

# **‘To Infinity and Beyond...’: The American Vernacular and Democratic Space**

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The spatial strategies adopted by the founding fathers of the American Republic are examined and their political roots and consequences explored. In particular the reasons for the neo-classical style becoming prominent are questioned, and whether that style was an appropriate spatial strategy for democratization. An analysis is presented of how American writing and literature was a forum for the working out of the questions of expansion into, and settlement in, new space.

**KEYWORDS** expansion, settlement, neo-classicism, vernacular, enlightenment, romantic, literature, infinity, democracy

## **‘We hold these truths to be self-evident’**

The American founding fathers made it clear, in ink and stone, that the models for their new Republic were classical. As Bertrand Russell points out, when the Declaration of Independence states “‘We hold these truths to be self-evident” it is modelling itself on the Euclid’. Russell goes on to assert that ‘the Eighteenth Century doctrine of natural rights is a search for Euclidean axioms in politics’ (Russell, 1984: 55). Equally we might say, with the White House, the Virginia State Capitol, and of course, Monticello and the University of Virginia, in mind, that the century of revolutions chose as the axiomatic architecture of liberty the classical pavilion set in an open natural landscape.

It is the contention of this study that the type of classicism adopted as a model for settlement by the new Republic could potentially raise issues in terms of its intentions towards, or its suitability for the securing of democracy for that polity. Could this classical heritage, which originally evolved with and articulated the social, political and cultural orders in the tightly defined urban spaces of ancient Rome and Greece, be considered an effective model for settlement across a vast continent, and for creation of a democratic Republic satisfying the American dream of ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’? Could it have been specifically chosen as a spatial model to

preclude particular democratic possibilities? And was not the American ethos of limitless expansion, and flight, 'yearning to breathe free' from the 'teeming shore'<sup>1</sup> of oppressive Europe characterized and shaped more by the vernacular or pioneering spirit?

Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* wrote

Men make their own history, but not spontaneously, under conditions they have chosen for themselves; rather on terms immediately existing, given and handed down to them. The tradition of countless generations is an incubus to the mind of the living. At the very times when they seem to be engaged in revolutionizing themselves and their circumstances, in creating something previously non-existent, at such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously summon up the spirits of the past to their aid, borrowing from them names, rallying-cries, costumes, in order to stage the new world-historical drama in this time-honoured disguise and borrowed speech. (Marx, 1983: 287)

The American revolutionaries wore just such a disguise, in revived classical models—Jefferson in particular with his important role in the architectural Roman Revival. But it is the prefix we add in describing Jefferson's chosen style as Neo-Classical, that is of special significance here, for as Marx wrote further in the same passage, 'The raising of the dead in those revolutions, therefore served to glorify the new struggles, not parody the old' (Marx, 1983: 289). Just so, as part of a spatial strategy by policy makers in the new Republic, classical architecture was exploited in a novel way (i.e. not isolated on its own formal terms but with a feature which (among others) makes it *neo-classical*, namely that it is *in a new relation to its terrain*), and towards new ends. The important feature of this architecture here is that unlike, say, the Baroque style, where buildings on their own or joined together with others use their facades to shape public space as streets, squares, crescents and so on, in the neo-classical style buildings stand foursquare and alone on open freeflowing land like a garden, a park or the open countryside: e.g. Monticello, Virginia State Capitol, The White House. As Michael Dennis writes,

From the absence of a strong tradition of closed urban space (that is, of forum or agora), we can conclude that America was principally the product of Neoclassicism, not of classicism, and that the profile of urban America, with its notably fragile tradition of urban space, is therefore more a result of chronology than of geography or genetics. (Dennis, 1986: 229)

The explicit ends that the American founding fathers intended with this spatial strategy were that all men had rights, including that to Property, and to government by consent. These aims could only be achieved by great expansion of the new peoples into new territory, yet in order to provide the stability needed for consent to be given to the governors, this spatial principle of expansion would have to be reconciled with that of settlement. The thesis proposed here is that the neo-classical style is not just exploited as an architectural, but as a comprehensive spatial model in dealing with that reconciliation. Yet as David Harvey points out 'transformations of space, place and environment are neither neutral nor innocent with respect to practices of domination or control' (Harvey, 1996: 44).

I then show here how this problematic is given a wider treatment through the forum of American writing. It is in its ceaseless probing and interrogating of both an

expansive and ever-expanding natural terrain, and the interhuman relations within that terrain, that American literature can be engaged as a critique of the neo-classical spatial model and the question of democracy within it. For a protracted, influential and effective discussion of the respective usefulness of classical and vernacular models in creating the democratic Republic through limitless time and space does in fact take place in literature, although many groups and sections of society, indeed a majority of the population, are ultimately excluded both from the expansion of American society in space, and from the discussion of its consequences.

Thus in the first section below I discuss the sources, definition, and the reasons for the adoption of neo-classicism as an American national architectural and spatial model. In the next section I discuss the problems with the character of such a model in its appropriateness as a social setting for achieving ‘consensus’ or more specifically, ‘democracy’. I then go on to discuss whether and how American literature has provided a forum for the working out of conceptions of spatial models which can be reconciled to the developing political, social, and economic exigencies of the new Republic.

### What form of classicism, and why?

First of all let us examine what specific form of classicism was adopted in the young Republic, who influenced the adoption of this form, and in what way could it be seen as suitable? In architectural terms at least, the buildings cited above (Monticello, University of Virginia) as typifying the structure of American liberty, can be categorized as neo-classical. In his book *Court and Garden: From the French Hotel to the City of Modern Architecture* Michael Dennis has neo-classicism as a major stage in the historical transformation of western architecture that is characterized by the ‘trading of the city of public space for the city of private icons’. As Dennis goes on to tell us

At the time of its birth in 1776, the United States of America had a total population of approximately 2.25 million. By 1790 this had increased to almost 4 million, but the total urban population was only slightly more than 200 000 people and only two cities were larger than 25 000. The whole country was regarded as something of a wilderness by foreign visitors, and there were no professionally trained American architects (Benjamin Latrobe, arriving 1796, was the first). Urbanism was barely an ideal, much less a developed tradition or even a necessity. The principal architectural element in the colonies had been the detached house; and even by the time of the Revolution, only the northern cities evinced some pattern of town houses with potentially common walls. (Dennis, 1986: 229)

This ‘relatively primitive arcadia’ (Dennis, 1986: 229) was fertile ground for the neo-classical style as defined by Dennis as a ‘regularised freestanding platonic solid’ in a ‘romantic landscape’ (Dennis, 1986: 136, 231). For the wider significance of this neo-classical architecture as originally a European phenomenon arising in that particular historical era, with its urbane refined construction standing alone in a setting of pastoral or freeflowing landscape, is that it is an architecture of contradictions, or at least one which demonstrates the 18th century symbiotic relationship of Enlightenment rationality and Romantic sensibility.

Just so, one of the finest European examples of neo classicism, the Petit Trianon, is a freestanding royal pavilion built in the Versailles gardens in 1761 with a clean simple, rationalistic plan, walls four-square and aloof from its plot, but surrounded by open, flowing, naturalistic romantic gardens. The critical distinction between this late 18th century style and the previous Baroque authoritarian style from the heart of which the French king (Louis XIV) could say '*L'état, c'est moi*', is important. The neo-classical Petit Trianon thus contrasts with the main part of the palace of Versailles, a massive articulated Baroque building built largely through the 17th and early 18th centuries, which embraces and shapes public space and spreads its influence and control out across a vast territory through use of geometrically organized, formal gardens.

In effect, with the building of Petit Trianon and its gardens, the Revolution took place architecturally at Versailles almost 30 years before the fall of the Bastille. In its free flowing garden setting the occupants of the building symbolically make no attempt to control public space and retreat into the simple, rational lines of their private home. It is arguably the original model of the bourgeois suburban house. Privacy and seclusion were indeed fundamental motives in its construction: built across the park, behind trees and out of view from the main palace it was originally intended to house the king's mistress. A couple of decades later the then Queen, Marie Antoinette, would dress as a milk-maid and play the simple life of the peasantry in its romantic gardens; and she had plays, including, notably, *The Village Soothsayer* by Jean Jacques Rousseau, performed indoors. (Seward, 1981: 99)

On a certain qualitative level then, parallels between the stance of the American founding fathers and the neoclassical style as typified by the Petit Trianon in terms of attitude (freestanding, enlightened, rational), and chosen territory (endless, freeflowing, natural, romantic) are remarkable. It is somewhat fitting also that the American who played a major role in bringing the influence of this neo-classical style across the Atlantic to the 'relatively primitive arcadia' there was himself an exemplary embodiment of such evident contradictions. Thomas Jefferson was an Enlightenment philosopher and a politician, a farmer and a thinker, a lover of liberty and an owner of slaves: he was as great a reader of the classics of Vitruvius and Palladio as he was of the romance of Ossian. He of course knew Latin, and he tried to teach himself Scottish Gaelic in order to read Ossian in the 'original' (Boyd, 1950: 96).<sup>2</sup> Thus in his own tastes and dispositions, for the classical and the romantic, for Roman order and Highland wilderness, Jefferson embodied the contradictions inherent in the neo-classical style. As Frederick Nichols and Ralph Griswold write 'The elegance of French neoclassical architecture, set in the naturalistic garden style of the English, appealed to Jefferson's mature taste' (Nichols and Griswold, 1978: 79).

But Jefferson, Minister (1784–89) to the Court of France in Versailles, would also have known the Petit Trianon: 'As Minister, he went regularly to Versailles on diplomatic errands, and occasionally wandered into the gardens' (Adams, 2000: 118). His favoured architectural model however, was one of similar restrained, rectilinear forms to the Petit Trianon (he called this 'Cubic architecture' (Nichols, 1978: 5)), namely the Maison Carrée, a Roman temple he knew in Nimes, and of which Michael Dennis remarks 'Jefferson mistook ... for a republican monument' (Dennis, 1986: 231). As Kimball shows, the Maison Carrée was the inspiration (with help from

Clérisseau) for the Virginia Capitol, — ‘the first building to be destined specifically for a modern republican government’ (Kimball, 1915: 44).

This neo-classicism as a pure institutional blueprint for the occupation of space was perfect for an American Republic whose individual citizens were liberated to a new open natural world from the tyranny of a European network of absolutist kings. Jefferson, the amateur architect, had brought the architectural model back from Europe, and we know its pedigree: from Enlightenment France and Britain, back through Renaissance Italy, from Vitruvian Rome, out of Periclean Athens. The Baroque style did, of course, have a similar pedigree. But unlike the Baroque, whose geometric complexities from Sixtus V’s Rome to Louis’s (17th and early 18th century) Versailles, sought to map exactly and maintain an entire territory under tight authoritarian control, this neo-classical style set in a free flowing romantic landscape had fine potential to serve as the fabric for Jefferson’s vision of a white man’s agrarian democracy. It also proved later to be a perfect model for a country — the American Republic — whose ‘manifest destiny’ was ‘to overspread and possess the whole continent’ (Sullivan, 1845), gridding the entire landmass of virgin territory with one-mile-square homesteads for potential freethinking husbandmen. And if it was exclusively those property-owning citizens who were to get a vote, then even as late as 1862 with President Lincoln’s Homestead Act, which opened up the Western lands to settlers willing to farm 160 acres each, the franchise was still being spread endlessly to reach towards a truly *democratic* republic.

### **The problem with neo-classicism as a spatial model for a democratic republic**

Yet for all its Greco-Roman models, in this American idyll there is ‘crucially little trace of either forum or agora’ (Dennis, 1986: 229). That is to say, that there is in this tradition an almost complete absence of the type of enclosed urban space which played such a pivotal social role in the ancient classical civilizations. And the political significance and meanings which are drawn from this lack of deliberate and formal public space intended as a focus for active social life seem to break down into two sets of critical possibilities: typically the standpoint of the European leftist or those of the American liberal patriot à la Thoreau. In the first respective case it would be said that this so-called democracy, with no public spaces, evidences little care as to how its citizens commune in public and express their everyday democratic wishes. Thus indeed, did not some of the founding fathers show a very Aristotelian rejection of the desirability of democracy, as with John Adams, who on that latter topic, wrote in his *A Defense of the American Constitutions* (1787)

Perhaps, at first, prejudice, habit, shame or fear, principle or religion would restrain the poor from attacking the rich, and the idle from usurping on the industrious; but the time would not be long before courage and enterprise would come and pretexts would be invented by degrees to countenance the majority in dividing all the property among them, or at least in sharing it equally with its present possessors. (Cave and Clayton, 1966: 33)

And Alexander Hamilton, in 1787 in Philadelphia, shows himself equally untrusting of the ordinary citizens ‘The people are turbulent and changing: they seldom judge

or determine right. Give therefore to the first class a distinct permanent share in the government' (Vidal, 2003: 51).

The second — American liberal patriot case — would maintain that this system with its light touch seeks to leave its citizens in peace and freedom on their own land to get on with their own legitimate and very private concerns, and rejects those massive, organized and formal spaces, of which the Baroque was so proud, and where kings and states could display all the pageantry of their formal power and control. Just so Thoreau claims to 'heartily accept' the motto 'that government is best which governs least' (Thoreau, 1964: 2).

In the final analysis of course, it is probably neither necessary nor useful to force down on one side or the other the question: whether the architectural and urban models of the young American Republic have been exploited to democratic, or for paranoiac ends. As another Architectural critic, this time an American, Vincent Scully, says of the basic psychology proper to life as a citizen of that Republic, there is 'a feeling at once of liberation and of loss' (Scully, 1969: 12). Liberated, that is, to endless free and open space, but losing out on the regular and formal places built for public and civic intercourse.

### **Literature as the forum for exploration of the democratic potential of limitless time and space**

It would nonetheless be a perversely mean analysis of the democratic potential of the American Republic which took into account only the effect of the concrete and physical forms of its territory, and refused to concede that there exist fora — and perhaps more important ones — in other media, such as TV, internet, film, newspaper, literature and so on. Jacques Derrida famously wrote, 'No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy' (Derrida, 1993: 28). And the argument I propose here is that it is historically in the world of American literature that we find the most wholeheartedly democratic attempt at delineation of the Republic. But I would go further and argue the reason that has been possible is because some American writers in their own obsession with that limitless natural space exploited by the neoclassical style, have added vernacular models to the attempt to democratize it as the living space of the republic. This obsession with limitless natural space can be seen across the canon of American literature from Melville's Ahab chasing the largest known mammal across the vast oceans — and indeed Olson's declaration thereon, that 'I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America' (Olson, 1997: 11), to Kerouac's endless American journey *On the Road*. I plot that spatial literary debate, albeit in a somewhat restricted fashion here in this short article, by initially taking as exemplary some of the meditations of four writers: Whitman, Twain, Vonnegut, and Vidal; and then by juxtaposing against those the writings of Wharton, Angelou and Morrison.

But before defining exactly what we mean by here by 'vernacular' however, let it just be said that there is no small irony in the fact that the etymology of that word points to its origin in the Latin 'verna' meaning 'home-born' slave. For of course, in Jefferson's vision of a utopian republic it was precisely that class of human beings who would be excluded from full citizenship rights. That etymology also points to

our definition of ‘vernacular’ here, for what we mean are forms which are homespun, of no easily recognisable or institutional pedigree, which are not based on any formalized inherited model, least of all the rhetorical classicism drawn from the Ancient European world. It is this complete freedom to roam in time and space (metaphorically through a wild, open, ‘empty’ continent, one might say) that characterizes the American vernacular as different certainly from any other Anglophone one, like say, the Scottish vernacular whose function and scope may be described as operating to ‘preserve or revitalise the modes, forms, and language of the native tradition’ (Simpson, 2009: 91). There is no singular native tradition for the American writers, and nor do they feel a ‘threat to (their) cultural identity’ (Simpson, 2009: 91) as did say the 18th century Scots Enlightenment and Romantic writers, like Burns, Ferguson and Ramsay, all of whom had such an important influence on the young Republic. Indeed I will show here that the American writers feel rather a confidence in the power of the vernacular voice of their civilization that it may go forward out across the centuries and the continents, and talk with any other which it meets as an equal, and in one sense this is why with the American writers there seems to be so much of an obsession with ‘eternity’ or limitlessness. But this ultimately raises the question whether is it really possible for American writers — even in their infinitely long haul — to fully achieve the movement beyond inherited modes and forms?

Take Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* for example, not only does he praise the eternal principles and force of life in nature,

...What is the grass? . . .  
 . . . the handkerchief of the Lord . . .  
 . . . a uniform hieroglyphic. . .’ (Whitman, 1995: 7)

But he enlightens us as to the human’s part in eternal nature, how they are inseparable from its reality:

The smallest sprout shows that there really is no death  
 And if ever there was it led forward life  
 And does not wait at the end of life to arrest it  
 And ceased the moment life appeared. (Whitman, 1995: 8)

Thus not only can Whitman talk in this vernacular to every man that ever was, but he *is* everyman:

Of every hue and trade and rank, of every caste and religion  
 Not merely of the New World, but of Africa Europe or  
 Asia . . . a wandering savage,  
 A farmer, mechanic, or artist . . . a gentleman, sailor, or quaker  
 A prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest. (Whitman, 1995: 23)

And he *is* everything, every ‘leaf of grass’ too. What we have here is something very different from a merely eloquent and poetic reworking of that mundane political theme of the ‘melting pot’, or indeed another sermon on the worthiness of multiculturalism. For Whitman’s transcendentalism is recognisably Romantic in its enthusiasm for natural right, and thus can be seen in direct relation to the founding fathers’ neo-classical vision.

With Mark Twain the story is different, if at least as complicated. While on the one hand his bucolic comedies of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn may be amenable to the founding fathers' guiding spirit, with *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* he has a close encounter of an entirely unprovincial kind. His protagonist picks a fight on his own terms (well almost, apart from the bump on the head which landed him back in the 6th century) with some particular and typical enemies of his own civilization, namely, medieval magicians, superstition, an absolutist king and his aristocracy, and hidebound religion. But the 19th century American mechanic who time travels back to 6th century England can cope with any of that. . .

'I was just as much at home in that century as I could have been in any other. . .' (Twain, 1917: 56)

And if he picks particular fights in that country and that century then the point is clearly that they illustrate the general power of his creed that as a self-sufficient American liberal technocrat he can stand up anywhere, throughout all eternity, and make his voice the telling one. In his fight against outdated forms he outlines his eternal creed (*italics Twain's*)

You see my kind of loyalty was loyalty to one's country not to its institutions or its office holders. The country is the real thing, the substantial thing. . . I was from Connecticut whose constitution declares "that all political power is inherent in the people, and all free governments are founded on their authority; and that they have *at all times* an undeniable and indefeasible right to *alter their form of government* in such a manner as they may think expedient." (Twain, 1917: 100)

But if ultimately Twain's character succumbs to typical human power-hungry failings in his struggle with medievalism, it is because Twain is an artist here writing a human tragedy and not a beancounter filing a manual of political science.

Death ought not to be seen anyhow as a failing, Whitman tells us. And nor does death even exist, as Kurt Vonnegut has a character explain in his novel *Slaughterhouse 5*. Vonnegut's everyman protagonist in that novel, Billy Pilgrim, takes the discussion on liberty out infinitely further than Twain's once-round time-traveller in *Connecticut Yankee* by not only travelling back and forth to other time zones on this planet, but by measuring up his civilization to the culture of a race of extraterrestrials, the Tralfamadorians. They inhabit a planet 300 million miles from earth (Vonnegut, 1972: 61), and tell him,

'We will all live forever, no matter how dead we may sometimes seem to be. . .'  
(Vonnegut, 1972: 140)

Billy Pilgrim learns in his conversations with these beings that they view events not as things happening then disappearing into the past, as it were, but as staying with us for all time; and what seem to us as separate and mutually exclusive moments, exist together and always, like 'a stretch of the Rocky Mountains' (Vonnegut, 1972: 25).

But if indeed the vernacular spirit is characterized by being homespun, or of no exclusive or easily recognisable institutional pedigree, then surely it is proper to it that when there is a lack of coherent and comprehensive models for exploitation, some novel, and thus out-of-this-world, paradigm would be conjured into being. In a new

big country where people find themselves free and eager to loosen off historical hierarchies and formalities, which they perceive as hindering the attainment of fresh social priorities, what could be more appropriate to encapsulate that scene than the comment from the Tralfamadorians that,

‘All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings and explanations. It simply is.’ (Vonnegut, 1972: 61)

For this is surely something less like cultural time than geological time, where as the 18th century Scottish Enlightenment geologist, James Hutton put it ‘there is no vestige of a beginning, and no prospect of an end’ (Hutton, 1788: 304), and stones formed by geological activity millions of years ago lie side by side with those of more recent formation.

In *Slaughterhouse 5*, as with Hutton’s contiguous rocks, we see details from different eras in the personal history of Vonnegut’s character presented alongside one another on the same page. This kaleidoscopic chronology (or lack of chronology in the narrative) is given another twist when details of Pilgrim’s ahistorical life among the Tralfamadorians are also presented alongside this earthly combination. We realise ultimately that the Tralfamadorians view is Vonnegut’s own view as author. And when the layout of a Tralfamadorian book is described, it is Vonnegut’s own composition style in *Slaughterhouse 5* that we picture:

...a clump of symbols is a brief urgent message — describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn’t any particular relationship between all the messages except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvellous moments seen all at the same time. (Vonnegut, 1972: 62–63)

Vonnegut has moved so far out of any historical framework, or from the relevance of any inherited models, so far into infinite space here, that no comprehensive human objectivity is any longer possible. The republic his characters operate within is so liberal its only existence is in complete subjectivity. And as Kant’s *a priori* are hanging so far out the metaphorical automobile window, it seems no politics, nor communal life, is possible in this endless roadmovie of a civilization, and even the randomly vicious death of Vonnegut’s protagonist is only a sublime aesthetic peak amongst a range of carefully chosen scenery. In effect, that is to say, we have a free flowing romantic wilderness here . . . Yet, at least from Vonnegut’s critical reimagining of time/space relationships and their effects on us we are provoked to a clearer appreciation of the neo-classical style as a humane understanding of the living and symbiotic relationship between Enlightenment and Romantic values: respectively the static, discrete and individualistic figure of the classical pavilion, and the dynamic, continuous, and free flowing ground as the landscape surrounding it. Or as Kant, also respectively put it ‘Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts blind’ (Kant, 1993: 69).

Blindness would indeed be the greatest of drawbacks for the visual delights of Gore Vidal’s version of the vernacular Republic, although in his description of it he does often seem to get both his and our own concepts in a bit of a twist. Vidal’s eternity,

where the American proves his/her infinite worth, heads not into limitlessness, as with those other writers discussed, but into restriction, and proves ultimately to be a political sub-genre. For when Vidal, in the novel titled simply *Myron*, traps his protagonist Myron Breckenridge eternally on the set of the Hollywood blockbuster *Siren of Babylon* in 1948, s/he is condemned to be present over and over again at the making of that film starring Maria Montez and Bruce Cabot. The significance of this endless repetition and remaking of the one film lies not in something like Marx's condemnation of those who do not understand their history to repeat it, but in the creation of a timeless 'golden age' (Vidal, 1997: 220), which represents according to Breckenridge 'the best of our race's dreams since those brutish paintings on the cavern walls at Lascaux' (Vidal, 1997: 249). For the utopian heights of everlasting beauty, surprise and depth here are not the Rocky Mountains, the image in Vonnegut's novel, but are nonetheless still located out west, in the Hollywood films of the 1930s and 40s. When we had, again according to the trapped Myron Breckenridge

'MGM at the most crucial moment in the history of the motion picture industry when, thanks to television, the studio system is about to go down the drain, taking with it Andy Hardy, Maisie, Pandro S Berman, Esther Williams — everything, in fact, that made America great...'

(Vidal, 1997: 249)

And in the middle of that quotation, we are in effect given the key to the Vidal role of this utopia in determining or failing to determine the everyday politics of the Republic. For again he has his protagonist say, that but for TV as the 'age of darkness' which superseded that great era of movie making, 'Richard M Nixon could never have been elected president' (Vidal, 1997: 249–50).

This theme of betrayal thus runs through the whole novel: from the banal film-critic protagonist Myron who has betrayed his female alter-ego, the outrageous and dishy Myra, by having his/her sex change reverted; to the betrayal of the great Hollywood visual tradition by TV; the betrayal of the American Dream and American people by the impeached Richard Nixon; and even to the protagonist's citing of that great European canonical tale of betrayal, when in order to describe him/herself on the set of that film *Siren of Babylon* as being at the centre of one of the greatest events in human history, s/he says 'it is like being present at the siege of Troy' (Vidal, 1997: 316).

Vidal could well be said to have innovated by pushing the logic of the freedom of the vernacular from inherited models into the world of gender. And where better to do that than in a tale of a blockbuster utopia of the vernacular American Republic in its brashest, most swaggering and handbagging glory. But can we, in the end, say that he too betrays the vernacular republic? For if motion picture art gave the possibility to create new times and spaces, and relationships between those two; and to exploit all those effects noted in *Myron*, like 'FADE . . . JUMP CUT . . . DISSOLVE . . . SLOW MOTION . . . CUT' (Vidal, 1997: 226–228), to alter space and time, then this was an authentic new vernacular for a new American art for a new American century. As Virginia Woolf noted after seeing her first film 'it seemed as if thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than by words' (Woolf, 1950: 169). Yet how does Vidal, (a sophisticate, city slicker, with friends in the ruling elite class and pretensions to influence on high, rather than a hick, or backwoodsman, like those other writers above are in social comparison (Whitman, Twain, Vonnegut)) describe

this new vernacular? The truth is that he continually defers to pedigree, and the canon of the western tradition, placing film in that tradition by comparisons not only like ‘the siege of Troy’, but also as, for example, the ‘Divine Comedy’, and the ‘Sistine Chapel’(Vidal, 1997: 322), and he makes us feel dubious as to what he intends.

In an egregious but oddly enlightening passage in his work, architectural historian Bruno Zevi once bypassed Marx’s meditations as cited above, to characterize the revived architectural classicism of the European Renaissance directly as a ‘conformist schizophrenia’ claiming that the classical style there was merely a ‘sham façade’ which ‘evoked the Greco-Roman past in a mythical key in order to camouflage the instability of the present’. We wonder here if Vidal’s adoption of classical models does not signal that he himself feels some form of guilt, and has thus to shore his frontage up, and ‘assume a courtly forbidding or an Olympian air to hide (his/her) desolation’ (Zevi, 1994: 15–22) in modern America? And does not his provocative value lie in the fact that, rather like Myra, (or is it Myron?), a double reverted transgender with a sham façade sculpted by a surgeon, he is always a travesty of the vernacular republic?

So ironically, Vidal, who is, unlike those other writers here above, most generally perceived as a very political writer, ultimately betrays that American freedom to endlessly create new possibilities for vernacular democratic spaces by his heavy dependence on classical models — be they models of antique or of modern provenance. And there is an apparent rejection of the endlessness of the American landscape inherent in his portrayal of infinity itself as a trap or a nightmare or a repetition rather than as a dream, or indeed a forum for endless discursive opportunities.

### **‘that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights’**

Yet perhaps Vidal, at once a chronicler and a fabler of the founding fathers (Vidal, 2000, 2003), intends to show us how the very classical precepts those founding fathers set up were in themselves a ‘betrayal’ of the American people; the majority of the American people, that is. All the above writers are of course, white men. What then is the real significance of their freedom-loving vernacular expatiations on ‘everyman’ and the unlimited space of their democracy, when the uncomfortable reality is that the majority of Americans — namely, the non-property-owning-whitemen — were long excluded from the possibility of equality and independence? For American literature also shows us that even the women of the rich 19th century leisured classes who, like Henry James’s Isabel Archer (James, 1982) and Edith Wharton’s Lily Bart (Wharton, 1952), strive towards their own declaration of personal independence, are trapped and endlessly tortured by the machinations of their powerful class-fellows. The spaces out of which these classes operate are indeed described by Bart’s cousin in *The House of Mirth* in classical terms:

I’m sure Mrs Bry thinks her house a copy of the *Trianon*: in America every marble house with gilt furniture is thought to be a copy of the *Trianon*. What a clever chap that architect is, though — how he takes his client’s measure! He has put the whole of Mrs Bry in his use of the composite order. Now for the Trenors, you remember, he chose the Corinthian; but based on the best precedent. (Wharton, 1952: 174)

And meanwhile in her search for social success, and a good marriage, Bart's own world is continually described both by the narrator and character herself not in terms of freeflowing territory and limitlessness, but in terms of spatial restriction and captivity; 'People can't marry you if they don't see you — and how can they see you in these holes where we're stuck'; 'there were plenty of available oubliettes to swallow them'; and 'gasping for air in a little black prison house of fears'. (Wharton, 1952: 38, 17, 69). Wharton's intentions and achievements with the character of Bart are summed up by Ammons as:

Not until *the House of Mirth* in 1905 was she completely and coolly able to express the tragedy of woman's situation as she had come to see it: the waste, the crippling, the curtailment. (Ammons, 1980: 3)

But can we say that ultimately Bart is afforded some insight into a redemption of her tiny failing place in a grander scheme, conform to the doctrine of Sullivan and the great gods of American expansion looming infinitely on Mount Rushmore: 'Her ambitions had shrunk gradually in the desiccating air of failure. But why had she failed? Was it her own fault or that of destiny?' (Wharton, 1952: 30). It is more like an admission of her hopelessness, and that if a woman is to reach towards the limitless American way, then only a man can help her there; a demi god — as Selden, her friend who might have saved her, puts it classically:

But he would lift her out of it, take her beyond! That *Beyond!* on her letter was like a cry for rescue. He knew that Perseus's task is not done when he has loosed Andromeda's chains, for her limbs are numb with bondage, and she cannot rise and walk, but clings to him with dragging arms as he beats back to land with his burden. Well he had strength for both — it was her weakness which had put the strength in him. (Wharton, 1952: 172)

If we stand back and gaze up at a clear night sky, then the obvious political commentary to make on that American metaphor of social power would surely turn on the relative vastness of Andromeda as the numb and weak captive, and the minute extent of the free and strong Perseus. But for black women writers, of course, those chains are not merely metaphorical. Harold Bloom for example, sees in the writings of Maya Angelou a twin root in the forms of the 'sermon' and the 'slave narrative'. Thus in this categorization, alongside the legacy of the physical reality of those chains of slavery, the notion of 'destiny' takes on if not a definitely greater spiritual dimension than the whiteman's, then in its sermon it maps out a radically different eschatology and relation to those gods and demi-gods. When Angelou writes of 'my fatalism' (Angelou, 2010: 170), we know from the delineated spaces of her operation as recounted in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* — just as cramped and restricted as those of Lily Bart — that Angelou is not referring to any 'manifest destiny' to 'overspread and possess' anything;

my room had all the cheeriness of a dungeon and the appeal of a tomb. It was going to be impossible for me to stay there, but leaving held no attraction for me. (Angelou, 2010: 256)

Bloom writes of this retreat and restriction in space as an 'interiorisation' and a 'lost fullness of being' (Bloom, 2011: 1) putting it in the context of the 'early black Baptists,

who ‘spoke of ‘the little me within the big me’ (Bloom, 2011: 1), and he goes on to describe how the American blacks

brought to the slave owners’ religion a kind of gnosis, a radical knowing that ‘the little one’ belonged not to the space and time of this harsh world but to an unfallen realm before the Creation-Fall of the whites. (Bloom, 2011:1–2)

The gnosis to which Bloom refers would historically entail a set of beliefs regarding the way of salvation from the material world, which latter was created not directly by God but by some deceiving and evil demi-urge. We can thus infer in the ascribed gnosis of the American black spirituality that the whitemen are the evil demi-gods or demi-urges, and their ‘manifest destiny’ to ‘overspread and possess’ limitlessly the given material world is their evil act of Creation. There is nonetheless alongside that fatalism a concept of endlessness and infinity in this gnostic eschatology, but for the blacks it is not to be found in this ‘harsh world’ created by the whites. Indeed after a particularly stirring sermon at a black evangelical festival Angelou describes the neighbours of her hometown as

They basked in the righteousness of the poor and the exclusiveness of the downtrodden. Let the whitefolks have their money and power and segregation and sarcasm and big houses and schools and lawns like carpets, and books, and mostly -mostly- let them have their whiteness. It was better to be meek and spat upon and abused for this little time than to spend eternity frying in the fires of hell. (Angelou, 2010: 127)

This gnostic determination of the material world as ‘evil’ is also seen, for example, in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, where Baby Suggs, a former slave and a type of mother nature/spae wife described as ‘holy’ (Morrison, 1997: 89), starts from a nightmare on her deathbed, with;

‘These whitefolks have taken all I had or dreamed’, she said, ‘and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks’. (Morrison, 1997: 89)

This corroboration of the gnostic retreat from the material world is raised to a formalistic level in Morrison’s novel. Although we are made aware through the action and the narrative that the story takes place in certain States and not long after the Emancipation of slaves, it is made clear that the ex-slaves and their children have no actual time and space of their own in this Republic. The house they live in is simply referred to by a number (124) — like a slave’s branding mark. It could be thus argued, with Rafael Pérez-Torres, that in the black experience and literature in general, and in Morrison in particular, those cramped spaces referred to above are shrunken infinitely into ‘absences’, as Pérez-Torres writes,

Absence is made tangible in *Beloved* from the first page of the novel. We are presented with several historical and geographical facts: the action is set near Cincinnati, Ohio; the year is 1873; the address of the house is 124 Bluestone Road. These concrete details do nothing to obviate the sense of loss that pervades the opening. [...] The historic and geographical specificity that opens the narrative stands opposed to the equally concrete absences evident in the story: the missing ancestor and the missing descendants. Readers are placed generationally in a space that floats between an absent past and an absent future. Into this static fictional present a ghostly past perpetually attempts to reassert itself. (Perez-Torres, 1999: 181)

And while the narrative in *Beloved* is not linear but dialogic and fragmented, and presents, like Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* a 'kaleidoscopic chronology' with details of actions and events from different eras presented side by side, the effect is not of the picturesque or of a pastorate of 'many marvellous moments seen at the same time', (Vonnegut, 1972: 62–63) existing together and always like 'a stretch of the Rocky Mountains' (Vonnegut, 1972: 25), but of a timeless and tortuous spin of a groundless nightmare.

### **'that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness'**

Since the 1970s a new theoretical approach to space has arisen in the social sciences, often referred to as the 'spatial turn', which 're-entwines the making of history with the social production of space' (Soja, 1989: 11), and is typified in the work of such postmodern thinkers and geographers as Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey and Edward Soja. Through this work there is a stress on the interplay of geography and history in critical social theory, where space is not just seen as a passive container in which history takes place, but that the spaces we live in are both produced by society and help shape that very society, or, as Harvey puts it 'space and the political organization of space express social relationships that also react back on them' (Harvey, 1973: 306). This 'turn' allows for new understandings of the significance of American spaces and discourses on those spaces. Inasmuch as the founding fathers believed democracy was desirable only when the (white) citizens had a stake — land or property — in the welfare of society, this entailed an ever-expanding availability of space for the multitudes flooding into America. As John Adams put it

A balance of power on the side of equal liberty and public virtue is to make the acquisition of land easy to every member of society, to make a division of land into small quantities [...] If the multitude is possessed of landed estates, the multitude will take care of the liberty, virtue and interest of the multitude in all acts of government. (Vidal, 2003: 52–53)

That society therefore in its avowed rejection of 'absolute Despotism' and 'absolute Tyranny' had to believe in the possibility of an endlessly expanding space to occupy, and the fitness of its new property owners to be the equal of any other civilization. Of course there were vast if finite tracts of land becoming available for expansion to be taken over from the aboriginal inhabitants, from the French, the Mexicans and the Spanish. But still the problem for the fledgling republic was how to find a style or an organizing ethos which could reconcile the democratically necessary and dynamic principle of expansion with the civil and static principle of settlement. Thus the concept of space in this public calculation is a social symbol, just as are the words in literature; and even if Jefferson thought to solve that problem and institutionalize the relationship between those evidently contradictory impulses of at once settling and expanding ('the station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature's God entitle them' and 'the pursuit of Happiness') in the neo-classical style, then literature could not do other than restlessly interrogate and describe endless new meanings and individual interpretations to those social symbols and that institution. So that with Derrida, we see that democracy could not have been possible without this literature, this impulse

in that public calculation to say everything, everyone's meaning; and this literature would not have been possible without the impulse towards democracy, or as it appears in that independent expression, towards the right to 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness'.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> From 'The New Colossus' (1833), a sonnet by Emma Lazarus (1849–1887), written in 1883, engraved in 1903 on a bronze plaque and mounted inside the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty.
- <sup>2</sup> On 25 February 1773, Jefferson wrote to Charles McPherson of Albemarle on James MacPherson's *Ossian* and the Gaelic Language as follows, 'I am not ashamed to own that I think this rude bard of the North the greatest Poet that ever existed. Merely for the pleasure of reading his works I am become desirous of learning the language in which he sung, and of possessing his songs in their original form'. (Boyd, 1950: 96)

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