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“History Is Gossip, but the Trick Was in Determining Which Gossip Is History”: Gore Vidal’s American Chronicles, Henry James and Henry Adams

Kurt Albert Mayer

On a canvas of epic dimensions, Gore Vidal’s American chronicles – *Burr*, *Lincoln, 1876*, *Empire*, *Hollywood*, and *Washington, D.C.* – project select chapters of the American past from the first days of the War of Independence to the late 1950s. Retracing the ascendancy of the American empire, as it were, the six books parade a vast array of “real” characters, be they notables like Washington, the two Roosevelts, Mark Twain, and Charlie Chaplin, or notoriety like John Wilkes Booth, Jay Gould, William Randolph Hearst, and Joseph McCarthy. The predominant method of scenic presentation relies largely on dialogue, focuses on character rather than action, on motive rather than deed, and invites readers to become observers of history in the making. Coherence and continuity are provided by a complementary line of fictional characters, the descendants of Aaron Burr’s alleged illegitimate son, who rise in the press and there acquire wealth and power.

This is not to suggest that Vidal’s chronicles are as tightly knit as, say, John Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.* trilogy. *Burr* and *1876* are first-person narratives figuring Charlie Schuyler, Aaron Burr’s fictitious offspring, while the other four books are told by third-person narrators who liberally and at random enter the minds of a host of factual and fictional characters. The first volume to appear, in 1967, was *Washington, D.C.*, which, seen by itself, is by all accounts a conventional historical novel where history provides little more than occasion for political gossip, a backdrop to a fictional melodrama. Chronologically the last of the series, it “constitutes something of a countermemory for Vidal’s own lived experience of that period” (Pease 267); yet it contains no indication of the larger frame in which it eventually came to be placed. When its protagonist muses, “History is gossip, . . . but the trick was in determining which gossip is history” (*W* 147), it is not to be assumed that he has really learned the trick and can divulge the secret.

Washington was followed, after an intermission of six years and the completion of seven other books, by *Burr*, which, the first in terms of the temporal sequence, at once takes a more daring, experimental turn. Another three years later, in time for the bicentennial, *1876* came out, a sequel of sorts to *Burr*. Only when working on *Lincoln* did Vidal apparently realize the scope and potential of his ongoing project; for *Lincoln* (1984) was followed up immediately by *Empire* (1987) and *Hollywood* (1990).¹

Probing the myth that is at the root of the States at last (in 1865) truly united, *Lincoln* also marks a turning point in the attention accorded to Vidal's chronicles. The book sold spectacularly, and most reviews were highly commendable, winning the author even the recognition so long denied by critics connected with English departments.² Only a few historians voiced dissent, charging that Vidal had trespassed from the field of fiction to the field of history, and that in trying to fuse the two lots, he had succeeded in neither. Prominently, C. Vann Woodward in "Fictional History and Historical Fiction" singled out Vidal's book as glaring evidence that "fictional history . . . is the greater source of mischief, for it is here that fabrication and fact, fiction and non-fiction are most likely to be mixed and confused" (236). Among the authorities Woodward cited, the editor of *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* claimed that "more than half of the book could never have happened as told," and "a leading Lincoln biographer" maintained that "Vidal is wrong on big as well as little matters. He grossly distorts Lincoln's character and role in history" (238). Vidal was prompted to several harsh replies (collected as "Lincoln, *Lincoln*, and the

¹ The personal dimension dominating the first of the chronicles is worth noting since Vidal regards himself as an "author little prone to autobiography" (U.S. 1183). Only gradually does that personal dimension yield to a national one in *Burr* and *1876*, and thus supports Jay Parini's assertion that Vidal "had nothing like a sequence in mind when he wrote *Washington*" ("Vidal" 20). Vidal confirmed that he did not think of a sequence "at the outset," but stated, not altogether convincingly, "I suppose it was during the composition of *Burr* that I realized that a sequence could be made of that material. I had several references to Aaron Burr in *Washington, D.C.*, and of course my stepfather's family was related to Burr. Somewhere along the way I realized I was involved in a family history, that it could all be expanded from there. In *Burr*, I focused on the first thirty years of the Republic. I wanted to keep going, to see what would happen to these people and their descendants. Eventually, the story spanned two centuries" (Parini, "Interview" 286). The author's intention of doing a series of loosely coherent chronicles is not documented until the Afterword of *1876*, though there it is at once vigorously asserted. In this light, Louis Auchincloss seems right when he writes, "I find a true unit only in the trilogy of *Lincoln*, *Empire*, and *Hollywood*" (240).

² Harold Bloom, for instance, praised the novel in *The New York Review of Books* and adjudged that Vidal's "narrative achievement is vastly underestimated by American academic criticism" (228). On the reception of Vidal's writings, see Parini, "Vidal."

Priests of Academe" in *United States*). He refuted allegations that he had distorted historical facts, controverted the charges one by one, and in turn castigated his academic critics as representatives of the species "scholar-squirrel," who "must itemize everything sold in the shop" (*U.S.* 678) and were but devotees of "the Mount Rushmore school of history" (*U.S.* 666), professional hagiographers busy dusting and polishing the plaster casts of their idols.

Ever more willing to engage his wit in literary polemics than in literary theory, Vidal is far from reticent; yet he has habitually sidled questions as to whether he regarded his chronicles as historical fiction or fictional history and termed his books, a little evasively, "his biography of the United States" (as the back cover of my paperback edition of *Washington* would have it) or "meditations on history and politics" (Parini, "Interview" 280). He does not want to be pinned down in either camp, although he has repeatedly called attention to the fact that several of the volumes in question are designated as novels in their subtitles. In its various shapes and guises, the hexalogy emerges as a modern version of the traditional epic, a genre Vidal is intent on cultivating.

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. . . . I continue, endlessly, to explain, to examine, to prophesy, particularly in the six novels where I deal with the history of the beginning to now. (*U.S.* 670-671)

Vidal declares that "In the past, history was the province of literary masters" (*U.S.* 675). The epic of old did not distinguish between fiction and history; to do so today, on the supposition that the nature of narrative has fragmented, creates, besides valuable insight, a good deal of confusion. Even if the writer restricts him- or herself to the facts generally agreed upon, he or she reinvents the historical figure selected for scrutiny, in the way Shakespeare reinvented "real people" and the people have kept reinventing Shakespeare.³

³ Cf. 1876 250.—Vidal's argument parallels the case Dominick LaCapra holds against "a 'documentary' or 'objectivist' model of knowledge that is typically blind to its own rhetoric. . . . The difficulty is that a restricted documentary or objectivist model takes what is in certain respects a necessary condition or a crucial dimension of historiography and converts it into a virtually exhaustive definition. It also diverts attention from the way 'documents' are themselves texts that 'process' or rework 'reality' and require a critical reading that goes beyond traditional philological forms of *Quellenkritik*. It thereby obscures certain aspects both of the past and of the historian's discourse about it" (17, 19-20).

Concerned less with a summary philosophy of history than with what in "Lincoln, *Lincoln*, and the Priests of Academe" is called "the nature of fact as observed in fiction and, indeed, fiction in fact" (*U.S.* 695), Vidal finds that fact and fiction are impermeable, inseparable. Contending that "pure history, if such a thing could be, is flawed," he invokes Tolstoi, who had said of "History" that it "would be an excellent thing if it only were true" (*U.S.* 696). Significantly, Vidal has asserted, "I do not invent my literary ancestors. If anything, they invented me" (*U.S.* 673). A latter-day Jeremiah,⁴ he has deplored that "Everything is so quickly forgotten, especially in the U.S." U.S.A., he says, is short for "United States of Amnesia" (Parini, "Interview" 279), and blames the diagnosed loss of cultural memory at least in part on the misteachings of not only academic historians but also members of English departments.⁵

Vidal's American epic, conceived as a traditional remedy for his fellow countrymen's diminishing sense of the past, revises the story of the nation's origin and growth; and in formulating novel versions of the founding myths, the six chronicles seek to reunite fiction and history.⁶ This ambitious task may be presumed to have inspired the homage, paid in an essay published in 1991 and selected to conclude the collection *United States*, to "the two Henrys, James and Adams, neither ever very far from my thoughts" (*U.S.* 1254). The seemingly neat twin affiliation to James the artist and Adams the

⁴ Publishing his first novel (of some twenty-five) in 1946, at age twenty-one, on his wartime experiences in the Navy, Vidal enjoyed early success but fell out of favor as his third novel, *The City and the Pillar* (1948), treated homosexuality all too openly for the priggish spirit of the time. He turned to writing screenplays and essays, producing to date more than 150 titles in each branch, as well as two box-office hits on Broadway. Never one afraid of raising provocative issues, he has also been politically active – which he demonstrated in his three underdog campaigns as a radical candidate for Congress. His views are best reflected in those essays which are addresses to the nation, like "State of the Union 1975" and "State of the Union 1980," or adaptations from speeches actually held, like "The Second American Revolution" and "The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas" (all contained in *United States*). The novels, too, can be read as extended, if veiled, commentaries on present affairs, as Parini ("Vidal" 22-23) and Pease (267-270) have shown.

⁵ See, for instance, "The Hacks of Academe" (*U.S.* 111-120).

⁶ The term "chronicles" seems peculiarly appropriate for Vidal's series of books, if only for its medieval ring which points backward, to a time when story and history were not yet separated. Yet the term also points forward, to what has come to be known as New Historicism. The definition of "chronicle" provided by Hayden White stresses the dominance of the narrative element while maintaining that in a chronicle the "objective" component demanded of "scientific" historiography is patently absent; White's definition makes ample allowance for the suspicions Vidal harbors against the "objective" approach to history – suspicions manifest in the chronicles' complete lack of what White calls the "dissertative aspect" of traditional historiography (28).

historian, while true to a certain extent, is at once complicated by a line Adams's *Education* has on what in German is called so neatly *Geschichte*, designating both story and history: "Historians undertake to arrange sequences, — called stories, or histories, . . ." (Adams, *Novels* 1068-1069). James's essay on Anthony Trollope also spurned the easy distinction: "It is impossible to imagine what a novelist takes himself to be unless he regards himself as an historian and his narrative as a history" (James 1343).

In "The Art of Fiction" James remarked, "as the picture is reality, the novel is history" (46), and "The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*" ridiculed "the so-called historic fiction — so beautiful a case it is of a muddlement of terms" (797). James's credos are brought to bear on Vidal's chronicles, which insist on expanding imaginatively on the factual, politico-historical material at the core of each narrative. That material necessitates a foregrounding of politics; yet the approach chosen for the presentation of the facts is radically subjective. The opening scene of *Empire* may serve as an illustration.⁷ Set at Surrenden Dering, a lush manor in Kent reminiscent of Gardencourt in *Portrait of a Lady*, it is dominated by the conversational mode and the narrative techniques of a James novel; the time is Summer 1898, the day after the armistice ending the Spanish-American War is announced. The numerous characters, mainly "real" citizens of the United States, belong, in terms of class, without exception to the limited social spectrum populating James's fictions.⁸ The very prominence of the persons assembled invokes history; and the assorted correspondence of those "drawn by name into the narrative" (as Adams would put it [L 6: 50]) testifies that on the whole Vidal remains true to facts generally agreed upon. Surrenden Dering is rented by the retired Senator from Pennsylvania, Donald Cameron.

⁷ Another case in point is the novelistic portrait of Abraham Lincoln. The president bent unswervingly on preserving the union and in effect refounding it as a nation state is always seen through the eyes of other characters, with a minimum of authorial comment; what remarks there are on "the Ancient" (as the private secretaries Hay and Nicolay call him in the novel), come from observers. The narrator, while liberally entering the minds of characters surrounding Lincoln, abstains altogether from presenting Lincoln's own thoughts or perspective. "Honest Abe" thus remains a puzzle of contradictory glimpses; his portrait, remarkably complex. For a more extended estimate, see Bloom, who noted Vidal's "immense gift for revisualizing historical personae" (228).

⁸ Vidal in his essays has indirectly justified his selective approach by pointing out that "The Inventors of the United States . . . were hostile to the idea of democracy and believed profoundly in the sacredness of property and the necessary dignity of those who owned it . . . Government would be by the best people in order to forward the best interests of the country's owners. They might have invented the word 'meritocracy' had they not had the same prejudice against neologisms as they had against new men" (U.S. 644-645).

He and his wife Elizabeth have taken in their friend Henry Adams, some Cameron and Adams relatives, a few Lodges, and the family of John Hay (the American Minister in England, soon to depart for Washington as the ingoing Secretary of State). Among other assorted guests, Henry James drops in and is honored with a few choice lines which silence Brooks Adams's exuberant martial imperialism – while brother Henry is said to smile benignly, "the large round brain-crammed head of America's great historian, wit, dispenser of gloom" (*E* 15) nodding tacit assent.⁹

The very scope of the chronicles, Vidal suggests in an essay, was dictated by James, who in his biography of Hawthorne "observed that it took a great deal of history to make a little bit of literature" (*U.S.* 28).¹⁰ By another Jamesian touch *Empire* relegates the taking of weighty historico-political decisions to the background, though the issues at stake are frequently discussed as the inner circle of John Hay's and Henry Adams's friends, an élite among the Washington élite, occupies center stage. Social gatherings, tea-time chat and dinner-table talk compose large parts of the narrative; and often, what is not said is more important than what is said in the relentless verbal skirmishes. At one of the dinners described – the one President Theodore Roosevelt grudgingly hosted in January 1905 in honor of Henry James's sojourn in the capital – the celebrated author is shown to have the last word over who was, of all inhabitants in the White House, surely the most loquacious and domineering – and not only in conversation. James coined the nickname "Theodore Rex," which was soon commonly used in Adams's house.¹¹

⁹ Incidentally, Vidal passed up the best summary of the atmosphere prevailing that summer at Surrenden Dering. That was delivered by John Hay in a letter to Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (who felt he had to stay at home because of the war): "D- ['Don,' Senator Cameron] is the finest type of old Tory Baronet you ever saw. His wife makes a lovely chatelaine, and Oom Hendrik [Adams] has assumed the congenial functions of Cellarer and Chaplain" (3: 133; cf. also Thayer 2: 178). Adams in later years admitted repeatedly that he felt "homesick for Surrenden" (*L* 4: 636; 5: 125).

¹⁰ Vidal would contend, however, that another statement James made in *Hawthorne* was no longer applicable, namely that "History, as yet, has left in the United States but so thin and impalpable a deposit that we very soon touch the hard substratum of nature" (James 327). On that matter, he would concur with Adams, who early in 1869, when to him, a journalist in Washington, the contours of the incoming Grant administration became recognizable, wrote to his brother Charles: "these fields are gloriously rich and stink like hell" (*L* 2: 14).

¹¹ The dislike, Vidal notes in "Theodore Roosevelt: An American Sissy" (1981), was mutual. "[. . .] TR had denounced James as 'effete' and a 'miserable little snob' – it takes one to know one – while James thought of TR as 'a dangerous and ominous Jingo.' [. . .] James described the president as a 'wonderful little machine . . . quite exciting to see. But it's really like something behind a great plate-glass window on Broadway.' TR continued to loathe 'the tone of

Vidal's narrative not only employs skillfully many a trick of the Jamesian trade, but also attributes to the expatriate novelist a fervent anti-imperialism such as is rarely acknowledged by James scholars. That trait is more in keeping with Henry's brother, William, who spoke out publicly as an officer of the Anti-Imperialist League.

William James, however, is conspicuously absent from Vidal's chronicles, while Henry Adams looms large in all six parts. He haunts *Washington* as a ghost of the past, the name whispered by the elders, much as Vidal remembered of his own youth in the capital.¹² The protagonist of the novel, too young to have known Adams, is curious to learn as much about the famed "cave-dweller on La Fayette Square" (Adams, *Novels* 1120) and his coterie as he can; the verdict, "history is gossip . . .," attests that he has caught up pretty well with the vein of Adams's late writings. *Burr*, centering on the lost diary of Aaron Burr, which young Charlie Schuyler eventually gets to read and copy, and incorporates in his narrative,¹³ recalls the biography which Adams wrote of Jefferson's first vice-president, but withdrew from publication, and eventually destroyed; verily, Vidal's novel poses as a fictional replacement of Adams's lost book. *Lincoln* early on contains an account of young Henry Adams's first meeting with John Hay, Lincoln's private secretary; the episode at the inauguration ball in March 1861 is remarkable as no reference to it exists in the surviving documents. *Hollywood* mourns the death of Adams, in March 1918, by having a niece in wish bemoan: "So much history – gone" (W 208).

It is no accident that the social sphere rendered in *Washington* takes after the one Adams described. A patrician like Adams, Vidal spent his boyhood in the capital, brought up largely by the maternal grandfather, Thomas P. Gore, the blind Senator from Oklahoma. Gene Vidal, the father, held a

satirical cynicism of Henry James and Henry Adams while the Master finally dismissed the president as "the mere monstrous embodiment of unprecedented and resounding noise" (U.S. 734).

¹² Cf. U.S. 1259. – Vidal also spoke quite self-consciously of "Adams's friend and mine, Theodore Roosevelt's daughter, Alice Longworth" (U.S. 1255).

¹³ When the last sentence of *Burr* establishes that Charlie Schuyler is indeed Aaron Burr's (fictional) illegitimate son, this revelation introduces far-reaching links since the name Schuyler points, not to Burr, but to one of the most influential families of New York, the clan which around 1800 was "led by Philip Schuyler and his son-in-law Alexander Hamilton" (Adams, *History* 1: 76). Thus, the breach made ostentatious by Burr's killing Hamilton in a duel is closed, and the connection firmly established between Burr (whom Henry Adams called "the type of a political charlatan pure and simple, a very Jim Crow of melodramatic wind-bags" [L 2: 424]) and Hamilton, who to Adams and Vidal was also an obnoxious character. – On Vidal's views of Hamilton, see U.S. 651-652.

government post as Director of Air Commerce until 1937 and later became a successful founder of airlines. The stepfather, Hugh D. Auchincloss, in whose gaudy house Eugene Luther Vidal moved at age ten,¹⁴ personified inherited New York wealth dislocated to Washington; and Nina Gore Vidal Auchincloss, a leading socialite in the capital, turned the estate into a gathering place of political magnificoes and their entourage, where, among others, Eleanor Roosevelt and her cousin Alice Longworth, TR's daughter, were frequent guests. (After the divorce from Vidal's mother, Hugh D. Auchincloss married one of her ladies in waiting and in due course became the step-father-in-law of a president, John F. Kennedy.)

While critics often unwittingly positioned Vidal in Adams's vicinity,¹⁵ the author acknowledged the debt freely in an essay published in 1976: "I cannot remember when I was not fascinated by Henry Adams," who wrote "the finest of American histories as well as one of our few good political novels" (U.S. 661). The novel was *Democracy*, a book much on Vidal's mind at that time, as he had just completed *1876*. Adams's centennial account, done anonymously for an 1880s audience, offered a handy foil for the intended bicentennial peroration and set the tone when declaring that "democracy, rightly understood, is the government of the people, by the people, for the benefit of Senators" (Adams, *Novels* 17).

A light political comedy of manners, Adams's *Democracy* turns inadvertently into a dark comedy of political manners as Madeleine Lee, the central character, comes to recognize the depth and extent of political – that is, for Adams, moral – corruption in the United States. The portrait of the Republic of Reason usurped by the Almighty Dollar, as it unfolds in Charlie Schuyler's notebook, is larger and bleaker. While Adams blames the Civil War and the attendant transgressions for the perversions rampant in his time, Vidal traces the roots of evil further back. *Burr*, debunking the Founding Fathers of the Republic with considerable gusto, "slyly hints" that "America really lost its republican innocence . . . as early as the American Revolution" (Tatum 215).

¹⁴ The first name of Gore was not adopted until 1939, when Vidal "abandoned his patronymic birth name in favor of the metronymic Gore Vidal, delighting no doubt, in the name's patrician ring" (Kiernan 2-3).

¹⁵ One, for instance, claims that "No other American writer has Vidal's sense of national proprietorship" (Poirier 233); others label Vidal as "detoured politician" and "Edmund Wilson-like 'last intellectual'" (quoted in Parrini, "Vidal" 29) or find him to be "very much of an eighteenth-century writer" (Pickering 156), an author who likes to twin his books (cf. Parini, "Vidal" 17) and cultivates "a mandarin style, with its controlled ironies, its neatly balanced syntactical parallelisms, and its occasional baroque flurries of eloquence" (Parini, "Vidal" 23).

In 1876 Charlie Schuyler, a sixty-two-year-old Europeanized American come home to write a book on his native land, is in many ways a variation – with a twist – of the familiar James and Adams type. James, for one, returned, at age sixty-two, to do the American scene. Adams also spent long periods abroad and upon returning never failed to record his shock of recognition. The diary Schuyler keeps, the notes for a novel whose completion is precluded by the author's death, is replete with wry political observations recalling the letters Adams wrote as "stable companion to statesmen" (Adams, *Novels* 1010). Among the rogues and knaves Schuyler mentions, "the Adams descendant who edits Boston's *North American Review*" is a rare exception, for he at least produced "often interesting efforts" (1876 76) as a writer in history and politics.

The deepest bow to Henry Adams comes in 1876 with "the resurrection of Baron Jacobi" (as the "Afterword" of the novel has it). In *Democracy*, the aged Bulgarian Minister of that name personifies old-world dis-illusionment and unmasks American exceptionalism as a spurious fraud. He asserts that by the time of the next centennial, "the United States will . . . be more corrupt than Rome under Caligula; more corrupt than the Church under Leo X.; more corrupt than France under the Regent!" (Adams, *Novels* 38). Vidal makes Jacobi "Minister of Servia" – which somehow sounds more appropriate than Bulgaria. When Schuyler first meets the diplomat at a White House dinner, their talk quickly shifts to the writer's recent work. Charlie's diary contains a sparkling aside.

The little man reads everything; spoke knowingly of Cavour [whose biography Schuyler had written]; also mentioned some old pieces of mine for the *North American Review*, and asked if I knew its current editor. I said that I did not.

"A splendid man, a fine scholar –"

We were interrupted. . . . (1876 232)

Jacobi subsequently becomes a portavoce for the author (and Adams) when he lights upon the distinction between history and literature. "We cannot know any history, truly," he says. The only way to learn from the past is through "Dante, Shakespeare, Scott – all fiction writers" (1876 250).

The opening of *Empire* is prefigured by *The Education of Henry Adams*, which in a breach of the prevalent tone remembers fondly that "The summer of the Spanish war began the Indian Summer of life" (Adams, *Novels* 1051) – that is to say, the last seven years covered in Adams's would-not-be autobiography. Vidal's novel ends, like *The Education*, on the death of John

Hay, Adams's best friend and next-door neighbor, whom an essay by Vidal calls "that most literate of our secretaries of state" (*U.S.* 662). Adams in a letter accompanying a gift copy of the privately printed *Education* made believe that one reason for writing the book had been "to clear my conscience of biographising Hay" (*L* 6: 50); the final stage of *The Education* became indeed a necrologue of John Hay. Vidal has Hay appear at the beginning of the novel, along with Henry Adams, as a bemused observer and analyst of the political spectacle arising from the war in which the United States had gained control of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, but its leaders were caught unawares of the consequences this sudden imperial surge entailed. In *Empire*, the former private secretary of Lincoln becomes once more a central consciousness through which large parts of the events related are reflected.

The forging of the "imperial republic," as presented by Vidal,¹⁶ remains for the spectator Adams a high comedy verging on political farce, while it becomes for Hay a tragedy with himself as the protagonist. Hay had coined the phrase of the "splendid little war," which came to stick as a tag, but nobody had heard the sarcasm in Hay's quip when it surfaced in a letter addressed to Henry Adams. He was not the ardent imperialist he was commonly held to be, lumped together with his friends Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge; only Hay's sense of duty made him carry out official policies which he in private deemed inexpedient and wrong.¹⁷ *Empire* depicts him as a gentleman politician with ulterior cultural interests, set on his tragic path already before President McKinley is assassinated. With McKinley's tacit backing, he had been able to fend off the wildest moves of the hawks preying on the administration, even if he had to resort to ominous language. In the controversy over the Nicaraguan treaty, which met with stiff opposition by Republican hardliners, a note Hay sent to Theodore Roosevelt on February 12, 1900, began: "Et tu! Cannot you leave a few things to the President and the Senate, who are charged with them by the Constitution!"¹⁸

¹⁶ In Vidal's essays, "imperial republic" is frequently used as a term for the United States after the Spanish-American war and well on the way to "the National Security State" of the cold-war era (cf., e.g., *U.S.* 709).

¹⁷ The letters Hay and Adams exchanged during the Spanish-American war reveal that neither of them had been in favor of the war, and both independently recommended arbitration by a European power such as Austria-Hungary. In repeated missives to Henry Cabot Lodge, Hay cautioned the Senator to steer a more moderate course; in his first statements on the question of annexing the Philippines, Hay agreed in principle with Andrew Carnegie, an outspoken opponent of colonialist schemes in south-east Asia (cf. Thayer 2: 175-176).

¹⁸ Quoted in *L* 5: 93. The same note is printed in Thayer (2: 225), though there the recipient is declared to be "unidentified."

When the murderous hand of Leon Czolgosz inaugurated "Theodore Rex," Hay was ground down unremittingly by the incumbent's "wielding unmeasured power with immeasurable energy." On that account, *The Education of Henry Adams* also postulates that "friends in power were lost" (Adams, *Novels* 1101) and contends that Hay's political friends Roosevelt and Lodge had a fair share in sending him prematurely to his grave.

Vidal's novel highlights the tangled interrelation between two empires – the one created almost inadvertently by President McKinley and brought to glaring bloom by his successor, the other founded on the vast ambitions of William Randolph Hearst. Since the narrative conflates the events leading up to the status quo, much of what is presented as a matter of fact seems adventitious like the murder of McKinley that promotes Roosevelt to the presidency. The American empire aspired by the competitors Roosevelt and Hearst is finally brought about more by accident than by premeditation or design. When the fictional Henry Adams insists, "I don't care what happened. I want to know why it happened" (E 173), he sets himself apart as the only one in the novel who is at all troubled by the preponderance of chance. The founder of the empire, William McKinley, is essentially a plain and homely man, a provincial bent upon establishing the United States as a world power; that he succeeds, is the result of his single-minded determination and political cunning, but he never knows quite how he does it. Theodore Roosevelt and William Randolph Hearst may be possessed by boundless energy and ambition, but neither shows a sense of control or awareness commensurate with the grandeur of his schemes. All public leaders in Empire seem to be variants, with a vengeance, of those populating Adams's *History of the United States*, which proclaims that "in any case, the American, in his political character, was a new variety of man" (2: 1332) – having sternly depicted, in all that went before, the leaders of that new variety of man as mock-heroic figures stumbling from one blunder to the next (cf. Mayer 102).

As a Jamesian novel focusing on character, *Empire* is by needs selective. Though introducing a large number of people, the narrative marginalizes several figures now considered major contenders – if only it does so, because rules of economy in narration dictate that the author be discriminating, and the choice of genre and method of presentation precludes hindsight in judging characters and events. The Cabot Lodges, for instance, are slighted in the novel, though both were prominent figures in the formative years of the "imperial republic" and long intimates of Adams and Hay. Hindsight, as it were, came to haunt Vidal in 1990, when reviewing Patricia O'Toole's *The*

Five of Hearts, which cited convincing proof that John Hay and Nanny Lodge had had a lasting amorous affair while Adams became a confidant of both sides and an astonished observer of Cabot's unwittingness. *Empire* never alludes to these private entanglements, though Vidal's review suggests Cabot knew "that Hay had so elaborately antlered him" (U.S. 1266) and calls attention to Adams's verdict, veiled in *The Education* but pronounced in the letters, "Our friend Cabot helped to murder [Hay], consciously as possible, precisely as though he put strychnine in his drink" (L 5: 689).

Vidal proclaimed on several occasions that Senator Lodge, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, was one of "the Four Horsemen," the quartet of "our turn-of-the-century imperialists" (U.S. 1010-1011) – Alfred Thayer Mahan, Brooks Adams, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Theodore Roosevelt – largely responsible for the United States' bumptious entrance among the colonial powers. As *Empire* skirts the events leading up to the Spanish-American war, it downplays the fact that aggressively expansionist plans were indeed worked out and slighted Lodge's efforts toward U.S. hegemony over the Caribbean.¹⁹ (Only in *Hollywood* is Lodge granted a prominent position in the narrative, functioning as President Wilson's chief senatorial antagonist in the contest over American participation in the League of Nations and, as if because of an authorial afterthought, as a link to the old élite of Lafayette Square.)

Empire also passes over that Henry Adams, too, was deeply involved in the Cuba crisis that sprang from the insurrection shaking the island with renewed intensity in 1895. Having been to Cuba several times, he soon opened his house to exiled Cuban leaders and turned it, by 1896, into "a hotbed of Cuban intrigue" (Samuels 163). For Senator Cameron he prepared a report favoring recognition of Cuban independence, which was unanimously adopted by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (cf. Samuels 171). During the Venezuela crisis in 1895, Adams openly clamored for war with Britain.

Adams, called *Porcupinus angelicus* by his friends, is presented by Vidal as more angelic than porcupine. The Adams in the novel is of course an

¹⁹ What it was all about, Theodore Roosevelt gave away in his loquacious and self-centered autobiography (published in 1913). In 1897, he already thought the anti-imperialists were men of a by-gone era, claimed that the prime motive why he had "favored war" had been humanitarian, and admitted that "Our direct interests were great, because of the Cuban tobacco and sugar, and especially because of Cuba's relation to the projected Isthmian canal" (209). He also singled out for praise "Senator H. C. Lodge, who throughout his quarter of a century of service in the Senate and House has ever stood foremost among those who uphold with farsighted fearlessness and strict justice to others our national honor and interest" (210).

imperialist, albeit no longer an avid one; he is decided about keeping American hands off the Philippines. A spokesman of the author, he is said to regard William McKinley as the greatest president since Lincoln – an opinion in keeping with recent assessments by revisionist historians (cf. Poirier 238), though hardly consistent with the judgments contained in Adams's writings. Later, Adams's letters fumed at “the stupid, blundering, bolting bull-calf of a Theodore” (*L* 5: 365) and coined the analogy between Theodore Roosevelt and Wilhelm II, the “madman in the White House” and “the madman of a Kaiser.” Vidal extended the parallel, without epithets, to Lincoln and Bismarck (cf. *U.S.* 733).

The final allusion to Adams, at once the novelist's most comprehensive admission of his indebtedness, is the climax of the last scene of *Empire*, the fictional show-down between Theodore Roosevelt and William Randolph Hearst, and there is attributed, perhaps a little awkwardly, to Hearst. “True history . . . is the final fiction. I thought even you knew that” (*E* 587).

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