

VISHNU AS DOUBLE AGENT



Kalki

by Gore Vidal
Random House, 288 pp., \$10

Reviewed by John Simon

UNTIL NOW, Gore Vidal's fiction has mostly been wickedly clever. With his latest novel, *Kalki*, Vidal ascends into a new category: diabolically clever. I say "diabolically" rather than the more innocuous "devilishly" because what has increased is not the cleverness but the nastiness. *Kalki* is a hybrid: part social satire; part slick entertainment (in the Graham Greeneian sense); and part doomsday comedy in the manner of, say, Stanley Kubrick's cinematic black comedy, *Dr. Strangelove*.

Some of Vidal's diabolism manifests itself right away, in the plot's construction. For *Kalki* is a thriller, and by an ancient and honored custom, reviewers are not allowed to give away the main twist in a thriller's plot. What comes to their aid, however, is that the twist tends to be a single fact near the end of the book, one that the critique can easily sidestep. Here, however, the presumably unbetrayable twist comes much earlier and permeates and affects everything before and after it, just about tying a reviewer's hands before he can properly begin.

Still, if I tell you that in *Kalki* the world does come to an end, I am not committing an unpardonable crime. For such is Vidal's cleverness that the suspense continues beyond Armageddon and hinges on such fascinating posers as "Will anyone survive?" and "If so, who?" and, above all, "Can a new race arise, and if so, what will it be like?" With such tricks still up his sleeve, Vidal can go on flaunting his mastery of suspense within suspense. And about his eschatology—or is it dysteleology?—I shall keep strictly mum.

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The heroine and narrator of *Kalki* is Teddy Ottinger, divorced and self-sterilized mother of two, champion aviatrix and Amelia Earhart idolater, and perpetual student of engineering and the humanities, with a dominant interest in French literature—particularly Pascal. Teddy is also the nominal author of *Beyond Motherhood*, ghostwritten by one Herman V. Weiss, hack. Furthermore, she is a practicing bisexual with a preference for lesbianism, living with Arlene Wagstaff, aged forty-two plus, who is a sort of combination Arlene Francis and Barbara Walters, plus, of course, Vidal's vivid fantasy. Teddy has at least a working knowledge of a great many other things, and herein lies the novel's first problem: She is too multifarious to be a fully believable character. At the very least, she is distressingly twofold: the bright, enterprising, but also eminently fallible thirty-four-year-old female dilettante and the omniscient author of *Kalki*—well, at least as omniscient as Vidal is capable of being: say, somewhere far beyond your standard entertainment writer but still this side of Pico della Mirandola.

Not only is Teddy at least two people, she also is at least two styles—perhaps rightly so for a bisexual, about whom one of her presumably favorite authors might have said, "The styles are the man-woman." Though much of what she sets down is sharp, pertinent, and virilely concise, she will also resort to the kind of sneaky shortcut appropriate to what used to be referred to with the now justly obsolete term "the weaker sex." At such times, Teddy (or Vidal) merely invokes a phrase like "as

H. V. Weiss would have put it" and blithely plunges into blatant platitude. And even when she is not Weissanizing, Teddy fluctuates disturbingly between an enlightened best seller style (better, to be sure, than an unenlightened one) and an intermittent finer thing. Exactly what that is is hard to define; call it an American approximation of Evelyn Waugh—just as deadly, but a shade less funny.

Here enters the second problem. Vidal conceives of the novel as a receptacle for all of his personal gripes. Settling a personal score by dragging in a real person from left field seems needlessly bitchy. And not only bitchy but also something worse: essayistic rather than novelistic. There was, of course, a style of novel writing in the eighteenth century that could accommodate the odd essayistic excursus, but amid Vidal's fast, nervous forward movement even a clever disquisition on Jewish princes and princesses in fact and fiction feels inappropriate—to say nothing of a less skillful harangue against politicians. Moreover, Vidal often makes things too easy for himself, as when he describes Weiss as a "cliché master and structuralist" and demonstrates only the former sin. I happen to dislike structuralism every bit as much as Vidal does, but guilt by association is not an honorable procedure even in fiction.

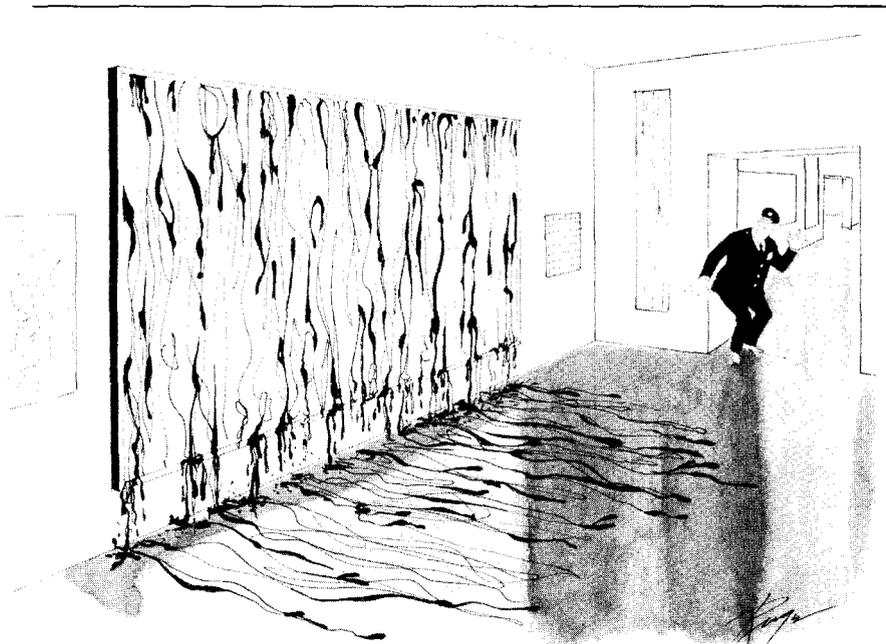
A word or two about the plot now seems indicated. A new incarnation of the god Vishnu appears to have materialized in Nepal. This Kalki, as he calls himself, whose cult is rapidly encircling the globe, preaches the proximate end of the world and the chance for his

converts to be in line for eventual reincarnation rather than face the irredeemable destruction that awaits everyone else. For some reason, Kalki—who turns out to be ex-sergeant Jim Kelly from New Orleans, who was assigned to a chemical warfare unit in Vietnam and who may be using this religious revival as a front for his international dope racket—wants no one but Teddy Ottinger to write the series of articles with which *The National Sun* hopes to scoop Mike Wallace. And so Teddy goes off to Katmandu.

That may be enough of the basic plot, though mention should be made of a few other major characters. There is the beautiful and blonde goddess, Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu-Kalki-Kelly, whom Jim met in Chicago's Drake Hotel when she was Doris Pannicker and engaged to another chap. There is the pretty and smart redhead, Geraldine O'Connor, who forsook a professorship in biochemistry at MIT to become one of Kalki's five Perfect Masters. And there is that mysterious Indian, Dr. Ashok, whose card reads "Professor of Comparative Religion at Fairleigh Dickinson University" (how cunningly Vidal picks the aptest title and spot for a potential phony), who may or may not be Dr. Giles Lowell, Jim Kelly's former professor of medicine, and who may also be a narc, a member of the CIA, and a hit man for a rival Chinese dope ring out to get Kalki.

All this would be fine if *everyone* in the novel were not a double agent of Vidal's—a pawn of his whimsy rather than a character real enough to dictate his own terms to the author, as truly successful fictional creations seem to be able to do. Here, however, a narc (a triple agent, but still a narc) will openly declare, "The single, nay, unique objective of the Bureau [of Narcotics] is the *increased* sale of every kind of drug all over the world," to which a demagogic senator running for the presidency will add that without international drug rings his richly funded Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control "would wither away." Equally implausibly, a fellow from Internal Revenue will proclaim, "We at the IRS never assume that anyone is innocent until he is proved guilty. That is the American way."

Satirist's privilege? Not so; in high gear, satire has its own crazy plausibility, as Vidal well knows. Thus when a television director for *60 Minutes* says about the interview in which Kalki announces the date on which he will end the world, "This segment will run ten, ten and a half, maybe eleven



minutes, you know, an in-depth study," this is barely, if at all, tampering with the preposterousness of things as they are. Or take a doctor's urging Arlene "to give up tequila in the morning. He begged her to switch to a good, light, refreshing breakfast wine from the Napa Valley. He himself owned a share in a vineyard. He would sell her his own brand." Vintage satire, that. Equally crushing is a seemingly casual remark like, "Over the years what Arlene had not had lifted could never have fallen"—which might have been even better with the addition of two commas.

A man who can so easefully carry off such sardonic effects ought not to settle for less. Yet Vidal will stoop to the heavy and obvious. He writes: "Dr. Ashok looked so crazed that, for the first time, I thought him not only sane but possibly serious despite the essential frivolity of his alleged employer the CIA." Here both the facile paradox and the unduly propaedeutic tone of "the essential frivolity of his alleged employer" seem to me miscarriages of satirical justice. Yet Vidal can do worse. He will become pontifical and leave a good piece of satirical raw material uncooked: "This was a commonplace in that era: events were only real if experienced at second hand, preferably through the medium of the camera." Moreover, he will mix metaphors (and not deliberately—the speaker is his alter ego, Teddy): "the dark caravans of words that cross the pages of newspapers to invade and ravish the delicate house of memory like killer ants." It is unnerving to have camels shrink in mid-metaphor to ants, however deadly. Or take, "Miscegenation was in the air; it hovered like a mushroom cloud between us." This is not mixed, merely clumsy: Even in an ironic context, a mushroom cloud is too much to invoke apropos a black man's stare at a white bosom, and the image bombs out. And any schoolboy of Vidal's acquaintance could have written "the effect ... was ghostly, ghastly," which is only ghastly.

But then, for a fastidious, indeed finicky, writer, Vidal can become remarkably sloppy. Thus the Hindu phallus is the *lingam*, not the *linga*; the Latin for duplicity is *duplicitas*, not *duplicitatem*; Chomsky's first name is Noam, not Noah; "imposter" is a vulgar error for impostor; "Myna birds" is a redundancy for mynas; "forthcoming" is not acceptable in the sense of communicative or outspoken; no Frenchman would write "de Vigny" for Vigny; "could not help but" is tautological; and so on.

But—and it is, as it is so often with Vidal, "but" time once more—there are also wonderful things in *Kalki*. There is at times a lightness of touch that nevertheless reduces the satire's butt to mincemeat: "I was able to read the odd page by Joan Didion, the even page by Renata Adler," which with the greatest gentleness makes both writers out to be unreadable. Or take: "Since talking to taxicab drivers was the hallmark of the higher journalism, I asked the driver what he thought of Kalki." Again: "I affected an even deeper sincerity. I sounded to myself like a Malibu surfer discussing ways of getting together his/her inner space." Or, a TV commentator lapsing into TV grammar: "I think all of we Americans...." And what about this splendid *reductio ad absurdum*: "The Australian press was unusually aggressive. Apparently, they had once been able to drive Frank Sinatra out of Australia. This feat had made them overconfident." And, most devastating of all in its lethal concision: "Ms. Brownmiller's book on men, and rape," where putting the declared subject last and what Vidal takes to be the real one (sour grapes rather than bitter rape) first is a masterpiece of ingenious—or insidious—ridicule.

But—again but—this meticulous writer is capable of such lapses as having a singular child on page 245 turn into plural children on the next page. Such things are disturbing. But more disturbing still is the ultimate question this novel raises: Can one really pardon the feeling one gets in reading *Kalki* that Vidal would welcome the end of the world? This slips out time and again: "But then [if I were God] I would not have gone to the trouble of inventing the human race"; or "I did not be-

lieve that Kalki would switch off the human race... as desirable a happening as that might be." Not even Swift, in all his *saeva indignatio*, went that far.

And yet, and yet—one cannot help savoring a master satirist able to put down a whole subcontinent with a mere description of arrival at New Delhi airport: "The moon was still bright in the western sky. The dawn was pale pink. The air smelled of wood smoke, curry, shit." And who is able to dismiss the end of the entire world with, "You cannot mourn everyone. Only someone." ●

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Beyond Romance

An American Romance

by John Casey

Pocket Books, 455 pp., \$2.25

Reviewed by
Joe David Bellamy

CONTRARY to the evidence that argues otherwise—from *Pamela* to *Wuthering Heights* to *The Catcher in the Rye*—we persist in our superstitions about first novels. A first novel is something committed, like a faux pas or a burglary. Like a first date, it will probably be a little clumsy and embarrassing. Out of simple good taste, a first novel is best ignored. Let the poor kid learn the ropes, and if he makes anything of himself in 10 or 20 years, there will always be his masterpiece to contend with and plenty of time for a retrospec-

