

security and benefits, demanding longer and longer hours and at least two incomes per household as prerequisites for a minimally middle-class existence, and depriving people of control over their work even in the professional classes are taking place in the absence of any credible opposition to the free-market dogma that rules the day. On the contrary, the capitalist triumphalists are riding high on a wave of "prosperity" that has enriched a minority of the population while obscuring the long-term slippage of our standard of living and our quality of life.

There is indeed an obsessive and borderline-hysterical quality about the current emphasis on getting, spending and celebrity, not because we are brainwashed by the media but because the marketplace is our main source of readily available pleasure and shopping one of the few socially convenient acts that feel something like freedom. It's impossible these days to trade money for time, to decide to work less and live modestly. The choice—for those who have a choice—is endless work

for low pay or endless work for high pay. If you have it, why not spend it? And if you don't, there's always a dollar and a dream. What bedevils most men is not that they are ornamental but that they are subordinated. As for those few at the top of the corporate hierarchy—the ones who are absent from Faludi's pages—they do not seem too worried about their manhood (and I doubt that they feel like ornaments, either). They still have power, in the world and, by and large, over the women in their lives. If enough Lorna Wendts sue their CEO ex-husbands for half their wealth, perhaps the masculinity crisis will climb on up the class ladder; but I'm not holding my breath.

My point, though, is not that men's feelings of emasculation are merely a displacement of class oppression. It's that for men who have no sense that their society could be different and better, the rise of women and the erosion of male power are an unmitigated grief. A crisis of masculinity happens when men are told it's the end of history at the very moment they realize that history has passed them by. ■

## 'Our' Gide?

PATRICK SMITH

**GORE VIDAL: A Biography.** By Fred Kaplan. Doubleday. 850 pp. \$35.

**GORE VIDAL: Sexually Speaking. Collected Sex Writings.**

Edited by Donald Weise. Cleis. 280 pp. \$24.95.

Whenever Gide wrote or spoke about himself directly, which was not infrequently, he would insist that his wars within were to be traced to his very genes. His mother was Norman and Catholic, his father from the south and Protestant. He was of two races, Gide would say—two cultures,

two traditions. And from this dicotyledon grew those contradictions that entwined everything he did and wrote: the constant traveler dependent upon domestic comforts, the sexual apostate without emotional attachments, the proper French bourgeois with leftist sympathies. Gide spent sixteen years writing and rewriting *Corydon*, his famously self-revelatory dialogues on homosexuality, before publishing them in 1924. "*Je ne suis qu'un petit garçon qui s'amuse—double d'un pasteur protestant qui l'ennuie,*" he wrote just prior to that long excursion: I'm merely a little boy amusing himself—paired with a Protestant minister who bores him.

*Patrick Smith was a correspondent abroad for many years. His most recent book is Japan: A Reinterpretation (Pantheon).*

He was 37, and already grand.

Fairly or un-, usefully or reductively, I sometimes wonder if Gore Vidal isn't our American Gide. They both arch their eyebrows, having found advantage in a distance of their own choosing. They both achieved a rare clarity in their best productions. Vidal wants us to think before we feel—as Gide did. He holds a razor to reality, not a mirror; so did Gide. A generation and a world or two apart, our *petit garçon* has waged many of the same wars as the *maître*. When it finally came out (as it were), *Corydon* made the middle-aged Gide a renegade in French intellectual circles. Vidal didn't wait that long. He published *The City and the Pillar*, his self-exposing exploration of eros, when he was 22—and then assumed something of the same position in the land of the Puritans.

Vidal met Gide in 1948. The old man had his Nobel, the young one had just published *City*. In *Palimpsest*, Vidal's 1995 memoir, he is snippy as to the extent this was the paying of court. But one senses he knew well he was meeting a writer who had traveled long miles on a path he had just started upon. *Palimpsest* offers an altogether fuller account of the encounter than Fred Kaplan renders in *Gore Vidal*, his new biography. That is true in other passages, too. But it is in Kaplan that all the pieces of the puzzle are at last assembled. Vidal is a dicot, too—dedicated from the womb onward to the achievement of wholeness out of parts. He told us this in *Palimpsest*. But the memoir begged the biography: It is Kaplan who lets us see the seed and the shoots, the leaves and flowers—and, alas, the weeds.

Vidal has given us many gifts. His gathered essays are nonpareil in post-war American letters. With *Julian*, published in 1964, he began to exploit the historical novel to an extent no one I can think of approaches. Then came the American series, which opened with *Washington, D.C.* and ended with—what else?—*Hollywood*. Amid these came Vidal's "inventions," as he calls them: from *Myra Breckenridge* in 1968 to the recent *The Smithsonian Institution*. Italo Calvino thought of these as hypernovels, "that new form which is taking shape in world literature." In the land of Updike and Jane Smiley, one does not stray this far from the nineteenth century without risking opprobrium. Some of Vidal's risks—too many, one could argue—have not come good. Praise be to him, though, for all the leaps he has attempted. In no artist's work can the failures be subtracted from the triumphs.

It will be a better time than this, I think, when we finally understand all of what Vidal has been up to, or—better, perhaps—when we're finally ready for him. For a half-century and counting, he has sought to stretch not just our notions of sexuality but of humanity. Though he lives entirely a life in the present, neither time nor space nor fixed characters have interested Vidal as artistic constraints. In one dimension, he has run a one-man crusade against the sick, debilitating eternal present of which the American consciousness is made. The historical novels challenge us to find ourselves in the past—not exactly a popular notion to advance in the United States. In *Julian* and elsewhere afterward, we are confronted with what we lost of ourselves when we gave up the natural

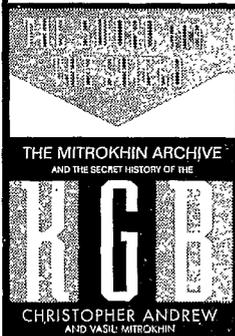
world and the ancient mysteries in favor of Christian morality and conquest. In the American books, we have no less than an alternative version of history, just as the inventions give us "alternative narratives." Let us see ourselves as we are, stripped of encumbering myths, for clear sight comes first: It has never been an easy message to deliver, yet Vidal has never stopped urging it upon us.

I opened Kaplan's book with many questions. Vidal wrote from an early age; *Williwaw*, his first published novel, came out when he was 20. Thereafter he produced quickly and much. Yet fiction has always been a struggle, and the peaks and valleys many. It wasn't until he was nearly 40 that Vidal found his feet as a novelist, and the fight didn't end then. Why? Equally, Vidal has always seemed to me something of a ventriloquist. More than most writers—more than most Americans, at least—he relies upon devices and detachment. He is concerned with form: His novels are European in this respect. In Hollywood they are no doubt considered "high concept." As he puts it, he is objective and classical, not subjective and romantic. He speaks indirectly, hiding himself within, so that he's everywhere and nowhere, a little like Beckett in his novels. His father, for instance: When Vidal wanted to draw him (or draw upon him) in *Hollywood*, he made him an assistant to Douglas Fairbanks. I like this quality in Vidal's fiction: It suggests authority, control. But it is hardly in the realistic, straight-from-life American grain. Again, there's the why of it.

Most of all there is Jimmie Trimble, Vidal's first, lost love. Trimble died at Iwo Jima—and has lived on in Vidal ever since. We met him in *City* and again in *Two Sisters*, Vidal's 1970 "memoir in the form of a novel." But it wasn't until *Palimpsest* that Vidal revealed the primacy of this, "the unfinished business of my life." Kaplan calls *Palimpsest* "a nonintrospective memoir without a center of consciousness." I couldn't agree less. The Trimble material was a revelation; the rest of the book is draped around it.

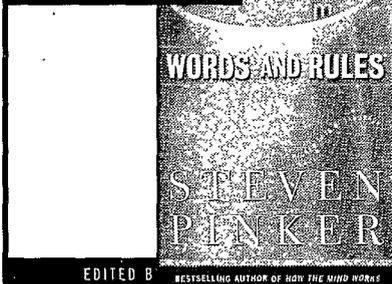
"Finally, I seem to have written, for the first and last time, not the ghost story that I feared but a love story, as circular in shape as desire (and pursuit)." That's Vidal finishing his memoir. Can it be coincidence that Trimble reappears in *Smithsonian*, Vidal's first work after it? Is his lifelong grief unrelated to the cold eye he came to cast on love, art and much else? These are legitimate questions, and Vidal

# THINK BASIC.



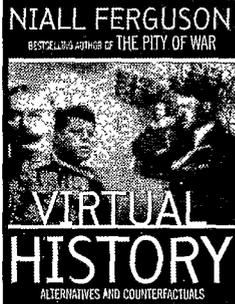
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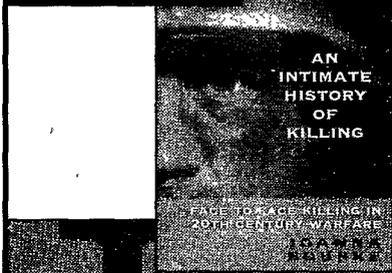
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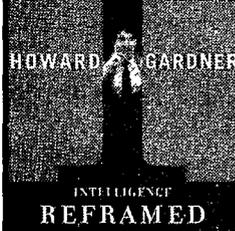
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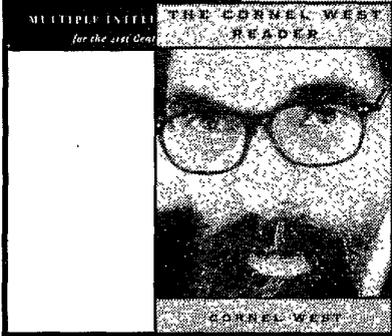
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invites them. "It was the key to everything," he wrote of his attachment. "You only see the pattern afterward."

For the first 74 years of Vidal's life it is afterward now, and Kaplan helps us see the pattern. And so far as warring factions go, Gide has nothing on our man: Northern, aristocratic and Catholic on the father's side, Southern, populist and Protestant on the side of a true mommy dearest. Emerging from this is the man of privilege, charm, intelligence, looks. They were all Vidal's in generous measure. But so long as we understand these simply as gifts, we do not understand. Among the great conflicts in

Vidal's life was that fought between the public figure and the private man. And here, just as one suspected, the blessings were mixed. It's tempting to conclude that Vidal had too easy a time moving in and out of early television, Broadway, Hollywood, the talk shows and Democratic Party politics. Amid it all came the I'm-number-one literary wars, often fought in public, and an all-too-American addiction to "success." Surely Vidal risked living an elegant chronicle of wasted time. He started out wanting to be either President or a writer. Only when he made his choice—in the early sixties, after a failed Congressional bid—did he reach the clearing in his woods. His first book to follow was *Julian*, one of his best. Thereafter, the public man tended to follow the artist, and the politics went into the writing—and in this dimension, at least, Vidal made himself something like whole.

Kaplan manages all this in an unexpected way. Unexpected, at least, given that he's a scholar with lives of Carlyle, Dickens and Henry James behind him. (Even among the dead, Vidal has a gift for good company.) *Gore Vidal* is weak on literary judgments and analysis. It rests, instead, on Kaplan's assiduous, hands-off accretion of the facts. "There's no end to your thoroughness," Vidal tells his Boswell at one point. That's for sure. I like the detail; the density is necessary, by and large. Yet, with apologies to the late Miao, I could do without an account of the passing of Vidal's cat in Ravello, her home on the Italian coast. And Kaplan takes us down numerous such narrow paths. On the other hand, he is describing, more than anything else, the evolution of an artistic consciousness. Dolly-in is the correct camera direction. And in any event, the detail is all we've got.

This means we're free to form our own

thoughts on Kaplan's complex subject. And we're thrown back on the essays and novels, which is no bad thing. To speculate briefly, maybe Kaplan intends this as a companion volume. Maybe he thought he covered the literary side in *The Essential Gore Vidal*, which he edited and brought out earlier this year. And he does tell us, in his first sentence, just what he told Vidal as he began his work: "I prefer my subjects dead." Perhaps this is why *Gore Vidal* is a book of dots without the

*I prefer my subjects dead,' the biographer told Vidal. Perhaps that is why Gore Vidal is a book of dots without the connecting lines.*

connecting lines. Kaplan's legwork is everywhere evident. He knows the books and has interviewed thoroughly—though he sometimes seems a touch too willing to take Vidal's word for things. It works, for the most part. But one would've liked more. The Trimble stuff is simply too important to be treated this way. So are the threads between the works.

Kaplan is also one of those writers who manage to put it all down in monotone. In 850 pages, the voice rarely modulates. He describes swims in the Hudson and casual encounters with the same intensity he applies to the writing of the biggest books. I would've liked more drum roll, for instance, as Vidal composes his first essay. (His first for this magazine was published in April 1950, believe it or not.) On a winter's night in 1962, Vidal climbs Delphi. At the Temple of Apollo he has a moment of almost mystical clarity that will resonate through his work for many years. This gets a paragraph—a good paragraph—but the next one begins, "In Rome he saw familiar faces...." After a time, the effect is something like "If this is Tuesday it must be...." One suspects that haste may have been a factor here—in the writing, not the research. And haste is almost always a blight—as Vidal's work, here and there, shows too well.

One other point in this vein is technical, having to do with craft. Time and again when Kaplan is in the early years, for which sources can be scant, he draws from the novels to depict actual people and events. He uses a passage in *The Season of Comfort*, Vidal's fourth novel, to describe Vidal's birth. He relies on "fictional surrogates" from the same novel to describe Vidal's life at school, summer camp and a ranch out West. This is simply not acceptable—not even once. Yes, a

character may be recognizably drawn from life. But the thoughts, feelings and acts assigned to him in a novel may or may not correspond; they are certainly not admissible as biographical evidence. This is freshman lit crit, it seems to me, though the problem arises with startling frequency among literary biographers. It jars here because it suggests that Kaplan may not understand the transformation at the heart of the fiction-making process. And that can't be so. It's a strange error for one of Kaplan's stature. It would be as much to surmise that Giacometti preferred the company of tall, thin people.

At this point I suppose I ought to add the usual "But these are quibbles." But I'm not going to flip Kaplan that dime. He's too rich in talent to need it. I value this book; it's a strenuous, professional effort, and it can't have been easy. But the lapses mar its veneer, and they are the more regrettable for the knowledge that this is, safe to say, all we're going to get for a good long while in the way of full-dress biographies of our *petit garçon*, our *cher maître*.

Vidal on sex, all in 280 pages. Here, surely, is the work of an editor with a sharp No. 2. If I were managing Cleis Press, publisher of *Sexually Speaking*, Vidal's "collected sex writings," I'd have allowed for ten times that length—and then fretted about what to take, what to leave. What about the fiction—and not just *City* but *Julian* or *Myra*, for instance and for starters? As Kaplan's book reminds us, Vidal on this subject is a rich lode. And not even in *City*, which makes its way as a cult novel now, did Vidal limit his purview to the same-sex encounter. Therein, of course, lies his wisdom on the subject.

*Sexually Speaking*, alas and alack, has no such round ambition. It seems, rather, quite a pointed production. It's nicely presented, with a jacket that gives a curious echo to the striking cover art that graces *Palimpsest*. But of its fourteen essays, thirteen are reprints from *United States*, the big, encompassing collection published in 1993. Only "J'accuse!"—a brief piece on the just-settled Matthew Shepard murder case—postdates it. So there's not much new here. Given the provenance, this collection looks like an act of generosity on Vidal's part.

Still, it is good to see these pieces under their own roof, so to say. There are several (including "J'accuse!") that map the intersection of sex, politics and the

legal statutes. Vidal is surprisingly thorough on this subject, invoking John Stuart Mill, the published lectures of Oxford dons and old Mann Act cases to deliver his case. Among these essays we find the Vidal not so familiar to many readers, who used to publish in *Partisan Review*. "One postwar phenomenon," he wrote in *Sex and the Law* (1965), "has been the slowness of the liberal community to respond to those flaws in our society which might be corrected by concerted action." Hmm. A little woody, I'd say. To me, the best pieces here are those about other writers: Wilde, Isherwood, Maugham, Henry Miller. And I can read as much Vidal on Tennessee Williams as Vidal will ever produce, as often as I get the excuse to do so.

writes. "It is the virtue of a great writer like Tennessee to know that there is only one team, the human, and that the rest is politics." It's eloquent. But doth the man protest too much?

You have to wonder. At the other end of *Sexually Speaking* we find an interview first published in 1992. It is the last of three included here, and it's called "The Sadness of Gore Vidal." It was conducted by Larry Kramer, the playwright and journalist, over dinner at the Plaza. And you have to wonder, too, whether it isn't a record of the worst meal Vidal has ever consumed there. It left a sour taste in my mouth, certainly. Here is a man who claims Vidal as "one of my all-time heroes and

role models" and who displays a misunderstanding of everything Vidal has put on paper:

GV: Look, what I'm preaching is: don't be ghettoized, don't be categorized. Every state tries to categorize its citizens in order to assert control of them.

LK: But...many of us want to be ghettoized and categorized.

And on. It's a disheartening display, though it does reveal lakes of sympathy and patience in Vidal that one doesn't always see. It's easy to misread Gore Vidal, or mistreat him, or misuse him. It must be: People do it all the time—and that truly is sad. ■

Vidal has been salient on human sexuality from his earliest days in print. That we're all bisexual, all dwelling in different houses along the same long road, is a running theme. It's not a discovery, of course. There's Freud, and the old Kinsey Report, sensational stuff when Vidal was a young man conversing with Gide in Paris. Vidal has cited both—and then used the idea to change the way we see things (and ourselves). He has also driven us back—"I'm a radical, which means I go to the root of it," he says at one point in this book—to show us the world and the race when things were different: in Greece, in Rome, in Elizabethan England, the England before Cromwell.

It would have been rewarding to see him expand on such matters in this book. A few years ago, the social critic Richard Sennett published a volume called *Flesh and Stone*, in which he explained the ways and the place of the human body in Greece, Rome and onward through Western Civ. Fascinating stuff, and it would have been wonderful to see Vidal enter upon such a topic. Even though he seems to have no more to add to what he has already said, well-selected passages from some of the books, à la Kaplan's anthology, might have been illuminating. It would have given *Sexually Speaking* a better claim to its subtitle, certainly. As it is, it's a useful primer.

I could be misreading this book entirely, but the point of it seems to be to drive a flagpole into Vidal's chest cavity, as if he were a patch of public park, and fly the flag of "gay writer" above it. Vidal vigorously protests this impulse in his preface. "The confusion that there are two teams—one good, straight; one bad, gay—is not helped by reversing the adjectives," he

# Consider the possibilities...

## PROSPECTS FOR TOMORROW

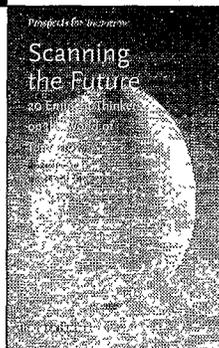
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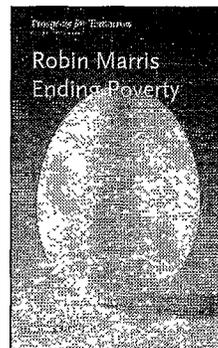
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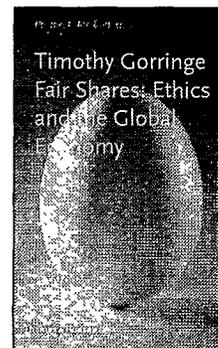
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