

GORE VIDAL



1876



A Novel



Random House New York

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BY GORE VIDAL

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Homage to Daniel Shays, Collected Essays 1952-1972

For Claire Bloom

1876



One



1

“**T**HAT IS NEW YORK.” I pointed to the waterfront just ahead as if the city were mine. Ships, barges, ferry boats, four-masted schooners were shoved like a child’s toys against a confused jumble of buildings quite unfamiliar to me, a mingling of red brick and brownstone, of painted wood and dull granite, of church towers that I had never seen before and odd bulbous-domed creations of—cement? More suitable for the adornment of the Golden Horn than for my native city.

“At least I *think* it is New York. Perhaps it is Brooklyn. I am told that the new Brooklyn is marvellously exotic, with a thousand churches.”

Gulls swooped and howled in our wake as the stewards on a lower deck threw overboard the remains of the large breakfast fed us at dawn.

“No,” said Emma. “I’ve just left the captain. This is really New York. And how old, how very old it looks!” Emma’s excitement gave me pleasure. Of late neither of us has had much to delight in, but now she looks a girl again, her dark eyes brilliant with that

all-absorbed, grave, questioning look which all her life has meant: I must know what this new thing is and how best to use it. She responds to novelty and utility rather than to beauty. I am the opposite; thus father and daughter balance each other.

Grey clouds alternated with bands of bright blue sky; sharp wind from the northwest; sun directly in our eyes, which meant that we were facing due east from the North River, and so this was indeed the island of my birth and not Brooklyn to the south nor Jersey City at our back.

I took a deep breath of sea-salt air; smelt the city's fumes of burning anthracite mingled with the smell of fish not lately caught and lying like silver ingots in a passing barge.

"So old?" I had just realized what Emma had said.

"But yes." Emma's English is almost without accent, but occasionally she translates directly from the French, betraying her foreignness. But then I am the foreign one, the American who has lived most of his life in Europe while Emma has never until now left that old world where she was born thirty-five years ago in Italy, during a cyclone that uprooted half the trees in the garden of our villa and caused the frightened midwife nearly to strangle the newborn with the umbilical cord. Whenever I see trees falling before the wind, hear thunder, observe the sea furious, I think of that December day and the paleness of the mother's face in vivid contrast to the redness of her blood, that endless haemorrhaging of blood.

(I think that a little *mémoire* in the beautiful lyric style of the above might do very well for the *Atlantic Monthly*.)

Emma shivered in the wind. "Yes, old. Dingy. Like Liverpool."

"Waterfronts are the same everywhere. But there's nothing old here. I recognize nothing. Not even City Hall, which ought to be over there where that marble tomb is. See? With all the columns . . ."

"Perhaps you've forgotten. It's been so long."

"I feel like Rip Van Winkle." Already I could see the beginning of my first piece for the New York *Herald* (unless I can interest Mr. Bonner at the New York *Ledger*; he has been known to pay a thousand dollars for a single piece). "The New Rip Van Winkle, or How Charles Schermerhorn Schuyler Sailed to Europe Almost Half a Century Ago . . ." And stayed there (asleep?). Now he's come home, to report to President Martin Van Buren who sent him abroad on a diplomatic mission, to compare foreign

notes with his friend Washington Irving (who invented him after all), to dine with the poet Fitz-Greene Halleck: only to find all of them, to his astonishment, long dead.

Must stop at this point.

These pages are to be a quarry, no more. A collection of day-to-day impressions of my *new* old country.

Titles: "The United States in the Year of the Centennial." "Traveller's Return." "Old New York: A Knickerbocker's Memories." "Recollections of the Age of Jackson and Van Buren . . ." Must try these out on publishers and lecture agents.

At this moment—midnight, December 4, 1875—I am somewhat staggered at the prospect of trying in some way to encompass with words this new world until now known to me only at the farthest remove. I can of course go on and on about the past, write to order of old things by the yard; and happily there is, according to my publisher, Mr. E. P. Dutton, a considerable market for my wares whenever I am in the reminiscent mood. But the real challenge, of course, is to get the sense of the country as it is today—two, three, four times more populous than it was when I left in 1837. Yet, contemplating what I saw of New York this afternoon, I begin only now to get the range as I sit, perspiring, in the parlour of our hotel suite while dry heated air comes through metal pipes in sudden blasts like an African sirocco.

None of the Americans I have met in Europe over the past four decades saw fit to prepare me for the opulence, the grandeur, the vulgarity, the poverty, the elegance, the awful crowded abundance of this city, which, when I last saw it, was a minor seaport with such small pretensions that a mansion was a house like Madame Jumel's property on the Haarlem—no, Harlem—no, *Washington* Heights—a building that might just fill the ballroom of one of those palaces the rich are building on what is called Fifth Avenue, in my day a country road wandering through the farms north of Potter's Field, later to be known as the Parade Ground, and later still as Washington Square Park, now lined with rows of "old" houses containing the heirs of the New York gentry of my youth.

In those days, of course, the burghers lived at the south end of the island between the Battery and Broadway where now all is commercial, or worse. I can recall when St. Mark's Place was as far north as anyone would want to live. Now, I am told, a rich

woman has built herself a cream-coloured French palace on *Fifty-seventh Street!* opposite the newly completed Central Park (how does one “complete” a park?).

A steward hurried across the deck to Emma. “*C’est un monsieur; il est arrivé, pour Madame la Princesse.*”

Everyone told us that of all the Atlantic ships those of the French line were the most comfortable, and so the *Pereire* proved to be, despite winter gales that lasted from Le Havre to the mid-Atlantic. But the captain was charming; and most impressed by Emma’s exalted rank even though her title is Napoleonic and the second French empire is now the third French republic. Nevertheless, the captain gave us a most regal series of staterooms for only a hundred and fifty dollars (the usual cost of two first-class passages is two hundred dollars).

Our fellow passengers proved to be so comfortably dull that I was able during the eight and a half days of the crossing to complete my article for *Harper’s Monthly*, “The Empress Eugénie in Exile,” filled with facts provided by the Emperor’s cousin, my beloved Princess Mathilde who of course detests her. Conforming to current American taste, the tone of the piece is ecstatic and somewhat fraudulent.

But the Empress has always been most kind to Emma and to me, although she once tactlessly said in my presence that literary men give her the same sense of ennui as explorers! Well, the writer is not unlike the explorer. We, too, are searching for lost cities, rare tigers, the sentence never before written.

Emma’s visitor was John Day Apgar. We found him in the main salon. Rather forlornly, he stood amongst the crowd of first-class passengers, all looking for children, maids, valets, trunks.

Quite a number of the men were having what the Americans so colorfully refer to as “an eye-opener” at the marble-topped bar.

“Princess!” Mr. Apgar bowed low over Emma’s hand; his style is not bad for an American. But then John, as I call him, was for a year at our embassy in Paris. Now he is practising law in New York.

“Mr. Apgar. You are as good as your word.” Emma gave him her direct dark gaze, not quite as intense as the one she gave New York City, but then John, unlike the city, is a reasonably well known and familiar object to her. “I’ve a carriage waiting for you at Pier Fifty. Porters—everything. Forgive me, Mr. Schuyler.” John bowed to me; shook hands.

"How did you get on board?" I was curious. "Aren't we still in the harbour?"

"I came out on the tender. With all sorts of people who have come to greet you."

"Me?" I was genuinely surprised. I had telegraphed Jamie Bennett at the *Herald* that I was arriving on the fourth but I could hardly expect that indolent youth to pay me a dawn visit in the middle of the Hudson River. Who else knew of my arrival?

The captain enlightened us. "The American newspaper press is arrived on board to interview Monsieur Schuyler." The French pronunciation of Schuyler (Shwee-lair) is something I shall never grow used to or accept. Because of it, I feel an entirely different person in France from what I am in America. Question: Am I different? Words, after all, define us.

"How extraordinary!" Emma takes a low view of journalists despite the fact that my livelihood from now on must come from my pen, from writing for newspapers, magazines, anything and everything. The panic of 1873 wiped out my capital, such as it was. Worse, Emma's husband left her in a similar situation when he saw fit to die five years ago while ingesting a tournedos Rossini at the restaurant Lucas Carton.

Whether it was a heart attack or simply beef with foie gras lodged in the windpipe, we shall never know, since neither of us was present when the Prince d'Agrigente so abruptly departed this world during a late supper with his mistress. It was the scandal of Paris during the three days before the war with Prussia broke out. After that, Paris had other things to talk about. We did not. To this day none of us understands how it was that the Prince died *owing* the fortune that we thought he had possessed.

With the slightly shady pomp of a chamberlain at the imperial court, the captain led us across the salon to a small parlor filled with gilt chairs à la Louis Quinze where, waiting for me, was the flower of the youth of the New York press. That is to say, the new inexperienced journalists who are assigned to meet celebrities aboard ships in the harbour and, through trial and error (usually more of the second than of the first), learn the art of interviewing, of misdescribing in sprightly language odd fauna.

Twenty, thirty faces stared at me from a variety of long shabby overcoats, some open in response to the warmth of the cabin, others still tightly shut against the morning's icy wind. We have been told a hundred times today that this has been the coldest winter in memory. What winter is not?

The captain introduced me to the journalists—obviously he is well-pleased that the reduction in our fare has been so dramatically and immediately justified. I sang for all our suppers; spoke glowingly of the splendour of the French line.

Questions were hurled at me whilst a near-sighted artist scribbled a drawing of me. I caught a glimpse of one of his renderings when he flipped back the first page of his paper block: a short stout pigeon of a man with three chins lodged in an exaggerated high-winged collar (yet mine is what collars should be), and of course the snubbed nose, square jaw of a Dutchman no longer young. Dear God! Why euphemize? Of a man of sixty-two, grown very old.

Thin man from the New York *Herald*. Indolent youth from the New York *Graphic*. Sombre dwarf from *The New York Times*. The *Sun*, *Mail*, *World*, *Evening Post*, *Tribune* were also present but not immediately identified. Also half a dozen youths from the weeklies, the monthlies, the biweeklies, the bimonthlies . . . oh, New York, the United States is the Valhalla of journalism—if Valhalla is the right word. Certainly, there are more prosperous newspapers and periodicals in the United States than in all of Europe put together. As a result, today's men of letters come from the world of journalism, and never entirely leave it—unlike my generation, who turned with great reluctance to journalism in order to make a desperate, poor living of the sort that now faces me.

"What, Mr. Schuyler, are your impressions of the United States *today*?" The dwarf from *The New York Times* held his notebook before him like a missal—studying it, not me.

"I shall know better when I go ashore." Pleased chuckles from the overcoats that had begun to give off a curious musty odour of dirty wool dampened by salt spray.

Handkerchief to face, Emma stood at the door, ready for flight. But John Apgar appeared to be entirely fascinated by the Fourth Estate in all its woolly splendour.

"How long has it been, sir, since you were last in America?" A note of challenge from the *World*: it is not good form to live outside God's own country. "I left in the year 1837. That was the year that everyone went bankrupt. Now I am back and everyone has again gone bankrupt. There is a certain symmetry, don't you think?"

This went down well enough. But *why* had I left?

"Because I had been appointed American vice consul at Antwerp. By President Van Buren."

I thought that this would sound impressive, but it provoked no response. I am not sure which unfamiliar phrase puzzled them more: "vice consul" or "President Van Buren." But then Americans have always lived entirely in the present, and this generation is no different from mine except that now there is more of a past for them to ignore.

Our republic (soon to be in its centennial year) was in its vivacious sixties when I left, the same age that I am now.

Although my life has spanned nearly two-thirds the life of the United States, it seems but a moment in time. Equally curious is Emma's first impression of New York: "How old it looks," she said. Yet there is hardly a building left from my youth. As I spoke to the press I did finally recognize through the window—porch—thole—the familiar spire of Trinity Church. At least no new fire has managed to destroy that relic of the original city.

(Noted later: my "familiar spire," according to John Day Apgar was torn down in '39. The current *unfamiliar* spire dates from the early forties.)

Questions came quickly. My answers were as sharp as I could make them, considering how tactful, even apologetic one must be for having stayed away so long. And if the newspaper reports of my return prove to be amiable, I will find it easy—I pray—to acquire a lecture agent, not to mention magazine commissions from—from anyone who will pay!

"Where have you been living, sir?"

"For the last few years in Paris. I came there—"

"Were you in Paris during the war, during the German occupation?"

I restrained myself; was modest; *agréable*. "Why, yes, in fact I wrote a little book about my experiences. Perhaps you know the title. *Paris Under the Commune*?"

Either my publishers have exaggerated the success of the book or journalists do not read books or even reviews of books. Yet *Harper's Weekly* referred to *Paris Under the Commune* as "a terrifying and entirely fascinating eyewitness account of the siege of Paris and the rising of the Commune, all recorded with that celebrated gift for detail which marks any utterance from Mr. Charles Schermerhorn Schuyler's pen." I recall this notice by heart, largely because the only utterance I have ever heard my pen make is a squeak.

The man from the *Sun* looked very pleased with himself as he asked, "You yourself, sir, are not a Communist?"

"No, no, dear boy." My voice filled suddenly with catarrh as I deliberately mimicked old Washington Irving at his most gracious. "I am a simple American."

"Then why have you lived so long abroad?" The *Graphic*.

"When I was an American consul in Italy, I married a Swiss lady—"

"Is that her?" The dwarf looked over his missal at Emma; in fact, pointed that object at her as if he were an imp from hell with a summons.

"My wife is dead. She died at Paris some years ago. She—"

"What is *your* name, miss?" The *World* to Emma.

"*Je ne comprends pas, monsieur.*" Emma's face was white, her full lips a straight line of irritability. The French words snapped in the room like a whip.

"My daughter is the Princess d'Agrigente." Much confusion as we worked as one to get the spelling right. Finally, a compromise: in English she is the Princess of Agrigento. "She is a widow—" I began.

"What did the Prince *do*?" From the *Express*.

Emma started to answer, furiously, in English, but a gesture from me stopped her. Raptly John Apgar stared at us, as if at the theatre.

"The Prince had many interests. His father, as I am sure you all know, was a marshal of France and served under the first Napoleon. He was ennobled in Italy. After Waterloo, when Napoleon was defeated—" For once I was spelling out too much. Impatiently they indicated that Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo was known to them.

"Got any children, Princess?"

"Two," I answered quickly. "In Paris. With their grandmother. The dowager Princess." Who is charging us—that sovereign bitch from hell—*five thousand francs* a year for their support, almost a thousand dollars: the entire income Emma realizes from what remains of her husband's estate. Need I say—yes, I *do* need to say, even to this journal where it is perfectly irrelevant, that I have never in my life met such a terrible woman as Emma's mother-in-law. According to legend, she was a prostitute when Lieutenant du Pont, the future marshal and Prince d'Agrigente, met her, but I doubt the story, as she must have been even then as plain—and odoriferous—as an abattoir on an August day.

"Are you planning to write about the change in New York

since you lived here?" This from the charming thin man of the *Herald*, who knows me as a "valued contributor."

"Indeed. I look forward to a tour of the States. East and West. North and South. I shall attend and write about the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia when it opens—"

"For the *Herald*?" Again from the most amiable thin youth.

"Where else?" Equal amiability from me—if not total sincerity, for I shall sell my wares to the highest bidder.

"Are you related to Mrs. William Astor?"

This was as startling a question as I have ever been asked. "Certainly not!" I fear I was too sharp.

The mystery was promptly solved: apparently Mrs. Astor's maiden name was the same as my mother's—Schermerhorn—something I had not known, although even at Paris we have often been told by amused and bemused travellers of the grandeur of Mrs. Astor's receptions, of the gorgeous splendour of that New York society which she dominates, having managed to unseat her sister-in-law Mrs. John Jacob Astor III who outranks her, at least according to primogeniture, for J.J. Astor III is the eldest son of that family, and its head.

Once, a half-century ago, I saw the original J.J. Astor crawling along lower Broadway; the old man wore an ermine-lined coat and was supported by my old friend—and his secretary—the poet Fitz-Greene Halleck. All dead.

Questions about my books. But not many. According to the press, I am a famous author in the United States, but this set of overcoats was not certain just *why* I am celebrated. On the other hand, they are all familiar with my journalism, not only my pieces for Jamie Bennett's *Herald* but also those for the *Evening Post*, where my literary career began. I am the New York press's perennial authority on European matters.

Politics. Sooner or later that subject always comes up with Americans.

What did I think of the recent arrest and imprisonment of Boss Tweed, who stole millions of dollars from the city of New York whilst building the lavish new Court House. Piously I deplored corruption.

What did I think of General U.S. Grant, whose second term as president is due to end in a year's time?

I was wary. The corruption of General Grant's Administration is a matter of some poignancy to me. My capital was administered

by the banking house of Jay Cooke, which collapsed in the fall of 1873, bringing on a panic whose effects are still with us—as my capital is not.

Certain Wall Street criminals, among them Jay Gould and Jim Fiske—how well I know their names!—in an attempt to corner gold, brought on a thousand bankruptcies. Whether or not General Grant himself was involved in any of this is a disputed point. Certainly he is known to take large gifts from men like Gould and Fiske. If Grant is not himself a criminal he is a fool. Yet the Republican party protects him, cherishes him, is loath even to let him go now after two terms.

“Do you think General Grant will want a third term?” From the *Times*, a newspaper particularly devoted to the Grant Administration.

“Since I have never met the General, I can hardly say. But . . .”

Deliberately I set out to make—well, not my fortune but at least a *place* for myself where I can survive without fear of poverty the few years left me. “But,” I repeated, “as you know, I am a Democrat, of the Jackson–Van Buren persuasion . . .”

This caused some interest. There was a marked coolness from the reporters representing the Republican interest (the majority, I fear), but keen sympathy from the others.

“Do you favour Governor Tilden for the Democratic nomination?”

Favour him! All my hopes are based upon that fragile figure obtaining the presidency next year. “Indeed I do. I am not, of course, *au courant* . . .” Mistake to use French but the phrase was out.

Odd. In France I think only in French. Now—in this hotel room—what language do I think in? English? No. A *mélange*!

“I hardly know as much about New York’s affairs as you gentlemen, but I do know that Mr. Tilden’s breaking up of the Tweed ring so pleased the honest people of the state that last year they made him governor. After all, he has stopped the rich stealing from the poor—”

“But that sounds communist, sir.” From the *Times*.

“I had no idea that honesty and communism were the same.” This evoked some applause. I find it fascinating that communism should so distress the overcoats. Obviously the uprising in Paris frightened the New York burghers—certainly it frightened us Parisians when the Communards seized the city as the Germans