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**TEXTS AND OTHER FICTIONS IN GORE VIDAL'S
*BURR***

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Over the years, Gore Vidal has campaigned furiously against theorists and writers of the new novel who, according to Vidal, "have attempted to change not only the form of the novel but the relationship between book and reader" ("French Letters" 67). In his essays, he has condemned the "misdirected" efforts of writers such as Donald Barthelme, John Gardner, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, William Gass, and all those who come equipped with "formulas, theorems, signs, and diagrams because words have once again failed them" ("American Plastic" 102). In comparison, Vidal presents himself as a literary conservative, a defender of traditional form in fiction even though his own novels betray his willingness to penetrate beyond words and to experiment with form, especially in his series of historical novels. Vidal's *Hollywood* calls to mind Doctorow's *Ragtime*; *Lincoln* owes much to the literary form pioneered by Truman Capote; and his 1973 novel *Burr* resembles in many ways Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, a turning point of sorts for the American historical novel.

Despite Vidal's objection to *The Sot-Weed Factor* as that "astonishingly dull book [which] for a dozen years I have been trying to read" ("American Plastic" 111), Vidal, like Barth, writes about writers and writing, about historians and historiography, about facts and fiction, and about how history happens. That both would turn to biographies, letters, poems, diaries, novels, journals, histories—to "factional" and fictional literary forms—testifies to their infatuation with documents and to their belief that history and fiction make good neighbors. At the same time, both distrust history, suspect documents, and question the reliability of "facts." They share, it seems, William Gass's conviction that "the written word...is a murderer of meaning" (260). In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Barth discovers that history is not there at all while Vidal in *Burr* concludes that history disappears in the hands of historians—the murderer is not so much the word but the historian. In *Burr*, Vidal seems bemused by texts, perplexed that words hide history even as they hope to reveal it. Thus he debates, revises, and corrects his historical sources because their words cannot be accepted at face value and because history, consequently, lives somewhere else. As he works with his sources, he concludes that texts, upon close examination, deconstruct, that words offer only partial truths, and that

ambiguity and elusiveness not only shroud but perhaps constitute history.

In *Burr*, Vidal's quarrel with history is obvious enough as he sets out to topple the icons of the American Revolution, debunk American cultural myths, and expose the fictions that surround America's beginnings, producing along the way a new "history" of the period. At the same time, Vidal carries on another more significant and ultimately more revealing debate, a private quarrel with his sources that goes unnoticed by the general reader. For much of his information Vidal turned to Matthew Davis's *The Memoirs of Aaron Burr with Miscellaneous Selections from His Correspondence* (1836), to Davis's edition of *The Private Journal of Aaron Burr During His Residence of Four Years in Europe* (1838), and to Charles Burdett's novel, *Margaret Moncrieff: The First Love of Aaron Burr. A Romance of the Revolution* (1861). These sources provided Vidal with information, anecdote, and with an intriguing device for the structure of his novel, namely a plot within a plot, featuring characters who, in the course of the novel, would write the very books that Vidal would draw from for his own novel. Thus fiction, history, and literary history double back on themselves in the same sense, but with a different purpose, than they do in John Barth's *Letters*.

That so many of the characters in *Burr* are writers is, therefore, not surprising, even less so as one notices that the "fictional" plot is the story of the aspiring writer, Charles Schuyler, a character who appears also in *1876* and *Lincoln*. During the course of the novel, Burr updates his already written *Memoirs* and Matthew Davis, Burr's long time friend, is occupied with editing the *Memoirs* as well as Burr's *Private Journal*. Schuyler is writing two books about Burr, a scandalous piece of political hackwork (a false history) and a serious, full-length biography (a true history). Schuyler, described by Robert Kiernan as "self-conscious about his literary defects" (83), also writes occasional pieces for *The New York Evening Post* on such diverse subjects as love, apples, lady singers, the murder of Elma Sands, and a trip on the Brooklyn-Jamaica railroad. Various other writers—Washington Irving, William Cullen Bryant, William Leggett—appear as minor characters discussing their own work in progress or that of friends such as James Fenimore Cooper. In a word, the novel runneth over with writers, writing about Burr and about history, a technique that provides the novel with a sense of historicity and lends credibility to Vidal's view of 1830s America. More to the point, it allows Vidal the opportunity to examine multiple "documents," to create texts within texts, each of

which adds to and yet challenges the others, and to engage himself in the rewriting, the correction so to speak, of the texts themselves.

This is especially evident in Vidal's treatment of Matthew Davis's editions of Burr's *Memoirs* and his *Private Journal*. From the *Memoirs*, Vidal borrowed details, descriptions of events, and lengthy anecdotes such as Washington's reply to Burr's resignation from the army and Burr's humorous record of his treatment in jail during his treason trial in Richmond. Vidal also structures his novel by alternating chapters drawn from materials in the *Memoirs* which cover the years 1775-1807 with those depicting Burr's activities in the 1830s. Even then Vidal invents new "memoirs" on occasion and reworks originals to suit his interpretation of the period as a time when little men seized great power.

Vidal's relationship to Davis is, however, more than that of a writer to his source. For one thing, Vidal makes Davis a character in the novel where he works intermittently on the *Memoirs* and even exchanges information and manuscripts with Schuyler. For another, Vidal makes it clear that he disapproves of Davis's work. Publically, he has Schuyler complain that Davis simply "pastes an occasional platitude over the Colonel's wax-life effigy" (179). Privately, Vidal knows what the reader does not, namely that Davis gave the world a sanitized version of Aaron Burr by improving Burr's moral character through prudish editing which included "committing to the fire all such correspondence [between Burr and various women] that would have wounded the feelings of families" (*Memoirs* IV). Quietly, Vidal inserts back into history deleted portions of Burr's life. Anathema to Davis, Burr's womanizing, for example, becomes a major part of the novel which begins with Burr's marriage to Madame Jumel, an aging former prostitute, and closes with his death-bed romance with a young Jane McManus. Burr is portrayed as a fertility god who sires children wherever he touches the earth—a true father to his countrymen. Almost devilishly so it seems, Vidal ends the novel with Schuyler's discovery that he is Burr's illegitimate son just as his real-life model, the novelist Charles Burdett, was himself the illegitimate offspring of Burr. Even this parallel seems in part directed at Davis who, although he knew Burdett personally, never reveals the Burr-Burdett relationship in his publication.

At other times, Vidal's quarrel takes on a mock-epic quality as he turns to minor details in his effort to humanize Davis's portrait of Burr. Once again, the debate takes place as much outside the novel as in it. Consequently, only through a careful comparison of Davis's and Vidal's texts can we observe the extent and intensity of Vidal's objection to

history as written. In *Memoirs*, Davis, for example, writes that Burr took a carriage from Cambridge to Newburyport to join Arnold's Canadian expedition (I, 62). Vidal's *Burr* explains it differently: "A new and eager soldier, I went on foot. Matt sensibly took a carriage" (54). Later, Davis comments that during the Canadian campaign Burr "disguised himself as a young Catholic priest" to seek information (I, 67). Writing as if his readers knew this detail intimately, Vidal presents a furious Burr who interrupts his own narrative of the campaign to say, "I should note here that I did not ever disguise myself as a French priest in order to pass through the countryside unremarked...I have no idea where this story came from, but like so many other absurdities it has been duly published" (61). Finally, Davis, at another point, tells us about Trumbull's painting of the death of Montgomery: "Col. Trumbull in a superb painting recently executed by him...has drawn the general falling into the hands of his surviving aide-de-camp [Burr]" (I, 71). Vidal's *Burr* takes exception to this: "Trumbull's recent and deservedly popular painting...omits me entirely while adding...several officers who at the time were nowhere in the vicinity" (64).

Davis's edition of Burr's *Private Journal* provokes a similar response from Vidal. On the one hand he trusts the document enough to borrow information about Burr's poverty in London and Paris, his attempts to meet Napoleon, his efforts to borrow money, and his struggle to obtain a passport from an unfriendly American consul. On the other, he publicly warns his readers that his source is corrupt. Early in the novel, Schuyler says that "Davis will destroy the *Journal*;" and in a postscript, Charlie reminds us that Davis has indeed "bowdlerized" the work which he published two years ago (560). In *Burr*, Vidal took steps to restore the text from which Davis had again "suppressed certain parts," explaining that no "father should write and preserve such a record for his daughter" (VI). As he had done in the case of the *Memoirs*, Vidal reversed life and art, or at least history and fiction, by using his novel to restore the history which had vanished at the hands of the historian. On one occasion, he inserts a fictitious letter as an example of Burr's "Journal." Written to Theodosia and dated 2 May 1811, the letter details Burr's exploits with "a dark creature...with a mole at the corner of her mouth" (86). Needless to say, no such letter exists; quite the contrary, from the 18th of February until the middle of May 1811 the pages of the journal are missing. On other occasions Vidal invents entries which further allude to the Colonel's sexual proclivities although Schuyler complains that they contain "French words which I don't understand" (86).

Vidal's disappointment with Davis and with historical texts perhaps explains why he turned to fiction (specifically to Burdett's 1861 novel, *Margaret Montcrieffe: The First Love of Aaron Burr*) in order to develop his own history. Strictly speaking, Vidal borrowed only a few incidents from the novel, none of which further the plot or theme of *Burr*, but Vidal's treatment of them shows that his debate with history had become internalized, less related to the concerns of *Burr* and more related to his growing awareness that words may indeed murder meaning. The reader is again excluded from Vidal's private quarrel; only at the end does he even learn that Charles Schuyler is modeled loosely on the "obscure novelist Charles Burdett" (564) and only there does Vidal imply that Burdett and his novel lend insight into the nature and, ultimately, the predicament of Vidal's own journey into the past.

Widely believed to be Burr's son, Charles Burdett (1815-1861) was adopted by Burr as a youngster, tutored in private schools, and sent to Princeton at Burr's expense. Burr wrangled him a military commission and employed him in his New York law office in the 1830s (Dick 182; Lomask 389). A newspaperman and political office holder, Burdett also wrote some fifteen novels, the most popular of which, ironically, was *Margaret Montcrieffe*, a work which featured a supposed affair between Burr and the fashionable daughter of a British officer stationed in New York during the Revolution. In *Burr*, Vidal refers to the Montcrieffe affair only once when Burr remembers that "I did not like the girl at all. I am told she gives me the honor of having been the first to take her virginity. But I do not think that would have been possible" (76). With a line of witty dialogue, Vidal dismisses Burdett's fictional claim; in fact, he appears to include the scene only so that he can challenge Burdett. Burdett after all could have heard about the romance from reliable witnesses or from Burr himself. Also, he was familiar with N. C. Stone's acknowledgement of the affair as it appeared in James Parton's 1858 biography of Burr. As an appendix, Burdett published an excerpt from Montcrieffe's *Memoirs* in which she suggests that her lover was Aaron Burr. In the face of all this testimony, Vidal's disclaimer seems to fly in the face of history except that the trail undoubtedly led Vidal back into history, to Montcrieffe's autobiography, issued in 1794 as *The Memoirs of Mrs. Coqhlan*. There he must have discovered that Montcrieffe never actually named her American beau. Texts deny texts, Vidal learns, and history is fashioned from words that do not exist.

On the other hand, Vidal's study of Davis and Burdett leads him to conclude that fiction reveals truths that elude the historian. In one of his memoirs, Vidal's *Burr* recollects the Battle of Kips Bay/Harlem in

September 1776. The passage is short and unimportant. Burr remembers advising his fellow officers to retreat. "If you stay," he tells them, "You will be taken prisoner and hung as high as Master Hickey" (104). Vidal takes Burr's words from an original letter written by Isaac Jennings and Andrew Wakeman to support Burr's petition for a pension. Davis includes the letter in Burr's *Memoirs* and Burdett appends the letter to his novel along with materials relating to the execution of Thomas Hickey, including the record of his trial for treason and the planned kidnapping of George Washington, and the "Warrant for the Execution of Hickey" signed by Washington. The Wakeman/Jennings letter, as found in Davis and Burdett, makes no mention of Hickey, however. They quote Burr as having said, "If you stay, you will be either prisoners or hung like dogs" (Davis 401). Clearly Vidal is more taken with the truth of Burdett's historical novel in which Hickey briefly appears than he is by the accuracy of Wakeman and Jennings, eyewitnesses at the event. Truth transcends facts as Vidal unflinchingly corrects the document to show what Burr ought to have said—what he does in fact "say" to Vidal and the unsuspecting reader.

Yet words make up texts after all even though they are flimsy things indeed as Vidal had seen in the works of Davis, Burdett, and Montcrieffe. That words can be changed, deleted, or misread is just as apparent, of course, in Vidal's versions of Burr's *Memoirs and Journal* and in his fictional portrait of Charles Burdett, whose own words have all but disappeared from literary history. Even the documented word may be inaccurate just as historical perceptions may be the wrong perceptions—just as history might itself be "wrong" in need of correction. This radical view, not uncommon to the contemporary American historical novel, led Vidal to commit the unthinkable—the rewriting of original texts so as to present history as it ought to have happened.

This is not to say that Vidal treats facts as cavalierly as Barth, Coover, and other writers of what Barbara Foley calls "the apocalyptic historical novel" (101). Quite the contrary, Vidal regards texts seriously enough to chide his historical sources and to make repeated statements that his historical novels are nothing less than facts dressed up. In the afterward to *Burr*, he insists that "the story told is history and not invention" and that he has "tried to keep to the known facts" (563-64). In 1876 he emphatically reminds us that his characters all "existed, saying and doing pretty much what I have them saying and doing. I have moved about history only twice" (447). Later, in *Lincoln*, he again closes by insisting that very little of the book is "made-up" (659); and in *Empire* he notes that he has been faithful to the "generally

agreed upon facts" (487). But in the end facts are not enough. Charlie Schuyler makes this clear when he indicts Matthew Davis because Davis "simply put them [the facts] all down" (179), and in the process reduces Burr to a shadow of himself. For Vidal, neither facts, nor texts, nor even words are enough since all seem untrustworthy in the end, a view that places him in the mainstream of the new American historical novel and which links him with writers—Barth, Berger, Coover, Doctorow, Mailer, Flanagan—whose suspicion of history as written results in novels where "history" transcends historical texts.

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