern novelists.

Although classical historical novelists like Sir Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper do not figure in their works a crisis in the philosophy of history comparable to that suggested by their postmodern counterparts, they do advance theories of historiography, both implicitly (through the various compositional choices they make in the emplotment of historical materials) and explicitly (in the form of authorial asides). A comparison of Lukács' work on historical fiction and that of Hutcheon provides an

² Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1973), xii.

opportunity to investigate whether and to what extent history functions differently in classical historical fiction and the historical novels of the postmodernists.

Defining the Historical Novel: Generic Conventions

It should probably come as no surprise that defining the historical novel is about as easily done as disentangling the Gordian knot; after all, formulating generic definitions that keep the right works of literature in—and the wrong works out—is an endeavour well-known for its vexatiousness; there is also, of course, the paradoxical hybridity of historical fiction (aren't history and fiction mutually exclusive categories?) to complicate matters further. Avrom Fleishman registers these difficulties in his wry remark that “everyone knows what a historical novel is; perhaps that is why so few have volunteered to define it in print.”³ It is tempting, as Fleishman notes, to follow the example of Alexander in Phrygia and hack through this knotty problem with an affirmation that readers know a historical novel when they see one and defining the class is therefore unnecessary. As difficult as it may be to formulate a workable set of criteria for the genre, it is also clear that we *can* with some assurance say certain things about what makes historical fiction historical fiction.

One proviso that almost all definitions seem to share is that a certain temporal buffer exist between the year of the novel's publication and the year(s) in which the novel is set. For instance, “a novel that reconstructs a past age” is the concise phrase with which the editors of a standard handbook-to-literature open their entry on the historical

³ Avrom Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 3.

novel.⁴ With greater specificity, the Historical Novel Society (after prefacing that a certain degree of arbitrariness and unsatisfactoriness necessarily mars every definition of historical fiction) states, “To be deemed historical . . . a novel must have been written at least fifty years after the events described, or have been written by someone who was not alive at the time of those events (who therefore approaches them only by research).”⁵ A useful rule of thumb, then, this condition of a temporal remove nonetheless leaves a number of important questions about the definition of historical fiction unanswered. For example: what do we make of novels set, say, before the novelist was born but that do not represent any people or events known to historians? What is the difference between a historical novel about a past epoch and a narrative history that deals with the same period?

Joseph Turner argues that literary theorists have failed again and again to formulate a workable definition of the historical novel because they have insisted on pursuing a dead-end avenue of inquiry: the comparison of history and fiction. Given that no one can seem to agree on the ontological status of either one, he reasons, such an approach necessarily founders. Equally unsatisfactory as a solution to the definition problem, identifying the formal characteristics common to all members of the class “historical novel” enables the critic to do nothing more than “recapitulate an a priori definition.”⁶ Turner proposes reader-response theory as the most likely means of resolving the impasse and outlines a two-part strategy to be pursued under its aegis.

⁴ William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 250.

⁵ *Definition of Historical Fiction*, 2004. The Historical Novel Society. 8 August 2005. <www.historicalnovelsociety.org/definition.htm>.

⁶ Joseph Turner, “The Kinds of Historical Fiction: An Essay in Definition and Methodology,” *Genre* 12 (1979): 335.

First, the category historical fiction, impossible to define due to its amorphousness, must be divided into three more precise—and more critically manageable—sub-categories: the “invented historical novel,” whose characters and events have no prior existence to that with which the text imbues them, but that is at the same time set at a certain prior temporal remove to the date of publication and that, moreover, typically thematizes questions of historiography (e.g. Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*); the “disguised historical novel,” in which characters and events out of the documented historical past figure in some way but under false names and veiled appearances (e.g. Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*, Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel*); and, finally, the “documented historical novel” which, like Vidal’s *American Chronicles*, recreates a documented historical period without any attempt to conceal its extra-fictional referents.

Turner’s second proviso is that historical fiction be differentiated not only from narrative history but from non-historical fiction as well. As he puts it, we must consider two dimensions of readers’ responses to a particular text: “Whether they will consider the text a *historical* novel, and whether they will consider it a historical *novel*” (336). Such a methodology allows us to conceive of the three categories as existing on a continuum between the two poles of the non-historical novel and the narrative history. Moving from the former to the latter extreme, we pass through the invented, the disguised, and the documented historical novel respectively.

With the rubric “historical fiction” partitioned into three tractable sub-categories and these sub-categories arranged along a theoretical continuum between outright fiction and outright history, Turner proceeds to the crux of his argument: that categorial

distinctions among these five elements must be made on the basis of generic conventions and not on the basis of the Aristotelian notion that the writer, in transmuting particular historical details into universal aesthetic patterns, creates something radically autonomous from history. So, rather than trying to distinguish fictionalized history from standard history on the basis of “what really happened,” we would do better to observe, for example, that a bibliography and an index are highly conventional in the narrative history form, but not so in that of the historical novel.⁷ Whether historians can lay claim to greater historical veracity than novelists because they work exclusively from existing documentation and name their sources by means of a system of citation is a moot point: that they provide citation, whereas historical novelists conventionally do not, might serve as better grounds than historical veracity for differentiating between the two.

In comparing the conventions of the documented historical novel and the narrative history, Turner notes that novelists have generally enjoyed an important freedom denied to historians: the freedom to insert into their narratives events and people for which they do not have to cite an evidentiary, documentary basis, as long as these incidents and characters do not contradict widely accepted historical documents. Although the writer-reader contract has allowed speculation on the part of historians, it also stipulates that the author must always alert the reader when he is making guesses and must make clear the character of the evidentiary basis on which he does so. By contrast, the historical novelist traditionally has permission to engage in speculation without notifying the reader. As Turner remarks, “Crudely put, the difference is that the historian

⁷ This is not to say that no historical novel has ever contained paratextual features (footnotes and documentary inserts were popular in Scott’s day, and Pat Barker and Mary Renault, for example, used bibliographies, as did Vidal himself in *Julian*). Inclusion of, say, an index in a historical novel would signal that the author, perhaps not without precedent, is in some way working against generic conventions, refusing to meet all of the reader’s generic expectations.

is supposed to restrict himself to historical events, while the documented historical novelist need not. The novelist is free, more so than the historian, to fill in with imagined details the gaps in recorded history” (344).

Consisting of seven novels published between 1967 and 2000, Gore Vidal’s *American Chronicles* recount major events in American history, beginning with the Revolutionary Wars in the eighteenth century and ending, effectively, in the early 1960s. Along the way, Vidal offers portraits of a large number of prominent historical figures—Aaron Burr, Abraham Lincoln, Henry Adams, Charles Randolph Hearst, FDR, to name a small fraction of them—but intermingles with them a number of invented characters, like Charles Schermerhorn Schuyler and his descendants, for instance, whose subjectivity often serves to focalize the narrative point-of-view and sometimes constitute it entirely. The familiar notion invoked by Turner that the documented historical novel “fills in the gaps” left by histories seems to describe what happens in the *American Chronicles*.

As Vidal writes in his afterword to *Empire*, which closes with a fly-on-the-wall narration of a spectacular—and undocumented—*tête à tête* between William Randolph Hearst and President Theodore Roosevelt, “While the final meeting between . . . Roosevelt and . . . Hearst did take place within the context of the Archbold letters, no one knows what was actually said. I like to think that my dialogue captures, if nothing else, what each felt about the other.”⁸ In this notable instance, Vidal has supplemented official history with an imagined episode which, while its plausibility may be debated, certainly does not contradict or contest the extant documentation. As a rule, Vidal employs such an approach throughout the *American Chronicles*, though he does deviate from it and alter a historical detail here and there in the interests, he maintains, of storytelling. For

⁸ Gore Vidal, *Empire: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 1987; Vintage, 2000), 487.

example, in the afterword to *Lincoln* he admits that “occasionally, I have done some moving around. At the time of Kate Chase’s Boxing Day reception, McClellan had been sick in bed for almost a week; but I needed him at the Chases’. I have not done this sort of thing often.”⁹ Significantly, Vidal scruples to acknowledge in the afterwords to these seven novels all of the instances in which he has knowingly changed a documented detail and thereby implies that, while the historical novelist has permission to invent plausible scenes and characters where history is silent, he cannot distort an agreed-upon fact in the service of his art without notifying the reader that he has done so.

What is most significant about the afterwords, though, is their paratextual status: like footnotes, appendices, or epigraphs, they stand within and outside of the text simultaneously. In this way they instantiate Derrida’s “dangerous supplement” which, as David H. Richter remarks in his explication of the notion, forces readers to reassess the meaning of the text “proper”: “It seems to be adding something to what is already complete in itself, and the addition is thus implicitly a correction, even in a sense a recantation.”¹⁰ Ironically, whereas Vidal’s afterwords assert that the narratives preceding them should be taken seriously as history, their inclusion in his books tends to encourage the perception that the story we have just read should, in fact, not be considered history. After all, no historian would conclude a work by taking pains to assure us that much of what he has written is true, let alone to point out a few places in which what he has written he knows to be false. The most significant effect of the afterwords, then, is to reinforce the conventional distinction between histories and historical novels.

⁹ Vidal, *Lincoln: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 1984; Vintage, 2000), 658.

¹⁰ David H. Richter, ed., *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 944.

As a synthesis of the documented history of key periods in the American past and imagined narrations that plausibly “fill in the gaps” of the official histories, the *American Chronicles* exhibit the generic conventions of the documented historical novel. So too do the other post-World War II American historical novels that I will be discussing at length in this study, Don DeLillo’s *Libra* and E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*. Although *Libra*, *Ragtime*, and the *American Chronicles* may all belong to a single category—that of the documented historical novel—there exists nonetheless an enormous amount of variation among them in terms of the way they engage the past.

Defining the Historical Novel: The Relationship Between Present and Past

In contrast to Turner’s value-neutral, convention-based definition of the documented historical novel, Georg Lukács’ definition is evaluative and takes as its determining factor not generic conventions but the attitude of the novel toward the past epoch it evokes. To be more specific, Lukács claims that the “authentic” historical novel embodies and affirms the kind of historicism that posits a high degree of connectedness between present conditions and past events:

Without a felt relationship to the present, a portrayal of history is impossible. But this relationship, in the case of really great historical art, does not consist in alluding to contemporary events, . . . , but in bringing the past to life as the prehistory of the present, in giving poetic life to those historical, social and human forces which, in the course of a long evolution, have made our present-day life what it is and as we experience it.¹¹

¹¹ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962), 53.

“Really great historical art,” then, does not efface its distance from the past, but neither does it exploit the past as a short-hand for commenting on present events; rather, the great historical novel represents history as the pre-history of the present by portraying the everyday lives of its people with a maximum of vitality and concreteness but a minimum of anachronistic modernization, so as to discourage a perception of past people and events as antiquarian, exotic, or remote and encourage the view that present social-historical conditions are strictly necessary, given what came before.

Lukács locates the origins of the historical novel in the early nineteenth century, the age of Napoleon, and suggests that Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814) serve as the starting point for the genre. Given that literary historians generally situate the genesis of the novel proper in the early 1700s, Lukács’ periodization begs the question: Was no one writing historical novels in the eighteenth century? The answer, for Lukács, is no: the “so-called historical novels” of the eighteenth century—Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* (1764) is perhaps the pre-eminent example—exhibit only a superficial commitment to the representation of history and thus qualify only as costume dramas or period pieces, he states. In such works it is only the “curiosities and oddities of the *milieu* that matter, not an artistically faithful image of a concrete historical epoch” (19). Lukács concedes that the eighteenth-century tradition of realistic social novels represented the world of the day with unprecedented “plasticity and truth-to-life” (19), but he maintains that it never achieved a concrete portrayal of the process of historical change and thus failed to produce what he considers historical novels.

If Sir Walter Scott, then, is the prototypical historical novelist, there are good historical reasons why this is so. After all, Lukács contends, Scott was writing in an age

in which the experience of history had for the first time become a “mass experience” thanks to the intensity and extensiveness of the historical events of 1789-1814, namely, the French Revolution, the Revolutionary Wars, and the rise and fall of Napoleon. And if these far-reaching political cataclysms gave to the masses of Europe the sense of history as an urgent, tangible, and pervasive presence in their daily lives, so too did the transformation of military conflict from a matter of discreet, professional battles waged far from the eyes and ears of civilian populations into *levées en masse* that required the mobilization and participation of entire nations and consequently a great deal of widely-disseminated propaganda.

In addition to his arrival on the scene at a time when a heightened awareness of historical processes was taking hold in Europe, Scott’s class affiliations and political outlook also contributed to his success as “the greatest historical novelist.” A petty aristocrat and devoted Tory, the conservative Scott was a firm believer that the “middle way” in political and historical conflict generally prevailed. As Lukács writes, “he finds in English history the consolation that the most violent vicissitudes of class struggle have always finally calmed down into a glorious ‘middle way’” (32). Thus, Lukács sees in Scott’s conception of history a dialectical mode not unlike that of Hegel (even if he does suggest that, had Scott read Hegel, he would not have understood a word) and argues that this dialectical approach allows him to dramatize the process of historical change—the tragic but inevitable decline of the Highland clan system, for example—with great insight.

Lukács’ influential notion that historical fiction must instil in readers a sense of the past as the pre-history of the present has not gone uncontested. Harry Shaw, for

example, argues that the attitude that a work of historical fiction should take toward the past is not—as Lukács would say—an emphasis on history as process and pre-history of the present, but rather “the realization that history is comprised of ages and societies that are significantly different from our own”:

[Lukács] is not interested in the depiction of the past as an object in its own right: in fact, he tends to deplore it. In neglecting the problems of depicting the past as past, Lukács not only fails to account for the distinctive formal strengths and weaknesses of historical fiction, he also cuts himself off from recognizing the full esthetic situation from which the very sense of history he so admires arises in the best historical fiction.¹²

Thus, according to Shaw, rather than stressing history as *process* and emphasizing the connectedness of the publication-present and the past in which the novel is set, the writer of historical fiction ought to stress historical discontinuity by insisting on the radical otherness of the past age portrayed and minimizing the anachronistic impositions that our present outlook makes on the past. In short, he should treat the past “as past” or, to borrow David Lowenthal’s synchronic analogy for this diachronic relationship, he should treat the past as a foreign country.

Works of historical fiction that do not engage the past in this way generally exploit it in order to satisfy the needs of the present: either past *milieux* are used as remote theatres in which battles over present-day preoccupations can be waged at a safe distance (Shaw calls this “history as pastoral”) or merely as exotic window dressing for escapist melodramas (“history as source of drama”) (52). These two kinds of

¹² Harry Shaw, *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and his Successors* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1983), 26, 46.

engagement are equivalent of course to what Lukács calls “alluding to contemporary events” and “antiquarianism.”

So far, I have discussed a number of distinct modes in which works of historical fiction might engage the past: the present-centred “costume drama” and “history as pastoral” modes, which need not detain us any longer; the relatively present-centred, but patently more historicist Lukácsian mode of the “past as pre-history of the present,” in which special attention is paid to historical *process*; and, finally, the orientation that regards past ages as radically separated from the present, Shaw’s “past as past” mode. We might well ask how the example of Vidal’s *American Chronicles* series relates to the precepts provided by this abstract schema of modes. Do *The American Chronicles* conform more closely to Lukács’ conception of the attitude historical fiction should take toward the past or to Shaw’s?

Significantly, the plot of *The American Chronicles* ends in 2000, the year in which Vidal published his final instalment, *The Golden Age*. He had to pass over nearly a half-century of American history in silence to get there, and he only stays long enough for a 40-page coda in which Peter Sanford reflects on America’s past, present, and future at the end of the millennium; nevertheless, Vidal’s choice to bring his *Chronicles* all the way up to the year in which he was writing them is highly significant. Along with the *character* Gore Vidal’s declaration, during the taping of a political talk show at his villa in Italy, that the past for Americans is “a separate universe with its own quaint laws and irrelevant perceptions,”¹³ the choice indicates the considerable extent to which Vidal seeks in the *Chronicles* to bring the past into the present, to shake “the United States of

¹³ Vidal, *The Golden Age: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 2000; Vintage, 2001), 459

Amnesia” out of its lethargy and, by so doing, reinforce his argument that America, as a nation, has been steadily declining since the end of World War II.

Defining the Historical Novel: Linda Hutcheon and “Historiographic Metafiction”

Whereas Lukács’ classical formulation of the historical novel requires of the literary work a particular attitude toward the past, Linda Hutcheon’s theory of postmodern historical fiction focuses not on the relationship between a novel and the past it “represents” but on the question of how a relationship between the work’s present and past events is even possible. In short, Hutcheon foregrounds the novel’s treatment of historiography rather than its treatment of history. Works of what she calls “historiographic metafiction” put pressure on the “how” of historical fiction by telling stories about the past and simultaneously calling into question the conventional logic that underpins the process of storytelling and, more fundamentally, influences the process of narrativizing that is history-writing. Historiographic metafiction espouses neither “presentism” nor “nostalgia” in its engagement with the past, but rather manifests “an intense self-consciousness . . . about the act of narrating in the present the events of the past, about the conjunction of present action and the past absent object of that agency.”¹⁴

Postmodern historiographers and novelists regard with particular wariness the “totalizing” impulse of conventional narrative form, that is, its tendency to mask the unruliness and discontinuity of events through the imposition of an *a priori* pattern of organization that decrees, for example, a middle, beginning, and end, as well as definitive narrative closure. Totalizing allows the historian or novelist to achieve a certain mastery or control over his materials—to make them “coherent, continuous, [and] unified”(62)—

¹⁴ Hutcheon, *Politics*, 71.

but in doing so it necessarily does violence to those materials. Thus, even if they employ the structures and conventions of traditional narrative, postmodern artists problematize them; they stress that every interpretation and interpreter has a bias—that no discovery is ever so pure as to contain nothing of invention.

Hence, the notion that history is—or ever could have been—a matter of impartial observation and transcription is to Hutcheon untenable: “Historiography . . . is no longer considered the objective and disinterested recording of the past; it is more an attempt to comprehend and master it by means of some working (narrative/explanatory) model that, in fact, is precisely what grants a particular meaning to the past” (64). Not surprisingly, Marxist historiography, which underwrites much of Lukács’ theory of the historical novel, has come under attack from postmodernists due to its totalizing character: it purports to offer an objective, “scientific” account of human history.

In an effort to systematize the various attitudes which historical fiction can take toward the past it reconstructs, Turner outlines a three-part taxonomy whose categories encompass the modes that Lukács and Shaw valorize, as well as the postmodern preoccupation with problematizing the act of engagement itself. Using terms derived from Hegel, he formulates his categories in this way: the Original mode is that “where the principal concern is to create a compelling picture of the past,” and which treats history primarily “*in itself*.” In the Reflective mode, “the chasm between past and present is recognized only to be bridged”; this is history “*in and for itself*.” Finally, in the Philosophic mode the primary concern is “how, or if, history itself is possible,” that is, “history *in and for*, but primarily *about itself*.”¹⁵ The first two modes—the Original and the Reflective—roughly correspond to the modes of Shaw and Lukács, respectively. And

¹⁵ Turner, 354.

his description of Philosophic historical fiction as taking history *per se* as its principal subject is certainly consistent with Hutcheon's conception of postmodern fiction as historiographical more so than historical. Of course, in addition to the notion that postmodern historical novels are decidedly meta-historical (historiographic), Hutcheon also argues the point that they are meta-fictional. This choice is not surprising, given her tendency to collapse the distinction between history and fiction, the distinction that makes necessary both the "historiographic" and the "metafictional" in her appellation.

In suggesting that histories may be no "truer" than novels, Hutcheon aligns herself with the influential historian Hayden White, who argues that history, in spite of its aspirations to the status of a science, remains nonetheless very much an *art* and resembles literature in that it requires of those who study it an acute sensitivity to the ways in which meaning is created in linguistic constructs. Working within a structuralist paradigm, White states that "through the disclosure of the linguistic ground on which a given idea of history was constituted, I have attempted to establish the ineluctably poetic nature of the historical work and to specify the prefigurative element in a historical account by which its theoretical concepts were tacitly sanctioned."¹⁶ On his account, the modes of historical explanation by which historians proceed are in fact "*formalizations* of poetic insights that analytically precede them" (emphasis White's *xii*) so that privileging one explanatory mode over another would be as unjustifiable as asserting, for instance, that tragedies are "truer" than "comedies." Rather than defending the choice of one mode of

¹⁶ White, 11. White's structuralist approach is evident in his elaborate classifications of archetypical modes of historical explanation; there are three classes, Explanation by Emplotment, by Formal Argument, and by Ideological Implication and each class contains four modes. A given historian's historiographical style consists in his particular permutation of one mode from each of the three categories. Ironically, in White's work the totalizing strategies of structuralism are deployed in the service of a postmodern epistemological relativism.

explaining the past over another on the grounds that it is more “realistic,” we must acknowledge that such choices can only be made on moral and aesthetic grounds, he states.

Although Hutcheon makes a compelling case for the radicalism and iconoclasm of the aesthetics of postmodern historical fiction, we might well ask whether she overstates her argument. After all, no one familiar with the classical historical fiction of the nineteenth century—that of Scott, Tolstoy, Cooper, e.g.—would argue that it merely tells stories of past events without in any way offering readers a theory of history and, for that matter, of historical fiction. (Indeed, the historical novel that does not, at least implicitly, submit a theory of historical fiction is logically impossible since, like all cultural artifacts, historical novels are constructed and, in their constructedness, embody a theory of themselves.) The fact that Scott set *Waverley* at a historical moment 60 years prior to the novel’s narrating present necessarily tells us something about his theory of historical fiction, and it would do so even if he had not drawn our attention to it and commented on it.

In the novel’s opening chapter he explains that “my second or supplemental title [*Or, ‘Tis Sixty Years Since*] was a matter of . . . difficult election, since that, short as it is, may be held as pledging the author to some special mode of laying his scene, drawing his characters, and managing his adventures.”¹⁷ He goes on to explain that choosing a 60-year interval between the composition-present and the story-past (and emphasizing it in the novel’s subtitle) allows him to position his narrative somewhere between the prose romance genre, with its conventionally fairy-tale-ish and ahistorical past and the category of the highly topical, “presentist” novel of manners that is doomed to unreadability a

¹⁷ Sir Walter Scott, *Waverley: Or, ‘Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814; New York: Oxford UP, 1981), 20.

decade after its publication; in this way he hopes to synthesize a sensitivity to the eternal verities of human nature (“the great book of Nature [has been] the same through a thousand editions” [21]) with an attention to historical particularity.

Not only did nineteenth-century historical novelists like Scott find it congenial to discuss their theories of *historical fiction* in their historical fiction, but they also found it appropriate to articulate their theories of *history* in their historical fiction, as the following example from Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* demonstrates. Following a narration of the August, 1757 Fort William Henry massacre of British troops and colonists at the hands of the Iroquois, the narrator (who argues, perhaps inaccurately, that General Montcalm did not try to dissuade his Amerindian allies from perpetrating the slaughter) asserts that history distorts the truth. He claims that, for the most part, those familiar with Montcalm through historical writing consider him a hero for dying bravely on the plains of Abraham and know nothing of his failure to prevent the massacre at Fort William Henry:

As history, like love, is so apt to surround her heroes with an atmosphere of imaginary brightness, it is probable that [Montcalm] will be viewed by posterity only as the gallant defender of his country, while his cruel apathy on the shores of the Oswego and of the Horican will be forgotten.¹⁸

Although he was writing roughly a century and a half before the emergence of a postmodern zeitgeist, Cooper, like his forerunner Scott, clearly had no qualms about problematizing the “master narrative” of history.

¹⁸ James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826; Chatham, Kent: Wordsworth Editions, 1993), 166.

The difference between earlier forms of historical fiction, such as Scott's and Cooper's novels, and works of historiographic metafiction seems to lie not in the fact that the second thematizes form and problematizes historiography while the first does not, but rather the degree to which they do so. The passages that I have quoted from *Waverley* and *Mohicans* are evidence of a certain self-consciousness on the part of their authors; however, such metafictional and historiographic meditations are relatively few and far between in these novels, whereas in a typically postmodern work of historical fiction such as Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* the conventions of narrative and the assumptions of historiography are assailed on nearly every page.

Indeed, Barth's *Canterbury Tales*-like narrative structure, in which nearly every character encountered by the picaro Ebenezer Cooke ends up telling a long and elaborate story, foregrounds the act of narrating and reminds us regularly of the artificiality of the novel we are reading. Likewise, the importance in the novel of a "Secret Historie" that exposes its revered historical-figure author, John Smith, as a lecherous boob, not to mention a second alternate history that exists on the versos of an official transcript of the parliament of Maryland, function to undermine our confidence in the stability of the historical archive.¹⁹

In addition to foregrounding the constructedness of its own narrative and shaking our faith in the conventional wisdom of traditional history, *The Sot-Weed Factor* also carries out, on a deeper level, a searching interrogation of fundamental assumptions of epistemology and ontology. The unitary persistence of subjectivity through time, for

¹⁹ John Barth, *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960; New York: First Anchor Books, 1987). Another example of Barth's playful problematization of historiography is his chapter title "The Poet Wonders Whether the Course of Human History is a Progress, a Drama, a Retrogression, a Cycle, an Undulation, a Vortex, a Right- or Left-Handed Spiral, a Mere Continuum, or What Have You. Certain Evidence is Brought Forward, but of an Ambiguous and Inconclusive Nature."

instance, is called into question by means of Henry Burlingame's prodigious shape-shifting and the ultimate indeterminacy of his identity. In addition, the ontological status of historical figures is problematized by means of a suggestion toward novel's end that John Coode, despite his fame as the alleged political mastermind behind a plot to massacre Maryland's colonists, is in fact a fiction invented by spies both friendly and hostile to the colony's established government in order to facilitate their intrigues.

If Barth's novel is any indication, then, historiographic metafiction differs from classical historical fiction in that its self-reflexivity is more pronounced and sustained than that of the second, and its critique of traditional historiography is more radical and energetic. Although the canonical historical novels of the nineteenth century all operate to some degree within the Philosophic mode—they unquestionably have a historiographical and, I might add, a metafictional dimension—they do not do so with the same intense drive to problematize as do postmodern historical novels.

Thomas Keneally remarked in his review of what is generally the best-regarded instalment in the *American Chronicles* series that "*Lincoln* is a strangely dated piece of work lacking in the fantasy, idiosyncrasy, and flashes of lightning for which we depend on fiction writers, not least on Gore Vidal."²⁰ Vidal has composed and published his *American Chronicles* in the age of the postmodern and yet the aesthetics of his novel cycle might seem to have little in common with representative historiographic metafictions like *The Sot-Weed Factor*, DeLillo's *Libra*, or Doctorow's *Ragtime*, three books that offer a great deal, I presume, of the kind of "fantasy, idiosyncrasy, and . . . lightning" that Keneally found wanting in *Lincoln*. In the chapters that follow, I will

²⁰ Thomas Keneally, "Bore Vidal," *New Republic*, 2 July 1984, 32.

consider the questions of why and how this is so, and the implications of Vidal's resistance to the postmodern approach to representing history.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICIZING THE “SERIOUS” NOVEL: *BURR* AND 1876

In 1956 Vidal wrote that “after some three hundred years the novel in English has lost the general reader . . . and I propose that he will not again recover his old enthusiasm.”¹ That the cultural relevance of the “serious” novel was on the wane became a theme on which Vidal the essayist would play innumerable variations over the decades that followed. Forty years later, he hadn’t changed his tune: in *Palimpsest*, his 1995 memoir, Vidal recapitulates the argument that he and his generation of post-war novelists were, no later than 1950, witnessing “the end of the novel.”²

Despite his many declarations of the irrelevance of the novel to the broader culture, and the facility he developed with other, more popular, forms of creative writing, such as the TV drama, film script, and stage play, Vidal never abandoned novel-writing.³ Forced as a novelist into inactivity by a shortage of money, not to mention the literary establishment’s scandalized reaction to his depictions of same-sex desire in *The City and the Pillar* (1948), he worked mostly—and with enviable success—in television, film, and the theatre during the ‘50s, but returned with alacrity to the novel as soon as circumstances permitted: he reminisces that, by 1964, having achieved financial security despite not publishing a novel in ten years, “I could now afford to do only what I wanted to do, which was to write novels, even though it had been clear to me for quite some time

¹ Vidal, “A Note on the Novel,” in *United States: Essays 1952-1992* (New York: Random House, 1993; Broadway Books, 2001), 24.

² Vidal, *Palimpsest: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1995), 239.

³ Vidal is nothing if not prolific as a novelist: as of this writing, he has published 27 novels, not including the five potboilers that he authored pseudonymously, three of which he signed Edgar Box, a *nom de plume* that he adopted partly as an homage to that ambiguous combination of seriousness and popularity, Edgar Allan Poe. Fred Kaplan, *Gore Vidal: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 348.

that the novel as an art form—much less diversion—was of no great interest to the public at large and of too great an interest to academics in pursuit of theory.”⁴

As the quotation, along with his essays and public pronouncements, makes clear, Vidal viewed the increasing influence of university English departments and their novel-theorists as a major culprit in the vitiation of the American novel as a cultural force. University-affiliated navel-gazers, serious novelists wrote not novels but theoretical treatises in the guise of novels, he charged. And even if serious novelists refrained from writing literary theory, their works suffered from a monotonous banality of subject matter: their bland tales about “the doings and feelings . . . of white middle-class Americans, often schoolteachers” ritually excluded such “eccentric” character types as “political activists, intellectuals, members of the ruling classes, blacks,”⁵ and consistently ignored grand themes such as “the nature of society,” “the fate of the republic” or “the origins of Christianity.”⁶ An imaginative engagement with such people and ideas, Vidal suggests, came to be considered as beneath the serious novelist and more suitable work for the hack-authors of “trashy” best-sellers. “Shrinking each into his own skin, our novelists grow more private, and for those who lack genius (the majority), more dull,”⁷ he commented. Critic Jay Parini elaborates on this position by proposing that Vidal has fared poorly among academics because of the unfashionability of the “mandarin” tone in which he narrates his novels. Describing the opening scene of *Empire*, Parini notes,

⁴ Vidal, *Palimpsest*, 383.

⁵ Vidal, “Thomas Love Peacock: The Novel of Ideas,” in *United States*, 147-8. That Vidal came from a powerful and well-connected Washington family—his maternal grandfather, Thomas Pryor Gore, served three terms in the Senate and his father, Eugene Vidal, acted from 1933 to ‘37 as President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s director of aeronautics—may help to explain why writing about “members of the ruling classes” did not strike him as a particularly difficult stretch of the imagination. Kaplan, 53-55.

⁶ Jay Parini, ed., *Gore Vidal: Writer Against the Grain* (New York: Columbia UP, 1992), 281.

⁷ Vidal, “Satire in the 1950s,” in *United States*, 30.

This is a fictional world where French windows and china vases and people with connections to the likes of General Sherman or Del Hay . . . are taken for granted. In “high” art of the postwar era, only shabby best-selling writers deal with such things, not serious writers. Let Danielle Steele or Geoffrey Archer deal with the Rich and Famous. “Real” writers deal with characters like Moses Herzog or Harry Angstrom . . . (5)

As the *American Chronicles* attest, the assumption that serious novels did not deal with the rich, the famous, or the powerful was one that Vidal was happy to flout.

In presenting the case that post-war American novelists and literary critics scorned unfamiliar subject matter—that is, people at one or two removes from their personal experience and facts and ideas not connected with novel theory—Vidal has adduced the plight of the historical novel, which has been ill-regarded in his lifetime.⁸ Deploring as usual what he sees as the too-cozy relationship between novelists and college campuses, Vidal came to the defense of this maligned genre in his favourable assessment of one of its avatars, Mary Renault’s *The Persian Boy* (1972): “I am predisposed to like the novel dealing with history and find it hard to understand why this valuable genre should be so much disdained. But somehow, describing what happened

⁸ Held in high esteem in the days of nineteenth-century masters like Tolstoy, Scott, and James Fenimore Cooper, historical fiction had lost all literary cachet by the mid-twentieth century. Prominent *New York Times* literary critic Orville Prescott gave an indication of the dominant attitude towards historical fiction in 1947, when he wrote a dubious letter of reference for Vidal’s Guggenheim Fellowship application, centered on his historical novel-in-progress, *The Search for the King*: “An historical novel about Richard I and Blondel seems to me so conventional and even popular a literary project that it might well take its chances with others of its type,” Prescott scoffed (Kaplan 253). Attempting to account for the prevalence of such judgements, Harold Bloom remarks, “The historical novel seems to have been permanently devalued. Gore Vidal once said to me, with bitter eloquence, that his outspoken sexual orientation had denied him canonical status. What seems likelier is that Vidal’s best fictions (except for the sublimely outrageous *Myra Breckinridge*) are distinguished historical novels—*Lincoln*, *Burr*, and several more—and this subgenre is no longer available for canonization. . . . History writing and narrative fiction have come apart, and our sensibilities seem no longer able to accommodate them one to the other.” Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 20.

last summer at Rutgers is for our solemn writers a serious subject while to recreate Alexander the Great is frivolous.”⁹

The wittiness of that last contrast brings to mind another of Vidal’s favourite criticisms of the serious novel: valuing feeling over intellect, its caretakers privilege a tone of “solemn and often vatic” middle-class sincerity,¹⁰ and oppose themselves resolutely to any incursion of irony, wit, or satire. Bemoaning what he sees as the absence of satire in American letters, he writes “The sort of harsh truth-telling that one gets in Aristophanes, say, is not possible in a highly organized zoo like the United States where the best cuts are flung to those who never question the zoo’s management” (150). In *Myra Breckinridge* (1968), a satirical romp on cultural norms of gender and sexuality, and *Duluth* (1983), a juvenalian send-up of 1980s America, Vidal is clearly countering this perceived tendency.

Vidal’s expressed discontent with the state of the serious novel did not limit itself to the works of American novelists of what he would call the “solemn and vatic” school: he also took issue, in print, with the so-called French New Novel of the ‘50s and early ‘60s, which he first critiqued at length in an essay that appeared in 1967, one year after the publication of Susan Sontag’s influential *Against Interpretation* (1966) introduced names like Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Roland Barthes into American literary discussion. Although he admits to a certain level of respect for the writings of this triumvirate, he essentially denounces their New Novel as long on pretence and short on artistic merit; specifically, Vidal argues that the novels of Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute—not to mention of fellow-travellers Michel Butor, Claude Simon, and Robert

⁹ Vidal, “The Top Ten Bestsellers,” in *United States*, 81.

¹⁰ Vidal, “Thomas Love Peacock,” 148.

Pinget—embrace experimentation for no higher reason than its own sake; appropriate scientific concepts and terms in a way that is faddish and superficial; fetishize an ahistorical notion of “perpetual present”; and, by positing the work of art as hermetically sealed off from reality, “based on no truth that exists before it” (Barthes), espouse an epistemology that is too narrowly formalistic.¹¹ Deploring the New Novelists’ preoccupation with pure form, Vidal suggested that if a writer were to follow Robbe-Grillet’s theories to their logical conclusion, he would end up producing not a novel but “a collection of ink, paper, cardboard, glue, typeface, to be assembled or not by the reader-spectator.”¹²

The kinds of novels that Vidal has written reflect his dissatisfaction with the serious novel as expressed in his literary essays. Separable into two broad categories, his novelistic *oeuvre* consists of, on the one hand, highly experimental satires or “inventions” like *Myra Breckinridge* and *Duluth*, and, on the other, relatively conventional historical novels such as *Julian* and the *American Chronicles*. If Vidal considered the novel in his time an ailing, dying tradition, it stands to reason that he would try to contribute to the resuscitation of the form through innovative, avant garde prose fictions like *Myra* and *Duluth*. What is perhaps less clear is why, if indeed he sought to revitalize the serious novel, he chose to work within the confines of that most tawdry, old-fashioned, and unloved house of fiction, the historical novel, and to do so as a respectful resident rather than a bemused Barth-like building inspector.

¹¹ Vidal, “French Letters: Theories of the New Novel,” in *United States*, 106 *et passim*.

¹² In the mid-seventies, Vidal published another polemic against the French New Novel, suggesting that the theories of Barthes had had a strong—but toxic—influence on newly prominent American novelists such as Donald Barthelme, John Barth, Grace Paley, William Gass, and Thomas Pynchon. Vidal, “American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction,” in *United States*.

Vidal's appropriation of the conventional historical novel form is connected to his contention that "[one] of the great losses to world literature has been the novel of ideas,"¹³ as historical fiction provides a congenial forum for the presentation of the wide-ranging facts and ideas whose rarity in the serious American novel he has often decried. Of all the *American Chronicles*, *Burr* (1974) exemplifies best Vidal's taking up of the historical novel as a vehicle for ideas. And in addition to lending itself well to the exposition of a certain kind of knowledge, the historical novel proved well-suited to another of Vidal's major causes: a critique of the academy's canonization practices and the assumptions about commercial success and literary excellence that underpinned them. In *1876*, the next instalment in the *American Chronicles* after *Burr*, Vidal exploits the historical novel's ambiguous status in literary history as a once-prestigious, now-degraded genre to pursue that critique.

Vidal's biographer, Fred Kaplan, relates that his subject got poor grades throughout his schooling (which ended with his graduation from the Massachusetts private high school Exeter), partly because he preferred writing stories and reading books of his choosing to doing the work that his teachers assigned.¹⁴ Despite the mediocre report cards and the lack of a post-secondary degree, Vidal considers himself highly-educated, an autodidact who learned more on his own than he could have at any school. The lesson he seems to have absorbed early on—that fiction could be a more enlivening teacher than the one at the blackboard—was one that he would put into practice as a professional writer, most notably in his historical fiction, which, partly by its generic nature and partly by Vidalian design, always seeks to teach us something.

¹³ Vidal, "Thomas Love Peacock," 140.

¹⁴ Kaplan, 43.

To reconquer the interest of those readers who had presumably deserted novels (or had never read them in the first place), novelists had to make them more informative, but more accessible too. In his essay on Thomas Love Peacock and the novel of ideas, Vidal recommends appropriating popular, commercial genres and infusing them with intellect and erudition: “One final tactic that *might* work is to infiltrate the genre forms. To fill them up, stealthily, with ideas, wit, subversive notions: an Agatha Christie plot with well-cut cardboard characters that demonstrated, among other bright subjects, the rise and fall of monetarism in England would be attractive to all sorts of readers and highly useful.”¹⁵ Like the mystery novel, the conventional historical novel did not command the esteem of professors or critics, yet sold relatively well; accordingly, it was a prime candidate for the kind of appropriation that Vidal seems to have had in mind. That Vidal co-opted a prestige-less genre and filled it up with “facts and ideas” in an attempt to make novels more accessible and informative and, consequently, more relevant to the broad culture is, I propose, partially responsible for the *American Chronicles* seeming, to reviewers like Keneally, “strangely out of date” in the age of historiographic metafiction.

In *Burr* (1973), the second of the *American Chronicles* in order of composition but the earliest in terms of temporal setting, Vidal recounts the military and political careers of Aaron Burr through the prism of the fictional Charles Schuyler, an aspiring writer investigating Burr’s life as it draws to a close in the 1830s. A Revolutionary War hero who served as the attorney general of New York (1789-90), a U.S. Senator (1791-

¹⁵ Vidal, “Thomas Love Peacock,” 162. Although, as we have seen, Vidal often reproaches serious novelists for failing to give readers much in the way of facts, he also suggests at times that the reading public has gone too far in its preference of fact to fiction. He notes sardonically that “books about the Kennedys, doctors, and vivid murders are preferred to the work of anyone’s imagination no matter how agreeably debased.” Vidal, “French Letters,” 88.

97) and, under Thomas Jefferson, the nation's third vice-president (1800-1804), Burr (1756-1836) is best-known as the slayer of fellow founding father Alexander Hamilton, whom he shot in a duel in New Jersey on 11 July 1804. His triumph of marksmanship proved a defeat for his reputation, which suffered considerably in the aftermath of the duel, and sank even lower a few years later when in 1807 Jefferson accused him of the treasonous crime of attempting to separate the western states from the union. While Burr acknowledged that he had been planning a private military expedition against Mexico, which he sought to wrest from the Spanish, he categorically denied having had intentions to induce the states west of the Appalachians to secede from the U.S. Tried on this charge by three separate juries, Burr eluded Jefferson's hangman all three times by obtaining acquittals; however, judicial exoneration failed to restore his reputation and in 1808 he was driven to seek exile in Europe, not returning to the U.S. until 1812 when, no longer a player in American politics, he resumed his law practice in New York city.

Historian Roger Kennedy notes with puzzlement that a public man as controversial as Burr never made a major attempt to vindicate himself in the eyes of history. Kennedy suggests that, unlike Jefferson, who "saved and arranged every paper that might demonstrate his character as he wished posterity to assess it," Burr refused "to engage [posterity] in a conversation." As the historical Burr said, "I fear I have committed a great error; the men who knew their falsity are dead, and the generation who now read them may take them for truths, being uncontradicted. I admit I have committed a capital error, but it is too late to repair it."¹⁶

¹⁶ Roger G. Kennedy, *Burr, Hamilton, and Jefferson: A Study in Character* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.

But for Vidal, it was not “too late,” even in 1974. It is telling that Vidal makes of Burr, an arch-villain of orthodox American history, the first hero of his historical saga and the progenitor of the fictional clan whose members¹⁷—Schuyler, his daughter Emma Sanford, her daughter Caroline Sanford, et al—fill the protagonist roles in the later instalments of the series.¹⁸ Vidal’s choice of the much-reviled Burr as sympathetic subject—and dominant subjectivity—of the first novel in the series suggests the considerable extent to which he writes *against the current* of mainstream American history in the *Chronicles*. Indeed, Vidal’s contestation of the schoolbook version of the founding period in *Burr* does not limit itself to a favourable reassessment of Aaron Burr, but also involves an aggressive challenge to the lustrous historical reputations of heroes like George Washington, whom Burr characterizes as incompetent in the battlefield, dull-witted in the drawing room, and monstrously fleshy in the rear end, and Jefferson, whom he paints as a deceitful, unprincipled hypocrite.

With the publication of *Inventing a Nation: Washington, Adams, Jefferson*, nearly thirty years after the appearance of *Burr*, Vidal made another foray into the history of the founding period, this time as historian rather than historical novelist. Beginning with the framing of the Constitution in 1787 and ending shortly after the inauguration of President Jefferson in 1801, this short work of non-fiction recounts the defining events of the Washington and John Adams presidencies, insisting at several points that the history of America’s childhood and the speeches and writings of its early caretakers afford great

¹⁷ Burr’s murder of Hamilton, in addition to Jefferson’s accusations of sedition, led to his going down in American history as a kind of Miltonic Lucifer. As historian Joanne Freeman remarks of this “fallen angel,” of American history, he “has long been the *enfant terrible* of the founding period, an errant soul snaking his way through America’s creation myth.” Joanne Freeman, “History as Told by the Devil Incarnate,” in *Novel Historians: Historians and Novelists Confront America’s Past (and Each Other)*, ed. Mark C. Carnes (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 29.

¹⁸ Vidal can claim a tenuous family connection to Burr, to whom his sometime stepfather, Hugh D. Auchincloss, was distantly related on Auchincloss’ mother’s side. Kaplan, 318.

insight into what he considers the deplorable state of the union in 2003.¹⁹ As the title might lead us to expect, *Inventing a Nation* proposes that much of what passes for early American history is in fact more like mythology, both because of the calculation of founding fathers like Washington and Jefferson, who always remembered to turn their good sides to the cameras of posterity,²⁰ and the incompetence of patriotic or paid-for academic historians who emphasize only the “sunny aspects” of American history and thereby “invent” history. However, these negative senses of “inventing” occupy only a secondary place in this work, whose principal aim is not to denounce the first presidents as proto-spin doctors or to trash court historians, but rather to honour the achievements of America’s early presidents. After all, as Vidal intimates towards the work’s end, *Inventing a Nation* is his “hardly definitive answer” to a question John F. Kennedy once put to him in conversation, and whose premises he clearly agrees with: “How do you explain how a . . . backwoods country like this, with only three million people, could have produced the three great geniuses of the eighteenth century—Franklin, Jefferson, and Hamilton?” (187). Although it refuses to romanticize the founding fathers, *Inventing a Nation* does venerate them, and in this it differs markedly from *Burr*, and its Burr, who takes a sledgehammer to their pedestals.²¹

¹⁹ Vidal suggests that George Bush, Jr.’s administration has fulfilled Benjamin Franklin’s “dark prophecy” that, no matter how well-designed its initial government, America would “after a course of years” become “so corrupted as to need Despotic Government, being incapable of any other.” *Inventing a Nation: Washington, Adams, Jefferson* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2003), 31.

²⁰ Vidal relates that in 1785 Washington accepted from the government a gift of valuable shares in a public works company, but only on the condition that he be free to donate his dividends to charity: “This . . . condition became, as intended, the most highly publicized part of the legislature’s official grant. The ongoing, *self-nurtured* image of Washington as a modest and even selfless hero had made him for sixteen years the iconic . . . centre of the world’s stage” (emphasis mine 9). As for Jefferson, Vidal reminds us that in his later years his “canny working relationship with history” revealed itself in his compilation of *The Anas 1791-1806*, a collection of his correspondence which he carefully edited (82).

²¹ Vidal states in the Afterword to *Burr*, “I think rather more highly of Jefferson than Burr does; on the other hand, Burr’s passion for Jackson is not shared by me.” Vidal, *Burr: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 1973; Vintage 2000), 430. That Vidal takes pains to distinguish between his own reading of

Vidal often characterizes his home country as the “United States of Amnesia,” and it is clear from his essays that he judges abysmal the education in their country’s history most Americans receive in school. For this reason, he is unwilling in *The American Chronicles* to indulge in the kind of postmodern “fantasy” Keneally found lacking in *Lincoln*; unlike Barth or Doctorow, he does not concentrate on highly theoretical questions of the relationship of history and fiction, as the latter did in *The Book of Daniel* by reinventing the historical Rosenbergs as the Isaacsons and changing significant details about their story yet conserving enough salient points to make comparisons to the historical figures inevitable. In a rare moment of solidarity with university professors, Vidal made clear that he tends to conservatism where the incorporation of historical facts into historical fiction is concerned:

Of course, there is a problem with historical fictions or fictionalized histories, and I tend to be on the side, if not of the paid propagandists for our corporate way of life, of those historians whose teeth are set on edge by the fantasies of the talented E. L. Doctorow or the wistful musings of the author of *Roots*. For a people as poorly educated as Americans (take a bow, teachers), it is a mistake to play any sort of game with agreed-upon facts. Certainly, it is hardly wise, in what looks to be a factual account, to have Harry Houdini chat with Walt Whitman aboard the *Titanic*, or whatever. Fantasy, as such, must be clearly labelled, even for our few remaining voluntary readers.²²

American history and that of his invented Burr reminds us of Hutcheon’s point that the particular investments of single narrators need to be taken into account when considering their narratives.

²² Vidal, “Lincoln and the Priests,” 700.

Significantly, the stern pedagogical responsibility Vidal speaks of here instantiates itself in the figure of Burr, who functions not only as the founding father of the *Chronicles* but as its first schoolmaster too.

Burr, of course, plays the role of teacher to Schuyler's pupil, but there are other reasons for considering him an educator-figure in this novel. Not just Schuyler's tutor, Burr has instructed whole classes of students: "I was not able to be a king . . . but I have been lucky for I have always been able to indulge my true passion which is to teach others . . . and trained a hundred boys to make the best of their life, without complaint, or dishonour," he tells Schuyler while discussing his failure to become the ruler of Mexico (347). And the text contains many more remarks to the effect that Burr delights in instruction. "Well, I do enjoy teaching," (139) he states as he agrees to Schuyler's suggestion that he should dictate to him his memoirs. After noting that Burr devoted an entire afternoon to a five-year-old girl likely his unacknowledged daughter, Schuyler remarks in his journal, "Burr is marvellously patient with all children. Talks to them as though they were adult. Teaches them" (52) and in doing so echoes Washington Irving's comment to him that "Colonel Burr, as you know better than I, is a born pedagogue. He loves the young. He loves to teach them. After all he is the son and grandson of presidents of Princeton College" (121).

Tellingly, the aging Burr prefers pedagogy to polemics: it is not primarily adults whom he wishes to disabuse of the idea that he is an American Lucifer, but schoolchildren. Standing in front of Hamilton's tomb in the Trinity Church graveyard, Burr intimates to Schuyler a desire to set straight what he considers the lopsided history of the American Revolution which "seems cast in lead if the schoolbooks are any guide"

(7). And the interest he takes in his place in textbook posterity also reveals itself when, during the dictation to Schuyler of his account of the 1807 treason trial, he touches on a speech delivered in court by prosecuting attorney William Wirt in which Wirt denounced Burr as the Satanic tempter of one his chief collaborators, Harman Blennerhassett. He deplores the canonization of Wirt's oration in the textbooks of the nation:

I am told that this remarkable effusion is still taught in every school of the country as an example of—God knows what! I do suspect that my continuing dark fame in this republic is now almost entirely due to the fact that the only thing that three generations of American schoolchildren know of Aaron Burr they have learned while committing to memory William Wirt's oration. (374-75)

He adds that one of his young “wards”—perhaps the illegitimate five-year-old daughter—recently recited to him Wirt's speech from memory, not knowing that it was “her kindly old Gamp she was denouncing” (375).

Because Vidal wants to teach his readers about America during the founding period, he has to do a considerable amount of exposition in *Burr*. The novel's past-perfect narrative structure (to write a biography of Burr, Vidal looks back to the 1830s, in which Schuyler is writing a biography of Burr by looking back to the first forty years of the American republic) makes plausible such expository passages since Schuyler, like many readers, presumably, is himself learning the history of the Revolution and the four decades that followed through his perusal of Burr's notes, his transcription of Burr's memoirs, and his conversations with characters who are old enough to have lived through the years under study. In his role of novice historian living at a temporal distance from the epoch he is trying to reconstruct, Schuyler functions to motivate such passages as his

journal entry on recent developments in the debate on whether states can “nullify” federal laws (7) and Burr’s explanation of the legal concept of “constructive treason” (373).

Perhaps the most memorable example of this didactic function of Schuyler’s character is the scene in which Burr takes his acolyte on a kind of field trip to the Weehawken Heights in New Jersey where he gamely re-enacts the notorious duel of 1804, with Schuyler in the role of the doomed Hamilton.

The pedagogical imperative in *Burr* helps to explain Vidal’s statement, in the Afterword, that “I had thought to give a bibliography but it would be endless, and political. As a subject American history is a battleground today and I would prefer to stay out of range” (430). He follows this with the admission “of a bias” for a particular work on Jefferson by historian Leonard W. Levy, which partially exposes the disingenuousness of his professed wish to “stay out of range” of the political battleground of history. After all, while Vidal is not as invested as DeLillo or Doctorow in problematizing our ability to know the past, he certainly has a political interest in telling the story of the American nation in the particular way that he does. Doctorow said of *Ragtime* that it “defies facts”²³; by comparison, Vidal’s fiction implies that historical facts are not nearly as difficult to agree upon as the postmodernists maintain, and that these facts about the past can point the way to concrete political positions in the present. In an unexpected way, then, *Burr*’s commitment to providing readers with a particular kind of political education through the fictional reconstruction of American history bears

²³ Mel Gussow, “Novelist Syncopates History in *Ragtime*,” *New York Times*, 11 July 1975, 12. Of interest, Doctorow stated in this interview that he sought to reach a wide audience with *Ragtime*: “I do want the book to be accessible. I want working-class people to read it, people who don’t follow novels. Reading novels often requires an effort of the will. I want the reader to be as unaware of committing a cultural act as he is when he goes to the movies.” Like Vidal, then, he sought to enlarge the novel’s readership, but as concerns historical fact took a very different approach.

out theatre critic John Lahr's acerbic estimate of Vidal: "He doesn't want to be remembered; he wants to be memorized."²⁴

After shining the spotlight in *Burr* on one of American history's most embarrassing figures, Vidal gave centre stage in his next *American Chronicle, 1876* (1976) to one of its most embarrassing events: the disputed presidential election of America's centennial, which, foreshadowing the Gore-Bush election of 2000, was decided not by the voters but by a congressional committee, in this case in favour of the Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes. The novel opens with Schuyler, now in his 60s, returning to New York City in December of 1875 after a thirty-year absence from the U.S. in Europe, and chronicles Schuyler's attempts to marry off his aristocratic, widowed daughter Emma into wealth, not to mention his penury-driven journalistic coverage of the scandal-marred twilight of Ulysses S. Grant's presidency, the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia and political developments in Washington before and, of course, during the Hayes-Tilden election.

In *Burr*, Vidal had taken full advantage of the historical novel's potential to edify readers with facts and ideas that they would not encounter in the ordinary round of serious American novels;²⁵ in *1876*, which is as much concerned with *literary* history as history, he attempts a revision of established distinctions between the canonical and the

²⁴ John Lahr, "Way of the World," *New Yorker*, 2 October, 2000, 140; quoted in Dennis Altman, *Gore Vidal's America* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005), 124.

²⁵ *1876* has its didactic elements too. As in *Burr*, Schuyler functions as a figure of identification for readers unfamiliar with the United States of the historical period depicted since he, in effect, has to re-discover America and its politics after his long absence (he compares his position upon returning to that of Rip Van Winkle upon awakening from his 20-year slumber). Furthermore, the character of Nordhoff, the *Herald's* regular Washington correspondent, briefs Schuyler—who arrives from New York as a special correspondent *in medias res*—extensively on the political background to the presidential race. In these ways, Vidal once again provides compositional motivation for the novel's expository passages. When he learns that Republican senator and would-be presidential nominee James G. Blaine read one of his books as a schoolboy, Schuyler comments, "If I had known thirty years ago that I was educating a generation of American politicians, I might have taken more pains to point a moral or two" (185).

commercial in American letters of the period, suggesting that the prestige accorded to particular writers and works by academic critics may be as ill-deserved as is, perhaps, the iniquity assigned to Aaron Burr by academic historians. In this highly-publicized bicentennial-year instalment of the *American Chronicles*, a book that garnered him the cover of *Time* magazine,²⁶ Vidal holds out the possibility that novelists can be, as Schuyler says of his daughter Emma, “surprisingly rather literary, despite a vulgar taste in fiction.”²⁷

Marcie Frank contends that romance, as a fiction category associated with commercialism, popularity, and inferior literary artistry, is a central term in the *American Chronicles*, which fit the mould of the historical romance and, as such, have greater affinities with the classical historical novel (e.g. the works of Scott and Cooper) than with the postmodern mutations of the historical novel realized in the last few decades by novelists such as A.S. Byatt, Michael Ondaatje, and Don DeLillo. Among his contemporaries, Vidal the historical novelist belongs in the company of writers like Willa Cather, Mary Renault, Marguerite Yourcenaur, and Pat Barker, Frank suggests, authors whose “historical fictions are formally more conventional than their postmodernist counterparts, which subject both texts of history and forms of narrative to the same processes of fragmentation and disjointment.”²⁸ By affiliating the *American Chronicles* both with canonical historical romances of the nineteenth century and ill-regarded but best-selling contemporary romances, Vidal calls into question demarcations between high- and middle-brow literature and forces us to entertain the possibility that

²⁶ Kaplan, 687.

²⁷ Vidal, *1876: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 1976; Ballantine Books, 1976), 117.

²⁸ Marcie Frank, *How to be an Intellectual in the Age of TV: The Lessons of Gore Vidal* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005), 69.

(like Burr perhaps) the latter may not be nearly as irredeemable as the academy has made it out to be. Thus does Vidal attempt to contribute to a definitive reinstatement of the artist as “culture hero” at the expense of the “theorist-interpreter,” who, in his opinion, was coming dangerously close to usurping that role.²⁹

In *1876*, the romance novel and its associations with commercialism and female writers and readers is a significant theme, one to which Vidal draws attention repeatedly by having characters utter variations on the publishing truism that “novels are for the ladies.” (115) Citing Schuyler’s derisive judgement of Nathaniel Hawthorne, supposedly a writer of serious literature far superior to that of “popular, busy women writers,” as an overrated, feminized romance-writer himself (“that dark veiled lady of New England letters”³⁰), Frank points out that in *1876* Vidal holds up to ridicule the claims of both Hawthorne and Schuyler to high literary merit far above the crowd of “frivolous” though popular woman writers.³¹ Despite Schuyler’s fancying himself a writer of significance and integrity (based mostly, it would seem, on the supposed excellence of his historical work *Paris under the communards*, whose title no one can seem to remember), forced to write occasional puff-pieces about the lifestyles of European royalty to stay afloat financially, as a man of letters he stoops considerably more often than he conquers. Of course, as the sole narrator of the novel, Schuyler is the character with whom readers will most readily identify, and, as a result, his favourable self-assessment may find sympathy and credence among them; however, Vidal counters this pull by lacing his narrative with a number of incidents suggesting that, in spite of his pretensions to literary prestige, Schuyler is essentially the hack-who-would-be-master.

²⁹ Vidal, “Thomas Love Peacock,” 149.

³⁰ Vidal, *1876*, 115.

³¹ Frank, 64.

For example, in response to Schuyler's joking suggestion that, tastes being what they are, his lecture agent should book not himself, a political writer and historian, but his non-literary but glamorous and aristocratic daughter, the Princesse d' Agrigente, the latter misses the irony and expresses enthusiasm for the idea ("Would she do it?"), adding that, as a lecturer, she could command a substantial sum for a short tour (167). Although some might argue that the point here is not Schuyler's mediocrity as a writer but that of the public as readers, other passages in *1876* invalidate such a claim with unmistakable insinuations that Schuyler, like Hawthorne, owes most of the success he has enjoyed as a man of letters not to his eschewing of feminized, commercial romance fiction but to his complicity with it.

Mrs. Southworth, the best-selling romance novelist (historically, E.D.E.N. Southworth), whom Schuyler both envies and deplores, implies at a dinner party that Schuyler may be more at home writing for women than he would like to admit: "Your descriptions of the immoral court of the French Empress made me think that you have, perhaps, the gift to move with your imagination the hearts and minds of women everywhere, in every walk of life, be it the stately palace or the humble cottage" (191). While, unlike Mrs. Southworth, Schuyler does not see in himself a writer whose literary pretensions belie an essentially romantic sensibility, he does recognize this tendency in others, as his analysis of the contemporary polemic between realists and romantics in American literature demonstrates:

Neither school achieves anything but romantic false effects. American realists feel that to describe the workings of a factory is somehow to be vivid and truthful, and to a point they are right. But when it comes to writing about the men and

women *in* the factories and what they really do to one another, particularly at work or within marriage, these realists are every bit as romantic and *unrealistic* as the popular, busy women writers. . . (115)

Schuyler suspects of romance-writing not only the American realists in general, but also William Dean Howells in particular who, despite his editorship of that bastion of literary realism, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and his protestations of reverence for European, Schuyler-approved realists like Flaubert and Turgenev, writes “easy lady-flattering fictions” (115) that cast doubt on his seriousness as an artist. Readers need not be mental contortionists to make the stretch that Schuyler’s assessments of Howells and the realists might equally apply to himself; after all, as the editor of *Scribner’s Monthly*—where much of Schuyler’s lady-pleasing prose appears—puts it, Schuyler is not a realist but a “writer of good taste” (91).

In addition to calling into question Hawthorne’s place in the American literary pantheon, Vidal in 1876 gives a few good shakes to the pedestal of another canonical nineteenth-century writer, Schuyler’s contemporary Mark Twain. Partly out of jealousy, partly out of conviction, Schuyler criticizes Twain mercilessly in his journal entries, denouncing his books as crude, corny, and callow, the work of an artistically-mediocre literary huckster. “I found *The Gilded Age* entirely unsatisfying: a half-dozen good jokes embedded in a Mrs. Southworth plot,” he writes, thus associating Twain’s works with best-selling, lady-pleasing romance. Along with the work, Schuyler also disdains the man, primarily, it seems, because he thinks him more concerned with the literary marketplace than with literature *per se*. “I have never particularly liked the company of professional writers, and certainly this music-hall comedian and newspaper-writing

Yahoo is quintessentially the professional,” he writes, explaining his initial aversion to meeting Twain one night at the theatre (339).

Schuyler’s opinion of Twain changes markedly after their chance encounter at the theatre leads to drinks and conversation at Delmonico’s. Although, at first, “Twain the professional writer was living up to my grimmest expectation” by talking lengthily of the commercial side of writing (the press’ reactions to his books, sales figures, e.g.), he abruptly turns Schuyler’s ennui to shock by declaring—in a most uncharacteristic, aristocratic moment—that he loathes universal suffrage and thinks that wealth and voting power should be directly proportionate. Twain’s outburst induces an epiphany in Schuyler, who gains a new-found—albeit qualified—respect for him:

Had he the character to be *unpopular*, he might have been greater than Swift, another Voltaire, a new Rabelais. . . . He is . . . hurt Caliban, a monster who has had the ill-luck to see his own face mirrored in the composite looking-glass of a million adoring countrymen. By cunningly playing the fool, Twain has become rich and beloved; he has also come to hate himself, but lacks the courage either to crack the mirror or to change, if he could, that deliberately common face which it so faithfully reflects (345).

Schuyler’s conviction that Twain had enormous potential as a serious artist, which he left unfulfilled out of a need for popularity, flies in the face of the consensus canonical status Twain’s works enjoyed at the time *1876* was published. After all, Twain had surely appeared upon far more American literature syllabi in the previous fifty years than had William DeForest or Edward Eggleston, two Twain contemporaries whom Schuyler finds much more accomplished than the author of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. By

suggesting that America's nineteenth-century reading public fell for Twain because, rather than lay pearls before swine, he wrote encomia to their fatuousness, Vidal indirectly implies that, in canonizing Twain, the academy has proven itself equally willing to privilege flattering books over good ones.³²

Although Vidal argues in his essays that only the hopelessly ignorant can see in America anything other than a good, old-fashioned oligarchy, he exhibits in *Burr* and *1876* an abiding preoccupation with the foundational, democratic ideal of a nation of equals as opposed to a polity consisting of a tiny ruling class and a vast, unlettered underclass. In this pair of conventional historical novels, both of which made the *New York Times* best-seller list, Vidal forces us to consider closely America's national ideals of universal suffrage and universal education and their possible interrelationships, as well as those of politics and literature more generally: if everyone in America can vote—and read—why do so many do neither? In *Burr* and *1876*, Vidal suggests that the imbalance between the few rulers and the many ruled is reproduced microcosmically within American history and novel-writing, domains in which priesthoods of academics and critics arrogate to themselves the prerogatives of recounting the nation's past and assigning literary value to its books. While Vidal's privileged background and mandarin tone have often earned him the epithets "patrician" and "cynical" from the press, it is also true that in the *American Chronicles* he attempted to render his reading of American

³² Of course, Schuyler's literary judgements must be taken with a grain of salt. After all, his pressing need to make money by writing implicates him deeply in the marketplace of letters and, as we have seen, prejudices him against colleagues whose work sells better than his own. But, just as Schuyler's impugning of the reputations of Hawthorne, Howells, and Twain subverts the assumption that the commercial side of literature is irrelevant or anathema to discussions of literary merit, so too do Schuyler's conflicting interests as both a hack-for-hire and a would be arbiter of literary taste.

history—both political and literary—as popular as possible, both as partisan national politics and as art.

CHAPTER THREE

THE UNION, MYSTICAL AND MYSTIFYING: *LINCOLN* AND *LIBRA*

As a fictionalized account of Lincoln's presidency and the Civil War, *Lincoln* (1984) takes place in the pre-dawn of American modernity; Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), a fictionalized biography of Lee Harvey Oswald, reenacts what some consider the inaugural event in the history of American postmodernity: Thomas Carmichael, for one, states that, "In popular terms, [the assassination of JFK] is best known both as the original site of a contemporary nostalgia and as the moment at which all that follows in the postmodern period was violently interjected into contemporary experience."¹ Both of these historical fictions dramatize the murder of an American president and simultaneously give an imaginative account of the end of one era in American history and the inception of another.

With *Lincoln*, Vidal carried on his critique of the serious American novel as he had described it—that is, as either an unadventurous tale of middle-class angst or a radically formalist New Novel. He did so by bringing forth another *American Chronicle* bursting with facts, set at a remove from the audience's first-hand experience, and taking as its subject a storied American historical figure and the momentous events which he helped shape. Considered alongside *Libra*, *Lincoln* seems old-fashioned inasmuch as it takes a relatively non-problematic approach to the issue of our ability to know the past and shuns pronounced formal experimentation; however, the epistemological and stylistic traditionalism of *Lincoln* must be understood within the context of Vidal's view that the

¹ Thomas Carmichael, "Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject: History and Intertextuality in Don DeLillo's *Libra*, *The Names*, and *Mao II*." *Contemporary Literature* 34, no. 2 (1993): 207.

historical novel should not principally serve the serious writer as an occasion for philosophizing about historiography, but should enable him to construct a popular, artistically credible, and relatively definitive version of the American past whose political implications for the publication-present win the support of the reader.

Although it draws our attention at times to the ineluctable constructedness of history, *Lincoln* does not radically contest the bases of traditional historiography. By comparison, one of the principal themes of *Libra* is the possibility that history and, indeed, reality are fundamentally unknowable. Reflecting in 1983 on the cultural significance of the Kennedy assassination, DeLillo suggested that November 22, 1963 marked the beginning of an unraveling, in America's collective consciousness, of the coherence and predictability of reality itself:

We seem from that moment to have entered a world of randomness and ambiguity, a world totally modern in the way it shades into the century's "emptiest" literature, the study of what is uncertain and unresolved in our lives, the literature of estrangement and silence.²

Whereas for DeLillo the assassination constitutes "a natural disaster in the heartland of the real" (22) that helped alter the American zeitgeist and contributed to the development of a new literature of indeterminacy, for Vidal the assassination is an utterly intelligible occurrence, a "mystery" whose solution is a badly-kept secret. Adopting his arch-mandarin tone, Vidal muses in his memoir *Palimpsest* that "the ultimate irony is that the elements that did [Kennedy] in—the Marcello mob in New Orleans and so on—were the kind of people that his father [Senator Joseph Kennedy] had comfortably done business

² Don DeLillo, "American Blood: A Journey Through the Labyrinth of Dallas and JFK," *Rolling Stone*, 8 December 1983, 22.

with all his life.”³ In his excoriating review of *Palimpsest*, John Simon blasted Vidal for the nonchalance with which he delivers that provocative statement. “Vidal wants us to believe he knows exactly who did in Kennedy, but can’t be bothered to go into all those tiresome details,” Simon scoffed.⁴ The radical divergence in the attitudes of Vidal and DeLillo to the assassination, as expressed in these non-fiction commentaries, prepares us for the significant differences between their approaches to representing history in fiction.

A good way to bring these theoretical differences into relief is to juxtapose the authorial notes appended to *Lincoln* and *Libra*. As in the other *American Chronicles*, Vidal in the Afterword to *Lincoln* admits to and identifies a small number of instances in which he has changed minor historical details (usually matters of chronological sequence) in the interests of storytelling. In addition, he specifies which characters he invented and avows that, owing to a paucity of documentation, he largely had to make up the words and deeds of his pre-conspiracy David Herold. Finally, he affirms that the historical figures portrayed in the novel “said and did pretty much what I have them saying and doing” and, to buttress this contention, makes it known that Harvard Lincoln scholar David Herbert Donald read and corrected his manuscript.⁵ In this way, *Lincoln*’s Afterword gives us the impression that, with the few exceptions mentioned, the narrative jibes with standard histories of the people and events concerned. The Author’s Note at the end of *Libra* resembles Vidal’s Afterword in that it spells out which

³ Vidal, *Palimpsest*, 378. Vidal does not represent nor even mention the assassination in the *American Chronicles*, though he does portray Kennedy, indirectly, through the Kennedy-à-clef character Clay Overbury, who appears in *Washington, D.C.* and *The Golden Age* as a handsome young senator with presidential aspirations, a distinguished (if contrived) record of service in World War II, and a tendency to philander; in the *Golden Age*, Overbury is pursuing the Democratic presidential nomination in 1960 when he dies in a plane crash under mysterious circumstances.

⁴ John Simon, “What Gore Remembers,” *The New Criterion* 14, no. 4 (1995): 20.

⁵ Vidal, *Lincoln*, 659.

of the characters are wholly-invented, but the similarities end there. Unlike Vidal, DeLillo makes no claim to historicity; on the contrary, he disclaims any connection between his narrative and the historical events it seems to evoke. In the tradition of Sir Philip Sidney's argument that the poet "nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth," DeLillo asserts that *Libra* is "a work of the imagination" which "makes no claim to literal truth, because it is only itself, apart and complete." Significantly, he also suggests that the formalist autonomy he claims for his novel should allow it to serve as a "refuge" for readers staggered by the immensity and contradictoriness of the ever-accumulating body of interpretations of the JFK assassination.⁶ DeLillo's disclaimer has the distinct advantage over Vidal's claims to historicity of forestalling potential objections from fact-checking historians; however, it also has the drawback of sounding, on some level, disingenuous; after all, is it really possible for us to read *Libra* without reference to a historical reality outside the work, or, since the past is always mediated through the language of historiography, the abundant textualizations of that reality? What DeLillo is hinting at here is, in fact, not that the art object can on some level exist outside of history, as New Critics affirmed, but rather that in the age of the postmodern, as truth has come to be seen as a function of narrativization, fiction has achieved a kind of parity with non-fiction, and novels can no longer necessarily be considered as truer or less true than histories.

Returning to my Chapter One rendition of Turner's categorization of historical fiction, *Lincoln* is what Turner calls a documented historical novel since it tells the story of a well-known figure from American history (unlike invented historical novels, which foreground fictional characters) and Vidal does not disguise the links between his

⁶ DeLillo, *Libra* (New York: Viking, 1988), 458.

fictional narrative and its historical basis (as opposed to disguised historical novels, which do). If it were not for DeLillo's remarks in the Author's Note, *Libra* would also fit squarely within the documented historical novel category; given his insistence that his work makes "no claim to literal truth," though, we must concede that on some level the text could be considered a disguised historical novel like Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* since it positions itself in the liminal space between referentiality and autonomy. Somewhat less convincingly, it could be argued—if one takes DeLillo's disclaimer at face value—*Libra* meets the definition of the invented historical novel, since its characters supposedly have no basis in history. This contrast between the ease with which *Lincoln* can be classified and the relative difficulty involved in pigeonholing *Libra* signals a significant difference between the historical fiction of Vidal and DeLillo: whereas Vidal favours definitive retellings of the past that lend themselves well to political partisanship in the present, DeLillo prefers to explore questions of epistemology at great depth and thus articulates a politics that is perhaps more subtle, but less concrete than is Vidal's.

If we apply Turner's rubrics for describing a work's attitude to the past, *Libra* is best characterized as operating in the Philosophic Mode, in which the historical novel focuses primarily on "how, or if, history itself is possible." After all, DeLillo's text is an imaginative meditation on the possibilities and limitations of written language as a means of rendering the past. In contrast, *Lincoln* functions principally in Turner's Reflective Mode, which resembles Lukács' theory of great historical fiction as portraying the past as

the pre-history of the present, and in which “the chasm between past and present is recognized only to be bridged.”⁷

Lincoln belongs in this particular category because it dramatizes a reading of Lincoln in which he, more than any other figure in U.S. history, is the founding father of the modern American nation-state. Vidal has outlined in more than one of his essays a periodization of American history that posits the Civil War as the watershed event in what he describes as America’s supposed transition from republic to empire. According to a three-part schema he outlined in a 1980 essay, the first American republic lasted from the revolution of 1776 until the ratification of the Constitution in 1788, and the second lasted from that point until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861; these first two republics he describes as loose confederations of autonomous states. Although he calls the next phase in America’s history the third *republic*, Vidal insists that the United States forged in the fires of the Civil War would essentially be an empire. “At war’s end, our third and most imperial republic came into existence. This republic was rich, belligerent, hungry for empire. [Its] master was the Bank. [It] became, in 1945, the world’s master,”⁸ he writes. Fulminating from his late-twentieth century position against the military-industrial complex, Cold War fear-mongering, and the power of the banks, he speculated in 1980 that this third American republic, ushered in by Lincoln, was drawing to a close and expressed the hope that it would soon be replaced by something better. That Vidal’s *Lincoln* dramatically illustrates such an interpretation of the significance of Lincoln and the Civil War to national politics in the 1980s attests to the appropriateness to this novel of, in Turner’s term, the Reflective Mode.

⁷ Turner, 354.

⁸ Vidal, “The State of the Union: 1980” in *United States*, 941.

The responses *Lincoln* elicited from literary reviewers suggest that Vidal's approach to representing history in fiction was perceived as outmoded, at least in the literary magazine culture of 1984. Joyce Carol Oates, for instance, gave the novel a favourable notice in the *New York Times*, but in a way damned Vidal with the faint praise that *Lincoln* was "not so much an imaginative reconstruction of an era as an intelligent, lucid, and highly informative transcript of it." The proposition that the work resembled a "transcript," record, or chronicle of Lincoln's days in office more so than a novelization of them also appears in Nicholas Von Hoffman's review for *The Nation*, in which he declared that, "With *Lincoln*, Vidal allows history to use and dominate him. His book sticks so closely to the actual chronology of events and has so little of his imagination in it that it merits review by a historian." Along with Oates and Von Hoffman, Thomas Keneally also scratched his head at Vidal's use of the novel form as a vehicle for what seemed to him barely distinct from a work of non-fiction: "Since *Lincoln* never takes flight and offers no more enlightenment than a good practical biography, the reader wonders what its reason for existence is."⁹

Curiously enough, while members of the *literati* like Oates and Keneally expressed dismay at *Lincoln*'s supposed subservience to the historical materials on which it was based, a number of prominent historians balked at the work for the opposite reason: infidelity to historical fact. Indeed, distinguished historians C. Vann Woodward, Richard Current, Roy Basler, and Don Fehrenbacher, in various essays, reviews, and letters-to-the-editor, all pronounced *Lincoln* an affront to the serious historian. As Current put it, "At many points it is hard to know whether [Vidal's] version of Lincoln's life and times

⁹ Joyce Carol Oates, "The Union Justified the Means," *New York Times*, 3 June 1984, 37; Nicholas Von Hoffman, "Patriotic Gore," *The Nation*, 16 June 1984, 744; Keneally, 32.

is an outright invention, a dubious interpretation, or simply a mistake.”¹⁰ Furthermore, Basler’s objections to *Lincoln* threw cold water on Vidal’s hope, which I discussed in the previous chapter, that the serious American novel would become more omnivorous in respect of subject matter: “My impression is that Vidal writes best about his own time and the people he knows. He might do well to return to this milieu.”¹¹ The line of argument Vidal followed in his numerous and spirited counterattacks on these historians might best be summed up by this vitriolic quip from his memoir: “The Lincoln priesthood . . . think that absolute truth exists not in Plato’s attic but in some dusty yellowing newspaper cutting, to be squirreled from an archive.”¹²

Unlike Vidal, DeLillo actively thematizes the possibility that historical truth is simply unavailable. He does so primarily through the figure of Nicholas Branch, the retired CIA analyst contracted to write a secret history of the assassination, a project on which he has toiled for the past 15 years. In his fire-proof home office, the aging Branch dozes off intermittently, only to wake up suddenly to the “horrif[ying]” sight of endless stacks of files, documents, books, legal pads, and cassette tapes.¹³ Branch’s labours often appear in a Sisyphean light: faced with an unrelenting torrent of new data to analyze and new theories to evaluate, he has produced “precious little . . . finished prose” in his 15 years on the job; he wonders “if he ought to despair of ever getting to the end,” if his

¹⁰ Richard Current, “Fiction as History: A Review Essay,” *The Journal of Southern History* 52, no. 1 (1986): 80. Although Current criticizes the history in *Lincoln* harshly and at length, he is objecting not so much to Vidal’s particular “errors” as to the general practice of novelists using well-known historical figures as main characters. He does concede that “Vidal has mastered a much larger amount of information (as well as misinformation) about Lincoln, his associates, and his times than has any other author of fiction in which Lincoln appears as the protagonist” (88). Characteristically, Vidal fought back with lengthy, point-by-point rebuttals in the *New York Review of Books*. Often, and with fair success, he tried to refute Current’s criticisms by pointing out that the inaccurate information or questionable interpretation issues from a character’s thoughts and so does not necessarily represent Vidal’s own thinking.

¹¹ Roy Basler, “Lincoln and American Writers,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 7, no. 1 (1985):17.

work will prove “the history no one will read” (60). The sense of epistemological inadequacy that sometimes gets the better of Branch also informs the worldview of Larry Parmenter, one of three invented CIA agent characters who, disgruntled over the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, originally plot a deliberate and “spectacular” near-miss of Kennedy in Miami in the hopes that such an event will galvanize American public opinion and the country’s leadership into undertaking a second invasion attempt in Cuba. After a conversation with his wife about the CIA, which he likens to a religion, Parmenter muses that the only certainty is uncertainty:

He believed that nothing can be finally known that involves human motive and need. There is always another level, another secret, a way in which the heart breeds a deception so mysterious and complex it can only be taken for a deeper kind of truth. (260)

Given DeLillo’s thematic investment in ambiguousness and insolubility, it comes perhaps as something of a surprise that in his narrative a particular theory of the assassination is acted out: gulled into assuming the fall-guy role by David Ferrie, Oswald fires three times on Kennedy from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, hitting the President only once, with a non-fatal bullet to the neck area (408); as per the plan of the rogue CIA agent T.J. Mackey (a DeLillo invention), it is the Cuban exile Ramón Benítez, firing from behind a fence on the infamous grassy knoll, who delivers the fatal shot. Of course, if we have learned the lesson of *Libra*, we will recognize that the point is not to attempt to prove or disprove such a version of events, but to judge it according to the same assumptions that lead us to say, for example, that a particular character or situation

¹² Vidal, *Palimpsest*, 377.

¹³ DeLillo, *Libra*, 15

in fiction is plausible. DeLillo's novel gives us a certain version of events, which is internally plausible and coherent but also, finally, contingent. His text does not affirm, as we might expect, that the truth of the Kennedy assassination is that there is none, but rather that truth is always produced by a process of narrativization. As Oswald's mother puts it in her final soliloquy-testimonial, "Your honor, I cannot state the truth of this case with simple yes and no. I have to tell a story" (449).

If *Lincoln* is less formally avant-garde and more trusting of history than *Libra*, a major reason for this resides in Vidal's complicated attitude toward aesthetic hierarchy and the artist's place within his culture. In one of the many essays that constitute Vidal's defense of *Lincoln*, he offers a sweeping interpretation of Western literature that focuses on these two questions: Of whom has the poet sung? What has been the poet's role in his culture? For two thousand years, he argues, "from Homer to Aeschylus to Dante to Shakespeare to Tolstoi, the great line of our literature has concerned itself with gods, heroes, kings. . . . From the beginning, the bard, the poet, the writer was a most high priest to his people, the custodian of their common memory, the interpreter of their history, the voice of their current yearnings"¹⁴; for Vidal, in the late-eighteenth century the printing press, increased literacy, and the industrial and bourgeois revolutions of Europe and America contributed to a fundamental shift in literature: in a turn toward the demotic, deities, knights, and monarchs began to lose their leading roles to the commonfolk. Vidal does not see this development *per se* as a change for the worse, but as he is fond of warning us, literature about the middle class can easily become dull: "Although a George Eliot or a Hardy could make art out of . . . simple domestic tales, in

¹⁴ Vidal, "Lincoln and the Priests of Academe" in *United States*, 670.

most hands crude mirrors of life tend to be duller than Dumas, say, and, paradoxically, less popular” (671). In his own time, Vidal claims, he has borne witness to a puzzling state of affairs in the republic of letters: on one side of the coin, high-brow literature, by casting tedious middle-class college professors in its leading roles, has become so boring that hardly anyone reads it outside of English departments, where it is steadily being rendered obsolete by hubristic, pseudo-scientific literary theories; on the flip side, the high-ranking protagonists of so much great Western literature have fallen into the clumsy hands of pulp fiction writers. “Today’s popular novel, carelessly, recklessly composed on—or by—a machine, paradoxically has taken over the heroes and kings and gods, and places them in modern designer clothes amongst consumer dreams beyond the dreams of Sheherazade,” he writes (671). Although here, as he does in *Duluth* through the character of the farcical romance novelist Rose-Marie Kantor, Vidal insinuates that much of popular fiction consists of processed words and superficial fantasies, it is also true that he sees no reason why serious literature cannot involve imaginative forays into the intimate lives of emperors, generals, presidents. Furthermore, it is clear from his essays that Vidal finds desirable the idea of relegating critic-theorists to the margins of culture, and reinstating artists as its hieratic, central figures, beginning, perhaps, with himself: “So what am I up to? I continue, endlessly, to explain, to examine, to prophesy, particularly in the six novels where I deal with the history of the United States from the beginning to now” (671).

As a novel with serious literary aspirations that nonetheless takes a historical celebrity for its protagonist, *Lincoln* exemplifies Vidal’s desire to reinstate the creative writer as “a most high priest to his people,” a trusted, revered, and intelligible explainer

rather than an incomprehensible *poète maudit*. The broadness of *Lincoln*'s appeal, I would argue, results primarily from three factors: as "non-fictional" fiction it holds out to the average reader the promise of teaching him something concrete and therefore 'useful'; it takes as its hero a central rather than marginal figure; and, its style and structure are both relatively accessible to non-specialized readers. Although the reasons for its appeal are open to question, its commercial success is undeniable. Published in June, 1984, the novel sold well enough to rank fourth on the *New York Times* annual best-seller list in the category of hardcover fiction.¹⁵ "Nothing ever written about the sixteenth President was more widely read," asserts Merrill Peterson, noting that the novel's first printing ran to 200,000 copies, while its first paperback print run, a year later, consisted of one million copies.¹⁶

That Vidal sought a wide audience for *Lincoln* is also attested to by its status as, in a sense, a made-for-TV novel: Vidal began the project in 1979 not as a book but as a script for a six-hour television miniseries, with the hope that his acquaintance Tony Perkins might appear in the title role. NBC purchased the rights to this script-in-progress, which Vidal also intended to adapt for the stage after the airing of the television program, but subsequent changes in NBC's executive ranks brought about the cancellation of the miniseries, which led Vidal, despite an initial aversion to the idea, to eventually retool his *Lincoln* project as a novel; thus, in October of 1982 he signed a contract with Random House to publish *Lincoln* as the fourth installment in the *American Chronicles*. Completing the circle, the novel that began as a script became a script once again in 1988 when NBC, its interest rekindled by the book's commercial success, adapted it for

¹⁵ Edwin McDowell, "Publishing: Top Sellers Among Books of 1984," *New York Times*, 18 January 1985, p. C26.

television and aired “Gore Vidal’s Lincoln,” a two-part miniseries starring Sam Waterston and Mary Tyler Moore as the sixteenth president and his first lady.¹⁷ Vidal’s willingness to write a Lincoln script for television at a point in his career when money was no longer an issue suggests that, unlike the stereotypical intellectual, he rejected the proposition that television and serious artistic achievement were incompatible.

As noted in Chapter Two, Marcie Frank has argued that romance is a significant term for the *American Chronicles* because it allows Vidal to affiliate his novel cycle with the canonical historical romances of recognized nineteenth-century masters like Scott and Cooper while at the same time allying it with the mass appeal of contemporary romance novels. Romance is also a useful term for discussing representations of Lincoln, if we are to believe Edmund Wilson, who writes of Lincoln in *Patriotic Gore*, “There has undoubtedly been written about him more romantic and sentimental rubbish than about any other American figure, with the possible exception of Edgar Allan Poe.”¹⁸ In his novel, Vidal attempts to *deromanticize* his subject, to reimagine him in contradistinction to the saintly Father Abraham of academic hagiographers, not to mention the rail-splitting Honest Abe of sentimental biographers like Carl Sandburg.¹⁹ Thus, although he treats

¹⁶ Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994), 393.

¹⁷ Taking considerable license, the scriptwriter who adapted *Lincoln* for TV concluded the miniseries by having Mary Todd Lincoln speak the novel’s dramatic last line, which in the novel belongs to John Hay’s consciousness as focalized through the narrator. Thus, in a moment of high implausibility that irked historians, the mourning First Lady soliloquizes, “[Lincoln] willed his own murder as a form of atonement for the great and terrible thing that he had done by giving so bloody and absolute a rebirth to his nation.” According to the *New York Times*, the scriptwriter made the change to appease Mary Tyler Moore, who wanted more lines. The show’s producers affirmed that Vidal “read and applauded the script.” Harold Holzer, “A Filtered Portrait of Lincoln Comes to the Small Screen,” *New York Times*, 20 March 1988, 94-5.

¹⁸ Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford UP, 1962), 115.

¹⁹ In reference to Sandburg’s best-selling, Pulitzer prize-winning treatment of Lincoln’s presidency, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years* (1939), Vidal wrote, “Sandburg managed to reduce one of the most interesting and subtle men in world history to a cornball Disneyland waxwork.” Vidal, “First Note on Abraham Lincoln,” *United States*, 664. Wilson quipped that “there are moments when one is tempted to

Lincoln with reverence, Vidal also adopts certain deflationary strategies: he makes frequent mention of Lincoln's constipation and reliance on the "Blue Mass" emetic; invents a late-night conversation between Hay and a drunken Herndon so as to include in the novel the historical Herndon's controversial belief that Lincoln had syphilis; suggests that Lincoln was so naïve in economic matters that he assumed the treasurer would have to hand-sign every greenback; and maintains that Lincoln believed colonization the best policy for dealing with America's black population almost until the war's end.²⁰ In such ways, Vidal positions *Lincoln* as a project of demythologization, an attempt to substitute for the waxwork Lincolns of Sandburg and his ilk a portrait of Lincoln that, while reverential, is free of sentimentality.

Vidal concurs with Wilson not only in regards to the sentimentalization of Lincoln but also with respect to the notion that Lincoln and the Civil War ushered America into the age of the massive, unified modern nation-state. Taking a cue from Wilson's assessment of Lincoln in *Patriotic Gore*, Vidal wrote to a correspondent while composing his novel that "Lincoln is our Bismarck, and that's how I plan to show him."²¹ The novel encourages this reading, most conspicuously in its final scene, set at court in France. Vidal has the now-expatriated Charles Schuyler and his daughter Emma make a cameo appearance so that the latter can speak these lines to Hay: "[Bismarck] has now

feel that the cruelest thing that has happened to Lincoln since he was shot by Booth has been to fall into the hands of Carl Sandburg." *Patriotic*, 115.

²⁰ Herndon told the co-author of his 1889 Lincoln biography, Jesse Weik, that Lincoln had confided in him having contracted syphilis about 1835; he later said he had not intended for this information to become public. Historian Current judges preposterous the notion of a syphilitic Lincoln, citing his "rugged health" and "normal family" as proof he could not have suffered from "what was in his time a devastating and incurable malady." Richard Current, *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), 35. For Current's objections to Vidal's rendering of Lincoln as chronically constipated, unsophisticated on economic matters, and devoted to colonization for blacks, see Current's "Fiction as History," 80.

²¹ Kaplan, 737.

done the same thing to Germany that you tell us Mr. Lincoln did to our country.

Bismarck has made a single, centralized nation out of all the other German states.”²²

A good deal of evidence can be marshaled in support of Vidal’s thesis that the modern American nation state was born during Lincoln’s presidency. For example, as historian Phillip Shaw Paludan notes, under the Lincoln administration American finance became far more centralized. The Legal Tender Act of February, 1862 created the first national currency, the so-called greenback, which replaced the state bank notes that were issued by about 1600 different institutions at the outset of the war. Congress also passed Secretary of Finance Salmon P. Chase’s bills to establish America’s first income tax and to significantly raise excise taxes, thus increasing the power of the federal government in financial matters.²³

Lincoln presided over not only financial centralization, but the ongoing project of knitting together America’s disparate regions through the expansion of transportation and communications networks as well.²⁴ A running joke in *Lincoln*—and an index of rail transportation’s singular importance to the economic development of the U.S. at this time—is that seemingly every Northern political and military leader has a background in the railroad industry (this is true of Lincoln, George B. McLellan, and Ambrose Burnside, for example). As portrayed by Vidal, Lincoln, who often represented railway companies as an attorney in Springfield, Illinois, views a sea-to-sea railroad as an essential infrastructural component of the nation he envisions. While watching the results of the

²² Vidal, *Lincoln*, 656.

²³ Phillip Shaw Paludan, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 109-110.

²⁴ The most notable contribution to railway development made by the American government during Lincoln’s presidency was the Pacific Railroad Act. Passed in July, 1862, it granted millions of acres of public land and millions of dollars in credit to railroad companies in exchange for extensions of the track between Omaha and Sacramento. Paludan, 116.

1864 presidential election come in at the War Department's telegraph office, congressman Elihu B. Washburne reminds Lincoln that the cross-country railway remains far from complete, but Lincoln insists that the project will be realized and uses the occasion to assert its significance to the modernization of the United States. "What matters is that there will be, one way or another, a railroad that joins the whole Union into one . . . union [ellipsis Vidal's]. Without such a railroad we have no nation in the modern sense," he declares (382).

As much as they expedited communication over great distances, iron rails could not deliver information with nearly the same speed as the electric wires of the telegraph, a relatively new technology that proved highly useful in disseminating news and coordinating military operations during the Civil War. As telegraph historian Lewis Coe writes, "The Civil War, often called the first modern war, was also the first to employ the Morse telegraph for communications on a large scale."²⁵ Like history's Lincoln, Vidal's Lincoln spends a great deal of time in the War Department's telegraph office, watching voting returns and tracking troop movements. Significantly, as the war wears on in Vidal's narrative, the telegraph network comes to be figured as a sensory appendage to Lincoln's body: shortly before Gettysburg, Lincoln has Hay reflect that "the President, for all practical purposes, lived at the War department. The telegraph office now seemed to be simply an extension of the Commander-in-Chief, like his large ears" (441). Hay's musing suggests a kind of melding between Lincoln's corporeal body and the nation. A few pages later, Lincoln is once again identified with a communications-machine, as Hay figures the President in his thoughts as an "engine" powered by "fire," evoking the image

²⁵ Lewis Coe, *The Telegraph: A History of Morse's Invention and its Predecessors in the United States* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1993), 51-52.

of a locomotive (456). Steam-powered and wired to the telegraph machine, eating almost nothing and barely sleeping at all, Vidal's Lincoln, as the end of the war—and his life—draws near, is assimilating into his fleshly self the lines and wires of the modern communications grid that will articulate his union.

This notion of Lincoln embodying the American nation created by the Civil War has been insightfully articulated by Michael Paul Rogin, who reads Lincoln's presidency through the lens of the medieval doctrine of the king's two bodies and argues that, although America was a nation of laws and not monarchs, and though in theory the President could be distinguished from, and subordinated to, the office of the Presidency (and with it the Republic), in Lincoln's case something else occurred: the nation was absorbed into the personal identity of the President. Rogin states that, in the American cultural imagination of Lincoln's time, the two most obvious analogies for this war president who suspended *habeas corpus* were the "classical," in which he was likened to an imperial tyrant, a latter-day Caesar or Napoleon come to fell the American Republic,²⁶ and the "Christian," in which the king's mortal body dies and is transfigured, becoming "the *corpus mysticum*, the regenerate community."²⁷ Having characterized the Civil War as God's retribution against America for the sin of slavery, Rogin writes, Lincoln figured

²⁶ Edmund Wilson points to Lincoln's Young Men's Lyceum speech as evidence that, even in the early stages of his political career, Lincoln desired a political cataclysm out of which he could reinvent the nation and thereby equal or surpass the glory of the founding fathers. In 1838, as a 29-year-old member of the Illinois legislature, Lincoln delivered to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield an address called *The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions*, in which he posed the rhetorical question of whether the most talented and ambitious among newer generations of Americans would be content to administer the political edifice bequeathed to them by the founding fathers. Wilson, 107-9. Vidal suggests in *Lincoln* that the sentiments expressed in this speech help to explain Lincoln's handling of the crisis that met him when he became president over twenty years later. He does so by having Stephen Douglas confront Lincoln with quotations from the speech during a visit to the White House shortly after the capture of Fort Sumter by the Confederacy. "So now you have your chance to re-create the republic," Douglas insinuates (111).

²⁶ Michael Paul Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 88.

himself as the instrument of God's wrath and thereby not only assumed but exaggerated personal responsibility for the devastation the war wreaked (87). John Wilkes Booth may have declaimed "*sic semper tyrannis*" after assassinating Lincoln at Ford's Theatre on Good Friday of 1865, but Lincoln did not die the ignominious death of the tyrant; as the sacrificed son, he atoned for his own transgressions against Washington, the founding fathers, and their Constitution and regenerated the body politic in his *corpus mysticum*. "Lincoln was the war's climactic casualty. . . . His own bleeding body bound up the nation's wounds. Carried slowly by train on a twelve-day funeral procession through the North, Lincoln's body merged with the mystic body of the Union" (90).

Vidal's historical fiction bristles with passages in which Lincoln is seen to embody the sovereignty of the Union in the way Rogin describes. For instance, when Secretary of War Edwin Stanton brings Lincoln the telegram announcing Lee's surrender and Union victory, Stanton shakes the President's hand and perceives Lincoln as, paradoxically, a non-human embodiment of the nation: "It was as if his old friend had ceased entirely to exist as a human being and in his place there was now, suddenly incarnate, an entire and undivided nation" (636). Vidal further emphasizes this notion of "the President's two bodies" by dramatizing a particularly relevant Lincoln anecdote: In the fall of 1864, after receiving the welcome news that Sherman has captured Atlanta and likely assured his president a second term in office, Vidal's Lincoln takes a long look at himself in a carefully angled-mirror before explaining to Hay that he is trying to reproduce a "phenomen[on]" he experienced a few years earlier whereby "for an instant, I saw myself twice, one image was clear; the other was paler and shadowier . . . it looked

as if I was sitting next to my own ghost” (577).²⁸ Although he fails to recreate the phenomenon, Lincoln’s invocation of a phantasmic body-double here calls our attention to the semiotic slippage between Lincoln’s mortal body and the abstract entity, the nation, that it comes to figure.

In Rogin’s analysis and Vidal’s historical novel, the identification of Lincoln, the man, with America, the concept, attains a kind of paradoxical perfection not unlike that of the transfiguration of Christ. In this, Rogin and Vidal recall the words of Confederate vice-president Alexander Stephens, who famously wrote of Lincoln that “the Union with him in sentiment, rose to the sublimity of a religious mysticism.”²⁹ In contrast, DeLillo’s *Libra* stresses the limitations of identification with the social totality for the individual subject living in a mass democracy. As Michael Warner’s work on mass societies reminds us, “the people” is a slippery term and the sovereignty ascribed to “the people” in a democracy is difficult to localize. According to Warner, the mass individual can conceive of the social whole through figures such as “the nation,” “the American people,” or “the masses,” but these figures invariably leave him with a sense of dissonance and incommensurability because “the public” posited—by public opinion polling firms, for instance—does not empirically or objectively exist. When we invoke “the public,” “we do not gesture to a statistically measurable series of others. We make a necessarily imaginary reference to the public *as opposed to* other individuals.”³⁰

²⁸ Lincoln’s paranormal experience is not a Vidalian invention. In *The Lincoln Nobody Knows*, Current describes it as having happened twice in a matter of days, shortly before Lincoln’s first election to the Presidency in 1860 (69).

²⁹ Alexander H. Stephens, *A constitutional view of the late War Between the States*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1868-1870); quoted in Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982), 290.

³⁰ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 161.

The alienating effects of this dilemma are amply illustrated in *Libra*. In his article on the JFK assassination, DeLillo makes the point that doubling seems to be a persistent theme in the story of Oswald. To cite just a few of his examples of doubleness in Oswald lore: the CIA allegedly had two sets of files on Oswald; in the weeks leading up to the assassination numerous Oswald look-alikes were spotted around Texas; the date of Kennedy's death becomes a numerical doubling when written "11/22."³¹ In *Libra*, the doublings of identity undergone by Oswald seem to be of a piece with the existential dissonance he experiences as he attempts unsuccessfully to reconcile, in a synchronic register, his selfhood with his ostensible membership in a mass community and, diachronically-speaking, his individual life with the flux of history. Early in the novel, as a chronically-truant public school student in Brooklyn, the Louisiana-born Oswald is teased by a couple of local bullies who call him "Tex" and "cowpoke," and ask to hear his "drawl" (7-8). After Oswald moves with his mother to New Orleans the scene repeats itself, only this time his tormentors bait him with taunts of "Yankee" (41) instead of "cowpoke." Thus does DeLillo position Oswald as the perennial outsider in American culture. But in other ways the text suggests that the future assassin, in his perfect ordinariness and mediocrity, is indistinguishable from the mass of Americans, just another representative for "the men in small rooms" motif that runs through the narrative and encompasses the CIA plotters. As a marine, Oswald serves time in the brig at a U2 spyplane base in Atsugi, Japan, where he learns that "the trick inside the wire was to stay within your own zone, avoid . . . anything that might hint at a personality behind the drone unit. The only safety was in facelessness" (108). When he arrives in Russia as an American defector only to be told, at first, that he cannot stay, the prospect that he is and

³¹ DeLillo, "American Blood," 22.

always has been an essentially anonymous person drives him into suicidal despair. “No one could distinguish him from anyone else,” he agonizes (151). Whether in the American North or South, in the U.S.A. or U.S.S.R., Oswald invariably occupies the paradoxical role of resident alien.

On 22 November 1963, Oswald was transformed instantly from “zero in the system” to (in)famous American historical figure, as DeLillo emphasizes by reminding us that no one called him *Lee Harvey* Oswald until the media identified him as such that day. In *Libra*, great tension exists between Oswald’s status as an individual American and, owing to his typicality, his status as “the average American,” “the man on the street,” or any other such figure for social totality. One way in which DeLillo articulates his oscillation between these two poles is through Oswald’s persistent (mis)identifications with JFK. Oswald convinces himself that he resembles the President in many ways, as this narratorial look into his thoughts suggests: “Lee was always reading two or three books, like Kennedy. Did military service in the Pacific, like Kennedy. Poor handwriting, terrible speller, like Kennedy. Wives pregnant at the same time. Brothers named Robert” (336). The fact that it takes nothing less than a bullet from a high-powered rifle to render this fantasy of connection with Kennedy real suggests the extent of citizen Oswald’s alienation from the nation that Kennedy represents.

In the lead-up to Kennedy’s assassination in *Libra*, DeLillo summons the ghost of America’s other most famously assassinated president and invites us to consider JFK in relation to Lincoln. Just before a passage in which the assassins drive from their training camp to Dallas in November, 1963, the narrator tells us that Nicholas Branch (working two decades later), has received for consideration “a four-hundred-page study of the

similarities between Kennedy's death and Lincoln's" (379). Moreover, DeLillo includes Lincoln in the overtones of his climactic scene by referring to the Lincoln-brand limousine in which Kennedy rides through Dallas as "the Lincoln" seven times in five pages of narrating the presidential procession.

It is fitting that a car can put us in mind of the Civil War president since, as Vidal's novel argues, Lincoln more than any other single historical figure invented modern America, which would come to be epitomized a few decades after Lincoln's death by the automotive assembly line of Henry Ford. With *Lincoln*, Vidal carries the *American Chronicles* over what he considers the most significant threshold in U.S. history, the Civil War, which would transform America, in his view, from a republic of loosely-affiliated states into a centralized nation increasingly unified by technologies of mass communication and increasingly committed to projects of imperial expansion.

In *Lincoln*, Vidal pretends to an authoritativeness on Lincoln's historical significance and legacy that a postmodern theorist like Hutcheon would likely qualify as totalizing, and in need of problematizing. Indeed, though it obviously violates Lukács' dictum that world historical figures should have small parts in historical fiction, Vidal's sweeping dramatization of the Civil War and Lincoln's presidency as the crossing of a Rubicon between republican and imperial America, the necessary pre-history of the present, comes much closer to satisfying a Lukácsian than a postmodern prescription for historical fiction. On the other hand, *Libra*'s comparatively emphatic thematization of the constructedness of history places it within the purview of historiographic metafiction. As one commentator has written of *Libra*, DeLillo's aim "is not to propose a definitive truth pertaining to the mysteries of history, but to proclaim the more general truth that

history, whilst never innocent or intrinsically coherent, is always being ‘rewritten’ in each telling” (96)

Unlike *Libra*, *Lincoln* does not make the destabilizing of historiography a top priority; in contrast to DeLillo’s deliberately fractured narrative of epistemological malaise, subjective alienation, and mystifying union, *Lincoln* presents American history as a coherent and intelligible whole, much as it does the union that Lincoln’s life—and untimely death—made possible.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE AMBIGUOUS BIRTH AND UNCONFIRMED DEATH OF MODERNISM: *EMPIRE AND RAGTIME*

When Vidal became an honorary citizen of Ravello, Italy in 1983, his friend Italo Calvino marked the occasion with a brief encomium to the honouree's *oeuvre*, in which he singled out *Myra Breckinridge* and the just-published *Duluth* for special praise. "Vidal's development along that line, from *Myra* to *Duluth*, is crowned with great success, not only for the density of comic effects, . . . not only for the craftsmanship in construction, . . . but because his latest book holds its own built-in theory, that which the author calls his 'après-poststructuralism,'" Calvino said. A literary joke between friends, 'après-poststructuralism' is also a good indication of the complicated relationship which Vidal's fiction bears to literary postmodernism. Indeed, as Calvino noted in his speech, Vidal has consistently positioned himself in opposition to Roland Barthes and the theorists of "Narratology" and, at the same time, made significant contributions (most notably with *Myra*) to "that new form which is taking shape in world literature and which we may call the hyper-novel or the novel elevated to the square or to the cube."¹

Faced with the question of whether Vidal's fiction ought to be classified as postmodern, one might propose that, on the one hand, the not explicitly historical "inventions" rightly qualify as postmodern literature on account of their pronounced formal self-consciousness and thematic investment in pop culture, intertextuality, and decentred subjectivity, and on the other that the histories do not since they do not differ significantly in either form or theme from the nineteenth-century historical novel of Scott

¹ Italo Calvino, "Imagining Vidal," in *Gore Vidal: Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini (New York: Columbia UP, 1992): 35-6.

and Cooper. Such an attitude informs the sly parody of Blake with which Thomas Keneally opened his *New Republic* review of *Lincoln*:

Lincoln, Lincoln, burning on
 In the nation's pantheon—
 A mystery of like degree:
 Did he who made Myra make thee?²

Keneally contrasts *Lincoln* with Vidal's previous novel, *Duluth*, arguing that the latter mounts a spirited attack on the conventional logic of novelistic characterization (and thus shares in the postmodern preoccupation with decentred subjectivity), while the former, a "literal, solid, and reverent" work, plays by the old rules of unitary, coherent character-subjects and so seems like a throwback to earlier, more innocent times in the history of the novel. Like a number of other critics, Keneally finds it disappointing that the postmodern iconoclast who authored *Myra* and *Duluth* would deal in the kind of literary orthodoxy of *Burr*, *1876*, and *Lincoln*.

If, as Keneally's jab suggests, the degree to which a Gore Vidal novel is postmodern varies inversely with the amount of historical content therein, then Vidal's fiction does not operate as we might expect it to based on Hutcheon's conception of the literary postmodern, which she describes as "resolutely historical."³ For Hutcheon, postmodern art is aptly characterized as "self-conscious about its literary heritage and about the limits of mimesis . . . yet managing to reconnect its readers to the world outside the page" (5). This contention that historiographic metafiction "reconnects" readers to an extratextual reality is bound up with her assumption that modernist novels attempted to

² Keneally, 32.

³ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 4. Hutcheon is quoting Larry McCaffery's description of Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

transcend history or to iron out its idiosyncrasies with totalizing forms. As she puts it, postmodern literature “must contend with modernism’s attempts to be *outside* history—through pure form, abstractionism, or myth—or to *control* it through theoretical models of closure. In postmodern fiction, the literary and the historiographical are always being brought together” (emphasis Hutcheon’s).⁴

In Vidal’s hands, the historical novel is not quite historiographic metafiction; it is not as playful, as paradoxical, or as problematized as, say, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1984), Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1967), or Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1975). Unlike many historiographic metafictions, Vidal’s *American Chronicles* do not trade in magic realism: Saleem Sinai may channel the children of Indian independence through his highly-receptive nose in Rushdie’s text, but such a fanciful plot element would never appear in one of Vidal’s historical novels. Furthermore, Vidal does not employ the characteristically postmodern technique of pastiche: unlike Barth, who in *The Sot-Weed Factor* imitates with as much ambivalence as meticulousness the eighteenth-century picaresque style of Fielding and Smollett, Vidal—though he favours an ironic mode—does not write sentences around which ironic quotation marks loom subtextually. Finally, as concerns the incorporation of historical texts into fiction, Vidal is conservative when considered alongside someone like Doctorow, who, as is well known, exercises considerable poetic license in his fictionalization of history. Whereas Doctorow blithely described the narrative of *Ragtime* as “a series of meetings that never took place,”⁵ Vidal

⁴ Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 101.

⁵ Gussow, 12. Doctorow admits, he “made up a lot of tricks for Houdini.” According to Derek Wright, he also made up for *Ragtime* the philanthropic social phenomena of Poverty Balls, at which the wealthy dressed as paupers, and Stockyard Balls, at which they *fêted* amidst “hanging carcasses of bloody beef,” not to mention Freud and Jung’s trip down the Coney Island Tunnel of Love together. E.L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (New York: Random House, 1975; Plume, 1996), 34, 33; Derek Wright, “*Ragtime* Revisited: History and Fiction in Doctorow’s Novel,” *International Fiction Review* 20, no. 1 (1993): 15.

has written disapprovingly of Doctorow's historical fiction, "Fantasy, as such, must be clearly labelled."⁶

What is the difference between the conception of the historical novel's cultural function implicit in Vidal's novel series and that which inheres in the historical fiction of Rushdie, Barth, and Doctorow? The answer depends to a considerable extent on one's view of postmodernism, which may not have made as significant a break with modernism as a theorist like Hutcheon suggests. If one subscribes to Peter Wollen's theory of postmodernism as a symptom of the declining fortunes of Fordist economics and functionalist aesthetics in the late twentieth century, rather than as "an exemplary antidote or alternative to modernism,"⁷ postmodernism—and historiographic metafiction—can come to seem more like "modernism plus cosmetics," as American architectural theorist Charles Jencks has characterized postmodern art, than a revolutionary way round the impasses of modernism. As Jencks writes of postmodern architecture, "so many years ago [Adolf] Loos had declared ornament a crime and now the cosmeticians and embroiderers and tattooists were finally having their revenge as they stuck their pastel neon or their Chippendale curlicues or their brutalist storm fencing, according to taste, on to perfectly legible modern buildings."⁸ From such a standpoint, Vidal's historical novels are no worse off—or less sophisticated in their fictional interpretation of history—for having failed to assimilate the dominant tropes of postmodernism.

⁶ Vidal, "Lincoln and the Priests," 700.

⁷ Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993, 29.

⁸ Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1977); quoted in Wollen, 206.

As Stephen Harris contends in his book-length study of the *American Chronicles*, the spirit and style of Vidal's novel cycle, though not postmodern, do not express a naïve faith in old-fashioned notions of literary realism. Rather, Harris claims, "Vidal creates sophisticated narratives that at once acknowledge the philosophical problems intrinsic to all modes of historical representation whilst also attaining a realistic effect in political terms through encouraging an awareness of the imbalances and omissions perpetrated by the 'official' or received history."⁹ He further argues that the *American Chronicles* meet certain of the criteria of historiographic metafiction as articulated by Hutcheon: for example, they can fairly be said to be "critical revisings" of the past that problematize issues of identity and subjectivity and challenge the legitimacy of supposedly definitive versions of past events. In *Burr*, for instance, a number of textualized voices—that of Burr, Charlie, Washington Irving, et al.—speak history into being, and this structural polyphony emphasizes the intertextual nature of history and allows Vidal to present a historical account that doesn't emanate from an authoritative, "official" source or an institutional context, but is incomplete, unfixed, and polyvalent (139-140).

Vidal sets himself in opposition to official histories not as an intellectual end in itself, Harris maintains, but to stress the political importance of a skeptical engagement with history. In *Burr*, as in the other *American Chronicles*, Vidal counsels a skeptical engagement with history, a "positive provisionality" (147) through which history in general retains its value as a "signified" and the meaning attributed to any given event is not so much put under poststructuralist "erasure" as kept open to revisionary

⁹ Stephen Harris, *Gore Vidal's Historical Novels and the Shaping of American Political Consciousness* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), 70.

interpretation. For Harris, the *American Chronicles* are less formally metafictional than dramatically, intellectually ironic.

As noted in Chapter Three, Vidal grumbled in the late '80s that "today's popular novel . . . has taken over the heroes and kings and gods, and places them in modern designer clothes amongst consumer dreams beyond the dreams of Sheherazade."¹⁰ While Vidal alluded to *The Thousand and One Nights* to suggest the tawdriness of 1980s pulp fiction fantasies about the rich and famous, Peter Wollen employs it as a metonym for an early-1900s strand of modernism whose significance to the history of modern art—and postmodern art—he judges to have been underestimated and obscured. In the opening passage of *Raiding the Icebox*, Wollen's analysis of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism in fashion, visual art, and architecture, he takes us back to Paris in the summer of 1911, to fashion designer Paul Poiret's Thousand and Second Night party, held to celebrate the advent of his new "Oriental" look. To give an indication of the costumes and *mise en scène* that characterized this *fête*: Poiret "was dressed as a sultan, lounging on cushions under a canopy, wearing a fur-edged caftan, a white silk turban, a green sash and jewelled velvet slippers . . . Nearby was a huge golden cage in which his wife . . . was confined with her woman attendants" (1). According to Wollen, the scenography of Poiret's party was representative not only of the designer's newest fashion line, but more generally speaking of an early form of artistic modernism characterized by the effusive and extravagant ornamentation favoured by Poiret and other Orientalist artists such as Leon Bakst and Henri Matisse, not to mention Sergei Diaghilev, whose Russian Ballet served as a creative rallying point for the others.

¹⁰ Vidal, "Lincoln and the Priests," 671.

(Indeed, the previous year the Russian Ballet had staged *Schéhérazade*, like Poiret's party a European fantasy projected onto the Orient and marked by ornamentation and excess).

Like most art movements, Wollen argues, "Modernism wrote its own art history and its own art theory, from its own point of view" (17); in what we might call its authorized autobiography, then, modernism makes scant mention, when recounting its formative experiences, of the Russian Ballet and these Orientalists in its orbit, preferring to locate its "mythic moment of origin" primarily with Picasso and the cubists. This privileging of cubism over the Orientalism of Poiret, Bakst, and Matisse was unwarranted, Wollen contends, and grossly distorted the early history of modern art:

In the years immediately after 1910, Poiret, Bakst and Matisse were much more widely known than Picasso or the cubists. Their impact was much greater. Poiret was the most successful designer of the time, the unchallenged leader of innovative fashion. The Russian Ballet swept all before it in Paris and wherever it appeared. Matisse built steadily on the scandal of the Fauves, consolidating his own reputation with a series of startling new works. They represent a pivotal moment in the emergence of modernism, later to be disavowed. Only now, perhaps, as modernism declines, can we see their significance again (17).¹¹

In histories of modern art, the Orientalist aesthetic usually stands on the sidelines as cubism converges with new industrial technologies in the formation of a highly influential "aesthetic of the engineer" (13), a rational functionalism that sternly proscribes the extravagant ornamentation for which Poiret, Bakst and Matisse were known. Adolf

¹¹ Wollen points to the anti-German French patriotism of World War I as a major reason that Poiret, Bakst, and Matisse lost their rightful place in the pantheon of early modernist pioneers: with France conceiving its struggle with Germany as a clash between the home of Enlightenment reason and the land of barbaric *Kultur*, the exuberant, Dionysian aesthetic of the French Orientalists came under political suspicion (21-22).

Loos raised the battle flag for this “machine form” aesthetic when in 1908 he declared, “The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects” (14); in the efflorescence of art movements such as Soviet Constructivism, the Bauhaus, De Stijl, purism, and Esprit Nouveau, the influence of this functionalist creed is evident. Whereas the influence of the Orientalists—expressed primarily in fashion, ballet, and decorative art—was crucial to the emergence of modern art in the early twentieth century, the impact of Americanism—especially in film, architecture, and applied art—dominated modernism’s “period of consolidation” and thereby came to obscure the significance of the former (35).

Wollen seconds Arno Mayer in fixing modernism’s triumph at a late date, after World War II, when, on his account, the long-delayed transfer of power from the *anciens régimes* of the nineteenth century to the bourgeoisie of the twentieth finally became a *fait accompli*. In his periodization, modernism found itself in crisis little more than two decades after its coronation, as in the early seventies the “dominant trope of ‘postmodernism’ . . . expresse[d] the confusion caused by the simultaneous and persistent crisis of Fordism in the economy and of high modernism in the arts” (205). These crises precipitated a return of the repressed: an important strain of modernism from the beginning, the aesthetic countertradition begun by Poiret, Bakst, and Matisse came to the fore once again. “In a new upsurge of hedonistic consumerism, as the old manufacturing, smokestack industries decayed, once more there appeared the fascination of androgyny, the return of the decorative and ornamental, and the insistence of female desire, celebrated or problematized,” he writes (29).

Taking the long view, Wollen locates the earliest beginnings of modernism in the free circulation of images from the margins of culture to its centre, positing as seminal the publication of compilations of popular prints beginning in the 1880s and the influence these had on academic artists like Manet and Degas in France, Larionov and Goncharova in Russia and Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros in Mexico.

From the beginning, modernism developed out of the circulation of images from low to high and periphery to core and, by doing so, challenged the aesthetic hierarchies of the *anciens régimes*. On this subversive and unstable base an aesthetic of rationalism and functionalism was later superimposed, after the collapse of the *anciens régimes* precipitated by the First World War. Artists and art theorists rallied to a utopian dream of a new society modelled on the exemplary modernity of new American technology and new Fordist industrial organization. But the circulation of images and discourses was never completely blocked and with the collapse of high modernism, it simply re-emerged. (208-9)

Thus, unlike Hutcheon, who may profess neither to celebrate nor denounce postmodernism, but undoubtedly sees in it something genuinely new, Wollen frames postmodernism as the failure of a long-ascendant kind of modernism accompanied by the resurgence of another form of modernism that was long repressed. As he writes, “the revival of the decorative and the extravagant is symptomatic of the decline of modernism, but it is not an exemplary alternative or antidote. It was modernism’s symptomatic shadow from the beginning” (29).

Wollen’s contention that postmodernism represents a vexed continuation of—more so than a decisive rupture with—modernism has significant implications for our

understanding of late-twentieth-century historical fictions such as Vidal's *Empire* (1987) and Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1974), both of which are set primarily in the first decade of the twentieth century. *Empire* opens on 13 August 1898, one day after the U.S. has won the Spanish-American War, and thereby massively expanded its colonial holdings; it ends in 1907 with the interpolated dialogue, mentioned in Chapter One, between yellow press magnate William Randolph Hearst and President Theodore Roosevelt in the White House Cabinet Room. Covering many of the same years as *Empire*, *Ragtime* begins in 1902, when Father builds the family home in New Rochelle, New York and concludes with the onset of World War I, which claims Father's life when he goes down with the *Lusitania*. As both works were published in the last quarter of the twentieth century and are set in America as it came out of the century's turn, they both engage, from positions in the postmodern era, a crucial phase in the development of American modernity.

Ragtime and, to a slightly lesser extent, *Empire*, can be read in the context of Wollen's theories of postmodern art as instantiating a return of the Orientalists' partiality to the extravagant and irrational. In *Ragtime*'s explicit thematization of mysticism as a volatile force underlying America's official allegiance to instrumental reason in the early-twentieth century, for instance, we see evidence for Wollen's claim that postmodern art revisits the kind of unruly effusiveness that fascinated and delighted Diaghilev and the Orientalists. Doctorow's narrative raises the possibility that several key actors in the rationalization of American industrial production are, surprisingly, closeted mystics. For example, in an encounter between Henry Ford and J.P. Morgan, Doctorow has Morgan, that captain of modern American industry, make it known that he subscribes to an elaborate theory of reincarnation: metempsychosis is the conduit by which "*prisca*

theologia” or secret wisdom has been transmitted from the ancient Egyptian pharaohs via the Rosicrucians and other secret societies all the way down through history to contemporary sages like Ford and himself. Significantly, Morgan preaches to Ford (whom he considers a latter-day manifestation of the pharaoh Seti I) that if it were not for the Enlightenment, the truth of his self-aggrandizing theory would be more evident. “Why do you suppose an idea which had currency in every age and civilization of mankind disappears in modern times?” he asks Ford, before venturing his own explanation:

Only in the age of science have these men and their wisdom dropped from view.

I’ll tell you why: The rise of mechanistic science, of Newton and Descartes, was a great conspiracy . . . to destroy our apprehension of reality and our awareness of the transcendently gifted among us. But they are with us today nevertheless.

They are with us in every age. . . . They come back! (124-5)

As far-flung as Morgan’s beliefs may seem, they do not surprise Henry Ford. In fact, the originator of the automotive assembly-line avows that he, too, believes in—and ascribes his mechanical genius to—reincarnation, the authentic principles of which he purports to have gleaned from *An Eastern Fakir’s Eternal Wisdom*, a 25-cent novelty book.

In *Ragtime*, Morgan and Ford are not the only prominent figures in early-twentieth-century America who champion the virtues of modern rationalization, while privately nurturing a credulous fascination with occultism. “America was in the dawn of the Twentieth Century, a nation of steam shovels, locomotives, airships, combustion engines, telephones and twenty-five-story buildings. But there was an interesting susceptibility to occult ideas of the most famous pragmatists in the land,” (168) the

narrator affirms. He specifies that the horticulturalist Luther Burbank, who used plant science to increase crop yields, held covert conversations with his botanical specimens and believed they could understand him, while Thomas Edison, “The man who invented the Twentieth Century,” thought science would allow humanity to contact the dead. Harry Houdini’s ambivalence on that same subject succinctly figures this tension between science and superstition: he wants to believe in the possibility of communicating with his beloved late mother, yet launches a crusade to expose fraudulent mediums by “duplicat[ing]” their feats “using mechanical means” (266).

The suggestions in *Ragtime* of a superstitious, irrational subtext to the dominant turn-of-the-century ideology of rational progress crystallizes on the last page of the text, with the narrator figuring history as, on one hand, a machine, and, on the other, a madman. History may be no more than “a tune on a player piano,” the narrator muses. Or it may be the ritual of a lunatic: “Harry K. Thaw, having obtained his release from the insane asylum, marched annually at Newport in the Armistice Day parade” (270).

In the opening scenes of *Empire*, in which Caroline is visiting Henry Adams and Senator and Mrs. Don Cameron at the English country manor of Surrenden Dering, Vidal makes it plain that, the bucolic setting notwithstanding, the *American Chronicles* have entered the era of the modern machine, or, as he describes it, “the new era of loud clattering railroads, sinister silent telegraphs, garish electric lights” (5). In addition to railroads, telegraphs, and electric lights, the world of *Empire* also abounds with telephones, typewriters, and automobiles: Henry James shuttles between Surrenden Dering and his residence at nearby Rye in a chauffeured “electrical motor conveyance” (36), and has the prose he dictates “machined” (17) by an amanuensis equipped with a

Remington. Indeed, the emerging machine culture of turn-of-the-century America is a crucial thematic starting point in *Empire*, a novel whose main preoccupation consists in dramatizing the effects on American national identity of two mass mechanization phenomena, the construction of a U.S. navy powerful enough to grant America entry into the empire-building game, and the frenzied production and distribution of those nation-inventing fictions, newspapers.

Though it does so to a lesser extent than *Ragtime*, *Empire* also figures in its narrative the uneasy co-existence of a dominant ideology of rationalism and the dogged persistence of cultural energies that could not be assimilated by logic, and thus shares with Doctorow's text an investment in what Wollen views as modernism's repressed origins. In *Empire*, the stewards of early-twentieth-century America may not be secret occultists, but Vidal does take pains to call into question the totalizing, rationalistic imperatives inherent in the attempts of Henry Adams, and his younger brother and fellow historian Brooks, at devising a kind of scientistic, unified theory of history. During a scene in which Caroline converses with Henry Adams and Smithsonian Institution secretary and scientist Samuel P. Langley, the narrator states that "Adams wanted to find a scientific basis to history, on the order of the second law of thermodynamics. . . . [Caroline] had always found it odd that men required coherent reasons for things that women knew to be non-reasonable" (392). Indeed, Caroline embodies a kind of healthy irrationalism throughout the novel: she often asks herself whether she is crazy—"the Sanford family was full of eccentricity" (10), she worries—just before acting on an audacious plan, but her bold undertakings, from buying the ailing *Washington Tribune* to having James Burden Day seduce her brother, generally succeed. This exceptional

success rate renders Caroline's judgements highly credible. As a result, when she muses skeptically about whether Henry VIII, when he had Anne Boelyn executed, "Was obeying a law of history which said, Energy requires that you now start the Reformation" or "simply, want[ed] a new wife, and a son" (37), we are inclined to identify with her deflation of Brooks Adams' totalizing system of historical explanation. Generally speaking, then, and though it does so to a lesser extent than *Ragtime*, *Empire* does exhibit the postmodern characteristics of a suspicious disposition toward 'master narratives' and an insistence on the limits of Enlightenment rationality.

According to Wollen, "Surrealism was the principal successor to Orientalism as the vehicle for a rejection of instrumental reason from within the avant-garde."¹² Not only does *Ragtime*, as an exemplary postmodern text, lend credence to Wollen's reading of postmodernism through its emphasis on a spectre of irrationalism haunting well-known champions of American modernism, it also does so by representing history as that surrealist fetish, the dream. Doctorow achieves this effect through whimsical renderings of figures such as Freud, Harry Houdini, and Emma Goldman, who come to seem like slightly skewed, familiar-yet-foreign versions of their historically documented selves, largely because they say and do astonishing or peculiar things for which there is no historical basis. Thus does Doctorow create an eerie tension between what readers think they know of, say, the historical Freud, Houdini, and Goldman, and these people as they exist in *Ragtime*. As Doctorow himself said in interview, "My book is a false document. A true document would be the Gulf of Tonkin resolution or the Watergate tapes. The

¹² Wollen, 24.

basic false documents are dreams, which repeat things that didn't take place—and prophesy our lives.”¹³

The presence in Doctorow's narrative of the character Coalhouse Walker also contributes to the dream-like quality of its history, though it does so in a different way than the casting of Freud, Houdini, and Goldman does. Whereas the father of psychoanalysis, the great escape artist, and the militant anarchist are real people who seem weirdly unreal as conjured by Doctorow, Walker is a wholly made-up character who, due to his implication in certain plot incidents, comes to seem patently historical. To readers of *Ragtime* not well-acquainted with the history of the novel's time period, it is perhaps counterintuitive to assume that Walker is a fictional character rather than a historical figure. After all, he and his gang force a lengthy standoff with police by commandeering and threatening to blow up none other than J.P. Morgan's personal museum. Surely, a casual reader might reason, such an act must have occurred, because if it did not critics could prove that Doctorow had contradicted historical fact. Yet, it turns out that Coalhouse Walker is not a figure from American history but rather one out of German literature, modeled on Michael Kohlhaas, the eponymous protagonist of Heinrich von Kleist's 1810 novella. As Derek Wright notes, the reconstruction of Coalhouse's car by fire chief Willie Conklin and Walker's subsequent demise, essentially by firing squad, re-enacts the end of his Kleistian prototype, the similarly-wronged horse trader Kohlhaas, whose “shining new horses are paraded past him as he climbs the scaffold.” As Wright puts it, Coalhouse Walker in *Ragtime*, “Though he appears to be

¹³ Gussow, 12.

perceived in historical terms, is really a derived fiction, and he ends as one, paralleling the fiction in which he has his origin.”¹⁴

As a final comment on the significance of Coalhouse Walker, it is telling that, in the race to be the first newspaper to publish a photograph of him after the fire hall bombings begin, Hearst’s *American* runs a photo of ragtime pioneer Scott Joplin, which it erroneously touts as a portrait of Walker. Since Joplin is the historical figure most closely associated with ragtime music, and thus the figure to whom, at first, we assume Doctorow is alluding with his Coalhouse Walker character, the journalistic mix-up underlines the dream-like, identifiable-but-unrecognizable quality with which Doctorow imbues his historical and non-historical characters alike in *Ragtime*.

Fredric Jameson has remarked upon the dreamlike quality of *Ragtime*’s use of history, which he views as a major departure from the traditional methodology of the historical novelist. Beginning with the historical fiction of Scott, he argues, historical novels have generally “mobiliz[ed]” the kind of established knowledge of history that comes to readers through schoolbooks, and thereby produced narrative dialectics between what they presume to know about, for example, the Pretender, and what the historical novel makes him out to be in the flesh. “But Doctorow’s procedure seems much more extreme than this,” Jameson states, adducing the Little Boy’s unusual naming of his relatives and the parity it establishes between them and historical figures in support of his characterization of *Ragtime* as an “uncanny” historical fiction:

The designation of both types of characters—historical names or capitalized family roles—operates powerfully and systematically to reify all these characters and to make it impossible for us to receive their representation without the prior

¹⁴ Wright, 16.

interception of already acquired knowledge . . . which lends the text an extraordinary sense of *déjà vu* and a peculiar familiarity one is tempted to associate with Freud's 'return of the repressed' in *The Uncanny*, rather than with any solid historiographic formation on the reader's part.¹⁵

Jameson's emphasis on the flattening out that occurs in *Ragtime* of the distinctions between real and fictional people, and his comparison of reading the text to the experience of *déjà vu* express eloquently the strange tension between the assumptions about Houdini, Ford, and Goldman that a reader might bring to the novel and these figures as Doctorow portrays them. Unlike in Vidal's historical fiction, in which he aims to 'correct' our supposed misconceptions about well-known Americans (that Burr was a traitor, for instance) by confronting myths with facts, in *Ragtime* Doctorow emphasizes above all else the frailty—and, even, fallacy—of the barrier we posit between history and fiction. He thereby implies that a project of telling the truth of a nation's past in order to demonstrate the rightness of present political positions is not nearly as unproblematic a proposition as Vidal assumes.

Jameson forcefully advocates the position that *Ragtime* despairs of our ability to know or represent the past. "This historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only "represent" our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes 'pop history')," he writes. In opposition to Jameson's description of *Ragtime* as a literary inauguration of "the disappearance of the historical referent" (208), Hutcheon argues that the historical referent is very much present in Doctorow's text, since the novel concretely renders a historical period, and incorporates

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" in *The Jameson Reader*, eds. Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 207.

into its reconstruction of that past epoch a number of historical figures as well as representatives from various classes. While Jameson balks at Doctorow's blending of fact and fiction, Hutcheon states, it is precisely this "mixing of the historical and the fictive" that allows him to draw attention to "the particular nature of the historical referent."¹⁶ This clash of interpretations illuminates a key difference between Vidal's historical fiction and that of Doctorow. On the one hand, *Empire* strives for the kind of historical realism that Jameson mourns as lost in postmodernism, and inscribes itself within Vidal's larger literary project of providing a popular yet aesthetically-respectable body of historical fiction whose particular periodization of U.S. history supports his partisan position on national politics. On the other hand, Doctorow's *Ragtime*, like DeLillo's *Libra*, concerns itself first and foremost with the more fundamental question of whether we can know the past at all, let alone well enough to derive from it political lessons for the present.

Reading *Empire*, one does not get the sense of history-as-dream that *Ragtime* imparts to its readers; it is true, however, that Vidal, like Doctorow, incorporates into his historical novel a slew of characters and events that historians can prove never existed or occurred. After all, Caroline and Blaise Sanford are not figures out of American history, nor was there ever a U.S. Senator named James Burden Day who hailed from "American City" (317). The crucial difference between the approaches of these two novelists is that Doctorow will invent actions and speech for well-known historical figures like Freud and Houdini without alerting readers to what he is doing whereas Vidal, in the comparatively small number of instances in which he feeds such figures lines or stage directions from his imagination, will advertise this to the reader (in his Afterwords).

¹⁶ Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 89.

The contrast between Doctorow's dream of history and, to borrow Keneally's epithets, Vidal's "literal" and "solid" fictionalizations of the past is also apparent in their highly dissimilar uses of narrative point of view. Whereas Vidal in *Empire* employs a third-person omniscient point of view (shading at times into free indirect discourse) that is relatively unobtrusive and generally emphasizes the content of the narrative more so than the method of narration, Doctorow in *Ragtime* uses a narrator who discomfits the reader by operating somewhere between the first and third person. For instance, the narrator refers to the Little Boy in the third person, yet designates his parents as "Mother" and "Father" as if they were its own. Effectively, *Ragtime*'s narrator is on one level the Little Boy growing up in the 1900s, but on another level the same person later in life, reconstructing his family's story from a detritus of diaries and paper scraps he has accumulated, and looking back with ironized nostalgia at that time of "white parasols," hefty and elliptically-faced tennis racquets, and "sexual fainting" (3).¹⁷ Thus does Doctorow emphasize, by formal means, the notion of the past as a paradoxical simultaneity of ontological absence and textualized presence.

Like DeLillo's *Libra*, *Ragtime* partakes principally of Turner's Philosophic Mode, being a historical novel whose true subject is history itself. By comparison, in his unwillingness to let history take on the associative fluidity and disorienting vagueness of the dream as Doctorow does, Vidal furnishes, with *Empire*, another *American Chronicle* in the Reflective Mode since it acknowledges the gulf existing between past and present, but bridges the distance so as to make history politically-instructive for the present.

With *The Smithsonian Institution* (1998), Vidal showed that he was not necessarily averse to mixing history and fantasy. In this text, T., a thirteen-year-old

¹⁷ Charles Berryman, "Ragtime in Retrospect," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (1982): 31.

physics prodigy, steps into a kind of alternate universe when he enters the eponymous Washington museum on Easter Sunday, 1939.¹⁸ Over the course of the narrative, T. has an affair with Mrs. Grover Cleveland; averts the Second World War in Europe by foiling Woodrow Wilson's bid for the governorship of New York in 1910; and holds regular conversations with an Abraham Lincoln fatuous enough to believe what he reads about himself in Carl Sandburg's biography because he was sucked from one dimension to another at the moment Booth's bullet hit his skull. Like the historiographic metafiction of Rushdie, Barth, and Doctorow, then, *The Smithsonian Institution* draws on standard historical texts but warps them with whimsy, irreverence, and fantasy into something far removed from a conventional historical account. That being said, that Vidal also scrupled to give *The Smithsonian Institution*'s outlandish plot a grounding in a rudimentary version of string theory attests to a lingering reserve on his part, an irreducible resistance to fictionalizing history with a hand as free and an imagination as unfettered by the agreed-upon facts as Doctorow. Moreover, in addition to the convoluted scientific explanations, he makes readers unmistakably aware that they are in a sort of science fiction theme park of American history, much of whose charm is meant to derive from the broad discrepancies between its fun-house-mirror distortions of the known facts and the facts themselves. Unlike Doctorow, Vidal in *The Smithsonian Institution* respects his maxim that "fantasy, as such, must be clearly labelled."

The "About the Author" sections that appear in certain editions of Vidal's works often mention that, in addition to participating actively in American politics as a writer and pundit, he has twice campaigned for public office: in 1960 he ran unsuccessfully for

¹⁸ Vidal modeled T. on his own beloved boyhood schoolmate, Jimmy Trimble. Like Trimble, T. attends St. Albans, excels at baseball, and dies in combat while serving as a U.S. marine on Iwo Jima. Vidal, *The Smithsonian Institution: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 1998).

Congress as a Democrat in a traditionally Republican district on the Hudson River, and in 1982 he presented himself as a candidate for the Democratic senatorial nomination in California, losing once again.¹⁹ Given this willingness to involve himself directly in what John Hay refers to in *Lincoln* as “old shoe” Washington politics, it stands to reason that Vidal’s project of fictionalizing American history would, in contradistinction to much historiographic metafiction, advance a systematic and relatively straightforward periodization of that history in support of the political ‘platform’ that he has outlined in his long and prolific career as a commentator on U.S. politics. Some critics have judged Vidal’s work in the genre of historical fiction as disappointingly “old shoe.” But as the foregoing reading of *Ragtime* in the context of Wollen’s account of postmodernism suggests, what seems new about historiographic metafiction may in fact be a return to old forms and preoccupations. And what seems most old-fashioned in Vidal’s *oeuvre*, the *American Chronicles*, if understood as a late-twentieth century attempt at restoring the classical historical novel to a position of literary prestige and political influence, may be as bravely original as *Myra Breckinridge*.

¹⁹ Kaplan, 474, 730.

WORKS CITED

- Barth, John. *The Sot-Weed Factor*. 1960; New York: First Anchor Books, 1987.
- Basler, Roy P. "Lincoln and American Writers." *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 7, no. 1 (1985): 7-18.
- Berryman, Charles. "Ragtime in Retrospect." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (1982): 30-42.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995.
- Calvino, Italo. "Imagining Vidal." In *Gore Vidal: Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini, 31-36. New York: Columbia, 1992.
- Carmichael, Thomas. "Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject: History and Intertextuality in Don DeLillo's *Libra*, *The Names*, and *Mao II*." *Contemporary Literature* 34, no. 2 (1993): 204-218.
- Coe, Lewis. *The Telegraph: A History of Morse's Invention and its Predecessors in the United States*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1993.
- Cooper, James Fenimore. *The Last of the Mohicans*. 1826; Chatham, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 1993.
- Current, Richard N. "Fiction as History: A Review Essay." *The Journal of Southern History* 52, no. 1 (1986): 77-90.
- _____. *The Lincoln Nobody Knows*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958; Greenwood, 1980.

- _____. "Vidal's *Lincoln*": An Exchange." *New York Review of Books*, 18 August 1988, 66-67.
- DeLillo, Don. "American Blood: A Journey Through the Labyrinth of Dallas and JFK," *Rolling Stone*, 8 December 1983, 21.
- _____. *Libra*. New York: Viking, 1988.
- Doctorow, E.L. *Ragtime*. New York: Random House, 1975; Plume, 1996.
- Fehrenbacher, Don E. "Vidal's Lincoln." In *The Historian's Lincoln: Pseudohistory, Psychohistory, and History*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt, 387-392. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Fleishman, Avrom. *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971.
- Frank, Marcie. *How to be an Intellectual in the Age of TV: The Lessons of Gore Vidal*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005.
- Freeman, Joanne. "History as Told by the Devil Incarnate." In *Novel Historians: Historians and Novelists Confront America's Past (and Each Other)*, ed. Mark C. Carnes, 29-38. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.
- Gienapp, William E. *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America: A Biography*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.
- Gussow, Mel. "Novelist Syncopates History in *Ragtime*." *New York Times*, 11 July 1975, 12.
- Harris, Stephen. *Gore Vidal's Historical Novels and the Shaping of American Political Consciousness*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005.

Holzer, Harold. "Vidal's *Lincoln*: An Exchange." *New York Review of Books*, 18 August 1988, 66.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

_____. *The Politics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." In *The Jameson Reader*, eds. Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks, 188-232. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

Jencks, Charles. *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*. London: Academy Editions, 1977. Quoted in Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993.

Kaplan, Fred. *Gore Vidal: A Biography*. New York: Doubleday, 1999.

Keneally, Thomas. "Bore Vidal." *New Republic*, 2 July 1984, 32-34.

Kennedy, Roger G. *Burr, Hamilton, and Jefferson: A Study in Character*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000.

Lahr, John. "Way of the World." *New Yorker*, 2 October, 2000, 140. Quoted in Dennis Altman, *Gore Vidal's America*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005.

Lukács, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Translated by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. 1937; London: Merlin Press, 1962.

McDowell, Edwin. "Publishing: Top Sellers Among Books of 1984." *New York Times* 18 January 1985, 26.

Oates, Joyce Carol. "The Union Justified the Means." *New York Times*, 3 June 1984, 36-37.

Paludan, Phillip Shaw. *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994.

Parini, Jay, ed. *Gore Vidal: Writer Against the Grain*. New York: Columbia UP, 1992.

Peterson, Merrill D. *Lincoln in American Memory*. New York: Oxford UP, 1994.

Richter, David H, ed. *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.

Rogin, Michael Paul. *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987.

Scott, Sir Walter. *Waverley: Or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since*. 1814; New York: Oxford UP, 1981.

Shaw, Harry. *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and his Successors*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1983.

Simon, John. "What Gore Remembers." *The New Criterion* 14, no. 4 (1995): 18-27.

Stephens, Alexander H. *A constitutional view of the late War Between the States*, 2 vols. Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1868-1870. Quoted in Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982.

Turner, Joseph. "The Kinds of Historical Fiction: An Essay in Definition and Methodology." *Genre* 12 (1979): 333-55.

Vidal, Gore. *1876: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 1976; Ballantine Books, 1976.

_____. *Burr: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 1973; Vintage, 2000.

- _____. *Empire: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 1987; Vintage, 2000.
- _____. *The Golden Age: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 2000; Vintage, 2001.
- _____. *Inventing a Nation: Washington, Adams, Jefferson*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2003.
- _____. *Lincoln: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 1984; Vintage, 2000.
- _____. *Palimpsest: A Memoir*. New York: Random House, 1995.
- _____. *The Smithsonian Institution: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 1998.
- _____. *United States: Essays 1952-1992*. New York: Random House, 1993; Broadway Books, 2001.
- Von Hoffman, Nicholas. "Patriotic Gore." *The Nation*, 16 June 1984, 744-45.
- Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2002.
- White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1973.
- Wilson, Edmund. *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War*. New York: Oxford UP, 1962.
- Wollen, Peter. *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth Century Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993.
- Woodward, C. Vann. "Gilding Lincoln's Lily." *New York Review of Books*, September 24, 1987. 23-26.
- _____. "Gore Vidal's *Lincoln?*: An Exchange." *New York Review of Books*. 28 April 1988, 56-57.
- Wright, Derek. "Ragtime Revisited: History and Fiction in Doctorow's Novel." *International Fiction Review* 20, no. 1 (1993): 14-16.