United States; Essays 1952-1992. New York: Broadway Books, 1993. P/bk 1295 pp. ISBN 0-7679-0806-6. Price $27.95; *The Selected Essays of Gore Vidal.* New York: Vintage, 2009. P/bk 480 pp. ISBN 0307388689. Price $17.00.

In his introduction to *United States: Essays 1952-1992* Gore Vidal writes that the earliest of these essays appeared "the year that Eisenhower was elected president, and the last in [...] the year of Clinton's election" (np). The voice and opinions undergo no radical changes over the course of these forty years, but there is a definite increase in commitment and impatience. This is, in part, because, while even the earliest of these essays and reviews bear rereading, some of the subjects in the earliest years — bestsellers, Henry James, John O'Hara — clearly failed to engage much of his interest.

In his 1985 review essay on biographies of his friend Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal writes about being on a television talk show with the playwright. At one point in the discussion, Williams leaned back in his chair and shut his eyes. The nervous host asked Williams if he were asleep. Without opening his eyes Williams replied, "No, I am not asleep but sometimes I shut my eyes when I am bored" *(United States* 439). As felt Williams, so felt Vidal. With a trivial subject, such as the top ten best sellers of a given year, Vidal comes across as impatient and only minimally engaged. He would clearly just turn on the verbal flow and let it run, a critical engine at idle, and the witty put-downs that many readers (and, even more so, those who knew him primarily from television appearances) found so entertaining would flow with ease, if with little depth. But as the years passed, Vidal wrote fewer and fewer of these toss-offs, so this collection gains power as it goes.

Where Vidal has a subject that engages him, the observations are just as sharp, but the sarcasm, the cutting dead — when they are not clearly related to some outrage, especially a political outrage — are often signs that he has encountered intellectual faint-heartedness or arrogant self-interest. This can be clearly seen in, for example, "First Note on Abraham Lincoln." Vidal begins by surveying Carl Sandburg's *Lincoln:* "In the course of several million clumsily arranged words, Sandburg managed to reduce one of the most interesting and subtle men in world history to a cornball

Disneyland waxwork rather like [...] yes, Carl Sandburg himself" *(United States* 664). Vidal then goes on to say of Lincoln that despite reading only Shakespeare and law books, Lincoln "somehow (out of continuous and severe thinking?), he became a master of our most difficult language, and the odd music to his sentences is unlike that of anyone else—with the possible exception of Walt Whitman on a clear unweepy day" (664-5). Such examples clearly show Vidal's voice when passing out, in the first instance, disdain and, in the second, admiration.

In this same essay, Vidal makes it clear that he admires the Lincoln described by his secretary John Hay: "No great man is ever modest. It was his intellectual arrogance and unconscious assumption of authority that men like Chase and Sumner could never forgive" (665). And yet, as we read these essays, encounter the cutting quips and learned corrections, we come to see that arrogance was not, for Vidal, the highest literary virtue.

In writing about John and Henry Adams, Vidal singles out for admiration their family modesty, noting that, "No Adams was ever, to himself, truly famous," and the entire family had "insisted on noble failure in a society that has always been devoted to easy, crass success" (663). Vidal himself was more modest than most readers recognized: in "Novelist and Critics of the 1940s," he writes: "The best that a serious analyst can hope to do is comment intelligently from his vantage point in time on the way a work appears to him in a contemporary, a comparative, or a historic light; in which case, his opinion is no more valuable than his own subtlety and knowledge" *(United States* 12). Here is modesty (And there is that other word again, the word he used to express admiration of Lincoln: "subtle.") Few who knew only the television personality, the literary and political knife sharpener have referred to or thought of Vidal as "subtle" — or "sly" (its more aggressive relation) — but that trait is everywhere present in the essays if we know where to look for it. The shape modesty characteristically takes in his writings is described by Vidal himself in this same essay: "To pretend there are absolutes is necessary in making relative judgments [...] but to believe there are absolutes and to order one's judgments accordingly is folly and disastrous" (12-13). If we bear this in mind, the modesty (and subtlety) of these essays is clearly apparent.

This pragmatic loyalty toward absolutes is one of the traits that locates Vidal in the mainline of American political feeling (as opposed to the more

detached and self-serving "political thought") — an individualist, pragmatic shrugging off of too abstract thinking and a simultaneous commitment to Big Ideas and the Little People. One or two of his political ideas may come across a bit simplistic, as when he suggests that eliminating aid to both Israel and the Palestinians will force them to make peace rather than suffer financial ruin, but he generally is a pragmatic, observant and convincing advocate of putting ordinary lives before the special interests of political tunnel vision. This same attitude shapes his views toward homosexuality — which he declares does not exist as such. He believes that everyone is capable a wide range of sexual feelings and attachments they can indulge in once fears and prejudices have been set aside.

Vidal was born at West Point. His grandfather was a senator from Oklahoma, and he would visit with such figures as Eleanor Roosevelt (once while she was arranging some gladiolas in a toilet), and JFK. His father was a famous aviation pioneer, and Vidal "often saw more of my own father in newsreels than in life," as he wrote in an essay on Orson Welles *(United States* 1146). He knew the rich and powerful, and lived a very comfortable life. Still, reading his essays reminds us that there are strata among the rich, as well. In "Rich Kids," a review of Robert Coles' *Privileged Ones*, he writes about the "one percent" who live truly opulent lives — this in 1978. He writes that he likes Coles' work, but that Coles is "seldom able to tell us anything that we did not already know" *(United States* 630), and subtly suggests there is something convenient and halfhearted about Coles' engagement with his subject — and his politics. Responding to Coles confession that, while he was also a child of the well-off bourgeois, he had always seen himself as one with the victims of our economic system and so felt ill at ease interviewing those same well-off folks in New Orleans, Vidal writes: "So Saint Francis must have felt whenever he stopped off at Assisi to visit the folks, only to find them still busy netting and eating those same little birds he liked to chat with" (631).

The relatively slim (480 pages to *United States*' 1300) *Selected Essays* is made up almost entirely of essays from the larger volume, but is valuable because it reprints "Black Tuesday," Vidal's controversial essay on the events and background of the 11 September 2001 attacks, an essay of outrage and humanistic reason. Vidal seconds William Pfaff's view in the *Herald Tribune* that the terrorists want a violent, disproportionate reaction by the American government because it will give them more converts: "the

spectacle of an American president who declined to serve his country in Vietnam, howling for war against not a nation or even a religion but one man and his accomplices, a category that will ever widen" *(Selected Essays* 425). And widen it undeniably did.

"Black Tuesday" is also notable for being one of the few times when Vidal disregards the integrity of the "well-written essay" form: page after page has been taken up with a detailed survey of the wars — big, small and covert — that the United States had undertaken from the 1950s onwards. The rare instances where Vidal produces essays that eschew elegant form are signs of deep engagement. The Tennessee Williams essay is another, if quite different, example: Vidal is not only fully engaged but also clearly feels that there is more to the man than he can capture: the essay sputters into unrelated segments, as if Vidal saw the limit of his word count approaching and wanted to cram as much in as he could.

Despite the heft of these books, and the millions of words Vidal published in the essay and other forms, this attitude — that there is more to say, even if space and time didn't allow — leaves the reader with the feeling that the best of these essays open up more than they sum up. An enviable legacy for any writer.

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