Journal of American Studies of Turkey
35-36 (2012): 17-28

Memories of Gore Vidal

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Assessing the Career of Gore Vidal

I find myself thinking of Vidal often, as he and I had a conversation that continued for over thirty years, and I learned a great deal from him. I miss these conversations very much.

Our friendship began on the Amalfi Coast, where I rented in a small villa overlooking the Mediterranean. Above the villa hung on a cliffside an impressive villa on five stories, surrounded by fifteen acres of garden. I didn't, at the time I moved there, know that Vidal lived nearby, although I asked the newsagent in the nearby village who owned the amazing house on the cliff, assuming it was some Italian nobleman or mafia capo. He said: "Gore Vidal, il maestro!"

Indeed, he explained that Vidal stopped by every afternoon to buy a paper and have a drink at the bar adjacent to his shop. Surprised and delighted, feeling vaguely hopeful that I would meet him, I left a note: Dear Mr. Vidal, I'm an American writer who has moved to town. If there is any chance to meet you, I would be very glad to make your acquaintance. Much to my amazement, however, he knocked on my door a few hours later, saying: "Parini, come for dinner."

One thing led to another, and soon we became friends. He would read what I wrote and comment in detail, offering shrewd criticism. I would read drafts of things that he wrote, too, and we talked endlessly about the craft of writing, as well as about American politics and history. He really did seem to know everything, and had an almost encyclopedic memory for quotations – Twain, Henry James, Flaubert, Thomas Mann. He gave me endless tips, which stay in my head.

When I look at the shelf of books by Gore in my study, I feel awed by his productivity over more than half a century, beginning with

Williwaw, published just after the war. His twenty-five novels include such masterpieces as *Myra Breckinridge*, *Lincoln*, *Julian* and *Burr* – novels that will continue to attract readers for years to come, and books that redefine their genres. He wrote witty plays such as *The Best Man* and *Visit to a Small Planet*, numerous screenplays (including a final draft of *Ben Hur*), short stories, gossipy memoirs, and -- splendidly -- the countless essays collected in United States. While critics dispute the ultimate value of his novels and plays, few doubt he was a great American essayist, a worthy successor to Emerson and Twain in this neglected genre. And he never minced words, writing as an early advocate of gay liberation, as a political radical with ties to the American and European Enlightenment. His understanding of the United States political system was remarkable and extensive.

As a young boy, he lived with of his grandfather, Senator Thomas P. Gore. (Gore's parents had divorced, and he was a lonely boy who didn't get along well with his alcoholic mother.) I remember, perhaps fifteen years ago, walking around Gore's old mansion on Rock Creek Park, in Washington, D.C. It had become an embassy by then, but its current inhabitants let us wander around freely. Gore showed me where he slept, where his grandfather's huge library was. He recalled reading late into the night in that room, working his way through Greek and Roman history, through the Founding Fathers of the American Republic. He had a terrifying recall of favorite passages, and would recite them to me, over and again. He showed me where he crouched at a small desk under the eaves and wrote his first poems and stories – he originally thought he might like to be a poet, although his family wanted him to enter the family business: national politics.

Twice he ran for public office. He was living along the Hudson River in the 1950s, and there he deepened his connections with the local Democratic Party. He ran for congress in 1960 in Duchess County, which was a Republican stronghold. He had a little help from his friend, President Kennedy, who campaigned beside him. Vidal lost, of course. One could hardly imagine a largely Republican district electing a man who had often represented himself in the national media as pro-socialist, pro-gay and anti-war. His experience of retail politics discouraged him, and he fled to Italy, where – for the most part – he lived for the next four decades, dividing his time between a flat in Rome and the villa in Ravello. He returned briefly

to California in the early eighties, running for the Senate – another failure. After that, he never ran for public office, although it was hard to know that he wasn't running.

Gore seemed to attract attention wherever he went, a famous people happened in his way. As a young man, he moved to Guatemala to live cheaply and write a novel, having bought a dilapidated former convent. He took in a roommate: Anaïs Nin. In her diaries, she claimed that she had an affair with the elegant young man, although he told me this was nonsense. In the late forties, he traveled in Europe with Tennessee Williams, one of his closest friends (Gore adapted *Suddenly, Last Summer* for Hollywood – a fine piece of screenwriting.) He later met Joanne Woodward, and was briefly engaged to her; indeed, her soon-to-be husband, Paul Newman, became one of Gore's best friends, and they remained in close touch until the death of Newman in 2008. Gore, it seemed, knew everybody in the areas of politics, film, or literature, and when he moved to Italy had become friends with Fellini and Italo Calvino and countless others. In later years, he often socialized with Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon, with Sting, with James Taylor and others. He had an especially good relationship with the politician Dennis Kucinich, and he endorsed him in these terms in a written statement: "When others were promising 'permanent war for permanent peace' Kucinich was the one who pointed out the idiocy and the hypocrisy." Of course, Vidal was talking about himself there.

Gore's surveyed the contemporary world scene with the prowess of a hawk looking for prey. His famous feuds are the stuff of legend: Norman Mailer and Christopher Hitchens both felt the brunt of his wit. But even they seemed to like him despite his rude remarks. I had dinner with Gore and Mailer about ten years ago, and Mailer told me how much he admired Gore. And Gore spoke affectionately to me about Mailer. On another occasion I had a private conversation about Gore with Christopher Hitchens, who told me how much he looked to Gore as a model. Anyone can see how much the famous Hitchens style owes to Gore. They shared a wry and acerbic wit, and they both thought in complete sentences, even whole paragraphs. They both pissed from an enormous height, and those caught in their golden showers of their prose had to duck and weave.

When I try to assess the career of Gore Vidal, I'm stymied by the complexity. But one thing stands out: he was an American patriot who

took seriously the ideals of the Founding Fathers, which of course left him open to great disappointment. A natural scold, he attacked those who didn't behave in a way that was right and proper. Injustice of any kind upset him. He hated war-mongering, and he opposed almost every major war in his adult lifetime, having himself served in the Second World War, seeing firsthand the horrible consequences of military action. In recent years, he scorned a political system in the United States that allowed rich people and wealthy corporations to buy off politicians in ways that would reduce their taxes -- corporate and personal -- and kill regulatory legislation. "We're a country with only one party," he said to me, "the party of property." He thought of the Republicans and Democrats as simply two wings of this single party, which had very little to do with the people. In a very recent conversation, he told me it was almost too late: "The republic is over, perhaps."

My guess is that, generations from now, readers will turn to his many books with pleasure, for information about the twentieth century, for a sense of how the American republic developed into a world empire, and what some of the problems were with this approach. Gore's essays on American writers, on world writers, will continue to edify those who wish to know about such authors as Henry James or Edmund Wilson or Scott Fitzgerald or Montaigne. His wit shimmers through his writing, and it will last.

Dennis Altman

Q: You have claimed in a 2006 interview that Gore Vidal is the most significant American writer of the twentieth century. Do you still stand by that claim? Do you think his reputation rests on his ability as a writer or on the depth of his preoccupations with the American past, present or future? Or both?

I explain that claim in my book.[1] I don't mean he is the greatest "literary" writer, but rather that his collected work as an essayist, novelist, and public commentator meant that he had more ongoing influence on public debate than any other writers. Gore's theme was consistently the United States and its role in the world – even though several of his

1 *Gore Vidal's America*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006.

best novels, such as *Julian* and *Creation*, are set long before the country existed – and he attracted a very considerable audience through his wit, his knowledge of American history, and his increasing willingness to criticize almost all elements of the Establishment.

Q: Do you think Vidal actively embraced his identity as an American citizen? Not necessarily in patriotic terms, but because he assumed the responsibility of being America's biographer, as well as its physician?

A real patriot is one who tells the emperor he has no clothes, and that was the role Gore adopted for himself. Increasingly some of his criticisms seemed to be simplistic, but running through his works is a deep analysis of how the United States had, in his eyes, betrayed the principles upon which it was founded. Gore never forgot he came from a long-established American family; although he rarely recognized that "long established" only made sense if one ignored the indigenous inhabitants who were dispossessed by white settlers.

Q: Did Vidal's political ambitions affect the ways in which people perceived him as a writer? In other words, can an aspiring politician be a great author, or vice versa?

When Gore wrote *The City and the Pillar* (1948) – a novel about homosexuality – he effectively ended any real chance of a significant political career. Even though he subsequently ran twice for office – and did so reasonably seriously (unlike Norman Mailer's quixotic tilt to become Mayor of New York) – I think he effectively chose his career as a novelist over that of a politician. The deep homophobia of the time also explains his own ambivalence in matters to do with sexuality, even though he wrote a scathing satire of conventional views in *Myra Breckinridge* (1968).

Q: And following on from that, did his ambitions in movies (as a screenplay writer, and later on an actor) affect the ways in which the public perceived him?

Gore wrote screenplays for the money and acted in movies out of vanity – and who could blame him? It is a mark of how much of a celebrity he had become that he could be cast in a film like *Gattaca* (1996), although

his acting skills never allowed him to change his persona from the public face he presented when he was playing himself.

Q: Vidal was an accomplished performer on all media. What was the particular persona for television and radio (and in movies later on in his career)?

Gore was a consummate performer but one who demanded the spotlight at all times. After my book came out I spoke twice with him at crowded events in Californian bookstores, and his vanity was overwhelming. The private gentleman became an insufferable diva as soon as there was an audience for his performances.

Q: Why do you think he continually needed to reassure himself of his own importance?

I don't want to engage in secondhand psychoanalysis, but from knowing Gore over a long period I have learned that if one hungers for fame one can never have enough, and aging is made more difficult as new generations emerge for whom one's preoccupations are no longer as central as they once were.

Harry Kloman

Q: How do you interpret Gore Vidal's view of the journalistic profession in his novels? For instance, in ***Empire*** *Vidal turns his lenses on W. R. Hearst and yellow journalism: do you think this is part of a wider critique of American values, or was he especially suspicious of journalists?*

Well, first, Hearst is sort of an easy target: it doesn't require an iconoclast like Gore Vidal to criticize Hearst for his excesses. History pretty much agrees that he was a scoundrel who used the power of the media to attack or destroy people with whom he quarreled or disagreed and to further the ideas he supported by fabricating news and stirring up emotions.

As for the rest of the press in Vidal's work – and this includes his nonfiction as well – one shouldn't be surprised that Vidal is critical of the media. Vidal has long argued that the ruling class uses its money and

power to collect more money and power and to suppress the rights of the people. Vidal also railed specifically against *The New York Times*, which he said blackballed him after the publication of his first gay-themed novel, *The City and the Pillar* in 1948. So no, I wouldn't say he was especially suspicious of journalists – no more so than he was of politicians, corporate leaders and the military-industrial complex.

Q: Although Vidal seems to be critical towards the media in his historical novels such as ***1876*** *and* ***Empire****, he used to use the media in different ways to express his opinions. How do you interpret this apparently contradictory view? Do you think he considered himself a media "star" - someone who favored publicity and deliberately courted it, even while professing to despise it?*

Vidal once said: never pass up an opportunity to have sex or be on television. He never professed to despise publicity – he just didn't like people to criticize him or disagree with him. I see no contradiction in one's using the enemy (so to speak) to say what you have to say. If newspapers and magazines were willing to print his unedited words, then why would he pass up the opportunity to have those words published and to get paid for it? Most of Vidal's essays appeared in smaller, politically-oriented publications like *The Nation* and *The New York Review of Books*. He sometimes wrote for larger commercial publications, like *Esquire* or *Vanity Fair*. He was surely paid well for those pieces, but they were comparatively few and far between for most of his career. And nobody makes a fortune by publishing the occasional essay in a big national magazine. As for deliberately courting publicity, he was a writer who believed he had something to say, and the more people notice you, the more they'll hear what you have to say. Vidal had an enormous ego, and he once said, "There is no human problem which could not be solved if people would simply do as I advise." This ego is why he was always willing to appear in the popular media.

Q: How do you think the media - both in America and elsewhere - interpreted Vidal? Did they pay enough attention to him? Did they consider him a serious author, or just a personality? How do you compare the ways in which the international media treated him compared to his treatment in the United States?

"The media" is too large a category to generalize about. Small left-leaning political magazines embraced his views and often published his work. Liberal (but not left) publications like *The New York Times* were at times open to him and at times wary, depending upon the inclinations of the current editors. ("When it comes to mischief," he wrote, "never underestimate the power of *The New York Times*.") His work never appeared in *The New Yorker* – which, he said, is "doomed to conform to a wondrously dull style," and where the work of John Hersey "has been, presumably, processed to the consistency of a Kraft cheese" – until Tina Brown became editor in 1992; she was married to Harry Evans, an executive at Random House, Vidal's publisher at the time, which seemed to open the door. But in general, the American media certainly considered him to be a serious author.

The foreign media – political as well as mainstream – embrace him less critically precisely because he was so critical of American history and politics. Remember that he wrote after World War II, during a time when America was the world's undisputed first power, and this caused some psychological consternation for the old European order. So the European media was perfectly happy to embrace a writer who exposed the shortcomings of the nation that had replaced Europe as the center of the world.

Q: What do you think represents Vidal's biggest contribution to American literature or American ***belles lettres*** *in general? Do you think he will be remembered for what he wrote, or for his pronouncements through the media?*

A look at the current printing history of his books tells that story. His non-political novels are either out of print or in print through small publishing houses. His political novels are the ones that still sell: *Lincoln*, *Burr* and *Washington, D.C.* are among his most successful novels, and even now, in paperback, they've gone into multiple printings. There's so much gay literature available that *The City and the Pillar* is nearly forgotten by this emerging generation of young gay readers. *Myra Breckinridge* is still *sui generis*, but again, there's so much sexually graphic mainstream literature in the canon – not to mention pornography – that few people need to read it any more or realize the pleasure of doing do. I think one of his most prescient novels is *Messiah*, but it's virtually forgotten (although still

in print). I really can't predict how Vidal will be remembered in, say, a quarter century or beyond. But if I were to venture a guess, I'd say he'll be remembered as a historical novelist (*Burr*, *Lincoln*) and political essayist (the many essay collections published as books). He will be largely forgotten or ignored as a playwright, political figure (he ran for office twice), and literary novelist.

The only play of his that may survive is *The Best Man*, which has seen a revival in recent presidential election years (2000, 2012) when Broadway audiences seem to be in the mood for two hours of star-powered political cynicism. For these Broadway revivals, it's been retitled *Gore Vidal's The Best Man*, an honor that may bring his name to attention every decade or so. If it does, then hopefully over time, as people forget who he is, they'll Google him and remember, if only for a moment.

Then again, maybe they won't – maybe some new iconoclast will replace him in the popular mind. For as Vidal wrote at the end of *Washington, D.C*: "The generations of man come and go and are in eternity no more than bacteria upon a luminous slide [….] since change is the nature of life, and its hope" (76). Vidal is gone, and as he wrote in his historical novel *Julian*, "now nothing remains but to let the darkness come, and hope for a new sun and another day, born of time's mystery and man's life of light" (112).

Fatih Özgüven

Q: How and when did you come across Vidal literature? At university or elsewhere?

Elsewhere.

Q: How did you come up with the idea of translating Vidal into Turkish? What intrigued you to translate Vidal? And why ***The City and The Pillar****?*

That it is the first work of its kind--- one that deals with homosexual experience so early. Of course I tried to retain the spirit of the source-text but I did insert a sentence from a Turkish pop song [by singer Ajda Pekkan] since it seemed so appropriate; "*kendi kendimle ben dost oldum yeniden*" ["I have become friends with myself once more."]

Q: If you were in the position of translating another Vidal work, which text by Vidal would you prefer and why?

Myra Breckinridge and *Myron* — both gender-based pastiches, a novelty at the time. They are already translated.

Q: Every translator somehow communicates with the writer s/he translates. What is the level of your emotional tie with Vidal?

Very low - I think he is an arrogant, pompous voice, except for *The City and the Pillar*.

Q: How do you assess Vidal literature within the framework of American culture and literature?

I think Vidal was important as a figure who took risks. I prefer James for his subtlety and introspection.

Q: Vidal's relationship with academia has been problematic. Do you think this is the case?

I don't think Vidal ever gave a thought to the subject. It doesn't look that way. He seems to have considered himself American blue blood and did not need the approval of any person or institution.

Q: Suppose that you will choose a Vidal piece to teach to university learners. Which one would it be?

The scene where he seduces and has a one-night stand with Jack Kerouac from his memoir *Palimpsest*; it is daring and pathetic at the same time - the bathetic retelling of an important scene: "Reader, I've slept with him."

Q: Vidal seems to have attracted more attention outside America than in America. Why do you think this is the case?

Because he is film star stuff - daring, glamorous, good-looking, fun. That is, the man - the prose is easy and accessible. What better combination?

Q: What do you think Vidal's contribution has been to America and American Literature in general?

An American whiff of dandyism. Energetic and no-nonsense.

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