

The End of Gore Vidal

Lila Azam Zanganeh interviews Gore Vidal

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The iconoclastic leftist and novelist discusses the rage that fueled him, and how he felt about his coming end alongside the ruin of America in this interview previously unpublished in English.



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When I went to see Gore Vidal for the first time, in 2005, he was working at his typewriter, hunched over in the baroque shadows of his Italian villa. It was there in Ravello, in his legendary house, *La Rondinaia* (the Swallow Nest), built high on a cliff of the Costiera Amalfitana, that he wrote *Palimpsest*, the first volume of his memoirs. It was where he wrote *The Golden Age* and, before moving back to the Hollywood Hills, *The End of Freedom*.

Gore Vidal was well known for his iconoclastic political positions and his unambiguous homosexuality. In 1948, his novel *The City and the Pillar*, with its overtly homoerotic theme, was pilloried by *The New York Times*. To make a living, Vidal started writing for television, theater and film. He became extremely successful and soon returned to the forefront of the literary scene with his novel *Julian*, as well as innumerable cultural and political essays. After 9/11 he began writing his *Imperial America: Reflections on the United States of Amnesia*. He was one of the few writers to come out strongly against the war in Iraq, which he perceived as a symptom of totalitarian temptation. Despised by the American Right, yet considered a prolix herald of the extreme Left, Vidal continued denouncing the hubris of the Empire and the slow decline of its civil liberties.

In person, he loved displaying his verve, his acuity of thought, his caustic, dry wit. Until his last years he continued writing every morning, and read Milton and Montaigne in the afternoons. A misanthrope adored by Hollywood, the last Titan of a dying generation, Vidal perhaps

enjoyed one of the most extraordinary lives of the great American century.

My interview, parts of which have been translated from the French, combines two sessions: one in August 2005, at the Rondinaia, in Ravello, Italy; the other in April 2006, in Los Angeles, at his home in the Hollywood Hills.

—Lila Azam Zanganeh for *Guernica*

Guernica: When did you first come to Ravello?

Gore Vidal: I came here for the first time in 1948, in a Jeep, with Tennessee Williams. We had driven down from Rome, we had decided to come here to spend the day, and then I discovered this magical cliff. Of course I had no idea that twenty-five years later I would buy a house here...

Guernica: Do you feel more at home in Europe?

Gore Vidal: No. On the contrary, I spend most of my time in California. I feel I am fueled by rage and by the political climate there. I am angry most of the time when I am there, which might be unbearable for someone else, but for me it's fuel for my writing.

Guernica: You have long been engaged politically—you ran for Congress in 1960, and again in 1982. This is rather rare for an American writer. In Europe, we had Malraux and on the opposite end of the spectrum, Drieu La Rochelle. And there is Mario Vargas Llosa in Peru. Mailer ran for Mayor. But, usually, in the United States...

Gore Vidal: A writer also represents his family history. My grandfather was a senator and my father served in the Roosevelt administration. In other words, I grew up in politics. This is why it seemed perfectly natural to take part in the battles of my time, and to participate in the writing of the history of my country. I devoted years to this, seven novels, and countless essays. I know that many of my contemporaries are more interested in marriage, child custody, art, or the best way to become a teacher. Fascinating, no? No.

Guernica: What kind of impact does a voice like yours have on American opinion?

Gore Vidal: These little books I write, such as *The End of Freedom*, about the post-9/11 political climate in the United States, sell in the hundreds of thousands of copies. Whereas, I hear novels on marriage are not selling. This is perhaps not the judgment of God, but it is certainly that of history.

Guernica: Is success important to you?

Gore Vidal: For this kind of polemical essay, yes, it is essential that you reach the greatest number of readers. Beyond that, truthfully, I have never been particularly impressed by the self-centered musings of my fellow writers. Freud did some serious damage to American literature—a lot of writers began therapy in the 1940s, after which they all became terribly egocentric. Saul Bellow wrote a hilarious piece about this which I helped publish, *The Last Analysis*. It's a small masterpiece on the innate wimpiness of American egotism.

Guernica: Are there writers of your generation whom you have read, and admired?

Gore Vidal: I read a lot of essays, history, but barely any novels. Every now and then I find a good essay in the *New York Review of Books*. But the writer always disappears immediately. The one writer I've admired over my long life is Italo Calvino. I introduced him to America, which was difficult because he wasn't "familiar." Especially since the Americans only like things they can label, even if it kills them. I mean, think of those poor Latin American writers. Some of them are very good. But the "magical realism" label has absolutely ruined them. The critics are like tourists who return from a trip saying they've "done" Machu Picchu: "Okay, we've done magical realism," so now we can throw it out.

Gide offered to give me one of his books. I chose Corydon, and he answered, "I will never give this book to anyone, it's so passé, so stupid."

Guernica: If I had to compare you to a French writer, it would probably be André Gide. The Gide of *Travels in the Congo* and *New Terrestrial Food*, the patron saint of political homosexuality.

Gore Vidal: I like this comparison, in fact I knew Gide personally. 1 bis rue Vaneau—that's where he lived in Paris, on the second floor. He had a giant office with thousands of books, one day he invited me to breakfast there. He offered to give me one of his books. I chose *Corydon*,

and he answered, "I will never give this book to anyone, it's so passé, so stupid." And I answered, "That's why I want it." I still have it, he signed it for me. And it isn't as bad as he thought.

Guernica: What do you think of religion today in America?

Gore Vidal: It's the work of the devil. Maybe there is no good God. But there is definitely a devil, and his predominant passion is the religion of those Protestant fundamentalists. I believe my country is beginning to resemble a theocracy. Using television, the evangelists raise appalling amounts of money which they then invest in the election of mentally disabled obscurantists.

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Since there is no system of public education, the great majority of my fellow citizens is frighteningly ignorant. They have no idea where Iraq is. They accept as the gospel whatever the government tells them. Good grief, any other normal country would have been against the Iraq war! But we live in an abnormal country, governed by experts in deceptive advertising.

Guernica: And the Democratic Party?

Gore Vidal: Ah, if you can find it, I'll look at it. But it doesn't exist.

Guernica: The country has never been so divided.

Gore Vidal: Yes, between imperialists and anti-imperialists. That is the situation. The most powerful country in the world is on its way back to the Stone Age. They say, "We were elected by the gods to govern the planet." But the truth is that what counts is getting hold of the last oil reserves. Instead of finding alternative energy sources, we try to subjugate entire regions of the world. People do not understand that by doing this, the country is going to absolute ruin.

Guernica: Do you believe that freedom of expression is in danger in the United States?

Gore Vidal: Of course it is. The country belongs to a handful of men who also control the media. Look at General Electric. It produces nuclear weapons for the Pentagon and also owns the NBC News cable channel, which is a very sophisticated censure apparatus, intrinsic to the system. It's genius. It's like an electronic cage around the nation which blocks information from getting through.

Guernica: You have said now and then that American democracy is dying.

Gore Vidal: Democracy is something America has never really practiced. Because the Founding Fathers hated two things: monarchy and democracy. They wanted a republic, a replica of the Roman or Venetian republics. They didn't even like the etymology of the word "democracy."

Guernica: And literature in the midst of all this?

Gore Vidal: No one reads novels anymore. And I don't see the situation improving. People prefer video games, reality TV, and films. There are so many reasons now not to read novels...

Guernica: Then what are your reasons for writing them?

Gore Vidal: The fact that the novels I write weren't written beforehand, I guess.

Guernica: That's it?

Gore Vidal: And because I am a born novelist, which does not happen all that often. There are people who try to write for a certain time, then they become Ministers of Culture under de Gaulle, and they begin living their own fictions... Between Malraux, Balzac, and Montaigne, I choose Montaigne. Montaigne will survive all the others, because the essay, meaning direct communication between the writer and his reader, will outlast the novel, by at least a thousand years.

Guernica: Is that why you've been writing mostly pamphlets and essays?

Gore Vidal: Yes, and also because it's the most direct way of attacking the politics of my country. Frankly, I would prefer doing it on television, which is even more frontal.

Guernica: But you are also interested in the historical novel.

Gore Vidal: I am. Because the writing of history is our only heuristic principle. The Germans have a word for it, *empfinden*. It is the ability to experience the past in the present and to recreate it. In my books, I have tried to recreate it in the most natural way possible: History must be integrated into the story without the weight of premonition.

I was serving in the American Army, in the Pacific, at the time they bombed Hiroshima and then Nagasaki, and I felt there something like a foretaste of the end of the world.

Guernica: What about your apocalyptic novel *Kalki*? What were the origins of *Kalki*?

Gore Vidal: My interest in eschatology. The world came so close to self-destruction during my lifetime. I was serving in the American Army, in the Pacific, at the time they bombed Hiroshima and then Nagasaki, and I felt there something like a foretaste of the end of the world. Years later, I decided it would be interesting to invent a character whose mission it is to exterminate the human race—himself and a few others excepted—so that only his descendants would repopulate the world.

Guernica: You've also just finished the second half of your memoirs, the first volume of which, *Palimpsest*, came out ten years ago.

Gore Vidal: It was difficult. I don't find my own life that interesting, you know. And then sometimes I think I said it all in the first volume, which ended as I was turning thirty-nine. And I have lived over forty years more than that, so I guess I had more to write. How boring. I suppose I might have plagiarized Montaigne.

Guernica: You wrote in the preface to *Palimpsest* that the book was not an autobiography, but rather an "I remember": the primacy of sentimental truth over the presumed acuity of memory?

Gore Vidal: Memory is strange. Scientifically, it is not a mechanical means of repeating something. I can think a thousand times about when I broke my leg at the age of ten, but it is never the same thing which comes to mind when I think about it. My memory of this event has never been, in reality, anything except the memory of my last memory of that event. This is why I used the image of a palimpsest—something written over something partially erased—that is what memory is for me. It's not a film you play back in exactly the same way. It's more like theater, with characters who appear from time to time.

Guernica: What about the second part of your memoirs?

Gore Vidal: I have called the second volume *Point to Point Navigation*—which is what we did during the war, in the Aleutian Islands, because the weather was so bad there we couldn't lay out our itinerary in advance. This second volume covers the last forty-odd years of my life. Writing when you are already very old means you have lived through the endings of so many things, you are more aware of the shape life takes. You begin to know Death, you've been close to it. But youth can barely imagine the end of this journey.

Guernica: Of all your books, which one do you like best?

Gore Vidal: There's one I would like everyone to read because it could be useful: *Creation*. Everyone is in it: Socrates, Plato, Zoroaster, Confucius. And a question which came from Montaigne is asked of each of them: What is creation? How was the world created? Was it created? I believe in the usefulness of books, mind you. I am not much interested in art for art's sake.

Guernica: And how is *Creation* useful in your sense?

Gore Vidal: It's a good accelerated course on the history of religions. If only I could get the damn Christians to read it... An example: A disciple asks Confucius: "Master, if there is one single precept which could guide your life, which one would it be?" Confucius replies, "Treat others the way you would like to be treated." And you have no idea how much hysteria was caused in America by that sentence, spoken five hundred years before Jesus Christ! [*Now speaking with a highfalutin accent*] "But it's not possible. It must be made up. Only Our Lord could have said that!"

Guernica: Are you an atheist?

Gore Vidal: Oh yes, a pure atheist. A born again atheist.

Guernica: And a provocateur, of course. Do you really think the United States has become the totalitarian country you describe?

Gore Vidal: Yes, more or less. But we have been at war almost constantly since the last century. And it has not helped our institutions. Congress no longer represents the people. The courts do not practice justice any more. The armies never stop playing at being the policemen of the world and of oil.

Guernica: So the battle is already lost. How do you find the courage to write?

All I want is that [Americans] still be able to read the alphabet. I am not very ambitious.

Gore Vidal: The Americans are clever. They thoroughly understand things that have to do with money, war, death, sickness. And there is also a real tradition of skepticism in this country.

Guernica: In a hundred years, which would you prefer that people read, your novels or your pamphlets?

Gore Vidal: The alphabet! All I want is that they still be able to read the alphabet. I am not very ambitious.

Guernica: What gives you joy?

Well, I guess I am glad my life is coming to an end... To think that it might last another five hundred years, now that would be terrible, in my case.

Gore Vidal: [long silence] I don't have many reasons to be joyful.

Guernica: There must be something.

Gore Vidal: [another long silence] Well, I guess I am glad my life is coming to an end... To think that it might last another five hundred years, now that would be terrible, in my case.

Guernica: You have lived a full and, by any standards, exceptional life.

Gore Vidal: Yes, I have. And I don't need to live it again. Once is enough. Do you know Jackie Kennedy's take on this? It was at the time when everyone was saying she should write her memoirs. "I know," she said, "I know... but first of all, my secretary at the White House mistakenly threw out all my notes. And what can you do when you've forgotten everything?" Jackie thought it was surely a fine idea to write her memoirs, but that would also mean having to relive them. And I think that this, for her, would have been awful.

Guernica: But you've written your memoirs.

Gore Vidal: Well, I've never been to Dallas.

Guernica: What memories do you have of your happiest years in Italy?

Gore Vidal: They're rather dark these days. The death of Howard, my companion, was slow and terrible, and it darkened everything around me.

Guernica: Is it possible to sum up a life?

Gore Vidal: It's an exercise in memory. And the exercise is made more difficult because memory is defective, it is never quite precise enough. It doesn't speak, but it is there. You can pick up its trail, conjure it, but never really speak to it. We listen to it, and suddenly we're able to write it down, subject to its intensities, suffering, fractures.

Guernica: And the future?

Gore Vidal: You are with one of the last American intellectuals, and he has chosen to finish his days hidden in the Hollywood Hills.

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