



Books

SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR

LITERARY HORIZONS

No Cross on Olympus

GORE VIDAL, who wrote *Williwaw* when he was nineteen and had written eight other books of fiction before he was thirty, has just published his first novel in ten years, *Julian* (Little, Brown, \$6.95). In the meantime he has written successful plays, movies, and TV scripts, and a variety of reviews and miscellaneous essays.

His Julian is the fourth-century Roman emperor commonly called "Julian the Apostate." A nephew of Constantine, the first emperor to be converted to Christianity, Julian was brought up in isolation as a student of philosophy and as a pious Christian. The philosophy had more effect on him than the religious instruction, and when, by a series of coincidences, he mounted the imperial throne, he disestablished Christianity, proclaiming a regime of tolerance but at the same time giving preference to the old worship of the pagan gods. Philosophical enough to regard the Greek deities as manifestations of the One, he was at the same time abjectly superstitious. Both because of what he was and because of what he tried to do, he has interested many people; as Vidal remarks in a prefatorial note, "Julian has always been something of an underground hero in Europe."

Vidal has tried to tell Julian's story in a straightforward fashion. The greater part of the book is made up of what purports to be Julian's autobiography. The book, however, opens with a letter, written seventeen years after Julian's death, from Libanius to Priscus. Libanius, one of Julian's teachers, proposing to write a life of Julian, asks Priscus, also a teacher and a close companion, to send him the memoir of Julian he has kept secret. Priscus does so, and the two old friends and rivals comment

from time to time on Julian's manuscript. Thus the account is put together, until towards the end, where we have Julian's brief notes on his Persian campaign, which are amplified by Priscus, who is left to tell the story of Julian's death—about which Vidal has an ingenious theory.

The account is carefully worked out. We see how Julian's education inclined him towards Hellenism, and there is a reasonably convincing description of the religious experience he has when he is initiated into Mithraism. On the other side we watch him develop from a man of thought into a man of action as power is thrust upon him. His battles in Gaul are well described, and the Persian campaign is made even more vivid. He feels himself being corrupted by his great power, but, though he sometimes surrenders to temptation, his regime seems, in its fourth-century setting, a model of moderation.

HAVING found some of the book instructive, some of it exciting, a good deal of it dull, I wonder why Vidal wrote it. Roman emperors have attracted many novelists in our time. One of the brilliant successes is Robert Graves's *I, Claudius*, with its sequel, *Claudius the God*. In dealing with the first century Graves seems to have an absolutely sure touch, while at the same time he makes Claudius a contemporary of ours. Claudius represents himself as a clown, and we end by happily acknowledging that he is a hero. Thornton Wilder in *The Ides of March* has gone even further in the direction of modernizing his hero, and if he never seems so thoroughly at home in ancient Rome as Graves does, he brings Julius to life. Margaret Yourcenar in *Memoirs of Hadrian* has done a kind of psychological-poetic portrait that seems a little

- 31 Literary Horizons: Granville Hicks reviews "Julian," by Gore Vidal
- 33 Waste: An Eye-Witness Report on Some Aspects of Waste in Western Sicily, by Danilo Dolci; The Honored Society: A Searching Look at the Mafia, by Norman Lewis
- 37 Pagan Rites in Judaism, by Theodor Reik
- 38 To an Early Grave, by Wallace Markfield. Leah, by Seymour Epstein
- 40 Every Man a Murderer, by Heimito von Doderer. The Land of Youth, by Richard Power. Get Home Free, by John Clellon Holmes
- 41 Eros Denied: Sex in Western Society, by Wayland Young
- 42 The Cart and the Horse, by Louis Kronenberger
- 43 The Second American Revolution, by H. Wentworth Eldredge. But Will It Sell?, by Marya Mannes
- 44 The Nation's Economic Objectives, edited by Edgar O. Edwards; Towards a World of Plenty?, by Barbara Ward; The Population Crisis and the Use of World Resources, edited by Stuart Mudd
- 46 Money to Grow On, by Stuart Chase. Angola and Mozambique, by Anders Ehnmark and Per Wästberg
- 47 On African Socialism, by Leopold Sedar Senghor
- 48 SR's Checklist of the Week's New Books

fuzzy but has bright flashes of insight. Then, in a related field, there is Mary Renault, who has not only given breath to a mythical hero, Theseus, in *The King Must Die* and *The Bull from the Sea*, but has also, in *The Last of the Wine*, recreated Athens in the age of Socrates.

The first thing we ask of any historical novel is that it give us a sense of a time and a place. Vidal has a bibliography, not very impressive when compared with Miss Yourcenar's fifteen-

page note on sources, but enough to show that he has done his homework. If his feeling for life in the fourth century is not so remarkable as Graves's familiarity with the first, it is sufficient to create an illusion. Vidal is particularly effective in suggesting what life is like in an era of universal fear and suspicion.

As for the imperial hero, modern taste demands that he be not too heroic, not too much like a character out of Sir Walter Scott or Bulwer Lytton. As I have said, Graves humanizes Claudius by making him something of a fool and letting his more heroic qualities slowly emerge. Wilder shows us from the beginning that his Julius is a man of extraordinary gifts, but he has his weaknesses and is a long way from being godlike. Vidal's Julian is a very human mixture of good and bad, and on that score he is quite acceptable. He doesn't, however, really grasp the imagination. Looking at him simply as a character in a novel, one wonders whether he is worth writing about at such great length.

The book, naturally, dwells on the conflict between Hellenism and Christianity, and Vidal, who is not particularly inclined to favor the latter, presents with some skill Julian's arguments against it. The issues, however, never seem alive and pertinent. Vidal has said: "There is no doubt that if he had not been killed in Persia at thirty-three our world would be a different place today." But the novel doesn't make the reader feel this, doesn't give a sense that this Julian was the kind of man who changes history.

In his collection of essays, *Rocking the Boat* (SR, Aug. 4, 1962), Vidal discussed the decline of the novel and his decision to turn to television. In my review I humbly suggested that, instead of becoming a politician or a script writer or a commentator, he might "return to the writing of novels and try to do a little better than he has before without worrying too much about the mass audience." It now appears that at that very time he had a novel in hand, none other than *Julian*. He began it in 1959, and a couple of chapters appeared in 1962 in a paperback called *Three by Gore Vidal*. In a note in that book he says, "I interrupted work to write a play called *The Best Man*, and I have not yet been able to get back into Julian's skin." Shortly after writing this he must have felt that he had recovered his power to identify himself with his hero, for the novel was soon finished. It shows a most commendable industry, but it is not the novel I was hoping for. Perhaps I was wrong in suggesting that Vidal, whose life is so rich in possibilities, should settle upon a career as novelist.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

The Author: Who is the real Gore Vidal? The novelist? (Eight best-sellers.) The playwright? (Two major hits.) The TV dramatist? (Dozens of network shows.)

The movie writer-producer? (*Ben Hur*, *The Best Man*, *Suddenly*, *Last Summer*.) The politician? As the grandson of the late Senator Thomas Gore, he attended his first Presidential convention at age fourteen, and has been a delegate to many since. Vidal ran for Congress from New York's fusty old 29th District and, although trounced, won more votes than any Democrat had in fifty years. Was all this activity simply an exercise in eclecticism or were there other motivations, we asked over a drink. (He took branch water: "I'm in training for a gastronome tour of France. It's hell on the liver.")

"The older I get," Vidal mused, "the more I find myself worrying about usefulness and relevancy in writing. Too, in this difficult age, each of us, artist or not, must have some sense not only of social purpose, but moral priority. I remember I once wrote that stylized despair is both luxurious and dangerous."

Neither liberal nor conservative, Vidal refers to himself as a "correctionist." "If," says he, "something is wrong in society, it must be fixed." Right now the priorities are population control and the civil rights struggle: "Even if we get a bill through, blood will be spilt . . . probably this summer."

Vidal, at thirty-eight, has come almost full circle from the days at Exeter when he was a "dedicated Anglophobe and isolationist"—an organizer of an anti-Bundles-for-Britain group, and an America Firster. ("It was the influence of my grandfather, with whom I went to live at ten. He was a Populist and profoundly isolationist. It was also partly due to the fact that in those years I ate Welch Fudge Bars. They were distributed by Big Bircher Welch himself. There was something in those fudge bars that was reactionary.") The late President Kennedy took up one of the themes in Vidal's 1960 Congressional campaign, which eventually led to creation of the Peace Corps. "I guess you could say I sort of invented the Peace Corps," Vidal said. On the delicate subject of the two Chinas, he favors admission of Mainland China into the U.N. and a plebiscite in Formosa.

Why did he feel qualified to run for office? "Because questions," Vidal replied, "are as important as answers. I lack many answers, but I think I know



the right questions. Only by examining presuppositions can we approach any kind of truth. A novelist is expert at asking questions. If I'd been elected I'd like to have headed a Congressional investigation of what we mean when we speak of 'the free world.'"

Vidal was close to JFK ("He confided to me that he planned to crack heads and wreck the seniority system in Congress, but his narrow margin of victory held him back.") But brother Bobby, in Vidal's view, was cut from another cloth. "To Bobby," Vidal explained, "the world is black or white. Them and Us. Indeed, his view of men and actions seems to be a good deal closer to Goldwater than to his brother."

His cocker spaniel came nuzzling up. "Meet Blanche DuBois," Vidal said, "Joanne Woodward gave her to me. Joanne always wanted to play Blanche." We moved into the world of theater. Did he prefer playwriting, movie and TV scripting to the novel? "Not at all!" His decision to abandon the novel for a time and write dramas was based to a large degree on financial considerations.

He still prefers the novel. His first, *Williwaw*, was dashed off during his Army years (he enlisted at seventeen). At twenty-five he had seven to his credit. Because they were written at supersonic speed, Vidal is now reworking some of them, a self-imposed chore assumed by few if any contemporary novelists. "*The City and the Pillar*," Vidal said, "was my best seller and probably the worst written." It needed "putting into English." *The Judgment of Paris* has recently been honed, too. He is now thinking of polishing up *Messiah*. The others weren't worth reworking, Vidal thought. *Julian* was nine years in the making. Research took years. "I can't imagine it being popular," Vidal ventured.

With a Greek revival mansion on the edge of the Hudson (he takes a swim daily), royalties pouring in, and the knowledge that in politics it is "the artful dodger, rather than the true believer" who gets the prize, why doesn't Gore Vidal relax and assume the playboy role? (He looks the part.) He thought a while, and then recalled something he had written in a small book of essays. It was still totally relevant: "Even as one anticipates the final nightmare of our race, something in the blood says: No, not yet. Life will prevail somehow. To help life prevail one can write novels. TV dramas, critical essays, and run for office." The Vidal campaign train will probably roll again in 1966. If elected he will be the only novelist, he observed, ever to sit in the U.S. Congress. —MARY KERSEY HARVEY.