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Gore Vidal Book Reviews

Burr: A *Novel.* Gore Vidal. London: Abacus, 1993. P/bk 502 pp. ISBN 0-349-10531-6. Price £12.99 (first published, 1973)

Burr is chronologically the first volume in Vidal's historical fiction series, called *Narratives of Empire* that includes *Lincoln* (1984) *1876* (1976), *Empire* (1992), *Hollywood* (1989), *Washington DC* (1967), and *The Golden Age* (2000). The series traces American history from the Revolution down to the post-World War II years, developing Vidal's thesis on the deviation of the United States from a "flawed republic" to a "murderous empire" (ix). Employing different literary techniques, the novels span key events in American history with a mix of historical and fictional characters.

Burr offers a fascinatingly tragic account of the enigmatic Aaron Burr, who started a bright career as hero of the Revolution, then a brilliant lawyer before serving as Vice-President under Thomas Jefferson. In 1804, Burr, still Vice-President, killed Alexander Hamilton in a legendary duel. Then in 1807, accused by Jefferson of conspiring to create his own empire in the Southern States and Mexico, Burr was arrested, tried for treason, but acquitted by the Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall. Moreover, Burr was involved in several sex scandals. Martin Van Buren, for instance was rumored to be one of Burr's illegitimate sons. Consequently, Burr has for long been portrayed with all sorts of vices, in history as in literary writings, as a conspirator, a traitor, a villain, a sexual predator and a cold-hearted assassin.

The novel juxtaposes two narratives. The first reads as a journal by the fictional narrator Charles Schuyler, covering the years from 1833 to 1840; the second consists of Burr's fictional memoirs on the Revolution and the intrigues surrounding the Founding Fathers. Throughout the novel, Vidal depicts Burr as an honorable and heroic gentleman, a loving father and a talented statesman; in brief, a "sort of Lord Chesterfield set loose in a world of pious hypocrites" (viii), who takes on the task throughout the novel of refuting many of the slanderous stories about himself while vindicating his own actions.

At the same time, the novel reveals shocking truths about the Founders, beginning with Washington's poor education and failing military leadership, Hamilton's vicious and self-destructive nature, and Jefferson's basically impractical, hypocritical nature as he cheats Burr of the presidency and then abuses his power to outwit his rival. Jefferson's rhetoric, the fictional Burr argues, "had poisoned the political life of the nation by slandering as 'monarchist' anyone who stood in his path" (272), while his retreat in Monticello had been an escape from "the discomforts and dangers of war" (66).

Thoughout the novel, Vidal marshals historical evidence in support of his case, mainly the actual two-volume *Memoirs of Aaron Burr* edited by Burr's friend Matthew L. Davis in 1836. However there are other parts which have been overtly fictionalized: the narrator is half-based on the novelist Charles Burdett, who was Burr's assistant and rumored to be another of his illegitimate sons. The shadows surrounding Burr's life give Vidal an opportunity to speculate on Hamilton's bruising remarks about Burr that provoked the duel. After losing in New York's gubernatorial race, Burr learned about the "despicable opinion" Hamilton expressed against him at a dinner party. Burr exchanged several letters with Hamilton asking him to explain and apologize. But Hamilton's evasive answers outraged Burr enough to invite him to fight a duel. Vidal cites incest as the only plausible explanation: "Why, he [Hamilton] said that Aaron Burr was the lover of his own daughter, Theodosia" (356). When interviewed on the issue by the psychobiographer and author of *Fatal Friendship,* Arnold Rogow, Vidal acknowledged that the "incest motif is my invention" (Rogow 339-340).

As an isolationist and radical critic of the American foreign policy, Vidal exploits through the novel the relationship between the past and the present political situations. He finds in Burr's iconoclasm the best way to infuse his own political cynicism, urging readers to question established myths on the American politics. Burr's life is a way to get back to what Vidal considers to be the roots of the American empire, criticizing the paradox between the hidden imperialistic vision and the political rhetoric celebrating the United States as a model democracy. He leaves us reflecting on whether the United States have informally embraced Burr's imperialistic aspirations.

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Works Cited

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Rogow, Arnold A. A *Fatal Friendship: Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr.* New York: Hill & Wang, 1998. Print.