

## Palimpsest

*G. Vidal*

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This is not an autobiography but a memoir. The distinction may be fine, but if given any edge, it must refer to a haphazard collection rather than a straight portentous narrative constrained by chronology. Thus in particular we are spared the customary digression on ancestors that are normally thrown into the face of the hapless reader before he has warmed up to the subject, not that those matters are not divulged, only introduced in due time. 'Palimpsest', a word that Vidal confesses he for a long time neither properly understood nor was able to spell correctly, invokes the process of recalling and rewriting, true to the awareness that the very act of bringing forth memories invariably alters them, so that the revisiting of the past inevitably becomes its rewriting, or rather an act of over-writing. What is true, what is false? Vidal does, however, not go for postmodernist relativization, after all truth and honesty are supreme virtues, and even as such notoriously difficult to exercise, not to be denied. The most scathing contempt, in a book devoted to the cold eye treatment of many a hapless individual crossing his path, has been reserved for Truman Capote, regretting that his obsessive inventiveness never was put into service in his fiction.

Vidal grew up in so called 'high society'. He shared a senatorial grandfather with the once Vice-President and presidential contender Al Gore, and a step-father with Jackie Onassis. His father was a pioneer in the aviation business called to do Government service under Franklin Roosevelt; while his mother was an alcoholic beauty, resented by her son and her parents alike. Thus Vidal was born with connections, others may devote a life to obtain; hence enabling him to safely disdain what others may merely dream of. But to extricate yourself from a circle, often proves even more difficult than to ingratiate yourself into one, so a reader will be treated to a long glittering array of personalities in politics, in the literary world and of course the show-business, most of which have in time faded into well-deserved obscurity.

Politics and show-business are in one respect very similar, as both play themselves out in front of the public eye, and thus its stars by necessity turn into celebrities. Thus Reagan for once made a point when confronted with the question how come an actor could be President replied that he could not see how a President could be anything else than an actor. With literature it is different, although still in the late forties its stars were also visible on the public sky, being generally revered even if not always read. Thus the general reader of today will be less enthralled by encounters with a Santayana or a Gide than with trivialities like Garbo and Mrs Kennedy.

As to politics, into which he dabbled once without succeeding to be elected, the author can off-handedly drop the remark that there are problems whenever some of your friends and acquaintances becomes the President, no longer can you address him by his first name (really?) nor precede him in the door entering a new room. Thus the allure of Kennedy, always referred to as Jack in allegorical complement to Jackie, is something not even Vidal has been able to remain immune to. The couple makes its spotty appearance already within

the initial pages of the memoirs, only to be devoted an entire chapter at the end, based on some notes relating to a dinner invitation to their Hyannisport retreat, written, as Vidal is careful to point out, on green transparent paper. Kennedy was a cold warrior who dreamed about becoming a hot one as well. He was in poor health, looking much older than in his photographs, well aware that his time was limited and glory had to be seized quickly. Had he been given the choice, his eventual assassination in Dallas, certainly would not have appalled him giving the nature of the realistic alternatives. A brutal end that for all time has enshrined him as a saint, on which mud simply cannot stick for too long. That Kennedy was sick, (suffering from among other things the Addison disease that gave to his skin a bronzed look, and deprived him of a natural source of adrenalin) that was known, as well as that he was obsessively promiscuous; but in those days, the public was sheltered from such knowledge, a fact approved of by Vidal, as one should never confuse public morality with private. In fact, Vidal notes, at the time everybody was seized with fear of the Sovietunion as the great international bully; and during the short reign of the Kennedy administration, at least according to the author, there was an explosion of military spending. Intimate as his relations with the presidential couple may appear, they were of no long duration, and as he admits, only once was he called up by phone by Kennedy himself asking him to deny the true rumours of his affliction with Addison. Still, the most interesting thing is after all not a political assessment of Kennedys brief tenure with the advantage of thirty years hindsight, but a glimpse of how life was back then. What was said during dinner conversations, the routines involving security staff, a furtive exploration with Mrs Kennedy and friends evading attention (how idyllic it must have been in the early sixties, such excursions clearly would be impossible nowadays). A vignette of the Kennedys watching (for what time?) a newsreel of their recent state visit to France, gives a rather disturbing hint of narcissism. Yet the President was well-informed, a voracious reader and an enthusiastic gossip, naturally inviting confidence. Still he brought us to the brink of disaster. His brother Bobby comes across as a more sinister character, maybe because he is reported to have hated the author along with the teamster boss Hoffa the most. Once an aid to the notorious McCarthy, and as has been remarked, politicians usually never change, and when they do it is always for the worse, there is little incentive for the author to soften the characterization. In fact, Vidal, for obvious reasons always apt to view things from a certain sexual angle, is not above dropping hints of the younger brother Kennedys supposedly suppressed desires as relayed by Nureyev. The Kennedys did not necessarily keep good company, a tradition started by their father involving himself with the mob and the mafia. As a telling aside Vidal recalls the anecdote about giving an appointment to his Polish brother-in-law, a notorious crook. A dossier was presented. It was very thick. Kennedy asked whether he needed to read all this. No, he was told, just do not make the appointment.

Hobnobbing with the rich and famous is not really what makes Vidal tick, in spite of its source of entertaining gossip. Going to parties only makes sense, he notes, if you want to further your career or your sex life. As to the latter, his sexual passion seems to be for the quick casual encounter with same-sexed strangers. Never mix friendship with sex has been his principle, boasting that he had never felt prone to sexual jealousy. (Still the maintaining of a steady male companion for thirty years rises a few questions, never

formulated let alone addressed) He gives few details of what by its very nature is not very memorable, except some hints as to an encounter with Kerouac, thus producing in the average reader estrangement. As to a deeper sexual bond there is only his teenage infatuation with a certain Jimmie Trimble, who died at twenty on the Pacific theatre, and whose loss of his Platonic half he obviously has never gotten over.

His career has been his writing, and a very remunerative one at that. He already made his debut at the age of twenty, thus having taken the fork of literature instead of politics. His homosexual novel published in 1948 made him a persona non grata, barred from reviews in the New York Times. But as he points out, whenever he wrote under a pseudonym, he received raving praise, from which you may derive two conclusions, that after all literary merit is objectively assessed, so when denied it is out of spite, and secondly more importantly Vidal has it. He then launched himself into writing for the theatre and later Hollywood in the fifties, achieving financial independence, the prerequisite for the free and fulfilling life. Writing obviously takes up most of his life and passion demanding unwavering discipline and sustained diligence, but of the process, maybe the most private aspect of an individual's life, not surprisingly precious little is divulged. We learn in passing that one of his pot-boilers, a seventy odd thousand detective story, published under the pseudonym of Edgar Box, was written in a mere eight days, and similar claims are also made for some more notable works, testifying at least to stamina. The memoirs themselves were written during a two year period, one surmises on and off as a mere distraction.

The man who lives on wit and looks must keep fit. This is clearly an obsession with Vidal. He refers to regular diets and physical works-ups, and also, disturbingly, to the regular testing of blood, both as to its sugar content and well as its pressure. Fittingly the book ends with a visit to a cemetery in Washington D.C. where he has bought a spot for himself and his companion, incidentally close to the grave of his adolescent love. Yje circle is about to be closed.

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