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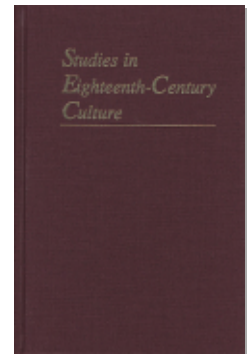
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Introduction: Daniel O'Quinn's Melancholy Cosmopolitanism

ASHLEY L. COHEN

An English bluestocking traveling with her ambassador husband is detained in Belgrade for a month thanks to the military rule of a corrupt pasha. Trapped inside, she takes solace in the good company of her host, an accomplished scribe who long ago eschewed the dangers of a political career in favor of a retired life of cultivated ease. Treated to the comforts of fine wine, her host's good table, and excellent conversation on everything from the woman question to poetry, she is quite comfortably entertained. In this "scene of hospitality" she finds "a kind of sanctuary from" the world outside, which is a nightmarish "historical zone of violence, irrationality, and death." The bluestocking in question is, of course, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and this rarely discussed episode from her *Turkish Embassy Letters* epitomizes the casual, quotidian scenes of "cosmopolitan interculturalism" that are often overlooked in scholarship on the global eighteenth century, but which take central stage in Daniel O'Quinn's *Engaging the Ottoman Empire*.¹

O'Quinn's book does not give us what Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, calls "the historian's view of the past."² Of course, Woolf is writing prior to the inception of women's history and social history, let alone what we now call cultural history. One hundred years ago, History was still the stomping grounds of Great Men and the Wars they started. Such men are not absent from *Engaging the Ottoman Empire*—the subject of the book might

very well be described as their wars. But both appear askew, as if we are viewing them from an unaccustomed angle. And we are. The remarkable gift O'Quinn gives readers of his new book is a glimpse of war stolen through what William Cowper famously termed "the loopholes of retreat," which afford a view of the outside world from a safe and sheltered remove.³ It is through these loopholes that we experience, along with Lady Mary, the siege of Belgrade. With her, we take refuge in the hospitality of Achmet Beg and take delight in the "intimate enlightened conversation" that unfolds at his dinner table and in his library (194). Her host's mistaken belief that Lady Mary understands Persian may be no more than a polite feint—a willingness to believe that his extraordinary guest must be cultured to a degree that exceeds Europe's narrow bounds—but linguistic hurdles prove no serious obstacle to lively conversation about "Arabian poetry" and "Persian tales," as well as a few friendly "disputes" about the difference between European and Ottoman "customs, particularly the confinements of Women" (193). This is what geopolitical horrors look like when viewed from inside the intimate bunkers that privileged people build to survive them.

Fantasy and domination are the usual poles of scholarly engagement with non-European "Others" in eighteenth-century studies. Neither of these keywords is fully absent from *Engaging the Ottoman Empire*. Indeed, fantasies of domination proliferate in the book's second half, "Besides War," which focuses on the post-Seven Years' War era, when European imperial ambitions intensified. But, to a remarkable extent, this book gives us something different than what we have come to expect from studies of empire. In place of exotic projections and outright oppression, we find quotidian intimacies, unexpected friendships, and artistic collaborations. In part, this focal shift is a product of O'Quinn's subject: the Ottoman Empire was a rival to European imperialism, not a victim of it. The benefits of studying this powerful non-European empire have already been well established for the early modern period by scholars like Nabil Matar and Gerald MacLean, who have shown us the extent to which England's geopolitical ambitions were alternately tempered and kindled by "imperial envy" of Europe's nearest neighbor to the East. O'Quinn brings these insights to the field of eighteenth-century studies, where they are not yet mainstream, and builds on them using one of the field's most distinctive preoccupations: sociability. *Engaging the Ottoman Empire* shows us sociability as we have rarely seen it before. Far from London, far from England, far from the capital (or even provincial) cities of Europe, we enter the sociable world of the expats who gather around English, French, and Dutch ambassadors to the Sublime Porte. In this book, ambassadors are the closest thing we get to agents of imperialism, and while O'Quinn certainly attends to their

political maneuvers, the center of gravity in his account lies elsewhere. Ambassadors are of interest primarily for the retinues they accumulate—of friends, artists, informants, assistants, translators, lovers, wives—and the visual and textual archives they generate. These archives tell a story about what O'Quinn calls “intercultural sociability” and what we might also call melancholy cosmopolitanism (19).

Of late, cosmopolitanism has arguably lost its vogue as a keyword: its utopian naïveté seems hopelessly out of step in scholarship far more concerned with histories of enslavement, dispossession, and genocide than with the Enlightenment's self-proclaimed virtues. O'Quinn's cosmopolitanism *redux* makes the term useful again by folding its utopian strain into a history of loss: “‘Cosmopolitanism’ is a term so imbued with hope,” he writes, “that we need to ask what it means for it to be inextricably tied to mutilation, loss, and the tangible relics of slaughter” (194). The specific context for this provocation is the death of Lady Mary's convivial host, Achmet Beg, when Belgrade is captured and burned during the Austro-Turkish War shortly after her stay. But this sentiment is equally applicable to the book as a whole, which repeatedly reveals cosmopolitanism to be what happens in the interstices of geopolitics. Cosmopolitanism is the normal magic of sociality that occurs when people from different sides of a cultural divide work and play together; and it is always melancholy because the interstices that sustain it are always fleeting. These evanescent interstices are what O'Quinn calls “peace.” When peace ends—as it does at regular intervals throughout the century and a quarter covered here—we are left with “the sadness that attends the momentary contemplation and ensuing foreclosure of an unrealized future” (332). The sadness, in other words, of seeing the world as it might have been.

Inevitably, *Engaging the Ottoman Empire* tells the story of Europe's march towards global domination. But it also tells a different story: the Europe that conquered the world, O'Quinn reveals, was not an autochthonous marvel of self-creation. Instead, we find that Europe's art and media, its invented classical past and its imagined imperial future were all, in important ways, shaped by its engagements with the Ottoman empire. For me, as a scholar of British imperialism, the most refreshing and the most subtly revolutionary aspect of O'Quinn's book is its decentering of Britain, its refusal to re-inscribe Britain's imperial hegemony. This is what it looks like to truly “provincialize Europe”: the British empire becomes one of many empires overlapping in space and time. Without getting sucked into the centripetal orbit of the British empire, O'Quinn nonetheless manages to make a contribution to the study of British imperialism. To name just one example, his account of how European diplomats tried (often unsuccessfully)

to negotiate the rituals of Ottoman state ceremonies, public processions, and court audiences designed to visualize and perform Ottoman state power has profoundly enriched my own understanding of the strategic use and abuse of Mughal ritual by the colonial state in nineteenth-century India. It now seems clear to me that the trials and tribulations of European ambassadors like Sir Robert Ainslie in the Sublime Porte represent the prehistory to British colonial manipulations of Mughal vocabularies and repertoires of state power a century later in India. When O'Quinn's chapters on Ainslie and the choreographed spectacles surrounding the mediation of the Treaty of Karlowitz are read alongside Bernard S. Cohn's classic essay on "Representing Authority in Victorian India," the only logical conclusion is that the road to British imperial supremacy in South Asia was paved in Asia Minor with centuries of humiliation by a non-European adversary who almost always had the upper hand.⁴

The short essays that follow testify to the importance of *Engaging the Ottoman Empire* across an unusually broad range of disciplines and field formations. Many of the responses focus on method, with the implication that the book's use value is portable beyond its particular subject matter. Angelina Del Balzo contextualizes this book's *modus operandi* with reference to O'Quinn's two previous monographs on the London theater: "paradoxically, by moving away from conversations around the representation of the Ottoman Empire onstage," Del Balzo explains, "O'Quinn has made a compelling argument for the importance of theater scholarship to literary study beyond questions of representation." The complexities of the eighteenth-century "media environment" are taken up by Douglas Fordham. An art historian, Fordham fleshes out the importance of an aspect of the book easily overlooked by literary scholars: its "integration of paint on canvas into a larger world of printed images and documents." This is merely one example of how O'Quinn's interdisciplinary, mixed-media approach might challenge or even upend critical narratives whose stability requires the controlled environment of hermetically sealed disciplines.

In a related vein, Lynn Festa throws into relief the book's profound critique of the conventional "chronologies that organize our histories." If O'Quinn uses "formal disturbance" in media as a kind of blue dye test to reveal the presence of intercultural influence, then Festa locates the success of *Engaging the Ottoman Empire* as a truly intercultural study in the book's chronological disturbance: a "temporal hiatus at the heart of O'Quinn's book" that works to rupture "the smooth chronologies that underwrite periodization" and "remind us of the partiality of our own perspectives, the violence implicit in the imposition of contemporaneity, and the ways in which the periodizations we invoke stabilize the totality of our own point of view." Katherine Calvin

locates the book's capacity to upend conventional critical narratives in O'Quinn's blended method. While O'Quinn's microscopic attention to detail—what literary scholars call “close reading”—is certainly indebted to the “reduction of scale” associated with microhistory, O'Quinn innovates, Calvin argues, by “positioning ... multiple microhistorical studies in a dynamic, constellatory field.” O'Quinn's exquisitely minute close readings add up to a magisterial big picture—much as the tiny threads in an Ottoman carpet combine into a single fabulous design.

Perhaps the most surprising payoffs of *Engaging the Ottoman Empire* pertain to its profound engagement with the classics, as well as the European reinvention of the classical past. Zirwat Chowdhury suggests that O'Quinn's attention to the usually overlooked “Ottoman interlocutors” who assisted—and thereby made possible—European antiquarian expeditions offers “necessary alternatives to more conventional histories of Enlightenment antiquarianism and archaeology, according to which white British men like Pars, Revett, and Chandler step into the arcs of progress that we call modernity by rescuing ancient patrimony from the hands of purportedly declining cultures ... histories [that] continue to underpin the forms of custodianship that institutions such as the British Museum (controversially) still claim for themselves.” Finally, Charlotte Sussman sifts out the book's subtle, but profound challenge to the conventional wisdom that, by “the eighteenth century ... the epic was a genre both *about* the past and *of* the past”—that is, “distressed, or residual,” in short, played out. Contrary to this assumption, Sussman explains, O'Quinn unearths a stunning use value for classical allusion: in a virtuosic reading of the *Turkish Embassy Letters*, he reveals how Montagu used classical allusion as a vital “practice through which to articulate intercultural exchange.” In a remarkable reversal of the kind of Eurocentrism Johannes Fabian censured in *Time and the Other*, O'Quinn reveals how Montagu used epic, in Sussman's words, “to confront not temporal inaccessibility, but geographical accessibility: she relies on classical epic as a site of translation, a basis for allegory, and a source of allusion to describe and engage the world through which she travels.”

My first encounter with *Engaging the Ottoman Empire* was an exercise in humility: it is disconcerting to discover that a subject you know very little about is so crucially important to the subjects you hold most dear. Rarely have I learned so much from a single book. *Engaging the Ottoman Empire* has the potential to upend so much of what we thought we already knew—about art history, the classics, periodization, media history, European imperialism, and so much more. Its ripple effects will be felt in scholarship on all of these topics for years to come.

Notes

1. O'Quinn, *Engaging the Ottoman Empire: Vexed Mediations, 1690–1815* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 193–94. Subsequent citations will be made parenthetically.
2. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Anna Snaith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 34.
3. Cowper, *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 2:189.
4. Cohn, "Representing Authority in Victorian India," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).