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No Country for Illiterate Men? Reading Western Literature in the Wake of November 5

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On November 8, 2024, Vice President-elect J. D. Vance took a victory lap on X (former Twitter), pontificating that "[o]ne of the most important skills I see in successful (and good) people is to constantly reevaluate assumptions."[1] As it turned out, "successful (and good) people" mainly referred to those who had anticipated Donald Trump's substantial win in the presidential election three days earlier, while Vance chided the American voters, pundits, and news media who were caught off guard by the election's outcome:

> If you were confident that Donald J. Trump was going to lose, maybe you should question what else you "know" about him. Maybe the people who misled you about his electoral chances have misled you about other things. In the words of Cormac McCarthy, "If the rule you followed brought you to this, of what use was the rule?"[2]

Social media users were quick to point out that the literary quotation at the end of Vance's tweet was not a direct statement from Cormac McCarthy himself. Instead, it is a line of dialogue from McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men* (2005), delivered by its antagonist Anton Chigurh—right before he kills his interlocutor. Journalists and cultural critics questioned Vance's reading comprehension, media literacy, and ostensible support of a fictional serial killer, and some drew comparisons to Trump's own tendency to bring up Chigurh's fellow fictional villain Hannibal Lecter on the campaign trail.[3]

Trump never mentioned Hannibal's creator, novelist Thomas Harris, but asked his supporters during several campaign speeches whether they had seen *The Silence of*

the Lambs, the 1991 film adaptation of Harris's second book in the Hannibal series. He alternately referred to the character as "the late, great Hannibal Lecter" (so far, the character is alive and well in the book series and in its many adaptations) and a "wonderful man," while routinely joking to the crowd that Lecter "would love to have you for dinner."[4] The invocation quickly became a regular element of Trump's diatribes against immigrants coming into the US, although the supposed link between the soft-spoken, highly educated psychiatrist-turned-psychopath and Trump's xenophobic representation of real-life immigrants as "invaders" of American soil continued to elude journalists and audiences alike. Some speculated that Trump conflated the terms "asylum seekers" and "insane asylum," as Lecter spends most of the film confined at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.[5] Others noted how Trump's unwieldy speeches occasionally oscillated between recognizing Lecter as a fictional pop cultural artifact and treating him as a real-life figure who supposedly had endorsed Trump's third presidential run. Anthony Hopkins, the actor portraying Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*, subsequently denied any endorsement and stated that he was "shocked and appalled" by Trump's comments.[6] (Several observers hypothesized that Trump may have confused Hopkins with fellow actor Jon Voigt, a vocal Trump supporter with a passing resemblance to Hopkins.)

During the campaign, Trump's campaign communications director Steven Cheung, who is currently serving as the White House communications director, commented on the repeated references to Hannibal: "President Trump is an inspiring storyteller and referencing pop culture is one of many reasons why he can successfully connect with the audiences and voters."[7] At a rally in Arizona in December 2024, Trump himself would credit Lecter for his electoral victory seven weeks earlier: "[W]hen [the voters] went into the booth and they signed their ballot they said, hmmm, Hannibal Lecter, that's a bad guy, we don't want him here."[8] In a move comparable to Vance's postelection tweet, the president-elect chided the news outlets that had questioned his invocations of Lecter: "They knew that, they didn't like that, they didn't like that I used him, because it's a very good example, it's incredible, incredible, what they do. […] We need borders, we need fair elections, and we need a free and fair press, and we're gonna try getting all of them."[9]

Vance's tweet and Trump's speeches display a comparable confusion over authorship, fictionality, and the moral proprieties of unquestionably immoral characters. They also share a weaponization of cultural touchstones to attack their opponents—mainstream media, especially. However, these two examples also showcase how the cultural references of the fiftieth vice president and the forty-seventh president of the United States represent different strands of the current conservative coalition's efforts in the ongoing culture wars.

Trump's preoccupation with a pop cultural icon like Lecter epitomizes an appeal to the common denominator, a reference that all of his supporters will recognize, no matter how obscure or nonexistent the link to Trump's political program. Vance, on the other hand, appeals to much more highbrow affects, pompously claiming that he

is simply repeating "the words of Cormac McCarthy." There is still a connection to popular culture at work here—*No Country for Old Men* was adapted into the award-winning film of the same name—but Vance opts to accentuate the prestige linked to McCarthy's name, allowing him to recast Chigurh's statement as if directly endorsed by the author. Vance is at the vanguard of a faction within Trump's coalition that represents New Right intellectualism. Western literature, to this faction, has become an amalgam of key resources in posttruth politics—its various meanings obfuscated, oversimplified or wildly distorted to fit neoreactionary ideologies. As Brian Santin argues,

> postwar conservatives produced, in effect, an ambivalent double register in the discourse of conservative literary taste that sought to celebrate specific neo-aristocratic manifestations of cultural capital while viciously condemning newer, more progressive manifestations revolving around racial and ethnic diversity that were celebrated by those liberal elites [that they villainized].[10]

More recently, Nicholas Gaskill has noted how "[p]ost-truth politics made not just reality but also fictional attempts to address that reality more troublesome than ever."[11]

New Right intellectuals like Vance contribute to this undermining of the common conceptions of reality through their mobilization of canonical texts and authors. In the process, they unburden much of the Western canon from its "liberal" status.

This is perhaps most evident in the efforts of neoreactionary thinker Curtis Yarvin, whose company Tlon was named after Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." In Borges's story, Tlön is at first a mythical world that rejects the reality of objects and words. Eventually Tlön materializes and starts to disintegrate Earth. As the story's narrator gloomily concludes: "Already Tlön's (conjectural) 'primitive language' has filtered into our schools; already the teaching of Tlön's harmonious history (filled with moving episodes) has obliterated the history that governed my own childhood; already a fictitious past has supplanted in men's memories that other past, of which we know nothing certain—not even that it is false."[12] Borges (the narrator bears his name) is himself obscuring the distinction between reality and fiction here, but neoreactionary readers like Yarvin turn this postmodern reflexivity against their liberal adversaries, so it can no longer be used "to test anew the efficacy of fiction in a moment desperate for facts," but becomes complicit in the confusion perpetuated by posttruth politics.[13]

While many authoritarian rulers outright prohibit the publication of literature that they consider inimical to their respective ideologies, intellectuals such as Vance and Yarvin deploy more subtle tactics: they lay claim to literature that can otherwise

energize resistance to their undemocratic agendas. Yarvin is arguably the New Right's most forthcoming figurehead in his ambitions to disrupt and disintegrate "our" world, but there is a through line to the politics of Peter Thiel and Giorgia Meloni, who both persistently celebrate *The Lord of the Rings*, or the preoccupation of Elon Musk, Jordan Peterson, and countless other prominent conservatives with epic poetry.[14] What Santin identifies as the "ambivalent double register" of postwar conservative literary taste now includes the usurpation, rather than condemnation, of "progressive manifestations revolving around racial and ethnic diversity."

Already in 2007, Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas tried to position himself in the public eye in a way not unlike Vance would attempt a decade later: by way of a memoir that celebrates its underprivileged author's remarkable upward mobility after being raised by his grandparents. Like Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), Thomas's *My Grandfather's Son* singles out the act of reading as especially empowering. Thomas briefly namedrops conservatives' darling Ayn Rand, but he is especially invested in postwar African American novelists—writers who are far less commonly, if ever, associated with the New Right. He cites reading Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a formative experience, and he names the book's final chapter, in which he has overcome the Anita Hill hearings and joined the court, after James Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man." Baldwin's short story narrates a lynching, and through the evocation of the title, Thomas links the story to his own contested confirmation hearing, where he infamously defended himself as being the victim of "a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks who in any way deign to think for themselves, to do for themselves, to have different ideas."[15] Throughout the memoir, Thomas identifies with Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* (1940) and its protagonist Bigger Thomas. This identification reaches its apotheosis during the Anita Hill hearings: "After a lifetime of struggle and achievement, I'd been thrust back, into Bigger Thomas's world."[16]

Thomas strategically weaponizes a classic of Black literature to position himself as a victim of liberal progressives—never mind that his own voting record on the court has consistently disadvantaged Bigger's real-life counterparts on death row.[17] Justice Thomas's identification with a book and character that ostensibly promote ethics and ideologies that directly oppose his own is emblematic for much of the New Right's unexpected mobilizations of classic literature, but it also epitomizes a tendency to deliberately conflate reality with fiction. In this co-optation of literature, fiction not only loses its potential to resist authoritarian rule, but it also becomes indistinguishable from the real-world narratives that its reactionary readers construct. As we are witnessing a profound rightward shift in global geopolitics, proponents of democracy, human rights, and intellectual freedom cannot let great works of fiction be corrupted to seemingly support autocratic fantasies and make criticism of those fantasies suspect. Challengers of undemocratic ideologies must remain vigilant not to let literature become enmeshed in a Manichean worldview, and to maintain that literature's multifarious potential for meaning, disruption, and critique.

On January 26, 2025, Colombian president Gustavo Petro retorted on X against Trump's threat to start a trade war if Colombia continued to refuse to accept deported migrants. Petro's tweet contained a litany of cultural, historical, and fictional references. At one point he called Colombia "[the land] of the colonels Aurelianos Buendía, of which I am one of them, perhaps the last one."[18] The Buendía family are the fictional protagonists of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). In a sense, the affiliation with these characters runs parallel to Vance's invocation of Anton Chigurh: each generation of the Buendías perpetuates the same faults and cycle of violence. Their unwillingness to learn from the past and from their tendency to self-mythologize is precisely what perpetuates the Buendías's condition of solitude.

It is paramount that critics of the MAGA movement do not imitate New Right intellectualism's deliberate conflation of fiction and reality. Reading fiction can energize, structure, and multiply modes of resistance, but only if literature is recognized for what it is: a complement and product of our everyday reality, not its substitute.

Notes

1 J. D. Vance (@JDVance), "One of the most important skills I see in successful (and good) people is to constantly reevaluate assumptions," X, November 8, 2024, https://x.com/JDVance/status/1854925621425533043.

2 Vance, "One of the most important skills."

3 Arthur Delaney, "JD Vance Approvingly Quotes Fictional Serial Killer," *The Huffington Post*, November 8, 2024, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jd-vance-anton-chigurh-cormac-mccarthy_n_672e8905e4b01e5999fd30f4; and James Folta, "JD Vance Quoted One of Cormac McCarthy's Most Evil Characters to Make Some Asinine Point," *Literary Hub*, November 11, 2024, https://lithub.com/jd-vance-quoted-a-sociopathic-serial-killer-to-make-some-asinine-point/

4 Miles Klee, "Why is Trump so Obsessed with Hannibal Lecter? A Complete Timeline," *Rolling Stone*, July 30, 2024, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/donald-trump-hannibal-lecter-timeline-1235070008/

5 Klee, "Why is Trump so Obsessed with Hannibal Lecter?"

6 Klee, "Why is Trump so Obsessed with Hannibal Lecter?"

7 Klee, "Why is Trump so Obsessed with Hannibal Lecter?"

8 Will Neal, "Trump Credits Hannibal Lecter with Election Win in Bonkers Rally Speech," *The Daily Beast*, December 22, 2024, https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-credits-hannibal-lecter-with-election-win-in-bonkers-rally-speech/

[9] Neal, "Trump Credits Hannibal Lecter."

[10] Brian Santin, *Postwar American Fiction and the Rise of Modern Conservatism* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 17.

[11] Nicholas Gaskill, "Reality in America, Redux: On Trump Panic Fiction," *American Literary History* 36, no. 4 (2024): 1057, https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajae120

[12] Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Penguin Classics, 1999), 81.

[13] Gaskill, "Reality in America, Redux," 1057.

[14] Orlando Reade, "Why Is the Right Obsessed With Epic Poetry?" *The Nation*, January 6, 2025, https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/right-wing-epic-poetry/

[15] Clarence Thomas, *My Grandfather's Son: A Memoir* (Harper Perennial, 2008), 271.

[16] Thomas, *My Grandfather's Son*, 251.

[17] Austin Sarat, "Alabama Death Penalty Case Reveals Clarence Thomas's Cruelty," *Verdict: Legal Analysis and Commentary from Justitia*, May 18, 2023, https://verdict.justia.com/2023/05/18/alabama-death-penalty-case-reveals-clarence-thomass-cruelty

[18] Gustavo Petro (@petrogustavo), "Trump, a mi no me gusta mucho viajar a los EEUU, es un poco aburridor, pero confieso que hay cosas meritorias, me gusta ir a los barrios negros de Washington," X, January 26, 2025, https://x.com/petrogustavo/status/1883624818811236502. My translation.

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