

UNITED STATES: Essays, 1952-1992
By Gore Vidal

The publication of "United States" confirms Gore Vidal as the most stimulating essayist of our time—if one agrees that a slip in the face qualifies as stimulation.

Love or loathe his confrontational style, Vidal's urbane and confident intelligence remains spellbinding. Whether he discusses literature (classical, modern, unfashionable and obscure), politics (in which he has been a prime-time participant, having made an unsuccessful primary run for a U. S. Senate seat from California) or philosophy (as a "born-again atheist," he works over monotheism, "easily the greatest disaster to befall the human race, with a rhetorical rubber hose) he is never dull.

He consistently brings to his subject something on the order of one part formidable knowledge, two parts aphoristic wit à la Oscar Wilde and a liberal dose of whatever it is that chefs use to make their sauces a touch bitter. The zest with which Vidal takes on perceived enemies pervades this collection. If revenge is indeed a dish best eaten cold, it may be deduced that Vidal is not in need of a microwave oven.

In a piece on critics titled "Literary Gangsters," he ironically posits: "It is not wise to praise anyone living." Vidal's writings adhere to this maxim. Norman Mailer's "The Naked and the Dead" is "a clever, talented, admirable executed fake...I do recall a fine description of soldiers carrying a dying man down a mountain (done almost as well as the same scene in Malraux's earlier work)."

If Mailer's compositions can be disingenuously alluded to as plagiarism, it is only a hop, skip and jump to the passing along of nastier (and unsubstantiated) rumors. Vidal recalls a discussion with World War II novelist John Horne Burns in which Burns theorized that to be a good writer it is necessary to be gay. "But what about Faulkner, I asked, and Hemingway. He was disdainful. Who said *they* were any good? And besides hadn't I heard how Hemingway once..."

This is three dot journalism at its most lethal, with a deceased and thus unverifiable source dropping the poison pill into the goblet.

Minor authors no longer with us, however, have nothing to fear. Thomas Love Peacock, Logan Pearsall Smith, Dawn Powell and

Frederic Prokosch are among the writers' writers whose works are thoroughly and enthusiastically explicated.

The middle ground is a humdrum terrain not often occupied by high-flying controversialists. But it is just when Vidal is ambivalent or patently undecided that he is at his most interesting. This is the case with pieces written on Tennessee Williams, whom he knew well, and Somerset Maugham, whose entire output he had absorbed while still in his teens. Sexually complex lives like theirs engage Vidal and prod him to investigate the psychological underpinnings of gay life in general. There are no homosexuals or heterosexuals, he wisely observes, only homosexual and heterosexual acts.

The political essays gathered in this book are incisively humorous. Vidal, whose forebears were in the political mainstream, wryly suggests that the Japanese now regard us as "The Yellow Man's Burden" and hope they will treat us more kindly than we did them now that the shoe appears to be on the other foot. "Should we disobey, they will buy the networks and show us many hours of the soothing tea ceremony."

A visit with Barry Goldwater in the '60's produces this punchy metaphor: "When the Presidential virus attacks the system, there is a tendency for the patient in his fever to move from the Right or the Left to the Center where the curative votes are, where John Kennedy now is."

Feminism, a cause Vidal is generally in sympathy with, is deplored for the sameness of its texts. "Each does a quick biological tour of the human body, takes on Moses and St. Paul, congratulates Mill, savages Freud (that mistake about vaginal orgasm has cost him his glory), sighs over Marx, roughs up the patriarchalists, and concludes with pleas for child-care centers, free abortion, equal pay, and—in most cases—an end to marriage."

"United States," then, is provocative. It will try many a patient soul. Even that unflappable master of the art of casuistry, William Buckley, lost it upon being stung by Vidal's verbal jab once too often on network television). Buckley abandoned the finer points of his celebrated debating technique for the more direct and less rational resolve to reshape the nose of his tormentor with clenched fists.

Vidal can do that to you. These essays, however, are better approached with a philosophical acceptance of their occasional

displays of pettiness. They are redeemed by courageous (and outrageous) thought, by a superb prose style and by an enlightened use of history in the service of wisdom. With this collection (which spans four decades) Vidal, as much as anyone, defines for us who we are at this time in this land.

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