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# *POLITICAL DISSENT IN THE NOVELS OF MAILER AND VIDAL*

**Submitted by**:
Mr. MAHDJOUB-ARAIBI Hicham

**Supervised by**:
Pr. BOUHASSOUN Azzeddine

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2025-2026

# DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the substance of this thesis is entirely the result of my investigation, and that due reference and acknowledgement are made whenever necessary.

Hicham MAHDJOUB-ARAIBI

# DEDICATION

*I dedicate this thesis to my parents.*

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the representation of political dissent in four of Norman Mailer's novels and Gore Vidal's series of historical novels often called the "narratives of Empire". It, accordingly, tests the claim that the historical novel as a sub-genre may overlap with the political novel, and can be used as a means of political dissent just as it may serve as a vehicle to glorify nationalism. It argues that the two chosen writers do not refrain from discussing dissent and dissenters in their novelistic production. It does so by, first, pointing out the portrayal of American presidents as a manifestation of the authors' opposition to post-war American policies. Then, it demonstrates that Mailer reflects his passionate opposition and vehement criticism of American presidents (who allowed U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, Iraq and other countries) in his *The Armies of the Night, Why Are We in Vietnam*, and that Vidal does the same in *Lincoln, Empire, Washington DC,* and *1876.* The representation of American presidents is also studied to find out whether the authors confirm the glorious image of the presidential institution or reveal the reality, whether they distinguish the presidents from the presidency, the office from its occupants. It equally deals with the presidential "inherent powers" in wartime and whether they are abused to encroach on the dearly-held, much-celebrated American individual liberties. The representation of the long process of presidential election in Vidal's *Washington D.C.* and *1876* is then elucidated.

Eventually, focus is concentrated on the role of intellectuals in opposing the American political status-quo. Because politics is usually the playground of the intellectual, an inquiry is carried out about the political positions taken by Mailer's and Vidal's intellectual characters in *Barbary Shore* and *Washington D.C.*, respectively, followed by their categorisation either as conformists or dissenters. Finally, media's double role both as repressive tool against political dissidents and as vehicle for political opposition is explored, with particular attention to the mainstream papers' distorting coverage of Mailer's march on the Pentagon as narrated in *The Armies of the Night*. Adopting the comparative approach, and historicism when needed, this thesis concludes with the convictions that Mailer and Vidal spilled their proverbial political opposition on their novels, using them to draw parallels with and decry an unsatisfying reality; that postmodern novels are not necessarily apolitical; and that the two contemporary authors share too many things in political stance and fiction-writing than an observer of their personal enmity might believe.

**Keywords**: Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, postmodernism, political dissent, president, intellectual, media

# ملخّص

تناقش هذه الأطروحة تمثيل الكاتبين الأمريكيين، نورمن مايلر وغور فيدال، للمعارضة السياسية في منجزهما الروائي، تحديدا في أربع روايات لمايلر ومجموعة فيدال التاريخية الموسومة ب"سرديات الإمبراطورية". بهذا تختبر هذه الدّراسة الادّعاء القائل أنّ جنس الرواية التاريخية قد يتداخل أحياناً مع جنس الرواية السياسية. تفترض هذه الدراسة أنّ الكاتبين المذكورين لم يتردّدا في استلهام المعارضة والمعارضين في كتابتهما الروائية، وهذا عن طريق التركيز على تمثيلهما الأدبي لرؤساء أمريكا، أوّلًا، ثمّ عن طريق إثبات أنّهما قد عكسا معارضتهما الشديدة ونقدهما اللّاذع للرؤساء الأمريكان الذين تسبّبوا في التدخل العسكري في فيتنام والعراق وغيرهما في روايات جيوش الليل، لِمَ نحن في فيتنام، لينكولن، إمبراطورية، واشنطن دي سي، و 1876. يهدف تحليل التمثيل الأدبي للرؤساء الأمريكان كذلك لاكتشاف ما إذا كان الكاتبان يؤكّدان الصورة النمطية البرّاقة للرئاسة، أم أنّهما يكشفان الحقيقة، إن كانا يفرّقان بين الرئيس والرئاسة، بين المنصب وصاحبه. تحاول الدراسة أيضاً التأكد من إمكانية سوء استغلال "السلطات الكامنة..." للرئيس أثناء الحرب للتعدّي على الحرّيات الشخصية المحتفى بها والأثيرة لدى الأمريكيين. تنتقل الدراسة بعد ذلك إلى تحليل عملية الانتخابات الرئاسية في روايتي فيدال: واشنطن دي سي و 1876. يتمّ التركيز بعدها على دور المثقفين في معارضة الوضع السياسي القائم، والمواقف السياسية التي تتبنّاها الشخصيات المثقفة في روايتي شاطئ البرابرة، وواشنطن دي سي لمايلر وفيدال على الترتيب، ثمّ تصنيفهم إلى مؤيدين ومعارضين. أخيراً، تتمّ دراسة الدور المزدوج للإعلام كأداة لقمع المعارضين السياسيين، ومطيّة للمعارضة السياسية في نفس الوقت، مع التركيز على التغطية المضللة للجرائد الرسمية (صحافة التيار العام) لمسيرة مايلر الاحتجاجية نحو البنتاجون كما رواها في جيوش الليل. تنتهج الدراسة مقاربة المقارنة، والتاريخانية عند الحاجة، لتستنتج أنّ مايلر وفيدال قد أغدقا من معارضتهما السياسية المعروفة على رواياتهما ( التاريخية خاصة) بعدما استخدماها لرصد تشابهات وتقاطعات الماضي مع الواقع المرير والتشكي

منه، أنّ روايات ما بعد الحداثة ليست منفصلة بالضرورة عن السياسة، وأنّ مايلر وفيدال يشتركان في الكثير من المواقف السياسية وفي تفاصيل الكتابة الروائية-أكثر مما يتصوّر الملاحظ المدقّق في "عداوتهما" الشخصية.

**كلمات مفتاحية**: نورمن مايلر، غور فيدال، مابعد الحداثة، المعارضة السياسية، الرئيس، المثقف، الإعلام

# Résumé

La présente thèse analyse la représentation de la résistance politique dans l'œuvre romanesque des deux écrivains américains Norman Mailer et Gore Vidal, en particulier dans quatre romans de Mailer ainsi que dans la série historique de Vidal, dite «narratives of empire ». Ainsi, c'est une étude qui interroge la théorie qui stipule que le roman historique chevauche parfois le roman politique ; tout comme il peut être utilisé pour glorifier le nationalisme. Cette étude avance l'hypothèse que les deux romanciers n'hésitaient pas à représenter l'opposition et les opposants politiques dans leurs romans. D'une part, c'est une analyse de leurs représentations des présidents américains comme preuve de leur résistance aux politiques américaines d'après-guerre et, d'autre part, une démonstration que l'ardente opposition de Mailer et de Vidal et leur critique acerbe aux présidents américains qui ont permis l'ingérence militaire au Vietnam, en Iraq et dans d'autres pays, se sont reflétées dans leurs romans : *The Armies of the Night*, *Why Are We in Vietnam ?*, *Lincoln*, *Empire*, *Washington DC*, et *1876*. L'objectif de cette analyse de la représentation des dirigeants américains est de voir si les deux auteurs confirment l'image stéréotypique de la présidence ou plutôt révèlent la vérité, s'ils distinguent entre le président et la présidence, le poste et son occupant. Cette étude est aussi une enquête sur l'éventualité d'abus des « pouvoirs inhérents » du président pendant la guerre, contre les libertés civiles, très chères aux Américains, dans deux romans de Vidal, à savoir *Washington DC* et *1876*. Il y sera aussi question du rôle des intellectuels dans l'opposition au statu quo politique. Etant donné que la politique est d'habitude la préoccupation des intellectuels, cette thèse étudie les positions politiques prises par les personnages intellectuels dans *Barbary Shore* et *Washington DC*

respectivement, puis les catégorise soit comme sympathisants, ou comme opposants. Finalement, le double rôle des médias en tant qu'outil de répression des opposants politiques et, simultanément, véhicule pour l'opposition, sera éclairci, tout en nous focalisant sur la couverture fallacieuse de la presse dominante de la marche de démonstration vers le Pentagone (contre la guerre du Vietnam), entreprise par Mailer, comme il l'a narré dans *The Armies of the Night*. Cette étude adopte une approche comparative et historiciste pour conclure que Mailer et Vidal ont imprégné leurs romans (surtout historiques) de leur fameuse opposition, après les avoir instrumentalisés pour établir des parallèles entre le passé politique de la République et sa politique actuelle. Elle démontre également que le roman postmoderne n'est pas nécessairement apolitique et que Mailer et Vidal partagent beaucoup plus de positions politiques et de techniques d'écriture romanesque qu'un simple observateur de leur « animosité » mutuelle ne pourrait le penser.

**Mots clés** : Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, le postmodernisme, l'opposition politique, le président, l'intellectuel, les médias.

# GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In contrast with the earnest literary achievements that constitute a substantial part of the western canon including, for instance, in the English language, Shakespeare's tragedies, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), and Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), numerous world literary masterpieces were works of playful parody and jesting joviality. Be it Shakespeare's comedies, Apuleius' *The Metamorphosis*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67), or Shaw's "Pygmalion" (1912), or yet Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* (1968), the aim is often to address the reader's playful faculties and titillate his sense of humour. Critics have long explained the double nature of literature (and art in general), thus dividing it, like Cassius Longinus arguably did in his *On the Sublime*, into serious, didactic, philosophically-informed and committed works, on the one hand, and, on the other, funny, merry works of pun and hilarity which relate to those aspects of art which arise from the impulse to play—a distinction not so different from the later dichotomy of Immanuel Kant's thesis (often summarised as art for art's sake) and Friedrich Hegel's anti-thesis ( shortened as art for the sake of Man). This is not to assume the two categories are mutually exclusive, however; some hilarious works are also dead serious and trenchantly critical in the manner of the acerbic jokes of a wise court jester. Nor is it a claim that one artist should contribute to one category only. Tendency to favour one type of literature over the other is arguably decided by multifarious factors, including the literary movement authors belong to and the *zeitgeist* which is itself a by-product of the political state of affairs. Periods of political strife and social upheaval like colonization and civil war incite artists to opt for commitment, didacticism and politicization.

Focus in this thesis is on elements of the committed, "earnest" category of literature, and the larger field of politics and the American post-war novel. The term *politics* is used in this work to mean the government institutions, the electoral procedure, the foreign policy, the domestic rulings, etc. It is used, that is, in its more specific dictionary senses of "activities that relate to

influencing the actions and policies of a government or getting and keeping power in a government", and "the opinions that someone has about what should be done by governments**:** a person's political thoughts and opinions".

That Mailer and Vidal were dissenting writers is well known and amply documented; hence, our aims in this research are to shed analytical light on their literary representation of political dissent and dissident characters; to find out whether Vidal reflected his passionate opposition and vehement criticism of American politics and of U.S. military intervention in several countries in his fiction in general, and in his series of historical novels in particular; and whether Mailer's political opposition to what he calls "technological land" (and sometimes "corporation land") or what Vidal names "empire" did overflow into their fictional works the way it did in their speeches, essays and interviews. We try as well to gauge the veracity of the hypothesis that fictional dissidents in the two authors' novels serve as mouthpieces. Moreover, we bring to test in this research the idea that the historical novel as a sub-genre can be used as a means of political dissent too; and addresses the question whether it is indeed a fallacy to speak about postmodernists' intentions and messages, or whether they occasionally use their work (and politically engaged characters in them) as vehicles to reflect their own respective lives and environment, defend their views, and answer back their enemies and may be one another. How safe is it to claim that postmodernism as a movement about failing individuals, inexorable situations and mysterious human nature has made of Vidal's and Mailer's fictional works apolitical products of escapist dreamers?

There are multiple forms (and varying degrees) of political opposition that range from mild apologetic stances to reformist attitudes all the way across the spectrum to radical revolution and anarchism. Political dissent may also have varied objectives as it may address one or more aspects of American politics like political institutions (the White House, the Congress, etc.), or

people (party leaders, Senators, Presidents, as well as politically-committed intellectuals), or yet the system at large with its electoral procedure, its two-party nature and the Constitutional texts underpinning it. It may, moreover, question some of the tools commonly used by the people in power and the governing institutions like propaganda in journalism and in media in general.

Symptomatic and expressive of the nature and degree of an American author's political dissent is the type of novelistic representation he gives to American presidents. Although very topical in these days of popular opposition to President Biden and the even more vehement one to President Trump, this representation has not been sufficiently dealt with in critical studies. Vidal published three non-fiction books and two plays on American presidents and presidency: respectively, *The American Presidency* (1998), *Dreaming War: Blood for Oil and the Cheney-Bush Junta* (2002), *Inventing a Nation: Washington, Adams, Jefferson* (2003), "The Best Man" (1960) and "An Evening with Richard Nixon" (1970); and this particular interest as well as Mailer's passion with and great admiration for J. F. Kennedy, and his persistent dream to be president himself, must urge one to question the accuracy of the representation in their novels of Kennedy and of American presidents in general, knowing that not much has been done on this topic as yet, or at least, none that I am aware of. Furthermore, another equally significant indicator of the authors' political opposition is the fictional representation of intellectuals.

Traditionally, intellectuals in America (like Thomas Hooker and Roger Williams) were long persecuted by the Church; they were usually looked at as somewhat alien, esoteric, exotic and subversive. Today, a significant number tend to oppose mainstream views, question common beliefs, and comment on the political status-quo. Because of this role in political opposition and the eventual shift in their situation and appreciation from *personae non gratae* to 'superior beings', it is worthwhile to study their representation in the American post-war novel. Emphasis will be placed on the social results that emanate from such opposition and on the intellectual's

acceptance or refusal of them.

Intellectuals, especially campaign directors and journalists, usually carry out plans and strategies to embellish in the public eye the image of the politicians (presidents in particular) who employ them. In the second half of the twentieth century, as George Bush campaign strategist and then Deputy Cabinet Secretary, Tevi Troy, specifies, these intellectuals implemented a set of tools, chief among which was media. American presidents are most aware of the decisive influence media and press have on politics and politicians; they have been, since 1929, appointing efficient, conversant press insiders to the prominent post of "press secretary" in order to improve their public image and to promote their policies and decisions. The media-dissent relationship being so peculiar and tense throughout history, such an inquiry as this should as well consider the two novelists' portrayal of this relation—i.e., the dissenters' attitude towards corporate-owned, mainstream media and alternative outlets, and their image in the eyes of media representatives.

Because this work is mainly concerned with characters, we mainly confine ourselves to the study of Vidal's and Mailer's novels and fiction (with occasional reference to plays, speeches, TV shows and critical essays whenever helpful). Fiction in general and novels in particular have a narrative line and a scope that allow the writer to shape and develop his characters. Mailer and Vidal are aware that the novel offers the writer ample opportunity to achieve his intention, and many factors make their fiction particularly appropriate for the study of political dissent in American post-war literature. For one, numerous characters in their work can be regarded as dissenting intellectuals and political dissidents in the sense of *a person who strongly disagrees with and criticises their government, especially in a country where this kind of action is dangerous*. Besides, both of them were actively interested in politics and enmeshed in political dissent since an early age. One of Mailer's often cited quotes, for instance, is about the artists'

duty (himself obviously included) to proudly antagonise all manifestations of authority, and to blow "the small trumpet of your defiance".

Moreover, Vidal's and Mailer's novels, just like their extra-literary writings and political essays, are vehicles for political dissent, regardless of the allegedly apolitical creative school they belong to, i.e. postmodernism. The writers in question started to consciously interact with political reporting and investigative journalism leading to renewed interest in the age-old "historical novel" and giving currency to the new hybrid genres of the "self-reflexive novel", "autofiction", "metafiction", and "faction". Truman Capote and Hunter Thompson paved the way for Norman Mailer who capitalised on the new fashion and obtained both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for his *The Armies of the Night* (1968) and *The Executioner's Song* (1979), and who equally invested in the historical novel to pen *Ancient Evenings* (1983) and *The Castle in the Forest* (2007) albeit with shockingly original point of view and narrative techniques. As to Vidal, novelised history was a much larger project that included seven works at least on American history alone, and many more on ancient world history like *Julian* (1964) and *Creation* (1981). The hypothesis underlying this research is that a study of political dissent in Vidal's and Mailer's fiction may reveal the ideas and opinions which won them (especially Vidal) their "ambidextrous position" in the American literary tradition, i.e. marginalised and yet unavoidable. A second presumption is that regardless of their manifest antagonism and mutual enmity, Mailer's and Vidal's extra-literary writings display similar political positions vis-à-vis post-war America, based on their careers which show similar aspirations for political office.

Mailer's interest in politics and in political writings barely needs demonstration. His disrespect for politicians in general is not the least surprising. He claims in *The Castle in the Forest* that politicians are by definition mendacious beings who are sometimes unaware even of

their untruthfulness because of the deception of Satan's servants like the one that "possesses" the narrator. Besides, Mailer was a member of the editorial board of the influential, left-wing, democratic-socialist quarterly, *Dissent*, and when his essay, "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster", in which he pays tribute to the sub-culture put in place by the hipsters, the rebels and psychopaths, was published in 1957, a tidal wave of aversion and criticism submerged him with outcries and accusations of violence-celebration and of stereotype-confirmation, as against a feeble trickle of congratulatory reviews.

As to Vidal, his deep interest in politics started quite early under the unfaltering influence of his maternal grandfather, T.P. Gore (1870- 1949), a man of integrity who was in 1907 (when Oklahoma became state) the youngest and first blind U.S. Senator, and with whom Vidal had a very close relationship and a long correspondence. This particular intimacy made him a political animal of the finest breed (LaHood 413). It is responsible for Gore's understanding, "perhaps better than any writer of our time, the enormous importance of the political world..., the complexities of that world, its almost limitless possibilities, and the use and abuse of power within its circumference" (416). He spent most of his childhood in the Senator's Washington mansion, but also frequented his attic library in Maryland where he read him plenty of political writings, including constitutional history, and British common law (414). In an introduction to a late edition of his famous, if scandalous, *The City and the Pillar*, Vidal reminisced: "I was brought up by a politician grandfather in Washington D.C., and I wanted very much to be a politician too. Unfortunately, nature had designed me to be a writer. I had no choice in the matter". Confirming the common belief that political affiliation in America, just like Alma Mater and sports affiliation, is a family tradition, Vidal was manifestly influenced by Senator Gore's complex stances vis-à-vis a number of pressing political issues (like WW1, and the League of Nations), and of prominent politicians. As if by osmosis, Vidal absorbed and carried on his mentor's dislike for Wilson, and for Franklin D. Roosevelt as a politician who showed

insatiable appetite for power and unquenchable hankering after fame (413-414).

Young Vidal was politically outstanding and so conspicuous as an orator and supporter of the America First movement which was against US involvement in WWII that his junior colleague at Exeter, novelist John Knowles, used him as a model for the young politician character, Brinker Hadley, in his famous work, *A Separate Peace* (1959). As a contemporary American writer with manifest political aspirations (regardless of his statement that the realm of politics ‘‘is one of lies”), Gore Vidal is definitely as much of a political activist as he is a writer; he ran for political office on two occasions advocating, in his 1960 Congress campaign, some audacious foreign-affair policies like the recognition of Communist China as well as domestic, populist, demands like more federal aid to education and decrease of the bloated, cold-war, defense budget. Not only did he preside over many organizations and the People’s Party (1970-1972), he also wrote pamphlets and essays against American expansionism, the power complex and the George W. Bush administration, singling himself out as a major political critic in the manner of Edmund Wilson. More tellingly, as Mewshaw argues, it was his political aspirations which drove him to change his name from ‘plain’, ‘insipid’ Eugene Junior to the politically-familiar Vidal, a name that might win him more votes (10).

Vidal models many of his novels on political conflicts and moments of strife in American life. His series of historical novels including*1876, Lincoln* (1984), *Hollywood* (1990), and *The Golden Age* (2000) are quite revealing in this respect. Vidal did not aim to raise national pride and foreground and celebrate the major historical events, he rather crafted what Gabriel Garcia Marquez called “novelized histories”[1] in order to comment on, criticise and parody the American

[1] “Vidal’s magnificent series of historical novels or novelised histories” (qtd. in the title page of the Abacus edition of Vidal’s *Empire,* 1987.)

political status-quo without compromising his oath to keep as close as possible to true history, if the latter is not an oxymoron altogether, given that Vidal wrote that no history is credible, that one cannot know history, and that fiction is truer if not in the details, at least in its portrayal of human nature, which makes Shakespeare's plays great even though Shakespeare's history is not true (*1876* 206-208). His is an original blend of the historical and the political novel, and in it parallels with present time America are easily drawn. In *1876*, for instance, he wrote about the centennial of the Republic to reflect on the bicentennial; and about political issues ten years after the Civil War to address American politics ten years after involvement in Vietnam.

There are allusions to contemporary America in *Hollywood* too as Vidal narrates the events that surrounded American participation in the World War I, the creation of the League of Nations and the return of Republicans to power with Warren Gamaliel Harding (1865-1923). Many parallels can be drawn with the happenings of the late eighties and beginning of the nineties when this novel was published at the time of the second Gulf War. Whenever historians challenged him, Vidal vigorously defended the historical accuracy of his novels; yet the question of whether or not historical fiction as a genre has didactic value will no doubt continue to be debated. In what remains one of the most insightful and comprehensive articles on Vidal's *oeuvre*, ''America and the Vidal Chronicles'', Donald E. Pease argues that Vidal's novels 'undermine the assumptions constructive of Literature as a discipline separable from History as well as the ruling narratives corroboratory of their separation" (268). As he suggests in relation to *Washington D.C.*, and to the 'Narratives of Empire' as a whole, Vidal clearly differentiates between various historical narratives and political mythology. A historical novelist avoids the repetitious consolidation of the latter by embracing one of the former (Pease 269), and reinforcing it with fictional characters, free dialogue between them, and the motive driving them (*Washington* 198).

Mailer and Vidal's literary feud and the antagonism between them tends sometimes to blur their common political zeal and to discourage critics from reading one against the other. The personal egoistic drive is often given full credit by experts on creative writing as one of the great forces that are responsible for literary production; alongside aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, and political purpose (Orwell, *A Collection* 212- 213). This personal element, compounded with vanity and selfishness is often responsible for the various antagonisms and literary wars between writers over the centuries and in different traditions. When the subject of literary quarrels in America is brought up, and conflicts between literary rivals that were not limited to words written and spoken are discussed, the degrading 1936 Key West event between Ernest Hemingway and Wallace Stevens is usually evoked and sneered at. Indeed, the list of modern literary contentions is long and varied and Norman Mailer is part of it as he was personally involved in one of the most dramatic and mediatised altercations with his adamant opponent was Gore Vidal. It is common knowledge that Mailer gradually lost Vidal's friendship to become his nemesis and —intoxicated— even dared to deal him a head butt live on TV during an episode of the Dick Cavett Show in 1971.

Having personally known both, novelist and author Michael Mewshaw calls Mailer and Vidal "[t]wo of the most fractious and egotistical authors of their generation" (11); he offers a comparison between them in an article bearing their respective names, in which he clearly sided with Gore, to whom he later devoted a whole book/memoir entitled: *Sympathy for the Devil: Four Decades of Friendship with Gore Vidal* (2015). The similarities between the two authors are multiple, however, and not the least of them are their politically-informed fiction and dissenting positions. Vidal admits of this similarity in his review of one of Mailer's books, claiming that they "both dislike the same things about our native land so we had lots to talk about". Norman Mailer is definitely not the first name to cross one's mind when the subject of

commitment literature is brought up or the political novel is discussed. Topics of a different colour are associated with his name instead (self-assertiveness, violence, sex, machismo, and brash masculinity for instance), just as homosexuality, foreign policy, and opposition to the establishment are routinely evoked with respect to Gore Vidal. For all his political activism, Mailer is barely the vanguard, subversive, one-theme writer who consecrates his life, energy, and literature to change the world order or incite the crushed masses to bring about a vibrant revolution; yet little of his literary and extra-literary output has been totally politics-free, and a careful student of his novels, might single out several recurrent threads of constant political commentary from the tangled web of his fiction. His vast literary ambition, his stylistic experimentation, and his disgust with the modern era—often reflected in his recurrent use of personal life as a substitute for his fiction, and of his biography instead of fictional characters—failed to entail disregard for his environment, nor did it dilute his serious concern with contemporary politics.

Mailer could not be pleased with Harold Bloom's appraisal of his work and his views which are particularly acerbic. In his compilation entitled *Norman Mailer*, Bloom leaves no doubt as to his favourite contemporary novelist. For him, the post-war era is definitely the age of Thomas Pynchon regardless of his relative invisibility which strikingly contrasts Mailer's omnipresence on the literary and cultural stage. Mailer, though "the most visible", is far lighter on Bloom's scales of literary merit. Even the very few compliments he occasionally deigns to attribute to some of Mailer's literary works, he loses no time to attenuate and counter with numerous, tart, deprecatory remarks. For one thing, the reputation of Mailer as a leading legitimate heir to Hemingway's school of writing (which is notable for its embrace of adventure, infatuation with danger, and involvement in machismo and scandal) is for Bloom quite misleading as Mailer seems to lack the irony that pervades the style of Hemingway. Even

though he possesses exceptional literary capacities, Mailer fails to pen a non-problematic, indisputably good novel. Besides, Mailer's work also fails to follow or develop an appropriate aesthetic form, thus becoming irrelevant, redundant, and closer to Dreiser's rude, insipid writings than to Hemingway's elevated works. Furthermore, Bloom goes all the way to remark that Mailer is barely a novelist per se, that none of his best work (e.g., *The Executioner's Song*, *The Armies of the Night,* and *Advertisements for Myself*) is a typical novel.

Mailer is said to be unable to reflect innovative contemporary American poetics the way Hemingway foreshadows Wallace Stevens for instance. He is, therefore, much more like Carlyle than any novelist per se. His failure to appeal to Bloom, however, is symptomatic of the whole period (with few remarkable fictional and poetic exceptions), rather than merely due to individual weakness. Indeed, Mailer remains representative of his generation, and also of the American literary sensibilities as opposed to those of the European continent, and a keen reader can single out Emersonian affinities in his work, and traces of Whitman's *Song of Myself* in his *Advertisements for Myself,* for instance. Characterising most of Mailer's literary output as uninviting to reread due to faulty form and the loss of the immediacy of its occasions, Bloom has some preferences, even though none amounts to the status of masterpiece. *The Executioner's Song* is definitely his favourite book, *The Armies of the Night* would one day be better remembered as it captures a significant era of American life, i.e. the 1960's (Bloom 5), and *Ancient Evenings* has its merits of inventiveness and force too. Unfortunately, no work fully meets Bloom's standards, and Mailer failed miserably to come up with the "explosion of effect" he envisaged in *Advertisements* (2).

As regards Gore Vidal, although he is not a one-subject writer either, and the theme of homosexuality constitutes only a fraction of the vast scope of his interests, the latter is unfortunately responsible for and decisive in many critical appreciations of his works—

congratulatory or otherwise. Indeed, it didn't cost him just the career in politics he had always wanted, but also determined the perspectives many critics adopted to look at his works. Since 1951 when the first critical evaluation of his work was published, i.e. *After the Lost Generation* by John W. Aldridge, up until the present, many critics tend to formulate their opinions on the merit of his fictional and non-fictional writings in accordance with their attitude to the question of homosexuality rather than develop them on impartial, analytical grounds. Aldridge for instance was initially pleased with Vidal's early novels (*Williwaw* and *In a Yellow Wood),* but once *The City and the Pillar* was published in 1948, he expressed a diametrically opposed view of him, a view that he was a writer whose work contained "disturbing signs of a spreading aridity of the soul".[1]

On the far end of the critical spectrum, conservative critic Stephen Macaulay followed in Aldridge's footsteps to bitterly condemn Vidal's work in *Gore Vidal or a Vision from a Particular Position* (1982). The condemnation of the work and vilification of the author were set mainly on moral (but also political) grounds. Reactionary Macaulay accuses Vidal of haughtiness and of condescension towards "uncivilized" Americans whom, he claimed, barely read anything deeper than *TV Guide*. He vilifies Vidal and ridicules his novels because he refuses the latter's reproaches against society. As Kloman asserts, Macaulay refuses to admit that he "...is clearly more disturbed by Vidal's politics than his literature". He is also put off by Vidal's (im)morality and alleged defence of vice, filth, and debasement. Another critic who was neither exempt nor immune to this proclivity is Ray Leavis White, witness the great admiration and celebratory remarks he voiced in his *Gore Vidal* (1968)—the first book exclusively

[1] I am indebted in this part on the critical writings on Vidal's works to Harry Kloman's article: "Writing about Gore Vidal: 1951 – Present".

devoted to Vidal's works- which were partly due to his own embrace of the homosexual ″cause″ and his deep concern with what he qualifies as the lack of tolerance so rampant in American society. White discerns in Vidal's writings a plurality of voices that consists, at least, of the "literary prince", the champion of homosexuality, the "tradesman" who writes for money, and the public commentator. Moreover, White laments the marginalisation that, even that early, started to encapsulate Vidal who deserved "a better hearing from literary critics".

The fact that Vidal was marginalised and deprived of canonical status in American literature and culture, regardless of his so many contributions to multiple and various cultural domains, was elaborated by numerous critics. Jay Parini made clear allusion to this non-belonging even in the title of his collection of critical essays, *Gore Vidal against the Grain* (1992). He advanced many reasons for his being taken "off the shelf" instead of getting celebrated for the "postmodern prototype" that he, and rightly mentioned Vidal's nonconformist political stances as one reason for estrangement. Yet, Parini didn't elaborate the typical dissenting nature of these positions or emphasize their importance to understand the characters in many of his novels. Five years later, Nicole Bensoussan foregrounded Vidal's status as a dissenter in her book, *Gore Vidal, L'Iconoclaste* (1997), where she underlined not only his radical opposition to many aspects of American life, but also the didactic, edifying character of his oeuvre—fictional and otherwise— and thus his embrace of a literary vision that is both postmodern and mimetic. Unfortunately, Bensoussan tends to accentuate the "Puritanical" elements of Vidal's defended worldview (in order may be to contrast his reputation as immoral and decadent) at the expense of his dissident political views.

Dennis Altman explains, in his book *Gore Vidal's America* (2005), how Vidal's iconoclastic politics was a major component of his work and how it is responsible for the disruptive, revised historical narrative he set forward in his historical novels, and accordingly for his failure to

integrate the literary canon and thus remaining marginal and "politically incorrect". In that same year, Marcie Frank published an interesting study on Vidal the intellectual, *How to Be an Intellectual in the Age of TV: The Lessons of Gore Vidal* (2005), and on the model he suggests to meet the modern requirements. She argued that politics is the primary interest of intellectuals like Vidal who shows no greater zeal for any other topic except sexuality may be. Mrs. Frank equally demonstrates Vidal's infatuation with media and the importance he confers on it in his work by reminding the reader of his aphorism: "Never pass up the opportunity to have sex or appear on television." Yet, left unexplained in the book is the intellectual's assigned political function, and the image of the politically-dissenting intellectual in Vidal's work as represented by several of his fictional characters.

Stephen Harris is more elaborate about Vidal's use of the historical novel as a vehicle to address contemporary political questions in his: *Gore Vidal's Historical Novels and the Shaping of American Consciousness*, also published in 2005. Three years earlier, Harris published his comparison of Vidal's work with that of Edgar Lawrence Doctorow, entitled *The Fiction of Gore Vidal and E.L. Doctorow* (2002), in which he reiterates and tries to illustrate the theory of the inherent opposition between the morally superior individual and the frustrating, stultifying society as a major trope in American fiction. Like Vidal, Doctorow is so interested in, and has contributed to the sub-genre of the historical novel which combines the tasks of both the historian and the novelist, and he succinctly summarized them in an interview with *Time* where he claimed that: "The historian will tell you what happened. The novelist will tell you what it felt like" (26 June 2006). He is moreover as distinguished and equally awarded and acclaimed for the audacity and imagination that are manifest in his work. Unlike Vidal however, he is an academic clearly embraced by politicians of the highest rank like President Obama. Important as Harris's comparison is in contextualising Vidal's work there is still need for other

"comparative" work that picks a more canonical, more opposed and yet representative author than Doctorow to dissect and reveal the merit of Vidal's works. Mailer is a better alternative as he offers a more interesting perspective, given his pronounced opposition and the alleged animosity between the two.

Vernon Tad Davies did just that, among other things. He accomplished a PhD thesis on politics in the novels of Mailer and Vidal alongside three other post-war American writers. It is about the representation of governing institutions like Congress and the White House in their fiction. It is quite remarkable that he does not focus on the rivalry and literary feud between Mailer and Vidal, he just grouped them with other writers of the 60s (namely, Ralph Ellison, Hunter S. Thompson, and Allen Drury) and disregarded the impact their mutual scorn might have on their later writing. The political facet of the Vidalian gem has also been a major interest of Heather Neilson's—an interest that resulted in "A Theatre of Politics: History's Actors in Gore Vidal's *Empire*" (2008). She even carried out a comparative study of Mailer and Vidal in "Jack's Ghost: Reappearances of J. F. Kennedy" where she dealt with the representation of one particular American President. Although I was not aware of the work when I started this endeavour, I consider the present research, particularly Chapter Two, a continuation of her effort and an elaboration of the comparison she engaged in, as I shed light on the image of other American Presidents besides Kennedy as well as the presidential election itself. Another interest of hers is Vidal's treatment of the relationship between media and politics, a field that we intend to explore in Chapter Four, enlarging the scope to involve a few works of Mailer too.

More than Mailer, Vidal is well known, and sometimes reproached, for his "diverse canon", mixing in the postmodern fashion the high-brow with the low-brow, the academic and the folklore, the official with the marginal—a creative promiscuity that won him the epithet of "the Forrest Gump of twentieth century culture" (Kloman, "Writing about Gore Vidal"). Moreover,

he does not just approach and practice various literary genres with remarkable prolificity, but is also engaged, and eventually succeeds, in so many endeavours including: politics, cinema and acting, speculating, gender politics, and journalism. Of all those, this research is basically concerned with his—as well as Mailer's—fictional writings, although the analytical dough is occasionally spread out to thinly cover their political activity and slightly touch upon, especially in Chapter Four, their involvement with media and their journalistic experience.

Mailer and Vidal penned political and historical novels that are here considered samples of an important section of American cold war fiction, and analysed as such in order to trace and explore possible expressions of their leftist stances and of their political dissent. Because it is an analysis of political dissent, it has more to do with earnest works in the two authors' multifarious literary oeuvre, with occasional, limited reference to the whimsical ones. Therefore, the two sub-genres primarily addressed here are the political novel and the historical novel which are commonly believed to be more serious and edifying than many other types of fiction. Answers will thus be provided to these questions:

1) Is postmodern literature, which is often said to transcend genre boundaries, to question authorities and historical narratives, combine high-brow with popular literature, blend history and journalism, is it always anti-didactic and non-mimetic though? And can the historical novel (often regarded as a precarious, swinging, and hybrid form that is neither fully history nor completely fiction) be used as an edifying vehicle for political dissent?

2) Mailer and Vidal have long been considered literary rivals and self-declared nemeses. Are the political stances they embrace in their novels also opposed, or is the animosity between them only personal and temperamental?

3) Are the intellectual characters in Mailer and Vidal dissenters or apologists?

public or specific? organic or traditional?

4) How do Mailer and Vidal represent US Presidents in their novels? Do they use media as a vehicle for political dissent?

The hypothesis underlying this thesis is that, regardless of all their surface antagonism and mutual enmity, Mailer's and Vidal's novelistic output displays similar political positions vis-à-vis post-war America. Both of them were actively interested in politics and enmeshed in political dissent since an early age. Moreover, their novels, just like their extra-literary writings and political essays, are vehicles for political dissent, regardless of the allegedly apolitical literary school of postmodernism they belong to.

The corpus for this dissertation comprises, out of Mailer's and Vidal's plethora of novels (twelve by Mailer and thirty-plus by Vidal), only those distinguished for the astuteness of their political observations and in which at least one character is a political dissenter, or a politically-involved intellectual—meaning by intellectual an individual who is endowed with a remarkable mental, rather than manual, ability and who uses it for elevated, practical, or organisational purposes. The following list may not be exhaustive, yet each and every novel in it meets this basic requirement: Mailer's *An American Dream*, *The Armies of the Night*, *Why Are we in Vietnam*, and *Barbary Shore*, and Vidal's historical narratives (i.e. *Washington D.C.*, *1876*, *Lincoln*, *Empire*, *Hollywood*). These novels are not grouped for analysis in the chronological order of publication but rather in accordance with their thematic affinities. Although not primarily concerned with extra-literary political pronouncements, this study occasionally refers to them and other non-fiction works as they can be quite helpful in indicating whether or not their authors are true to themselves in the political positions they embrace in their fiction and attribute to their protagonists; and there is also mention of other American writers as well, mainly those who opposed or were opposed by

Mailer and Vidal, so as to make our study of their oeuvre more contextualized.

Four chapters constitute the bulk of this thesis. The first is reserved to theoretical definitions of key terms and concepts like "political dissent", the "historical novel", the "political novel", and "culture". Adding to that, the major definitions of "the intellectual" will be cited and explained. The second chapter studies the literary portrayal of the first magistrate, in four of Vidal's novels (namely, *Lincoln*, *Empire*, *Washington D.C.*, and *1876*) and two of Mailer's (*The Armies of the Night* and *An American Dream*).[1] Given that a gap has always existed between the image and the reality of the occupant of the White House, this chapter tries to demonstrate whether Mailer and Vidal confirmed the widespread view of the president as an omnipotent celebrity or rather revealed his reality; whether they distinguished the presidency from the presidents, i.e., the office from its occupants; and whether they treated them all the same way, or allowed instead for their tremendous personal differences. This second chapter consists of two sections: the first sheds analytical light on the way the American President handles austere domestic and foreign crises in critical moments in U.S. history. The second section is about his portrayal of American Presidents' involvement in war politics. It specifically analyses the rendering of Presidents Johnson and Kennedy in *The Armies of the Night* and in *An American Dream* respectively.

The aim in the third chapter is to approach Mailer's *Barbary Shore* and once again Vidal's *Washington D.C.* in the light of the concept of the politically-involved 'intellectual'. The two works will be re-interpreted as novels that display the different political positions taken by various types of intellectuals, and demonstrate the way in which power institutions treat them.

[1] In this chapter, Vidal's novels are studied before Mailer's due to the special place for American presidents in them.

The first section is devoted to the clarification of the difference between “intellectual politicians” and “intellectuals in politics”. Section Two proceeds to survey the literary representation of intellectuals who grapple with the political game in Mailer’s *Barbary Shore*. In the third section, three intellectual minor characters in the said novel are selected to comment on Vidal’s portrayal of their apologetic “buffoonery”, their eventual treasonous “fall”, and betrayal of Communist dogma resulting in the tendency to serve the dominant Bourgeoisie. Chapter four is about the representation of media as an efficient political tool to either indoctrinate or educate the masses. Emphasis will thus be placed on the interplay between media, politics and power in Vidal’s *Empire* and *Washington D.C*. The second section is devoted to the study of the denigration of political opposition and of political dissenters as presented in Norman Mailer’s *The Armies* and *An American Dream*.

Chiefly concerned with literary representation, this thesis naturally adopts a comparative approach in order to lay bare the image of the dissenter and of the politically-engaged intellectual as embedded in Vidal's and Mailer’s fiction; it thus belongs more specifically to the field of imagology. However, while studies of imagology usually target the literary representation of the 'other' (colored people, foreigners, immigrants, ethnic minorities, etc.), the political dissenter converges in the case of these two writers with the self, although he remains a variation of the other in the eyes of society at large. Because the two authors are themselves politically dissidents, this endeavour partly claims self-valorisation as a field of study. To better grasp the interaction of Vidal's and Mailer’s novels with their respective lifetime and milieu, historicism too is implemented as a tool, particularly in the second and third chapters which deal with US presidents and intellectuals, alongside ideological criticism which enables us to see through the inherent prejudices against the intellectuals who dare trespass the prohibited boundaries. Moreover, this study will be supported, whenever possible, with an analysis of

stylistic devices (metaphor, irony, symbolism, etc.) that further clarify the dissenters' standpoint, and determine Vidal's feelings for, or against them.

# CHAPTER ONE:

# POLITICAL DISSENT AND THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

## 1.1. The Political Novel

The political novel is one component of the larger literary sub-genre that is often called Political fiction, alongside numerous other components like the social novel, the proletarian novel, and social science fiction. Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) are one and all political novels, i.e. novels that comment on political events, sometimes criticise the status quo, suggest a correction or even a better society, and often make use of satire, among other things, as a critical technique. They are characterised by the scrupulous attempt to create an equilibrium between the literary merit and political relevance (Davies 24) and are more date sensitive than other types of novels (26.) This sub-genre that equally includes Utopian and dystopian works like Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Her*e (1935) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty- Four* (1949).One of the earliest American advocates of literary involvement in politics, second perhaps only to Henry Adams, was Walt Whitman (1819-1892) who claimed in his essay "Democratic Vistas" (1871) that only a new, national, politically-aware literature could save the American nation that came fresh from a costly political debacle, i.e. the recently ended civil war (Lehmann 43).Whitman's belief in the pervasive influence of literature on life and on politics is unfaltering, especially the high-brow type which "penetrates all, gives hue to all, shapes aggregates and individuals, and, after subtle ways, with irresistible power, constructs, sustains, demolishes at will" (5). For Americans to safeguard their much-cherished democracy he suggests they should trust their own spiritual values which "great literature" protects and propagates, thus forging models of democratic participation, more than they do their political institutions. No earlier work however was so involved in its political surrounding as *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873) by Charles Dudley Warner and Mark Twain, which dubbed a historical period. It is arguably the first

modern political novel in America that paved the way for many others (45). Most authors of political novels tend to preach in fastidious morality against the evil temptations of politics, and prefer—along with their protagonists—to distance themselves and their readers from and spurn the sordid political world. This condescension is in Christopher Lehmann's view a serious encumbrance in the way of aesthetic achievement as it hinders the development of character and the richness of plot, among other things. When the novelist portrays his protagonist as a pious, righteous person who escapes a political career to save his soul, or as an innocent being bogged in the filthy mire of political conduct and thus falling from grace, little room remains for showing the complexity of character and for crafting intricate stories. Contrarily, a politically ambitious protagonist embracing politics as a worthy avenue of endeavour and playing the 'corrupt' game with zeal and self-interestedness is more credible and convincing, and his story makes a more nuanced and better crafted plot. Lehmann asks an interesting rhetorical question: "Don't the intrigues sprouting from our well-known human flaws and excesses ultimately make for more engaging plots and character studies than the falls from grace of a thousand or so Washington ingénus?" (46) The novelist, like the general reader, should then prefer captivating political satires to flat fables with an ever repeated moral.

Critics like Orwell, and Trilling early in his career, argue that the novelists have always got to grips with urgent political issues; that since its earliest conception the **novel**, this "most anarchical of all forms of literature" (Orwell, *Essays* 241), has been politically charged either overtly or in covert way; regardless of the few short-lived attempts at the turn of the twentieth century to dissociate it from its historical and political surroundings as well as the biographical dimensions—better known as modernism. Indeed, even that short hiatus of political disinterestedness or neutrality was politically significant, because it was itself a

political attitude. The tendency that followed in the sixties to question the authority of official political narratives and the finality of History (with a capital letter) did not bring an end to the political inclinations of the new (also called, postmodern) novel. It rather urged writers to revise history and deconstruct the contemporary political situation in their fiction. In his seminal *the Liberal Imagination* (1950), written in the beginning of the cold War, Trilling makes it clear that literary texts deal with the obstacles and complexities that stand in the way of political progress and have political consequences. Some of them are politically correct and others are not; and it is the function of the literary critic to show us which is what. In his ensuing works however, namely *The Opposing Self* (1955) and *Beyond Culture* (1965), Trilling compiled less politically-inspired essays as he began to cope with the new tendencies that derived from the conviction that literature and politics were not so tangibly intertwined[1]. The post-modern school of writing that started to colour the literary scene promoted that conviction and thus distinguished itself as apolitical.

The modernists, with their obsession with symbolism and fragmentation, disowned the interaction between fiction and politics as didactic and nonliterary; they declared realism obsolete and affected "an ironic *hauteur*" that rendered political commitment an anathema. They— especially the first generation of the 1920s like Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Lawrence, Lewis, and Huxley—had nothing to do with politics in the narrower sense; their literary production seemed to be unaffected by the most important political events that happened in Europe at that time. Many of them went too far "art-for-art's-saking" that they bordered on worshipping the meaningless (Orwell 228-9). However, after telling the thirties

[1] See Louis Menand's introduction to *The Liberal Imagination.*

apart as a period of politically-themed works of modernism that are more engaged and committed than first-generation modernist works by pioneers, George Orwell claims that the former are less popular than the latter, and warns against writers who are too politically involved or members of political parties because of the "discipline" that is imposed on them and their writings and the self-censorship that manacle their fiction. They have to deal with a Hobson's choice that encroaches on the freedom of literature and of the novel in particular, and thus either "toe the line, or shut up" (241). No decade in the past hundred and fifty years has been so barren of imaginative prose as the nineteen-thirties. There have been good poems, good sociological works, brilliant pamphlets, but practically no fiction of any value at all (242). Strangely, the self-proclaimed hauteur that characterised Joyce, Eliot and the modernists of the 1920s occasionally re-emerged in literary criticism and was not easy to completely abrogate. As late as the early nineties when modernism was long bypassed by the new modes of writing some prominent writers and critics, including English prize-winning author, Martin Amis (1949- ), defended the apolitical and solipsistic attitudes in literature and fiction, and reiterated the claim he had made in his non-fiction book, *Visiting Mrs. Nabokov* (1993), that "[t]he dominance of the self is not a flaw, it is an evolutionary characteristic; it is just how things are" (Pilger 11.) In these late writers' view, politics has to be kept out of literature because we reached a stage of the apolitical self in which the author's self-obsession and introspection is as important as, or even more interesting than a concern with politics and reality. In contrast to this, many authors (marginalized by the "mainstream" yet supported by defiant struggling publishers), aimed and succeeded to illuminate the political state of affairs and "the shadows of rapacious power" (11).

Unlike the modernists, post-modernist fiction writers like Mailer and Vidal never repudiated politics in their novels, nor lost sight of the political dimension of their fictional

works which were no less representative of Aristotle's theory of the mimetic function of literature, although in different ways, than the realistic literary output. They reflected the contemporary political scene, and sometimes criticised it and denounced its agents. They displayed different positions vis-à-vis what Trilling believed to be the only available political philosophy in the U.S. during and after the Second World War, i.e., Liberalism. Indeed, Vidal demonstrates in one of his essays that the 1960s constitute as a golden era of interaction between politics and literature,[1] a peak time for "literarily inclined politicians" and "politically ambitious writers".[2] To wit, even though some former American Presidents distinguished themselves with their literary works, essays and lectures like Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, and Woodrow Wilson, yet it was in the late fifties and early sixties that a president obtained a Pulitzer Prize in Letters, namely J. F. Kennedy (the only one to date) for his *Profiles in Courage* (1956).

One reason that made of writers in the sixties quite famous, and turned them to political celebrities of sorts, Vidal explains (44), was the emergence of "television" as a major communication medium, the central position it was gradually occupying in national politics, and the urgent need for informed commentators like Mailer and Vidal who were quite frequently invited to fill airtime and debate on the political situation in talk shows (Davies

[1] Writers and the World", *United States: Essays: 1952-1992* (41-47).

[2] Even though some former American Presidents distinguished themselves with their literary works, essays and lectures like Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, and Woodrow Wilson, yet it was in the late fifties and early sixties that a president obtained a Pulitzer Prize in Letters, namely J. F. Kennedy (the only one to date) for his *Profiles in Courage* (1956).

4). Equally responsible for the political aspirations taken by American writers in the 1960s was their relative freedom, i.e. they were freer than politicians per se because they did not have to succumb to the restraints of political parties, of the governing bodies, and of the need to prepare for the next election. Although even they had to think of selling the next book (Blotner, *The Political Novel* 5), to heed the rules set by the advertisers, network companies and federal censorship, still they were more likely to dissent and oppose. Mailer's and Vidal's novels do not belong to this despised category of propaganda literature however; the two authors—though politically-biased—do not embrace a rigid ideology or officially belong to a particular political party.

## 1.2. Postmodernism and Political Dissent

Liberal leftists as they were, Mailer and Vidal, like many postmodernist writers, did not only play with the political in their fiction, they also showed no scruples in voicing their discontent and opposition to most aspects of the contemporary political apparatus. In one anthology of postmodern American fiction, the works of some of the most prominent contemporary novelists and short-story writers are classified under six specific rubrics; namely, "breaking the frame", "fact meets fiction", "popular culture and high culture collide", "revisiting history", "revisiting tradition", and "technoculture". The editors of this anthology (Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology) conveniently excerpt Mailer's The Armies of the Night alongside Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* in the section that is devoted to "faction", the gaping absence in the category of "revisiting history" of any sample of Vidal's extensive historical novelistic output is alarmingly remarkable and thus barely

permissible. Yet the facts remain that prolific Vidal is incomparably more famous and more widely read than the younger David F. Wallace, which makes it intolerable to sideline Vidal's oeuvre. The last category aside, all the remaining five have in common nonconformity and dissent. Revolution against literary conventions, against rigid demarcation lines between various disciplines, and strict categorisation and stratification of knowledge and of tastes; against prevalent History and meta-narratives may each and all be qualified as a form of nonconformity. Dissent in general is thus at heart of postmodern fiction, and political dissent is one major dimension of it.

One literary dictionary defines "dissident writers" as "those who do not confirm to the political and cultural ideology of their country"; it adds that they, especially the prominent ones among them, hail more often than not from Communist-led countries like Boris Pasternak, Alexander Solzhenytsin and Vaclav Havel (from Russia and Czechoslovakia respectively) than from the democratic West (Cuddon 229). The truth however is that an environment of democracy and the liberal culture are more susceptible to encourage dissent and tolerate political opposition amongst fiction writers than totalitarian regimes. Therefore, western literature in general and American literature in particular are no less marked by prominent dissenters who decried one or more aspects of their societies, even though Cuddon and his likes tend to overlook these dissenting writers and focus rather on writers from the eastern bloc. A fact that was confirmed by George Orwell in his essay "Inside the Whale" in which he argues that literature, and prose in particular, demand "mental honesty and a minimum of censorship", that in order for the novel to flourish it has to avoid the damaging atmosphere of orthodoxy because it has always been a Protestant form of art and "a product of the free mind", and that novelists tend to favour political dissent and anarchy more than toeing the political line: "Good novels are not written by orthodoxy-sniffers, nor by people

who are conscience-stricken about their own unorthodoxy. Good novels are written by people who are *not frightened*" (*Collection* 241-242).

In an article on the influence of civil disobedience on American political thought, John Diggins argues that to define "political dissent" one had better contrast it to "authority"; particularly political authority and not family rules or the codes of conduct in particular institutions like schools. Authority has also to be distinguished from the more general concept of "power" in at least the fact that it is a matter of consent, i.e. that citizens and subjects have agreed to obey its rules as long as the latter are in harmony with the dictates of their conscience as citizens (Diggins 344). Political dissent starts first with the decision to question those rules on the basis of personal (religious, moral, philosophical, etc) convictions, and materializes later with the actions an individual (who may lead a group, a movement, or a party) carries out to expose, defy, and replace them. Its spectrum spans wide enough to include different—sometimes opposite—forms and degrees that range from civil disobedience (which can be pacifist or violent, adamant or mellow) and peaceful opposition all the way down to radical revolution and even sheer nihilism. These forms of refusing to obey, of saying no to rules,[1] are as old as government itself. In Plato's *The Apology of Socrates*, Socrates is shown to deal with political dissent, and in *Crito*, Plato defines one of its variations, namely "civil disobedience", as the opposition to civil law in order to satisfy the requirements of moral law; it

[1] French philosopher Alain (Emile-Auguste Chartier) believes that true, authentic thinking means disobeying rules and dogmas: "thinking means saying no" (*Penser, c'est dire non*). Dissent, political and otherwise, is thus undistinguishable from, and the first stage of thinking.

> often rests on the assumption that the individual is the ultimate source of authority and that the self acts under the sanction of some principle that is "higher" than the state, society, or even the people under a system of democratic government. Its animating ethos is the feeling that one is morally bound to disobey some law or custom, for not to do so would betray the dictates of conscience (Diggins 344).

It is thus a common form of political dissent that emerges from the potential contradiction between the conditional allegiance pledged to a political body of government and the duty towards the deep individual conscience.

Political dissent, in all its manifestations, is deeply seated in the Western mind; it was confirmed and legitimated by the Judeo-Christian tradition which emphasised the incompatibility (particularly underlined by Jesus Christ P.B.U.H.) between the teachings of the God-inspired religion (often engraved in individual conscience) on the one hand, and the requirements of political authorities and the conventions of social conduct, on the other. If Christian orthodoxy before the Reformation had often been accused of docility, and of meek acquiescence, due to the fact that it dwelt contentedly on the distinction of and separation between the religious and the political realms, and thus shied from pushing the boundaries to the logical end of dissent, revolt, and disobedience; Protestantism, however, hadn't shown a single qualm in embracing outright dissension and sometimes radical activism, due partly to the strong belief in individuality and the characteristic dismissal of intermediary institutions.

Being a major protestant nation that owes much of its political culture to the Calvinistic world-view of its Founding Fathers and the first settlers in Cape Cod, America has naturally been stage for a long tradition of political antagonism and outspoken disagreement, especially

since the 19th century when Abolitionists opposed the powerful institution of slavery in the South, and refused to uphold the Fugitive Slave law. Opposition and decry of that particular bone of contention in U.S. political system was succinctly expressed in the philosophical expositions and essays, but also in the literary production of many contemporaries like Mark Twain who, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), voiced his vehement scorn of slavery's underlying racism by making the innocent protagonist, Huck, prefer to heed the incentives of his deep conscience to help his slave friend, Jim, and eventually go to Hell to respecting social norms, cohesion and acceptance of racist social codes that disturbed his inner peace. Surprisingly, other religious denominations than mainstream Protestantism partook in the recurrent political outcry. For instance, Benjamin Tucker was not the typical pacifist Quaker but rather an anarchist who reinterpreted the concept of the "inner light" preached by his fellow believers in order to found and justify his aggressive, violent position vis-à-vis political authority.

The 20th century, however, was the golden age of political dissent in America and elsewhere in the world as one of its varieties, i.e., civil disobedience, was embraced by many who were inspired mostly by Gandhi's philosophy of passive rejection of the colonial rule in India and in South-Africa, in order to ward off different forms of aggression, like the territorial invasions that were carried out by Nazi Germany in the 1930's. In America, disobedience was manifest on many occasions like the opposition to intervention in the WW1, the student's jeremiad against the Vietnam War in the 60's, the onslaught on segregation and the resulting endeavours to promote Civil Rights for Afro-Americans and other minorities by means of sit ins, marches, and demonstrations (Diggins 345). In fact, Martin Luther King's legal and societal campaign, in the second half of the 20th, to obtain voting rights for the blacks and bring racial segregation to an end is one of the two major instances of political

dissent in America that are often referred to and compared; the second being Thoreau's defiance of the Mexican war in the first half of the 19th century. Many commentators tend to favour the first example for being less revolutionary yet more collective, efficient and beneficial to the Afro-Americans and other minorities of America. Political dissent, once again, was not limited to the Protestant section of the American society. Many radical Catholics implemented contributed to it, including Dorothy Day with *The Catholic Worker* movement, followed by Jesuits Daniel and Philip Berrigan who were vehemently against the Vietnam War and attacked its draft centres.

Literature, too, has been a vehicle of civil disobedience and of political opposition. Indeed, one of the a priori claims on American literature is that of "dissent"; it is recurrently embraced in the works of literary historians and of cultural observers (like Vernon Parrington in *Main Currents in American Thought* and F.O. Matthiessen in *The American Renaissance*) stipulating that the self, or the individual consciousness is essentially more significant, nobler, and more reflective of the American ideals than society at large with its communal codes. Conflict is thus believed to be logical and inevitable between the democratic, idealistic self on the one hand and the stultifying social conventions on the other. Society is often shown in this rhetoric of conflict and opposition to lag behind the gifted, creative individual in regard to espousing and promoting the ideals of freedom and of equality. A sense of tension that routinely intensifies into contradiction and dissent is omnipresent between the liberal, radical voice and communal conformism.

Conversely, contemporary Canadian critic Sacvan Bercovitch (1933-2014) departs in his major works—comprising *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975), *The American Jeremiad* (1978), and *The Office of Scarlet Letter* (1991)—from this traditional perspective, and offers a new interpretation that is based on the analysis of "the interaction of language,

myth, and society" in major, canonical works, and the conviction that the true meaning of classical American literary texts can only be grasped by an attentive exploration of the process of "social interaction" and its specifics which are not necessarily those of conflict. There is instead "...a *dynamic* relationship between individual and community, one that accommodates individual protest by high-lightening the quintessentially American function of protest" (Colatrilla and Alkana xii).[1] Bercovitch calls for a new vision that reveals the often-stated tension between self and community to be misleading because the two parties are rather interdependent; the individual consciousness draws its ideals from the rhetoric of the community, and this latter eventually appropriates the grievances of the self and canonizes the individual voice, i.e. American literature and culture are far more expressive of a ritual in which the self berates and criticises, and society accepts and embraces.

In *The American Jeremiad* conflict is defined as "a mode of control ... an aid to socialization" (160), and that is exactly the intention of Henry David Thoreau (to pick up Bercovitch's own example) when he narrates in *Walden* (1854) his escape to nature and to simple life in the woods for a couple of years, away from the alleged social hypocrisy and corruption, only to come back to society at the end and eventually become a significant figure of American culture. His book as well becomes significant in the tradition of the jeremiad because "the act of mimesis enables Thoreau simultaneously to berate his neighbours and to safeguard the values that undergrid their way of life" (*The American Jeremiad* 186). Thoreau

[1] In *Cohesion and Dissent in America* (hereafter abbreviated as *CDA*), the two editors attempt a critical assessment of Sacvan Bercovitch's method and collect a number of studies which apply it to major American texts.

proves that the true relation between the antagonist individual and the communal conventions is not that of conflict per se but rather a way of interaction and exchange. Indeed, the two parties are not diametrically opposed or mutually exclusive binaries; the individual jeremiad is rather a means for the berating subject to integrate a dynamic society that manages to ritually contain individual dissent and turn it into an anodyne attempt at social cohesion.

Another American classic Bercovitch picks up to demonstrate and corroborate his theory of ritual socialization is *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). He expounds that critics and readers of Hawthorne's classic usually refrain from considering and interpreting Hester Prynne's final return to the community of puritan oppressors after discovering and exposing their hypocrisy and dogmatism, and equally ignore her insistence at the end to wear the castigating letter "A" still. Both Hester's return and the persistent letter on her chest show that tenacious dissent feeds into, rather than distorts, the ritual practice of belonging and of cohesion. Hers is a story of socialization where she does not have to adapt and conform in order to fit in socially, but rather to consent (*The Office of the Scarlet Letter* xiii).[1] The time of the novel, well-known as antebellum America, was one that urgently required unity and agreement rather than division and secession, so Hawthorne made sure his heroine returned and embraced the object of her outspoken aversion and outcry. Her "action in the final chapter describes the reciprocal operation of individual dissent and social cohesion" (xiii).

Bercovitch unwittingly validates the significance of his critical claims as he is himself an

[1] There are nuances of difference between the two verbs: "to consent" involves choice and willingness, it means giving permission; while "to conform" means to toe the line and passively follow the rules.

antagonist voice with an individual jeremiad (though non-American and more concerned with criticism than with literature per se) whose dissent, i.e., his departure from traditional analytical trends, has been appropriated and institutionalised as a major method of interpretation by literary and cultural authorities, witness the number of critics who employed it in their studies.[1] A recurrent mistake by many literary critics and literary historians, belonging to or influenced by various critical schools and trends, is that they often consider literary texts as successful, finite works that have been analytically thought over down to the last word and punctuation mark by the author, thus neglecting the involuntary, unconscious aspects of the process of literary creation and, among other things, the possibilities of failure to control the product, and of language writing itself and breaking free from the original intention of the writer. The critics who tend to single out the literary text from its originator and its entourage, especially those who have actually practiced creative writing instead of just theorising about it, are aware that the final text is almost as strange to the writer as it is to the reader and to the critic, that the former sometimes just watches the text materialise in front of him without complete conscious, decisive control of his, and that it would often be an outrageous overstatement to talk of authorial intentions and objectives. This common oversight is sometimes referred to in modern criticism as the *intentional fallacy* (a literary term that was developed by W.K. Wimsatt, Jr. And Monroe C. Beardsley in *The Verbal Icon,* 1954 to point out the tendency "to judge a work of art by assuming the intent or purpose of the artist who created it"), and many major theories and perspectives on American literature

[1] *CDA* compiles the works of *eleven* critics, including Kathy Smith whose inquiry, 'Norman Mailer and the Radical Text', deals with the relationship between Mailer's work and the politics of literature, and argues that *The Armies of the Night* is one typical American jeremiad that is eventually embraced and canonized by the community.

and American literary history are not immune to it, invluding that Bercovitch who insinuates that individual writers have clear, specific, and well-determined projects that encapsulate the entirety of their works. Moreover, Bercovitch's view, "like all systems of analysis that bring to light underlying processes", creates a problem in the field of American studies; one that is manifest in the tendency of numerous critics after him to become so formalistic in approach, and deterministic in tone. In their studies, a pessimistic tone is embraced that offers little to no place to the possibility of evolution in the studies of American culture and literature (Colatrella and Alkana xv). Bercovitch has also the habit of picking up small details from canonical works, claiming them to be the most valuable pieces on the creative chessboard, which underline the determining strategy of the writer, and of blaming precedent and contemporary critics for ignoring them in their analyses. Zooming further out, he puts forward the idea that phases of American literature (like that of the Renaissance) and of criticism invariably have a dominant ideology that impregnates all the writers then active—a contentious ideology that is often rediscovered and interpreted, yet ideology all the same. Norman Mailer, for instance, manifests a distinct type of opposition that cannot be reduced to a general tendency in American post-war novels or played down as a ritualised conflict that is, à la Bercovitch, a common characteristic of American fiction.

## 1.3. The Historical Novel

The phrase "historical novel" in the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* means "...a form of fictional narrative which reconstructs history and re-creates it imaginatively", a form in which characters may be both historical and fictional and which–

though fictional—requires good practitioners (i.e., historical novelists) to deeply research their chosen period for a better grasp of verisimilitude (Cuddon 383-4). It emerged relatively late in the English-speaking world due mainly to the influence of, one, foreign works like *Princesse de Clèves* (1678) by Madame de La Fayette and, two, of its cousin sub-genre, the Gothic novel, that was usually set in the Middle Ages. Cuddon also offers a concise historical survey of its development from the arguably first typical example, i.e. *Castle Rackrent* (1800) by Maria Edgeworth, to Sir Walter Scott's first attempt, *Waverle*y (1814), and his ensuing long impressive series of very popular and successful ones, and eventually–mostly inspired by Scott—the torrential flow of 19th century works by many famous (and less famous) novelists including Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, and George Eliot who obtained in English literature the eminence and authority that Balzac, Stendhal, and Tolstoy achieved in European literatures (383-4).

The historical novel lost much of its appeal and popularity amongst readers in the early decades of the twentieth century, and only a few practitioners persisted in embracing it with any degree of distinction. From the late thirties to immediately after the war, however, the western historical novel had witnessed a remarkable boom; it flourished "more luxuriantly than at any time since Scott." Conscious of the deep historical changes after the Great War, the reading public wanted to know more about history, recent and contemporary history instead of the Middle Ages and distant by-gone. They aimed to quench their growing thirst by means of other than lectures, monographs, and traditional media. Fiction served as a more pleasurable alternative, if less accurate. Indeed, in the United States, most historical novels of the post-war dealt with the "local and relatively recent affairs" (B. J. Whiting 95). Produced in the heyday of Modernist formalism and aesthetic innovation, these novels deviated from the mainstream and constituted a parallel set of works that were more often concerned with the

historical material and thus quite conventional and barely experimental. They remained so until the late sixties when postmodernism confidently settled in the literary scene and dominated fiction-writing.

It should be noted that—like every other literary text—the post-modernist text is historical in at least three different ways (Trilling 184).[1] The postmodernists were conscious that the sense of the past was part of the aesthetic merit of their novels, and some had openly drawn their material from American and world history and contributed to the genre of the historical novel. The ideal postmodern novel, Philip Roth notes,[2] rises above the dualities of pure / committed literature, real / irreal, formalism / contentism; it does not ignore the historical and the didactic while it aims at the formalistic and aesthetic. Fragmented and self-referring as they definitely are, the post-modernistic works are certainly different from the plethora of classic conventional historical novels à la Walter Scott, yet they are still variations of the same sub-genre. This departure from traditional historical novels in fact demarcates postmodernism from the preceding school of writing, given that one difference between the modernist and the

[1] Lionel Trilling argues that the literary writer, and the poet in particular, was a historian originally, that he is more accurate than the historian because more general. Accordingly, the literary text cannot help being partly historical. It is historical because it contributes to and distinguishes itself against a "tradition" that keeps changing, and its historicity is part of its aesthetic merit and value, its pastness makes readers travel in time and heightens its appeal to them (184-185).

[2] "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodern Fiction" (qtd. in Umberto Eco's *Postscript* mentioned below).

postmodernist, according to Umberto Eco, is that instead of negating or destroying the past, a process that produces nothing but mere silence, the postmodernist "revisits" the past, with no innocence but a great deal of irony instead.[1] Therefore, the postmodernist neither imitates the past texts nor totally ignores them. Another divergence is the postmodernist's attempt to reach out both for the masses to captivate their imagination, delight them, or even haunt them (by creating new myths, for instance), *and* for the intellectual elite who are awake to, and appreciative of the ironical elements and meta-linguistic play in his work often overlooked by the illiterate masses who tend to take them seriously. In so doing, the postmodernist mixes high art with enjoyability.

In a piece that foretells the death of tragedy and the establishment of high comedy as the dominant literary form after the eventual success of Communism and the hegemony of its ideals, George Steiner expounds that *privacy* explains much about the development of the novel as the most recent favourite literary form, and that privacy is itself a result of a socio-economic complex (383). Because of the deep changes emanating from the electronic revolution in communication and media, as well as the contemporary (meaning the 60's) spread and growth of mass-culture, new literary forms that are "non-private" started to emerge, pushing literary art closer and closer to its predicted final culmination as "the laughter of intelligence" (392). The novel is thus declining alongside the socioeconomic premises that made its emergence possible, and which were more rooted in, and representative of a past-time Europe than they are of the modern and the contemporary worlds:

> The novel is a *genre* with evident and concrete foundations in history and society.

[1] Umberto Eco, "Postscript to The Name of the Rose" in *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*, pp. 623-24.

> It carries within it the world-view associated with its origins in European mercantile life of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries...classic prose fiction deals with the world of here and now, with man in the condition of social and, more often than not, urban existence ....the novel is intimately inwoven with the monetary values and relations of a mercantile or industrial society (387).

Even as its predecessors (that is, the epic poem and the verse drama) had respectively given pride of place to more representative and better-fitting forms of writing, so did the novel (which is the third genre to dominate western literature) begin to falter and lose its bearing and its appeal to a surging, less fictional, and more accurate literary mode. The thirties saw the actual beginning of these more factual less imaginative works that were closer to reportage and actual exposition, and that surpassed the novel in "sheer distinction of style and force of suggestion "(389). One of the effects of World War II on Western literature is that it confirmed the retreat of the novel and enabled the rise of works inscribed by authors who witnessed the enormity of reality and felt the obsolescence of fiction and the insufficiency of imagination, compared to "unadorned report", in rendering the gravity of fact (388).

While his remarks on the threatening technological culture were so accurate as the latter intensified in the six decades that elapsed since his article was written, Steiner was manifestly wrong about the disintegration of the dominant genre. The novel did not disappear as anticipated by him, but proved once again its malleability and adaptation to the changing times as it metamorphosed on many occasions to the postmodern variety which appropriated some journalistic, factual elements from the arts of reportage and exposition. Refuting the claims of Steiner and like-minded critics about the obsolescence of the novel in an age of communication technology, of electronic displays, and of the disintegration of privacy,

English critic, novelist, and dramatist David Lodge (1935- ) argues in a piece he writes as late as the nineties,[1] that the novel is still safe and sound, and dominant too, because it has found a way to survive the pressing challenges of an unprecedented reality by integrating the sweeping facts of the modern history and then interlacing them with the threads of imagination into its generic fabric:

> The ambivalent and contradictory relationship between fact and fiction in the early novel persists into its classical and modern phases. Novelists are and always have been split between, on the one hand, a desire to claim an imaginative and representative truth for their stories and, on the other hand, a conviction that the best way to secure and guarantee that truthfulness is by a scrupulous respect for empirical fact (Lodge 27)

Working equally on both ingredients, the post-war novelist managed to establish a sense of balance, if precarious, between empiricism and figments of his imagination. The facts did not submerge fiction but rather served as fuel for the novel, because "[n]ovels burn fact as engines burn fuel" (28). The novel feeds more precisely on the contradiction existing between fact and fiction; it is an ingenious reconciliation of them, and it crumbles down in the absence of either polarity (28). Conversely, Lodge believes it is fiction which is in a position to pose a threat to efface fact, because novelists, true to their unethical nature, always tend to favour the former when it contradicts the latter (30).

The postmodern novel started to consciously interact with political and investigative

[1] See "Fact and Fiction in the Novel: An Author's Note", in which he explains that what happens in his stories is not always truthful.

journalism leading to the rise of the age-old "historical novel" and giving vogue to new hybrid genres of the "self-reflexive novel", "autofiction", "metafiction", "faction" (Orwell, *Essays* 241). Truman Capote and Hunter S. Thompson respectively paved the way with *In Cold Blood* (1966) and *Hell's Angels* (1967) to Norman Mailer who capitalised on the new fashion and obtained the National Book Award and the Pulitzer with his *The Executioner's Song* (1979) and *The Armies of the Night* (1968). Mailer equally explored the historical novel in *The Castle in the Forest* (2007) and *Ancient Evenings* (1983). As to Gore Vidal, the novelistic history was a much larger project including seven works at least on American history alone, and many more on ancient world history like *Julian* (1964) and *Creation* (1981). Instead of delegating the time-consuming, arduous historical research to hired graduates, a common practice by many novelists, Vidal personally endeavoured to engage in the years-long request of the historical information (Mewshaw 8).

The new postmodern, historical novel however is not conceived to celebrate or commemorate distinguished moments of glory or outstanding national figures like its distant cousin championed by Walter Scott and Leo Tolstoy. It is rather intended to disturb dogma, question authority and nationalism, vet national heroes, decry unison, and defy standardisation. History has often been manipulated by "traditional" and subservient intellectuals, writers, and literary critics to support and authenticate the political orientations and ideological choices of governments and power institutions; a mainstream, politically-correct interpretation has usually been forced on it to exclude the myriad of "marginal", "unofficial" possibilities and perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood, and which can be exploited and capitalised on to justify "subversive" political acts. Just like the

standardisation of history into a conventional institution, however, a revision of it in the manner of postmodern fiction writers is definitely a politically-driven process, and usually an expression of political dissent. Yet, for all its differences, the postmodern historical novel is not immune to the recurrent criticism levelled against its distant cousin since Dr. Samuel Johnson. One chief reproach is directed at its intrinsic hybridity, arguing that the historical elements in it are not literary or artistic, and the literary aspects in it are not historical. The history-based postmodern works are too believed to precariously linger in the hazy limbo world between the realm of pure works of imagination and the domain of serious scholarship, vacillating between accuracy and distraction, pedantry and verisimilitude.

## 1.4. The Intellectual

Being generally defined as the art or the science of governing, politics has usually been the playground of the intellectual who is by definition endowed with better mental, spiritual or practical faculties. These distinguished faculties are believed by their owners to be a good reason to meddle in the art or science of managing people, political parties, and states. From Solon's time to the present, many intellectuals have tried to enlighten the public and guide them to better living conditions through the legislation of laws and regulations, the writing of manifestos, the endorsement of political stances, and the support or defence of political figures. There have been, however, sections of intellectuals who have condescended on politics as lowly and unworthy of their consideration, and on politicians as vicious and opportunistic. In fact, many major theories on, and definitions of the concept of the intellectual are based on the interplay between the mind and politics. It is the position of the

intellectual vis-à-vis politics (along with culture) which categorises him within one category or another. Accordingly, the theme of the relation between the intellectual and politics has become a leitmotif in cultural and philosophical studies, and any attempt to consider it is faced with the (for researchers) disconcerting fact that very little is left unexplored. Precision and limitation of the scope of research are more than necessary to underline the importance of one's study in this field. America as a republic is rather the deliberate construction of a group of intellectuals (the Founding Fathers) with a considerably shorter history than that of the U.K. for instance. Thus, the involvement of intellectuals in its politics since its conception is remarkable and peculiar, which makes the study thereof quite interesting and rewarding.

An a priori categorization of the American intellectual based on his attitude towards US politics would logically yield two opposed groups: the involved and the aloof, the committed and the detached. There are roughly two types of the involved and committed intellectualas regards their attitudes and positions vis-à-vis the state policies and politics in general—namely, conformists and dissidents, those who are pro- and those against. However, a deeper approach brings out the complexity of the situation and the several possibilities for the intellectual, a clearer and more contextualized sense of the intellectual must first be put forward. Indeed, the definitions associated with the term "intellectual" are too many and can be roughly classified here into two major categories: the universal, "public" intellectual and the academic or specific one. The first category includes the definitions and descriptions provided by Julian Benda, Jean Paul Sartre, Russell Jacoby and Edward Said amongst others. The universal public intellectuals share the tendency to oppose and challenge as well as to speak in general terms; they generally tell others what to do and stand for universal values. Conversely, intellectuals of the second category—specific ones—function in a more limited space and are more related to their immediate environment; they are best represented by

Gramsci's “organic intellectuals” and Foucault's “specific” ones. They are experts with competence in specific fields who share their specific knowledge with the others. They think and talk *with* the others, not about or for the others. Unlike the universal ones, the specific intellectuals prefer collective work and non-representational practices. For convenience of space, and because of their encompassing nature, only Benda's, Sartre's and Jacoby's definitions are hereafter discussed.

In *La Trahison des clercs*, Julian Benda defines the intellectuals and determines their expected tasks in society. His conception of the intellectual being quasi-religious, he calls them “clercs” to exclude any relation to material advantages, to personal ambitions or secular powers. His examples are over-endowed and morally-gifted; they are rare human beings who represent the conscience of the world, and whose activity: “is not the pursuit of practical ends, but rather the enjoyment of art or science or metaphysical speculation, in short the achievement of a non-temporal aim, saying in a way: ‘My reign is not this-worldly’.”[1] Accordingly, Benda's conception of the intellectuals' vocation is, aside from their practical, aesthetic or metaphysical trade, to denounce corruption and defy the authorities, confronting them with the universal principles of justice, freedom and equality which the intellectuals alone represent and cherish; they try to complete their task at any price. Benda's "clerics" do not detach themselves from their surroundings, they struggle—come what may—to realise the eternal and universal principles they have in mind. They do

[1] “ne poursuit pas de fin pratique, mais qui, demandent leur joie à l'exercice de l'art ou de la science ou de la spéculation métaphysique, bref à la possession d'un bien non temporel, disant en quelque manière : ‘Mon royaume n'est pas de ce monde’” (Benda 131-132).

not think of sectarian causes and do not support national questions unless the latter meet their perennial and transcendental standards. Benda does not compromise his outcry against the new attitudes of the European intellectuals toward the post-First World War situation, and never cease trying to show the shift (the 'treason') in the European intellectuals' concern and preoccupations. Because it was a time of European dominion of the cultural scene, recognition of non-European intellectuals was then unheard of. Therefore, for him, intellectuals are European by definition. Treason for Benda is the resort to politics in the name of realism, the tendency to extol tradition, nationalism, race and party, the abandonment of the realm of disinterested thought and of abstract and eternal values, and the compromise of the intellectuals' original mission: the protection of the most universal, humane and spiritual values.

The view of intellectuals as an exclusive category or class was maintained in France after Julien Benda by Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980). The latter brought about several definitions of the intellectual in different periods of his life (Wagner). *In Plaidoyer pour les intellectuals* (1972), Sartre distinguishes between true intellectuals and false intellectuals or *clercs.* The first division contains those who expose the rift between ideals and their realisations, between truth and the dominant ideology: "The intellectual is he who is conscious of the opposition, within himself as well as in society, between the quest for practical truth...and dominant ideology" (translation mine).[1] They discover truth; denounce the dominant ideology as injustice, oppression and exploitation; pose disturbing questions; perform the "extraordinary"

[1] "L'intellectuel est l`homme qui prend conscience de l`opposition en lui et dans la société, entre la recherche de la vérité pratique…et l'idéologie dominante" (40).

task of choosing; and try to substitute for authority, reference and standards which are, in Sartre's view, absent. The *clercs* however are false intellectuals or "*chiens de garde*" (in Paul Nizan's words); they are gifted members among the "*techniciens du savoir pratique*", say physicians, engineers, lawyers, and teachers who strive to preserve and reproduce the inherited knowledge. In the fashion of the eighteenth-century philosophers, Sartre believes they are agents of hegemony and supporters of the socio-political status-quo.

For his part, Russell Jacoby analyses in *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (1987) the demise of "the public intellectual" and the rise of the academic bureaucratic intellectuals. Russell Jacoby distinguishes between intellectuals, "those who cherish thinking and ideas", and "public intellectuals, who contribute to open discussions". The intellectual for Jacoby falls into categories. First, the paradigmatic public intellectuals (or the "café-philosophers" of Greenwich Village) are those who hold such liberal and radical democratic ideas as might be traced back to the era of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Their main function is to "disclose society to itself", to take "upon [themselves] the office of leavening and leading an enlightened public opinion" (Weinstein 37-47). Independent from all forms of institutional power and especially from the universities, they should take sides and "adopt positions on public affairs" following personal analysis and judgment. Moreover, they ought to use clear intelligible language rather than esoteric jargon in the independent magazines to which they contribute.

The second category and modern counterpart of this—for Jacoby—quasi-extinct social group are the coteries of academic bureaucrats, cliques who migrated in the 1950s to the bureaucratised universities which can be considered integral components of the power complexes of the technological corporatism of our age. These think tanks' employees have given up any possible interest in society outside their institutions or any concern over social

change or betterment. Betraying (in Benda's sense) their assigned role of sharpening thought and interpreting reality, the university intellectuals succumb to the lures of institutional perks and get involved in a "corrupt form of thought", using an esoteric jargon that serves only their institutional and career promotion (Weinstein 41). Lust for wealth and the desire of power drive them to apologise for the present status-quo.

Edward Said is of the same opinion as Jacoby with regard to the effects of the university on the intellectual. The modern intellectuals up to the Vietnam War tend, more often than not, to oblige, and therefore voice very little criticism—if at all—to the State and its empirical intentions; and the university is one reason for that timidity. Like C. Wright Mills, himself a distinguished professor, who paints an unflattering image in *The Sociological Imagination* of the university intellectuals and academics who failed to fulfill their duty of raising the public's awareness to the struggle for power carried out about them due partly to the privatised, bureaucratic university, so does Said lament in *Culture and Imperialism* the positions of the university intellectual and points out the fact that universities and think tanks received huge government subsidies to pursue the ideas of racial prejudice, of traditional societies and of social types that were embraced and propagated by those intellectuals connected with, and working for them so as to justify United States imperial policies and conduct (*Culture* 290). The professor turns out to be an apologist[1] of sorts whose function is similar to that of other pundits. Regretting the almost complete loss of the values of vocation and critical sense championed by Benda due to the professionalisation of the intellectual life

[1] An apologist as a "person who supports a particular belief or political system, especially an unpopular one, and speaks or writes in defence of it".

and the internalisation of the norms of the state, Said blames the university intellectual, particularly "literary, philosophical, historical specialists", for allowing themselves to be "defanged" by "the American university, with its munificence, utopian sanctuary, and remarkable diversity", and for letting "[j]argons of an almost unimaginable rebarbativeness dominate their styles". as well as refraining from addressing the truly vital issues that haunt the community and the human race at large,

> Cults like post-modernism, discourse analysis, New Historicism, deconstruction, neo-pragmatism transport them into the country of the blue; an astonishing sense of weightlessness with regard to the gravity of history and individual responsibility fritters away attention to public matters, and to public discourse. The result is a kind of floundering about that is most dispiriting to witness, even as the society as a whole drifts without direction or coherence. Racism, poverty, ecological ravages, disease, and an appallingly widespread ignorance: these are left to the media and the odd political candidate during an election campaign (303).

Another reason for the uncritical stance is related to the remoteness of the American intellectual both geographically (as he lives oceans away from the old world and its tribulations), and culturally (as he dwells in an ivory tower overlooking but never fully interacting with the events of everyday life, and relishes his assumed superiority). British Marxist historian Victor Kiernan argues in *America: The New Imperialism* (1978) that the remoteness of these intellectuals who constitute an American intelligentsia often distances them from historical reality (Said 302). They established a tradition after the first World War and up to the Vietnam war of yielding to the military-industrial complex and participating in activities connected with it like strategy planning and counter-insurgency. One unfortunate

symptom was the keenness of intellectuals on glorifying the president in return for invitations to the White House (302). Besides, even the dissident intellectuals were not particularly efficient, given the established tradition of intellectual subservience and collaboration on the one hand, and the absence of an environment of earnest thought and reflection, on the other: "There was a certain shallowness, a failure to rise much above the level of journalism, in the literature of protest in the inter-war years... It lacked the imaginative depth or resonance which can only be derived from a responsive environment..." (Qtd. in Said 302).

Sartre's conception of the intellectual is comparatively larger and more embracing than others; thus, allowing for artists, practical professionals, as well as Matthew Arnold's culture protectors. Sartre's view is by no means exhaustive, however. It does not for instance allow for a development in the career of intellectuals; it conceives intellectuals as one type or the other. Benda's and Jacoby's conceptions of the intellectual have been selected and discussed above because in them intellectuals are not described as innately divided into two exclusive groups, or as if there existed a solid clear-cut barrier between them. Both conceptions account for a transition in the intellectual's role and status in society; they allow for the progress and adaptation of the intellectual to social and economic changes, despite the fact that Benda, as well as Jacoby, refuses this development.

In *Hegemony or Survival*, Noam Chomsky argues that most intellectuals are and have always been conformists and subservient to the holders of power. He agrees with Hans Morgenthau, one of the founders of modern international relations theory, that historically intellectuals have been so naive and self-righteous, and that they tend to give in to political leadership and choose to have faith in it. Chomsky, therefore, doesn't expect all, or most intellectuals to be dissenters who question or criticise the political decisions taken by those in power; he just requests them to be rational and honest in their judgement because "noble

intent" is not sufficient, and warns that they will fail to understand the world unless they employ "the same standards whether they are evaluating their own political and intellectual elites or those of official enemies" (48-9).

As shown above, Edward Said claims that the modern intellectuals up to the Vietnam War tend, more often than not, to oblige, and therefore voice very little criticism—if at all—to the State and its empirical intentions. He argues that the university is one reason for the timidity of the intellectual,[1] and so does C. Wright Mills, himself a distinguished professor, in The Sociological Imagination where he paints an unflattering image of the university intellectuals and academics who failed to fulfill their duty of raising the public's awareness to the struggle for power carried out about them due partly to the privatised, bureaucratic university. Another reason for the uncritical stance is, in Kienan's view, related to the remoteness of the American intellectual both geographically (as he lives oceans away from the old world and its tribulations), and culturally (as he dwells in an ivory tower overlooking but never fully interacting with the events of everyday life, and relishes his assumed superiority). British Marxist historian Victor Kiernan argues in *America: The New Imperialism* (1978) that the remoteness of these intellectuals who constitute an American intelligentsia often distances them from historical reality (Said 302). Moreover, they

[1] Surprisingly, Said's characterisation of the university intellectual is significantly different in his collection of essays, *Representations of the Intellectual,* where he defended the professors against the charges of over specialisation, of self-interest and of esoterism, claiming that many of them like C. Wright Mills can still be independent and critical regardless of their connection with the university.

established a tradition after the first World War and up to the Vietnam war of yielding to the military-industrial complex and participating in activities connected with it like strategy planning and counter-insurgency. One unfortunate symptom was the keenness of intellectuals on glorifying the president in return for invitations to the White House (302). Besides, even the dissident intellectuals were not particularly efficient, given the established tradition of intellectual subservience and collaboration on the one hand, and the absence of an environment of earnest thought and reflection, on the other: "There was a certain shallowness, a failure to rise much above the level of journalism, in the literature of protest in the inter-war years... It lacked the imaginative depth or resonance which can only be derived from a responsive environment..." (Kiernan's *America,* qtd. in Said 302).

## 1.5. Culture

When I hear the word 'culture'… I cock my Browning, Hanns Johst.[1]

For a more nuanced understanding of the intellectual and of his role in society particular attention should be paid to "culture" because, as Raymond Williams explains in Culture and Society, the concept of the intellectual is more concerned with the twin concept of 'culture' than with any of the words he singles out as focal, namely "industry", "democracy", "class",

[1] *Wennich Kultur hore...entsichere ich meinen Browning.*

"art", so much so that it is often described as the intellectual's capital. To suggest that the word "culture" alludes to one specific meaning however is to overlook the complexity and gradual development of its "signifié"; a development in usage that Williams believes is the most striking among all the words he named, and that may serve as a "special kind of map" by means of which the changes in social, economic, and political life can be explored and grasped.

Three pertinent definitions are given in the *Cambridge English Dictionary* to the term "culture"; and one of them concerns not society in its entirety but only particular sections thereof. Concise and straightforward, the two remaining definitions may still point at the modern polarization of the concept into a "way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time" on the one hand, and "music, art, theatre, literature, etc." on the other. Historically, culture was less diverse however. Even though the concept itself had not marked a real presence in Europe until about the time of the Renaissance, the signifier, i.e. the term "culture", can easily be traced back to the distant Roman times, and precisely to the Latin word: *Cultura* which belongs to the lexical field of agriculture. Cicero is one of the first to have used agriculture metaphorically to talk about the soul instead of the land: "cultura animi" he wrote in his *Tusculanae Disputationes* (ca. 45 BC) meaning the "cultivation" of the soul. The relationship between culture and farming is a symbolic one. Western civilization, like many ancient civilizations around the world, was originally agricultural, and the tasks of tilling, planting, and of harvesting were so important and deeply engraved into European psychology that they attained a symbolic dimension. The French language, for instance, borrowed the word "culture" from its original semantic field and implemented it figuratively on the domain of literature, the arts and the intellectual fruits of the Renaissance in general. That borrowing brought to light a social reality that had not

been universally perceived. It fore-grounded a new concept and made it an empirical idea.

Owing to the development in the nineteenth century of social sciences like anthropology, psychology, political economy and all the sciences that study and analyze social reality, the term "culture" started to develop in meaning from the original Renaissance sense, i.e., the fruits of human thinking in the fields of arts, psychology, science, law, etc., to a new one that fitted the age of analysis and of dissection. Consequently, new questions started to be asked, like: What is the structure of culture? What are its components? Furthermore, new political and social developments like industrialism, democracy and the pressing influence of social class had interacted and led "culture" to eventually embrace yet another sense, namely "a body of values superior to the ordinary progress of society" rather than its products. This new sense, Williams maintains, provoked either hostility or embarrassment because it insinuates that the "owners" of culture will first interpret, qualitatively assess, and then try to change the common experience.

The first type of culture is high, universal (i.e. European in essence) and owes its existence to the nostalgic views of prominent, public intellectuals like T. S. Eliot and Matthew Arnold before him whose book *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) (as stated in the preface) aims "to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties" and defines it as "a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know...the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits...". This culture-cum-knowledge aims to convince people (and institutions as well) that the existing society is commercialized, lacks authentic values, and resembles a Waste Land. Since reality is not what it should have been, there is desperate need for the intellectuals who alone have maintained the said authentic values and tradition and who alone can provide and resurrect them again. These intellectuals are mainly literary critics,

allegedly striving, among other tasks, to obliterate class division but paradoxically constituting a new distinct social group themselves. Receiving and transmitting cultural heritage are their prerogative and therefore they are self-proclaimed "saviours" trying to facilitate the endangered communication between the past and the present. It is in this light that we can fully understand Julien Benda's "clercs", Russell Jacoby's literary critics and their likes who claim to reintroduce culture to the daily social progress, but cultural tradition as a store of values is paradoxically more valuable and important (that is, beneficial to them) when it is not omnipresent as a social force; its absence is their "raison d'être" (34).

The shift from culture as "a body of arts" to culture as a body of superior values was anything but unnatural or unforeseeable, given that the term "Art" itself underwent within the same period a real semantic change from "a human attribute" or skill to "a kind of institution, a set body of activities of a particular group of skills…" However, a substantial and much deeper change in the sense of the word "culture" occurred in the closing decades of the nineteenth century when English anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917) revolutionized in his book *Primitive Culture* the conception of the term by making it more regional and more historical, and giving it an anthropological dimension. He expounded that it is not intelligence or the capabilities of the mind which distinguishes individuals from societies with different degrees of evolution; the distinguishing feature of an individual hailing from an advanced society rather comprises the accumulation of information, the thinking habits, the type of education, i.e., "culture". The latter now meaning a "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1). It is no longer universal (also read "Euro-centric") but connected to a given region or society. In this phase of semantic development of the term "culture", we can legitimately speak of an *American* culture per se as distinct from the

European cultural tradition.

Culture is certainly more diverse and more semantically challenging than explained above, but these were the main senses that reigned in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When the Americans felt the necessity to break away from Europe and to develop a cultural independence in the early decades of the nineteenth century, it was these two conceptions of culture that were brought into conflict,[1] witness Emerson's speech, "The American Scholar" (1837), in which he spurred Americans to achieve "Americanness" in literature and art and also the efforts of Noah Webster (1758—1843) to appropriate the English language and celebrate a distinct American usage in his dictionary (1828). Despite a few voices arguing that America was unfit, or not yet ready for a culture of its own and that art should not be confused with politics or corrupted with patriotism (like Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James), most intellectuals and men of letters of the time were militants for the local, national type of culture that reflected their national character.

European cultures in the larger, more inclusive sense of the word were—at least partly or unwittingly—reflected, and closely connected with their corresponding cultures of the limited scope (bodies of superior arts and thoughts). Conversely, in nineteenth century America, exclusive culture aimed to reject and get beyond the large-scope culture that was established by generations of native-born Americans and by immigrants. A painful struggle emerged

[1] See Emerson's speech, "The American Scholar" (1837), in which he spurred Americans to achieve "Americanness" in literature and art and also the efforts of Noah Webster (1758—1843) to appropriate the English language and celebrate a distinct American usage in his dictionary (1828).

therefore to free oneself from that body of religious beliefs, customs, manners, etc., in which one was born or at least in deep contact with. It was a formidable, draconian struggle because culture in its larger, anthropological sense exerts a vehement power on the individual that he cannot totally extricate himself from it. With Lionel Trilling, one can formulate:

> No aberration can effect a real separation: even the forms that madness takes, let alone the way in which madness is evaluated, are controlled by the culture in which it occurs. No personal superiority can place one beyond these influences: the unique gifts of genius are understood to have been conditioned by the cultural conditions in which they developed; only in that time and place could they have appeared. Even when a person rejects his culture (as the phrase goes) and rebels against it he does so in a culturally determined way: we identify the substance and style of his rebellion as having been provided by the culture against which it is directed.[1]

Culture may be better understood when contrasted to its varying binary opposites. While a group of intellectuals like Thomas Hobbes and Rousseau contrasted it, favourably or not, against "a state of nature" that reigned in "uncivilised" indigenous societies (allowing for the authentic, uncorrupted lives of "noble savages"), Matthew Arnold's Romantic definition pits "culture" against distortion, chaos and confusion; its absence leads to a state of barbarism that he calls "anarchy" because culture is prerogative to (but also responsible for the creation of) a social elite that comprises artists, men of letters, thinkers and literary critics. It is a major characteristic feature, and a set of ideals and acquisitions that sets them apart and aloof from

[1] See the preface to Lionel Trilling's *Beyond Culture* (no page).

the plebeian masses and the proletariat philistines. Matthew's understanding of the term is, one, manifestly inspired by social-class strife and ruling class prejudice in 19th century England and, second, more applicable within the civilised (read, European) society. In his book on the European tradition of reflection on the relation of philosophy to culture, Richard L. Velkley demonstrates that this sense falls within the category that was arguably originated by German historian and philosopher Samuel Von Pufendorf (1632- 1694) who had defined culture as: "the ways in which human beings overcome their original barbarism, and through artifice, become fully human" (Velkley 11–30)_a definition that Marxist critics of a later time insisted to have always been used by the ruling class as one effective tool to indoctrinate the proletariat into accepting and embracing an unfair, discriminatory bourgeois reality; and into developing a false consciousness. It is a major component of the general "superstructure" that emanates from (but also affects) "the base" of capitalistic work relations and division of labour.

Edward Tyler on the other hand, clearly influenced by his early voyage to Mexico and the ambient imperial situation and ideas, is more interested in weighing different societies against one another than in the social classes within a particular society; he argues that every society has equal intelligence, but varying degrees of culture in the more inclusive sense, that is to say "folklores" which mark them as "civilised" or "less civilised", or even "uncivilised" societies.

# CHAPTER TWO:

# NOT THAT GLAMOROUS: THE (MIS)REPRESENTATION OF U. S. PRESIDENTS

## 2.1. U. S. Presidents and Presidential Election in Vidal

Originally, the American Republic had not been conceived as an executive entity, but rather as a legislative, congressional one in which the president has but little to do. In reaction to the English royal prerogatives during colonial times and the havoc the English king, George III, wreaked on the colonies, the Founding Fathers invested more powers and responsibilities in Congress and thus established "a congressional republic, not an executive one" (Brinkley and Dyer 175). Certainly, the president is given full liability as regards foreign affairs, and is held accountable as to the state of the army, yet it is the Congress that is celebrated and prized by the Constitution in all other important domestic respects (174). One reason only few literary critical studies have been concerned with the representation of American presidents in American fiction is the fact that, Abraham Lincoln aside, American presidents are seldom portrayed in historical novels, much less in fiction at large. It is in fact the Senate which is more often addressed in post-war novels as "a synecdoche for the federal government as a whole" because it is more directly elected by the American people, and more representative of them than the presidency (Davies 6). Gore Vidal is quite an anomaly in this respect. In his play, *The Best Man* (1960), he dramatised the presidential race in election year; Besides, he devoted one of his seven "Chronicles of Empire" to Abraham Lincoln (1809 - 1865), and also gave enough space to other presidents in the six remaining ones—e.g. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson in *Burr,* Ulysses Grant in *1876*, Woodrow Wilson and Warren Harding in *Hollywood,* Franklin Roosevelt in *Washington D.C.* and in *The Golden Age*.[1] Vidal was himself a close friend of the Kennedys and an insider of both Washington

[1] The novels above are ordered according to the chronology of their subject matter.

and the White House. Moreover, he stated that most writers in the 1960s played with the idea of running for the highest executive office. Very few literary writers are thus in a better position to speak about American presidents than Vidal.

The current presidential system of government being part of the much-proclaimed political exceptionalism of the United States, an exploration of the image of the president in fiction is quite rewarding, especially in these Joseph Biden years that follow the much-contested Trump administration. In the public eye, presidents are much more influential and iconic than the second Article of the Constitution stipulates:

> Almost all presidents—whatever they have or have not achieved—have occupied positions of enormous symbolic and cultural importance in American life. They have become the secular icons of the republic—emblems of nationhood and embodiments of the values that Americans have claimed to cherish… Almost everything a president does, in the end, seems to much of the nation to be larger than life.[1]

Such a study might do well to uncover the machinations of presidential campaigns and elections, the importance of the president in a given administration, his honesty or absence thereof, his conflicts with the Congress and other branches of government, as well as his personal demeanour and conduct. Given that there has always been a gap (sometimes enormous, sometimes relatively narrow) between the image and the reality of the president and his office, did Vidal confirm the image of the president or did he rather reveal the reality?

[1] Brinkley and Dyer, pp. x-xi.

Manifesting varied degrees of influence and prestige, did Vidal distinguish the presidents from the presidency, the office from its occupants? Did he treat them all in the same way, or did he allow for their tremendous differences?

Asked in the year 2000 to re-stage his successful and famous play, *The Best Man,* Vidal declared that it was no longer the same country it had been in the early years of the republic or even four decades earlier, that politicians and media needed to awake to the fact that the president today –regardless of his public image—had lost most of his significance to the "great financial powers and corporate interests" which were planning, with considerable success, to influence legislation and push it in the direction of lesser and lesser taxes (Gardner 2). Does this mean that all presidents before that date are rendered as quite significant and overpowering in his fiction? Who is the best president in American history according to Vidal and why? These are some of the questions that outline this section. *Lincoln* and *Empire* are here selected because in them we have a better focus on particular presidents, unlike *The Golden Age* which may be considered as a belated version of *Washington D. C.*, and *Burr* which revolves much more around the unique personality of the vice president and his intrigue than on President Thomas Jefferson himself. As to *1876*, there is much more concern with the presidential election campaigns than with either presidential candidate, namely Tilden and Hayes.

## 2.1.1. The President and Internal Conflict in *Lincoln*

### a. Lincoln's "Inherent Powers" and Dictatorial Fantasies

> *No biographer, and until now no novelist, has had the precision of imagination to show us a plausible and human Lincoln, of us and yet beyond us.*
>
> *Harold Bloom*

Vidal wrote fiction on several world leaders like Roman Emperor, Julian, in 1964, and a number of American presidents, but none of the latter, not even George Washington, has a whole book by Vidal devoted to him except Abraham Lincoln, which is clear indication as to the personal preference of the novelist. He contends in his memoir that his novel, *Lincoln,* was either actually read or claimed to be read by the presidential contenders and presidents in the last dozen years,[1] including Reagan who was not an avid reader to say the least, and who criticized one of its scenes as inaccurate (*Palimpsest* 326). Striving to be accurate in his rendering of major historical events and figures, Vidal models his Lincoln on the same strong, very tall, awkward man of the biographies. Indeed, as he admits in his afterword to the novel, "[a]ll of the principal characters really existed, and they said and did pretty much what [he has] them saying and doing". As a literary character, however, Lincoln remains mysterious and distant because Vidal opts for the "distancing" third person point of view and thus, whatever Lincoln really has in mind is oftentimes beyond the reader, or at best a matter of deduction and of guesswork. In her article on this novel, Joyce Carol Oates compares Lincoln

[1] Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (who is not very fond of Vidal) admires *Lincoln* and asserts in an interview that it is the "best American historical novel I've read in recent years." See "The Education of Gore Vidal", American Masters Digital Archive (WNET). February 26, 2002.

to another character, i.e., Aaron Burr in Vidal's eponymous novel, and stipulates that "[s]ince it is the author's strategy to keep Lincoln mysterious and secretive, we are never privy to his thoughts, as we were to Aaron Burr's; but, by degrees, we come to know him well through the eyes of his witnesses" (1).[1]

Approached properly, this mystery may be saluted as a literary achievement because it makes Lincoln look quite like a real person living amongst us. Its merits and literary advantages aside, the first-person point of view may reduce the ability of the reader to judge for himself, thus obtaining his insights through the ego filters of the hero which may distort, silence, redeem and accommodate disturbing facts. Therefore, the use of third-person narration in Lincoln is most fitting. The mysterious president does reveal himself in the novel, but only indirectly; and Vidal did very well to allow us to judge Lincoln based on his actions, and his conversations with other characters, and thus approaching him like we do real people around us. Vidal therefore, partly because of the narrative techniques employed, is much in keeping with the modern taste for 'showing' rather than 'telling' the reader. The latter finds out for himself the attributes of this mystified persona of American history.

In physical appearance and attire, Vidal drew a correct, historically verifiable portrait: a non-photogenic, haggard, gloomy man who, in Eric Foner's view, would make a poor image of president in this age of TV and public relations industry.[2] Heated controversy, however,

[1] One can only guess Vidal's possible response to this statement by Oates. Michael Mewshaw claims that Vidal once asked him jokingly, while dining together in Rome, "What are the three saddest words in the English language?", then answered: "Joyce Carol Oates" ("Vidal and Mailer" 9).

[2] Eric Foner, The Reconstruction, Columbia University MOOC, EDX courses (www.edx.org).

has been caused about Lincoln's *moral* characteristics. Many politicians and historians then and now (Supreme Court Justice Roger Taney, Democratic Party observers, border state critics, Southern politicians and secessionists, for instance) blame and castigate Lincoln as tyrannical and dictatorial; and Vidal alludes to this denigration in his novel, making even Secretary of State, William Henry Seward (1801 – 1872) lament the presence of a despotic streak in Lincoln who managed very well to dissimulate it under a veneer of false humility and populist behaviour.

> For nearly three years, a thousand voices, including his own, had called for a Cromwell, a dictator, a despot; and in all that time, no one had suspected that there had been, from the beginning, a single-minded dictator in the White House, a Lord protector of the Union by whose will alone the war had been prosecuted. He had been able to make himself absolute dictator without ever letting anyone suspect that he was anything more than a joking, timid backwoods lawyer, given to fits of humility in the presence of all the strutting military and political peacocks that flocked about him (370).

Oates takes for granted Seward's opinion as expressed in the words above as well as similar ones by Lincoln's enemies, and therefore she doesn't hesitate to qualify Lincoln as usurper, and to list his allegedly undemocratic acts.

It can be proven, Oates observes, that Lincoln actually took advantage of the "inherent

powers" to establish a dictatorship that censored the press, suspended the *habeas corpus* and threatened to imprison Democrats who were campaigning in the border-states against the Republicans as the 1864 election approached. Furthermore, adopting the view of yet another of his detractors—namely, Stephen Douglas (1813-1861)—Oates claims that Lincoln had the proclivity and was prepared for this undemocratic conduct even before the commencement of the war. Hence, he did not do more than foregrounding a dictatorial streak inherent in his character. Oates further suggests that Vidal is of the same opinion on Lincoln as Stephen Douglas who, with the jealousy but also the clairvoyance of a defeated rival, reminds Lincoln somewhere in the middle of the novel, of the alleged declaration he had made when much younger that laid bare his early dictatorial fantasies which could not be satisfied now by the mere office-holding that results from democratic election: "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". Douglas, just like Vidal, was aware of Lincoln's inherent, insatiable ambition for greatness at any price, be it that of "emancipating slaves", or "enslaving free men" (Oates 1). Douglas is indubitably right about Lincoln's quest for greatness (what politician does not, for that matter?), but that quest was not allowed to go out of hand or turn into an urge for dictatorial powers. Little evidence in the book corroborates Oates's claim that either Seward or Douglas is Vidal's mouthpiece. True, Vidal amply shows, first, the extent to which Lincoln favoured General Grant's and General Sherman's genocidal war tactics against the Confederates to McLellan's apathetic strategy and his attempts to save civilian and military lives; and second, how the president suppressed the *habeas corpus* alongside other liberties, invested in and abused the vague wartime "inherent powers" of the presidency, detaining political opponents, rigging elections, etc. However, this does not necessarily imply that Vidal portrays him as a dictator.

An inquiry into the nature of Lincoln's attitude towards individual liberties, journalism, and Congress might well answer the question whether he was dictatorial or not. Lincoln knew very well that, unless he compromised some peacetime democratic liberties, he had an awfully slim chance to preserve the Union and defeat the secessionists who fought on their own land and had excellent experimented commanders like General Robert Lee (1807-1870). He resorted for instance to the arrest of about two thousand civilians without trial. Suspending the writ of *habeas corpus* that had always protected individuals and citizens from the abusive conduct of their government was thus but another draconian measure to accomplish a formidable task. In her article on Lincoln, Jean H. Baker reproduces the president's righteous rationalizing that appeased his troubled conscience and led him out of the acute dilemma: "Would he not have broken his oath of presidential office, asked the president, had he allowed the scrupulous observance of one law to stand in the way of preserving all the others and thereby permitted the government to go to pieces"? (Brinkley and Dyer 178) Vidal had to deal in a pressing moment with a difficult choice, either preserve the *habeas corpus* or save the Union and its constitution as a whole. He opted for the second option at last.

As to journalism, Vernon Tad Davies argues that Vidal believes in the vital role media plays in modern politics, at the expense of party machines which are in decline (7-8). It is indeed an age of media-mediated politics. Does Vidal's rendering of the influence press and journalism (no radio and TV at that time) had on mid-eighteenth-century politics in general, and on the image of presidents in particular show it was any lesser than it is today? Absolutely not! As to the charges of newspaper censorship and the illegal imprisonment of editors leveled against him by Oates in the quote above, Lincoln actually imprisoned (albeit for three days only) the managers of *New York World* in 1864 after shutting down the said paper, and thus proved definitely guilty, but for different reasons than Oates would like us to believe. Lincoln

is shown to fear and try to manipulate Horace Greeley (1811-1872), the influential editor of *The New York Tribune*. He wrote letters to him explaining war tactics and the political status quo, hoping to win him over to his side. It was a precautious war measure. No war in history is immune to such measures that limit freedom of opinion and of speech, democracy or no democracy.[1] Freedom of speech can easily be taken advantage of by the enemy as a cover to spread fraudulent propaganda, or, unwittingly used by naive editors to compromise and jeopardize the war effort:

> Infringing on First Amendment privileges, he closed down newspapers not because they criticized him – for Lincoln remained remarkably thick-skinned to personal abuse – but rather because they repeatedly opposed the war effort, discouraged volunteering, and published grossly misleading information that undermined popular support for the war (179).

Lincoln's alleged "despotic" streak had thus nothing to do with his infringement of free press, which turns out to be one inevitable war measure.

[1] Ironically, the first newssheet in American history, namely *Publick Occurences* (Boston, 1690), was suppressed after just one issue partly because it criticised public policy. See Ben Procter, "William Randolph Hearst and the Rise of Yellow Journalism". *Booknotes: Stories from American History*, p. 157.

### b. Relations with the Congress

In stark contrast to Oates, Jean Baker announces in her eponymous article that Lincoln was a moderate who never contemplated dictatorial authority, but rather held the legislative in high esteem because it had primacy in orienting the affairs of the nation, not the president (Brinkley and Dyer 173). In line with the policies of the Whig to which he belonged until the late 1850s, Lincoln to condemned in 1861 "a very free use of any … means, by the Executive, to control the legislation of the country. As a rule, I think it is better that Congress should originate as well as perfect its measures without bias" (179). As a Whig congressman, he was known to have attacked President James Polk's use of war powers to involve the United States in a conflict with Mexico in 1846. Was this merely an opponent's unaccountable polemics, given that the opposition's statements are so often irresponsible and exaggerated?[1] Did power and war eventually change Lincoln's principles?

Indeed, critical observers do not lose sight of the unprecedented political sins Lincoln committed against Congress (and other institutions) during the war. For one thing, he involved the Union in civil war, increased the size of the army, and carried out a blockade of southern ports without any declaration of war by Congress. Moreover, he acted unilaterally, usurping the prerogatives of both Congress and the courts from the start of the war till July, 04th. These actions however, were more due to the fact that Congress was not in session (from the time of Fort Sumter until July), rather than to any malefic intention to usurp the legislative and

[1] George Orwell explains in his essay on Rudyard Kipling that, unlike the ruling power which always thinks of alternatives and consequences of its policies, "the opposition is not obliged to take responsibility or make any real decisions" (*A Collection of Essays* 131).

judicial powers for dictatorial aspirations. True, even after Congress was held, Lincoln bypassed it in some of his endeavours. For instance, he laid his hands on the treasury, instructing it to pay two million dollars to enable two secret agents to support the war effort with military supplies before Congress mandated him, thus violating "the provision that expenditures could be made only when carrying out specific congressional appropriations" (Baker 179). In so doing, Lincoln acted in accordance with his newly embraced conviction that he alone, not the members of Congress or judges, was nationally elected.

These derivations from Democracy, however, are quite normal in time of extreme crisis or war. The executive by nature responds faster than the legislative, and many political philosophers (like John Locke) considered such prompt executive decisions quite valid. It is thus unfair to judge Lincoln's measures during a critical period of national alarm by peacetime standards. More to his credit, President Lincoln sought retroactive sanction for his acts when Congress was back in the political life, claiming that his actions, strictly legal or otherwise, had been undertaken in the name of urgent necessity, and managed to obtain it within a month when his actions were belatedly endorsed. On the whole, Lincoln, who had the good sense of not initiating any legislation, had a quite easy relationship with a Congress, dominated by his party, regardless of the few instances of seemingly disrespectful conduct mentioned above.

To sum up, Vidal indubitably deviated from the wide-spread, inaccurate, and romantic image of Lincoln as a backward, rail-splitting western young man becoming a righteous lawyer so intent on emancipating the blacks, even at the risk of civil war. Lincoln appears instead less ideal than many biographers wanted us to believe, including the poet Carl Sandburg (1878-1967) in his multi-volume book (that won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1940). He stands ridiculous at times, but authoritative and seemingly dictatorial oftentimes. In his

memoir, Vidal worries that Lincoln's icon was remodeled over the years to serve current necessities, and is presently peddled by school teachers as "a born-again abolitionist" (*Palimpsest* 223). Lincoln is certainly not a noble, ingenuous politician who stands by the ideals of freedom and integrity but rather a smart, cunning and vicious one hankering after fame and greatness. A superb manipulator of the levers of a complicated political machine, outwitting all opponents with presidential ambitions like Stephen Douglas, George McClellan, William Seward and Salmon Chase, and making some of them look ridiculous or treacherous.

Vidal believes and shows Lincoln to be greater than George Washington, the Machiavellian "bounder" who created the Union (may be because he had no heir to inherit a kingship), because he achieved the far harder task of saving it, or rather creating a different (better?) one. As Stephen Harris asserts in his essay on Vidal's historical novels, "Lincoln presides with mute authority over the competitive claims of Hearst and Roosevelt to sovereignty over history, Vidal clearly see[s] Lincoln as the dominant figure in American history" (110). He appears convincing, more plausible, more humane, thick-skinned, and ready to learn from his mistakes. Like most successful statesmen, he is open-minded and far from opinionated on the subject of slavery as well as that of war. Hence, Vidal honors the president in his novel and makes him look so different from the conventional image propagated in text books and by the marble statue in Washington; different in the sense of more tragic but also "more complex, mysterious and enigmatic, more implacably courageous" (George Carrett, qtd. in *Lincoln* 2.) This revisionist attitude towards a great president whose figure basks in admiration and pride on the five-dollar bill does not in the least erode or tarnish his importance and significance, nor does it mean to parody and mock him with a distorted portrait. Vidal would "either create –out of air—a parallel Duluthian universe or

…recreate, from agreed-upon facts, a figure like Abraham Lincoln" (*Palimpsest* 99); a figure whose portrait, Oates believes, is reasoned, judicious, and convincing.

Lincoln emerges from the namesake novel, not as a warmonger "much like the bogeyman of certain contemporary paleo-conservatives",[1] but rather as a realistic practical leader who was driven to a war he had never wished (though he wasn't a pacifist either) and who accomplished his difficult mission with distinction. War, not Lincoln, should be held accountable for the atrocities that befell Americans, all Americans, victorious and defeated, supporters and opponents. Vidal aspires to uncover the hideous aftermath of Reagan's (and presidents before him) adventures in Central America, Afghanistan, etc. If Lincoln was driven into a war he did not want and fought a secession that started before his inauguration, present-day presidents wittingly intervened in foreign countries and brought war upon peace-loving peoples. Unlike that of Lincoln, their wars are inexcusable by any means, and fought merely for greed, expansion and the desire for hegemony. Dennis Altman was awake to the parallels Vidal drew between the events of his novels and the current state of affairs: 'Bitter debate between the characters in *Empire* over the annexation of the Philippines can be seen as prefiguring divisions over interventions in Vietnam and Iraq a century later' (79).

A good exercise as to the degree of appreciation Vidal held for Lincoln is to contrast the latter's literary image (as revealed above) with those of Presidents William McKinley (1897-

[1] Christopher Caldwell claims in "Hard-Core Gore" that Vidal's Lincoln is "an imperialist authoritarian", and his private secretary, John Hay, is "a callow whoremonger", p. 51.

1901) and Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) whose administrations are also portrayed from a revisionist point of view in *Empire,* although theirs are definitely less developed representations as neither had the ample space of a whole book.

## 2.1.2. The President and International Expansion in *Empire*

### a. McKinley and The Spanish-American War

The parallels between the fates of Lincoln and Kennedy have recurrently been drawn, yet only few discussed those between Lincoln's and McKinley's lives like Vidal did. It must be noted though that the latter offers the reader of *Empire* two distinctive appreciations of McKinley. On the one hand, McKinley was a shrewd, politically cunning strategist, yet a genuinely good man and, according to Secretary Hay and a few other characters, "the first great president since Lincoln" (70). That is also the opinion of his character Hearst who is confident that 'McKinley runs the show, and lets Hanna collect the loot, and take the blame' (223). On the other hand, President McKinley was seen as a mere puppet of Senator Mark Hanna of Ohio (1837-1904) and other moneyed interests, a president "easily influenced, if not controlled, by a powerful group of aggressive foreign policy unilateralists committed to extending the power of the United States on the world stage, and controlling access to external vital raw materials" including Theodore Roosevelt, Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (Hagan and Bickerton84).Greater credence is ultimately given to the former interpretation, however (Neilson 82).

McKinley is sometimes convincingly likened to Lincoln in terms of goodness of heart and political efficiency. Moreover, in their personal lives, both were more fatherly attached to a

young official (John Hay and his son Del Hay respectively) than to their own respective sons. However, they could not be more far off from each other as regards foreign policy and attitude towards colonial expansion. Lincoln is not shown to have entertained any desire to expand the territories of the U.S. to Mexico or Canada the way his Secretary of State, William Seward, did for instance. His foreign policy is typically isolationist. Americans had to wait for the end of the century to see expansionist officials in the White House like McKinley who is portrayed in *Empire* as the spearhead of American imperialism, along with Secretary John Hay. There is little doubt about Vidal's position—himself an isolationist and a leftist intellectual who condemned America's involvement in WWII, Vietnam and Iraq— and about his preference of Lincoln to McKinley, and to all imperialist presidents for that matter. When Marc Cooper asked him in an interview whether the U.S. should call back its military from bases around the world, Vidal was categorical: "Yes. With no exceptions. We are not the world's policeman… I think it is time we roll back the empire—it is doing no one any good'.[1]

Immensely aided by Hearst and the dishonest journalism of his time which blew, without tangible, irrefutable evidence, the mysterious sinking of the American navy ship, the *U S S Maine* (1889) out of proportions, McKinley involved the nation in a war with Spain and made sure to invade Cuba, Hawaii, Guam and the Philippines. With remarkable intelligence and firm resolution, McKinley, alongside his admirals and generals, proceeded like the major conquerors of the world to install the foundations of an ever-expanding empire,

[1] "The last Defender of the American Republic?" p.195.

notwithstanding its seemingly naive demeanor and parochial nature. Vidal's heroine and à la Hearst journalist, Caroline Sanford, is utterly surprised by the swift analysis and shrewd capacities of McKinley's mind. She has not expected him to conquer as much territory as Caesar and Alexander whom he barely knew of, without having to leave "the ugly national house" or using anything but the telegraph-machine. She realised at last that there was "a lot to be learned about acting from McKinley" (*Empire* 206).

### b. Theodore Roosevelt and Imperialism

McKinley is thus portrayed in the novel as responsible for and a pioneer in paving the way towards imperialist expansion, which was followed after his assassination by Theodore Roosevelt. Vidal follows in his novel the progress of the latter from a navy officer to a very popular president of the United States. It comes as no surprise that he occupies more space in the novel than McKinley and that he enjoys a superior presence, given the tremendous popularity and long-lasting impact he had on American people. The popularity of 'Teddy' does not obfuscate Vidal's view and his revisionist perspective. This celebrated emblem of courage and of indefatigable energy who inspired a generation of politicians and presidents, who coincided with the coming of age of press in America, and whose intimate doings were reported with obsession to every household even after his terms were over and up until he died in 1919, this "larger-than-life" figure is ridiculed and caricatured in *Empire*. Diametrically opposed to Lincoln who cared little for his image amongst his contemporaries in general and political opponents in particular, Roosevelt is shown to create a mystery of bravery and a halo of adventure about him. Vidal reiterates in *Empire* what he has done in two

essays accompanying it, namely "Theodore Roosevelt: An American Sissy" and "The Day the American Empire Ran out of Gas", i.e. deeply analyses Roosevelt's character only to find him miserably lacking in that essential quality which should be essential in the realm of politics, i.e. moral courage. Obsession with physical courage instead is in fact a sign of immaturity in a politician, and Roosevelt, regardless of his characteristic bravado and distinguishing domineering attitude in politics, was deprived of real courage which could have come in handy to help uproot the corruption that inflicted the republic under his administration (Neilson 83).

Besides his war-mongering and domineering conduct, Roosevelt is physically represented as an exaggerated caricature. Contemplating Roosevelt, it is not just Hay who "marvelled at the way neck became head without any widening at all', but so does the reader (*Empire* 400). Unlike Lincoln whose tendency to crack bawdy jokes and to mimic black accents is silenced in *Lincoln*, Roosevelt's many idiosyncrasies including his teeth-clacking habit and restless movements are allowed to contumaciously recur in *Empire* so as to puncture the mystery and demystify the persona. In this, Vidal was true to his pet acerbic, denigrating technique of scrutinizing the physical characteristics of prominent figures he does not cherish in an exposing "close-up" that deflates their artificial aura (Neilson 83). While John Hay tolerated his president's weaknesses because he appreciated the—to him—far superior qualities that singled him out as "the best the country had to offer". Vidal exposed and ridiculed them because of his poor opinion on "Teddy" however, especially in comparison with Lincoln. Indeed, Vidal questions Roosevelt's integrity and alludes, for instance, to his illegal request of money from Standard Oil to finance his election campaign: "What…were the President's relations with Standard Oil? Obviously, there was something that he didn't want known; and it probably had to do with the gathering of money for the 1904 election" (*Empire* 481).

Similar accusations could not be truthfully levelled against Lincoln in Vidal's former novel. The corruption in the White House was rather connected with the First Lady, Mary Todd, whose debts and prodigal spending were carried out unbeknownst to the president.

Theodore Roosevelt has even less appeal to Vidal as he is, like McKinley before him, a committed expansionist. Some historians claim that McKinley's war on Spain and his attachment of foreign territories were mainly the work of Roosevelt and like-minded entourage. As a 'revisionist' historian, Vidal argues that American engagement in overseas imperialism was not 'abrupt and unpremeditated' as Louis Hall and many mainstream historians would like us to believe. Roosevelt deliberately wanted to follow the example of Britain and believed that colonies help hold power at sea. In this, he was under the influence of some of the leading architects of American empire like US naval officer and historian Alfred Taylor Mahan (author of *The Influence of Sea Power on History*), Brooks Adams, and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge who carefully thought it out. Caroline Sanford, is clearly disgusted with the war Roosevelt offered to the Americans: 'Why drive poor weak old Spain out of the Caribbean and the pacific? Why take on far-off colonies? Why boast so much? (25) Along with John Hay, she shares Vidal's conviction and those rhetorical questions might well be his own.

It could be argued with regard to the instances above that Vidal's representation of U.S. presidents does not always reproduce the wide spread myths; it is rather based on 'true' historical accounts in order to uncover the reality. Neither Lincoln nor McKinley or Roosevelt in Vidal's novels is what the average American reader who is indoctrinated with the official historical narratives expects. However, Vidal's 'revisionist' representation of presidents is not mainly an attempt to distinguish history from myth and to correct some historical minutiae (like when he gave a more accurate version of Lincoln's 'Gettysburg Address'). The 'didactic

heresy' that the formalists and the aesthetes of modernism and post-modernism had warned writers of fiction against is clearly at play in Vidal who aims rather at commenting on and criticising contemporary politics and the foreign policy in particular. Parallels could easily be drawn by alert readers with the *status quo*. One telling example is the portrayal of the Spanish-American war; a war that Hagan and Bickerton claim to be closer and so similar to U.S. involvement in Vietnam and Iraq. Although Vidal had Reagan in mind when he wrote *Empire,* Hagan and Bickerton assert that successors in the White House like George H. W. Bush did not prove any wiser,

> The Spanish-American War, as it is better known, more than any other fought by the United States, resembles the present war in Iraq. Like the Iraq war, it was begun ostensibly to achieve regime change, to bring democracy to a people suffering under a cruelly repressive regime. It was initiated by an administration loudly proclaiming the moral righteousness of its cause, led by a president widely believed by contemporaries to be easily influenced, if not controlled, by a powerful group of aggressive foreign policy unilateralists committed to extending the power of the United States on the world stage, and controlling access to external vital raw materials while espousing free trade doctrines. In 1898 President William McKinley, like President George W. Bush in 2002, portrayed himself as deeply religious, acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty.

They added that both wars witnessed short-lived conventional fighting that resulted in some sort of 'victory' for the American military, and that both had far-reaching, mostly unexpected consequences, within and without the U.S., including for instance a concomitant, brutal insurgency war vying to expel American soldiers from native land. Moreover, both wars proved economically and strategically counterproductive in the long run (84-5). Accordingly,

the presidents in Vidal's 'Chronicles of Empire' are meant to compare with those recently in power, and to enable Vidal to pronounce his political dissent against former and current presidents alike like Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

### 2.1.3. Presidential Elections and the Fall of an Honest Candidate

Dictatorial and bullying, expansionist and supremacist, vindictive and intriguing, one wonders how such presidents as Theodore Roosevelt and William McKinley could win the people's confidence and got elected. Blame should not be put on the "bad" president himself as much as on the system that makes his election possible. With the presidential election crisis of 2000 in mind, when candidate Al. Gore (a distant cousin of Vidal) obtained more popular votes than G. W. Bush yet failed to be elected, and the accusations of fraud and forgery in Florida, along with the more recent election of Republican candidate Donald Trump who, ironically, lagged behind the other contestant, Democrat Clinton, in all major polls and predictions, a study of the presidential election procedure in Vidal's novels is especially rewarding and overdue. It shows how American presidency usually fails to attract and embrace America's sharpest wits and dashing politicians, and how the presidential elections often involve banks, intelligence agencies, big money, foreign powers, and media among other agents and parties.

Vidal's cynicism about, or at least dissatisfaction with the electoral procedure is expressed in different venues, including his introduction to *The City and the Pillar* where he explained how at the time of its first publication his grandfather was arranging a political career for him in New Mexico: "...in the greatest democracy the world has ever known—freedom's as well as bravery's home—elections can be quietly arranged, as Joe Kennedy liked to explain to you" (xii). In *1876*too, Vidal was prescient. He dramatized the presidential election problem

of that year a quarter of a century prior to its repetition in 2000. Although the more recent election plummeted to unprecedented levels of vulgarity and scandal, yet even in Tilden's days presidential candidates and their campaign managers resorted to not so legitimate measures including suspicious sponsorship by big business, forgery, and the purchase of votes. As to *Washington D.C.*, Vidal exposes therein the whole electoral system while narrating the particular story of Senator Burden Day's aspiration to occupy the White House. Although the first in the "Chronicles of Empire", it covers, along with *The Golden Age,* the most recent period in American history (1937-1952), spanning WWII and its aftermath. It is considered by some critics as the best, the most literary, and least historical in the series. In it, characters are more developed and their psychological features better fathomed, due to the absence of rigorous historical authenticity impediments. Kloman qualifies it as the purest work of fiction in Vidal's set of narratives, given that he "felt more comfortable inventing and probing the psychologies of his characters" than he did in the other six histories where great attention was paid to his interpretation of the facts of history. However, Vidal did not intend it to be the first in the series. Only later did he decide to go on with fictionised histories of the American nation, thus penning six more novels about earlier periods starting from the revolution and ending in the year 2000. The last novel, *The Golden Age,* is in fact an attempt to reformulate its antecedent, *Washington D.C.*, in order to make it fit nicely in the ensuing septuology.

*Washington D.C.* narrates the story of a Democrat Senator from a Western state who is almost perfect in terms of honesty and the sense of duty. The day he starts to run for presidency, Burden Day realizes that he must "play the game" if he wishes to ever get elected, that running for president has its own financial as well as moral costs. Unfortunately for him, President Franklin D. Roosevelt still wants a third term, and Blaise Sanford, a Washington

press lord, favours Day's handsome chief aide, Clay Overbury, a Kennedy-like aspiring politician recently returning as a hero from war in Europe. Elected to Congress first, Clay blackmails Day in the hope of succeeding him in the Senate. Blaise's bond with Clay is strengthened by the latter's marriage to the tycoon's only daughter, Enid. Peter is Enid's brother and Vidal's youngest protagonist, an idealist who, to the mortification of his father, embraces Communism. Overall, the novel is an accurate and interesting portrait of the machinations of presidential elections in all their intricate relations with press manipulation, lobbying and financial interests. It teems with elements straight from Vidal's life too. For one thing, Peter resembles young Vidal in many a trait, not least of which his pervert love for a schoolboy friend who died in the war which is reminiscent of Vidal's homosexual bond with Jimmy Trimble. Moreover, Burden Day reminds the reader of Vidal's grandfather, Senator T. P. Gore of Oklahoma, who was too an anti-New Deal Democrat, and his name is reminiscent of an earlier character in Robert Penn Warren's political novel *All the King's Men*, namely Jack Burden.

The narrator in *Washington D.C.* has little respect for politicians in general because he views them, at best, as "clowns and medicine men" tricking people to vote for them. Furthermore, he sketches an even darker image of US presidents than the ones outlined in *Lincoln* and *Empire*. He finds out that Presidents are better off without the restraints of morality and principle. "Burden was afflicted with conscience, a unique disadvantage, he knew, in a man who wanted to be President" (53). Part of Burden's early burden is his conscience-stricken mind, and he is shown to be conscious of the political disadvantages that it entails. He is a great admirer of Plato and likes to contemplate the framed *aristocratic* quotation on the wall which affirms that because we are born for our country and our friends too we should be involved in public life to prevent worthless men who do not have the best

motives. Burden was in this respect no less undemocratic than Plato himself with who would have made very good friends (53). Presidents, and aspiring politicians who run for the Presidency, should not be restrained by morality or a desire to serve the country and the people if they mean to compete with efficiency. Most presidential candidates and politicians shy away from righteousness and integrity: "Idealism comes late in life, if ever. After all, politics was largely twisting and turning merely to survive, and in the process even the simplest goal was lost sight of" (53). Clay, whose name hints at the qualities of malleability and flexibility, knows very well, even better than his associate Burden, that the less convictions one has the better for one's political career. The dogmatic and doctrinaire are not fit for either Congress or Presidency. He is shown to get along well with the Texans and to tolerate other working politicians due to the realisation that it helps a lot not to have too many convictions as "one man's conviction is another man's heresy" (61). Very few politicians in Vidal's novels have noble motives and deep convictions, and these very few, including Senator Day, are quite ready to step in line and follow the not too noble rules once they cast an aspiring eye on the White House. Josh Greenfeld asserts that no method is too low for presidency contestants in Vidal who,

> never attempts to dignify his characters and their quests with individual meaning or distinctive motivation. …They all treat the Presidency as if it were a local Everest. They want it because it's *there*, the top of their world, as viewed through miles of lettered streets and People's Drug Stores. And they are willing to charge through any spotlight to reach their goal (Greenfeld).

Hence, what produces 'bad' presidents is the corrupt presidential electoral system that allows unscrupulous politicians with no such things as morals, or willingness to serve, to run for presidency. They are pragmatic seekers urged solely by sheer quest for power, with no

clear ideology or strong conviction to tame it. Greenfeld is not optimistic as to the possibility for improvement, and believes that there is ample reason for alarm because "our system delivers unto us the kind of mediocrities that our time—which is not the best of all possible times—requires." It is mostly the electoral system, which is itself a reflection of the present decadent time, that must be held accountable for the success of uncouth, inadequate men to occupy the White House. Accurate as the statement above is, Greenfeld misses the point, however, when he claims that Vidal does not sufficiently tend to "the difficulty of selecting chief executive in a democracy, in an era when press agents and plutocrats have become political bedfellows". Vidal does clearly reveal in this and other novels that, alongside business tycoons and oil speculators like Nillson, Presidents are in the mercy of press lords like Blaise Sanford and William Randolph Hearst before him, especially in the fifties when media superseded the party machines in brokering presidential campaigns (Davies, 28). Hence, he reiterates in his novels the condemnation of the way undistinguished individuals have been given a chance to start a political career and then to run for presidency by the press lords expressed elsewhere in his essays and interviews. For instance, in an interview on politics and Hollywood, Vidal laments the present state of affairs where mediocre Richard Nixon, fresh from the navy, lacking in leadership and charisma, picks up a paper and notices an advertisement put by Republican businessmen looking for a returned veteran to run for congress and thus start a career in politics that eventually propulses him to the White House (Colin Wright 44).

Let us first demonstrate the effect of big money in presidential election as portrayed in *Washington D.C.* With difficulty at first, as he had a high opinion of himself and a correct upbringing, even Burden Day had to give up some of his reservations and play the game so as to be elected president. The game dictates accepting bribes among other vices. The passage

below spells out the agonizing conflict in Day's mind between his upright conscience and his political aspirations:

> He would be the President but without the help of Nillson. If he was not true to himself, he was nothing. Old saws occurred to him. He recalled the McGuffey Reader he had studied as a child, on every page a moral lesson. Despite later knowledge, he still believed it all. Honesty is the best policy. A stitch in time saves nine. Every man has his price. No. *Not true!* He crumpled the envelope and with finger and thumb shot the wad straight at the bronze statue of an admiral. Full steam ahead! That was more like it. And then on January 20, 1941: *I, James Burden Day, do solemnly swear* ... I will be good (49).

There is no doubt as to which party prevails at last. And then Vidal proceeds to offer the reader an extensive example of how subtle agreements happened between vicious politicians, coated in an intricate tissue of allusions and cant (62-63). One politician should always think of a convincing alibi to cover his misdeed, while another digs for the incriminating evidence, and trade his silence about it with the former for sufficient reward. Monstrously unscrupulous, none of them has qualms about the illegal nature of their conduct. Politics for them is not a choice between good and bad, or moral and immoral.

As president of a Senate subcommittee, Burden Day had to allow one Edgar Nillson, an oil speculator, to buy some Indian lands under his protection if he ever desired the latter's money for his campaign (62). He takes the precaution of having the subcommittee allow the purchase while he is abroad in what looks as perfect alibi, and of hiring Nillson as treasurer of the James Burden Day for President Committee; but you cannot be too careful in Washington. A congressman finds a way to keep hold of irrefutable evidence, a recording of Day's phone call

while in Canada instructing a fellow Senator in the subcommittee to allow the deal. Not surprisingly, the intruder asks for something in return for that recording and another murky deal is affected, i.e. Nillson buying "a few skimpy acres", situated near the Indian lands in question, and belonging to a friend, for "a quite reasonable price". When Clay, who was still working for Senator Day, realised there was no room for denial, he willingly proceeded in the political game. Vidal's details of that agreement do not only reveal an insider's connoisseurship, but also the amazing, righteous jargon used in such agreements which makes the deal look normal, or even innocently benevolent to both parties. No such things as greed, corruption, self-advancement and opportunism could be smelt in this masterpiece of cant and political lingo. The exchange is carried out with righteous expressions like "fair trade", "reasonable price", "my good friend", and "good old boy… not unduly greedy". The threat of ending Day's presidential campaign and Clay's political career even before they begin is only subtly insinuated, but immediately and seriously felt. The bargaining congressman affects involvement, compassion, and fear of the possible embarrassment ensuing from the leak. The recording device in question, which is the only source of his crashing power over Day and Clay has become, in his dishonest language, "a truly infernal doodad which could spell the ruin of us all." Moreover, the ever-repeated inclusive pronouns "us" and "we" are calculated to feign involvement and an illusion, dispelled by both parties even before it is enunciated, of a shared common fate. The act of bribery is alright, provided the language is politically correct. Politicians tend to tolerate most aberrations of conduct if well-presented and correctly talked about. The conversing politicians sound like decent people surrounded by evil-doers and threatened by corrupt menacing creatures on the watch for their doom. The vileness of the act and its accompanying cant find their match and physical correlative in the equally disgusting smile Vidal confers on the bullying congressman: "The Congressman beamed, revealing broken teeth, brown from chewing tobacco".

To Clay's amazement, Nillson does not in the least protest against the threat or the suggested deal, he rather feels amused by the way politics works: "Once I buy the land, he's in *my* pocket. He can't use anything against me that I can't use against him. What a world we live in!" Day loses the presidency because, among other things, the war in Europe helped Roosevelt to run again. He was not prepared however to be forced out of the Senate (where he served for thirty-plus years) not by popular vote, but by his aides' scheming. The piece of evidence is ironically brandished like a Damocles' sword not by political enemies, but by associates and aides. Day has yet to learn this. He who is complimented by Blaise as a master of covering tracks pays amply and dearly for the one (and only) mistake he commits in a long political career. He quits the Senate, and later commits suicide when he learns his misdeed is headlining the papers due to a vindictive journalist who was exposed as a liar and propagandist. Day was not behind that exposure, but often in politics one pays for the others' mistakes. The reader, thus, along with Clay and other characters, learns a basic lesson about presidential election in the United States, just as Mrs. Eleanore Roosevelt, in her early innocence, rushed to her husband in awe and said: 'Franklin, they are *buying* votes right here in Dutchess County!' The President laughed it out and responded, 'Don't worry, dear, the Republicans buy them, too' (*Washington D. C.* 75).

Long forgotten are the days when Day had serious qualms of conscience about buying votes. His youthful complaints and righteous opposition against this practice during his first political campaign were ridiculed by seasoned campaign managers then, and are tamed and hushed by no other than himself now. One cannot get experience without first ridding oneself of immature prudishness. He is "practical" and "tolerant" now, he was "pedantic" and idealistic then. It is the voters who are corrupt and want some dollars for their votes, not himself. Besides, you cannot win an election if you restrain yourself from what your political

opponents readily accept.

> The question, finally, was at what point one drew the line. Neither the President nor Burden was responsible for the corruption of the voters. Even so, was it right to continue the corruption? The question was fatuous. One did what one had to do to win, and that included selling votes as well as buying them. When he took Nillson's money he had sold his vote, which was morally no worse than the accepted practice of buying one. He comforted himself with the thought that what he had done was precisely what any other politician would have done (75).

When Senator Day was obliged to forestall his presidential aspirations, Clay, assisted by the same corrupt Nillson, did not refrain to play the same game. It is no problem to pay "twenty, thirty thousand" to a powerful judge in return for his support, plus "the first year's salary to the party, kind of investment, you might say, in the future" (*Washington D.C.* 79).

*Washington D.C.* offers an accurate representation of the way American presidential candidates compete with one another for party nomination first, and for people's votes later. Assisted by untruthful press and suspicious money, even the worst of candidates can make it to the White House. More conscience-oriented candidates have little chance to prevail. Indeed, the novel has a prescient dimension in foretelling the crisis of the 2000 and the 2016 presidential elections.

## 2.2. U. S. Presidents and War in Mailer

It has been shown that Vidal believes that all wars are ugly, mainly because brutal strategies and undemocratic actions are *sine qua non* if one really wants to win them. War, he regrets, corrupts the American character, empowers the executive branch beyond the curbing authority of the representative institutions, obstructs freedom of expression, affects journalism and jeopardizes individual liberties, among other things. Wars always benefited segments of the American economy including the elite 1% and the financial-military complex, and fostered a savage version of Capitalism that concentrated wealth in the hands of the few. Hence, Vidal spares no effort and uses all possible means (novels and essays in particular) to denounce hawkish presidents who bring about war and thus deteriorate the well-being of the poor in terms of health care and education, bloat the defence budget (already higher than those of the rest of the world combined), and tarnish the image of the country in the world.

It is commonly argued by conformist politicians, apologetic intellectuals and journalists that war abroad has always given a boost to American economy, created jobs in factories, opened and secured markets at home and abroad. The Second World War, for instance, brought an end to the worst economic crisis in the 1930's. It is moreover quite noticeable that American voters have a characteristic weakness for the war hero—a proclivity manifested in the considerable number of politicians and presidents who were elected to office partly due to their prior participation, and distinguished service in different wars at home and abroad. The list includes the father of the Republic George Washington himself, Ulysses Grant, Theodore Roosevelt (who got literally propelled out of the dead-end position of vice-president to a thriving executive career due to the Spanish-American war), Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon amongst presidents; it also counts Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton, to name only two

amongst leading politicians. War is thus a culmination of political crisis, but also a great opportunity for a distinguished political career. Vidal prophetically asserted in a lecture at Harvard about the invasion of Iraq that "We shall yet be invited... by the sponsors of USA, Inc., to bear witness to a presidential election in which one of the heroes of the Gulf will confront the politically ambitious Terminator'. Yes, it will be someone like Rumsfeld versus Schwarzenegger...".[1] Generals never cease talking about peace and stability seemingly because nobody knows the horrors of wars and their deadly cost as they do, but in reality war is the greatest opportunity for them to distinguish themselves, impress the public, and urge it to vote for them. Even presidential candidates with no or very limited experience of actual fighting, like Democrat John Kerry, brag military service to the nation. Presidency is thus tightly woven with wars and war-heroes have always been favourite candidates in both political parties. It could be argued that Vidal's and Mailer's favourite presidents—i.e. Lincoln and Kennedy –were not war heroes, but civilians. Yet, even for civilian or intellectual presidents like these two, war was an opportunity to demonstrate their courage and stamina. It is their management of and attitude in the Civil War and the Cold War respectively which gained them the "respect" and admiration of their compatriots as well as their nemeses abroad, like Khrushchev who had formerly treated Kennedy as a spoiled rich boy with soft hands.

War is part and parcel of politics. When diplomacy fails, American presidents exercise their prerogative of war-declaration allegedly to defend the interests of the nation. War, as the epitome of human suffering and, arguably, the most tragic event that may befall society, has

[1] *Point to Point Navigation*, hereafter shortened to PPNV.

often been rendered in American literature, especially since the Civil War. From Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps* (1865), Herman Melville's *Battle Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866) and Stephen Crane's seminal *The Red Badge of Courage* to the innumerable novels on the second World War, the armed confrontation between soldiers and the heavy cost on civilians and communities have always appealed to writers and readers alike. The fictional rendering of war however varies considerably and critics distinguish between true and untrue war stories. Tim O'Brien, in his *The Things They Carried*, argues that true war stories are obscene and amoral, they promote no virtue, and are difficult to believe. They are embarrassing, seemingly endless, without a moral, and about anything else except war. Moreover, they avoid generalization and are contradictory and partly made up. It is quite telling that the novelistic careers of Mailer and Vidal started with works connected to the Second World War, just as the "Lost Generation" had been launched into writing fiction by the Great War, and Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves were inspired by the same calamity to write poetry. Vidal, who was born in a military school, wrote his first novel, *Williwaw* (1946), while still a nineteen-old soldier in the Alleutians, while Mailer soared to immediate fame, hard on the heels of the war, with *The Naked and the Dead* (1948).

### 2.2.1. Kennedy and Johnson in *The Armies of the Night*

The more recent sub-genre of the non-fiction novel, developed in the sixties and seventies by Truman Capote (*In Cold Blood* 1965), Hunter S. Thompson (*Hell's Angels,*1966), and Norman Mailer (*The Armies of the Night* 1968, and *The Executioner's Song* 1978) is history in the guise of a novel, i.e. an account ostensibly based on accurate historical facts with no fictitious characters or imagined dialogue, but like the historical novel, making use of novelistic techniques of narration. Norman Mailer's handling of the new genre differs from Capote's, even if the latter is generally considered the founder. One major difference is that

Mailer satirizes Capote's emphasis on the objectivity of the new narrative and the deletion of the author. In *The Armies of the Night*[1], one of his most celebrated and critically acclaimed works (recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction, and National Book Award for Arts and Letters), Mailer writes an autobiography celebrating the self and giving it central stage; he uses third person narration to speak about himself as protagonist, and refers to himself as: the novelist, the Beast, the minor poet, Mailer, etc. This difference in approach between Capote and Mailer is one of the reasons that led to a long literary feud that ended only with Capote's death.

Non-fiction is usually about crime and sensational events, yet it can sometimes be very antagonistic and political. Considered "one of the most liberating books ever swirled into being by a human mind" (Siegel), The Armies is definitely a political masterpiece which follows on W*hy Are We in Vietnam?* (1967) and is based on protest and resistance to American foreign policy, unlike his second non-fiction novel, *The Executioner's Song*, where he conforms to the newly established tradition. The narrator claims that novelists "keep their politics in their pocket" (7); that, just like movie stars, men of letters never depart from consensus so as to endorse gallant moves of opposition. In remarkable irony, these claims are advanced in a work that clearly contradicts them. If they may apply to many contemporary American writers, they do not do justice to Mailer himself who is marked out as unique and eccentric. Bernard Malamud for instance is shown to fail in the novel to take action and boycott the Vice-president whose policies in Vietnam he claimed to oppose, but Mailer as protagonist makes fun of and outspokenly vilifies most modern American Presidents and politicians.

[1] Henceforth referred to as *The Armies.*

As has been done with Vidal's narratives of empire, it is attempted here to examine Mailer's literary rendering of the American president in his novels, particularly *The Armies* which narrates the events of the March on the Pentagon in October 1967.The mock third-person narration used in *The Armies* makes it difficult for the reader to discern a neutral portrait of the president that is independent of the narrator-cum-protagonist's subjective attitudes and insights. The protagonist is definitely against current president Lyndon Johnson, and believes himself to have been one of the first Americans to attack him when other writers were on the admiring side: "… his speech at Berkeley in 1965 had attacked Johnson at a time when lots of the mob now so much against the war were still singing 'Hello, Lyndon'" (9). His defiance and disrespect for the president are so acute that they determine his attitude towards fellow American writers. He admires those who, like Robert Lowell (1917-1977), oppose Johnson and despises those who were apologetic and hesitant.

> Mailer told instead of why he had respect for Lowell as a man. A couple of years ago, the poet had refused an invitation from President Johnson to attend a garden party for artists and intellectuals, and it had attracted much attention at the time for it was one of the first dramatic acts of protest against the war in Vietnam, and Lowell was the only invited artist of first rank who had refused (43).

Mailer's prism of aversion to President Johnson diffracts and shatters not just the reader's conception, but also the narrator's appreciation of fellow writers.

Interestingly, Mailer's ridicule of L.B.J. is due to other than mere political contention, important as it certainly is. One more thing he hates about Johnson is his profanity which trespasses the boundaries of acceptability; for Mailer painstakingly tries to distinguish two

kinds of foul language, one admissible (like his), and the other quite obscene and vulgar (like Johnson's). Criticising Johnson for obscenity can be taken more seriously, however, if leveled by other than foul-mouthed Mailer who had claimed previously that freedom of expression meant his capacity to use a four-letter word in *Time* magazine, and whose novels are not lacking in swear words. However, some critics claim that his foul language, like the one used in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is meant as a criticism of the political life and "can be read as both comedic and serious, inciting laughter just as it functions as part of a larger critique" (McKinley xi). If anything, Mailer's attack on Johnson's obscene language demonstrates the degree of his aversion and disdain of Johnson himself: "…an obscenity uttered in a voice too weak for its freight was obscene, since obscenity probably resides in the quick conversion of excitement to nausea—which is why Lyndon Johnson's speeches are called obscene by some" (49).

Yet, Mailer is aware that some of the reasons behind his scorn of the President emanate from their surprising resemblance which is not limited to the use of swear words. Mailer sees in Johnson some of the features he hates about himself, and tells his audience in the same indecent language he blames Johnson for, that he may well be Johnson's "alter ego": "…see here, you know who I am, why it just came to me, ah'm so phony, I'm as full of shit as Lyndon Johnson. Why, man, I'm nothing but his little old alter ego. That's what you got right here working for you, Lyndon Johnson's little old *dwarf* alter ego" (49). Immediately after, Mailer is surprised that his half-thought-out statement, *originally* intended to entertain and excite the audience is not a mere hyperbole but rather a sound observation. He realized that they are alike, that he could well be a version of Johnson that is shorter yet with the same "sores, sorrows, and vanity" (50). Political difference should not induce one to delve to such personal trivia as a president's accent which has nothing to do with his decisions and policies,

yet, in the light of his discovery of their resemblance, Mailer proceeded to mockingly imitate LBJ's Texan accent. Moreover, Mailer seems to agree with the shouting, clapping prisoners that LBJ was one of the vilest war criminals in the country, and joins in chants claiming so: "Hey, hey, LBJ! How many kids did you slay today?" (156). Furthermore, President Johnson is not above rabble rising and sheer demagogy, nor does he hesitate to employ his oratory for those ends. After a spectacular demonstration and an unprecedented march on the Pentagon, the narrator admits that Johnson emerges as the sole victor due to his cant and false rhetoric. He has no scruples in manipulating the press and slandering the demonstrators:

> Yes, the end seemed to have come, and the immediate beneficiary of the March could be nobody other than the President of the United States. Lyndon Johnson made a point to have his picture taken Saturday sitting at a table on the White House lawn with Hubert Humphrey, Dean Rusk, and Orville Freeman. .....He had sent a memorandum to Defence Secretary McNamara and Attorney General Clark. "I know that all Americans share my pride in the man in uniform and the civilian law enforcement personnel for their outstanding performance in the nation's capital during the last two days. They performed with restraint, firmness and professional skill. Their actions stand in sharp contrast to the irresponsible acts of violence and lawlessness by many of the demonstrators (285).

In sum, the (distorted?) image of Lyndon Johnson communicated by the hateful narrator of *The Armies* is one of vulgarity, vanity, crime and hypocrisy; an image that is degrading not only to the 36th American president but to the novelist as well, given the similarities he willingly admits of.

Mailer felt superior to all presidents since World War II except John Fitzgerald Kennedy

(119) who is the only president rendered in this novel worthy of respect and admiration and whose representation is diametrically opposed to that of Johnson. Unlike Vidal who was the closer of the two writers to Kennedy, and who did not refrain to demystify him in some of his novels as well as in his memoir and essays with accounts of promiscuity and flimsy morality, Mailer had a deep veneration for J.F.K. that is not completely free of envy. Just like him, Kennedy was a graduate of Harvard and a participant in World War II, yet far superior to him in looks, prestige, and social status as he comes of distinguished Irish stock. He is therefore represented as a charismatic leader whose influence on the people is positive and remarkable. Under his presidency, the narrator advocates,

> everybody looked good. The thousand days of John Kennedy had done much to change the style of America; nowhere perhaps more than to the sartorial sense of the liberals and Left-Wing intellectuals now gathering for breakfast—some drabness had quit them since the fifties, some sense of power had touched them with subtle concomitants of power—a hint of elegance" (81).

Alongside empowerment and elegance, Kennedy was the last president to excite confidence in people, including his political opponents and the political prisoners who never after his assassination trusted an American jail (207).

It must be noted though that Mailer's disdain of American presidents in general is not peculiar to *The Armies*; it is equally displayed in most of his political and literary oeuvre. It is not easy for the reader to empathize with Lyndon Johnson or admire him, not only because of his attitude to the Vietnam war, his views, and convictions but also due to his personal characteristics. He stands for almost everything Mailer opposes and decries, including capitalism, brutal masculinity, machismo, rashness, and the kind of ruthlessness and

aggression that thinly disguise weakness and other personal insecurities. Although Mailer himself was often denounced for some of these attributes, the novel makes it clear that those accusations were at least partly unfair. But even if they were truthful, one doesn't always appreciate one's likes, especially when they exaggerate one's tendencies. Therefore, the similarities between the protagonist of *The Armies* and Johnson do not attenuate his aversion and scorn for the president.

Moreover, Mailer makes it clear in *An American Dream,* that democracy is an illusion and that in order to become president one has not to depend merely on public election but rather be well-connected with the super-rich. When the protagonist Stephen Rojack dated the aristocratic Deborah Caughlin Mangaravidi Kelly, heiress to a considerable fortune, he felt about to realise the presidential dream. "I thought the road to President might begin at the entrance of her Irish heart…Now in retrospect I can say with cheer: that was the closest I came to being President" (2). His soaring confidence was given further boost with the fact that he went out in the company of Jack Kennedy who was, like himself, a graduate of Harvard, and who is favourably portrayed as a good and trustworthy friend inquiring and concerned about Stephen's wellbeing after the news of his wife's alleged suicide reaches him. In Mailer's fiction and non-fiction alike, Kennedy remains a model for a successful politician and a brave citizen.

Besides his appreciative, if brief, mention of Kennedy and deprecatory representation of Lyndon Johnson in *The Armies,* and in *An American Dream,* Mailer—unlike Vidal—does not devote great fictional space to American presidents in general. His interest however is more drawn to foreign leaders and rulers like the Russian Tsars and the German Fuhrer (may be more than Vidal who also celebrated Roman emperor Julian the Apostate in an eponymous novel and Darius of Persia in *Creation*). We can thus only speculate that Mailer looked for

charismatic and powerful leaders who overshadow their disappointing American counterparts in terms of courage, determination and influence. Another possible perspective from which one may observe this Romantic tendency in Mailer to favour the distant in geography and the far-away in history is less political and more psychological, one which underlines Mailer's often pointed at reputation as a radical, self-assertive and violent tough guy who stabbed his wife and helped release a convict who killed again. Because Mailer could not find a match among American presidents—not even in the belligerent Jackson and the indulging Johnson—who are to him quite dull and effeminate weaklings, he sought the evil, extreme persona which embodies the proclivities he cherished and prescribed in some of his works, particularly in his audacious essay, "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster".

### 2.2.2. Politics of War in *Why Are We in Vietnam?*

Norman Mailer didn't obtain the Purple Heart like Tim O'Brien and did not participate in the fray of the Vietnam War. However, he had first-hand experience of the second World War (an even more intense one than Vidal's) when he participated as infantry rifleman in the American Pacific campaign (the Philippines and Japan), and thus has been ever since particularly drawn to the theme of war. *The Naked and the Dead* is basically a war novel, if not one of the best that emerged out of the Second World War. Following this masterpiece, Mailer kept revisiting and exploiting the war theme in many of his fictional works and non-fiction too. Whether it was in Vietnam or in the Middle East, Mailer seldom failed to focus his imaginative skills on war. *An American Dream, Barbary Shore, Deer Park, Why Are We in Vietnam?* and *The Armies* are one and all concerned, in different ways and varying degrees,

with one war or another, and so is his *Why Are we at War?* Moreover, in *Advertisement for Myself* (1959) and elsewhere, Mailer never tries to hide his interest in the wild and fierce, the cruel and savage, and war is a situation where most of these are at play. The representation of war in Mailer is therefore quite rewarding in solidifying his treatment of presidents.

In *Barbary Shore,* published at the height of the McCarthy paranoia, the protagonist is so traumatised by the war he cannot tell us much about it. Reminiscent of Mailer himself at the time when he started writing *The Naked and the Dead,* Mikey Lovett is a handsome young man of about twenty-five years of age, returning from active engagement in World War II and bent on writing a novel. Besides the visible wound mark behind his ear, and the hidden scar on his back, Mikey brought home from battlefield both his beautiful, tampered with, features and the incapacity to remember the past. A total amnesiac, his mind plays so many tricks on him that he no longer distinguishes the historical facts he might have witnessed from the figments of his own inflamed imagination which is so fuelled by readings and conversations. He says: "I could never judge whether something had happened to me or I imagined it so" (4). In fact war stories are difficult to remember even for normal soldiers. O'Brien claims that "In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. When a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes and duck and float outside yourself…" (*The Things They Carried* 176). Mikey could equally be victim of a downed jet plane or a rocketed tank, an inmate of an orphan institution, or an educated and privileged boy. For him all time is the present, and this handicap is not without its advantages and benefits.

Half through the story, Mikey, so depressed and bored, retires to his bed and delves into imagining the most exceptional events (*Barbary Shore* 161). War being chief among these,

one page and a half are devoted to his views thereupon. He claims that the world is heading to a new war, regardless of people's refusal to "suffer a hungry belly" or to "be blown to bits"—a war fought by dispirited unwilling soldiers who are intricately involved all the same because "men enter into social and economic relations independent of their wills".[1] Almost everyone believes in the fatality of war but no two individuals agree on the reasons thereof. It could be anyone of the following: the stupidity of our leaders or those of our opponents, the mysterious ways of God or the selfishness of Man, the abundance of machines or the lack thereof. Nor is there agreement on the strategy to counter war except that it is one and only: more selfishness, more liberty, less selfishness, less liberty, a big army, less taxes, anything and everything. If these millions share anything beside their expectation of war, it is their hard-earned conviction of the insolubility of the question. One thing is sure whoever the enemy is. All that is left is a wealth of patriotism burnished with anger.

Conversely, the narrator in *Why Are we in Vietnam?*,[2] and arguably Mailer too, seems to be quite certain about the reasons that led to the Vietnam war. *WWVN* is a novel that stands out of the rest of Norman Mailer's oeuvre with its original structure and unusual formal characteristics. Indeed, it is not easy to read the novel and comprehend the extended allegory as well as the numerous allusions. The book is challenging and very complex at various

[1] This is one of the quotes Mikey remembers from former experience and previously studied books. It is reminiscent of a statement in Karl Marx's *The Critique of Political Economy* (1859): "In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will".

[2] Henceforth abbreviated to *WWVN*.

levels, especially the language which Mailer decided to make shockingly profane in an attempt to match the vulgar reality as he saw it. This language is reminiscent of what Mailer describes in "The White Negro" as "the language of Hip", i.e. a special language that cannot be taught to those who haven't gone through the peculiar and intense experience of exhaustion that it describes, and thus looks to them as vulgar and profane; an artful language that is "different in kind from white slang, as different as the special obscenity of the soldier which in its emphasis upon "ass" as the soul and "shit" as circumstance, was able to express the existential states of the enlisted man" (285). It was a language, though, that was scathingly criticised by critics as a barrier to comprehension. As to the narrative techniques, Mailer alternates between first and third person points of view so as to demonstrate the duplicity of the narrator's identity, a young privileged white Texan sometimes, and his alter ego at other times: a black man from Harlem. Moreover, Mailer opted for a rejection of the comforts of linearity and settled with hallucinatory stream-of-consciousness that is framed within a preface, eleven chapters, and eleven short "Intro Beeps". The disruption of form corresponds with both the polarised, obscene American mind that led to the Vietnam War and the disruption of American society resulting from it. Furthermore, the personal pronoun "we" in the title question has nothing to do with the characters of the novel as none of them is actually in Vietnam, although the youth amongst them are said at the very end to be heading there. It rather refers to the involvement of Americans in general, and the U.S. Army in particular, in the Vietnam war. That is why the story is not set in South-East Asia but in the wild and far-away Alaska. The events of the hunting experience are narrated two years after they took place, at the farewell party given to DJ and Tex as they get ready to leave.

Mailer asked the title question because it was topical and urgent, and because he aimed to fulfill the task of a "true intellectual" that was stipulated by Edward Said and other leading

theorists, i.e. “speak truth to power”. Not many intellectuals were brave enough to ask the right question. They rather inquired about how to win the war or what forestalled that achievement. In order to grasp the risks in stock for nay-sayers, one has but to remember the high price the few dissenters and opponents had to pay for daring to counter the Government’s tendencies. McCarthy had certainly been swept out of the political arena by then, but his witch-hunting methods and denigrating strategies were still in place.

*WWVN* is meant to address a number of political, social, and cultural problems America suffers from. It is definitely an outcry against an aggressive form of capitalism, ignorance, machismo and elitism, but mainly a criticism of a related phenomenon, i.e. American imperialism, which led and is manifested in the U.S. involvement in the quagmire of Vietnam. Mailer enumerates a set of deviations as possible answers to the title question, including the traumatic lack of political vision, and the misconception of valour as sheer violence and of American exceptionalism as dependent on brutish capitalism and power rather than on freedom. In a much later book written on the invasion of Iraq, namely *Why Are We at War*? (2003), Mailer reiterates his assertion that “the newly invigorated notion of American exceptionalism, increasingly reliant on corporate capitalism and the notion of superiority as opposed to liberty, is turning America into a nation of ‘cultural barbarians’” (McKinley xvii). Furthermore, Mailer takes issue in this lamentation novel with the “machismo” that is embedded (sometimes hidden) in the cultural values of America.

The novel is an indirect indictment of war, every war, although it directly alluded to the one in Vietnam. The American invasion of Vietnam had been so significant to Mailer that he didn’t directly deal with it in this novel which brandishes its name. It is mentioned only on the last page because it was so disastrous that the author had to step back and keep a safe distance for better comprehension, and preferred to portray, not its events and atrocities, but rather the

factors which induced some American young men, like the two Texan friends, to get recruited and mobilised instead of being the dispirited, unwilling soldiers Mikey broods about in *Barbary Shore* or trying to avoid the draft like many American celebrities including Muhammad Ali for instance. Just like *The Castle in the Forest* where the reader sees no castle whatsoever because, as the narrator explains, it only exists in the minds of some ironical, witty detainees to refer to the potato field where the Nazis imprison them, Vietnam is not manifest in the novel at hand but its brutal episodes are deep-seated in the psyches of the protagonists even before it broke out.

The two teenage friends push their barbarian hunting passion and the quirks of their adventurous demeanour a step further. “Gooks” will thus replace caribous, wolves, bears and big game in general. Alaska started to lose its wildness and savage appeal due to the ever-increasing number of tourists and hunting expeditions, but Vietnam didn’t. Just like in a video game, it offered an advanced and more challenging stage in the hunting experience than venturing bare-handed into the frozen territories of Alaska, which is in itself a stage higher than hunting with the necessary rifles. In the light of Frederick Jackson Turner’s theory about the importance of “the Frontier” in understanding both the American psyche and American history, one may argue that fighting in Vietnam was the newest hunting “frontier” the way outer space had become the new settling “frontier” for President Kennedy a few years earlier.

The fact that Randy D. J. Jethroe and Tex Hyde volunteered to fight in Vietnam does not mean that most American young men equally wanted to join the army and participate in wars abroad. D. J. is unique and non-representative of his young male compatriots due to a particular upbringing within a harshly capitalistic, corporate entourage presided over by his brutal, narrow-minded industrialist father, and Mailer tried to explain his uniqueness and relate it to a trend in American popular culture. Moreover, the tendency of American voters to

venerate war heroes does not imply that the public always supported involvement in international military conflicts and welcomed the decision to draft the youth and send them to distant hostile territories. The admiration of war heroes and the inclination to vote for them were in fact inculcated by the political parties, the establishment, the subservient press, and popular culture as well. It can be confidently argued as well that Mailer specifically opted for Texan characters in this novel so as to refer to, and compare with Lyndon Johnson, the Texan president who was responsible for escalating the war in Vietnam, and whose type of character is mostly represented by Rusty, the protagonist's father. Part of Johnson's image in the public opinion, the one that shows him as a brutish, imposing, macho president, is explicitly confirmed and illustrated in this book. It is in keeping with Mailer's view of him as a modern dictator without vision who "sent American soldiers to Vietnam to distract from problems at home and to compensate for his own shortcomings" (McKinley xv); a view that was already demonstrated in other works like *The Armies*.

*Why Are We in Vietnam?* is not a historical novel, but in it (and in *Barbary Shore* too) Mailer agrees with some revisionist historians like Howard Zinn who argues in his classic *A People's History of the United States* that the majority of Americans refused U.S. involvement in the wars abroad (particularly WWI and Vietnam war). In a chapter significantly titled "War is the Health of the State", he pointed out the tremendous efforts of Wilson's administration and the Supreme Court, supported by a manipulative biased press, to suppress all forms of resistance to participation in "the Great War",

> The government had to work hard to create its consensus. That there was no spontaneous urge to fight is suggested by the strong measures taken: a draft of young men, an elaborate propaganda campaign throughout the country, and harsh punishment for those who refused to get in line…Despite the rousing words of

> Wilson about a war 'to end all wars' and 'to make the world safe for democracy', Americans did not rush to enlist. A million men were needed, but in the first six weeks after the declaration of war only 73,000 volunteered. Congress voted overwhelmingly for a draft (364).

Indeed, the first world war was one of the least popular and most resisted, especially when compared to WWII which could at least be disguised as a defence of liberties and democracy against fascism and authoritarianism. Wilson's administration had to make a lot of efforts and spend a big deal of money on propaganda and the manufacturing of public opinion to propagate the zeal of the industrialists and the political leaders amongst the masses and promise progress and well-being.

There is no evidence that the tactics and strategies of the American government to build support for war abroad have changed during the Vietnam war. Lyndon Johnson followed in the footsteps of the Wilsonian government which opted about five decades earlier for draconian measures to incriminate those who escaped the draft and opposed involvement in the first world war, like the *Espionage Act* that was passed by Congress in June 1917 not to counter foreign spies as its name might suggest, but to intimidate those who spoke or wrote against the war. The Act trampled on the freedom of expression and of speech causing 900 people to be sentenced to many years in prison, especially Socialists like Eugene Debs who delivered a rhetorical speech across the street from the jail where three of his friends were imprisoned for evading the draft one year after its passage: "Wars throughout history have been waged for conquest and plunder … The master class has always declared the wars; the subject class has always fought the battles…" (qtd. in Zinn 367). *The Espionage Act* clearly unheeded the First Amendment to the Constitution stipulating that "Congress shall make no

law… abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or of the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances".

# CHAPTER THREE:

# FRIENDS OR FOES? AMERICAN INTELLECTUALS AND POLITICAL DISSENT

Intellectuals have always been an essential part of U.S. presidential election campaigns, and their relationship with politics always complex and problematic. Besides, politics is mainly about people; it is they —politicians— who run the institutions, execute the policies, and issue the laws. They are party leaders, senators, Presidents, as well as politically-committed intellectuals. The latter serve several functions as election campaign directors and journalists; they are either pro status quo, i.e. usually carrying out plans and strategies to embellish in the public eye the image of the politicians (presidents in particular) who employ them; or dissenters who oppose, comment on, and question the political operation alongside the corresponding mainstream views and common beliefs. The present chapter aims to display the different political positions taken by various types of intellectuals (ranging from apologetic attitudes to outright dissent), and their relationship with power institutions, starting with a clarification of the difference between "intellectual politicians" and "intellectuals in politics."

## 3.1. Intellectual Politicians or Intellectuals in Politics?

### 3.1.1. Uneasy Relationship: Intellectuals and Presidents in America

All American presidents are not mere practical politicians with the necessary aptitude to lure the public to elect them to office, or convince the executive branch to support them. Some of them are intellectuals in the sense of well-read and well-educated individuals, college professors and philosophers, like Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, James Garfield, Woodrow Wilson, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama. Yet, presidents and intellectuals had always been two distinct groups. Because American presidents enjoyed varying degrees of support amongst intellectuals and vice versa, it is quite rewarding to consider those

degrees, and comment on the many American intellectuals who took to politics in its limited sense of seeking or holding office. This will serve as an introduction to the analysis of the representation of "intellectuals in politics" in Vidal's and Mailer's novelistic output.

In his article, "All the Presidents' Brains", on the relationship between U.S. presidents of the last half a century and intellectuals, Tevi Troy underlines the crucial importance of the latter in shaping the perception of presidents by voters and by the public in both the short and long terms (267-270). These intellectuals influence the reputation of politicians in general and of presidents in particular by means of **media**, history books, and several other tools, yet they seem to be insufficiently aware of the desperate need for them that is felt and experienced by presidents and office holders, alike.

The term "intellectual" was arguably first used (within quotation marks) in America in 1899 by William James in a letter about the "Dreyfus affair" and the problematic relation between intellectuals and politics that the affair foregrounded. Therefore, politics was closely connected with the use of the term, but American intellectuals were, ironically, encouraged by the same philosopher to stay out of it (Draper 201-225).[1] They haven't always heeded the advice in the present century however, but rather flooded into politics. To the contrary of William James, Robert M. La Follette, a progressive politician and the Governor of Wisconsin, contacted many colleges to invite intellectuals to implement their knowledge and contribute at the local level to his state administration with advice and information. He conceived of the intellectual as adviser and leader of reform movements. However, this was

[1] I am mostly indebted to Theodore Draper's article "Intellectuals in Politics" in the following paragraphs.

not what Draper meant by "intellectuals in politics". Nor did he mean "dissenters", or intellectuals in ''revolutionary politics". He referred instead to the likes of Woodrow Wilson, Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski (1928- 2017), i.e. academics and university professors who went into actual politics and served in the government, or were even elected to the White House; not those who did no more than offering ideas and counsel, or exerting intellectual influence. Draper claims that the history of the coming of intellectuals into politics is a recent one, and that it needs a different narrative than the one defended by Richard Hofstadter in his famous *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963). At the very beginning of the American republic, with people like Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams, politics and intellectuals were reconcilable as most politicians were *intellectual* politicians. However, the Jacksonian Era (1828-1854) drifted politicians away from intellectuals so much so that each group disdained the other like Hofstadter claimed and generalised in the aforementioned book. Indeed, they become two distinct occupations. Draper explains that the United States had known intellectual politicians in its early decades rather than intellectuals in politics. He emphasised the distinction between the intellectual politician which is a type of politician, and the intellectual in politics which is a type of intellectual (202). Just as the politicians had become less and less intellectual, there was a more and more urgent need for intellectuals to enter politics.

It must be underlined that only at the turn of the twentieth century did intellectuals influx American politics. Woodrow Wilson, a professor of jurisprudence and political economy, left Princeton University to serve like Governor of New Jersey, then President of the United Sates. It was the Great War, however, which brought deep changes and contributed to the coming of intellectuals as experts to help guide American policy. One good example is "**Inquiry**"—a body that consisted of hundreds of scholars working to deal with negotiations and post-war

relations. There was always this cyclical nature, this "revolving door effect", to the phenomenon, however—intellectuals coming in and getting out of politics. After the First World War, intellectuals stepped back from politics and remained aloof up until the thirties, but the real breakthrough of the intellectuals' involvement in politics happened with Franklin Roosevelt who appointed experts and professors in several departments and to many offices, instead of the usual financiers, industrialists, and party leaders.[1] It has to be noted that it was the exceptionally dire economic crisis that dictated this change, rather than any sudden appreciation of the work and worth of intellectuals— a crisis that proved to be the midwife of that breakthrough for the intellectuals and experts (206), many of whom lectured Roosevelt on the changing situation and how to solve problems.

After the Second World War, with American involvement in many parts of the world, the expansion of government to many aspects of life, as well as Truman Doctrine and Marshal Plan, area study experts, social economists and economists were urgently needed to help firmly establish the new empire that was emerging in the wake of the destroyed European ones. It is true that *Brain Trust* was created for intellectuals to contribute and promote the New Deal in the thirties, but it was the Second World War that completed the work of urging intellectuals en masse into politics. It brought a new type of intellectuals who were not interested in domestic policies, financial reform, and criminal justice, but rather fascinated with, and devoted to foreign affairs—i.e., the foreign affairs intellectuals (208). The United States witnessed a development and sophistication in its foreign affairs and the new

[1] According to Arthur Schlesinger, there were not many literary intellectuals, critics or fiction writers in this invasion that started under Roosevelt: "they were mostly lawyers, college professors, economists, or social workers" (Qtd. in Draper 207).

intellectuals started to deal with international branches of economics, politics, and law, among other specialties. The intellectual in America, just like his country, rose to a status of great political influence. Intellectual support was accordingly essential for the empire to get sold out to the public at home, accepted and approved by observers abroad, and tolerated by the colonised indigenous communities, just like religions and ideologies have always profited from the services of proselytizing, apologetic intellectuals. Addressing the particular case of American imperialism which was boosted after W W II, Said confirms its need for adamantly supportive intellectuals to defend its values and ideology regardless of its basically economic nature: "Granted that American expansionism is principally economic, it is still highly dependent and moves together with, upon, cultural ideas and ideologies about America itself, ceaselessly reiterated in public" (*Culture and Imperialism* 289). Culture and ideology being their favourite playground, intellectuals are *sine qua non* for the success of the American imperial endeavour.

Soon afterwards, the intellectuals receded and felt rejected again (some claimed to have been persecuted) during the administrations of Truman and Eisenhower when C. Wright Mills was writing his book on power elites. Naturally, Mills didn't mention the intellectuals as holders of power, or part of the power elites. He contended that most of them exercise influence on the people in power rather than enjoy it themselves; i.e. intellectuals are merely "hired men", and they have more recurrently been used as a glossy cover for politicians to appeal and convince. However, the intellectuals surged again under Kennedy who was favoured by the most imminent amongst them. He is generally believed to be the American president who had the best relation with university professors and intellectuals in general. He could hire a few Harvard professors like Arthur Schlesinger and John Kenneth Galbraith to secure presidential nomination against heavy-weight liberal opponents like Hubert Humphrey

and Adlai Stevenson. Moreover, he selected Schlesinger as a personal assistant and an ambassador to the intellectual communities. According to his aide, Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy appointed more intellectuals than any other American president or European government. Furthermore, it was not just the white house in his time which appointed intellectuals to different offices, the Congress too was gradually infiltrated with elected intellectuals. It was not easy however after Kennedy to charm the intellectuals into devoted support for the presidential policies; it was a time of tension and of political and social crises in which the intellectuals were divided into two categories: "the conservatives" and "the liberals". This made it more challenging for U.S. presidents to capitalise on intellectual support, except for Nixon who made of Henry Kissinger an outstanding exception.

Many intellectuals and writers hankered for political power during the sixties, (just like Vidal who sought a Congress seat shortly before the election of Kennedy, and Mailer who sought New York city hall in 1969), yet a considerable number of them pushed away in Johnson's time because of the Vietnam war. Lyndon Johnson tried to cultivate and gain the favours of intellectuals like Kennedy had done before him, but his aide Jack Valenti was not hailed and admired the way Arthur Schlesinger had been. Johnson imputed this scorn to the fact that Jack comes from the wrong side of the Mason-Dixon line. Later, he had to hire Princeton professor Eric Goldman as ambassador to the intellectuals but this latter failed to win over the intellectuals again, to attract them to the White House Festival of the Arts, and to stop the few who attended (like Dwight MacDonald) from signing and circulating a petition against the American involvement in Vietnam. Ten weeks after that "scandal", Goldman left the White House and Johnson lost any hope of intellectual support for the rest of his presidency.

While "Johnson lost the intellectuals, Nixon never had them" (Draper 212). Many

intellectuals have been allergic to the Republicans, particularly since the New Deal (1933-1938), and Nixon was not particularly attractive to them, especially after the scandal of Watergate (1972-1974). Regardless of his different political party affiliation, Nixon chose Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a Democrat who served under both Kennedy and Johnson, for ambassador to the intellectuals. The Republicans did not like him however, even when he criticised the radical members of his own party. He was perfectly aware of his status as stranger and thus advised Nixon to breed a bunch of intellectuals in his own party, which Nixon heeded later. It must be admitted however that no other president allowed full autonomy and considerable power to an intellectual as Nixon did to Henry Kissinger (1923-2023) considering him "an intellectual genius" and a master negotiator of unequalled intelligence and stamina. Kissinger reached the highest point possible for his species (223), and only Brzezinski gained a somewhat comparable power in his capacity as National Security Advisor (1977-1981) under Jimmy Carter (1924-2024). The Georgian peanut farmer that he was, Carter thought he did not need eastern intellectuals to tell him how to act, so he ignored them for the three years preceding the disastrous hostage crisis in Iran, and the economic recession. Therefore, he was left exposed to harsh criticism and had to face political pressure on his own, naturally yielding in 1980 after one term only. It can safely be argued thus that presidents cannot do without intellectuals, if they don't want to be considered shallow and lacking a precise vision.

Tevi Troy asserts in his above-cited article that there are far more and better-compensated intellectuals today than in the past, that they enjoy stronger influence and have become more ambitious than ever before, and that ambition "makes them a potentially easy target for presidents" like Bill Clinton who had no scruples about exploiting it (268). He made it known among the intellectual circles that he was an avid reader, and tried to charm authors of new books and titillate their ego by displaying their works on his desk and inviting them to the White House to discuss their books. His aide, Sidney Blumenthal, was a good example of adopted, ambitious intellectuals who compromised independent analysis and free scholarship for party ideology. The growing ambition Troy discussed was behind the division of American intellectuals into two cadres ready to defend the acts and policies of their respective parties based on party affiliation. Clinton's extensive reading (allegedly four books a week) could not help him either create or change policy. He cultivated the centrist intellectuals in the Democratic Leadership Council who defended him later with a petition (signed by 412 intellectuals and professors) to prevent his impeachment, and prove it unconstitutional. In fact, Clinton disappointed them, dashed their expectations, and trusted his campaigner and political adviser, Dick Morris, more than anyone of them.

To sum up, the intellectuals who were engaged in politics never felt free. They contributed ideas and suggested alternatives but there was always a superior secretary who decided whether or not to implement those ideas. Moreover, once connected with power circles, intellectuals had to change their ideas and compromise their attitudes. They were obliged to give up and back down on some of their views expressed in books they published before their immediate involvement in politics; and learnt, like Wilson before them, to turn their backs against their formerly espoused principles and convictions. To illustrate, Kissinger's views on *détente* before he worked for Nixon as a Secretary of State are different from those he

defended during and after. He had to compromise his former conviction, expressed in "The Policymaker and the Intellectual" (1955), that the intellectual was needed for "endorsement" rather than insights and advice, and that he was unfairly treated and marginalized by the politicians. Moreover, Members of the "Brain Trust", including professors Rexford Guy Tugwell, Raymond Maloy, and Adolf A. Berle, felt like troubleshooters called to fix a temporary problem. Tugwell, for one, admitted before giving in to the temptation of Washington that he would lose much of his freedom and intellectual integrity as part of the administration; and that was exactly what happened. Tugwell later qualified himself as an "errand boy", and Moley, as Arthur Schlesinger narrates in *The Coming of the New Deal*, was asked to write speeches just as "if [he] were a plumber and a pipe needed fixing" (qtd. in Draper207). All of them came to recognize that the politicians' interests are not geared to the past, that they prefer policies looking at the future and the possible ramifications of present decisions. The Brain Trust intellectuals were then requested to serve three major functions: 1- producing ideas, 2- searching for talented employees, and 3- writing speeches. Worse, they sometimes served as scapegoats left by presidents and politicians to succumb on their own to harsh criticism, like Roosevelt did to Tugwell. Those intellectuals were mainly supportive of the government's policies, but how about dissenting intellectuals?

### 3.1.2. Conformists or Dissidents? Literary Intellectuals in American Politics

The definitions and descriptions of the intellectual (by Julien Benda, Antonio Gramsci, Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, Russell Jacobi and Edward Said for instance) surveyed in the theory section above show pretty well the different ways in which they are involved in politics. The literary intellectual is not exempt, he is mostly the writer in the limited sense of

producer of literature, i.e., poet, dramatist and novelist, but also the critic who tends in fact to be more associated in everyday usage with political opposition than the writer. One form of his opposition and dissent is the production of a Utopian work (either eutopia or dystopia) like *Brave New World* and *1984* to escape the confines of sordid realities, and the list of contributors to the sub-genre is so lengthy, including Hesiod, Ovid, Vergil, Horace, Aristophanes, Rabelais, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Butler, William Dean Howells, H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell. There are nonetheless outstanding examples of writers deeply involved in particular political crises like Emile Zola and his adamant position against the immortals of the Académie Française in the Dreyfus affair,[1] and Jean-Paul Sartre in the Algerian question. As to America, the often-evoked disjunction between literature and culture does not necessarily mean the literary intellectual's withdrawal from politics. Indeed, it paves the way to more or less radical positions like alienation, expatriation and bohemianism. There is a long tradition of American men of letters being particularly concerned with politics or opposing and denouncing the American political system, ranging from Henry David Thoreau and Edgar Allan Poe, to William Faulkner and Toni Morrison, and not ending with Thomas Pynchon and Norman Mailer. Refusal to pay taxes destined for war and enslavement, jeers on the concept of democracy, and the denunciation of the plight of the South (and the blacks) are a few examples of the writer's involvement and sometimes opposition to established political authority. This has not changed in the end of the twentieth century and the dawn of the twenty-first when the writer, as Edward Said stated in "The Public Role", "has taken on more and more of the intellectual's

[1] Noam Chomsky explains that the term "intellectual" emerged exactly then as a pejorative appellation denigrating those who thought Dreyfus was innocent (*Who Rules the World?* 5).

adversarial attributes in such activities as speaking the truth to power, being a witness to persecution and suffering, and applying a dissenting voice in conflicts with authority" (119).

The literary intellectual's political position is not only expressed in his acts and speeches, but also in his literature in general, and political novels in particular. Walt Whitman's belief, as expressed in "Democratic Vistas", that political literature corrects the social wrongs and leads to political reform is well validated in a number of very influential works by his contemporaries and later writers. Harriet Beecher Stowe's classic, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), led to the Civil War which was necessary to settle the moral issue of slavery for good; Edward Bellamy's often cited utopia, *Looking Backward* (1887), led to the immediate appearance of "a political mass movement" (Fromm vi) and induced the founding of the Nationalist Party as a pioneering American Socialist movement; and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) spurred corrective legislature on meatpacking industry ( the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act).William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967)is also a showcase in which he evokes the tragic story of the infamous "rebel" to address the modern question of violence and militancy in the Civil Rights Movement.

Many literary intellectuals in the inter-war years, however, refused to deign on politics, especially the formalists of all schools and denominations, including the Modernist writers who made it a matter of faith not to mind political context, teach a moral, or comment a real situation, and contented themselves with technique and the creation of art for art's sake à la Kant rather than art for society and Man à la Hegel. In all that concerns politics, they are neither dissenters nor conformists, but rather detached and aloof—in their literary works at least. Conversely, George Orwell insists in his essay "Why We Write" that writers often draw their motivation to write partly from the desire to push their current situation in a certain direction that is in accordance with their political convictions. While speaking of Henry

Miller, Orwell harangued those modernist writers who failed to address contemporary public events as "footlers" or plain idiots (212). Politically conservative as they mostly were in their private lives, the great writers of the twenties (James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, Lyndham Lewis, Aldous Huxley, for instance) emphasised form and language, and paid little attention in their literature to urgent political events. Therefore, a tendency to espouse and celebrate the meaningless gradually infiltrated the literary and "cultured" circles. A critical trend thrived which believed literature "to consist solely in the manipulation of words. To judge a book by its subject matter was the unforgivable sin, and even to be aware of its subject matter was looked on as a lapse of taste" (228). This tendency to eschew and warn against the "intentional" and "didactic" heresies was short-winded though, for the young writers of the following decade like Auden and Spencer, despite their connection with those of the twenties, brought along a radical change in the attitude towards politics and started to develop a sense of "serious purpose". They managed to constitute a distinct movement many of whose members shared an inclination towards the 'left', or were clearly influenced by Communism which managed for a short time to preside over the main stream of English literature (231).

In his survey of the political novel, Christopher Lehmann mentions post-Cold War works like Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1955), Joe Klein's *Primary Colors* (1992), Christopher Buckley's political satire *Thank you for Smoking* (1994), and Larry Beinhart's *The Librarian* (2004), most of which handle politics in a way that displeases him, and advance "a vision of politics as the squalid self-interested manipulation of events beneath the dignity of any sane moral actor" (41). Edward Said's diatribe against contemporary and modern-time intellectuals who failed to accomplish their task and became domesticated (mostly by the state and the university—among other agents) is not without pertinence, yet his

description of post-modernists who are out of touch with their surroundings, while it accurately qualifies some amongst them like Truman Capote, it fails to apply to others like Mailer and Vidal who could not be easily intimidated, nor did they refrain from getting involved in politics, not as bureaucrats and apologists but as dauntingly dissenting intellectuals.[1] Involvement in the political racket was not an easy endeavour however, especially for the dissenters who opposed the atmosphere of orthodoxy. They learnt the lesson that politically-committed writers would be obliged either to "toe the line" or "shut up". Likewise, American politicians and press during the Cold War kept warning the public against the Red Scare and the dormant cells of Communist activists and intellectuals, as pointed out by Mailer and Vidal in *Barbary Shore* and *Washington D.C.* respectively

## 3.2. Intellectuals and Political Opposition in Mailer's *Barbary Shore*

Many of Mailer's works and activities were carried out and completed within a clearly political context, they were a consequence of his deep involvement in politics as vividly manifest in the two following crucial acts. First, the publication of his essay, "The White Negro", in which he pays tribute to the sub-culture put in place by the "hipsters", and the

[1] For all their known, reciprocal "animosity", Vidal refers in Palimpsests to Mailer's noble support for Henry Wallace in the 1948 election and admits that in the fifties, "no writer of my generation was truly political except Norman Mailer". Paradoxically, he claims elsewhere in the same book that "Mailer's studies in Harvard ill-fitted him for literature and politics".

rebels and psychopaths, defining the white hipster as a non-conformist who shares numerous traits with the "negro" in his own view and in the eyes of his society. The hipster is not always an intellectual, yet Mailer's interest in him reveals his vehement opposition to the socio-political status-quo. Second, in his capacity as president of PEN (an international organization that strives to keep the State away from literature and to stop it from intimidating writers), Mailer invited Secretary of State, George Schultz (1920 - 2021), to its conference on "The Imagination of the Writer and the Imagination of the State", held in 1986when America expressed the intention to ban some literary works from schools. Mailer, whose reputation as trouble-maker was then well-established, raised striking controversy by the said invitation that was seen by some as an involvement of the state in literary affairs, i.e. a breach of the policy and character of PEN. However, Mailer was quite outspoken and vehement during the said conference in his opposition to Schultz's logic, and in carrying out the task of the rational and committed dissenting intellectual.

In "Norman Mailer and the Radical Text", Kathy Smith explains how Mailer disagreed for instance with Schultz's belief that the individual is one category and the state quite another—a belief that insinuates that the writer had better operate in his own realm of fiction and imagination instead of trespassing the confines of a domain not his own (177). Mailer asserted, instead, the existence of movement between the two categories. The state for him is a living body rather than a mere shadow (178); it acts as a dynamic organism whose imagination (the imagination of state), following Hegel, produces our historical consciousness. "When states begin to perceive themselves as protagonists, that is to say, as embodiments of a creative vision, we may be entitled to speak not only of the imagination of the state, but to perceive of such states as actors in a scenario, or characters in a novel" (qtd. in Smith 177). Furthermore, Mailer believes that the state often intervenes in the domain of

the writer, that is why PEN exists in the first place, and the writer may play within the boundaries of the state either as a conformist or a dissenter.

### 3.2.1. Opposed yet Similar: The Radical Marxist versus the Federal Agent

Norman Mailer's afore-mentioned contribution to Henry Wallace's campaign sharpened his political wits and radicalized his views—a radicalization that was reflected in his second novel, *Barbary Shore* (1951). In striking contrast with his first, this one was poorly reviewed.[1] It is the story of young Mikey (or Mike) Lovett, the narrator who survived World War II with the dear, debilitating price of amnesia, and who comes to Brooklyn to write a novel where he meets a number of housemates including priggish Hollingsworth, cynical Marxist William McLeod, nymphomaniac landlady Beverly Guinevere, and unstable Lannie Madison. In the scope of thirty-three chapters (312 pages), the novel unfolds its details in a more professional jargon and offers a very different formal experience than that of *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), despite the fact that they are very kin thematically. This is not to claim it is form-oriented or flagrantly experimental with structure. The novel still focuses on themes and ideas that are mainly derived from the Marxist ideology(ies), given that Mailer's political teacher, Jean Malaquais was a great influence as well as a model for one character in the novel (Leigh 85).[2] Indeed, in parts (Chapter 29, for instance) the book seems to be a mere pretext for Mailer to voice his opposition to capitalism. It is about the amnesiac effects of the

[1] As to Gore Vidal, he confesses in *Palimpsests* that he had never finished, but liked the second (238).

[2] Nigel Leigh makes 'strong influence' almost synonymous with 'only cause' as he claims that Malaquais is the catalyser and driving force behind the scripting of the text (85). He tends at times to jump to far-fetched conclusions and interpretations without sufficient evidence or unequivocal illustration.

Second World War on one soldier, Mikey Lovett, who presently shows little interest in professional politics. Mikey does recount now and then a recollection of his early ardent embrace of a radical anti-capitalist organisation aiming to bring about a workers' revolution, and his well-merited distinction as the most zealous among its "study group" (125). He speaks about reading almost every word that had been written and listening to every message that had been delivered by its leader in Mexico—Leon Ttrotsky. Occasionally, when alone in his room, Mikey broods about politics, and on a particular occasion of lucid reflection and of remembrance all the previously learnt lessons and the formerly-espoused ideas suddenly pour down on him.

It can be fairly pointed out that although Mike Lovett admits unsuitability to reason methodically and consistently due to long social and economic isolation, he is shown to spend more than an hour in a stupor-like state "throwing pebbles into the mind's pool" (220); using and struggling with half-forgotten lessons, definitions and ideas that, as remnants of his past and of his vast reading, suddenly overwhelm him; and reconstructing what he cannot remember. He then delivers to the reader a well-articulate monologue that translates his thoughts and that can fairly be deemed an exposition of the communist ideology, complete with communist jargon (e.g. 'labourer', 'machine', 'factory', 'investment', 'labour-power' and 'wage'), and laced with an acrid indictment of the mobilisation of armies and of the declaration of wars to advance capitalism. Being a victim of the Second World War, he has, on the one hand, no doubt about the imminence of a third one that tries to solve the internal contradictions of the capitalist state; and, on the other hand, is quite pessimistic and cynical about the aftermath of the predicted Socialist revolution. As regards the latter, he contends that the laborers will be miserably disappointed about their party and their revolution because they will end up as mere wage-slaves:

> Their party which came to power the workers would think, and discover that the state was not their instrument but their master. An association of free producers and free consumers they once had demanded, and now would exist in a wage-relation to the party and to the state. The international co-operation of the nations they had sung, and one half of the world would fight the other. Socialist freedom, the greatest conception of freedom, and for substitute they would be granted the enslavement of regimented labor, the saturation of the working-class mind to propaganda until even the mating bed became a duty. There had been a heritage but it was given away, and the labor boss, the hack, and the Fabian devoured it among themselves. Moneybags would die, but not by the ax; slowly he would perish and of his own contradictions, simmering away in the wars he had cooked with their juice as sauce. That way it would come, or thus I saw it, and the armies of the swindled would bleed each other for slogans that became ever more similar (219).

As usual with Mikey's recollections however, one does not know, due to his amnesia, whether the event really happened or was just another figment of his imagination, narrated with panache and in metaphorical language.

Mikey, however, is far from mimetic of the dissenting intellectual; he could have been anything in his early young age but an intellectual, and the readers can only trust the present time of the novel and the events that unfold before their eyes. The only major characters in

this novel that unquestionably qualify for the epithet of "intellectual" in its general large sense are William McLeod and Leroy Hollingsworth, two neighbours of Mikey whose attitudes to the government in place are diametrically opposed. One of them is a dangerous fanatic dissenter and the other an extreme supporter and a secret agent. In chapter nine, Hollingsworth who is not yet discovered to be an investigating agent plays modest and, pointing at the "so many big books" on McLeod's shelf (79), qualifies him as an intellectual, then questions him in what seems like utmost innocence bordering on naivety, and allegedly for self-education purposes, about his political leanings and his position regarding free enterprise and Bolshevism. McLeod, having told Mikey earlier that he had spent about twenty years in the Communist Party (121), responds with condescension, sarcasm and radical acridity to the questioner's very direct questions, and to his tactless manners that were put in absolute evidence when he produced a pencil and pad of paper from his jacket to record the answers. McLeod takes him and his questions lightly, and even jokes about the necessity to assassinate the president and to imprison the congressmen:

> You might say that I am against free enterprise because it sucks the workers dry, turns man upon his brother, and maintains the inequities of a class society. This poison may only be met with poison, violence with violence. A campaign of vigorous terrorism must be undertaken to wrest the seats of power from the buh-geoisie (sic). The president must be assassinated, and the congressmen imprisoned. The State Department and Wall Street must be liquidated, libraries must be burnt, and the filthy polluted South must be destroyed nigh unto the last stone with the exception of the Negroes' (79-80).

Besides, McLeod has no qualms about making a remarkably long political speech that reads like a diatribe of Capitalism and an exposure of its evils (273- 286) addressed to an

investigating, incriminating Hollingsworth in the presence of both Mikey and Lannie.

Although Hollingsworth is shown to read mostly pornography and light literature, he is definitely an intellectual, at least in Gramsci's traditional sense, as demonstrated in the way he interpolates now and then with interesting political views, like the one on democracy and how it makes the stupid people happy, provided they do not know that they are in fact "swindled" (274-75). Little did McLeod know, any more than the protagonist, or the reader for that matter, that Hollingsworth was very earnest and cunning, that his strategy was to play fool in order to induce McLeod to make revelatory confessions and pronounce self-incriminating statements. He is an intellectual who is not just pro-government but also serves as a tool to expose and oppress the dissenters. Hollingsworth's success was complete as the interviewee proceeded and made the awful mistake of pledging allegiance to a foreign power. When asked to hand over the pad of sordid, serious, matter-of-factly notes he had written about McLeod's alleged atheism, Communism, Bolshevism, advocacy of violence, and other charges Hollingsworth half-heartedly agreed. Even after reading them however, McLeod (as well as Mikey) failed at first to take it as anything but a joke, and "chuckled without merriment" (81). He still failed to have doubts regardless of the investigative jargon about the value of the confession and the cooperativeness of the interviewee, and when Hollingsworth defended his note on McLeod's alleged readiness to administer poison (which McLeod denied) the latter gave in at last with very little resistance. Eventually Hollingsworth tore up the pad upon his departure while McLeod laughed at his foolishness. To the surprise of the reader and the protagonist alike, he finally reached the conclusion that, silly as he was, Hollingsworth must had come from some inquisitive party: "One thing I'd like to find out, …Which team does he come from?" (83). Therefore, even though Hollingsworth claims to be apolitical with some leaning towards liberalism (274), one should not believe him for he claims so many things

that are not all true and verifiable (to fool his interviewees?). He is arguably a McCarthyan creature, a *chien de garde* (in Paul Nizan's words), bent on curbing the "Red Scare" and on tracing and intimidating the communists.

In Gramsci's diction, McLeod is an "organic intellectual" who serves the interests of the proletariat, while for Jacoby he is one example of the "paradigmatic public intellectual" because he holds such radical democratic ideas, is independent from all forms of institutional power, takes sides and "adopts positions on public affairs" following personal analysis and judgment, and finally, uses clear intelligible language rather than esoteric jargon. Hollingsworth, on the other hand, is definitely a "traditional" one who propagates the dominant mainstream world-view. He is a bureaucrat who totally conforms to the state capitalism of his country, and McLeod is a radical opposition intellectual who writes against the political systems in two seemingly contradictory world powers, but the two are not extreme opposites as it might look on the face of it. As Leigh explains, radical intellectuals, whether conformists or dissenters, are diametrically opposed only for the inexperienced observer. Regardless of their manifest opposition and apparent enmity, Hollingsworth and McLeod are two bureaucrats with many points in common though serving two opposite systems:

> There are two forms of bureaucratic power in *Barbary Shore* which are the focus of Mailer's political concern. The first is American and embodied by Leroy Hollingsworth, a representative of secret government agencies; the second is European and associated with William McLeod (or his past behaviour) and the period of Russian history from the 1917 Revolution to Trotsky's assassination and the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact (Leigh 87).

McLeod was once as conformist as Hollingsworth, if to another system, namely the Soviet Union. Then, he defects and seeks exile in the United States. McLeod is thus a further phase of development in the career of bureaucratic intellectuals, a former conformist who, like Mailer himself, lost faith in Socialist revolution after the pact with the Nazis in 1939 and the assassination of Trotsky one year later.

Given Mailer's little patience with the professional intellectual and the specialized bureaucrat, his criticism of the standardization of fields of cultural practice that was due essentially, as Kathy Smith explains, to the fact that he was himself an engineer turned novelist, there is no doubt as to Mailer's preference. McLeod is certainly Mailer's favourite intellectual in the novel, as he resembles his mentor, Malaquais, in many respects, personal as well as intellectual. However, McLeod is more lucid and consistent in his beliefs than his creator. He can easily be described as a radical "post-Marxist", whereas Mailer's ambiguous position looms somewhere in the vague and hazy area between Marxism, Trotskyism, and post-Marxism.

### 3.2.2. Apologetic Attitudes, Socialism, and "Treason"

There exists, however, between the two radical positions of McLeod and Hollingsworth a middle, "moderate" one that pleases neither; a position that is held by the condescending socialist who learns to serve as an apologetic intellectual. No character in the novel is an apologist, for this type is not literarily represented by Mailer, but rather described and talked about by one of his characters. The reader has no insight into this type if not via the words of McLeod who asserts that he is in vogue today. Less scorned and vilified than the radical communist and more tolerated by the establishment, the sophisticated apologist unfailingly

admits what has to be admitted, that socialism is not in power, that it can serve the people. He has learnt as well to attenuate his take on state capitalism and ridicule the revolutionary streak in the communist ideology so as to justify the status-quo. He wastes no time to explain to McLeod and his likes that the revolution may never come as "the proletariat" has failed and may always fail to gain enough political consciousness; that the revolution is not a top priority for this present generation, nor is the lamentation of distasteful modern capitalistic trends like militarisation and standardisation. As to the ideals of equality and freedom, the apologetic intellectual claims that the one is an illusory dream that has never existed, while the latter is a luxury that may never exist independently from the context of wealth and leisure. What needs urgently to be done is learn to accept "standardisation", think of the future, and help the economic system establish a production "world plan" that can save civilisation and feed the hungry masses. The apologetic socialist would then proceed to question the very foundations of socialist ideology, and emphasise the merits of its opposite world-view:

> We have overestimated human nature. It is impossible for such a plan to provide the equality of socialism, but what matter? It's the mass who must be fed and in an orderly fashion or the world is destroyed. Our problem is not to end exploitation but to resolve contradictions in the economic structure. Indeed, we may have been wrong all the time, and the bourgeoisie have been right. Man is only capable of founding societies based on privilege and inequality (*Barbary Shore* 273-4).

Blowing the trumpets of the bourgeoisie, the apologetic intellectual also defends militarisation, exaggerates the odds of avoiding war, and plays down its eventual evil results if it comes to pass.

This type of "lightweight" socialist is biased and dishonest. McLeod explains to his audience that the claim to objectivity and impartiality often embraced by the apologist is so false, a mere pretence by a sordid realist who cannot help espousing the cause of one side or another, and hoping for its victory in the upcoming war. He qualifies the logic underlying the apologist's argument as attractively superficial and complete nonsense (275). Therefore, the apologist (or apologetic intellectual) as portrayed by McLeod is closer to Benda's concept of "treason", as, in the name of realism, he miserably fails to denounce exploitation and to defy the authorities. The tendency to extol civilization and nationalism as well as the abandonment of disinterested thought and of abstract, eternal values are so manifest in his argument; they showcase his utter failure to complete what Benda believes is the true mission of the intellectual, i.e. the protection of the most universal, humane and moral values.

However, it is not as easy to classify the apologist within either of Sartre's two categories, i.e. true intellectuals and false intellectuals. He clearly abstains from exposing the divide between truth on the one hand and the dominant ideology that is based on injustice, oppression and exploitation on the other. He refrains from asking disturbing questions and thus is by no means a true intellectual. Nor is he a false intellectual for that matter, because McLeod does not show him to be a physician or a lawyer or a teacher or a "*technicien du savoir pratique*", even while, like them, he is an agent of hegemony and an adamant supporter of the socio-political status-quo. In being that, the apologist bears resemblances to Russell Jacoby's coteries of academic bureaucrats who have given up interest and concern over social change and social betterment, although not necessarily driven by a desire for wealth and power. To sum up, Mailer uses these intellectual characters to vent some of his own frustration that was also announced in his non-literary and public activity.

While thematically-informed (rather than aesthetically-conceived and inspired), *Barbary*

*Shore* is yet to precise its politics and stabilize its stance beyond the obvious commitment of its author to radical social philosophy (Leigh 84), a commitment that is confirmed by the manifest honesty of the novel and its tangible political superiority to the former one, but does not suffice as yet to mark him as an accomplished political thinker and fail to obliterate Malaquais' view of him as ignorant and naïve.

## 3.3. Literary Intellectuals and Political Dissent in Vidal's *Washington D.C.*

As to the representation in Gore Vidal's fiction of more recent forms of the literary intellectual's coming to terms with politics, and the degree of their success, one needs to remember that he was himself a self-proclaimed literary intellectual with a long familial and personal tradition of political involvement who ably, if humorously, implemented "the historical novel" to expose and trace the history of American imperialism back to the Founding Fathers.[1] Apart from intellectual presidents (and politicians) like Woodrow Wilson (whom he admits to dislike due to family tradition), Vidal represents in his novels plenty of characters which are either actual or fictional intellectuals. Some of them are conformists and supporters of the status-quo like Henry Cabot Lodge in *Washington D. C.* who was an assistant professor of history at Harvard University, then a Senator.[2] Others are clearly

[1] See Andrew Stewart, "Skip 'Hamilton' and Read Gore Vidal's 'Burr'."

[2] In his memoir, Vidal shows his surprise when his new friend, President of Guatemalan Congress, told him Senator Lodge was on the payroll of the owners of United Fruit. Mature Vidal was eventually disillusioned about that politician who, as Kennedy's ambassador to Vietnam, presided over the murder of the Diem brothers and, as a Senator, denounced the

political dissenters like Cyrus Spitama, the blind, half-Greek fictional narrator in *Creation* (1981) who served as Persian ambassador to Athens and who is very close to Xerxes, the tyrant of Persia who was also his classmate and full coeval. In his account of ancient times and past events, Cyrus ridicules the celebrated historians and philosophers of his time, putting the lie, for instance, to the stories of Herodotus, correcting many of the details the latter had advanced, and retelling (revisiting?) them in his capacity as eye witness (before losing sight). Indeed, Cyrus took issue with the whole Greek culture which lacked reverence for truth and highly valorised the art of the word and of manipulation with oratory instead. Herodotus is thus shown as one example of the many philosophers and intellectuals in both Greece and Persia (including Socrates, Pericles, the Cynics, and the Hagian priests) who served power at the expense of truth and integrity. He is indeed an epitome of the conformist intellectual.

While *Creation* tries to reproduce an image of the Hellenistic times, it is argued here that none of Vidal's novels about modern-time America comes any closer to *Washington D.C.* in its portrayal of both conformist intellectuals and radical opponents of American politics (although the noun "intellectual" occurs only twice in it), in its reference to, and sometimes commentary on major American writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, and D.H. Lawrence, but also its development of a few fictional literary intellectuals who are enmeshed in politics. The protagonist, Peter Sanford, is a daring, gluttonous, 16-year-old Washingtonian who succumbs simultaneously to burning sexual desires within and a raging storm without, and who opens the novel so apolitically for the curious reader. As son to a wealthy media tycoon, Blaise Delacroix Sanford, he hails from a hub of power and of influence, has inherited

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popularly elected, Arbenz (*Palimpsest* 119-120).

a fortune from his grandfather, and bought a moribund paper (*Washington Tribune*) which eventually becomes very successful. Peter's snobbish mother, Frederika, is a Socialite lady who throws prestigious parties at her mansion known all over Washington as the "Laurel House" (the term "laurel" being emblematic of victory and pride) where everybody speaks politics and blames the President. Her snobbery is so deep-rooted that it occasionally overrides her prejudices, witness her readiness to invite the Rothschilds and the Warburgs in spite of her well-known anti-Semitism. Peter learnt to admire Blaise but not to like him, and to like Frederika but not to admire her. His family has certainly inherited a fortune that was made in different parts of the world, but has not obtained a reputation for remarkable intellect, erudition, or conspicuous interest in ideas. The people Frederika invites are mostly the glamourous and the fashionable, the wealthy, famous, and powerful politicians, senators, actors, businessmen, but rarely any intellectuals.

The one politician often invited to the Laurel House that Peter likes most is the anti-Roosevelt Democrat Senator, Burden Day, who reminds him of graceful Roman senators. Peter was not yet into politics in the opening episodes of the novel, yet he confided to Day his dream to work in politics sometime in the future, to the dismay of the senator who tried to convince him that it was alright to "like" politics, but not to "practice" it because it is so humiliating:

> You must be accessible to every fool who wants to see you, since the only person who can never escape a bore is the man who needs his vote. Woodrow Wilson used to say that the worst thing about being President was continually being told things you already knew. Well, it is the same for all of us. And then, at the end,

> your place is taken by someone else and you're forgotten, and nothing you ever wanted to get done at the beginning seems anywhere near fulfillment. The lucky man is the one who dies during a victory, like Lincoln, though even he had that dream—what was it? Something about a ship in a dark sea, far from shore, lost (13).

Senator Day is tired of the facility with which everyone can reach and address a politician, and with which the latter gets replaced and forgotten, but also of the compromises that politics requires and thus the impossibility to get one's goals fulfilled. Eventually, Peter seems to agree, especially when both Day and his daughter Diana awaken him to the fact that he can major in journalism and then take over his father's paper as a "good way of being political, without pain" (13).

Peter is a round character that starts naive and simple then becomes more and more complex and multifaceted in the course of the novel. He learns so many things, develops a taste for numerous fields of study, and gradually metamorphoses from a child who confuses Lawrence of Arabia with D.H. Lawrence into a politically-committed journalist due mainly to his university readings and the influence of a few teachers.[1] In parallel with his expanding, fattening body and ever-developing appetite, Peter's knowledge grew wider and deeper with a special liking for American history, a liking his teacher wanted him in vain to invest into postgraduate studies, and to particularly specialise on Aaron Burr whose portrait decorates the drawing room at the Laurel House. Yet it is not Peter we think about when we think of

[1]Peter looked for true stories of adventure and bloodshed in exotic deserts, but ended up reading, and eventually admiring *Women in Love* (1920) instead.

intellectual characters in the novel, even though later in the book he becomes eloquent and knowledgeable, makes reference to Hegel, Kierkegaard and to deep concepts, and mocks government policies against Communism in an imaginary HUAC hearing (213). Indeed, it was under the persistence of Diana and her husband, Billy Thorne, a radical intellectual who approached him for money to start a political magazine in Washington, that Peter had the desire, then endeavoured to establish *The American Idea*. They still called him a "reactionary" at that time for his belief in the divine rights of kings (59-60), but they had a major impact on his eventual resolution to buy a house in a negro slum and make it both a headquarters for his paper and his living place where he would spend half the day in bed very busy on the phone, working and receiving mail.

Not all "journalists" are intellectuals. Indeed, for many intellectuals the term is debasing and vulgar. As to Peter, he remains a rich dilettante who basks in the protection of his father whose influence for instance made sure Peter would not leave the country during the war but rather have a good time in Florida training as a rifle man then get assigned to the Pentagon as a sergeant in intelligence whose task consisted mainly of putting pins on maps. He has never fully outgrown and relinquished an inflamed childish imagination and a streak of rich-boy amateurish behaviour. The once shy and plain, but now direct and rude Diana who changed after meeting Billy from supporting the New Deal to embracing radical communism is not the typical intellectual character either. Nor is any of the leading characters in the book who are mostly politicians like Clay Overbury, intriguing wealthy bosses like Blaise Sanford, or corrupt rich members like Frederika and Enid. Except Burden Day, that is.

Built on the image of Vidal's maternal grandfather, Oklahoma Senator T.P. Gore, James Burden Day is a major character (mentioned more than 700 times in the novel) that is rendered as an intellectual par excellence in terms of appearance and attire as well as

behaviour and interests. His looks, words and acts are typical of an intellectual, if not stereotypical. Even though well past his prime now, and regretful of the metamorphose of his former youthful, muscular, vigourously attractive shape into grey hair and slack rotundity (1), he is still admirably stately in his suit and polka-dot tie, meets the world with an attractive somberness of expression, and carries himself with beguiling dignity (8). An aristocratic public intellectual who believes in his duty to serve country and friends, witness the Platonic quotation framed on the wall, he is equally shown to often contemplate the portrait of Jefferson opposite his desk, and -when alone- even talk to and share secrets with a life-size bust of another republican from the ancient times, namely Cicero, ornamenting his office which stands apart from the usual offices of public figures in U.S. politics (21). Viewed by the conservative press as "he defender of the Constitution", Burden is always ready to explain it to whoever wants to listen, especially after his conflict with the president. At one point he is shown to lecture Billy Thorne on the unconstitutional nature of those financial bills issued by Franklin Roosevelt, like Lend-Lease, because the Executive is not allowed by the Constitution to initiate legislation, a prerogative of the Congress (81).

Burden Day likes to use in conversation an elevated vocabulary and a refined style even with crude politicians and with his aide, Clay, which—alongside his Emersonian face and saintly habits—distinguishes him from the lot and makes him sound like "a courtly old-fashioned statesman" (92). His remarkable characteristics of subtlety, ease, and a propensity to realism radiated early in his senatorial career and gained him the interest and then the welcome of the secret Senate organisation, known as The Club, right from the start when he was newly elected and still in his late thirties. "The Club took him in and showed him the machinery of power; even allowed him, occasionally, to manipulate the levels" (21). All throughout the time span of the novel, he is quite intent on bringing the President down so as

to replace him in the White House, and quite happy to have contributed to the opposition he faces and the unpopularity he succumbs to within his own party so soon after election. If he failed to get himself elected President like the idol looking down on him in the office, he is absolutely head and shoulders above most senators just like the historical model he was invented to represent—i.e., T.P. Gore. All things considered, Burden is a mildly oppositional intellectual politician, not a radical intellectual in politics. His margin of political opposition is inscribed within the boundaries of his party and the encapsulating political system which he wants to preserve as a potential president.

Less central to the main story are the intellectuals per se, namely Harold Griffiths, Billy Thorne, Duncan Aeneas and his New York cohorts, who are, unlike Burden Day and Blaise Sanford, not content with their opposition of Roosevelt's policies, of his New Deal, or of the Democratic Party. They are radical literary thinkers who are against the whole system, or former and present leftists from different various shades of the Communist spectrum.

### 3.3.1. Harold Griffiths and Apologetic Buffoonery

"What a perfect son of a b**ch!" (34)

It has been shown above that the apologetic intellectual in Mailer's *Barbary Shore* is not rendered by the novelist but rather explored by his protagonist, namely William McLeod. In Vidal's *Washington D.C.* however, he has an illustration and a name. The first impression the reader has of Harold Griffiths (mentioned just over 200 times, i.e. almost twice more than Billy Thorne and Aeneas Duncan) is that of a boring, extremist intellectual who delights in quoting Shakespeare to uninterested strangers. He is a poet too in a city that had little time

and patience for poems and poets, unless it be Ogden Nash (13).[1] He also attacks the whole political system, is full of hate, is barely happy with anything, and does not spare anybody from his scathing comments. Coming from New York, Harold has settled in Washington where he sings in parties sometimes, and manages to eke out a living as a movie critic (watching twenty films a day) and then a columnist for Blaise's paper, a job that made him well-known to theatre people and to the capital's Society at large. To a bored Clay who struggles in vain to remember his name, and tries to be polite with him just because his mistress Enid happens to like him, Harold let loose his dissatisfaction with the world, and describes Washington in the worst terms possible:

> I loathe the rich. I hate politicians. I despise scheming young men ... Most of all I hate politics. I hate the President. I hate Congress. The Supreme Court is particularly awful. I detest the military. The Diplomatic Corps should be liquidated, preferably with poisoned canapés. I loathe Washington, District of Columbia, gem of the swampland, home of the chigger, wreathed in its poison ivy, its belly stuffed with cabbage cooked in bacon grease and indigestible Virginia hams which taste like scrapings from the keels of sunken ships. Oh, let my hate give me eloquence! (33)

Similar acerbic confessions filled Clay and the whole lot of Washingtonian audience with

[1] Frederic Ogden Nash (1902-1971) was a well-known American humorous poet whose poems explored unconventional rhyming schemes. Some of his famous witty pieces include "A Word to Husbands", "The Cow", and "The Politician."

dismay and offense with the short condescending New Yorker.

Clay was at once disgusted with Harold whom he had no doubt was a communist, and he hated to be considered guests by the other friends with such an "extraordinarily unpleasant creature". He could not contain his hatred, and eventually implied that he understood why people were bored with Harold when he referred to Shakespeare in a city that cared very little for anything that was not immediately familiar, i.e. mentioned in the morning papers. Harold admitted the accusation with laughter and merriness, and confessed that he bored even himself (34). He seemed to have barely any self-respect, when Clay asked him about the reason he had stayed in a city he despised that much, he evoked, among other vices, his weakness, his corruption, absence of purpose, avarice, and admiration of the company of savages. Clay's utter revulsion grew to a degree it had never reached in long years when Harold referred to Burden Day (Clay's master) as "fraudulent" and then teased him with the mocking name "Overboard" (a pun for "Overbury"), given that Clay explained earlier that names are power and felt at disadvantage because of his inability to remember the name of "this short man".

As the story proceeds however and the reader gets to know Harold Griffiths better, the first impression gives way to an even less impressive one. Mr. Griffith is shown not to be taken seriously by anyone, except Peter perhaps who believes him the smartest man in Washington. Almost everybody else starts to associate him with music and the movies rather than Shakespeare or literature. Mrs. Sanford for one thought him funny while he was singing in a state of exuberant drunkenness (13). He was so talkative and willing to dramatically sing the thousand songs he knew by heart. His friends and acquaintances rarely use any title while addressing him or talking about him. For them he is merely "Harold". Furthermore, his physical representation is equally meant to thrust him closer to the realm of caricature than to

three-dimensional characters. He was "short and barrel-chested with a great lion's head ... pale agate eyes", and short bowed legs (11).[1] Enid wanted to thrill her brother Peter with a funny, unlikely story when he asked her about the secret lover he had glimpsed on top of her in the pool-house during the thunderstorm. She brought up Harold Griffiths, for no other young man could be more improbable and more ridiculous.

Ridiculous Harold becomes a different person by the end of the novel, and his change is made even more striking when he embarks on a mission in the pacific as war correspondent. He launches this new phase with cheap, sentimental, propaganda journalism characterised with a low, soap-opera style of writing, and an exaggerated praise of Clay as war hero to prepare him for public admiration and eventual election to the Congress. Bearing in mind Vidal's expressed dislike of *The Naked and the Dead*, it might not be far-fetched to assume he is here mocking Mailer's first novel which was on the war in the Philippines, especially when his narrator declares on page 172 that the "new Harold tended to speak in short sentences, reminiscent of Hemingway", given that Mailer was often accused of imitating the great modernist. Harold speedily sloughs off his former positions and principles, and hence illustrates for the reader an image of the "apologetic" former communist who converts to an extreme opposition of communism, and is no longer willing to oppose the policies of President Roosevelt or to criticise his government. He is no longer wondering, the way he used to, "why you people want to hold office" (34). There is little he can do now besides pulling in his cheeks in mock resistance—a gesture that made Peter roll with laughter. Peter

[1] This is in keeping with Vidal's tendency to misrepresent the characters and presidents he does not like.

moderated his former mystification of the man, especially after Harold criticised the first issue of his cherished magazine, *The American Idea*, and claimed that it is "over-simplifying the ways of the world", attacked Aeneas Duncan and the whole lot of its contributors, and denounced the Communists to whom he once belonged (172). Peter learned over the years to think of Harold's wit as predictable and, on one telling occasion, prefers relishing his pecans to listening carefully to him doing what he likes most—explaining things (87.)

In keeping with Vidal's tendency to parallel the outside appearance of a character with his inner mind, already demonstrated in Peter's overweight physique which is tuned to his growing interest in ideas and knowledge, Harold Griffith gradually loses weight in synchrony with his vanishing intellectual resistance and dwindling social status. As his formerly-embraced principles are sold out, his body sheds many pounds of flesh and becomes skinnier. Moreover, the thinning out of his figure accentuates his caricatural silhouette: "But in actual fact Harold's paunch had been reduced by fever. He was now thin and fragile-looking; only the huge lion's head remained unchanged" (172). However, the finishing blow to Harold's reputation as a dissenting or even serious intellectual comes near the end of the novel when the reader finds out about his being a homosexual pervert that solicits strangers in public toilets, and realises that only Clay could save him from paying a two-thousand-dollar ransom to one blackmailing victim of his sexual advancement for fear of an outrageous scandal.

When Peter blames him for his sudden embrace of Clay and the sensational journalism he delves into for that end, Harold explains that Clay has changed because wars usually change men. Peter mockingly asks him whether he changed too but Harold, who is beyond embarrassment now and has never been short of answer retorts with the claim that every change of tactic is permissible, provided it serves that final purpose of history in which he has great faith. Even when Peter bitterly questions his "Marxist" leanings, Harold persists in

defending his principles: “No matter what you and your friends may think of my politics, I’ve always been opposed to the exploitation of man by man” (174). After an exchange of epithets in which Harold stamps Peter as “Dilettante”, Peter concludes in a persuaded tune, “You have changed”.

### 3.3.2. Two Falling “Clercs”

#### a. Billy Thorne and Treason

Harold’s original dissent and rabid criticism of politicians and political institutions could eventually be curbed, contained and attenuated to mere apologetic statements by powerful, aspiring men like Blaise, Clay and the representatives of the political system who knew how to invest in his desperate financial situation and his psychological insecurities to win him over. He is shown to plummet from the simply ridiculous to the utterly disgusting, from a communist critic to an apologist of the status-quo who illustrates Daniel Bell’s lamentation of the leftist intellectual and the disintegration of his objectives. Billy Thorne, however, is a different type of intellectual, more radically opposed, committed, uncouth and revolutionary; one whose name suggests “a thorn in the side”. Billy speaks clearly of himself as an intellectual and complains of the concomitant alienation. Unasked, he volunteers to explain to Burden Day the alienation of the intellectuals: “We’ve been alienated from American life much too long, without influence. But when the war ends, we’ll have a real chance to make connection with the people, with the soldiers returning, to change a greedy society into a generous one” (142). He thrilled Diana with his “heroic” endeavour, his involvement in the events of the world, and his narration of the Spanish Civil War which cost him a leg. She becomes ecstatic after his every speech and is so enamoured with him and his beliefs that she

subsequently married him, to the great dismay of her father, Senator Day. They fused to an absurd couple of New Dealers who supported U.S. intervention in the Second World War. After writing a book about the "Lincoln Brigade" (a group of Americans who took up arms against Franco), Billy tries now to enlighten the Washingtonians and influence the public opinion to start a socialist revolution by means of a political magazine he creates using Peter Sanford's money. Billy explains to Peter the meaning of the term "liberal" with a long powerful speech, made with such a booming voice and ecstatic temper that it made impressive images race in full swing in Peter's mind:

> Barricades materialized in the streets. The proletariat got their bread at gunpoint. Medicine was socialized. Inheritance taxes ended the great fortunes, while natural resources were nationalized. The rich went to work; the virtuous poor had long vacations. And at the center of this fierce leveling and raising, Billy Thorne stood, directing operations, wooden leg creaking, voice booming... (60)

He proceeded to verbally assault Peter who made it clear that he was unimpressed by an ideology aiming to strip him of his father's money, and to entice him to read Keynes, Marx, and Lenin (59 -60).

Billy is much more unbearable than Harold can ever be, and his physical representation is made even less appreciable, with a small stature, thin composure and a noisily creaking wooden leg that made him so unheroic (58). He is endowed however with a "thundering heroic voice"—a voice that reminds the reader of another one that "echoed loudly within" a European agent in the heart of Africa, who was "hollow at the core"[1]. Physical lameness is a metaphor of his double standards and moral ambiguity, manifest on several occasions like

[1] Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.*

when he decided to marry rich and to use the money of Burden Day to advance the socialist cause, and then testify against Ed. Nillson, an oilman raising money for Day. He fails for one year to start his magazine in Washington and to get a job, then joins the *Washington Tribune* as a rewrite man regardless of his former opposition to its owner whom he thought was worse than Hearst (59) and to his bourgeois class. Moreover, instead of simply taking the fifth like most, he makes a 20-page testimony in which he denounced every official in the government whom he worked with and thinks is a "commie". Billy calls Peter a dupe and Aeneas Duncan a "fellow traveller",[1] but Aeneas qualifies him as traitor, Judas Iscariot, stool pigeon (among other slurs), and believes he commits "treason" in order to get a job in the statistics service at the Department of commerce.

### b. Aeneas Duncan and the Bourgeoisie

Besides "fellow traveller", Aeneas Duncan is given other names and alleged functions too. Billy, for instance, accuses him of being a tool of the bourgeoisie (185) and Harold qualifies him as simplistic and communist. In the first section of part five (almost the exact middle of the novel, to the page), Aeneas Duncan is introduced to the reader as he and his coterie of well-educated and celebrated New York fellow soldiers make friends with Peter in Washington where he has been recruited to encourage and support the bored soldiers instead of being sent to the front to kill the Nazis as he wished. Aeneas is mostly brains and no muscle, his body is disintegrating and falling apart. He is not any healthier or more attractive

[1] A pejorative term used in American politics during the Red Scare to indicate a person (often an intellectual or a politician) with leanings to, and sympathies with Communism without being a formal member.

than Harold and Billy, but rather worse. He is a coughing, sickly, almost blind, middle-aged asthmatic man who keeps deteriorating his already poor health with heavy smoking. He arguably presents the most convincing image of the intellectual par excellence in the novel. Before the American intervention in the war, Aeneas was a teacher of philosophy, a literary critic, and a passionate political theorist who believed in the necessity to eradicate the whole political system. He had been a Marxist, just like his friends, up to the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 when they took a distance. He often quotes Marx, Locke, Hume and Hegel to a bewildered Peter whose "stupidity" he never ceases to highlight. He is introduced to us in the act of participating in, and enriching the poor cultural life in Washington—a typical role for an intellectual. We see him looking for a literary salon like the ones in his native New York, explaining to Peter the use of those literary gatherings, and finally finding the closest semblance to one in Millicent Smith Carhart's mansion. He takes it upon himself to teach the curious and knowledge-hungry, if naive, Peter and proclaims himself his mentor, to the admiration of the latter. Yet, the irony is so blatant to the reader who is aware from the beginning that "stupid" Peter is fooling smart Aeneas and the whole lot of deigning New York intellectuals as to his allegedly humble origins all along the months that precede their visit to Millicent's salon. Upon discovery, Aeneas feels the full weight of the deception and does not refrain to manifest it to Peter who claimed he had wanted to be appreciated for what he really was rather than as a mere rich son of a "fascist beast" of a man.

Aeneas is deeply interested in political theory, but his involvement in actual politics is fluctuating and dependent on major events. He is shown to step in and out intermittently; for instance, McCarthy pressed him out of politics and back to New York where he resumed his function as literary critic and started "butchering" poets, only to return after the decline of the infamous Senator and his era (214). Peter was first impressed by Duncan's striking "moral

decency" yet he gradually realises that Duncan, as well as his New York intellectual friends, are no different from common Washingtonians and people in general in their addiction for instance to the new terminology of psychiatry; a "pseudoscience" whose concepts they use to redefine life and art (147).

Aeneas could be influenced by Peter and convinced at last to write for the new leftist paper that was the dear project of Diana and her unlikable husband, Billy Thorne. In his articles in *The American Idea* which raise the blood pressure of politicians like Senator Burden Day *(186)*, Aeneas carried on his onslaught on the capitalistic worldview and on the exploitation of man, yet he does it for a salary this time. The clerical, proselytizing side of him started to fade and secede to the more materialistic urges. Solicited by Diana to contribute, he blankly retorted "I will write for anything that pays" (131). This new attitude is so uncharacteristic of Aeneas, or the first "image" of him that struck Peter as morally decent in an exceptional way. However, nothing in Aeneas's writings is against his formerly expressed beliefs in the failure of the political establishment to enable true change for the better, true emancipation and freedom. When Clay Overbury is rendered by his "admirer", Harold Griffiths, in the well-financed paper of Blaise Sanford as a war hero and a nationalist youth with great political possibilities, Aeneas is incensed with the marketing procedure that treated Clay like a bar of soap or some other commodity and he blames the latter for keeping mum about it and allowing it to happen (157). If at all, Aeneas believes things should be represented truthfully and honestly, to which Clay explains that he is not responsible for what journalists write. No sooner had Clay left the office of the radical paper (leaving him with the silent Peter and Diana) than Aeneas exclaimed, "Slickness, emptiness, a vacuum" (159). True, Peter questions the motives of Aeneas's take on Clay and claims it is sheer jealousy of the lucky, powerful, rapidly climbing politician. Significantly, Peter concluded the conversation

with the cynical, “It’s quite simple. He has all the luck. And that is unendurable, for us” (159). Yet, readers cannot help feel the righteous and true-ringing words of Aeneas.

Aeneas’s final return to Washington as a journalist and to actual politics as political commentator was a typical case of intellectuals compromising principles for status, prestige and power. It is shown, one more time, that politics has little tolerance for errant ideas, general principles, and reflections on the past; that it is rather about the present and the near future, i. e. how to get elected in the next polls. Aeneas gradually embarked in the political game, and before long he surprised Peter with his new-found “comradeship” with Clay, and his intention to “help” the latter write a book (mere euphemism for serving as “ghost writer”, i.e. writing it himself) so as to soar him up to public admiration and, eventually, to election to the Senate. Aeneas betrayed his sincere, formerly-expressed feelings of aversion towards Harold’s degrading style of propaganda journalism, and ended up embracing an even worse style. Harold’s admiration and praise could be explained on the grounds of his homosexual attraction to Clay, and to his sense of gratefulness for him as he succeeded in burying an insidious blackmail that could have notoriously scandalised and distorted his reputation. However, Aeneas’s new conduct is nothing but a craving for power and influence—a classic case of treason à la Benda.

Because intellectuals are usually very good at justification, Aeneas was true to form when he advanced to Peter the excuse of *pragmatism*. If Clay was to be President, what better strategy than to endorse him and try to ingratiate oneself with him in order to influence him later and direct his policies afterwards in a favourable leftist direction. Likewise, Aeneas drew out of his quiver the argument that Clay had changed considerably and sobered up from the “fascist” positions he had shared with Burden and Blaise. Peter is an enlightened, less gullible person now however and he can easily see through those flimsy claims. The once “stupid”

mentee explains to his former mentor the cunning logic behind Clay's approach of him. After securing the support of reactionaries and conservatives, he argues, Clay now needs the voices of the leftists and the dissenters; i.e. Aeneas is being "exploited" and "manipulated". Little did Peter know that Clay hadn't sought the help of Aeneas in the first place, that Aeneas actually volunteered. Peter had already asked himself troublesome questions about the integrity of Aeneas when the latter declared his readiness to contribute to any paper that pays, and had even tagged him as a "social climber", but nothing really prepared him for this allegedly leftist intellectual's last move. To secretly help the long-harangued "enemy" get elected is a debasement to a decidedly lower level of treason. Peter retaliated with savage sarcasm and derision, mockingly "advising" Clay to make the better of Aeneas's weird ideas, like the ones about similarity between orgasm and bomb, and the relation between television advertising and cancer (239).

It is no coincidence that the narrator uses the term "clerk" in his statement on the relation between power and the intellectual: "Power was irresistible even to this once incorruptible clerk" (242). Vidal was most assuredly aware of the connotations of this Benda term that emphasises the "integrity" and quasi-religious "righteousness" that "true intellectuals" used to entertain in their aloof "kingdom" before their "treason", which is clearly manifest in their hankering after pecuniary benefits and material gains. Peter mildly qualifies this treason and calls it an exchange of positions between himself and Aeneas, the latter becoming what the former used to be: "practical and matter-of-factly", and thus losing his "moral sense" as well as his vision of the purpose of history. Peter still gives him the credit of remaining accurate as regards facts, however (238).

It comes as a shattering dramatic irony when a couple of pages later Clay clarifies to a jealous Harold who is congratulating him on successfully "conning" Aeneas that the latter was

not in the least fooled or solicited but rather came of his own accord (245). Peter's swapping of positions with Aeneas resulted in their embrace of two opposed conceptions of politics. Hence, he confesses his beliefs to him immediately before he ends their old friendship; he takes on the intellectuals in general for their "inadequate" understanding of politics, their inability to adapt to current situations and to meet present challenges with improvised solutions, as well as their moralizing, theorizing, and historicizing. He distances himself from the lot, and perceives affinities with real politicians like "Clay", corrupt and empty as he considers them to be:

> You know, in a dreadful way, I'm much closer in character to Clay than I am to you. I was brought up to respect deeds, not theories; victories, not virtues. I see politics as men improvising. You see it as a series of stately position papers, reflecting some vast historic process. In the long run, you may be right. But the prizes in the moment go to the busy empty men like Clay, and though I may be unfair to the breed I do have his range, something you will never get (241).

Peter's affinities with Clay are reminiscent of Mailer's *prise-de-conscience* moment when he realises the resemblance between himself and his "alter ego", President Johnson, in The Armies. A major difference, however, is that Peter is proud of the similarities whereas Mailer is disgusted of Johnson's mirroring what he hates about himself. Peter's break with Aeneas does not mean total refusal and denigration however. It certainly does not blind him to the latter's worth and to some of the nuggets of wisdom he gave him; nor does he refrain to quote with due credit some of them like "it is the quality of the passion that matters, not the object" (247).

To return to the distinction made early in this chapter, it is quite safe to assume here that

the three intellectuals in Vidal's *Washington D.C.* are one and all "intellectuals in politics", not "intellectual politicians"; and so is Leroy Hollingsworth in Mailer's *Barbary Shore*. Indeed, William McLeod and Senator Burden Day are arguably the only intellectual characters this far studied who are professional politicians. As to political dissent, they all started as dissenters, although with varying degrees ranging from McLeod's radical opposition of the whole Liberal system of government to the senator's mild stance that is manifest in his obstruction of Roosevelt's New Deal policies within the Democratic party. Yet, all but the holders of these two extremes compromised their dissident positions, and floundered in the bogs of "treason" late in their careers. Vidal's intellectual characters are shown to turn to magazines and newspapers owned by capitalist tycoons or people connected in a way or another to them to work like journalists and reporters when they finally lose faith in the idealism of the Left and drop their ideology of revolt and change; i.e. commit the treasonous act. Media in general and the press in particular serve as safety valves that mitigated the fanaticism of leftist intellectuals and tame the radical thinkers and activists. But even before disillusionment, media is one major tool used by intellectuals, alongside the classroom and books, to meddle in politics and support or vilify presidents and politicians.

# CHAPTER FOUR:

# MEDIA AND POLITICAL DISSENT IN 'TV LAND'

## 4.1. Mainstream Media and the Masses in Mailer and Vidal's America

It has been shown in the previous chapters that both Mailer and Vidal realise the overreaching import of media in the modern time. They have witnessed how television has become so important in American life after W.W.II, and particularly during the 1960s. An American child, since the age of two, spends on average two to three hours per day in front of the small screen (*Jeanneney* 231). A significant sign of that growing importance is the surge in TV advertisement expenditure from less than 10 million dollars in 1948 to more than 1.5 billion in 1960, in order to reach the ever-increasing number of TV receivers which jumped in roughly the same period from 30 thousand to 35 million (294.) Mailer knows very well that one of the pitfalls of the post-war decades' "consensus culture" was the repressive and conformist nature of mass-media, and thus the absence of media freedom was a major concern of his. Likewise, Vidal believes in the vital role media plays in this age of media-mediated politics, at the expense of party machines which are in decline. He makes one protagonist of his, Peter, major in journalism and then take over his father's paper as a safe way of being political; and exposes another one, Lincoln, who shut down a major paper during the war and imprisoned its managers. Lincoln is also shown to fear the influential editor, Horace Greeley, and to try to manipulate him.

It has equally been pointed out (in Chapter Three) that the image of American presidents and American politicians in general in the public eye owes much to the efforts and plans carried out by the intellectuals they employ and resort to. A wide range of options and alternatives are open to the latter, but in the second half of the twentieth century, as Tevi Troy specifies, they focused on two chief ones, namely history books and media. They "help shape

the perception of elected officials, both short term in the media, and long term in the history books. It is in politicians' interests to woo them..." (267). Donald Rumsfeld, for instance, was consistently eulogised by the major papers and channels of the country during his invasion of Iraq under George W. Bush and even after things went south and the enterprise was proven a horrendous calamity. His "charm" and handsome looks were underlined by most reporters as if one could not be a full respectable celebrity without sexual appeal. Daniel Beaumont samples some celebratory epithets and mystifyingly excessive praise that were hurled at Rumsfeld by national papers and news channels like *People* magazine, CNN, *The Wall Street Journal*, and Fox News; respectively, "one of the sexiest men of the year", "a big flirty pussycat", "the new hunk", and a "babe magnet".[1] Furthermore, a sensational, effusive biography of him was written by the "neocon midwife", i.e. Norman Podhoretz's wife, Midge Dector (sic).

> The complicity of the news media in this is well known. The dreadful Judith Miller of the *New York Times* is only the most famous instance of the press's collusion in the criminal enterprise. The mass media not only aided Rumsfeld and his allies in creating support for the war, they made him a TV star. Once the invasion began this was almost predictable since the news is, at bottom, simply another television show. The invasion itself provided almost no drama...Rumsfeld's daily briefings full of his folksy phrases and pseudo-philosophical meanderings became a hit series. Hogan's Heroes meets American Idol.

[1] See "Enough is Enough: Donald Rumsfeld 1932-2021", *Counterpunch*. July 16, 2021.

American presidents appoint press secretaries who give daily press briefings to the reporters and journalists of different newspapers who constitute the White House's press corps to explain to them the administration's reactions to world event, and to interact with media in general. The presidents also read and watch the news every day to be in the know of the situation, and organize press conferences to clarify their decisions and defend their directives. They vary in their "obsession" with the news, though. For instance, George H. W. Bush was a "news junkie" who started his day with reading all the papers, and simultaneously watched the news on four TV sets installed in his study to compare (Fitzwater 467).

US presidents aside, it has to be underlined that there exist several ways to talk about media. One way is to classify it, based on the type of transmission, into two categories: "printed" and "broadcast" media. Printed media encapsulates a wide range of publications (e.g. newspapers, magazines, and books), signs and billboards, whereas broadcast media includes television, radio, and cinema. All these types of media are part of **traditional media** which is often contrasted to **new media**—a category that comprises emails, podcasts, E-books, websites, applications, streaming, and social networks. We can also organise media into "owned" media, "social" media, "curated" media, and "third-party" media, or rather consider its content and political leanings to categorise it into "corporate", "mainstream", "parallel /alternative" media, and "investigative" media.

One has also to specify the era, however, for an accurate account on media; for the latter underwent significant changes in the mid-twentieth-century. Just as the political parties were in decline, the media—especially radio and television—was on the rise (Davies 7). As to the **news media**, becoming more centralised in its corporate structure, more national in its reach and in its focus, and more rigidly formulaic in its standard news story, it eventually took over many of the functions the parties had once performed. It vetted candidates (especially

presidential contestants) like has been shown in the former chapter in the case of Overbury, determined the pressing issues to be covered (a function attributed to the "propaganda model" as will be explained below), and depicted candidates' personas for the electorate. Because **the press** is primarily a narrative medium, the manner in which voters connected with candidates evolved toward the kinds of personal identification that character-centered narration often produces and away from strict party or policy allegiances. As a narrative form, the **news story** is both a rival and compact cousin to the **novel**.

The role in American politics of mainstream media in general, and the press and the news story in particular, has often been dealt with and clarified. Many theories have been suggested about numerous models of this role. "The propaganda model" explained by Herman and Chomsky in their seminal *Manufacturing Consent* is an outstanding example. For them, mainstream media, like the Church in former times, determines the limits of acceptable socio-political discourse, and circumscribes the realm of appropriate debate and content. It is used by the dominant junta to condition the readers to see anything outside those boundaries as indecent and radical. It entertains the majority of Americans instead of enlightening them, and thus creates apathy in politics; and emphasizes what benefits the advertisers. As to the journalists and editors, they have already been indoctrinated throughout their long educational process into system-managers; therefore, there is no outright conspiracy or direct editorial censorship held accountable for that limitation. The reporters and journalists and editors in mainstream media are instead people who "internalized the framework of belief and attitudes of the surrounding power system in the society"; they absorbed the norms and ideals of Capitalism, or Neoliberalism, due to college education which is a filtering device that

produces and encourages conformity and obedience.[1] They act as "freely" as possible, but there are five filters that subtly delimit their freedom and control the content of their political and social discourse, including corporate ownership of the means, and flak.

Domestically, media has always been used in America and the West in general, Edward Said expounds, as "sensory extensions of the main cultural context" (*Culture and Imperialism*295); and more often than not, as a tool to induce the public to support the government, to embrace its decisions, and to sheepishly acquiesce to and comply with its policies, including its common mobilization of the people for wars abroad. Furthermore, media is now believed to replace the intellectuals when it addresses serious matters. Referring to a ridiculously ignorant article by Fouad Ajami, entitled "The Summer of Arab Discontent" published in the Winter1990-1991 issue of *Foreign Affairs* (at the time of the Gulf War), foolishly claiming that Iraq was arid and had never had any relation with books, ideas and civilisation, Said laments the manipulation and deception of the public and their preparation for unconditional support of the war effort by means of blatant lies and denigrating pseudo-knowledge mediated by untruthful intellectuals via media outlets:

> But such writing as this is symptomatic of the intellectual will to please power in public, to tell it what it wants to hear, to say to it that it could go ahead and kill, bomb, and destroy, since what would be being attacked was really negligible,

[1] Quoted in C.J. Hopkins, "The Mainstream Media and Its Discontents", *Counterpunch*, May 17, 2016.

> brittle, with no relationship to books, ideas, cultures, and no relation either, it gently suggests, to real people (298).

That is why Said considers the invasion of Iraq to be the most covered yet least reported war in history. The American intellectuals in mainstream media were, if not supportive with their articles and appearance in shows of the imperial desires of the government, at best reticent and passive onlookers (302). Henry Kissinger for instance did not only refrain from questioning the propriety and legality of the act of invasion, he even underlined the necessity for "surgical strikes", while Brzezinski's opposition of the war was mostly due to geopolitical reasons.

Internationally however, the imperial forces make use of the various forms of mainstream and corporate media to subdue the colonised communities at a different, unconscious (subliminal?) level, and the intellectuals—believing it is no less efficient, and may be even more influential an outlet than the university auditorium—contribute to its usage as a major weapon in the war for "cultural imperialism"—to use a phrase coined and made popular by Jacques Lang,

> Whereas a century ago European culture was associated with a white man's presence, indeed with his directly domineering (and hence resistible) physical presence, we now have in addition an international media presence that insinuates itself, frequently at a level below conscious awareness, over a fantastically wide range (Said 291).

America being the leading imperial power in our time, its intellectuals and journalists are quite dangerously influential on the rest of the world as they tend to be most obedient and supportive of its imperial adventures at the expense of true freedom of expression. For

instance, the McBride Report: *Many Voices, One World* (1980)—a UNESCO document (called after distinguished Irish diplomat and Nobel Peace Prize winner Sean MacBride) that pointed out the problems the new communication technologies created in the press and mass media; problems like the concentration and commercialization of the media, and the unequal access to information and communication—was attacked by American journalists as subversive of the freedom of expression and dominated by third world and communist rhetoric, and caused both the United States and the United Kingdom to withdraw from UNESCO in protest.[1] It is true that many societies obtained independence after World War II during the process of decolonisation, yet the new western media kept the same geo-political order and intensified the former colonial relations with more success and efficiency than colonialism in destabilizing and harming the developing, newly "independent" nations. When the McBride Report was released, the Internet as we now know it was not yet invented. January, 01st, 1983 is the official birthday of the Internet, and many social observers were not fully aware how important it was going to be and the extent of its influence on world communication and media. Anthony Smith, however, was awake to the devastating impact of the use of modern technologies in western media on the stability and independence of the developing countries. He warned the world in *The Geopolitics of Information* that the new western technologies that were implemented in the developing field of communication were more threatening to the independence of emerging third-world countries than colonialism itself. The imperial relationships between a few colonial powers and the rest of the world

[1] The report suggested a New World Information and Communication Order that is based on the democratization of communication and the support of national media to maintain its independence from external sources.

were not yet brought to an end with the decolonisation movement that had taken place in the sixties and seventies. Cultural independence was yet to be achieved, and western mass media was a major impediment on the way thereof, due to its "power to penetrate more deeply into 'receiving' culture than any previous manifestation of Western technology. The results could be immense havoc, an intensification of the social contradictions within developing societies today" (Qtd. in *Culture and Imperialism* 292).

Noam Chomsky is often cited as a critic of U.S. politics and foreign policy; so are his reflections on media in several books, articles, and interviews. In his conversations with David Barsamian, for instance, he occasionally refers to the role of media and press (all models considered) in the spread and support for U.S. power internationally. Locally, the press shuns very important information, and internationally, it is used to misinform, and strip the news of context. A telling example is Chávez's speech in the General Assembly on September 20, 2006, whose content that stipulated his policies and how different they were from Rumsfeld's was systematically ignored in American newspapers. The latter focused instead on the *rhetoric* used by Chávez; particularly his reference to Bush as the devil. *The New York Times* for instance did no better than making fun of the speech. "That's gossip", Chomsky asserts, and not an actual news account (*What We Say Goes* 43).

In *Rogue States,* Chomsky dedicates a chapter to what he calls "Recovering Rights", in which he singles out the right to information, and reiterates that Articles 19 and 21 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights emphasise the universal fundamental right to "receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds... through any other media", but media has become, alongside educational systems, a fervent battleground witnessing the interference not

only of state power, but also , as the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press clarified in 1946, the "private agencies" which toil hard , under the influence of advertisers and owners, to control media and impose "an environment of vested beliefs" and "bias as a commercial enterprise". Many human rights organisations including the European Commission of Human Rights and Human Rights Watch urge states to intervene and fight against this "excessive concentration of the press" which seriously compromises the rights guaranteed by the said articles (120).

Chomsky explains that Howard Friel and Richard Falk exemplify with the issues of *New York Times* (chosen because of its importance, with the assumption that the same applies to the rest of the mainstream papers) in the weeks building up to the invasion of Iraq to argue that journalists and editors are definitely lacking in honesty and willingly breaching with objectivity to defend the existing state of affairs. They demonstrate that if an enemy breaches with international law, the press is outrageous, but when the United States does the same, they act as if nothing happened (*What We Say Goes* 4). Chomsky retains a hopeful note though. He claims that change is happening, we have more protests, solidarity groups, popular pressure, and resistance to power than in the sixties and seventies, regardless of many alarming facts, mostly related to media and press. One instance is that the United States is against the UNESCO giving inputs to third world countries in international press and media, going as far as threatening to stop funding it:

> Chávez had talked at the United Nations about ...a new international information order. It was sponsored by the ... [UNESCO] in this case. The idea was to try to give third world countries some sort of input into the international media system, instead of having it totally monopolized by a few rich Western powers, the United States primarily. This was bitterly attacked in the United States. Across the

> spectrum, it was derided as an effort to end the free press and to control journalists. The attacks were full of the most outrageous lies. The press, like the *New York Times*, would not permit responses by UNESCO officials. Finally, the United States defunded UNESCO to try to prevent third world input into the international information system. They understand. The "free press" means we have a monopoly and you have to shut up and listen to what we say (61-62).

Another impediment is that the United States (and its lackeys) repeatedly attacked alternative international media like Aljazeera (Qatar) and TELESUR (Cuba, Venezuela, Uruguay, Argentina) which are new emerging outlets that don't support the elite. On the positive side however, Chomsky celebrates the existence of a few liberal papers like *Boston Globe* that are more honest and objective than *The New York Times* and its likes.

That media has almost always been used to misinform and manipulate the masses as well as perpetuate the status quo that benefits the economic and socio-political elites is often reiterated by sociologists, historians and social observers. But how did novelists and literary intellectuals respond to that abuse? Many fiction writers in general and American novelists of the post-war era in particular tackled the media/power question in their literary and extra-literary writings, witness Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal in their respective political novels. For the purposes of this chapter, we focus below mainly on the written press, itself composed of tabloids, propaganda and opinion papers. The aim is mainly to demonstrate the contrast or rivalry between the novel and the news story; to find out whether—similarly or differently—Mailer and Vidal used the novel either as rival or as an expressive cousin.

## 4.2. Denigrating Political Dissent in Mailer

### 4.2.1. The March on the Pentagon and Mainstream Papers in *The Armies*

The narrator in *The Armies* (1968) who is definitely one version of Mailer, or Mailer as he wants himself to be seen, starts his account of the March on the Pentagon and the events leading to it with the story of *Time* magazine, only to give us later a more accurate narration, pressing on the reader the impression that the magazine never gets it right: "Now we may leave *Time* in order to find out what happened" (4). Mailer is equally not fond of many other papers and magazines like the *New Yorker* to which he refused to contribute not only because of its lack of accuracy or its political leaning, but because it has never reviewed any of his works, particularly *The Presidential Papers*, *An American Dream*, and *Cannibals and Christians*. Besides, he laments the fact that it doesn't allow swear words in print which is, for him, a lack of freedom: "True liberty… consisted of his right to say shit in *The New Yorker"* (26).

Mailer who had a peculiar position vis-à-vis mainstream media, with "one foot in and one foot out" manifest mainly in his disrespect for objective, political reporting (Davies 8) started a diatribe against newspapers and reporters whom he considered the true enemy of the United States, "the silent assassins of the Republic", because of their distortion of facts and subservience to power. In a profane language that is characteristic of the novel, the narrator is disgusted with their haste to ingratiate themselves with and engage in sycophant praise of President Lyndon Johnson and his secretaries, Dean Rusk and McNamara, while cowering to stand up for truth in public (51). The irony is that one is obliged to read the national papers even when awake to their bias, and Mailer is shown to read *The Washington Post* for instance (57).

Dwight Macdonald who is leading the March with Mailer was himself deeply connected with media not only because he co-edited the *Encounter* magazine, contributed to the familiarization of a new perspective in journalism that was imported from England ("the 'I am dumb' school of English interrogation… a dull manifestation of British wickedness" 65), but also because, under the influence of his partner, he learnt a few "bad habits" in journalism, or so Mailer thinks.

Mailer agrees that newspapers can never be accurate and trustworthy in reflecting the actions and sayings of writers. They have a gift for distorting sentences and corrupting meanings no matter how accurate and straightforward writers tried to be; and for doubting the motives of the most noble of their actions. A chasm is eventually put in place between eventual readers and writers who are rendered helpless lambs as Mailer, the narrator, read it in the eyes of Lowell at one point in the novel. It might be difficult for non-writers to imagine, but it is always painful how a good writer is turned to an "idiot in newsprint". He gets so sad and suffers deeply as he realizes that the consequent distance from uneducated readers is not due to the alleged difficulty of his work but rather because of "the general horrors of journalistic mistranscription" (65)

Writers end up questioning the intelligence of the reporters and their capacity to make sense of utterances different from their own; they give up the hope of average reporters making out the nuances of meaning writers inlay into their statements. Rather than avoiding the company of reporters for good however, Mailer encourages writers to try first to speak to them in flat direct irreducible sentences and eschew beautiful, poetic words. He recommends salience over brilliance.

> If the ears of the reporters were geared to capture accurately the mediocre remarks of mediocre men, then one had to look for simple salient statements, so poetically bare, but so irreducible, that they would stick in the reporter's mind like a thorn. It was the only way to talk to a reporter. If one could not learn how to do it, then the only recourse was flight from any situation where a journalist might be present (66).

In his speech during the March on the Pentagon, Mailer rebuked the press for distorting the truth and misrepresenting the events; he proved it responsible over the last two decades for creating a liability in average Americans to accept horrific things like the Vietnam War (79). Press is also telling lies to embellish the image of authority, apologize for its failures and calamities, and indoctrinate the new generation of the Left (87).

When Mailer had a confrontation with the Nazi that was arrested with him, he didn't want to aggravate the situation and start a fight, for fear of the misrepresentation of the press which will seize any half opportunity to vilify the march and its leaders. Reporters, Mailer was sure, would not mention that the other party started the altercation, nor the fact that he was a Nazi. They would instead focus on the fact that Mailer was involved in trouble very soon after his arrest. Although it looks like paranoia on his part, Mailer can justify his conviction on the grounds of the reporters' twenty-year-long failure to tell the truth about him. Mailer knows media's strategies of misreporting and the reporters' habits of truth distortion so well that he pities the public who little suspect they are manipulated and systematically misinformed to the verge of "mass schizophrenia" (141). The mainstream papers, just like yellow sensational papers, television and Hollywood, are indeed so efficient in brainwashing large sections of the American populace that Mailer believes that no novel, no matter how successful and widely read, will ever compete with press and media in influence and reach:

> It was an old argument and he was worn with it—he had written a good essay once about the failure of any major American novelist to write a major novel which would reach out past the best-seller lists to a major part of that American audience brainwashed by Hollywood, TV, and *Time* (157).

The immense reach of television and its overreaching impact on the viewers drive the narrator to repeatedly refer to America as "TV land".[1]

At least three distortions infuriated the narrator as one of Mailer's fellow detainees started reading aloud the Sunday papers for him and the prisoners. First, the accounts of the March and ensuing events were so rigged and false, reviling the demonstrators and glamouring the soldiers and law-enforcement agents. The prisoners continually intervened with a chant of "bullshit, bullshit, bullshit" (201). Second, when a Richmond paper reporter claimed that Mailer "smiled wanly: 'I am guilty'", Mailer was extremely upset and thought of the possibility of tearing the reporter apart with his hands if he ever meets him. Indeed, Mailer was so fed up with the incapacity and unwillingness of reporters to tell the truth that he refused to make a statement to *The Washington Post* (204). A third occasion was when Mailer delivered a passionate, well-argued speech on the evil of Vietnam on the Christian nature of the Republic and the people. *The Washington Post* was so selective and reductionist and distorting. It mentioned Mailer's faith as a Jew to discredit his proclaimed love and respect for Jesus Christ (214-5).

At the very outset of his "Book Two: The Novel as History", Mailer explains that the

[1] On many occasions the phrase "TV land" is used in *The Armies* as a synonym to America.

professional historian has a hard task trying to sift the facts from the lies by relying solely on mass media. In fact, that is partly why Mailer decides to write a non-fiction novel in the first place—to clarify things for the historian and spare him the "forest of inaccuracy" that mass media created on the subject of the March on the Pentagon, and which risks to blur his vision (219). One striking example is that out of the numerous speeches and announcements the ring leaders of the March made in the press conference, the papers selected only the most violent words and the statements that might insinuate (when presented out of context) evil and violent intentions:

> ...but the newspapers could also quote Dellinger— 'There will be no government building left unattacked' (although the attacks "will be nonviolent"); Rubin—"We're now in the business of wholesale disruption and widespread resistance and dislocation of the American society"; Hoffman—"I would be unwise to say I'm going there with a gun because you all took my gun last time. I may bring a bomb, sucker" (234).

Participants in the March, especially leading figures like Mailer, know very well that the cited Dellinger, Rubin, Hoffman, and Brown were hardly the representative speakers or the spokespersons of the event, yet that was what the media wanted to suggest, and what an unsupported, unaware historian might deduce.

The narrator does not claim that national press was totally useless and harmful, or that all national papers were equally distorting. Alongside *The Washington Post* that, on page fifty-seven, he is shown to read, Mailer quotes *The New York Times* and praises its relative

impartiality in terms of numbers of demonstrators;[1] this latter being a usual bone of contention between governments and opposition in most demonstrations (244-245). The narrator also "dares" to quote an extract from an account in another paper, the *National Guardian*, regardless of his passing sneer that it is not generally objective or accurate: "It is not a paper famous for its lack of bias and the account here is obviously partisan, but its virtues are to be brief and vivid" (261).

About three pages to the end of the book, the narrator wraps up about the position of the press in the aftermath of the March on the Pentagon. It is not a very merciful verdict. The mainstream papers were critical, antagonistic, and mendacious. Just as the *New York Times* was typical and representative of the mainstream press in its severe condemnation of the event and its blatant abuse of journalism, so was one of its reporters (namely, Reston) exemplary of mainstream journalists and archetypal in his exaggerated reaction of the host (285).

The narrator is well aware however of a different type of press that is not subservient and apologetic to the government and its policies. While the mainstream papers naturally sided with the authorities and claimed the victory of the law-enforcement agents and federal forces in their confrontation with the angry demonstrators, a few marginal, dissenting fringe papers offered a different narrative that attributed victory to the vilified masses who marched on the Pentagon. Usually connected with the Left, the unofficial press countered the official discourse with "leaks" and elaborated the silenced elements of the story that were favourable

[1] To his credit, the narrator doesn't refrain from telling the "flattering" truth about the paper that he attacks afterwards.

to the rioters.

### 4.2.2. William Hearst and Yellow Journalism in *An American Dream*

Mailer is aware that the "unofficial" opposition papers were not always more trustworthy than the counterpart mainstream journals and publications, that there was no complete victory for the marching mob either. Their claims and amendments would certainly "distort, enrich, ennoble, purify, and finally transpose the real history of the events to their own need…" (266). An impartial historian might do well to balance and verify the two different, sometimes diametrically opposed, narratives rather than taking either one for granted. Worse than both the official and opposition papers are the sensational papers. For instance, Stephen Rojack, the protagonist of *An American Dream* does not hold the yellow journalism and the sensational papers in high esteem and is not surprised with their inaccuracies, exaggerations, and thirst for scandalous dramatization after his murder of his wife, Deborah Kelly. Reporters were manifestly happy with the turn of events and relished this opportunity to appeal to the readers for a couple of days:

> There was no need to go too thoroughly through the news stories. They splashed the front page, spoke of the death as suicide, gave details about Deborah and details about me, half of them correct, half incorrect, gave promise in their excitement that the story was good for two days more and probably a feature for the weekend round-up (134.)

This scandalous school of journalism owes much to the style that was pioneered by W. R. Hearst in his press empire. He was too rich, powerful, and (in)famous in the first three decades of the twentieth-century not to be mentioned or portrayed in contemporaneous and ensuing fiction and cinema. Therefore, he was referred to, directly or otherwise, in the works

of Jack London, Dos Passos, and John Steinbeck, respectively *The Iron Heel* (1907), *The Big Money* (1936), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), to name only the most famous. He was portrayed either as himself, like Gore Vidal did in his "narratives of empire", or under a different appellation, and was an inspiration for other protagonists and movie characters like the lead personae, Charles Foster Kane in Orson Welles's film *Citizen Kane* (1941). Most renderings and references were unflattering to be sure, for Hearst was the media and press magnate who established the largest and most extensive media chain in the world in the nineteenth twenties and thirties, and was known mostly for a type of journalism that is based on sensationalism and stories of crime and sex and scandals, that came to be dubbed "yellow journalism". In fact, he wanted to call his exciting "gee-whiz" style of combining news with entertainment, of using bold headlines and salacious stories, "new journalism"; but Pulitzer had a different name in mind, a name inspired by a color cartoon that featured Richard Outcault's *The Yellow Kid*, (a street urchin in the slums of New York) introduced in October 1896.[1]

Hearst's critics lament his tendency to take advantage of his ownership and editorship of sundry, widely-read, papers and magazines (twenty-eight at his height, and always with his name on them) in the five largest cities to spread his opinions, advocate his positions, and indoctrinate his working-class readers and serve his political ends. It is well known that Hearst had no qualms, and hence spared no efforts to spill his control and influence in the press business on the world of politics—succeeding only partly. He was elected to Congress for two terms, but failed to get elected as a Senator and as Mayor of New York. He wanted

[1] Ben Procter, "William Randolph Hearst and the Rise of Yellow Journalism" (Qtd. in Lamb 158).

government by journalism, however, and tremendously succeeded in implementing his papers and magazines to get allies elected, and Roosevelt inaugurated. Likewise, he proved very influential and efficient both domestically, like racially incriminating ethnic groups and communities he despised (e.g. the internment of the American-Japanese during World War II), and internationally like preaching and vehemently supporting the Spanish American war for instance, and attacking presidential rapprochement efforts with foreign powers like the Soviets, and hurdling the American attempts to get involved in world—particularly European—politics and world wars. He was outspoken in his papers about his embrace of some military and imperialistic projects, including the strengthening of the navy and obtaining strategic bases in the Caribbean, building a Nicaraguan canal, the annexation of Hawaii, and keeping the Philippines under US supremacy.

Outdoing American mainstream media and the press empire of his fervent competitor, Joseph Pulitzer, Hearst resorted in the capital-lettered editorials, and large-pictured, blunt-titled stories of his tabloids to downright manipulation, blatant lying, misrepresentation, and fake coverage. He accused Spain in the Cuba crisis with sinking the American ship, the *Maine*, and with other war-crimes without a semblance/ shred of evidence, and he oriented his reporters –out of spite and opposition to the 1935 attempts of former ally, present enemy, F. D. Roosevelt, to develop diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union—to concoct inaccurate reports and invent horrifying scenes about the Ukrainian famine—the Holodomor, which he "updated" from 1932 to 1935, as well as alleging Russian responsibility for it.

Because of this family resemblance between the news story and the novel, the two writers in this study have the most complicated relationship with the centralized mainstream media. Vidal is more convinced of the theories of conspiracy, however. To him, media specialists and practitioners certainly belong to a power structure, and consciously contribute to the

solidification of the status quo. While Herman and Chomsky barely question the sincerity and integrity of media people, stipulating rather that they are victims of the power structure in place, Vidal tends to view them as tempters and misleaders, definitely opposed to the masses, to freedom, and to democracy. Indeed, Vidal shows in his works, particularly in *Washington D.C.*, that press agents and capitalist moguls in the contemporary American democracy are important and complicit political agents. Besides there is a tendency therein for politicians to show little appreciation for media and media people—what Kloman calls, "a healthy Vidalian contempt for the press".[1] Vidal is most thorough in his examination of the rise of media-mediated politics, tracing the kinds of politicians, journalists, and lay citizenry such a system creates. He does so while contrasting the narrative mechanisms of that system with his own sprawling, rather than economical, narrative form.

Mailer seems to agree with Herman and Chomsky, however. As a journalist, he breaks the rules of objective, short-form political reporting. He was in charge of a media outlet, namely *Dissent,* which was clearly not part of the mainstream and the politically correct, to say the least. Indeed, alongside Vidal, Mailer the journalist manifests great courage in his exposure of, and take on the biased news media in general, and *The New York Times* in particular, because, as Marlin Fitzwater asserts on the role of press under Presidents Reagan and Bush, it is inherently agreed between reporters and journalists to avoid targeting peer papers and especially *The New York Times* with scorn and critique[2]—may be to avoid a new episode of

[1] Kloman, talking about *Lincoln*, in "Gore Vidal's American Chronicles".

[2] Marlin Fitzwater was one of the long-serving American press secretaries, and the only one to be appointed by two presidents, namely Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush.

rivalry and enmity that is reminiscent of the Hearst/ Pulitzer press war in the early decades of the twentieth century.

> There is an unwritten rule of journalism that you don't criticize other publications, and you especially don't take on the New York Times, which is, after all, the biggest and perhaps most powerful newspaper in America. For anybody, a reporter or otherwise, to challenge a *Times* story showed a lot of courage and a lot of ability to overcome peer pressure (469).

One instance of the power of the said paper is the disastrous effect on Bush's administration and eventual campaign that reporter Andy Rosenthal created with a false story about the President's wonder at the supermarket scanner; a story Bush and his press corps could not catch up with, and one that tarnished his image and made him look "out of touch". Mailer and Vidal manifestly breached the unwritten rule, and refused to succumb to the said pressure.

## 4.3. Press and Political Power in Vidal's *Empire*

Indeed, Gore Vidal is very outspoken as to the importance of the Fourth Estate in the politics of power, and that is quite convenient as he is better placed than most contemporaries to do so. He is a talented Hollywood screenwriter, and an actor who appeared (sometimes as himself) in eight films (like Andrew Niccol's *Gattaca* 1997), numerous TV shows and TV series (like *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*), and documentaries (like *Gore Vidal: The Man who Said No*1984). Moreover, many movies were based on Vidal's work: *Visit to a Small Planet* (1960), *The Best Man* (1964), *Myra Breckinridge* (1970), *Caligula* (1979), *The Left-*

*Handed Gun* (1988), and *Lincoln* (miniseries, 1988.)[1] Vidal is as well "one of the golden pens of the golden era of television drama" (Greenfeld) who used—in his capacity as disturbing public intellectual—to contribute essays and commentary to several papers and magazines like *The New York Review of Books* and *Esquire.* Furthermore, many of his characters are journalists and media people, like the protagonist of *1876,* Charles Schermerhorn Schuyler, who comes back from Europe where he worked as ambassador to serve as a noted journalist with excellent connections with New York's top newspapers and editors. Moreover, Blaise Sanford, a major character in more than one novel, is a Yale dropout turned newspaperman and apprentice to William Randolph Hearst, and eventually a Washington press lord who is quite actively involved in supporting presidential candidates, claiming confidently (in *Empire*) to have "invented" President Theodore Roosevelt. Blaise's half-sister, Caroline Sanford, is a Hollywood movie actress who is equally interested in influential Washington newspapers and in publishing.

While embarked on his series of historical novels (one of which is titled *Hollywood*), Vidal didn't turn his back on his life-long passion for broadcast media, particularly cinema and film. Just as he did with some of his favourite historical figures (Julian and Lincoln, for instance), he too devoted a whole book for acting and movies—namely, *Myra Breckinridge* (1968), a book that is not very different in topic from Mailer's *Deer Park*. Touching on the then extremely taboo realm of transsexualism, this thrilling sex comedy, dedicated to British gay writer, Christopher Isherwood, mesmerized the readers and was a sudden hit that sold a staggering two million copies. Yet, it also galvanized a few reviewers who saw in it an

[1] For an exhaustive list of Vidal's appearances on big- and small- screen, see Harry Kloman's "Gore Vidal in the Movies", 2005.

abomination and lamented the decline in literary taste to such a spectacular low. The novel is basically a memoir written by the protagonist Myra, 27, both as a way of therapy (recommended by her doctor) from the after-effects of her psychological and physical transformation and an attempt to accomplish a literary masterpiece that may equal the incredible transformation of her gender.[1] It is mostly set in the Academy of Drama and Modeling in Westwood, just outside of Hollywood, (built on a jointly inherited orange grove by her uncle, former cowboy actor and proprietor Buck Loner) wherein Myra is hired as a teacher of Posture and Empathy.

Hurriedly written in Rome (completed in a few weeks), this work enthralls the readers with the incredible story of Myra, a "queer" movie critic who struggles to share in the glamour of Hollywood, and negotiates for her share in Buck's property, the Acting Academy. Vidal uses Myra to expound a number of opinions about various topics like human sexuality, literature, and mostly cinema. For instance, Myra is shown to carry out a study of the second book of American author and film critic, Parker Tyler (1904-1974): *Magic and Myth of the Movies* (1947), as well as of the films of the forties. In her study, entitled *Parker Tyler and the Films of the Forties; or, the Transcendental Pantheon*, Myra agrees with and emphasises said critic's belief that "films are the unconscious expressions of age-old human myths" (14). She has watched so many movies, particularly those of the golden age of Hollywood between the early thirties and the late forties, that she is always reminded of an actor or actress in one

[1] In this transformation, Myra is reminiscent of Michael Lovett, the amnesiac protagonist of Mailer's *Barbary Shore* who underwent a plastic surgery. Unlike Myra, however, Mike's transformation accentuates his masculinity, it makes him more attractive but in a manly way that appeals to the feminine characters in the novel.

movie or another by the behaviour, words, or tone of her friends and the people around her. Drawing from the plethora of movies she watched and studied since her early childhood, she now overwhelms Dr. Montag and the potential readers of her memoir with references as she describes people and relates situations. Accordingly, she was greatly relieved to know during convalescence from the brutal car crush that cost her ten days of unconsciousness that Dr. Mengers who was a saint to her during her ordeal "knew so much about movies. Apparently, he too had seen every film made between 1931 and 1947" (206). Conversation between the two movieholics flowed so naturally therefore.

Vidal infers that the movies have been so important and influential on American people that many of them often fail to resist the temptation to project some of the scenes they like on their own lives. Just like Myra herself, one teacher in the Academy, namely Miss Cluff, is shown to draw on movies to tell her life-story. In her account "[w]e all recognized the plot of *The Seventh Veil* and so were able to ask the right questions in order to help her complete the fantasy". Moreover, Myra could not help showing her pleasure, for she is always delighted "when people resort to the storehouse of movie myth in order to create for themselves attractive personas" (72-73). Myra explains, though, that similar to the novel, it is past the golden age of cinema. Even before Marshall McLuhan's works on the importance and appeal of the cathode tube, she was aware of the attractions of T.V., that it had started in the early fifties to replace the movies as the leading attraction, and that the TV commercial was becoming most captivating to the American as well as the universal audiences, " In fact, I was sufficiently *avant-garde* in 1959 to recognize the fact that it was no longer the movies but the television commercial that engaged the passionate attention of the world's best artists and technicians" (32).

Vidal's fiction does not often contradict his views that are expressed in extra-literary

pieces like “The Enemy Within” (2002), the lead essay in his eventual book, *Dreaming War*. As the character Bigelow, a leading Democrat Congressman and presidential nominee in the novel, *1876*, tries to defend himself to the narrator, Schermerhorn Schuyler, against the accusations of treason leveled against him by *Times*, he proceeds to discredit the paper and expose it as a tool in the hands of a corrupt party that replaced his former, honest Republican party which had died after abolishing slavery and preserving the Union: “Now a corrupt machine continues to use our name, aided and abetted by the New York Times...” (*1876* 43). For a paper to serve as a mere tool in the hands of a party is a violation of its independence and a compromise of its impartiality, let alone its degradation to a corrupt and deceitful propagandist mouthpiece. Besides, Vidal makes a good example in *Washington D.C.* of the power of newspapers when he shows how they support unworthy candidates to run for presidency, and how a vindictive journalist who has been exposed to the public as a liar vent his steams of frustration and bitterness on Senator Burden, exposing his one and only misdeed, and thus pushing him to bring an abrupt end to his long senatorial career, and to his life as well. However, the use of papers and media as a propaganda tool in the hands of the ruling elite to “manufacture consent” and spiel the masses into supporting U.S. involvement in wars of expansion, and even pressuring the government to wage ones that ultimately serve the people in power is arguably nowhere clearer in Vidal’s “narratives of empire” than in *Empire*. As pointed out in a former chapter, the starting point of narration in the novel goes almost one century ahead of the date of its publication, i.e. the end of the Spanish-American war in 1898. Although the fourth of the “narratives of empire” in terms of publication (coming out after *Washington D.C.*, *1876*, *Burr*, and *Lincoln* respectively), the space of time covered therein makes it the third earliest element of Vidal’s septology. It is about turn–of—century America under President Theodore Roosevelt against which backdrop interact the

many historical figures that people the narrative, including media men like press tycoon, William Randolph Hearst, historians like Henry Adams (whose influence Vidal openly admits in many occasions),[1] and presidents like William McKinley. The story is also about the actions of a few fancy characters, particularly the Sanford half-siblings (descendants of Charlie Schuyler): Caroline, the grand-daughter of Aaron Burr—himself a protagonist of an earlier work—and Blaise, a Yale dropout who works as apprentice to Hearst. When the narration opens, Caroline (Vidal's first female protagonist) has already buried their father, and displayed some contention with Blaise over his will. Arguably, both are journalists in/on quest of/for a good share of power and political influence and in the manner of William Randolph Hearst, who is shown deeply involved in the political game, and bent on some unsavory intrigue to depose President Roosevelt.

In the course of the novel, Caroline goes through an educational journey that opens up her eyes to barely recognized facts. Alongside Blaise, she hankers after money in the hope of obtaining power, only to learn later, after paying a visit to Hearst's office in the *Tribune* Building in Park Lane, that neither money nor political office bestows true power, important as they definitely are. Actual power resides rather in the capacity to indoctrinate the largest number of citizens and of world masses, and control their own thoughts and beliefs:

> ...yet there was something far better than mere office, and she had got a glimpse of it that evening...; there was, simply, true power. Although money was the source

[1] Vidal claims a relative literary affinity with Adams: "In the American context, a writer whom I think I resemble in some ways is Henry Adams, but there was no model for me when I began" (Qtd. in Richard Peabody and Lucinda Ebersole, eds., *Conversations with Gore Vidal*, p. 86).

> of power in this rude place, now even less a civilization than it had been in Burr's day, what she had seen and heard of Hearst that night had convinced her that the ultimate power is not to preside in a white house or open a parliament while seated on a throne but to reinvent the world for everyone by giving them the dreams that you wanted them to dream. She doubted if Blaise…grasped this. He saw simply an exciting game to play, with money and the illusion of power as its reward" (*Empire* 100).

Unlike Blaise, Caroline wakes up to the fact that the President and Senators are mere employees at the service of the true holders of ultimate powers who count amongst themselves the press lords and media tycoons.

The power elite has its own interests, and it does not hesitate to implicate media and the written press in the intestine conflicts erupting now and then between its components. William Randolph Hearst, for instance, has no scruples in manipulating the readers' growing aversion to Spain and misinforming them by means of his newspapers to drive them to put pressure on the government and subsequently induce it to wage war against the European imperial rival, and fan the already inflamed, explosive situation in Cuba. According to Sidney Lens, the "situation in Cuba was bad enough, but it was exacerbated by some of the wildest and most dishonest reporting ever known" (qtd. in Nielson 84). There is indeed solid evidence that Hearst genuinely espoused the Cuban cause, but little does the public know that war serves Hearst and helps him expand the circulation of his papers, and thus compete with the other powerful press mogul, Joseph Pulitzer. W. H. Swanberg considers, in *Citizen Hearst: A Biography of William Randolph Hearst*, the coverage of the mysterious, disastrous explosion in Havana Harbour of the U.S. Cruiser, *Maine*, in which he traded on the American readers' hurt feelings and their deep grief for the loss of two hundred and sixty compatriots, to blame

the Spaniards and impute them with the deliberate commitment without irrefutable evidence, "stands as the orgasmic acme of ruthless, truthless newspaper jingoism".

With these new revelations, Caroline Sanford "now knew that nothing written in a newspaper should ever be taken seriously" (182)"; that is why she resorts to implementing the most reprehensible measures including downright lies to increase the readership of her paper. She serves, alongside Blaise, as a didactic tool Vidal uses to raise the readers' sensibility to the vital importance of media in obtaining and preserving power. She is incorporated into the plot of the novel to "perform the practical narrative function of intermediaries between the two bases of power, politics and the media" (Neilson 77). She is there to mediate but also expose the intricate relationship and the recurrent conflict between media on the one hand (yellow journalism in particular), and politics on the other, respectively represented in *Empire* by Randolph Hearst and John Hay.

After strongly endorsing Theodore Roosevelt's candidacy for the presidency and succeeding to get him elected, Hearst started to play with the idea of presidency himself. He resorted once again to the press and the (ab)use of his papers as propaganda to campaign and influence the public, but to electing himself this time. However, he failed at last, and was obliged to change target. In 1902 he managed instead to get elected as Senator for New York's Eleventh District. Four years later, he was humiliatingly defeated in his aspiration to hold the office of Governor for New York. The President was partly to blame for this thwarted aspiration, for Roosevelt sent his secretary of state to deliver an inflamed speech in which he solemnly accused Hearst of deliberately utilizing his newspapers in 1900 to get President McKinley murdered. Hearst's popularity and reputation were severely affected. Already jealous of Theodore Roosevelt whom he considered his own 'product', he decided to avenge himself in 1908. He resorted as payback to discrediting and vilifying his opponent with stolen,

incriminating documents he had previously laid his hands on. Hearst lied in a speech in Ohio on the way he obtained those documents,[1] then published them and sent them for publication in all the newspapers for the general public to read. They were written evidence that the vice president of Standard Oil Company bribed a few public officials to help pass favourable legislation.

Vidal, for all his claim of historical accuracy, rearranged a bit the historical events to serve his fictional goals. In *Empire*, it is not Hearst who lays his hands on the stolen correspondence of the vice president of Standard Oil but rather the fictional Blaise Sanford who buys a letter from Roosevelt to the same John D. Archbold. The latter is a plea for the said company to contribute to the latter's presidential campaign. Blaise Sanford involves Hearst in the secrecy and they both want to make the masses aware of the influence of oil companies and, by extension, big business in the presidential election, and American politics in general (Neilson 85-86).

One might disapprove, like Kloman, of the literary merit and narrative artistry of the novel, and accuse Vidal of resorting in it to frivolous gossip, name dropping, and concern with historical tidbits, and in it Vidal has certainly meddled with the actual story that occurred between Hearst, Oil Standard, and the President to showcase his own disapproval of Roosevelt and suit his own fictional purposes. Moreover, it was not possible at the time of the novel for a woman to edit a successful Washington paper, yet one has to admit the success of *Empire* in the rendition of the major role played by media in post-war American political life: "On the whole, *Empire* seems too concerned with frivolities, name dropping and gossipy historical deconstruction, becoming more of an exegetic dissection of a culture than an absorbing fictional narrative" (Kloman, "Gore Vidal's American chronicles"). The

[1] He concocted a story about a stranger handing them to him in his hotel room.

portrayal of media and of yellow journalism in *Empire* is only all too realistic; it provides an accurate image of their counterpart in American life and its distorting, misinforming, manipulating influence on the masses is true to form. Following his scandalous defeat in the quest for presidency, Hearst addresses the president with these prophetic words, "Soon you'll move out of here….and that's the end of you. But I go on and on, describing the world we live in, which then becomes what I say it is. Long after no one knows the difference between you and Chester A. Arthur, I'll still be here" (*Empire* 483). He believes that, as an owner of several newspapers, he is more powerful than the president who is a mere office-holder who serves one or two terms, only to end up like a "lame duck" and gets subsequently forgotten altogether, except for very few outstanding natures like Lincoln. There is a sense of truth in Stephen Schiff's claim that fictional Hearst's assertion about his power as a media boss over the president is inspired by Vidal and his grandfather's deception, and that it is a way for Vidal to vent his frustration as a politician who failed twice to get elected. "In *Empire*", Schiff argues, "Vidal reaches for a redemption no feud or campaign has ever provided him. He has recast the writer of fictions as the true politician, the true creator of history, the true man of action after all" (Qtd. in Nielson's "A Theatre of Politics" 87). Although Hearst couldn't in reality secure even his own image in the works of historians and novelists; yet, the power of the written word in widespread newspapers is irrefutable.[1]

Inasmuch as he manifested little patience for writers—at least those who are less famous than himself—Gore Vidal never really enjoyed the company of journalists either. His despise of media, his scornful attitude towards the written press, as well as his repugnance for interviews (a contradictory trait to his often expressed "dread of anonymity") might have been

[1] This section is partly dependent on Heather Neilson's said article, pp. 73-92.

fed by one or two unpleasant personal experiences. For instance, one journalist described him in a mean piece she wrote when he was in his late sixties as an "unkempt", "overweight" old man whose "belly is bursting through his shirt" (Chalmers).[1] Besides the (in)famous 1968 altercation on TV with public intellectual, Vietnam war supporter, and conservative political commentator and show host, William F. Buckley (1925-2008),[2] in which he was verbally abused and called "queer", Vidal suffered his work to be qualified as "meretricious" in yet another TV program hosted by British writer Richard Adams. Moreover, the then scandalous homosexual content of his *The City and the Pillar* tarnished his image for good and brought on him the wrath of mainstream, conservative journalism, particularly *The New York Times* which deigned to review his five subsequent works, causing him to nourish a deeply negative feeling towards it. Given that American writers are plagued in his view with "an inordinate concern for reputation", these unsatisfactory encounters had lasting effects on his bloated ego. The personal experiences apart, Vidal would still have loathed the press however for its "mendacious" reporting,[3] a hatred all the more intense as the press and media were very

[1] Even his interviewer, Robert Chalmers, was not spared Vidal's general animosity towards journalists: "I am quite sure you meant it [your question] maliciously. You are a journalist". He used the word "journalist" as an insult.

[2] The "vulgar" exchange between the two intellectuals on ABC in the election summer of 1968 was so (in)famous and epoch-making that it changed political debate on TV forever. See *Best of Enemies* (2015), a documentary co-directed by Robert Gorden and Morgan Neville.

[3] Even his interviewer Robert Chalmers was not spared Vidal's general animosity towards journalists: "I am quite sure you meant it [your question] maliciously. You are a journalist". Op. cit. He used the word "journalist" as an insult.

influential on the public and on the political scene. The influence and absolute power media—press in particular—had since the mid-nineteenth century up to the end of the twentieth century can be only partly comprehended in this time of alternative and investigative journalism, social media, whistle-blowers, Wikileaks, Julian Assange, Edward Snowden, Panama papers, and more recently, Pandora papers when governments-incriminating, classified documents can easily be made publicly accessible.

As he examines the post 9/11 situation in "The Enemy Within", Vidal is true to form in drawing parallels with the past. He shows for instance that the modern ruling junta profits from the aftermath of the exceptionally gruesome Tuesday just like the Washington D.C. building trades and up-market realtors of old did after the war of 1814 during James Madison's times. More importantly, the ruling oligarchy had a subservient complicit media that made sure the profitable moment would last long enough. Moreover, Vidal reveals the affinities between the role media has in galvanizing the public into supporting the consequent invasion of Iraq and its past function and success in marketing the invasion of Japan after Pearl Harbor sixty-two years earlier. Vidal claims that media is relatively freer in Europe and Asia, and that media people in the United States castigated those Europeans who did not support the invasion of Iraq, and slandered them as anti-Semitic—the peeve almost everybody is scared of in the west. It also condemns any critical stance or dissenting opinion that trespasses the already traced borders of "acceptable" debate as "un-American" and "unpatriotic", and stigmatizes their holders as "enemies" or "self-hating" citizens involved in a "conspiracy" against the nation.

> Post-9/11, the American media were filled with pre-emptory denunciations of unpatriotic 'conspiracy theorists', who not only are always with us but are usually easy for the media to discredit since it is an article of faith that there are no

conspiracies in American life.

Vidal illustrates with a particular situation on *CNN* (the most "supportive" channel) when an Indian academic tried to explain how Iraq was once an ally to the U.S. in its war against Iran, and anchor Jim Clancy responded with: 'None of that conspiracy stuff.'

U.S. corporate media sold out lies about 9/11 and about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, while most journalists in the written press and anchors on T.V. programmes showed little patience for foreign analysts who refused to buy the official narrative and to embrace the state rhetoric; brandishing the ready-to-use epithet of "conspiracy theorist". In its search for alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the American government used a no less lethal armament, given that the media's "weapons of mass distraction" can be as harmful as the alleged weapons of 'destruction':

> Meanwhile, the media were assigned their familiar task of inciting public opinion against bin Laden, still not the proven mastermind. These media blitzes often resemble the magicians (sic) classic gesture of distraction: as you watch the rippling bright colours of his silk handkerchief in one hand, he is planting the rabbit in your pocket with the other.

Vidal was perhaps wrong about the incriminating role of Bin Laden in the horrendous aggression, but his description of the magic tricks of U.S. media and its sly maneuvers to muster popular support for an American illegal and immoral invasion of a pacific country (rather, many countries) remains accurate, especially today as America has withdrawn its last boots from Iraqi and Afghan grounds respectively, after large numbers of the American public have detected the lie and realized how the rabbit was planted in their pocket.

This brainwashing role was not lost on the American government and its institutions

which, more often than not, (ab)used media for their own political and propaganda purposes. The CIA is one such governmental agency which has shown great interest in the prospects of manipulating news media and press; and notwithstanding the ongoing failure to prove beyond a shadow of doubt the alleged "Operation Mockingbird",[1] it is almost unanimously agreed that the CIA had always had a remarkable influence after the Cold War on media and on domestic press to manipulate the news and influence the public opinion abroad.

Regardless of his low opinion on journalists and journalism, Vidal knows they are sine-qua-non if one wants to keep informed and updated; he is also aware that some exceptions exist like *Time* magazine which he qualifies as "fearless", *Le Monde*, *The Guardian*, and a few more to which he resorts for information. In his vilification of U.S. press, he is not categorical or absolutist, but reminiscent of Edward Said who, in his celebration of revisionist historians and anti-imperialist novelists like Mark Twain and Randolph Bourne, he hailed the democratic character of a few "Left-liberal journals" like *The Nation* and *The Progressive* which published the opinions of powerful public critics like Noam Chomsky, Richard Barnet, and Richard Falk (*Culture and Imperialism* 287). Because the ruling oligarchy in America has often been divided based on political leanings into two blocs, corresponding to the two major parties that have so much in common regardless of the apparent opposition and self-proclaimed antagonism. Media follows suit in partisanship and political adherence. Some papers are traditionally Republican, others arguably Democrat; they are thus usually exploited by the respective party in power to defend its decisions and policies. While attacking and criticizing the government in place, the opposition papers are in fact consolidating the bi-party system that has always colored American politics rather than posing any real threat to it. The

[1] It is a CIA program that financed and recruited tens (even hundreds) of journalists and press members to advance US propaganda internationally by means of manipulation and fake news.

vehement, bona fide flak is rather reserved to the really revolutionary movements and their radical leaders who are susceptible to undermine the whole centuries-long, political tradition.

To conclude, both Mailer and Vidal wanted to represent in their novels, alongside the Congress (which was the most represented) and the Presidency, another of the "governing institutions", i.e. a national press with a growing political influence. These latter are in constant competition for control and influence on the non-suspecting masses that believe their political leanings and positions are a matter of conviction and free choice. Vernon Tad Davies explains in the introduction to his dissertation that the two novelists wanted mostly to highlight in their fiction work the fact that "individual political agency could no longer be imagined as *a priori* or independent, but rather as a position negotiated within the specific technologies of identification and control that competing, governing institutions afforded" (4). The press corps, and by extension media in general, is on the same footing of importance and impact in the political game as the political parties and the constitutional legislative and executive bodies. Davies proclaims that Mailer and Vidal are less interested in opposition politics per se in their novels, that their main focus is the "institutionalism" that settled in cold war America within the federal government and the electoral politics it rests on; an institutionalism that governs and informs the polemical movements in literature and politics which are merely reactions to and manifestations of it. Vidal's and Mailer's novels (particularly *Washington D.C.*) are less "policy oriented" than many critics believe them to be; they are more about "the structure of government, its mechanical functions, its corporate personality and psychology, and its management of human constituencies" (5).

# CONCLUSION

The biographical, temperamental, and literary differences between Mailer and Vidal could not be more striking and more visible to most biographers, critics, and commentators on their works. While Mailer, for instance, graduated from a most prestigious university, Vidal was a self-taught, avid reader whose formal schooling ended at high school, but who managed to make of himself "a polymathically educated man who took for granted that everybody shared his obsession with knowledge" (Mewshaw 9), and "the last gentleman of American letters" (qtd. in LaHood 416). While Mailer drew a very thin line between his protagonists and himself, Vidal confessed that he has never been his own subject. Besides, although both writers realised that "literary form" was as important as the tropes and content of their writings, that it framed the reading experience, shaped "the possibilities for identification within that experience", that modern times required new forms of writing to harness them, and were therefore both of them in search for some of these to represent U.S. presidents, the press corps, the intellectuals, and politics in the country, they eventually came up with different ones, however. While Vidal settles on the employment of roman-à-clef techniques and of the overstuffed historical romance as most appropriate forms for the 1960s and post-war situation in general, Mailer didn't resort to history as much, and even when he did it wasn't particularly U.S. history. Besides, he strived to create frenzied protagonists who are also thinly disguised—if at all—alter egos in order to offer the readers insights into his subjective experience (Davies 28).

As though to intensify the differences and deepen the chasm between them, Vidal recurrently states his 'disapproving' opinion on Mailer as a man and as a writer, claiming in his review of *Advertisements for Myself* that,

> I am not sure, finally, that he should be a novelist at all, or even a writer, despite formidable gifts. He is too much a demagogue; he swings from one position of cant to another with an intensity that is visceral rather than intellectual. He is all

> fragments and pieces. He appears to be looking for an identity and often it seems that he believes crude celebrity will give it him again.[1]

He sees him as a failure, as unfit for literature due to lack in honesty and integrity, and to a flawed perception of the self. These latter weaknesses seem most appropriate for a career in politics, and Vidal thinks that Mailer's radical political positions and leftist, pseudo-Marxist stances are just a further attempt at identification with his surroundings and with himself, one that seeks to replace the former role of war-novelist that led him to write *The Naked and the Dead*, and precedes his other role as "prophet of Hip and celebrator of sex" which resulted in the publication of "The White Negro". Furthermore, Vidal plays down the celebrity and influence of Mailer on public affairs, proclaiming that he:

> is a public writer, not a private artist; he wants to influence those who are alive at this time, but they will not notice him even when he is good. So each time he speaks he must become more bold, more loud, put on brighter motley and shake more foolish bells — *anything* to get their attention and, finally (and this could be the tragedy), so much energy is spent in getting the indifferent ear to listen that when the time comes for him to speak there may not be enough strength or creative imagination left him to say what he *knows*... (TNMS)

Mailer has to tumble about in the bog of buffoonery and foolishness in order to get noticed. Moreover, it can be convincingly argued that Vidal's criticism of Theodore Roosevelt's physical courage in "An American Sissy" might well have been directed against Mailer, himself known for bravado, and sado-masochist behaviour.

[1] "The Norman Mailer Syndrome", hereafter abbreviated as TNMS.

Occupying the two opposite end slots on the spectrum of masculinity and manliness, no two writers seem less likely to share many principles and take similar positions than "saddo-masochist" Mailer and "queer" Vidal. Yet, it has been shown in this work that beneath the rubble of differences—that intensify sometimes to diametrical opposition—between the two contemporaries in biography, literary form, politics, sexual orientation and other domains and pursuits, a world of agreement and harmony can be dug out and brought to daylight. To begin with, both embraced postmodern attitudes in writing yet neither was a single-issue-writer. Mailer's Jewishness does not impregnate his fiction or make him a disciple of the Jewish tradition in American literature with Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Bernard Malamud, and, likewise, Vidal's homosexual leanings do not limit his thematic scope the way it does Jack Kerouac's and Truman Capote's. What links them most however was their political dissent. Their opposition to U.S. foreign policy and its imperial adventures in many regions in the world, their condemnation of the degradation of individual freedoms and the domestic failures of the state, their warning against present ecologically harmful practices, their collections of acerbic essays and vitriolic critique, their vilification of war and its sordid effect on the American character, their scorn and derision of U.S. presidents who are gradually becoming lackeys with rubber stamps to validate the decisions of Wall Street Moguls instead of true leaders and decision-makers like Lincoln, and their resolution to reflect all these in their novels are hard to overlook by the alert observer and the conversant critic.

As to the questions asked in the introduction to this dissertation about the representation of American Presidents, it has been demonstrated in Chapter Two that the two authors' political dissent, especially Vidal's, is partly reflected in their oftentimes derogatory literary portrayal of a handful of American presidents which departs from the touting official narrative and from the

public mystification propagated mostly by textbooks and mainstream media. It is clear in Vidal's nonliterary writings that modern American presidents are unfamiliar with modern-day literature, that none of them can be conceived "reading a work by a serious contemporary American writer" (TNMS), and that no president since Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson could write their own speeches (Wright 44). In his novels too, a serious revisionist attempt is made to unearth 'true', unflattering accounts of the pursuits of, say, Lincoln, McKinley, Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, and to disillusion the indoctrinated public, not only about the wide gap between myth and historical reality but also about the resemblances and parallels with their successors to the White House like Bush and Obama, and with the current political status-quo, manifested internationally in expansionist, imperialist invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq by George Bush and in military interventions and threats to attack several other countries like Syria and Iran.

While Presidents Bush and Obama have no scruples in sending commandos of special forces, and drone strikes to foreign countries to carry out special operations and execute adversaries, including American citizens like Islamic cleric Anwar al-Awlaki in 2011, without trial or judgment or even proper burial (the case of Bin Laden), Abraham Lincoln unhesitatingly condemned in 1863 the call for assassination as "international outlawry", as an 'outrage' that should horrify 'civilized nations' and that merits the 'sternest retaliation'" (*Who Rules the World* 16), thus Vidal's respect and appreciation for him. For Vidal makes it evident in his fiction that Lincoln is the best American president as yet, and that Kennedy stands out of the bunch of presidents elected since. Vidal is not blind to the fact that Kennedy was responsible for several U.S. atrocities on the global chessboard. His decision in 1962 to change the mission of Latin American armies from 'hemispheric defense' to 'internal security', his blockade and repeated attempts to invade Cuba, the support he granted for Ngo Dinh Diem's regime in South

Vietnam and then for the generals who murdered him when he wanted better relations with the northern neighbour, are just a few examples of his imperialist endeavours of which Vidal was definitely in the know. Regardless of his contempt and opposition of U.S. brutal expansion, however, Vidal favoured Kennedy, not only because he was friend of his and husband to his stepsister, but because he cut a much more genial, charming image in comparison with his uncouth successors in office, and is responsible for a much lesser evil. Like Lincoln before him, Kennedy was neither righteous nor ideal, yet Vidal appreciated his sense of leadership, the Chutzpah, and the charming aura about him.

And so did Mailer. Although arguably more interested in criminals (*An American Dream*), secret agents (*Barbary Shore*), actors (*The Deer Park*), and foreign dictators (*The Castle in the Forest*), as well as foreign charismatic, powerful leaders like Russian Tsars and the German Fuhrer, Mailer did offer some fictional space (much less than Vidal, of course) to their local counterparts whom he considered —With his reputation (clearly exaggerated) as an assertive, astringently aggressive and violent little man—as dull and lacking in courage and stamina and other manly features he celebrated in "The White Negro" and other writings. However, an appreciative portrayal of J. F. Kennedy can easily be detected in his novels which radiates even brighter in comparison with the derogatory rendering of Lyndon Johnson in *The Armies, An American Dream*, and *WWVN*. Hence, both writers agree that U.S. Presidents are corrupt, inefficient, and expansionist, that they are manipulated by big business, and that they use and abuse media, take bribes, and resort to subterfuge. Kennedy stands out of the lot as an exceptionally brave individual. It is quite significant that the presidents dissenting Mailer and Vidal favoured were assassinated presidents.

Another finding in this research is that little change has happened since the days of the Greeks as to the function and fate of the intellectuals. There have always been two categories of

them; the first includes value-oriented intellectuals who stand for justice and equality, try to give voice to the voiceless, and exert free thinking in favour of the destitute victims of political systems and governments; whereas the second consists of technocratic, policy-oriented intellectuals who apologize for and rationalise the undertakings and policies of the government in place, inculcate obedience and support for the established order to the youth and the masses, and act as apparatchiks and apologists. The differences between these types of intellectuals, according to Chomsky, can be traced to even older times when the prophets (predecessors of the dissident intellectuals) expressed their condemnation of "the crimes of the powerful", called for justice, and were concerned for the poor, meanwhile the false prophets defended the acts of the rulers. The ones were opposed and harshly punished by Hebrew kings, the others flattered and rewarded (*Who Rules the World* 19-20.) Political dissent is no doubt the playground of the first category, but its reception in the western world is selective and biased. It varies in accordance with the political camp the dissidents belong to. If the opposing intellectual functions within "the world" (meaning Washington, London, and their orbiting states), he is subjected to vilification and accusations of perturbation, corruption of democracy, and distabilisation of order. He is quickly qualified as a dangerous creature derogating leadership, a miscreant defying authority and going against the legacy of the Constitution which requires the intellectual to be an 'enlightened statesman,' i.e. defend public interests against the "mischiefs" of democratic majorities—as asserted by the scholars of the liberal Trilateral Commission (*Who Rules the World* 9). In stark contrast, the dissidents who opposed US involvement in WWI, like Eugene Debs and Thorstein Veblen for instance were almost always imprisoned and oppressed by the state, with the approval and encouragement of the Wilsonian intellectuals (members of the second category) who toed the line and defended the government even though Wilson himself had been elected on an isolationist agenda. The dissident intellectual who belongs to the enemy camp (i.e. the Soviet Union and its satellites during the Cold War, and then Russia,

China and the Global South later) like Mandela, Archbishop Oscar Romero, and leading Latin American intellectuals and Jesuit priests, is praised, honored and exalted by the Western governments, the general intellectual community, and mainstream media as well. The term 'political dissent', therefore, does not apply, "with its favourable connotations, to value-oriented intellectuals at home or to those who combat U.S.-supported tyranny abroad" (10).

We pointed out in Chapter Three that two intellectual characters in Mailer's *Barbary Shore* belong to two distinct categories. McLeod is a radical dissenting intellectual who meets many of the requirements of Gramsci's organic intellectual and shares a lot of features with Jacoby's paradigmatic, public intellectual, whereas Leroy Hollingsworth is much closer in nature and function to what Gramsci qualifies as the traditional intellectual, and what is often dubbed the 'bureaucratic' one in the capitalist state. The two characters are not extreme opposites however. Both are bureaucrats with multiple points in common. It is the systems they serve which are diametrically opposed belligerents, i.e. the U.S. and the Soviet Union. As dissenter to the West, McLeod is, or has been before the 1939 pact with the Nazis and the assassination of Trotsky, a bureaucratic intellectual and a conformist to the Soviets. He is therefore just one career step ahead of Hollingsworth. Of the two characters, McLeod is definitely Mailer's favourite intellectual. For one thing, he shares too many personal and intellectual characteristics with Jean Malaquais (Mailer's Marxist mentor) that one is tempted to believe the former is a representative, or at least inspired by the latter. As a radical post-Marxist, he appeals to Mailer who was hesitant between Marxism, Trotsky-ism and post-Marxism throughout his career as writer and political activist. Furthermore, McLeod is arguably Mailer's only professional politician, i.e. an 'intellectual politician' rather than an 'intellectual in politics'. Hollingsworth stands however for many of Mailer's anathemas like conformism, professionalism and —above all— specialisation, given that Mailer himself was an engineer turned novelist.

In regard with Vidal who famously declared that the novelist and the politician are so different in temperament and in function as the former "must always tell the truth as he understands it while the politician must never give the game away",[1] it has been explicated that the three literary intellectuals in *Washington D.C.* (namely, Harold Griffiths, Billy Thorne, Duncan Aeneas) are not professional politicians like Burden Day, but "intellectuals in politics", and they are shown to give up their staunch political dissent and turn from their ideology of revolt to contributing articles and pieces to mainstream capitalist magazines and papers as somewhat conformist reporters, or at least as apologetic journalists and electoral campaign directors. In Vidal's fiction, mainstream journalism and media in general serve as a final resort for fanatic dissenters and leftist intellectuals after their disillusionment with activism and opposition, just as alternative media served as free space to say the truth to power, i.e. oppose and expose the government and system in place. It might be fair to conclude that most intellectuals in Vidal's and Mailer's novels start as dissenters, either radical like McLeod or mild like Senator Burden Day, but somewhere along the main plot of the novel they compromise their opposition and embrace varying degrees of what Benda baptized '*la trahison des clercs*', i.e. intellectual treason.

In Chapter Four, Vidal's literary depiction of media's central role in American politics and political dissent during the civil war as well as the first half of the twentieth century has been thoroughly explored. Although his family was connected with journalism at least since 1894

[1] See Vidal's introduction to *The City and the Pillar* where he claims that very few succeeded to fulfill the requirements of both novelist and politician simultaneously, and his interview where he names Benjamin Disraeli as a prominent exception that puts even W. Churchill to shame ("Gore Vidal Interview #1, The Education of Gore Vidal").

when his maternal grandfather helped establish a populist newspaper (LaHood 413), Gore Vidal puts part of the blame for his double failure to get elected and to pursue a long-desired political career on the papers and U.S. media in general. To vent his disappointment and frustration, he underlines in his novels (like he did in other writings) its overriding power and negative influence on American political institutions, and even on the President. His despise of mainstream media, his scornful attitude towards the written press, as well as his repugnance at interviews with journalists might have been due toother unpleasant experiences too. A particularly disconcerting one was due to his first scandalous novel. Outraged by the homosexual content of his *The City and The Pillar*, *The New York Times* and many conservative papers deigned to review several of his subsequent works, causing him to consolidate his deep aversion for journalism. The personal motives aside, Vidal would still have loathed the press for its mendacious reporting and other misdemeanors and failures. The growing influence and absolute power of the press and of media on the public and on the political scene since the mid-nineteenth century and up to the end of the twentieth century can only be partly comprehended in this age of alternative and investigative journalism, of social media and whistle-blowers, of Wikileaks and Julian Assange, of Edward Snowden, Panama and Pandora papers; an age in which classified, government-incriminating documents can easily be made accessible to the public.

Vidal examines the rise of media-mediated politics, and traces the kinds of journalists such a political system creates. To him, these mainstream media specialists and practitioners are members of a power structure who consciously work to defend the status quo. They are shown in his novels, particularly in *Washington D.C.*, to mislead the masses, oppose true freedom and 'excessive democracy', and act as political agents in complicity with capitalist moguls. They

constitute a subservient media that defends the ruling oligarchy and makes sure their profitable moment would last long enough. Vidal reveals, for instance, the affinities between the role media played in touting the invasion of Japan after Pearl Harbor, and its success, sixty-two years later, in galvanizing the public into supporting the invasion of Iraq. Indeed, Vidal's description of the magic tricks of U.S. media and its sly manoeuvre to muster popular support for illegal and immoral invasions of some pacific country or other, remains pertinent and accurate, especially today as America has withdrawn its last boots from Iraqi and Afghan grounds respectively, after large numbers of the American public have detected the lie and realized how the rabbit was planted in their pocket.

Ironically, in its justification for the search for alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the American government, Vidal proclaims, made use of media's weapons of "mass distraction" which were as harmful, if not lethal. TV reporting and news channels are under the control of the rulers who are engaging the USA into wars for whatever economic, imperialist and supremacist reasons. As if they are not enough to induce the bemused masses about American involvement, Vidal shows in his memoir how their work is corroborated by Hollywood blockbusters:

> The screening by CNN of our latest wars is carefully directed by those who are producing the wars. What these serial wars are all about is still not clear to us, nor are we ever apt to know what really happened until someone makes a backstage movie like *The Bad and the Beautiful* or, perhaps, *Platoon in the Desert*, a bitter, powerful film, quite as unrealistic, in its way, as the CNN-Pentagon releases (*PPNV*).

The brainwashing role of U.S. mainstream media was not lost on American institutions which,

more often than not, (ab)used it in order to achieve specific political and propaganda purposes. The CIA is one such governmental agency which has shown great interest in the prospects of manipulating news media, remarkably influenced and manipulated the news to influence the public opinion at home and abroad. 'Operation Mockingbird' aside, it is common knowledge today that, alongside *Voice of America* (V.O.A), there were two American radio stations targeting foreign audiences, namely *Free Europe* and *Radio Liberty*. They diffused from Munich (then Prague since 1995) to reach the popular democracies behind the Iron Curtain and the USSR respectively. Allegedly, they were privately funded, but it was revealed later that the CIA (under the very powerful Allen Dulles, brother to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles) was financing the National Committee for a Free Europe which was operating them (Jeanneney 353).

Vidal is right to claim, moreover, that media is relatively freer in Europe and Asia. American TV, for instance, is different from its European counterparts in many respects: it does not pretend to serve a cultural function and does not connect with intellectuals and universities. One of its eminent managers confessed it was typically an entertainment business, and sarcastically stated that only Western Union would satisfy those who wanted to send an educational message (Jeanneney 319). Moreover, it also is far more controlled by the private sector than is the case in Europe where a balance between public and private financing is more or less achieved, especially in England. For almost two decades, American Congress strived in vain to pass a law to allow the public funding of American TV channels; but did not succeed until 1967, under President Johnson, when the *Public Broadcasting Act* was voted. Nor was the American public very helpful in this regard as they did not cherish the idea of paying TV licence fees. They, in fact, found it normal for advertisers to completely take care of all the financing (320). Therefore, the public channels were always strenuously struggling for survival, and Ronald

Reagan did not feel good about the federal money assigned for them. He aimed to completely cut their public funding, but managed only to substantially reduce it (230). Furthermore, Vidal reveals how mainstream media people in the United States castigated those Europeans who did not support the invasion of Iraq, and slandered them as anti-Semitic. They condemned any critical stance or dissenting opinion that trespassed the already traced borders of "acceptable" debate as "un-American" and "unpatriotic", and stigmatized their holders as "enemies" or "self-hating" citizens involved in a "conspiracy" against the nation. During the build-up for the invasion, U.S. corporate media sold out lies about 9/11 and about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and most journalists in the written press alongside anchors on T.V. programmes showed little patience for foreign analysts who refused to buy the official narrative and to embrace the state rhetoric, brandishing the ready-to-use epithet of "conspiracy theorist".

Perhaps, Vidal "does the greatest favor to the general American public by showing that journalism itself is indeed the sporting profession of the activists and agitators, the trade of those who intend to change not just the world but minds also" (Stewart). It must be noted though that regardless of his low opinion on journalists and journalism, Vidal knows they are sine-qua-non to keep one informed and updated; he is also aware that some exceptions (mostly European) exist like the "fearless" *Time* magazine, *Le Monde*, and *The Guardian*. Some papers are traditionally Republican, others arguably Democrat; they are thus usually exploited by the respective party in power to defend its interests, decisions and policies. While attacking and criticizing the government in place, the opposition papers are in fact consolidating the bi-party system that has always underlined American politics rather than posing any real threat to it. The vehement, bona fide flak is rather reserved to the really revolutionary movements and their radical leaders who are susceptible to undermine the whole centuries-long, political tradition.

Norman Mailer is less of a suspicious conspiracy theorist, however; he seems to partake

Herman's and Chomsky's hesitation to question the sincerity and integrity of journalists and media people, and the proclamation that they are themselves victims of the power structure. As a journalist and editor of a radical, "politically incorrect" magazine, he broke away from the norms of short-form political reporting, refused to succumb to pressure, and courageously exposed and decried the biased news media regardless of the inherent agreement between journalists to avoid attacking peer papers lest a new press war breaks out in the manner of the infamous Hearst / Pulitzer dispute. Like Vidal, it has been demonstrated that some of Mailer's disrespect for many papers and magazines is inspired by personal grievances, i.e. their decision not to review some or all of his works; and by professional concerns, i.e. their incapacity for accurate reflection of the deeds and words of writers, their habits of distorting sentences and corrupting meaning, and their permanent questioning of the writers' motives that often make the latter look like idiots in the eyes of the readers, and make them doubt the reporters' capacity to ever make sense of their utterances and nuances of meaning. This horrible "journalistic mistranscription" aside, Mailer is pained and grieved by the mainstream papers and their reporters for objective reasons too. He called them "the silent assassins of the Republic" because of their distortion of facts, subservience to power, and their sycophant desire to ingratiate themselves with those in power as shown in *The Armies* with President Johnson and his Secretaries (51).

In that non-fiction novel, Mailer reproduces the speech he delivered during the march on the Pentagon to rebuke the press, underline its responsibility for inciting pitiful average Americans who are unaware they are being systematically misinformed to the verge of "mass schizophrenia" to accept horrific things like the Vietnam War (79), and expose its dishonest endeavour to embellish the image of authority, and to apologize for its failures and calamities (87). The scope of their lies is so phenomenal that future professional historians will have a

hard task telling the facts from the lies in this "forest of inaccuracy".

All national press was not totally useless, harmful, or equally distorting, however. The narrator in *The Armies* is well aware of a different type of press that is not subservient and apologetic to the government and its policies, a few marginal, unofficial, dissenting, fringe papers which offer a different narrative that show more respect for the participating masses and the readers as well. Yet, mainstream papers were mostly critical, antagonistic, and mendacious in their coverage of the march. *New York Times* was typical and representative in its severe condemnation and its blatant abuse of journalistic ethics. To the contrary of Vidal who believes in the great importance of the political novel in correcting the erroneous conception of political reality, Mailer reaches the cynical conviction that mainstream papers, yellow sensational papers, television, Hollywood, and other components of media are indeed so efficient in brainwashing large sections of the American populace that no politically-informed novel, successful as it might be, will ever compete with them in influence and reach.

Hence, in the final analysis, it is clear that Mailer and Vidal are true to the logic of their school of literary expression which, "at its most mature (and therefore least reactionary)", comprises "a rebuttal to the idea that there ever has been such a thing as "objectivity" in news reporting" (Stewart). They portray in their novels a national media with a growing political influence on the unenlightened masses, demonstrating that it has accumulated considerable importance in the political game. At these critical times of genocide, of frantic ethnic cleansing, and of collective punishment of civilians when western mainstream media is exposed to the rest of the world, and to the Global South in particular, as an efficient tool in the service of imperialistic NATO states, the representation of American mainstream media in the novels of Mailer and Vidal and its relation with political dissent, prove to be remarkably accurate and even prophetic.

Indeed American media outlets, especially TV and Press, have been manipulated since the very beginning by policy-oriented intellectuals (including journalists, anchors and reporters, as well as literary critics and authors) to embellish the image of U.S. presidents and other mainstream politicians of the Establishment (often referred to as the military-industrial complex) supporting the capitalist, imperialist policies, to endorse their international war-mongering decisions, to keep the masses indoctrinated, and to vilify all dissenting activists who call for reform, true democracy, and more freedom.

Philip Roth expounds, in his essay "Writing American Fiction" (1975), that writers of fiction faced a serious occupational impediment that consisted of a strong sense of estrangement from their surroundings and a feeling that they didn't really live in their own country. They were so disgusted by their era they couldn't manage to deal with it in fiction, just like Norman Mailer who has allegedly become an actor in the cultural drama not much as a writer but rather as himself, witness his *Advertisements for Myself* wherein his life substitutes his fiction. No longer duly respected or socially revered, it was difficult for the American writer in this time to appeal to a sufficient audience or represent the socio-political status quo. Grand themes and representation of contemporary phenomena, à la Salinger in *The Catcher in the Rye* (1948), were given up at last, and one possible recourse was withdrawal to the personal experience and the biographical detail. Therefore, a new prose style emerged to meet the exigencies of that 'appalling and ridiculous' age; a bounty, muscular style that is not an attempt to dazzle the reader, but to incorporate into American literary prose the rhythms, nuances, and emphases of urban and immigrant speech, a language of new and rich emotional subtleties.

These claims by Philip Roth, however, are more accurate and correct about the modernists who were on the decline after WW II, with their emphasis on the protagonist's alienation and

non-belonging on the one hand, and, on the other, the independence and self-adequacy of the novelist and artist in general. The thriving postmodernists barely concealed their concern with and reaction to contemporaneous social issues, and their dissent against the socio-political environment was thinly disguised-if at all. Besides, it is not fair to take Norman Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself* as typical of his work; it is rather diametrically opposed to many of his famous texts studied above, his *The Castle in the Forest*, and his historical novels. What applies to it therefore cannot be projected on the rest of his work, let alone the post-war American novel in its entirety. Furthermore, Mailer's resort in the said book to personal experience, and his reference to himself as 'Mailer' instead of the first personal pronoun may well be an influence of some members of the preceding generation of modernist American writers,[1] rather than a postwar novelistic tendency.

Vidal too disproves Roth's claims on the non-mimetic, unpolitical nature of post-war American fiction, because, if anything, his favourite subject is American political history. American politics has been a major interest almost his entire life, and although he sometimes actually participated in the political fray, it is probable that he "has had a greater impact on politics in America as an observer than he would have had as a player" (LaHood 416), given that his historical novels constitute a major part of his observation, and of his political dissent. Mailer and Vidal, it has been proved, believe in the power of the political novel and the politically-informed historical novel in not just reproducing the political status-quo, but in

[1] Richard Kostelanetz notes that the narrative voice of Avant-Guard authoress, Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), as employed in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) might well be responsible for Mailer's habit of dropping the 'I' in favour of his name, or of 'Aquarius' in his book *Of the Fire on the Moon* on the Apollo 11 expedition (*American Writing Today* 82).

critiquing and counterbalancing the official, oftentimes mendacious, narrative that is propagated by mainstream media, among other means. They-particularly Mailer-seem to agree with Davies that rather than representing the political truth and reflecting an objective political reality, the political novels, alongside other non-literary narratives, can indeed create one, that they "are part of a system that is in constant flux. They are part of the cultural renewal process that keeps the system in flux and brings new political truths to the forefront" (Davies 26). Political novels may have considerable influence on the reader's understanding of the political situation he lives in, and nuance, or even invert the views he brings into the reading experience.

After distinguishing the thirties as a period of politically-themed works of modernism that are more engaged than first-generation works by pioneers like Eliot and Joyce, George Orwell argues against writers who are too politically involved, or members of political parties because of the 'discipline' that imposes on them and their writings (fiction included) a difficult choice of 'toe the line, or shut up' (*Collected Essays* 241), a political commitment which encroaches on the freedom of literature and especially the novel. Vidal's and Mailer's novels, however, do not belong to his despised category of propaganda literature mainly because the two authors—though politically inspired—do not embrace a rigid ideology or adhere to a particular party. They rather speak up the truth against dominant ideology. Vidal is manifestly against the use of fiction as a tool of sheer propaganda that fails to address, and even quench, the aesthetic thirst deeply seated in the reader, but aims instead to overtly advance a specific argument or world-view. Yet, he asserts that the world of a particular novel is clearly a reaction to a contemporary experience. In a review of Mailer's *An Advertisement*, he contends:

> Now I am not sure that the novel...is particularly suited to didacticism. It is certainly putting an undesirable weight upon the novel to use it as a pretext for sermons or the resuscitation of antique religious myths. Works of fiction, at best, create not

> arguments but worlds, and a world by definition is an attitude toward a complex of experience, not a single argument or theme, syllogistically proposed (TNMS).

Late in his career, Vidal has no illusions as to the status of the novel in America and the world in the beginning of the twenty-first century. The time of the 'famous' novelist, just like that of the 'famous' poet is long overdue. Because political dissent does not make a celebrity of the novelists indulging in it, they must target other goals than popular fame, for "no writer except Hemingway is ever mentioned as news in the American press." The novelist will lose much of his belletristic worth and aesthetic merit when he tries hard to be famous and accepted by the Agora and the "religious-minded" critics; his work will eventually alternate between "the sub-literary bleating of the Beats" and "Mailer's portentous: 'I am the way and life ever after, crucify me, you hackers, for mine is a ritual death!'" (TNMS).

Vidal is alert to the fact that, as LaHood proclaims, "his status among the intelligentsia does not seem as great as that of others", that some commentators, including Christopher Caldwell in "Hard Core Gore", even question his status as an intellectual, so he loses no time to explain that his contemporaries' status does not mean they are really 'famous'.[1] He distinguished of course between fame on the one hand, and a place in the canon (or the school syllabus for that matter)

[1] LaHood regrets the fact that Vidal does not enjoy the celebrity and status he deserves. Like his fictional Roman emperor, Constantius, Vidal is "many men in the body of one", and LaHood believes these multifarious interests and success in so many fields, unlike his settled contemporaries who have succeeded in only one medium, are responsible for his relative marginalisation. He wishes, though, that time will eventually treat him fairly and "bring him greater recognition" (417).

on the other. Fame means influence on the public and being discussed favourably, just like Dickens was much discussed up till after the World War I in Britain and his characters alive as types of British citizens, or may be just like Francis Scott Fitzgerald was in America when *The Great Gatsby* was published or even in the sixties and seventies: "There is no such thing as a famous novelist now...Yet thirty years ago, novels were actually read and discussed by those who did not write them or, indeed, even read them." It is now the age of the "Tenth Muse" as the novel is still read only by a decreasing number of specialists and critics. In his memoir, *PPNV,* he concludes that throughout his lifetime as a political activist and writer he has never liked anything as much as going to the movies, and confessed that even as a child in Washington D.C. when he was a "compulsive reader" he was besotted by the large screen, to the point of watching five movies in a row one Saturday.

What makes most critics of Mailer's works handicapped is the fact that he has preceded their critical appraisals with a blueprint for the best way to approach his fiction. A blueprint so impressive and detailed that "only a powerful and gifted effort can go beyond it" (Lucid 607). It has been shown above, however, that in the image of its creator, Mailer's novelistic project is arguably more challenging to formal conventions and more explicitly rule-breaking than Vidal's, regardless of the fact that they both belong to the same aesthetic school of post-modernism. The two authors' literary project is part of their larger one as dissenting political activists and naysayers, a part of their life-long mission to say the truth to various types of power: literary, social, economic and political. And within that same project, the authors ventured in second degree writing and chose their own political dissent as subject to reveal its manifestations, its heavy cost, and the sordid fate of its perpetrators.

Finally, any claim of exhaustiveness in research would be outrageously presumptuous, and it is quite strenuous in the present one to cover all the works (or even just the fiction) of prolific Mailer

and Vidal. Any researcher working on these authors is challenged with not just the impressive number of their novels and works but also by their voluminous character. Many of Vidal's novels exceed 400 pages in most editions, and so does a number of Mailer's. It, thus, takes a long time and great diligence to read and analyse every fiction work by these men of letters who kept creatively active for more than six decades. Therefore, we cannot help but be selective and eclectic at best. Yet, a researcher who has carried out rigorous work, has spared no effort to master his subject, and analysed the opinions of all the experts who had tackled the chosen topic, is justified, even required, to balance his academic humility and avoid being too apologetic, for —following Umberto Eco— there is "nothing more annoying than a thesis in which the author continuously gives unsolicited excuses" (*How to Write a Thesis* 183.)

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