Palimpsest: A *Memoir.* Gore Vidal. New York: Random House, 1995. h/bk 432 pp. ISBN 978-0-3491-0800-1. Price £10.99.

Palimpsest, the title of Gore Vidal's memoir, evokes a ghostly past permeating the present and influencing the future. In keeping with this concept Vidal uses the memoir to not only recount his early life from his childhood growing up in Washington D.C. in the 1920s and 1930s to the revival of his career as a novelist in 1964, but also to amend the reminiscences of friends and associates. With the exception of letters from his grandfather, Senator Thomas P. Gore, and thirteen pages of notes on a memorable visit with the Kennedys in 1961, Vidal kept no record of events. Using the letters, diaries, and memoirs of his contemporaries to stir his memory, he corrects their mistaken impressions and outright fabrications transforming their common palimpsests. If Vidal does not manage to erase their testimony from the record, he may, at least, have the final word.

Vidal had been reluctant to make himself the subject of a book. A leading postwar novelist, screenwriter, playwright, controversial essayist, politician, television personality and actor, he had also known leading figures from the world of literature, art and politics. It was a life story worth revisiting, certainly one which demanded a biography. When his chosen biographer was unable to complete the assignment, Vidal decided to tell his story himself. To his surprise Vidal found "a certain pleasure in reliving a past that I thought I had used up in fiction or locked away for others." (100).

Vidal does not unlock many secrets in this first of his two memoirs, followed ten years later by a second and final memoir *Point to Point Navigation* (2006). Readers familiar with the author's literary criticism and political essays will find familiar stories here, some recast, others barely rewritten from the original. For the curious there are clues to the inspiration for his characters in his description of family and friends.

In his novels Vidal typically avoided casting his players, both fictional and factual, as outright villains, and this is also true of his memoir. Nina Gore, his mother, and Truman Capote come off the worst. Vidal depicts the latter as a plagiarist with a gift for the instant lie and a talent for self-publicity. However, it is not Capote but Nina Gore who is characterized as the author's true and formidable rival, eagerly crediting herself with

his accomplishments and enjoying his setbacks. Vidal writes with genuine affection about those he admires such as Tennessee Williams (nicknamed "The Glorious Bird") and his grandfather, the blind Senator T. P. Gore, whose humor, integrity and populist politics were adopted by his grandson.

The close relationship between grandfather and grandson was reinforced by a shared love of books. From early childhood, Vidal along with his grandmother and two secretaries would each in turn read to the Senator for hours on all manner of subjects. Family stories spoke of the Senator's support of unpopular causes; defying an oil company's attempt to confiscate Oklahoma Indian land and resisting Woodrow Wilson's efforts to bring the United States into World War I. "I always found him noblest when he put his career at risk for some overriding principle." (57) Vidal's last television play, *The Indestructible Mr. Gore* (1960), was based upon his grandfather's early career.

Later Vidal would find kindred spirits in Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Clinton, less so in John F. Kennedy who Vidal liked personally but found politically conservative and anxious for a full scale war. Vidal would become part of the political scene as an insider in the Kennedy circle. However, he grew disenchanted with the Kennedys' politics and finally broke with the family after a dispute with the humorless and temperamental Robert Kennedy.

Vidal had first gained notice as one of the leading postwar writers with his debut novel *Williwaw* (1946), whose story was inspired by his term as first mate on an army freighter during World War II. It is with the publication his third novel, *The City and the Pillar* (1948) that Vidal decided to risk widespread derision to reveal unpopular truths. The novel's matter-of-fact depiction of homosexuality reflected the lived experience of Vidal and his contemporaries who, having survived a second world war, felt free to do "what they were designed to do with each other" (101). In 1948 Vidal met Dr. Alfred Kinsey whose study on American male sexuality, published shortly after *The City and the Pillar*, offered further proof that sex between males was neither rare nor deviant behavior. Nevertheless, Vidal's novel outraged the literary establishment, particularly influential *New York Times* book reviewer Orville Prescott who made a point of ignoring Vidal's next five novels. It is unlikely that Vidal was surprised when *The New York Times* published a scathing review of *Palimpsest*.

In the fifties, Vidal sought more lucrative work in film, television, and the theater. His recollection of those years covers familiar ground. He discusses the fallacies in the auteur theory, his contributions to *Ben Hur* and his removal of Frank Capra from the director's chair for the film version of Vidal's play *The Best Man* (1964). On the literary front, Vidal was dismayed by the rising popularity of the Beats. To poet Allen Ginsberg he explained the difference between his purpose and theirs, "Just when I was getting a grip on what writing could be and how best to examine one's life, you came along [...] I wanted people to think. You wanted them to be. Well, they are, anyway" (225). To Vidal the purpose of a writer is to reveal to people the truth about themselves and their civilization, to not do so was to cultivate the worst in humanity.

Vidal's memoir captures the excitement and creative energy of America's cultural "Golden Age" of which he was a central figure. There is also a profound sense of loss. Vidal writes most poignantly about his first love, his "twin self" Jimmie Trimble, who was killed in World War II, but whose memory haunts the memoir. His loss was more than personal, Trimble seems to embody in life and death the extinguished potential of America itself. Vidal also remarks upon the passing of friends and acquaintances in the present as he records their shared past. As Vidal's star rose in film, television, theatre, and literature, he observes the decline of American culture where live television drama and provocative stories are replaced by quiz shows, the readership for the novel diminishes, and the screenwriters contribution to film are supplanted by the heavy hand of the auteurs. Vidal ends this volume with his return to the novel, looking back upon the lives and events that have shaped him and adding a last revision to his engaging and provocative palimpsest.

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