1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era

Volume 3

1997

Defoe and Cantermir Eighteenth-Century Explorers, West and East

Mihaela Irimia

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty

Part of the Aesthetics Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://repository.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty/vol3/iss1/12
I want to look at Defoe and Cantemir as explorers in space and time. In so doing, I will consider two works that are given relatively little attention, if any at all, today. One is *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, which we could easily dismiss from the terrain of literature because it looks so much like a *Whitaker avant la lettre*, or a *Baedeker* before its days, or a *Domesday redivivus*. Defoe committed it to paper between 1722 and 1726 following the observations occasioned by a number of apparently well-organized “circuit tours” in Britain. The mid-century saw successive editions of the text, which had already acquired the qualities of a palimpsest. Richardson’s “improvements” and the typical eighteenth-century editor(s)’ personal note(s) were obvious
deflections from the initial notations of an objective, even though not disinterested, observer. We now know that *The Tour* is to some extent Defoe's mere fabulations about places and happenings related to them, as we know that this exploration in space is also a plundering of Camden's *Britannia*.

The other work that I wish to consider is *The History of the Growth and Decay of the Othman Empire*, which Cantemir compiled between 1714 and 1716. Hospodar of Moldavia, a personal friend of Czar Peter the Great and an erudite conversant with all the prominent living languages of Eastern Europe, Cantemir spent twenty years in the heart of the Ottomanness, Constantinople before offering up his *History* to Europe. The writing of the original in Latin, as *Incrementa atque Decrementa Aulae Othomanicae*, is a clear indication of the Latin, therefore European, therefore Christian, identity of a culture under the suzerainty of the Turkish, and soon, like the rest of Eastern Europe, of the Russian, Empire. An act of cultural prestige and of political courage, this history had been written for the West. It was soon circulated in French and English translations, under Western courtly patronage, and remained for a remarkable lapse of time the source of information about the menacing otherness of the east. A splendid copy of the accredited English translation by Nicholas Tindal (1734-5) can now be consulted at the British Library (1756).

Why put these different works together? What should be the common denominator among a businessman's mercantile interest in solid British markets (as seen from within the lofty walls of prosperous empire), and an aristocrat's refined curiosity to look surreptitiously through the corridors of imperial power, still from within, but with a stranger's eye? An infrastructure of evaluative metatext rounds off the factual agglomeration on which these two explorations are built. In Defoe's and in Cantemir's excogitations we find the century's *Weltanschauung* with its melioristic penchant. As Todorov would say, both authors articulate a receivable discourse free of the value-sanctioning function, a discourse expected to fit a pattern of "idées
reçues."1 Or, as the phrase goes in Italian, *se non è vero, è ben trovato*.

Rooted in the real, Defoe’s *Tour* is no less an illustration of the life as journey metaphor. We are warned in the Preface to volume I that this book aims to “correct” the careless observations of foreign visitors to Britain. Whatever is is right for Defoe, as for Pope. The official voice of Enlightenment speaks through Daniel Foe’s down-to-earth evaluations: we live in the best of worlds, and if, at times, we people have a feeling that something goes wrong, the fault is ours and only ours, and comes out of taking the part for the whole; the part can be erratic, but not the whole, and we are fatally blind to the perfect project of the ensemble, because we see only bits. If only we could penetrate the whys and wherefores of the world, or, for that matter, of the political, economic, financial, social, institutional ensemble called England! On a small scale, the England of Defoe’s *Tour* is the world. His is a synecdochic logic advertising an imperative and imposable pattern. Defoe’s *Weltanschauung* is optimum (there is no better world, look at England!), optimal (the model is to be proposed to, and imposed on, others), optimistic (everything advances according to the law of progress), and optimizing (at the same time as the model is promoted, people prosper).

Likewise rooted in the real, Cantemir’s *History of the Growth and Decay of the Othman Empire* is nothing short of a full-scale philosophy on the fate of power. Power is human. It acts in the world. Cantemir’s subtle meditations sound so much like the New Historicist or the Cultural Studies critical jargon today! Power is inscribed through a set of perfectly conducted rituals, the rules of a subtle and most efficient public “grammar.” This keeps the world together. Cantemir’s worldly variant of this cosmic pattern is the Ottoman Empire, a hugeness of a reality, whether in space or in time, which he is

---

ready to explore. His metatext of meditative assessment recalls incipient twelfth-century Ottoman rule in Anatolia, only to gradually emphasize Ottoman prestige under Murat I, who established his capital in Adrianople, the former Hadrianopolis. It evokes the exploits of the fearful Bajazet, "The Lightning," as well as the glory of Mehmet II’s capital in Constantinople, already a legendary echo of the first Christian Emperor’s polis. It stops at some length to paint the taking of Constantinople in 1453, of the exemplary city founded on ancient pagan glory now translated into a discourse of Ottoman discipline. It contains spacious descriptions of imperial pride embodied by Solyman the Magnificent, but it equally gives due attention to the reiterated sign of decadence that the Ottomans will not see. For we see what we want to see, Cantemir indirectly admits, as does Defoe. The Lepanto defeat of 1571 is a sign, the 1699 Karlowitz Peace is another. The Kutchuk-Kaynardji treaty in the late eighteenth century would be another. Concomitant with the dislocation of the Ottoman, the inscription on the body of history of the Russian, imperial discourse is a process occurring under Cantemir’s eyes. He writes as a onetime Moldavian prince now hosted by the Czar, never oblivious of his gratefulness to the worldly Christian “father” Peter I. But, eiron-like, and unlike Defoe, for whom calling a spade a spade is the passport to efficiency, Cantemir has the distance not only of a different religious and political allegiance, but of a different intellectual stance. Hence his respect for otherness when this slides into intellectual sameness: a typically Enlightenment image of Solyman the Magnificent irradiates the melioristic energy of the book’s center to each and every line. Solyman, the one Sultan among Ottoman Sultans, is depicted with the book in his hand. The book. The written word sacrosanct, the “technology of symbolism” that can conquer worlds. Islam is a religion of the logos, of the book, to be propagated through the force of weapons, whereas Christianity’s force lies in its

pathos. Yet Cantemir's praise is preeminently the scholar's praise raising grandeur somewhere above the relevance of military skill and political cunning.

The word and the book—here are Cantemir's paragons. The spirit endures, whereas the way merely of the world is one of ups and downs, "incrementa atque decrementa"—Vico's "corsi e ricorsi." The calculation and the accountant's book—here, by contrast, are Defoe's measurements. The one, the aristocratic spectator to the "squabble" of the world (in Cantemir's own words), the other, the bourgeois engaged in transactions with the world. Defoe can only negotiate, as Greenblatt would say, in his characterization of a world of constant exchanges of energy. Nec-otium, the denial of otiose philosophizing. The one, the enacter of an ironic show, the other, the actor of a comedy (in Frye's acceptation of the term). Both fabricators: Cantemir, the fabricator of exemplary growth and decay, a Pope of the Essay and of The Dunciad; Defoe, the fabricator of growth as accumulation, a bourgeois gentilhomme, who had been born only to the name of "Foe."

Exploration is literally an enterprise whereby one goes out into the world (Lat. ex, "out"), in order to advertise one's discovery (Lat. plurare, "to cry out"). Discovering is uncovering the yet un-seen. But the explorer never simply falls upon something brand new; rather, he creates something so far untreated, and once the local habitation is there, he will bestow upon it a name. Exploration is a poetic enterprise recognizable in the interpretive framework that articulates it. As it sediments into discourse, it acquires and propagates a normalizing force eventually crystalizing in unequivocal, therefore univocal, expression. It reinscribes into its text the newly discovered and domesticates it by iconic representation, or stabilizing stereotypes. Such things give comfort in the face of the new. Silencing the other, the new, is thus a therapeutic operation, and the iconography of official grand history usually rises on the ashes of difference defeated. Putative moral superiority, which is as much as saying denigration of the other.
The rule of the center, versus the margin, of the metropolis versus the provinces. The capital city, for instance, the "caput," "capitis," both time- and space-wise. As origin of power, through prestige accumulated in time, and transposed into legend and eventually into myth, it becomes the exemplary, paradigmatic city.

Such is Byzantium in Cantemir's *History*. Edirne, the fourteenth-century Ottoman capital, assumes a new dignity in European eyes, as the City of Emperor Adrian, at once Latin and Greek: Adrianople-Hadrianopolis. By public mise-en-abîme, the city of *hic et nunc* rises to the dignity of an atemporal, utopian center. Opposite the Bosphorus, the other half of the same temporal city is Constantinople, or also Istanbul. Preeminently, this is the City of Constantine the Great, the first Christian Emperor in an empire echoing the other imperial power. The pagan and the Christian, the European and the Islamic meet here. Byzantium, the miracle of survival after fall, the legendary dwelling place, the stronghold of identity under the constant menace of otherness, becomes the City-Empire in a telling overlapping of center and margin—*orbis et urbis*, like ancient Rome.

Modelled on the pattern of Rome, the London of Defoe's *Tour* is at once Lundinium, the City of Anne, reduplicated in Annapolis, and the City of the Augustus Monarch of the day. London is Augusta, the *Civitas* Augusta, whose singleness is consecrated by successive circumferences irradiating order from the center. Central London (city and court) is the country, and round it lies England, and farther off lie the other countries in the kingdom, and overseas lie the colonies. Defoe reads the dense text of Englishness all compact in London. Symbolically, the pilgrim in Defoe periodically reaches his destination by exemplarily returning to London. London is the site of more than mere physical centrality, but in the comic mode of middleclass values this status is tested under mercantile circumstances. Huge amounts of goods are being carried and displayed in a London marketplace to which the witness is no
other than a Spanish ambassador, exemplarily humiliated by the spectacle of plenty. Defoe's first measure of excellence is quantity: the aristocratic Spaniard has to admit that not even in the whole of Spain is the equivalent of these colossal quantities of "flesh, fish, and fowl" sold, that are sold here, in one market in London. At this point Defoe stops being a mere traveller-explorer; he is a teleologist who knows in advance what he will "discover": the cornucopia of imperial Englishness. The dull accountant-like formulation fringing on reportage is "poetic" through what it implies (Lat. implicare < in + plica, "fold"). Between the folds of literal meaning adjacent meanings complete the "story," not the "history." Is there such thing as history, when everything is discourse, confabulation? And intentionality: being Spanish, versus being English is a matter of questioning imperial prestige in the world, for in the diffuse text of history is inscribed the defeat of the Invincibile Armada, a paradox deserving the aura of myth. Being Spanish also means being Catholic, and dissenter Defoe's explorations in The Tour are imbued with anti-Popish attacks. Last, but not least, being an ambassador is representing, rather than simply being present. The Spanish ambassador is the Spanish nation in a nutshell, so, metonymically, his amazement is the amazement, not less the envy of, the Spanish race, of Spanishness in front of Englishness. A second axis mundi rises in the middle of a London market.

For Cantemir, the scholar, myth rises out of, and is sustained by, the exemplary book. Phanar, the center of intellectual power in Istanbul-Constantinople, is the seat of schools and of the Academy recalling and revigorating the onetime fame of ancient pagan Akademos, the grove where peripatetic Plato taught. Cantemir's exploration starts in space and extends backward into the original time of European philosophy. Leaps in the boundless time of founding wisdom give the true dimension of this metaphysical exploration: most importantly, the Patriarchs of Constantinople are associated with the Academy of Phanar! They are the exemplary fathers of an
exemplary family dwelling in an exemplary city. Constantine is another way of saying Augustus, or Gloriana, or Victoria, or Adrianus. Superposed on the image of Solyman the Magnificent (yet another Augustus) holding the Book in his hand, this certificate of paradigmatic identity of the place is the key to our reading of another “story” in Cantemir’s “history.”

In Bakhtinian terms, Defoe and Cantemir are each engaged in chronotopic exploration. Places are visited which are “discovered” for the sake of confirming the landscapes devised collectively in a “tableau” of overall harmony. And encounters occur during the journey that satisfy such collective expectations. And this is how London or Byzantium condense into zero degree points of reference in space and in time. Exploration can be stirred by a number of motives, from the Odyssean itch of pushing out the limits of the known world, to the Quixotic rambling in search of ideality, to religious missionarism, or colonial conquest. All of these forms of exploration are encounters with the Other. They all presuppose a system of interpretation to accommodate the other and make it familiar. It is interesting to see how the more widely collective unconscious operates through similar protocols of assimilation, whether by agglutination or by exclusion. Both Defoe and Cantemir lend an occasional ear to the small gossip of history. The spicy “petites histoires” of royal courts, like the spicy episodes of “komos,” everyday life, are the salt and pepper on the main course of large-scale history.

*The Tour* is mainly an exploration of economic possibilities whose pragmatic aim is to extend the English model over otherness at home and abroad, over Scotland, Ireland, and the colonies. Where Scotland has been domesticated through the Union Act, stubborn Ireland remains the wilderness to Defoe’s disciplining eye. He is over-observant of Scottish and Irish sloth, laziness, and recklessness. And when the short visitation of metaphysics is allowed an infinitesimal space in the narrative, the otherworldy must be Scottish. In Letter VI, Defoe the traveller comes to the brink of a most curious hole in the earth,
where the man of the mountain dwells. The wildness embodied in the black-faced sweating collier makes him shudder not romantically, but rather with the rancour of the civilizing colonist who cannot fail to domesticate the text of his exploration all through. The narrator does not miss the chance to remark that this is an apparition not simply from the entrails of the earth, but ab inferis. Even the so very English folly of Bath summer hybris seems to fall on deaf ears in The Tour. Defoe cannot afford to waste time on gratuitousness. He is not mere presence in his circuit tours through the whole island; he is a representative, and the model he has embarked upon installing has to have regulatory power even without the least exception. As the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century were to invent a Scotland of romantic raggedness, so Defoe's equalizing eye invents an exemplary England to be consumed as universal panacea. And while middle-class Daniel Foe himself falls at times prey to meditations on the fate of empires in history, especially when consciously or less so he grows Camdenian, England is of necessity rendered timeless, even eternal.

At once an insider and an outsider, Cantemir can elegantly pendulate between the discourse of official Ottoman rule and that of peripheral "aberration." There are reports of Turkish monks that are able to live merely on one olive or one fig a week, and to fly as far as the Church of Sancta Sophia in Constantinople. They fly from the margin to the center. They are spiritual fathers, but their unheard-of capacity cannot help succumbing to questioning. And yet, the center appears tolerant to the margin, in Cantemir's account, because mediated by spiritual, rather than material, value. "If any Christian questions the Truth of this Story, a Turk thinks it sufficiently prov'd, if he shows it to be written in his Book. For the illiterate among them believe nothing false can possibly be recorded in their Books."\(^3\) The Book is the one Original Center

\(^3\) Dimitrie Cantemir, *The History of the Ottoman Empire* (Bucharest: Alexandru
for Moslem illiterate and Christian scholar. This spiritual relativization of the worldly center can be seen at work in anonymous collective art produced on the margin of empire at about the same time as Cantemir compiled his History. The paradigmatic city circulates in its variants in the famous churches in Northern Moldavia boasting spectacular frescoes on their external walls. One particular theme, the siege of Constantinople, arrests the explorer’s interest. The Moldovitsa fresco, above all, shows Constantinople as a Moldavian fortress assaulted by referentially identifiable Turks: costumes, hairdos, and weapons are a guarantee that they are unequivocally Turks. They are the infidels besieging the Christian Capital, the last bastion of identity, at least for Eastern Europe. Symbolically, the “small gossip” of farmer culture has made the Capital migrate to the margin: Constantinople as the Capital of Moldavia. Axis mundi stands up and out there. If the center absorbs otherness, to hush it into acquiescence, the margin does not do otherwise! Let us read the whole text, and we shall see that even the zig-zag line of history is patterned on teleological expectations. The next fresco, set in narrative sequel after the one we have just referred to, completes the exemplary “story,” not “history”: Hell, or rather descent into Hell, a sine-qua-non scene in each of these famous frescos, is here the descent of so many Turks into the bowels of infernal blazes! The two scenes are framed at human height, on display for the Everyman of the margin, at once an illustrated Everyman’s History and Bible. If not everybody can read the cryptic signs of writing, everybody can, instead, read the visual text. The New Historicist’s appetite for anecdote (literally the “unpublished,” the still “secret,” and because of this latently richer) is here excellently satisfied.

Why bring these so different texts together? Defoe’s Tour codifies eighteenth-century reality in typically Defoesque listings, but also in philosophical take-offs that bring it closer to
Defoe and Cantemir

meditative literature produced at the time. Respect for the written word is obvious. We need hardly remark how important the written word is for the erudite Cantemir. His resorting to the universal European language (Latin) makes of him a believer in some universal grammar, which was one of the dreams of the century. Defoe believes in his own grammar of pragmatic precision, and it is hard to deny how persuasive the Defoesque text usually is, if only because of its referential quality. Both Defoe and Cantemir venerate codification. The English translation of Cantemir's work is an overlooked entry into the archive hosting Defoe's Tour. This mutual jostling of text by text, of discourse by discourse, yields one more possible image of one more possible eighteenth century. The Ecole des Annales in France and the New Historicism, in the English-speaking world have long specialized in discovering (and producing) such multiple eighteenth centuries by means of literary and other texts; it is not uninteresting to approach the non- or paraliterary text with the tools of the literary critic. Defoe's jottings, entries, records, and tabulations, like Cantemir's, add vitality to their sometimes overly serious discourse. Both these authors, moreover, are inescapable. When the first grammar of a modern European language was composed, the grammar of the Spanish language by Antonio de Nebrija, its author sent into the world a statement that has not, to this day, lost its acute human meaning: "language has always been the companion of Empire." My use of the term "empire" focuses on the statement of power, itself inescapable, like fabulation, because, like the latter, human. West and east, authors in the eighteenth century tried to decode the code of power. The history of modern Europe begins in the eighteenth century. As an Eastern European, I hope this history will have a history. Which gives us plenty of reasons to resume exploring it.