

Remembering Gore Vidal: A Postscript

Fred Kaplan

Do you think Gore Vidal is one of the most significant writers of the twentieth century, as Dennis Altman has claimed?

No, I don't believe that Vidal "is the most significant American writer of the twentieth century." That's the kind of phrase that takes advantage of the vagueness of the word "significant." Does Altman mean best writer? I don't think so? Best novelist? Not likely. Significant to whom? Comparative evaluations need always to define their terms and even then often aren't helpful. I feel quite comfortable saying that Vidal is a significant writer for those who are interested in the overall arc of his career, his versatility, his elegant prose, his novels that dramatize important twentieth-century issues, and his contrarian essays and novels that offer perceptive examinations of American political, social, and sexual concerns.

Do you think Vidal actively embraced his identity as an American citizen? Not necessarily in patriotic terms, but because he assumed the responsibility of being America's biographer, as well as its physician?

Yes, he did. I don't think he was either America's biographer or physician. But he was a well-informed, historically savvy analyst of some of the major personalities and themes of American history, especially the long-standing conflict between the vision of America as a small-scale republic and America as an international behemoth, the heir to the British Empire. But he was not an historian or a biographer with a paramount dedication to the facts. For Vidal, facts followed fiction -- fiction in the sense of ideology. He had a personal and a public ideology which motivated his essays and his novels. He was more interested in political and social ideas than in art. One of the great strengths of everything Vidal wrote was that it has intellectual focus and an agenda. It's also, often but not always, a weakness.

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As a novelist, he's a novelist of ideas more than art. At his best, he can be very artful. But he doesn't provide the same aesthetic satisfactions that the best of Saul Bellow does, for example. Vidal also has a gift for language, but it relies more on wit than poetry. And certainly, as a physician, he specialized in diagnosis, sometimes right, sometimes half right, and often abysmally wrong, as in his offensive and insensitive essay on the Oklahoma City bomber (Vidal, "The Execution"). In his later essays, he rides one hobby horse too frequently, and becomes tiresome. Many of his earlier essays are brilliant. But as a physician, he had no cure. He had in the late 1950s and 1960s thought that he could be a physician to America's illnesses by being elected to high political office. He got nowhere with that.

Did Vidal's political ambitions affect the ways in which people perceived him as a writer? Can an aspiring politician be a great author, or vice versa?

I don't think that his political ambitions and campaigns in any significant way affected how he was viewed as a writer. The two campaigns had very little national presence anyway. But very few savvy political people thought he had any chance of being elected in either of the campaigns. In his New York State campaign for congressman he did have the support of the Democratic Party and its political leaders, which he didn't have in California. But the district was heavily Republican and none of the political people gave him much of a chance to win. The interesting issue is how the public perceived him, which your next question raises. And why did Vidal want to serve in political office? My own view is that the mainstream voting public never perceived him as a viable candidate and couldn't possibly do so. People don't usually get elected unless they have people skills and are perceived as likable. Vidal didn't and wasn't, except in small circles of people who shared his interests and admired aspects of Gore that the general public would not find attractive. Vidal had a sincere desire to serve, particularly himself. And his campaigns were mostly about himself, not about public service. He had both the blessing and the bane that his grandfather, whom he idolized, was a United States senator. Senator Gore had no talent for literature. He was a successful national politician. Gore had great talent as a writer but little talent for politics. I think that he would have served himself and the public better by devoting himself entirely to what he was best at. But of course that's not who he was and wanted to be.

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Did Vidal's ambitions in movies – as a screenplay writer and later actor – affect the ways in which people perceived him?

No and no, in my view. Vidal's political ambitions expressed themselves only in those two campaigns and, as I've remarked, I don't think he was perceived by the reading or general public in those terms. But he was thought of and experienced as a writer who had a great deal to say about politics, in the narrow and local sense, and in broader terms, a writer engaged with political and social issues and ideas. Much of his public presence and name recognition came from his appearances on talk shows and his lectures, and especially the Vidal-Buckley "debates" on ABC at the Democratic Party convention in 1968 ("William F. Buckley vs. Gore Vidal"). He was perceived, I think, as witty, caustic, combative, and entertaining, but at the same time as an aloof, condescending, and upper class controversialist who was smart, who put on a good show, and who had interesting, often provocative things to say about American life. His strength was his combination of ideas and personality, and his articulateness. He was not a reassuring but a provocative presence. This kind of person can never be elected to high political office in the United States or probably anyplace else. That Vidal thought he could be is what is significant. It seems to me a triumph of vanity and desire over intelligence.... The only politically successful writer I know of is Disraeli, and he was much more the politician than the writer and gave up writing once he attained high office. If Vidal had been elected, would he have continued to be a writer?

Vidal was an accomplished performer in all media. What was the particular persona for television and radio (and in movies later on in his career?)

No, I think what you got on television and radio was what you got all the time. He was very good at playing himself and had a terrific speaking voice. But he was a performer, not an actor. The movie roles were throw-away parts. In all the time I spent with him, he was always the performer and the same one. He did not speak the police in many voices. One voice. One Vidal.

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Why do you think he continually needed to reassure himself of his own importance?

A very difficult, perhaps impossible, question to answer. One of Vidal's pet hostilities was toward psychology, especially in regard to interpreting literature and writing biography. When I was asked by Jay Parini, acting as Vidal's representative, whether I was interested in becoming Gore's biographer, I was aware that I would have a challenging subject to deal with. It became even clearer when he told me that in his case what you saw was what you got -- that he had no inner life, that there was no hidden Vidal behind the visible Vidal. Of course I didn't take that at face value. One of his concerns was that I would write a biography that relied heavily or even at all on psychological interpretation. I didn't rely on psychological theories or models. But I tried to select and arrange the facts in a way that allows the reader to explain Gore -- his grandfather's influence, his cool and distant father, his alcoholic mother, his.... But he did himself refuse to think of himself as a subject for analysis, even self-analysis. It's hard not to speculate that behind his inseparable public/private persona there was a self-destructive combination of ego and insecurity.

Works Cited

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