Chapter 4

Strategic Improvisation: Henry Blount in the Ottoman Empire

Sabine Schülting

In May 1634, Henry Blount (1602–82) embarked on an 11-month voyage that would lead him from Venice over Dalmatia and Belgrade to Constantinople; and from thence to Rhodes, Alexandria, Cairo and back to Venice. Though it is obvious that he was not travelling for pleasure alone, the primary motive for his voyage remains obscure and can only be guessed. It has been suggested that Blount might have been on a more or less official mission, perhaps even mandated and financed by King Charles I himself, who knighted him in 1639.[1] But disregarding the exact nature of his journey, Blount's travelogue *A Voyage into the Levant* (1636), which was published a year after his return, deserves critical attention.[2] It is a fascinating historical document not only because its dismissal of traditional thought and its full-hearted support of empiricism[3] marks a

[1] See Gerald MacLean, 'Ottomanism before Orientalism?', in Ivo Kamps and Jyotsna G. Singh (eds), *Travel Knowledge: European 'Discoveries' in the Early Modern Period* (New York, 2001), p. 94.

[2] Henry Blount, *A Voyage into the Levant. A briefe relation of a iourney, lately performed by Master H. B. Gentleman, from England by the way of Venice, into Dal[matia], Sclavonia, Bosnah, Hungary, Macedonia, Thessaly, Thrace, Rhodes and Egypt, unto Gran Cairo: [W]ith particular observations concerning the moderne condition of the Turkes, and other people under that empire* (London, 1636). To date, literature on *A Voyage into the Levant* is sparse: Boies Penrose, *Urbane Travelers, 1591–1635* (Philadelphia, PA, 1942), pp. 215–36; Jonathan Haynes, 'Two Seventeenth Century Perspectives on the Middle East: George Sandys and Sir Henry Blount', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 3 (1983): pp. 4–22; Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558–1685* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 22, *et passim*; MacLean, 'Ottomanism before Orientalism?'.

[3] Blount writes: 'Wherefore I desiring somewhat to informe my selfe of the *Turkish* Nation, would not sit downe with a booke knowledge thereof, but rather (through all the hazard and endurance of travell,) receive it from mine owne eye not dazled with any affection, prejudicacy, or mist of education, which preoccupate the minde, and delude it with

'generic breakthrough in travel writing',[4] but also because the text clearly testifies to England's profound political, military and economic interests in the East. In the context of this volume, the text is of further relevance because it corroborates the collection's general hypothesis that the character and outcome of early modern cultural encounters (in the East) were decided 'in performance', that is, in the negotiations between the members of the respective cultures in the moment of encounter, be it through speech acts, bodily practices, fixed or improvised rituals, or (non-adherence to) diplomatic protocol. *A Voyage into the Levant* shows 'cultures at play' and Blount consciously presents himself as a gifted actor on the Eastern stage. Throughout the text he reflects upon the appropriateness of his demeanour in the Ottoman Empire and reports of his masquerades and assumed identities. At one point during his voyage, for instance, he is told that a year previously, an eminent military leader was killed by the English. As a result of this news, he pretends to be a Scotsman (33). He flexibly adapts to changing circumstances and stresses the necessity to improvise and observe local costume and customs in order to collect first-hand information on 'the Religion, Manners, and Policie of the *Turkes*' (2). Yet it would be naive to assume that Blount was a disinterested scholar advocating an early form of enlightened philosophy towards the cultural 'other'. Gerald MacLean describes Blount's interest in gathering knowledge as driven by English 'imperial envy' for the great Ottoman Empire; he even sees him as an 'ideal spy'.[5] For its English readership, Blount's journal was useful in two ways: first, it accumulated valuable knowledge about a highly effective and successful empire that would serve as an example for England and, secondly, it could be read as a guidebook

partiall *ideas*, as with a false glasse, representing the *object* in colours, and proportions untrue …' (4).

[4] MacLean, 'Ottomanism before Orientalism?', p. 85.

[5] MacLean, 'Ottomanism before Orientalism?', pp. 86, 93.

for 'future sons of empire how they might most profitably travel among and, more importantly, deal with the Turks'.[6]

Blount's travelogue is an excellent example for the study of performativity in early modern Anglo-Ottoman encounters. Blount propagates disguise, flexibility and improvisation as successful strategies that should be adopted by those following him. By comparing Blount's strategic improvisation to what Stephen Greenblatt has called 'Renaissance self-fashioning',[7] I will pay particular attention to the specific cultural and historical conditions, or constraints, as it were, of English performance in the Islamic East. I will argue that in a culture where individual identity along the lines of sex, class and ethnicity was indicated by cultural practice, by costume and customs, Blount's strategic improvisation often came dangerously close to apostasy.

I. Henry Blount's Performances in the Ottoman Empire

On his way to Constantinople, having – imprudently, as it first seems – left the protection of the caravan with which he travels, Blount suddenly meets four *timariots*, members of the Ottoman cavalry. The situation becomes precarious when the soldiers, on recognizing him as a Christian, address him in a hostile manner:

> I clad in *Turkish* manner, rode with two *Turkes*, an houre before our *Caravan*; wee found foure *Spahy-Timariots* by a river, where we stay'd, They were at dinner, and seeing by my head, I was a *Christian*, they called to me; I not understanding what they would, stood still, till they menacing their weapons, rose, and came to mee, with lookes very ugly … (98).[8]

[6] MacLean, 'Ottomanism before Orientalism?', p. 94.

[7] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980).

[8] The reference to his 'Christian' head suggests that Blount was wearing not only the 'long, and loose manner of garment reported to have been ever used in the *East*' (182), but had also submitted to the Ottoman sumptuary regulations that mandated differently coloured turbans for Muslims, Christians and Jews; see Nabil I. Matar, 'Renaissance England and the Turban', in David Blanks (ed.), *Images of the Other: Europe and the Muslim World*

Poststructuralist philosophers such as Judith Butler or Jacques Derrida have stressed the inevitable contingency and potential misfiring of performative acts, but as the example shows, a further problem emerges in cultural encounters. In an unfamiliar surrounding, the travellers are rarely (fully) familiar with the language, the norms and customs of the culture they visit. The iteration of conventionalized speech acts and rituals (as, for example, saluting and welcoming), on which meaningful social practice depends, becomes problematic or, particularly in first encounters, even impossible. In these situations, the conditions that ensure the communicative success of speech acts (such as propositional content, preparatory and sincerity conditions) are rarely (all) fulfilled. This is also the case in Blount's experience with the Ottoman soldiers. He does not know whether they utter a threat or a greeting (the former seeming more likely), and he is at a loss as to what kind of response they expect from him. His initial reaction to the situation is inactivity, as if to avoid 'misbehaviour' in a confrontation that is beyond his understanding and control. However, when he sees the soldiers approaching him with gestures and looks that he can only take as threats, he addresses them in a manner that seeks to reset the parameters of the encounter:

> I smiling met them, and taking him who seemed of most port, by the hand, layed it to my forehead, which with them is the greatest signe of *love*, and *honour*, then often calling him *Sultanum*, spoke *English*, which though none of the kindest, yet gave I it such a sound, as to them who understood no further, might seeme *affectionate*, *humble*, and *hearty*; which so appeased them, as they made me sit, and eate together, and parted loving … (98).

Blount has only partial command of the appropriate speech acts and gestures required in a situation like this. He does not know either Ottoman Turkish or Arabic, so he decides to speak English. The words themselves are anything but friendly, but due to the tone in

---

Before 1700 (Cairo, 1997), pp. 43–6. I will discuss this aspect in more detail below.

which they are spoken, and supported by his submissive bodily acts, they are taken as speech acts expressing a greeting, thereby assuring the soldiers of Blount's peaceful intention and his (apparent) submission. This is furthered by Blount addressing the soldiers as 'sultanum', that is, attributing them a higher social status than they actually have, and performing gestures that for the Turks signify respect and friendship. Language in this encounter functions on different levels. The implications of the voice and the bodily performance of the speaker are not congruent with the semantic meaning of the words uttered. One could of course also argue that Blount's self-gratulatory account is meant to gloss over the fact that, due to his inability to speak Turkish, he can neither succeed in passing as a 'Turk' nor really communicate with the people and gather the information he is interested in.

According to his own narrative, Blount's improvisation is successful. He is even invited to eat with the *timariots*. The short reference to the shared meal is of crucial relevance here. Performances of eating carry symbolic significance in all cultures.[9] Hospitality is granted by offering food to strangers; social cohesion is celebrated in shared meals; and the specific norms of a culture as to who is to eat with whom, what, when and how establishes cultural identity and stabilizes social stratification. Early modern England showed a particular interest in food and table manners, as is corroborated by the publication of numerous medical, moral and religious dietary instructions, by the diversification of eating cultures based on social hierarchy and the differentiation between the self and the other on the basis of eating habits and food.[10] In

[9] See also Gerhard Neumann, '"Jede Nahrung ist ein Symbol": Umrisse einer Kulturwissenschaft des Essens', in Alois Wierlacher, Gerhard Neumann and Hans J. Teuteberg (eds), *Kulturthema Essen* (3 vols, Berlin, 1993–97), vol. 1: *Ansichten und Problemfelder* (1993), pp. 385–444.

[10] See *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 145 (2009), special issue, *Bühne und Bankett*. See also Chris Meads, *Banquets Set*

A Voyage into the Levant the *timariots*' invitation is both a sign of hospitality as well as a downplaying of cultural difference. It is a response to Blount's greeting, assuring him that they welcome him as their guest and – despite his act of submission – as their equal. In the context of Blount's project to collect information on the Ottoman Empire, the offer of food represents an invitation to enjoy a (metaphorical and metonymic) 'taste' of Turkish culture.

Mutual understanding is obviously not Blount's aim; he must even hope that the *timariots* do not understand English but are captivated by the manner in which he addresses them. Only Blount's readers get the dramatic irony and are made to understand the Turks' 'felicitous misunderstanding'. Blount explicitly identifies his behaviour as play-acting. He stresses the considerable discrepancy between his bodily performance, the intonation and the semantic meaning of his words. However, as much as he may have been eager to reassure his readers that, as an Englishman, he would never have submitted to the Turks, in actual fact, his text does not describe an imaginary subjugation of the Ottomans. In clear contrast to other travellers who would in retrospect relish the successful deception of the cultural 'other', Blount's report is free from any *Schadenfreude*. Instead the passage discursively (re)enacts the encounter for the instruction of future travellers who are implicitly asked to learn from Blount's example. In particular, they are invited to compare Blount's behaviour with that of a Ragusan merchant whose meeting with the very same soldiers, described in the following passage, takes a completely different turn:

> [P]resently after, they [the Turkish soldiers] met the *Caravan*, where was … a Merchant of quality, … he being clothed in the *Italian* fashion, and spruce, they justled him: He not yet

---

Forth: Banqueting in English Renaissance Drama (Manchester, 2001); and Joan Fitzpatrick, *Food in Shakespeare: Early Modern Dietaries and the Plays* (Aldershot, 2007).

> considering, how the place had changed his condition, stood upon his *termes*, till they with their Axes, and iron Maces (the weapons of that *Country*), broke two of his ribs, in which case, we left him behinde, halfe dead, either to get backe as he could, or be devoured of beasts … (98).

Rather than just recording a memorable occurrence during his journey to Constantinople, the episode turns into an *exemplum* contrasting two different forms of behaviour in a dangerous encounter between Western Christianity and the Ottomans. Whereas the merchant uncompromisingly displays his cultural background, flaunts his disrespect for Ottoman customs, and tries to usurp the *timariots*' right of place, Blount judges the situation correctly and shows the flexibility required to establish peaceful relations with the soldiers. Although due to his lack of linguistic competence he cannot wish to pass as a subject of the Empire, his turban just as his behaviour display his (alleged) allegiance, or even submission, to Ottoman rule. Violence and death on the one hand and the shared meal on the other show the alternative outcomes of cultural encounters in the East. Quite obviously, Blount's choice is presented as the one to be favoured by English diplomats and merchants in the Ottoman Empire. Interestingly, these two forms of behaviour are nationally differentiated and it might not be accidental that Blount has the merchant wear Italian clothes. The episode can be read as an implicit comment on the strained Anglo-Italian relations in the early modern age[11] and the English anxiety about the influx of Italian wares into England. With Italy constituting a severe competition for English trade in the Mediterranean and beyond, the passage represents an imaginary elimination of the economic competitor, here metonymically

[11] See also Ralf Hertel, '"Mine Italian brain 'gan in your duller Britain operate most vilely": *Cymbeline* and the Deconstruction of Anglo-Italian Differences', in Manfred Pfister and Ralf Hertel (eds), *Performing National Identity: Anglo-Italian Cultural Transactions* (Amsterdam, 2008), pp. 45–62.

evoked through the clothes of the unwise merchant. In its reiteration of early modern English stereotypes of Italianness, which was associated with materialistic greed and moral corruption, Blount's travelogue implicitly 'performs' English national identity.[12]

Actually, Blount was not the first Englishman to recommend 'Turkish dress' while travelling in the Ottoman Empire. Around 1600, other travellers before him had elaborated on the colour symbolism of the turban, explaining that white turbans were restricted to Muslims and green turbans to the descendants of the Prophet. Matar summarizes that 'dressing like a "native" helped them in reducing the hostility to the "Frank" that was endemic in the Levant. Wearing a turban among the Muslims was a necessary expedient …'[13] However, in contrast to travel writers such as William Biddulph or George Sandys, Blount does not mention the turban explicitly. If, according to Nabil Matar, early modern England increasingly tended to regard the turban as a symbol of Islam and donning a turban was associated with a conversion ceremony,[14] Blount's eschewing direct reference to the turban might suggest an uneasiness about the implications of his cultural cross-dressing for an English readership.

Various anecdotes show Blount's successful negotiations abroad and describe in detail the hospitality he enjoys. In Cairo, for example, where he is welcomed by a

---

[12] See Manfred Pfister, 'Introduction: Performing National Identity', in Pfister and Hertel (eds), *Performing National Identity*, p. 10.

[13] See Matar, 'Renaissance England and the Turban', pp. 44–5, here p. 44.

[14] Matar, 'Renaissance England and the Turban', p. 49. This is clearly the case in the dumb show (Scene 8) of Robert Daborne's *A Christian Turned Turk* (1612), in which the pirate Ward converts to the Muslim faith. As signifiers of his new identity, he 'puts on his turban and robe, [and] girds his sword' (Robert Daborne, *A Christian Turned Turk*, in Daniel J. Vitkus (ed.), *Three Turk Plays from Early Modern England* (New York, 2000), p. 198). On the turban as a material object signifying Islam on the early modern English stage see Matthew Dimmock's 'Materialising Islam on the Early Modern English Stage', chapter 7 of this volume.

'Lord' in his palace, he imitates the demeanour he observes in others and is consequently treated like a prince:

> [E]ntering one of these Roomes, I saw at the upper end, amongst others sitting crosse-legg'd the *Lord* of the *Palace*, who beckoning to me to come, I first put off my Shoes as the rest had done; then bowing often, with my hand upon my breast, came neere, where he making me sit downe, there attended ten or twelve handsome young *Pages* all clad in *Scarlet*, with crooked *Daggers*, and *Scymitars* richly gilt; foure of them came with a sheete of *Taffaty*, and covered me; another held a golden *Incense* with rich *perfume*, wherewith being a little *smoked* tooke all away; next came two with sweet *water*, and *besprinkled* me; after that, one brought a *Porcelane* dish of *Cauphe*, which when I had dranke, another served up a draught of excellent *Sherbet*: Then began discourse, which passed by *interpreter*, by reason of my *ignorance* in the *Arabicke* there spoken … (42).

Once again, the account stresses the reward for appropriate behaviour abroad and reduplicates it, as in a stage performance, for the 'greedy eyes' of its readers. In an almost ekphrastic passage, which abounds with references to the allure of Eastern material culture, readers are 'made to see' the immense riches of the East: gold, valuable arms, rich cloth, elegant tableware and excellent drink. In addition to these promises for future trade relations, the text offers a more immediate, though immaterial remuneration: knowledge about the Egyptians, whom Blount describes as having 'a touch of the *Merchant*, or *Iew*, with a spirit not so *Souldier-like*, and open, as the *Turkes*, but more *discerning*, and *pertinent* …' (42). Further information is added on their excellent horses, their cities, the pyramids and Biblical places.

II. 'Renaissance Self-Fashioning' and Early Modern Encounters in the East

Postcolonial studies have drawn attention to the power structures and the economy of desire in which cultural transvestism is embedded. Inge Boer argues that '[c]ultural cross-dressing … refers to the *as if* situation of fantasy, dreams, and fiction where

everything is possible',[15] i.e. where it is possible to transgress cultural differences and boundaries. Yet Blount's cross-dressing differs considerably from the eighteenth-century fashion of the *turqueries* where the question 'Who is playing around with cultural roles and who exactly is being played *with*?'[16] is crucial. As I have argued above, the power relation that motivates Blount's cross-dressing is not that of Orientalism, and his cross-dressing is no masquerade. In the course of his journey he comes to understand that he is treated with aggression whenever he travels *not* according to Ottoman fashion but in Western European dress:

> [I]f I appeared in the least part clothed like a *Christian,*[17] I was tufted like an Owle among other birds: at first I imputed it to *Barbarisme*; but afterward lamenting thereof to one of the better sort, to note how they understood it; hee told me, they would have no *novelties*, and therefore would disgrace all new *examples*; then I perceived it to bee a peece rather of *Institution*, then *Incivilitie*; for they desiring perpetuall *hostility* with the *Christians*, must estrange the People from their *Customes* as utterly as may be … (99).

The stereotypical assumption that 'Turkish' impoliteness is proof of their barbarism turns out to be wrong. Instead Blount discusses the cultural and religious reasons of this behaviour and acknowledges the close connection between costume and custom. In Blount's Eastern encounters, just as in later examples of cultural transvestism, cross-dressing is 'not reversible'.[18] However, the reason is less the asymmetry that will govern European Orientalism from the eighteenth century onwards, but rather the fact

---

[15] Inge Boer, 'Just a Fashion? Cultural Cross-Dressing', in Inge Boer, *Uncertain Territories: Boundaries in Cultural Analysis*, ed. Mieke Bal, Bregje van Eekelen and Patricia Spyer (Amsterdam, 2006), p. 138.

[16] Boer, 'Just a Fashion?', p. 152.

[17] Although Blount is clearly aware of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious population of the Ottoman Empire, he repeatedly conflates 'Ottoman' and 'Turkish' with 'Islamic' and 'Western European' with 'Christian'.

[18] Boer, 'Just a Fashion?', p. 162.

that outlandish costume is prohibited for subjects of the Ottoman Empire.[19]

This rejection of outlandish dress, which Blount observes in the Ottoman Empire, mirrors the dominant attitude on the issue in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The popular genre of the costume book gives evidence of the extent to which in sixteenth-century Europe, 'national', social and gender identities were associated with respective traditional costume.[20] Since the fourteenth century, in England, as well as in many other European countries, sumptuary laws had been enacted that sought to secure social differentiation through the regulation of consumption, chiefly in the field of apparel. The debate reached a new climax in the course of the sixteenth century with Elizabethan sumptuary legislation, which was also a reaction to the growing influx of Eastern goods – spices, pigments, drugs, china and particularly textiles – into England. As early modern English portraiture shows,[21] Turkish carpets and 'outlandish' fashion functioned as powerful status symbols, and the same is true of Italian fashion as worn by the unlucky Ragusan merchant in the anecdote discussed above. However, with the expansion of international trade, the voices warning against foreign influences and propagating an imaginary construct of unchanging Englishness became louder. Authors of pamphlets, sermons and satires stressed that '[f]oreign fabrics on English bodies were not only an affront to the cloth industry but also blurred the line between English and foreign'.[22] In the first years of the seventeenth century the controversy quickly died

[19] Cf. Matar, 'Renaissance England and the Turban', p. 46.

[20] See for example Ulrike Ilg, 'The Cultural Significance of Costume Books in Sixteenth-Century Europe', in Catherine Richardson (ed.), *Clothing Culture, 1350–1650* (Aldershot, 2004), pp. 29–47.

[21] See Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, 'Composing the Subject: Making Portraits', in Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass (eds), *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 34–58.

[22] Roze Hentschell, 'Treasonous Textiles: Foreign Cloth and the Construction of Englishness', *Journal of Medieval*

down and Elizabeth's sumptuary laws were repealed by James I. Although the passionate rejection of cloth and clothes from abroad was thus already history by the time Blount travelled through the Ottoman Empire, he generally seems to agree with earlier critics of foreign fashion when he stresses: 'Now there is no innovation drawes in forreine manners faster, then that of *Apparell*' (99). Actually, his hesitancy to mention the turban, which I have discussed above, may be read as an expression of the very same fear of the foreign. He attributes a leading role in Eastern fashion to the Sultan's court, which he sees as comparable to the French,[23] while at the same time conceding that there is no real awareness of fashion in the Ottoman Empire, since 'they to this day vary but little from that long, and loose manner of garment reported to have been ever used in the *East*' (100). Implicitly identifying the craze for fanciful clothes as an exclusively Western European phenomenon, Blount does not interpret the lack of fashion in the Islamic East as an indicator of the Ottomans' cultural 'backwardness'. On the contrary, he even seems to sympathize with Eastern sumptuary rules.

Throughout his text, Blount shows a surprising ability to adopt the perspective of cultural 'others' and to empathize with their point of view. *A Voyage into the Levant* is introduced with a programmatic statement on cultural relativism: 'it seems naturall, that to our *North-West* parts of the World, no people should be more averse, and strange of behaviour, then those of the *South-East*' (1–2). Blount claims to have embarked on his journey in order to collect first-hand information on the Ottoman Empire, '(to wit) whether to an unpartiall conceit, the *Turkish* way appeare absolutely barbarous, as we are given to understand, *or rather an other kinde of civilitie*, different from ours, but no

---

and Early Modern Studies, 32.3 (2002): p. 545.

[23] Blount writes: 'for as the *French Court* gives this side of the world patterne of apparell, so does the *Turkish* to the *Levant*' (100).

lesse pretending …' (2; emphasis added). He stresses that it is essential not to judge other cultures by one's own standards: 'for the just censure of things is to be drawn from their *end* whereto they are aymed, without requiring them to our costumes, and ordinances, or other impertinent respects, which they acknowledge not for their touch-stone' (4).

Jonathan Haynes has argued that Henry Blount's strategic performance comes very close to what Greenblatt has termed 'Renaissance self-fashioning'.[24] In his seminal monograph of the same title, Greenblatt takes his departure from Jacob Burckhardt's notion of 'Renaissance Man', but, deviating from Burckhardt, he stresses the social constraints of early modern self-fashioning. Emerging as the product of a new insight into the malleability of individual identities, early modern self-fashioning was a practice of (mainly discursive) self-representation where the individual positioned him- or herself between an absolute authority (such as the church, the monarch or God) and 'something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile'. It was a reaction to 'an absolute power', but in its 'ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario',[25] it simultaneously came close to a Machiavellian 'improvisation of power'. In Greenblatt's reading of Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago is discussed as the prototypical example of narrative self-fashioning. His 'I am not what I am' becomes 'the motto of the improviser, the manipulator of signs that bear no resemblance to what they profess to signify'.[26]

Haynes agrees with Greenblatt 'that this ability to come to an intellectual understanding of another symbol system in order to manipulate it is an accomplishment

[24] Haynes, 'Two Seventeenth Century Perspectives on the Middle East', pp. 18–19.

[25] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, pp. 8–9, 227.

[26] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 238.

of the Renaissance'. He adds that this is 'a skill Blount has in abundance, and it goes along with his love of disguise and his Odyssean aptitude for making up stories about who he is'.[27] There are indeed close parallels between Blount and Iago. As I have argued above, Blount's signs – his speech acts as well as his gestures – also 'bear no resemblance to what they profess to signify'. The epithet 'I am not what I am' aptly describes Blount's habit of adapting to Ottoman sartorial customs and travelling in 'Turkish dress'. Blount's empathy for the position of the other even seems to make him an early modern representative of what Greenblatt, with reference to the US-American sociologist and specialist for psychological warfare Daniel Lerner, describes as Western 'mobile sensibility'. In the last chapter of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt quotes from Lerner's influential study *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958) in which he discusses what he sees as the particularly Western ability to adapt to unforeseen changes and to empathize with others. Lerner, Greenblatt summarizes,

> devised a set of questions that he and his assistants put to a cross-section of the inhabitants of the Middle East, to porters and cobblers, as well as grocers and physicians. The questions began, 'If you were made editor of a newspaper, what kind of paper would you run?' and I confess myself in complete sympathy with that class of respondents who like one shepherd interviewed in a village near Ankara, gasped: 'My God, how can you say such a thing? A poor villager … master of the whole world' … Professor Lerner invariably interprets such answers as indicative of a constructive personality incapable of empathy …[28]

Greenblatt duly distances himself from Lerner and stresses that this 'empathy' is not a magnanimous act of imaginary self-denial and 'sympathetic appreciation of the situation

[27] Haynes, 'Two Seventeenth Century Perspectives on the Middle East', pp. 18–19.

[28] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 225.

of the other',[29] but rather an expression of Western power that can be both creative and destructive at the same time. Yet he adopts Lerner's general concept in order to explore the function of this 'mobile sensibility' in early modern cultural encounters.

Interestingly, the last chapter in Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* repeatedly refers to the East – yet without fully acknowledging this 'orient-ation'. Greenblatt introduces his discussion of Shakespeare's *Othello* by a short comment on the textual parallels between the mythological King Arthur in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and the Scythian shepherd and later emperor Tamburlaine in Christopher Marlowe's play.[30] This uncanny link between Eastern and Western monarchs, *Othello*'s Eastern setting as well as its protagonist's hovering between Christian Europe and the Ottoman Empire are all examples of the intricate connection between strategic improvisation and cultural encounters in the East. Even Iago is 'orientalised' in Shakespeare's tragedy. When Desdemona reproaches him of slander, Iago replies, 'Nay, it is true, or else I am a Turk.' (2.1.117)[31] But despite these significant overlaps between self-fashioning and cultural liminality (in the East), Greenblatt follows Lerner in identifying the power of improvisation as explicitly Western – without taking any Eastern influences into account. Instead Greenblatt suggests parallels between the specific forms of self-fashioning in Marlowe's and Shakespeare's plays and the conquest of the New World, as discussed in a short episode from Pietro Martire d'Anghiera's *De orbe novo* (1525). Here the Spanish historian narrates how in the early phase of colonization the Spaniards, who needed slaves for their goldmines, made use

[29] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 227.

[30] Greenblatt asks: 'What if Arthur and Tamburlaine are not separate and opposed? What if they are two faces of the same thing, embodiment of the identical power?' (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 224).

[31] William Shakespeare, *Othello*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York, 1997).

of native American religious creed, in particular the belief that their dead would go to an island in the south where they would live in eternal bliss. Promising to reunite the native Americans with their deceased family members, the Spaniards successfully convinced them to leave their homes and to be taken away on Spanish ships. Their improvisation of power, Greenblatt concludes, was based on two specific operations: the 'displacement and absorption'[32] of the other culture through the Europeans' strategic behaviour.

Although I do not intend to question Greenblatt's general discussion of early modern colonial enterprises, his argument needs to be qualified. First, it seems to agree with Lerner's assumption of an ontological difference between a mobile (Western) Europe and a static rest of the world not able to cope with the European form of improvised power. Greenblatt secondly overlooks the considerable differences between the conquest of the New World and the complex diplomatic and economic relations between Europe, or, in this case, England, and the empires in the East. In the East, the improvisation of English travellers and merchants was rarely a form of seizing power but rather a coming-to-terms with England's *lack* of economic, political and military influence.

To put it succinctly, Lerner's model of a 'mobile sensibility' is inappropriate for the description of Western European encounters with the Islamic East. Although on the surface Blount's account seems to give evidence of a binary opposition between a mobile Europe (represented by himself) and a static 'Orient', the *textual* nature of his 'strategic empathy' and his characterization of the Ottoman Empire must not be ignored. If there is a link between Lerner and Blount at all, it consists in their shared

[32] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 230.

agenda to *discursively* self-fashion England or the West as mobile. But despite these (superficial) parallels there are considerable historical differences between the early seventeenth and the late twentieth centuries, which have been stressed by Richmond Barbour in *Before Orientalism*: 'pre-Enlightenment "orientalisms" expressed material, political, and discursive relations profoundly different from those Said finds typical of modernity'.[33] As much as Blount's flexibility and improvisation may thus resemble Lerner's 'mobile sensibility', his strategic empathy is *not* a privileged Western subjectivity that was developed in a Burckhardtian (Italian) Renaissance and could be employed for the colonial projects of the European powers. It is rather a *response* to, and an effect of, cultural encounters (particularly) in the East. Blount's self-fashioning results from his situation of powerlessness, the permanent threats English travellers were facing in the Ottoman Empire and England's fervent fascination with the power and wealth of the 'Turks'.

III. 'Playing the Turk' versus 'Turning Turk'

Despite England's 'imperial envy' for the Ottoman Empire in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, strategic empathy with the Ottomans could come dangerously close to emulating the other. 'Turning Turk' was both a social reality as well as a central topos of the early modern English imagination.[34] It can be assumed that several thousands of Englishmen converted to Islam between 1580 and 1630, among them many seamen who had been captured by North African pirates and who hoped to avoid a life in slavery if they renounced Christianity. A considerable number of merchants, soldiers and seamen converted however of their own will in order to

[33] Richmond Barbour, *Before Orientalism: London's Theatre of the East, 1576–1626* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 3.

[34] See Matar, *Islam in Britain*; and Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theatre and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630* (New York, 2003).

profit from the opportunities for social mobility in the Ottoman Empire. Blount stresses that among the converts he met during his journey 'there was none taken either with that [the Muslim idea of paradise] or other points of their doctrine, but manifestly with respects worldly' (133). The act of conversion itself was simple, and as nobody was forced to convert, the apostates were severely criticized by their contemporaries. In 1622 one John Rawlings writes that the converts 'never knew any god but their own lusts and pleasures'.[35]

By including lengthy passages on converts living in the Ottoman Empire (132–3), Blount implicitly differentiates between his own cross-dressing and the apostates' adoption of the other culture, repeatedly stressing that despite his 'Turkish dress', he was recognizable as a Christian because he was not wearing the white turban of the Muslim population. Although he remarks that he has 'wonne much courtesie from them [the apostates], and upon occasion, put my life at one of their discretions, and found him Noble', he adds that most of them are 'Atheists, who left our cause for the *Turkish* as the more thriving in the World, and fuller of preferment' (132). An unqualified fascination with apostasy might have been dangerous in early modern England, which would not have supported Lerner's celebration of strategic cultural empathy. 'Transcultural' self-fashioning was *not* seen as an asset but rather a considerable danger in intercultural encounters where the dividing lines between role and identity, self and other, easily became blurred. Blount's 'playing the Turk' (and donning the turban) is under constant threat of gradually giving way to his 'turning Turk'. Both are based on performance, on the adoption of another culture's 'fashions' and, by implication, of its

[35] Quoted in Nabil Matar, 'The Renegade in English Seventeenth-Century Imagination', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 33.3 (1993): p. 491.

cultural and/or religious practices.

Religious rites were of crucial interest to early modern travellers because they marked the difference between believers and non-believers, Christians and heathens. In Anglo-Ottoman encounters, however, the situation was more complex. The binary opposition between Christians and 'heathens' had been broken up with the Reformation.[36] So on the one hand, English Protestants in the Ottoman Empire were outsiders in a multi-ethnic society under Islamic rule, which granted religious tolerance towards the diverse creeds and ethnicities it had brought together: Judaism, Roman Catholicism and the Orthodox Church.[37] On the other hand, the Reformation and England's relative isolation in Europe led to new, albeit short-lived coalitions between Protestants and Muslims who shared their rejection of Roman Catholic 'idolatry'. As England's diplomatic and economic contacts with the Ottoman Empire expanded, the young Protestant nation thus found itself in a problematic allegiance with the traditional enemy of Christianity but, by the same token, had a new possible ally against Catholic Spain. Yet this did not mitigate the strong fear that English travellers, merchants and sailors might convert to Islam. Apostasy, implying both religious and political treachery, was identified as a disturbing phenomenon accompanying international trade relations.

Cultural self-fashioning in the East thus posed similar problems as those that were discussed in the controversies between Protestants and Catholics. After the Reformation the relations between external form and inner conviction, between faith

[36] See for example Matthew Dimmock, *New Turkes: Dramatizing Islam and the Ottomans in Early Modern England* (Aldershot, 2005) for a detailed discussion of the function and reinterpretation of 'the Turks' in the religious debates of the English Reformation.

[37] Cf. Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, p. 35.

and ritual, religion and theatre were at the centre of confessional controversies. The liturgy, cults surrounding burial and death, attendance of mass, as well as forms of prayer, were all crucial for an individual's religious identity. Contemporaries were not altogether certain whether the specific rites were merely the outer expression of religious belief or whether they constituted that belief in the first place.[38] Tobias Döring stresses that despite Protestant polemics against the pomp and theatricality of the Catholic mass, 'worshippers in the reformed church were as much engaged in performance as their opponents'.[39] With regard to converts, the relationship between religious performance and its success (or parody) was always at stake. What thus becomes apparent in the controversies between Protestants and Catholics, Anglicans and Puritans on the one hand and between Protestants and Muslims on the other, is an idea of the performative character of all religions and the proximity between religious rite and the theatre.

In Egypt Blount finds a model which allows him to talk about the function of religion in general. In his account he deplores that much of the knowledge of pre-Islamic Egypt has been irretrievably lost through the invasion of the Mamluks and the Ottomans. This loss was aggravated by the fact, Blount adds, that Egyptian religious tradition was not written down in a holy book in order to prevent '*Heresies*, as appeares

[38] On Protestant anti-theatrical ideology and the changes in religious ceremonies and secular rituals after the Reformation see Louis Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Chicago, 1996); Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1997); Michael O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theater in Early Modern England* (New York, Oxford, 2000); and Jeffrey Knapp, *Shakespeare's Tribe: Church, Nation, and Theater in Renaissance England* (Chicago, London, 2002).

[39] Tobias Döring, *Performances of Mourning in Shakespearean Theatre and Early Modern Culture* (Basingstoke, 2006), p. 18.

in the *Alcoran* and *Talmud*' (50).[40] In the following passage, although purportedly referring to Egyptian beliefs, Blount comments on the social function of religious ritual in general:

> [T]he *institutions* of their *Religions* were addrest, not to the *wise*, who are so few, … but to the *multitude*, which are passionate, not *judicious*: wherefore they were not put into a *rationall* way of discourse, which had served them to the *understanding*; but rather acted in such manner, as might moove the Senses, thereby raising such passions as were to the advantage of their *Religion*; Hence came the *perfumes*, and daintie *Musique* in their *Temples*; the *fantastique* vestment of their *Priests*; their solemne *Sacrifices*, *Pictures*, *Statues*, and *Processions*; which in new *superstitions*, were altred, with contempt of the former; yet in the maine point they all agreed; that was to ammuse, and entertaine the *imaginative* part of the minde, befooling the *Intellectuall*; so the *Ceremonies* renewed not alwayes utterly different, nor the same; but following the *State reasons*, and *popular Gust* … (50).

What purports to be a passage about Eastern superstition will have rung a familiar note with the contemporary English reader. The deprecating description of Egyptian religious rites comes very close to the standard Protestant view of Roman Catholicism. Yet the comment on religious change and the adjustment of rites to political calculus, the understanding that a new set of beliefs does not necessarily involve a complete rejection of old religious practices, and that religion is mainly addressed to the affects and not the intellect, could very easily also have been read as a dangerous (Machiavellian) comment on the Reformation and religion in general.

In this context, Blount's excursions on apostasy appear as textual strategies

[40] His reference to the Talmud attests to his – for the time – considerable knowledge of early modern Judaism acquired during his extensive contacts with Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire, which he discusses in detail towards the end of his travelogue (Blount, *A Voyage into the Levant*, pp. 207–24).

through which he performs his Protestant identity as a creed that cannot be affected by the many lucrative offers he receives from Muslim rulers during his journey. At the beginning of his journey, Murad Pasha offers him rich reward if he joins him in his war against Poland. When he is asked whether it would be lawful for an Englishman to join the Ottoman forces against a Christian nation, Blount faces a double bind. On the one hand, he must not give in to the proposal, but on the other, his mission as well as his personal safety demand that he declares himself a friend of the Ottomans. His response, which deserves to be quoted in full, is an ingenious solution to this predicament:

> I humbly thanked him, for his favour, and told him that to an *Englishman* it was lawfull to serve under any who were in League with our *King*, and that our *King* had not only a League with the *Gran Signior*, but continually held an *Embaßadour* at his Court, esteeming him the greatest *Monarch* in the *World*: so that my Service there, especially if I behaved myselfe not unworthy of my *Nation*, would be exceedingly well received in *England*; and the *Polacke*, though in name a *Christian*, yet of a *Sect*, which for *Idolatry*, and many other points, we much abhorred; wherefore the *English* had of late, helpt the *Muscovite* against him, and would be forwarder under the Turkes, whom we not only honored for their glorious actions in the world; but also loved, for the kind of *Commerce* of *Trade* which we finde amongst them: But as for my present engagement to the warre, with much sorrow, I acknowledged my incapacitie, by reason I wanted *language*; which would not only render me uncapable of *Commands*, and so *unserviceable*, but also endanger me in *tumults*, where I appearing a Stranger, and not able to expresse my affection, might be mistaken and used accordingly; wherefore I humbly entreated his Highnesse leave to follow my poore affaires, with an eternall *oblige* to *Blazon* this honourable favour wheresoever I came … (15–16).

Blount's speech act has two addressees: the Pasha and the English reader (perhaps even the king). The travelogue is a textual 're-staging' of the 'original' communication in which Blount, as he remarks, spoke Italian, which was then translated by an interpreter. So while expressing his admiration for the Ottoman military power and his

preparedness to serve under the Ottoman Sultan whom he tactically calls the 'greatest Monarch of the World', he at the same time stresses that he would not be able to carry out the Sultan's commands and that English interests lie elsewhere, namely in the lucrative trade relations in the Levant. Similar to the encounter with the soldiers discussed above, Blount's reaction includes a strategic performance of humility, the pronounced expression of admiration and deference, and – in this case – the promise of letting others know of the Pasha's 'generous' offer. By identifying Poland as a common enemy, he constructs himself as a potential ally for the Turks and, simultaneously, a good Protestant who rejects Catholic idolatry. His reference to their shared aversion to idolatry echoes Elizabeth's attempts in the last decades of the sixteenth century to establish a military alliance with the Turks against Spain, in which she also stressed their mutual rejection of Catholicism.[41] Blount now puts this plan into the mouth of a representative of the Ottomans, thus convincing his English readers of the Turks' strong interest in relations with England.

IV. Textual Performances of Cultural Encounters

A Voyage into the Levant reiterates similar scenes of encounter in which, due to his strategic performance, Blount is able not only to save his life and avoid enslavement, but also to 'win over' his Ottoman counterparts. I have argued that in doing so the text does not merely *record* cultural performance in Anglo-Ottoman contacts, it is performative itself in that it plays out alternative forms of behaviour in cultural encounters and invites its readers to adopt Blount's 'strategic empathy'. At a time when England was still dreaming of an empire comparable to the Ottomans' and the Sultan was clearly less eager to establish and expand economic, political and diplomatic

[41] See Jonathan Burton, *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579–1624* (Newark, 2005), p. 64.

connections than the English monarchs, Blount compensates for this lack by showing his English readers how to deal with the Turks by discursively forming alliances with them.

Blount's travelogue found many enthusiastic readers, among them Bishop Henry King, who eulogized him in his poem 'To my Noble and Judicious Friend Sir Henry Blount upon his Voyage',[42] first published in his *Poems, Elegies, Paradoxes, and Sonnets* (1657). King admits to having a strong desire to travel abroad without ever having managed to leave England. For this reason he has become an avid reader of travel literature because it takes him on imaginary journeys 'through Ægypt in a day, / Not hinder'd by the droughts of Lybia'. As an 'armchair traveller' King can study meticulously and safely foreign 'Peoples Manners and their Rites', their religion, 'Their habit, and their houses'; 'Their frequent washings', 'What honour they unto the Mufty give / What to the Soveraign under whom they live: / What quarter Christians have …'. For him, Blount's travelogue (re)creates the Ottoman world in perfect detail:

> By your eyes
> I here have made my full discoveries;
> And all your Countreys so exactly seen,
> As in the voyage I had sharer been.[43]

King's poem, which reiterates Blount's encounters with the Ottomans, testifies to the performative power of Blount's travelogue. Together they form part of a long European tradition that endlessly reproduced an imaginary 'Orient' for the reader at home.

---

[42] Henry King, 'To my Noble and Judicious Friend Sir Henry Blount upon his Voyage', in *Poems, Elegies, Paradoxes, and Sonnets* (London, 1657), pp. 111–17.

[43] King, 'To my Noble and Judicious Friend', pp. 112, 114, 115, 115–16.