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From Amsterdam, this is Bright Minds, the podcast from the John Adams Institute, a treasure trove of the best and the brightest of American thinking, I'm Jonathan Groubert, and this week's guest was once, in my opinion, the (inaudible) of American thought, the incomparable Gore Vidal.

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**Gore Vidal:** Each society selects its arts and its pleasures, and one is not obliged to sit in judgment on the difference in value, let us say, between *a mask* by Ben Jonson and the triumphs of that sublime film. For me, *Airplane!*, the creation of three demented youths in Hollywood. Each is of its kind, and that is that.

00:01:11

**Jonathan Groubert:** Witty, erudite and merciless. That's how friend and enemy alike described Gore Vidal. Gore Vidal was an American writer known for his essays, novels, screenplays, Broadway plays and attempts at political office. Vidal wrote for *the Nation*, *New Statesman*, *the New York Review of Books* and *Esquire*. And Vidal's major subject was America and through his essays and media appearances he was a longtime critic of American foreign policy. He even won an Academy award for his rewrite of the script of the epic drama *ben-hur* in 1959.

But he was probably just as famous for his feuds with rivals like Norman Mailer, Truman Capote and William F. Buckley. The Buckley-Vidal verbal jousts even inspired a documentary, and most of them are on YouTube, if you care to watch. Vidal died in 2012 from Pneumonia and in his obituary the *New York Times* wrote, "few American writers have been more versatile or gotten more mileage from their talent." And the *Washington Post* remembered him as a quote; "major writer of the modern era." Back in 1992 he was in fine form as he waxed poetic about his usual subjects: a heady mix of art, literature and politics, the death of the novel, in favor of cinema and anything else that popped into his head at the moment. This recording is from 1992 and it's pretty much found sound from an old cassette and even though I've cleaned it up, it sounds less than optimal, but we liked it so much we still wanted to put it in the podcast. So before 1992 audience in Amsterdam, this is Gore Vidal.

00:03:00

**Gore Vidal:** I feel like Vidal Sassoon. I have prepared some remarks for you, which I have unfortunately had to write down. I will read them, but I will look up from time to time in order to give an air of spontaneity to what I'm saying. You know, the last American president who was able to write a speech was Woodrow Wilson, who left office in 1920, and Ronald Reagan appears to be the last one who can read a speech. There is something wrong with Darwin somewhere.

Our greatest reader of speeches, the one that gave me the most pleasure was a President, many years ago, called Eisenhower, and he read his speeches with a real sense of discovery. And I remember when he was running for the presidency the first time in 1952, we were involved in one of our numerous wars for freedom and democracy. I think we were in Korea at that time pursuing this extraordinary goal, which you are quite right, John Adams thought impossible. Anyway, I thought that if Eisenhower was elected President, as a general, he would be able to end the war, which indeed he did do. But nobody had told the general.

So, he was reading a speech, he said; "And, if elected, I will go to Korea." No one had told him until he told the national audience, and the poor old thing had to go off to Korea. No golf. Nothing between then and the election. Recently Norman Mailer and I were interviewed, sounds like the queen of England, "My husband and I."

Recently Norman and I were interviewed jointly for the magazine *Esquire* in the United States. Since we are the last survivors of that American literary generation which came out of the second World War, we both served in the Pacific. Our lady interviewer found us poignant in a macabre sort of way. We are also the last survivors, she reminded us, of the *New York Times* best-seller list of 1948. Mailer with the *Naked and the Dead* and I with the *City and the Pillar* and George Orwell with *1984*.

I only now begin to feel just how long ago all this was. Happy to report the other seven on the list of ten have long since vanished and they may be beckoning us. The questions we were asked by the interviewer were all the usual ones. Then, as Tennessee Williams used to say, there are only 50 questions and if you allow the interview enough time, he asks all 50. This explains why our answers are so often a bit odd, even surreal. We too get bored as well as boring. During my chat with Mailer I think that I startled him. I know I surprised our interviewer when I said that I used to be a famous novelist and she said; "Oh, but you still are, everyone knows you." Except for those who don't. "And your books are sold and read and taught in American universities."

I assured her that I myself was doing as well as could be expected, but that my category had vanished. There is no longer such a thing as the famous novelist. The phrase is an oxymoron. It's like saying someone is a famous ceramicist or a famous stained-glass maker. The word novelist means nothing to the generality, while to the educated few it is interchangeable with the word poet. Each of no doubt worthy activity, but neither any particular urgency or utility.

The interviewer was not about to give up so easily. After all, if we weren't famous novelists, why on earth was she interviewing us? She intoned the magic (word) names, not only of Norman and me, but of Günter Grass, Garcia Marquez, Solzhenitsyn. And I said: well, your list proves my point. Each of the writers that she had named was famous not so much for his novels or for his art, as for his life in the world. Usually for having said no to the worst aspects of his society.

Finally, it is not so much the art of our novels, which is of no great interest, as it is the resonance of our negative that is heard round the world, and even then, we are not heard by very many in the first world countries of the affluent West. The East is different, and it is still possible to be a famous novelist in Russia, because the consumer society has not yet destroyed or corrupted their world, and so the word maker is still a sort of shaman magician. It's a very hard thing in a bad Russian winter to have only words to eat.

So, what is happening and what has happened? From the last half of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century the novel was not only the principal form of narrative entertainment, but it was also, at its best, the principal means of illuminating the prospect. If not before us all around us, and also to portray our common past. The novel with Richardson became archly moral, with George Eliot it became serious but not solemn, with Henry James, it became higher art, with Joyce it became a bold surrogate for religion. The novel as holy text, to be interpreted only by adepts.

I speak now of the novel in English, but the same sort of thing was happening in other languages: France, as usual in her deeply annoying way, made the greatest contribution, and Balzac, (inaudible), Flaubert right up to Proust and many others. The Germans checked in with Goethe, Mann (inaudible). Russia with Tolstoy, (inaudible) and the lovely Turgenev, who went to France in order to be a Russian. Incidentally, I'm not an expatriate. I live in Los Angeles as well as in Italy, but since it is Los Angeles, many people claim that I don't live in America at all.

Then, at the beginning of our own terrible century, whose edgy protagonist is Doctor Faustus, literature was taken over by something called modernism. Which at best was art for art's sake, a meaningless notion, and at worst literature is one of the exact physical sciences. Coldly calculated to rival, if not surpass, the true genius of our Faustian century: the scientist in his laboratory breaking the atom and with it all of art, to the extent that the artist wanted to imitate the machine, or indeed become a machine.

During the first quarter of Faust's century the novel most famously flowered with old Henry James and Wharton (inaudible), Faulkner. Then the novel swiftly went to seed and, due to the erosion of the cultural soil in the West, only hardy Cacti flourish for us now. A few months ago in an English journal, I was compared rather unpleasantly to Tiresias. But though I have never experienced his adventurous metamorphoses, I certainly had the gift of prophecy. In the year 1956, when I wrote: after some 300 years, the novel in English has lost the general reader, or rather the general reader has lost the novel, and I propose that he will not again recover his old enthusiasm. Appalling education, combined with clever new toys, has distracted the large public, which found pleasure in prose fiction. I then noted that television in the movies were the preferred diversions of the general public, even then. But that, to strike a somewhat tinny, optimistic note, the novel is left only the best

things: the expiration of the inner world's divisions and distinctions where no camera may follow, and so on.

Needless to say, for the next 20 years, I was attacked for having said that the novel was dead. When I have actually said was that the audience for the novel had moved away, a demonstrable fact even then. In any case, what I wrote more than a third of a century ago is now obvious to everyone. The famous novelist, qua novelist, has ceased to exist and in his place stands, proudly. that bold usurper; The auteur du cinema.

As the poet was on the periphery of the culture at the beginning of the century. Now the novelist has joined him at the outer edge, the outer edge, and the golden calf of the movies enthalls the world. Where once there were readers, now there are viewers, listeners, consumers. Efforts to analyze this state of affairs has given rise to a number of confusions. To overdo an understatement, the generation to which I belong, heirs to the last literary flowering, have been found wanting. If only we had been greater, whatever that means, people would still be reading books. But I think we are quite as good, if not in some cases, rather better than our famous predecessors. It is just that the art we practiced, and some of it still practice, is of no use at all to the many and of not much interest to the cultured few.

The many go to the movies, the few study film. Two years ago, I was president of the jury at the Venice Film Festival. I watched some 31 mediocre to bad films with one dazzling exception: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*. To celebrate two weeks of this Festival, the entire press of the world was on hand and any one of those bad movies commanded more world attention and audience than any novel. No matter how greatly the noble author had suffered in Stalin's Gulag or beheld a vision perhaps in the stacks of the library at the University of Bologna.

Last Spring I delivered the Massey lectures at Harvard. I finally made my peace with Academe in America, on-the-ground there's nothing left. I'm just rehearsing here. I go back again to Harvard, I go on to Dartmouth, I go from one investiture to another. I have lost. Anyway I delivered the Massey lectures at Harvard, which was under the aegis of the American Civilization Department, a suitably modest Bureaucracy. I hope that was not our cultural attaché from the embassy. We must keep up a front in foreign countries.

In a week of talking to thousands in auditorium, auditoriums and hundreds in classrooms, no one ever mentioned to me a novel or a poem by me or by anybody else. It was a lot of quite intelligent talk about politics and history, but literature was a non subject. So as a result, whenever I found things getting a bit dull, I would say: has anyone here seen the stones?

This picture had just opened, the saga of Jim Morrison. An electric shock would go through the room, everybody came to life, fierce arguments began, and no one believed me when I said that at my first Harvard lecture in 1950-something the same excitement that Scorsese and Alan aroused today would have been triggered by a mention of Mailer, can you?

Let me now burden you with a long cultural view is rather a specialty of mine, since such a view can never be proved or disproved, particularly in my native land, the United States of Amnesia, where anything that did not happen this morning did not happen at all. But I am a compulsive autodidact and historian, so I must lay this upon you, as they say.

In the fifth century BC. there was a simultaneous debate in four different cultures: Greek, Persian, Indian and Chinese. These societies were not in very close contact with each other. In fact, in the case of China, there was practically no communication at all with the others. Yet there was the same debate simultaneously between traditionalists and modernists.

Modernists wanted to write down everything; prayers, poems, histories, whatever. Traditionalists wanted the text to be memorized and continue to be memorized on-the-ground that a written text was not a part of the self, of the psyche, but a thing apart on a page.

As we know, the modernist won now that everything has been written down for two and a half millennia. The audio-visual is challenging the written text and the victory again will go to the innovators. And though some writing will have to be retained, anyone in need of narrative diversion or indeed high emotional, if not intellectual stimulus, will encounter to counter it with the push of a button on a screen at home. And wherever I travel in any hemisphere, I do get the same puzzled

question: why are there no great writers today? The immediate answer is undemocratic: how can there be great writers if there are no good readers, much less great readers?

But practically speaking, literature is largely irrelevant, except for a very few in the west, and they tend to be cloistered in academies where they brood upon sacred-texts and then pass them on to future adepts, rather like the monks of the dark ages who preserve Latin classical writing.

Lately, alarmingly, the American Universities, anyway, sacred-texts have been abandoned in favor of something called literary theory. A number of variants on Herman Hesse's glass bead game. These theories, of course, cannot be passed on, as the masters, Magistry Lodi, are only for the day and live only to make themselves ludicrous. Simultaneously as literature became our cane, the other arts do not flourish either.

Contemporary cabinet painting has become a cold-blooded store of value for the very rich. Good and bad are no longer adjectives to be tolerated in a relativist time. As a result, our Faustian architecture, all of its school of Heisenberg, is hated not only by the Prince of Wales, but by those who must work and live in buildings whose blueprints deserve prizes but whose construction deserves demolition. Although films are the lingua franca of our culture, even they are beginning to show signs of decadence and the audience grows restive with far too much to choose from and yet, paradoxically, not enough of interest. The first sign of decadence is when an art form become self-referential. Movies now allude to other movies and the movies are fascinating to watch because their history is so short and you can really learn it all on your own and rather quickly. Movies allude to other movies. At first this was amusing in small doses, but when an entire film turns out to be a byzantine (inaudible) of other films, one realizes that this highly collective art form has broken its essential mooring, which is not to old movies but to life.

Today, when a filmmaker wants to create a love scene, he's going to think about remembered bits and pieces from *Truthfull* or *Lubich*. It would never occur to him to draw anything that he has experienced in life. But then, like everything in time and space, the arts are organic birth and maturity, then decay in order to be reborn. William Hazlitt, with his usual bleak good sense, got the point. All arts are at their best at their beginning, and he cited Chaucer, Shakespeare, Fielding. He also warned: rules and models destroy genius and art.

Darwin's finest invention, nature, is ruled by the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Everything is running down to start-up again, presumably on the far side of the black-hole. Recently I met an American academic named Paul Fussell. He's a good, somewhat irritable writer with a fine ear for the wrong note. Since we are of the same age, we spoke of the second war that we had both served in and which he has written so brilliantly about.

And he told me we both had been first mate on a ship in the Pacific and he had been company commander in the infantry here in Europe, and he told me that he had started to read Henry James in order not to have to listen to his fellow soldiers, or think about his probable early death. I said that I had done exactly the same. We had turned to literature and turned our back on what was going on around us. Then he said: remember, when we thought back in the '40's that literature high literature would solve everything. It would take the place of religion, it might even take the place of the state. We grew very excited as we remembered that holy profession we had taken up, and then we noted, sadly, how in our lifetime, ever so gradually, it had all slipped away like Matthew Arnold's way from that desolate shore.

Literature will always have some utility for the few taught to read early and well. Whether there will be enough teachers to do the necessary teaching remains to be seen. Personally, I am tranquil. Each society selects its arts and its pleasures, and one is not obliged to sit in judgment on the difference in value, let us say, between *a mask* by Ben Jonson and the triumphs of that sublime film for me, *Airplane!*, the creation of three demented youths in Hollywood. Each is of its kind, and that is that. But the flattening out. Indeed, the irrelevance of art as century and millennium end is a very curious phenomenon. Could it be that perhaps Mephistopheles has now arrived upon the scene, ready to take down the hero Doctor Faustus, to whom he gave so much of art and of science in the doctor's lifetime, which has proven to be our century. So perhaps we are now at the close of a Faustian century and the devil has arrived to claim our inventor upon the stroke of midnight. If so, all that we

can do, as the clock begins to strike the final hour, join Doctor Faustus in his oration cry; O lente, lente, currite eque noctes. And for those who you're not upon your Latin that means run slowly, slowly, courses of the night.

00:28:18

**Jonathan Groubert:** I think he just predicted networks there. That was the writer, thinker and orator, the late great Gore Vidal, back in 1992.

Did you know that you can go to our website, <https://www.john-adams.nl/videos/>, where there is a link to the video of this extraordinary event. And of course, I'll put a link to the out video of this event in the show notes. We also have a newsletter, and you can sign up for a veritable treasure trove of great American thinkers and speakers at John Dash Adams. Dot John Adams. And while you're there, why not become a member of the John Adams? Not only will you support what we do, you get a discount of future live events. In the meantime you should go wherever you get your broadcasts and leave a review of this show. This will help get the word out and we can keep on sharing the very best of American thinkers in Europe with you free of charge. That's it for this week. Our theme song is called LA Prensa by the Parlano's, our editor Tracy Metz, from Amsterdam. This was Bright Minds, the podcast from the John Adams Institute. I'm Jonathan Groubert. Thank you for listening.