Journal of American Studies of Turkey
35-36 (2012): 67-78

Gore Vidal's *Washington, D.C.* and *The Golden Age*

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Gore Vidal's *Washington, D.C.* (1967) and *The Golden Age* (2000) occupy an interesting place in Vidal's *Narratives of Empire* that include five more novels *Burr* (1973), *1876* (1976), *Lincoln* (1984), *Empire* (1987), and *Hollywood* (1990). According to the publication order, *Washington, D.C.* is the first novel of the series and *The Golden Age* is the last one. Yet, according to the chronology of the events taking place in these novels, *Washington D.C.* is considered to be the sixth one just before *The Golden Age.*[1] The publication of the following novels in the series, particularly *The Golden Age*, changed the reception of *Washington, D.C.* This chapter examines the relationship between *Washington, D.C.* and *The Golden Age*, which rewrites the same historical period that *Washington, D.C.* has already narrated. By reiterating the intricate connections between these two works, this paper will also refer to the *Narratives* as a whole in order to justify the conceptualization of both *Washington, D.C.* and the *Narratives* as historiographic metafictions.[2]

Washington, D.C. takes place in the years between 1937 and the mid-1950s. The plot traces the events connected with the Sanford family and focusses on Blaise Sanford's relationship with his son, Peter, and his daughter, Enid. In *The Golden Age*, Vidal re-writes the same period covered in *Washington, D.C.* by focusing mostly on the incidents revolving around Caroline, Blaise's stepsister. *The Golden Age* not only covers the period narrated in *Washington, D.C.*, but it also recounts the events taking place from the mid-1950s to 2000. When *Washington, D.C.* was first published in 1967, the novel was interpreted as Peter's "coming of age in a psychologically destructive family" or Peter's "searching for personal

1 According to the chronological order in which the events take place in the *Narratives of Empire*, the novels should be cited as follows: *Burr*, *Lincoln*, *1876*, *Empire*, *Hollywood*, *Washington, D.C.*, and *The Golden Age*.

2 *Lincoln* is excluded from such a claim since it can be identified with the criteria of the historical novel.

integrity in a corrupt world" (Baker and Gibson 136-37). The publications of *Burr* (1973) and *1876* (1976) in the following years changed the interpretation of *Washington, D.C.* because people were now evaluating a trilogy:

> In 1982 the critic Robert F. Kiernan, reading *Washington D.C.* in a new context, described Peter Sanford not as an exemplar of personal integrity, but as the emblem for a republic in decline. [. . .] What seemed in 1968 a fairly straightforward story of one individual, by 1982 — in its new context — had become a commentary on national decline (Baker and Gibson 136-37).

If *Washington, D.C.* is evaluated without any connection to the other novels in the *Narratives*, the interpretation would be totally different, as the quotation above indicates. Such comments reveal the early interpretations of the novel before *The Golden Age* was written. *The Golden Age* completes the *Narratives*, and evaluating *Washington, D.C.* in the light of *The Golden Age* and the rest of the *Narratives* would further alter the approach to *Washington, D.C.*

Harry Kloman notes that after the publication of *The Golden Age* in 2000, *Washington, D.C.*

> no longer stands as the closing volume in the Chronicles. Nonetheless, it remains unique among the seven books, arguably the best, and surely — with its introspective look at Washington politics, revealed through the experiences of Vidal's provocative fictional creations — the most intimate and original ("Gore Vidal's American Chronicles: 1967-2000.")

Kloman claims that *The Golden Age* "is the narrative *Washington, D.C.* might have been had Vidal written the books chronologically" ("Gore Vidal's American Chronicles: 1967-2000.") Although Kloman's argument has its merits, the perception of *The Golden Age* as simply an extension of *Washington, D.C.* might be somewhat limited. Re-contextualizing *Washington, D.C.* in relation to *The Golden Age* might prove more fruitful.

The re-writing of *Washington, D.C.* in *The Golden Age* causes the former to become an inseparable part of the latter as Vidal deliberately works to integrate *Washington, D.C.* in the *Narratives*. Baker and Gibson note that there is "an apparent gap in the fictional continuity between this novel [*Washington, D.C.*] and its immediate predecessor in the series chronology, *Hollywood*" (131). Although Caroline occupies a major role in *Hollywood*, she is absent in *Washington, D.C.,* because when Vidal wrote *Washington, D.C.* in 1967, he had not created such a character (According to the sequence of the events in the *Narratives*, *Washington, D.C.* falls between *Hollywood* and *The Golden Age* in which Caroline reappears as one of the major characters.) Yet Vidal uses this gap as a tool to connect *Washington, D.C.*to the other novels. By providing a synopsis of *Hollywood* in the very early pages of *The Golden Age*, the narrator claims that sixty-year old Caroline, who lived in France between the years 1923 and 1939, has now returned home to America. The quote below offers an overt allusion both to *Washington, D.C.* in which Enid's shooting of Blaise is narrated and to *Burr* in which Burr and Hamilton's duel is recounted:

> The eyes of three men [Blaise, Clay, and Peter] were now on the portrait of Aaron Burr over the fireplace. In the middle of the left eye there was a small round hole where Enid, aiming unsteadily at her father with a pistol, had managed to do what Alexander Hamilton had failed to do so many years ago at Weehawken, New Jersey — shoot Burr, if only in effigy, dead (246).

Vidal connects *Washington, D.C.* to the *Narratives* through similar references throughout the novel, which shows his effort to establish a firm connection between these texts.

This approach above also points to the intertextual relations among texts in the *Narratives*. Roland Barthes interprets text as a kind of "network" which includes other texts within it, "at varying levels, in more or less recognizable forms" (39). In a similar manner, Julia Kristeva defines the text as "a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another" (36). Barthes and Kristeva draw attention to the textual characteristic of any narrative, whether literary or non-literary, by

emphasizing that a text lacks any reference to "reality." The fact that *The Golden Age* consists of references and allusions to the previous novels in the series is the embodiment of these ideas. *The Golden Age* is a kind of network comprised of themes discussed in other novels of the *Narratives*. In this sense, *The Golden Age* reflects a paradox: although the novel is based on historical fact, it also reveals its fictionality via the intertextual references to previous novels in the series. According to Linda Hutcheon, such strategies are both intertextual and extratextual, and these views "co-exist and operate in tension" (143).

The intertextual relationship between *The Golden Age*, *Washington D.C.*, and the other novels in the *Narratives* (save *Lincoln* because there is no reference to *Lincoln* in *The Golden Age*), requires us to evaluate these novels as historiographic metafictions, not as historical novels. The historical novel, as Avrom Fleishman states, is constructed to give "the feeling of how it was to be alive in another age" through "imaginative sympathy" (4). Harold Orel believes that this genre represents part of the "output of escapist literature" (1) as a form of entertainment and therapy. By contrast the principal aim of historiographic metafiction is not to give a sense of nostalgia for the past, but to critique the constructed nature of the past. As Hutcheon notes, this genre "puts into question, at the same time as it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real" (92); and concentrates on the complex relation of historiography "to narrativization, thus, fictionalization" (Hutcheon 93). Historiographic metafiction asks such questions as "What is the ontological nature of historical documents? Are they the stand-in for the past? What is meant — in ideological terms — by our 'natural' understanding of historical explanation?" (Hutcheon 93) that promotes "skepticism or suspicion about the writing of history" (106).

The other reason for evaluating *Washington, D.C.*as an extension of *The Golden Age* is the representation of Peter, the protagonist of *Washington, D.C.* In *The Golden Age*, Peter is not happy with the fictional universe in which he exists, and reveals his discontent to Vidal, who appears as a character in the novel, as follows: "'you should have constructed a better universe for us'" (462). Vidal's reply to Peter emphasizes how the work of writer or the historian is also contingent upon historical reality: "'One works with what one has and knows, as you know as well as I, in *your* universe'" (462, original emphasis). With this dialogue, the novel hints at the fact that if the context of experience changes, the construction of the

past changes with it. From the publication of *Washington, D.C.* in 1967 to *The Golden Age* in 2000, it is obvious that Vidal's historical context also changed, and the result of this new context is the re-written version of *Washington, D.C.* in *The Golden Age*, which also parallels the premises of historiographic metafiction, that aim to "re-write or re-present the past in fiction and in history" in order to "open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (Hutcheon 110).

Washington, D.C. is preoccupied with the constructed nature of history, especially through Peter who believes that history is "'gossip,'" but "'the trick [is] in determining which gossip is history'" (184). His remark on history as gossip connotes contesting narratives in history, which are not necessarily found in official historical accounts. Within the framework of the novel, Peter's comment also refers to the story published in Blaise's newspaper to falsely promote Clay, Blaise's son-in-law, as a heroic figure. Blaise recommends that Clay should become involved in a notable act to represent him as a hero in his newspaper: "In the cold voice, Clay heard power. 'If you do anything notable, Harold will write about it and I'll publish it. You see, I want you to go far'" (204). With this in mind, Clay joins the army as a major and goes to the Philippines. In the airbase where he is stationed, a hangar explodes. At that moment Clay is outside the airbase receiving medical treatment for a minor foot injury, but Blaise sees the explosion as an opportunity to manipulate the event. He publishes an article in which Clay is re-presented as a heroic major who saved a private by risking his own life. Upon this news the President is advised to decorate Clay with the Distinguished Service Cross. Moreover, Harold Griffith plans to make a film based on Clay's story.

Many people, such as Peter, the journalist Aeneas Duncan (Clay's brother-in-law), and Senator Burden Day know that Clay's story is not true. The novel includes several references to this incident, one of which is worth mentioning. Aeneas Duncan complains that "it [is] wrong to say something is what it is not" and "'even worse is not to *know* what is real and what is illusion'" by "deliberately confus[ing] people with something false'" (263-64, original emphasis). According to Aeneas, Clay is represented in that article "as a kind of cheap fiction hero" and "'Everything they [the newspapers] touch withers, becomes *kitsch*.'" (263-64). Aeneas criticizes the ways in which the press creates grand images by fictionalizing events in accordance with the dominant ideology. Peter is also bitter about the

constructed nature of this story, which eventually becomes a historical record. He asserts that "'History has to do with results; motives and intentions are the business of ethics'" (367). Peter sarcastically draws attention to the roles of so-called "great" people in making history by referring to Clay, whose image as a heroic major is created through false stories: without people like him "'there would be no history. The great things go to voracious'" (396).

Likewise, *The Golden Age* exposes the constructed nature of history through Peter, who "wonder[s] how history could ever be written without knowing the motivations of those who appeared to be making it" (99). He questions if it is possible "to excavate it [history] from under so many other long-lost nations. Troy upon Troy upon Troy, some with, some without Helen, but all once afire with wrath" (108). Peter tries to figure out "'what it [history] is, if it is anything at all except different versions of something that probably never was'" (97). Peter's criticisms of history echo those made by Hutcheon (106), especially when the subject turns to so-called "official" histories. Peter learns that his life is going to be written by middle-aged history professor Robert Sturtevant, who "did not appear to be much interested in getting to know anything that he [Sturtevant] did not already know. Very much a court historian, he did not question the prevailing myths about the nation-state in general and the United States in particular" (430). Peter is not comfortable with Sturtevant's approach to history, because he believes that Sturtevant is not genuinely interested in questioning myths or grand narratives. Peter not only criticizes the official history and history makers, but he is also suspicious about the media as a manipulative history maker. While he talks to A.B. Decker, who is currently in the television business, Peter points out the influence of media in making history by saying that "'Certainly, those of you who make the news — or those who hire you to create it — are literally history-makers, as William Randolph Hearst was the first to discover'" (448).

The Golden Age reiterates the subjectivity of history. The most intricate reference appears when Caroline talks about her grandfather Charles Shermerhorn Schuyler's memoir, which is actually Vidal's *1876*, and Aaron Burr's life story written by Charles, which is Vidal's *Burr*. While these references reinforce the connection among *The Golden Age*, *1876*, and *Burr*, they also underline the ways in which history undergoes a selection process according to dominant discourses. Caroline edits

these two manuscripts with the intention of publishing them and turns them over to Macrae, the owner of E. P. Dutton publishers in New York City. Macrae agrees to publish the manuscript about the centennial year of 1876 but he rejects the other one. Dumas Malone, who is currently writing the biography of Thomas Jefferson, exerts considerable influence over Macrae's change of heart. Malone does not like Charles' biography of Burr, because Jefferson is portrayed as "'[t]reasonous'" (180). He also "objects to Burr's observations that some of Jefferson's slaves were his own children" (180). Macrae ends the discussion by saying that "What Mr. Jefferson was means a lot to us [...] and we reject this [Charles'] story" (181). This conversation between Caroline and the publisher recaps the basic question of historiographic metafiction: Whose history survives? In this case, the owner of the publishing house seems to be in the position to decide. Eventually, the novel questions both Macrae's and Malone's authority to legitimate their own versions as history, and criticizes their rejection of publishing an alternative history.

Hence, the novel also demonstrates how grand narratives are deployed and alternative histories are suppressed, which exemplifies Jean-François Lyotard's discussion on metanarratives. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard examines the perception and the status of knowledge in relation to power. He emphasizes the relationship between wealth, efficiency, and truth, and states that power structures leave the "idealist and humanist narratives of legitimation in order to justify the new goal: in the discourse of today's financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power. Scientists, technicians, and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power" (Lyotard 46). The reason for this competition is that since performativity — the best input/output ratio — "increases the ability to produce proof, it also increases the ability to be right" (46). This explains the eventual relationship between legitimation and power: "power is not only good performativity, but also effective verification and good verdicts. It legitimates science and the law on the basis of their efficiency, and legitimates this efficiency on the basis of science and law" (47). Lyotard argues that this is how legitimation brings control over and totalization in knowledge. In this sense, it is fair to claim that "reality" is created according to the will of the ones who have the power proportional to their wealth and technology. In *The Golden Age*,

Mr. Macrae, the owner of E. P. Dutton publishers, is the possible power structure that creates totalization in knowledge about Thomas Jefferson.

The Golden Age provides an apt closure to the *Narratives* since it ironically refers to its own fictionality, which underlines the constructed nature of the novels in the series. As Patricia Waugh claims:

> [m]etafictional deconstruction has not only provided novelists and their readers with a better understanding of the fundamental structures of narrative; it has also offered extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems. (9)

This argument is also valid for historiographic metafiction, which deals with the relationship between literature (fiction) and history (the past as a social reality). The past is only known through its textualized versions. As Hutcheon observes, historiographic metafiction uses self-reflexivity as a metafictional element "to signal the discursive nature of all reference — both literary and historiographical," and postmodern self-reflexivity

> is the text's major link with the 'world,' one that acknowledges its identity as construct, rather than as simulacrum of some 'real' outside. Once again, this does not deny that the past 'real' existed; it only conditions our mode of knowledge of that past. We can know it only through its traces, its relics (119).

Through metafictional comments, historiographic metafiction opens up venues for discussion on these subjects.

Gore Vidal's appearance as a character in *The Golden Age* is noteworthy. Vidal parades in the novel a few times, but his most eminent appearance is the one where he discusses his novels with his characters. In the very last chapter of *The Golden Age* entitled "On Air," Vidal, Peter, and Decker meet at Vidal's home in Italy to record the television show Decker organized in 2000. Decker seems to be curious about what Vidal thinks about the fictional universe of his characters; Vidal (thinking that "It is

not often a character frees himself from the text" (460)), replies as follows: "'What does mine seem like to you?' [...] 'After all, you are in my narrative'" (460). Interestingly, Decker thinks that Vidal is in his own narrative: "'And I *think* you are in mine. I suppose that's how every being — invented or not — perceives the world'" (460, original emphasis). Through this dialogue, *The Golden Age* draws attention to its own fictional quality. Later on, Peter engages in a similar conversation with Vidal; referring to an event taking place in *The Golden Age*, he says that "'Personally, I always liked Truman. You know, he once gave Diana and me a ride in his train '" (462). When Vidal says that he knows about the ride, Peter nods and says, "'Of course you do. You made him up. Then you made me up, too'" (462). While Peter accepts his fictional existence, he at the same time draws attention to the textual or fictional characteristic of a historical figure, Truman, in the narrative. In this way, *The Golden Age* proves the truth of Hutcheon's remark that historiographic metafiction makes the reader "see all referents as fictive, as imagined," including historical personalities who are only known through "their textualized traces in history" (153). This is one of the basic differences between the historical novel and historiographic metafiction. As Hutcheon claims:

> [i]n many historical novels, the real figures of the past are deployed to validate or authenticate the fictional world by their presence, as if to hide the joins between fiction and history in a formal and ontological sleight of hand. The metafictional self-reflexivity of postmodern novels prevents any such subterfuge, and poses that ontological join as a problem: how do we know the past? What do (what can) we know of it now? (114-15)

The Golden Age turns out to be a metatext which questions the constructed nature of the whole *Narratives*. When Peter asks Vidal: "'How does it feel to play god?'" (462), Vidal replies: "'Unreal [...] 'Do I wake or sleep?'" (462). Vidal takes a look at a book entitled *The Golden Age*, which has been written by Aeneas Duncan, a fictional character in the novel. Hence, Vidal's *The Golden Age* is ironically, doubly, fictionalized. While the novel draws on historical events, it paradoxically reveals its constructed nature as fiction. As Hutcheon observes, this kind of representation is "part of the postmodernist stand to confront the paradoxes of fictive/historical

representation, the particular/the general, and the present/the past. And this confrontation is itself contradictory, for it refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy, yet it is more than willing to exploit both" (106). This postmodern self-reflexivity in the novel, as in the case of other historiographic metafictions, "acknowledges the limits and powers of 'reporting' or writing of the past, recent and remote" (Hutcheon 117).

In the last chapter, Vidal gives the *Narratives* a circular-like closure by creating a bond between the character Burr, who appeared in *Burr*, and Decker. While talking to Decker, the fictional Vidal has some suspicions about the connection between the two characters. Giving a surrealistic atmosphere to the novel, Vidal asks: "'You're Aaron Burr, aren't you?'" (460); Decker replies: "'If you say so'" (*TGA*), assuming the role of Burr's surrogate. The resurrection of Burr through Decker gives a sense of circular and surreal closure to the series which begins chronologically with Aaron Burr's life story in *Burr* and ends with the appearance of the surrogate of Burr in *The Golden Age*.

The completion of the *Narratives* with the publication of *The Golden Age* has changed our view of *Washington, D.C.* When read in relation to *The Golden Age*, *Washington, D.C.* turns out to be a narrative that questions the constructed nature of history. The act of re-writing the same period in another novel in the series is indicative of the possibility of continuously re-contextualizing the past. Hence the publication of *The Golden Age* thirty-seven years after *Washington, D.C.* epitomizes the plurality of history, as well as confirming the novel's status as a historiographic metafiction, drawing attention to its fictive nature through ample intertextual and self-reflexive references. The novel's interest in and skepticism about the writing of history also contributes to this interpretation.

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