CHAPTER 17

Herodotus in Fiction: Gore Vidal’s Creation

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My business is to record what people say, but I am by no means bound to believe it—and that may be taken to apply to this book as a whole.¹

The late Gore Vidal (1925–2012) was a prolific, versatile and charismatic figure who claims a distinctive place in American culture. He is variously remembered as an essayist, a novelist, a playwright, an actor, a politician, a strong adversary of monotheism and of American intervention in the affairs of other nations, and a reluctant icon for gay liberation. Recollecting his interviews with Vidal conducted over several years, Jon Wiener recently remarked that what Vidal really cared about were “the history of the American Empire, the rise of the National Security State, and of course his own life in politics, as a commentator and as a candidate”.²

Relatively less attention over the years has been drawn to the fact that Vidal was also a classicist.³ His broad education in the Classics was fundamental in shaping the emphases throughout his writings upon the corruption of empire and the transience of power, or—as John Marincola expresses this in relation to Herodotus’ Histories—“the instability of human fortune”.⁴

Vidal remarked on a number of occasions that the first adult book which he read as a young child was a 19th century translation of Livy’s stories of Rome.⁵ He admired Moses Finley, the influence of whose book The World of Odysseus he directly acknowledged.⁶ Between 1954 and 1963, whilst working on the

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¹ All translations of the Histories are de Sélincourt’s (2003).
³ The few who have significantly addressed this aspect of Vidal’s writing include Tatum (1992) and Endres (2004). I have written elsewhere about the novel Myra Breckinridge as a Menippean satire: see Neilson (2012).
⁴ Marincola (2003) xxv.
⁵ See, for example, Vidal’s interviews with Charles Ruas ((1986) 61) and with Jon Wiener ((2012) 31), and his memoir Palimpsest ((1995) 62).
⁶ Vidal acknowledged with gratitude the influence of The World of Odysseus, most evident during the writing of Creation (see the Introduction to the Abacus edition of Julian: Vidal (1993a) [1964] v).
novel *Julian*, the stage play *The Best Man*, and a number of scripts for television, Vidal was also intermittently writing a screenplay tentatively entitled *The Golden Age of Pericles*, with Pericles, Cleon and Alcibiades as the central characters. Whilst this was eventually neither published nor broadcast, Vidal would return to Pericles for the framing scenes of *Creation*. The beginning of his life as an essayist was “The Twelve Caesars”, a meditation on Robert Graves’s translation of Suetonius.

Suetonius saw the world’s history from 49 BC to AD 96 as the intimate narrative of twelve men wielding absolute power. . . . [W]hat, finally, was the effect of absolute power on twelve representative men? Suetonius makes it quite plain: disastrous.

**Vidal** (1993b) [1959] 524, 526

Thus this essay, written when he was in his twenties, heralded what would become Vidal’s principal concern. Whether writing about American history and politics, or about cultures of the distant past, he was always preoccupied with the nature of power—whence power derives, the ways in which it is manifested, and how it can be constrained. At one point Vidal anticipated that, of his writings, it would be his ‘inventions’, such as *Myra Breckinridge, Myron*, or *Kalki*, that would endure. However, when he was asked nearer the end of his life for what he would wish to be remembered, perhaps surprisingly his answer was ‘*Creation*’.

Thucydides was one of his favourite writers, a ‘proto-novelist’ as Vidal regarded him, and an abiding model. In their introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, Dewald and Marincola outline the scholarly debates concerning the nature and degree of fact versus fabulation in the *Histories*.

7 I viewed the draft version of this screenplay in 1988, when the Gore Vidal Collection was housed in the State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin. This material was in Box 66 at that time. Vidal’s papers were subsequently moved to the Houghton Library of Harvard University.


9 Ruas (1986) 62. Asked in his eighties to nominate the book which had had the most impact on his life, Vidal chose *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (Vidal (2006)). Thucydides’ characterization of historical figures was one of the book’s attractions for Vidal, who once praised the *History* as “a great novel about people who actually lived” (in an interview with *Paris Review* (Clarke (1974))).