

Gore Vidal's Love Affair with Italy

Judith Harris (August 01, 2012)



For over three decades Gore Vidal spent six months a year in Italy, living between Rome and the magnificent southern town of Ravello, on the Amalfi coast. He was proud that Federico Fellini had given him a role in his movie *Roma*, where he played himself. And he was proud as a peacock when the city of Ravello made him an honorary citizen. The eminent guerrilla fighter who used words like a bazooka loved everything Italian—including the Italians. "Left to themselves, the Italians work out a fine balance between anarchy and order. When times are bad—or good—the balance shifts this way or that. But the nice balance, sooner or later, is restored. Fundamentally, Italians hate both anarchy and order. This is very human." A first-hand portrait by a reporter who happened to meet him often.

ROME - For over three decades Gore Vidal, who died Tuesday of pneumonia at age 86 in Los



Angeles, spent six months a year in Italy. He and his partner, jazz singer Howard Auster, spent the colder Italian months in a roomy penthouse apartment whose terrace overlooked the ancient temple ruins at Largo Argentina in Rome. "And what better place to watch the end of the world?" Gore would say, in the world-weary voice he adopted, but which did not quite conceal the fact that he was, ever and always, an idealist.

Summer months were spent at his sprawling villa "La Rondinaia" - the Swallow's Nest - in the magnificent southern village of Ravello, at cliffside high above the sea. In Ravello, he said in 1977, four years after buying the villa, the locals "still speak of us as the 'two English sculptors.'" But most of the time he was already "a local icon, pointed out to tourists just like the thousand-year-old castle. Everybody comes to say hello to the Maestro, and I talk to the Monsignore in the piazza." With a Ravello priest he served on the Ravello booster council. And among his other Ravello friends was a retired English clergyman whose large family was so attractive that, as Vidal admitted, they made him long, "just once," to have a couple of sturdy sons of his own.

Every morning in Ravello Vidal walked down the cliff road to Amalfi to buy a half dozen Italian daily newspapers and an espresso in a cafe, before taking the bus back up to Ravello. Back at home Vidal became lord of all he surveyed - the distant sea, Paestum on its peninsula, the lemon trees, the shimmering light, the swallows that gave their name to the villa. Life at Ravello was "creatively boring," the day ending with a pre-dinner game of backgammon with Howard on the evenings (rare) when they were not entertaining guests, who, at different times, included Britain's Princess Margaret and Jackie Onassis, to whom Vidal was related by his mother's marriage to her father, Hugh D. Auchincloss.

Vidal already knew Italy when he came to live here in 1973. Indeed his family had an Italian connection, and he twice visited Forni a Voltri in Friuli, home of his ancestors from about 1586 to 1779. Originally a Romanischer family, they came to Friuli from Feldkirch, in Austria. "A Vidal then left Friuli to return to Feldkirch, where he bought back Vidalhaus; it was his son, my great-grandfather, who came to the United States in 1848. We were apothecaries for more than five hundred years, and I suppose that the Vidals in the Veneto who make the soap are remnants of the family who stayed on in Italy. I love Friuli...."

For that matter, he loved all of Italy, even though he never spoke Italian well. But then, as he said, "I write in English, after all. I read Italian easily, but I speak it with difficulty because I think in English and to translate swiftly what I am - I hope - swiftly thinking is hard work. Mind you, I have trouble reading Gadda, but Paese Sera, l'Unità, Messaggero, Repubblica, Corriere della Sera are the papers that I generally read, and are not difficult. But then I am old school: I was brought up in Latin."

He was proud that Federico Fellini had given him a role in his film Roma, where he played himself. He had already written most of the film Ben Hur, "happily without credit," around 1957 at Cinecittà'. And although saying that he admired the works ("some of them") of Marco Bellocchio and Michelangelo Antonioni, as well as those of Fellini, he said he preferred not to work with anyone other than Fellini because "the cultural differences are... how to be tactful? too great."

"The Italian character [his underscoring] has a good deal of strength of a sort that the American character lacks. The Italian means to survive, at any cost. The American survives, but there is often too high a cost," he once told me. "Left to themselves, the Italians work out a fine balance between anarchy and order. When times are bad—or good—the balance shifts this way or that. But the nice balance, sooner or later, is restored. Fundamentally, Italians hate both anarchy and order. This is very human."

He could be disenchanted over relations between the two nations, as he wrote me in 1980 from his home in California. "After the war a good deal of American money was given to rebuild Italy, and that was a good thing even if the Mafia and/or the politicians got too large a commission. Since then, I can't think of any American institution that contributes much of anything to Italy. I suppose that the fleet at Gaeta, and the air force at Vicenza, serve as a deterrent to Soviet ambition." And then he softened, recalling the wonders of the American Academy, where he had done research for his novel Julian, adding: "And I suspect that even those Italians who do not love America sometimes have nightmares of Tito dead and Soviet troops staring hungrily at Trieste and points south."



Wherever he was, Gore Vidal loved being Gore Vidal - a guerrilla fighter who used words like a bazooka. Or at least he loved himself most of the time. "I get so monstrously bored with myself," he once remarked to me. "Once I pretended to be this famous orchestra conductor. For weeks I went around being him. Later I met him. I didn't like him."

He had no objection to praise. Once he showed me an article he was writing about Italy. "May I make an observation?" I asked hesitantly. No, he said, and that was that. Later I pointed out to him that at least three of his books ended in acts of violence: the rape in *The City and the Pillar*, another rape in *Myra Breckinridge* and the bomb blast in *Kalki*. "Oh?" he said, as if he had not noticed this. "Well, then, I had better not stop writing."

He was proud as a peacock when the city of Ravello made him an honorary citizen. All Vidal's guests attending the citizenship ceremony, performed by the Ravello mayor, received a basket of lemons harvested from Vidal's own trees. The previous evening was celebrated with a trattoria dinner where, seated around the long table under the stars, were Italo Calvino, Luigi Barzini and Vidal's other close friends. The conversation was so rapid-fire that, seated in my corner, I could not keep up enough to make notes, as I often did when I was with Vidal. Still, I recall Calvino agreeing with me that Vidal's *Duluth*, written in 1983 and snubbed by U.S. critics, such as the *New York Times*' Christopher Lehmann-Haupt (the novel has the "usual apocalyptic indictment of the human race," he wrote), was in its way a masterpiece.

And so was Gore Vidal.

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