

OATES AND THE HANDLINS

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RECENT SINGLE-VOLUME biographies of Abraham Lincoln include one of the best and one of the worst. Admirable despite serious flaws is Stephen B. Oates's *With Malice toward None* (1977), some of the themes of which the author makes more explicit in his collection of essays subtitled *The Man behind the Myths* (1984).¹ Undeserving of even faint praise is Oscar and Lilian Handlin's contribution (1980) to the Library of American Biography, a series of brief, interpretative volumes of which Oscar Handlin is founder and editor.²

According to Handlin's specifications, each book in the series is to illuminate the intersection between the subject's life and the nation's history. In such terms the Handlins justify their small contribution to the vast Lincoln literature. They declare that "there is something more to say," and they are confident that they have said it. "Our research has uncovered no facts, but it has encompassed all the facts known," they assert. "And it has provided us with the means of understanding Abraham Lincoln, his times, and the meaning of both."³

Certainly there is room for a new short life of Lincoln, an interpretative one that would do what the Handlins claim to have done. Such a volume, to justify itself, would need to distill the best of recent Lincoln scholarship and present the distillation with at least a bit of dramatic flair and literary grace. This the Handlin book fails to do. Three-fourths of its pages are given over to a rather plodding, unimaginative account of the prepresidential years. The treatment of the presidency is not only skimpy but poorly organized. In a chaos of chronology Lincoln's assassination comes before Lee's surrender, which precedes the 1864 election, which in turn arrives ahead of the 1863 announcement of the 10 percent plan. The ill-told story lacks any clear and consistent theme or combination of themes, and it contains all too many dubious or erroneous statements, including

opinions once widely believed but now discredited. A couple of examples: Lincoln as an Illinois legislator in 1835 was "swapping railroads, canals, turnpikes, and bridges for votes" to move the state capital to Springfield; he decided not to run for Congress a second time because of the Illinois reaction to his stand on the Mexican War. In sum, the Handlins' volume does not fulfill the promises of its preface, nor does it meet the aim that Handlin himself set for the series.

Oates's Lincoln deserves much more attention than the Handlins'. Indeed, Oates's must be considered as, on the whole, the finest of the one-volume biographies. Among the other notable ones of this century, Lord Charnwood's (1917) and Nathaniel W. Stephenson's (1922) now seem completely outdated and almost quaint.⁴ Even Benjamin P. Thomas's (1952) and Reinhard H. Luthin's (1960) appear somewhat old-fashioned by comparison.⁵ For instance, neither Thomas nor Luthin included in his index the entry "Frederick Douglass," "Negroes," "race," or "racism." Oates does list these topics in his index, and he gives them considerable attention in his text, in accordance with his announced intention to reveal Lincoln's "racial views in the context of his time and place."

On matters other than race, the Thomas or the Luthin biography may sometimes be more useful, or at least handier, as a work of reference. But Oates is probably somewhat more readable than Thomas and certainly much more readable than Luthin. Not that Oates's style is flawless. He likes slangy expressions (on one occasion Lincoln "wasn't too interested"; on another he "griped"). He uses overfamiliar terms (surely the hatchet-faced, hard-bitten Montgomery Blair would resent the author's chumminess in always referring to him as "Monty"). He mixes his metaphors (someone once "waded into Lincoln's speech . . . with both fists, flaying it"). He falls into misusages ("by-elections" for "midterm elections") and even into malapropisms ("expostulated" for "expounded"). But gaffes of this kind will probably offend no one except perhaps some fussy old composition teacher. Nearly all readers will, no doubt, agree with the jacket blurb, which describes the book as "lyrical, engrossing and thoroughly moving." They are likely to get from it a warm sense of sympathy with Lincoln—and with Mrs. Lincoln—in their many trials.

Unlike the Handlins, Oates has kept abreast of the writing on Lincoln and his times. He avows that in preparing the biography he

has "utilized scores of published source materials and unpublished manuscript collections" in addition to numerous scholarly studies. In his reference notes, however, he actually cites very few manuscript sources. Essentially the book is a synthesis of recent scholarship and a remarkably comprehensive one. At some points, where scholarship remains divided or uncertain, the Oates account has an assurance and a precision that the sources hardly warrant. But more about that later.

In *With Malice toward None* the author announces his intention to present the "real Lincoln" in place of the "Lincoln of mythology." He undertakes to carry the exposure further in *Abraham Lincoln: The Man behind the Myths*, which we may view as a supplement to the biography. "In shaping it," he says of the newer volume, "I benefited enormously from a growing library of modern Lincoln studies. In fact, the last couple of decades have witnessed a veritable renaissance of Lincoln scholarship." Much of this "hasn't reached a broad literary audience. I am addressing that audience, because I want lay readers to rediscover Lincoln as the scholars have."⁶

Oates, then, does not pretend to be offering a strictly original interpretation. Perhaps the most innovative idea in the two books is his characterization of the Radical Republicans as "liberals." According to him, Senators Charles Sumner, Benjamin F. Wade, and Zachariah Chandler "belonged to a loose faction incorrectly categorized as 'radicals,' a misnomer that has persisted through the years." Radical Republicans of this faction "were really progressive, nineteenth-century liberals who felt a powerful kinship with English liberals like John Bright and Richard Cobden."⁷ Well, Sumner did feel a certain kinship with Cobden and Bright. He was a free trader, as they and the rest of the English liberals were, but most members of Sumner's faction were protectionists. Some of them, most notably Sumner himself, were to join the so-called Liberal Republican movement of 1872, but they did not refer to themselves as Liberal Republicans in Lincoln's time. For us now to call them liberals is inappropriate and anachronistic.

Oates apparently prefers to call the Radicals "liberals" so as to minimize the difference between them and Lincoln, whom he looks upon as another progressive, nineteenth-century liberal. He agrees with those scholars who see Lincoln as lagging only a little behind and quickly catching up with, the members of his party who took the most advanced positions in regard to emancipation, black suffrag

and the reconstruction of the seceded states. He is an advocate of what might be called the Donald-Hyman-Trefousse-McPherson-Belz-McCrary-Cox thesis, its foremost proponents being David Donald, Harold Hyman, Hans Trefousse, James McPherson, Herman Belz, Peyton McCrary, and LaWanda Cox.⁸ Each of those historians has taken issue with the once generally held belief that Lincoln and the Radicals differed significantly on questions of black rights. To Oates, that belief is the worst of the Lincoln myths, the one that he is at the greatest pains to dispel.

He likens his own interpretation to that of Peyton McCrary and adds: "Several older historians, especially those in or from the South, have faulted McCrary's inescapable conclusions that Lincoln stood with his advanced Republican colleagues on critical reconstruction questions; apparently these historians prefer the mythical version."⁹ I do not like to get personal, but I cannot help recognizing myself as one of those "older historians," one who lived for nearly thirty years in the South and, while living there, wrote a review that "faulted McCrary's inescapable conclusions." I now submit that the question whether those conclusions are "inescapable" is, to say the least, open to debate, as is the identity of the historians who "prefer the mythical version" of the events.

Consider what Oates has to say, in *The Man behind the Myths*, about the Emancipation Proclamation. It was, he contends, "a sweeping blow against slavery as an institution in the rebel states, a blow that would free *all* slaves there—those of secessionists and loyalists alike."¹⁰ The fact is that the proclamation did not apply to the rebel states as a whole—not to the areas under Union occupation but only to those still under Confederate control. Even at its most efficacious, the proclamation therefore would fall far short of freeing all the slaves in the rebel states.

Oates quotes the famous passage in Lincoln's December 1862 message to Congress beginning: "Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history." Then he says: "That message provoked a fusillade of abuse from congressional Democrats, who blasted Lincoln's projected Proclamation as unconstitutional."¹¹ Thus he gives the impression that Lincoln uttered those eloquent words in support of his forthcoming proclamation. The fact is that Lincoln was urging the adoption of a constitutional amendment that would authorize his favorite emancipation plan. According to this plan, the states themselves would have

to free the slaves. They could take their time about it, delaying final freedom until as late as 1900. They would have to compensate the slaveowners but could get financial aid from the federal government. And they would induce the freed blacks to resettle in Africa, Haiti, or some other place outside the United States. This was hardly a plan that the Radical Republicans could approve, and they did not approve it.

"As Union armies pushed into rebel territory, they would tear slavery out root and branch, automatically freeing all slaves in the areas and states they conquered," Oates continues. "By war's end, all three and a half million slaves in the defeated Confederacy could claim freedom under Lincoln's Proclamation and the victorious Union flag."¹² Maybe so. Maybe not. Lincoln himself had doubts about the lasting effect of the proclamation even in the still rebellious areas to which he confined it. On September 22, 1861, exactly one year before he issued his preliminary proclamation, he had defended his revocation of Gen. John C. Fremont's Missouri emancipation proclamation by asking: "Can it be pretended that it is any longer the government of the U.S.—any government of Constitution and laws—wherein a General, or a President, may make permanent rules of property by proclamation?"¹³ By September 22, 1862, he had persuaded himself to make permanent rules of property and to base his action on his constitutional authority as commander in chief of the army and the navy. It is very doubtful that the framers of the Constitution, when they made the president the commander in chief, had anything more in mind than to assure the supremacy of the civilian over the military. By the time of the Civil War, some students of the Constitution had begun to argue for a presidential "war power." Today we take that power pretty much for granted, but when Lincoln became the first president to exercise it, its constitutionality was very much in doubt. Would the federal courts approve? Even if they accepted the proclamation as a war measure, what would they think of its efficacy once the war was over? Lincoln did not know the answers to these questions, and neither do we. What we do know is that after Appomattox the future of slavery remained unclear until the final ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment near the end of 1865.

Consider, next, what Oates has to say about the proclamation of December 1863 in which Lincoln announced his 10 percent plan for reconstructing the Southern states. This, Oates declares, "made em an-

cipation the very basis of reconstruction, thus placing him on the side of Sumner and the advanced and moderate members of his party."¹⁴ In fact, it did no such thing. It required that at least 10 percent of a state's voters swear to abide by all congressional acts and presidential proclamations with regard to slavery. As yet, no act of Congress called for complete abolition. The Emancipation Proclamation, as we have seen, exempted those parts of the Confederacy that the Union armies had already recovered—the only parts where reconstruction could possibly begin. By no means did Lincoln's announcement place him on the side of the "advanced" Republicans, the Radicals. They showed their disagreement by passing a quite different reconstruction plan, the Wade-Davis bill, which Lincoln pocket vetoed. Then they denounced him in the Wade-Davis manifesto and plotted to get rid of him as the party's presidential candidate.

Consider, finally, what Oates has to say about Lincoln and black suffrage. "Over the winter of 1864-65," he writes, "Lincoln approved some form of Negro suffrage for other rebel states if Congress would accept his Louisiana regime"—without black suffrage. "But the compromise fell apart because most congressional Republicans opposed even limited Negro suffrage as too radical."¹⁵ Now, even McCrary, whom Oates closely follows, concedes that "there had been some misunderstanding on the precise nature of the compromise."¹⁶ The evidence for such a compromise is unconvincing. One thing seems clear enough: Lincoln insisted on the removal of the black suffrage provision from the proposed reconstruction bill.

Oates sums up his case as follows: "Not only did the historical Lincoln side with Sumner and Stevens on most crucial reconstruction issues; by 1865 he was prepared to reform and reshape the South's shattered society with the help of military force."¹⁷ But the historical Lincoln spoke "with malice toward none, with charity for all," of "binding up the nation's wounds." Thaddeus Stevens talked of compelling Southerners to "eat the fruit of foul rebellion"; of confiscating plantations, driving off the owners, and dividing the land among the freedmen; of revolutionizing the South. Neither Sumner nor Stevens thought the Constitution a hindrance. Sumner held that the Southern states, by seceding, had committed suicide and had reverted to territories. Stevens argued that having been defeated in war, those states were nothing but "conquered provinces." But Lincoln said the ques-

tion whether they were still states or not, whether they were in or out of the Union, was a "merely pernicious abstraction." The important thing, he thought, was to restore them to their "proper practical relation" with the Union as soon as possible.

Why should we even expect Lincoln to have taken positions as extreme as those of some Radicals in Congress? In the White House he could hardly afford to be so far advanced or so single-minded. He had to hold the North together and direct the war effort so as to achieve a victory that would reunite the nation. He had to act as the president of the Conservatives as well as the Radicals, the Democrats as well as the Republicans, the Southerners as well as the Northerners, the whites as well as the blacks. None of the Radicals represented any such broad constituency. Stevens, for one, had a very narrow power base; he was responsible only to the Republican majority within a small portion of a single state—the Lancaster district of Pennsylvania.

All this is, emphatically, not to suggest that Lincoln leaned toward the other extreme from that of the Radicals. The black historian Lerone Bennett, Jr., was quite unhistorical in denigrating him as a man notable for racism.¹⁸ The antiblack historian J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, a North Carolinian of the Dunning school, was equally wrong in praising him as one who shared conservative white Southerners' "belief in the natural inferiority of the negro" and who, if he had lived, would have managed to "check the radicals in Congress" so as to save the reconstructed states from the horrors of "Negro rule."¹⁹ James G. Randall was perhaps the greatest of all Lincoln scholars, but he was mistaken in saying that the Radicals were "the precise opposites of Lincoln" and that he planned an "easy reconstruction" but was "confronted with the hateful opposition of anti-Southern radicals."²⁰ Not Lincoln but his party foes, the Democrats, were the confirmed racists of the North. Not he but they were the true friends of the white supremacists in the South.

Oates and other recent writers who emphasize Lincoln's growing radicalism are much closer to the truth than were the earlier historians who portrayed him as the reluctant destroyer of slavery but the willing preserver of a caste system. There can be no doubt as to the direction in which he was moving during the presidential years. Under the pressure of events he tended to advocate the more and more immediate realization of the promise of equality. But doubts persist as

to exactly where he stood at particular times. At various points, as I have just undertaken to show, Oates and like-minded writers make him appear to have been farther advanced than the evidence warrants.

When Lincoln said, in his last public address, that he might soon "make some new announcement," what did he have in mind? Even McCrary recognizes that Lincoln's assassination a few days later "makes it impossible to know precisely what direction his proposed shift in policy might have taken."²¹ More than that, it makes it impossible to know whether he was actually contemplating any shift in policy.

This uncertainty has left ample room for speculation among historians, novelists, and politicians ever since Lincoln's death. Consciously or not, they have manipulated his memory to suit their own necessities. Opponents as well as proponents of Radical Reconstruction tried to get him on their side. Later, Southerners appealed to his name to legitimize state laws and constitutional amendments disfranchising and subordinating blacks. Then, as the renewed movement for civil rights gained momentum, sympathetic (white) historians attempted to enlist him in this cause.

Years ago, when William H. Herndon and the preachers were quarreling about Lincoln's religious beliefs, one of the preachers pointed out that "the faith and future of the Christian religion in no wise depends upon the sentiments of Abraham Lincoln."²² Today we might add that the justice and prospects of the civil-rights movement in no wise depend upon his sentiments. In any case, those who rewrite the past to serve a present cause, no matter how worthy the cause may be, are engaged in the very essence of mythmaking. In destroying the old myth of Lincoln the pro-Southern-white conservative, they are in the process of creating a new myth of Lincoln the most radical of Radicals.

NOTES

1. Stephen B. Oates, *With Malice toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977); *Abraham Lincoln: The Man behind the Myths* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).

2. Oscar Handlin and Lilian Handlin, *Abraham Lincoln and the Union* (Boston: Atlantic/Little, Brown, 1980).

3. *Ibid.*, pp. ix-x.

4. Lord Charnwood, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Henry Holt, 1917); Nathaniel Wright Stephenson, *Lincoln: An Account of His Personal Life Espe-*

"Oates and the Handlins"

cially of Its Springs of Action as Revealed and Deepened by the Ordeal of War (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1922).

5. Benjamin P. Thomas, *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952); Reinhard H. Luthin, *The Real Abraham Lincoln: A Complete One Volume History of His Life and Times* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1960).

6. Oates, *Man behind the Myths*, p. xiv.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

8. David Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Rights of Man* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970); Harold M. Hyman, "Lincoln and Equal Rights for Negroes: The Irrelevancy of the 'Wadsworth Letter,'" *Civil War History* 12 (1966): 258-66; Hans L. Trefousse, *The Radical Republicans: Lincoln's Vanguard for Racial Justice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969); James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964); Herman Belz, *Reconstructing the Union: Theory and Practice during the Civil War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969); Peyton McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction: The Louisiana Experiment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); LaWanda Cox, *Lincoln and Black Freedom: A Study in Presidential Leadership* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1981).

9. Oates, *Man behind the Myths*, p. 209.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

13. Lincoln to Orville H. Browning, Sept. 22, 1861, in Roy P. Basler, ed., Marion Dolores Pratt and Lloyd A. Dunlap, asst. eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55), 4: 532.

14. Oates, *Man behind the Myths*, p. 140.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

16. McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction*, p. 288-89.

17. Oates, *Man behind the Myths*, p. 137.

18. Lerone Bennett, Jr., "Was Abe Lincoln a White Supremacist?" *Ebony* 23 (Feb. 1968): 35-42.

19. J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, "Lincoln and the South," *Sewanee Review* 17 (Apr. 1909): 134-38.

20. J. G. Randall, *Lincoln and the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1946), pp. 119-23.

21. McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction*, p. 351.

22. James A. Reed, quoted in Richard N. Current, *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), p. 54.

VIDAL'S LINCOLN

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FOR A PROFESSIONAL HISTORIAN, the first question to be asked about Gore Vidal's *Lincoln* is: "What have we here?" Again, as in *Burr, 1876*, and *Washington*, Vidal has blended historical fact with literary invention, but the finished product in this instance might better be called fictionalized history than historical fiction. Subtitled *A Novel*, the book is nevertheless almost entirely about real persons whose depicted words and actions were drawn largely, says Vidal, from the historical record. Of course, as a novelist he felt free to attribute thoughts and motives, invent dialogue, and modify events. Yet he plainly intended the work to have historical as well as literary merit and for that reason submitted it before publication to the scrutiny and criticism of a leading Civil War historian.¹

Like other writings that mix the techniques of the novelist with those of the historian (such as William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Alex Haley's *Roots*, and the various quasibiographies of Irving Stone), Vidal's *Lincoln* poses a problem for critics with respect to criteria of evaluation. Is historical soundness a matter of central importance, or should a book calling itself a novel be judged simply as a literary creation? Predictably, both the *New York Times Book Review* and the *New York Review of Books* assigned the volume to literary reviewers, neither of whom was an expert on Lincoln and his era. In the *Times*, author and critic Joyce Carol Oates brushed aside the question of Vidal's historical accuracy. "Surely," she wrote with fetching innocence, "the history cannot be faulted, as it comes with the imprimatur of one of our most eminent Lincoln scholars, David Herbert Donald of Harvard." Oates saw the book as one in which the author had subordinated the role of novelist to the role of "historian-biographer," thereby producing "not so much an imaginative reconstruction of an era as an intelligent, lucid, and highly informative

transcript of it."² In the *New York Review*, Harold Bloom of Yale ventured the categorical statement that no biographer and no other novelist "has had the precision of imagination to show us a plausible and human Lincoln." Vidal, he declared "does just that, and more: he gives us the tragedy of American political history, with its most authentic tragic hero at the center."³

Here, then, we have one reviewer virtually classifying Vidal's *Lincoln* as a biography rather than a novel, and another finding it superior to the best nonfictional studies of Lincoln. Furthermore, even from less appreciative critics the principal complaint was that Vidal had written too much history into a purported work of fiction. "His book," said Nicholas von Hoffman, "sticks so closely to the actual chronology of events and has so little of his imagination in it that it merits review by a historian."⁴ Yet this widely read interpretation of Abraham Lincoln by a prominent author will receive little if any formal attention from historians and historical journals. That seems not only unfortunate but old-fashioned in an age of blurred literary boundaries when so much history is incorporated into fiction and so much fiction masquerades as history. Perhaps historians should pay closer professional attention to the influence on America's historical consciousness of works such as *Roots*, *Ragtime*, *The Armies of the Night*, and Vidal's *Lincoln*.

Of course there are many novels about the life of Lincoln and many more in which he appears as a secondary or background character. One remembers especially Winston Churchill's *The Crisis*, with its chapters on the Lincoln-Douglas debates; Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*, in which Lincoln vows to expel all blacks from the country; and Irving Stone's *Love Is Eternal*, a workmanlike, sentimental treatment of the Lincoln marriage.⁵ There are very few novels, however, that focus on Lincoln's presidential career. The only thing comparable to Vidal's in this respect is a trilogy written in the 1920s by Honoré Willie Morrow, an Iowan who went to New York as a young woman and, with some early encouragement from Theodore Dreiser, became a successful author and editor.⁶ Her Lincoln books were thoroughly researched and well written in a romantic tone, but she had no particular interest in the politics of the Lincoln administration. Vidal, on the other hand, is a man fascinated as well as repelled by the American political game—one who, in his younger years, thought of himself as having presidential potential.⁷ Thus it was perhaps inevitable that

he should come eventually to writing a book about Lincoln. According to Joseph Blotner, Lincoln has been a dominant influence on the genre of the American political novel, not as a character but rather as the model from which many protagonists have been drawn.⁸ Curiously, Vidal's book is the first major political novel making Lincoln himself the central figure.

It is no easy task to evaluate the historical validity of Vidal's *Lincoln* while at the same time recognizing the imaginative prerogatives of the novelist. Without doubt, a work of this kind tends to confuse many readers about what actually happened. For example, Joyce Carol Oates speaks of the "shrewd judgment" made by Stephen A. Douglas that Lincoln as a young man "had already fantasized dictatorial powers." She quotes Douglas as reminding Lincoln in 1861 of words that he had uttered in 1838: "You said that the founders of the republic had got all the glory that there was and that those who come after can never be anything except mere holders of office, and that this was not enough to satisfy 'the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle.'" What Oates had apparently failed to realize is that Vidal invented these remarks of Douglas in order to introduce passages from the most notable speech of Lincoln's younger years. She had mistaken fiction for historical fact.⁹

The difficulty of separating history from fiction in the book is compounded by a certain amount of factual error and dubious interpretation on Vidal's part, as well as by the unreliability of some of his sources. When Vidal has Lincoln say, "I was in New Orleans once" (instead of twice); when he declares that the Taylor administration offered Lincoln "no government appointment other than the secretaryship of the Oregon territory" (ignoring the governorship of Oregon, also offered); when he has Douglas winning reelection "decisively" (instead of narrowly) in 1858; when he puts a statue of Jefferson in Lafayette Square and speaks of Robert E. Lee as "the rebel commander" in June 1861—in each of these instances, it seems fair to assume that he has simply committed an error.¹⁰ But when he makes Elihu B. Washburne one of Lincoln's frequent companions on the judicial circuit, when he causes Lincoln as president-elect to carry "an elaborate file of papers" in his hat, when he pictures Mary Lincoln as having once been in love with Lyman Trumbull, has he likewise fallen into error, or is he engaging in literary invention?¹¹ Another question to be asked is whether Vidal's prerogatives as a novelist

include the right to retail dubious testimony (such as Herndon's maggoty speculation that Lincoln contracted syphilis and infected his family with it), and the right to perpetuate outmoded interpretations (such as the notion that Lincoln in 1858 deliberately adopted strategy calculated to lose the senatorial contest with Douglas in order to win the presidency two years later.)¹²

Although there is also "much good history" in Vidal's *Lincoln*, as Donald has asserted,¹³ the mixing of fact, fiction, and error, each difficult for the average reader to distinguish, produces a work seductively unreliable as biography, whatever its value as literature may be. Yet the ultimate question is not whether Vidal has written conventionally sound history, but rather the extent to which he has managed to penetrate the mystery of Lincoln's character and leadership.

The soberness of Vidal's approach to his subject has surprised and disappointed some reviewers who expect more mischief and iconoclasm from "the dancing boy of American letters." One critic, who found the book "literal, solid, and reverent," opened his review with a bit of parody:

Lincoln, Lincoln, burning on
In the nation's pantheon—
A mystery of like degree:
Did he who made Myra make thee?¹⁴

It is true that Vidal treats Lincoln with more respect than he accorded Jefferson, for example, in his earlier novel, *Burr*. But while putting aside his cynicism, he has not ceased to be a skeptical observer of politics. He admires Lincoln's skill but seems puzzled by what lies behind it. His treatment, I think, is not so much reverent as tentative. He circles Lincoln quizzically, viewing him from different angles, but seldom trying to get inside the man in the same way that he puts himself inside the minds of Chase, Mary Lincoln, and several other characters. His Lincoln remains something of an enigma throughout the book and perhaps seems all the more believable as a consequence; for the people we know best sometimes prove to be the profoundest mysteries. What Vidal provides more effectively is not an analysis of character but a delineation of leadership—leadership as it was manifested in the relations between Lincoln and the circle of persons most intimately associated with his presidential career. This feature of the novel is, in my opinion, his most valuable contribution to history.

NOTES

1. See Vidal's afterword on p. 659 of *Lincoln: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 1984); also his afterword on pp. 429-30 of *Burr: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 1973).
2. *New York Times Book Review*, June 3, 1984, pp. 1, 36-37.
3. *New York Review of Books*, July 19, 1984, pp. 5-6, 8.
4. *Nation*, June 16, 1984, pp. 744-45.
5. Winston Churchill, *The Crisis* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1901); Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1905); Irving Stone, *Love Is Eternal: A Novel about Mary Todd and Abraham Lincoln* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1954). See Roy P. Basler, *The Lincoln Legend: A Study in Changing Conceptions* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1935), pp. 45-49.
6. Honoré Willson Morrow, *Forever Free, With Malice toward None: and The Last Full Measure* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1927, 1928, and 1930).
7. Gerald Clarke, "Petronius Americanus: The Ways of Gore Vidal," *Atlantic Monthly*, 229 (Mar., 1972): 50.
8. Joseph Blotner, *The Modern American Political Novel, 1900-1960* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), p. 17.
9. The quotation is from p. 111 of Vidal, *Lincoln*. The reference is to Lincoln's address before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Ill., Jan. 27, 1838, Roy P. Basler, ed., Marion Dolores Pratt and Lloyd A. Dunlap, asst. eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55), 1: 108-15.
10. Vidal, *Lincoln*, pp. 9, 11, 28, 72, 186.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 37, 199.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 67, 100, 290. See also Vidal's essay on Lincoln in his *The Second American Revolution, and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 276.
13. Quoted on the jacket of the book.
14. Thomas Keneally, review of *Lincoln: A Novel*, by Gore Vidal, in *New Republic*, July 2, 1984, pp. 32-34.