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Diplomacy, Grotesque Realism and Ottoman Historiography

Costas M. Constantinou, *University of Cyprus*



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Diplomacy, grotesque realism, and Ottoman historiography

COSTAS M. CONSTANTINOU

I

In Chapter III of her mock-biography *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf comes to narrate in some detail the grotesque character of diplomacy.¹ Orlando, we are informed, being appointed by King Charles as Ambassador Extraordinary to Constantinople, engaged in the most delicate negotiations with the Sublime Porte and received a Dukedom for invaluable services to his country. Notwithstanding these successes, or probably because of them, Woolf's satiric account of his daily work exposes that inescapable comic dimension of a reverential profession, the funny intricacies of Ottoman protocol, and in the end, significantly, diplomacy itself as an absurd performance. It merits exploration if only for the provocation it levies to the conventional (Western) vision of diplomacy as the rational and fully representational dialogue between sovereign states. It also deserves attention for its implicit challenge to putatively neutral but in practice hegemonic attempts to theorise diplomacy in strict scientific language and tectonic style. For, under the pretext of science, such theoretical ventures generally seek to sedate rather than laugh at diplomacy, pursue 'the real' firmly and methodically rather than come upon it contingently—precariously limiting theory to the solemnity of epistemic rites and pious contemplations—wrongly assuming that we cannot parody, anecdotise, and theorise at the same time.

Woolf describes ambassadorial life in the Ottoman capital as masterly planned and routinely practised. Orlando would rise at around seven in the morning and for an hour divide his time bathing, enjoying the city panorama, and projecting himself in fantastic Oriental episodes. Afterwards, 'properly scented, curled, and anointed' he would receive his 'red boxes' which opened only to 'his own golden key.' Orlando would read his secret papers and prepare others, 'kept busy, what with his wax and seals, his various coloured ribbons which had to be diversely attached, his engrossing of titles and making of flourishes round capital letters, till luncheon—a splendid meal of perhaps thirty courses'. After luncheon he would enter his coach to visit other ambassadors and imperial officials, escorted 'by purple janissaries running on foot and waving great ostrich feather fans above their heads'. At this event, there were strict ceremonial rules that had to be followed without deviation. Woolf collapses all meetings with Ottoman officials to one single scene, repeated several times over each afternoon, a scene

Costas M. Constantinou is Senior Lecturer in the School of Politics, International Relations and the Environment, Keele University, UK.

which involved a grand entrance into a courtyard of some prestigious edifice followed by entrances and exits from one chamber to another. In the first chamber only the weather was mentioned; in the next only a comparison between London and Istanbul was made; in the next only the healths of the Sultan and the English King were discussed; in the next, compliments were exchanged on the host's furniture and the ambassador's attire; in the next food dishes were served; in the last chamber, there was a simulation of smoking a hookah and drinking coffee ('there was neither tobacco in the pipe nor coffee in the glass as ... the human frame would have sunk beneath the surfeit'). The 'biographer' informs us that Orlando was generally tired by this ambassadorial routine 'though [he] performed these tasks with admiration and never denied that they are, perhaps, the most important part of a diplomat's duties'. But, in the end, it was not in court and only to his dogs that Orlando managed to talk 'in his own tongue'. Soon the ambassador started behaving in a manner incompatible to his diplomatic profession. He mixed with natives in bazaars, joined Mosques, chanted hymns and recited poetry in the nearby hills, got married to a dancer of unknown ancestry and dubious morality ... and, finally, as a climax to this whole affair his sex mysteriously changed: yes, he became a woman and amidst the surrounding anarchy she left Istanbul on a donkey and joined the gypsies.

This literary image of diplomacy in the Ottoman Empire may appear historically incredible. But that is only within an understanding of history exclusively concerned with credible knowledge, with accrediting norms, with the accumulation of data that discover 'reality' behind the text, not considering in other words the fictive capability of historiography, the view of history as imaginative explanation and narrative.² Woolf's story may not have the benefit of being found in the Ottoman archives, recently opened to Ottomanist scholarship, but after all this same scholarship is nowadays not immune to the narratological approach to history. As Cemal Kafadar suggests in his study of Ottoman historiography: 'Turning the tables around, historians now indulge in the application of literary criticisms or narratological analysis to archival documents, to even such dry cases as census registers, which have been seen as hardly more than data banks in previous history-writing'.³ Such narrativisation of history has some important implications. It works to recontextualise events read as accessible reality, to retrieve the silences hidden in official hagiography, to reinvent practices viewed as given experience, and to reimagine visions fixed to grand and dominant narrative.

Woolf's fantastic narration may also appear an episodic monad, being a nomadisation of thought about diplomacy which leads to hyperbolic arithmetisation of ritual and possibility. But an exception it can only be if one supposes that the sovereign standard of knowing should be imperial or sedentary thinking, that is thinking which assumes the role of a colonial map-maker, confidently marking the conquered diplomatic terrain from an epistemic metropolis and geometricising it into theorems.⁴ Harold Nicolson, for example, could be seen as a classic representative of this type, drawing and measuring the cartography of diplomacy throughout the ages, showing 'in simple but precise forms, what diplomacy is, and what it is not'.⁵ Martin Wight criticises Nicolson precisely on this point, i.e.,

for assuming that ‘his’ diplomacy ‘is the only form of diplomacy (just as one might talk of “civilization” rather than civilizations.)’⁶ Whereas imperial thinking reigns from hierarchical centres and walls of exclusion, nomadic thinking rejects settling within fixed boundaries or dwelling in enclosed and static constructions.

Woolf’s grotesque image of diplomacy is possible and comprehensible because her writing is borderless. It subverts and reformulates the known by crossing the boundaries of ideal form. Her encounter is both anti-imperial and post-colonial. During a dinner conversation, a few months before the publication of *Orlando*, Nicolson ventured to explain to Woolf how ‘our English genius ... for government’ legitimised the Empire and colonial expansion: ‘We do our job: disinterestedly; we don’t think of ourselves, as the French do, as the Germans do ...’⁷ Woolf recorded in her diary her response to him: ‘Why not grow, change? Can’t you see that nationality is over? All divisions are now rubbed out, or about to be’.⁸ Perhaps too optimistic, but no wonder her literary ambassador left a historic capital, ashamed of the stigma of nationhood, and joined the gypsies to rove around the world, to ponder upon the world. There was indeed a time when journeying was enough for one to be literally in *theoria*, to engage in theory, and even to be practising diplomacy.⁹

II

How is one to engage in surveying the historical landscape of diplomacy? How far should the epistemic yardsticks of geometrical space be adopted as diplomatic norms or proven theorems? What is the colonial package they carry with them in disclosing the ‘real world’ of diplomacy rather than narrative equation? Taking a more specific and closer look at the imperial encounter as opened up by Woolf’s transgressive example in Istanbul: how to approach a scholarly plan, such as Hurewitz’s legitimate call for further research into the much neglected subject of Ottoman diplomacy, with the stated objective to ‘seek to determine its techniques and its rationale and try to differentiate between those features that are primarily Muslim or Ottoman and those that are universal?’¹⁰ What must we presuppose or risk if we are to follow in all good faith such research programme?

Must we infer, *firstly*, that assuming they can be distilled, those features which are not Muslim or Ottoman axiomatically constitute universals? One may readily admit that there are principles of diplomacy, either codified in the Vienna Treaty on Diplomatic Relations (1961) or as part of customary international law, that currently enjoy general universal application. But this is a long way and should be distinguished from taking such principles as universal *per se*. In other words, shouldn’t the way they got universalised and became dominant matter in historical investigation? Here one can refer to a variety of practices, ranging from the way Western powers forced permanent legations and continuous diplomacy on the Chinese Emperor to the assumption of territorial sovereignty and the capacity to represent it internationally as an ‘objective’ condition for decolonisation and self-determination. With regard to the latter, European powers denied in their imperial adventures that colonised peoples belonged, or

had the capacity to enter their society of states, but subsequently during decolonisation required adherence to the principles of that very 'international' society. This is neither to deny the functional work of international law or diplomatic immunity nowadays, nor is it to acquit Ottoman imperialism for its own violent imposition of law, such as the sending of the infamous palace gardeners, the *bostancis*, as emissaries of death (still, Ottoman principles are not presented as universals today, they are not much known, as Hurewitz says). The point is rather that such universal principles, like all universals, are not legal givens but are products of normalisation. They are not neutral and should not be taken for granted. They can be employed as a cover for the exercise of power. They have been used in the past as a means of fixing a specific understanding of 'diplomatic relation' which conveniently excluded the encounter with natives, downgrading the status of treaties signed with them, and so in effect employed as a rationalisation for assuming control over their polities and lives. Specifically in the Ottoman case, as clearly stated by another author, 'a new era of Ottoman diplomacy' came about, *inter alia*, in the 'imposition of European diplomatic concepts and practices'.¹¹ Such 'universal' principles as extraterritoriality were adopted by the Sublime Porte not because it was convinced of their universality or technical necessity, but rather as a result of treaties of capitulation with European powers.

Don't we need to consider, *secondly*, the extent to which the European-turned-universal principles we may adopt for testing Ottoman diplomacy have been influenced by Christian cosmology and theological concerns? Specifically I refer here to the idea of continuous diplomacy or resident embassy that is commonly considered as an essential principle, the distinctive mark of modern diplomacy impressed as the innovation of Renaissance Italy and necessitated for the more efficient regulation of relations between states. Or, as Hurewitz puts it, 'a concrete response to a concrete need' that the Ottoman dynasts only belatedly realised they needed.¹² Ottoman diplomacy is distinguished from the more 'developed' European practice, for being reluctant to send resident missions abroad until the very late eighteenth century, non-reciprocating the foreign resident missions accepted in Istanbul, thus ideologically attached to images of false grandeur and employing 'the most elementary principles' that 'classical Islam' offered for dealing with non-Muslims.¹³ (Hurewitz's argument is that the Ottoman rulers could have demanded reciprocation from the very beginning leading to entry in the European society of states before the nineteenth century.) This inward looking, Muslim-centric approach of the Sultans meant, for Hurewitz, that 'the Ottoman state had inherited only rudimentary practices for conducting external relations'.¹⁴

Leaving aside for the moment the question whether 'classical Christianity' offered anything more than elementary principles for dealing with non-Christians, there is a more pressing question on whether the continuous diplomacy that Hurewitz sees as the high technical development of the West was anything other than an ideological reformulation of Christian metaphysics. This is a view persuasively argued by Ernst Kantorowicz in his writings on political theology, specifically that a new emphasis on the continuity and infiniteness of time, substituting the transitoriness and apocalyptic imminence of it, gave rise to a

general ‘quasi-infinite continuity of public institutions’ of which diplomacy was part.¹⁵ In this respect, *ad hoc* embassies which served only momentary needs in the Middle Ages were assigned for longer periods, given time and credentials to readdress diplomatic business, and here Kantorowicz mentions the legal procuratores of Kings sent ‘almost permanently’ to the Papal Court in the early thirteenth century, and the permanent representatives sent to secular courts in the early fourteenth, as stated in the *Acta Aragonensia*. This evidence, however, Kantorowicz points out, has been neglected by scholars treating resident embassies as a technical, non-ideological innovation—scholars like Garrett Mattingly who is an important authority on the matter for diplomatic theorists. It is not surprising to discover that Hurewitz too formulates his reading of modern diplomacy out of Mattingly’s particular conceptualisation, generously footnoting him in his article: ‘The classic and indispensable study of the origins of continuous diplomacy is Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy*’.¹⁶ Such readings exclusively concerned with the technical novelty of continuous diplomacy, fix also the epistemic, putatively secular standard, and consequently the framework within which Ottoman diplomacy is to be studied.

Why follow Hurewitz’s call, *thirdly*, to seek ‘Muslim’ features in the diplomacy of the Ottoman empire, an empire that incorporated other religions too, and where Christians, e.g., Greeks, Armenians, and many other Europeans, participated in the formulation and execution of imperial diplomacy. How is one to classify the practices of highly influential and controversial figures—such as Alexander Mavrocordato, the Grand Dragoman—agents of Ottoman diplomacy who could move with ease across civilizations and religions, whose diplomatic representations could hardly be reduced to acts of single subjectivities, international diplomatists for whom nationality was a career. Hurewitz interestingly acknowledges, though ultimately underestimates, the input and significance of, say, Phanariot Greeks.¹⁷ This practice of erasing the ‘Christian’ impress on Ottoman diplomacy is characteristic of ‘civilisational’ authors like Nicolson, who just like Hurewitz acknowledges the role of Phanariot Greeks,¹⁸ but at the same time identifies a (politically loaded) shift of Byzantine diplomatic theory to Venice after the conquest of Constantinople.¹⁹ There is suspect silence on the possible shift of ‘Christian’ features to the ‘Muslim’ empire as well, even though by only connecting some of Nicolson’s scattered images in his texts covering Byzantine and Ottoman diplomacy the striking similarities between the two cannot be avoided. For example, the painstaking Ottoman ceremonies associated with the *mubadele*, the exchange of ambassadors across the frontier, are characteristically close to Nicolson’s distinctive feature of Byzantine diplomacy, namely ‘the extreme importance attached ... to questions of protocol and ceremony’.²⁰ In this respect one can also point out the general inaccessibility of both the Emperor and the Sultan to foreign delegates, not talking to them directly during audiences, addressing them instead through the *logothetes*, an official whom Nicolson refers to in the Byzantine case on page 26, and whose Ottoman equivalent is inadvertently displayed in the picture serving as the cover illustration of the same book.²¹ Furthermore, the conditional immunity of foreign delegates in Istanbul as pictured in the Castle of the Seven Towers, a prison ‘kept permanently ready’ to accommodate them if Ottoman policy so required

(page 35) is a modified practice and in principle not different from the qualified immunity of the *Xenodochium Romanorum* in Byzantine Constantinople, an honourable prison used to accommodate, in Nicolson's words, foreign delegates 'where their movements, visitors and communications were carefully scrutinised by a guard of honour composed entirely of the secret police' (page 26).

Fourthly, there is the important question of the constitution of Ottomanness, that refers back to the problem of historical and geographical boundaries and which is not seriously addressed in Hurewitz's plan. Far from a pre-given or natural entity, Ottoman subjectivity is a discursive, spatio-temporal practice. What kind of practices count as diplomatic is furthermore highly at stake here.²² Definitions can of course be given. But definitions involve limits as well as limitations. The ease with which the former are readily adopted is matched with the ease the latter are conveniently ignored, and even if initially acknowledged, tend to remain as a matter of common practice frequently unvisited. Take as an example, pipe-smoking which had become a distinctive part of Ottoman etiquette by the nineteenth century, with the French ambassador even threatening to leave Istanbul as a protest for not obtaining 'the honours of the pipe in the Sultan's palace'. This highly charged practice was only introduced in the Ottoman capital by English merchants in 1601. Not only was this alien to earlier Ottomans but also considered in the beginning as an 'abominable innovation' which Murad IV forbade in 1633 'on pain of death'.²³ That is to say, in different historical moments, Ottoman subjectivity was constituted differently: as non-smoking subjectivity in 1633 and as idiosyncratically smoking one later. In a similar fashion, pipe-smoking can expose different conceptualisations and approaches to diplomacy: as nonverbal communication and ceremonial ranking of status (i.e., who smokes with whom); as an instrument facilitating a change in diplomatic perspective (i.e., the inhaling of substances making one less self-centred, less self-interested and so more akin to compromise during negotiations); as a spiritual or vertical mediation of estrangement by which good spirits are called to participate and sanction an agreement, and evil ones chased away (i.e., the function of the American Indian pipe-of-peace). In sum, when opened to the genealogical and semiological approach, methods of (Ottoman) diplomacy tell us not only about the diplomacy of particular subjectivities, but about the role of the diplomatic process in the constitution of subjectivity, not only about the principles of diplomacy but about the ontological assumptions of principles and of finally drawing the limits of diplomatic practice.

III

What we address here, lest this has not yet become clear, is the colonisation of diplomatic imagination. And it is also the implications of working with dichotomous vocabularies, binary oppositions of high/low, developed/undeveloped, religious/secular, enlightened/mythical, technical/ideological forms of diplomacy, measuring the practice of others according to normalised types and processes. This very often leads to political distortions and caricatures which like Woolf's narrations offer extreme and exaggerated images, but, unlike them, do not subvert and remain unaware of their narrative suppositions. Put differently,

these images save and legitimate a sovereign, omnivoyant objectification. It is in this respect that the writings of Hurewitz and Nicolson serve to confirm a normal, commonsensical, and universal type of diplomacy. Though interestingly, the latter's work, which covers history, biography and literature, is sometimes even quite satiric of diplomacy (for instance, his novel *Public Faces*).²⁴ Still, it is stereotypically so. For Nicolson's amusing style and mocking opposition are generally concerned with the irony of the inappropriate. In this respect, as a few examples illustrate below, Nicolson's genre is quite informative about its ideological commitments concerning Turkish, Ottoman or Oriental diplomacy.

Firstly, early in chapter one of his *Diplomacy*, he downgrades the diplomacy of the Seljuk Turks to the 'primitive' level, where foreign delegates get mythologised and magically dealt with:

It must be remembered that in primitive society all foreigners were regarded as both dangerous and impure. When Justin II sent ambassadors to the Seljuk Turks they were first subjected to purification for the purpose of exorcising all harmful influence. The tribal wizards danced round them in a frenzy of ecstasy burning incense, beating tambourines and endeavouring by all known magic to mitigate the dangers of infection.²⁵

Nicolson's totalising edict about primitive prejudice regarding *all* foreigners fails to remember a few other things: for example, the sacred laws of hospitality often furnished by the very mythology Nicolson downgrades, or the prejudice of rational-racist policies at his own time, seeking to expel migrants, demonising foreigners, and which were based on their own mythology of national purity.²⁶ Nicolson quotes here, without acknowledging, a Byzantine historian, Menander Protector, who narrates Zemarch's embassy to the Seljuk ruler Dizaboulos in 568.²⁷ A close reading of Menander's fragments, however, reveals that the purification ceremony described by Nicolson was conducted by shamans the Byzantines met on their way, some time and quite a journey before they met Dizaboulos. In other words, it is arguable whether these people were officials of the Seljuk ruler, or whether this ritual was linked to protocol and the impending negotiations. Yet it is treated by Nicolson with certainty. Moreover, it is clear from Menander's fragments, for anyone who cares to read one or two paragraphs below this event, that the 'primitive' Turks had actually a highly instrumental ceremonial system which they manipulated for diplomatic signalling; specifically in this instance by explicitly giving precedence to the Byzantine ambassadors over the Persians.

A second, and perhaps more provocative caricature, appears in a passage concerning the ideal diplomatist and how such person ought to conduct negotiations with Oriental officials. As Nicolson advises:

A similar rule [to 'others may: you mayn't'] is applicable to those who have to deal with the subtleties of the Oriental mind. A notable British diplomatist, who had long experience in the Far and Middle East, was in the habit of providing younger negotiators appointed to Oriental capitals with the following piece of advice. 'Do not waste your time in trying to discover what is at the back of an Oriental's mind; there may, for all you know, be nothing at the back; concentrate all your attention upon making quite certain that he is left in no doubt whatsoever in regard to what is at the back of *your* mind'.²⁸

This being a view that Nicolson endorses, it is hardly surprising there is no mention of Oriental practice and innovation in ‘the development of diplomatic theory’ in his book. How could there be? If, in the negotiation process, there is nothing at the back of the Oriental mind worth discovering—rendering the Oriental incapable of reasoning or representation—what can Oriental ‘diplomacy’ offer or teach Nicolson’s ‘diplomacy’, ‘which in its essence is common sense’.²⁹ The evasive, elusive or mysterious character of the Oriental mind, makes it by definition the alien face of diplomacy, which is neither ‘invention’ nor ‘pastime’, ‘but is an essential element in any *reasonable* relation between man and man and between nation and nation’.³⁰ As Nicolson mused elsewhere, “the age of reason” was an entirely Occidental affair.³¹ Concerning the Turks, he unambiguously states his position in his reminiscences of the 1919 Peace Conference at Versailles:

For the Turks I had, and have, no sympathy whatsoever. Long residence at Constantinople had convinced me that behind his mask of indolence, the Turk conceals impulses of the most brutal savagery. This conviction was not diminished by his behaviour towards the Kut garrison or towards the Armenians within his borders. The Turks have contributed nothing whatsoever to the progress of humanity: they are a race of Anatolian marauders: I desired only that in the Peace Treaty they should be relegated to Anatolia.³²

Finally, in his biography of Byron, Nicolson suggests the total, natural incompatibility of the Turkish mind with the technical requirements of statecraft:

For the arts of settled government are alien and obnoxious to the Turkish genius [the obvious contrast is the English genius quoted above]; it is difficult for them either to conciliate or even, perhaps, to crush; they can neither construct nor maintain; the word ‘preservation’ does not, in fact, exist in their ungainly language.³³

A view that must have come as a surprise to the person to whom the book was dedicated: namely E. K. Venizelos. Moreover, it must remain a mystery how, with such mental, linguistic, and ultimately political deficiencies, the House of Osman managed to rule a huge empire and maintain an unbroken familial succession for more than six centuries. Nicolson’s problematic views perhaps need to be qualified with a different explanation. For as he acknowledges in his *Diplomacy*: ‘Had I myself spent two years as a Vice-Consul at Adana, I should have learnt much more about Turkey than I did as Third Secretary to the Embassy at Constantinople’.³⁴

IV

That embassy at Constantinople! It was destined to haunt Nicolson for another reason. For Woolf’s festive writing was not a mere product of literary imagination but bitterly real and personal. Her *Orlando* was dedicated to Vita Sackville-West, that is to say Mrs Harold Nicolson, with whom Woolf was having an erotic affair at the time. The picture of Orlando as ambassador on page 77 is in fact a photo of Mrs Nicolson especially dressed for the occasion. The

'Hon. Harold Nicolson' is acknowledged in the preface of *Orlando* (though not specified exactly for what), and upon reading it Harold Nicolson sent the following telegraph to Woolf from the British embassy in Berlin, on October 13, 1928: 'Orlando has filled me with amazed excitement. I feel deeply grateful to you Virginia for having written something so lovely and so strong'.³⁵ In a letter to her, on October 15, 1928, he confirmed: 'It really *is* Vita ... She strides magnificent and clumsy over 350 years'.³⁶ Furthermore, as it seems, Woolf expressed openly to her Orlando-to-be, on a number of occasions, her strong opposition to the pretentious, shameful, and non-sensible practice of diplomacy: '... have you talked to Harold about giving up silk stockings and swords and gold lace and humbug and nonsense and becoming a sensible man?' (18 February 1927); 'Look here, Vita, you must wring Harold's neck, if the worst comes to worst. You have my sanction. A dead diplomat in a dust heap'. (28 February 1927); 'I will write to Harold, whose letter enchants me, but shows a guilty conscience. He is ashamed of being an Ambassador [Nicolson was informed by the Foreign Office that he was soon to be made an ambassador]. I am ashamed that any friend of mine should be married to a man who may be an Ambassador.' (12 March 1928). The climax of *Orlando*, its domestic aiding and abetting, and the mocking of diplomacy at Nicolson's first post, raise a number of questions: did Woolf mix stories she heard from the Nicolsons about diplomatic life in Pera? Were certain images tacit references to Harold's own bisexuality? In the exchange of roles, was she also sodomising diplomacy, the other 'woman' and great love affair of Harold Nicolson?³⁷ Did *Orlando* have its share in Nicolson's decision to resign from the Foreign Office in September 1929, less than a year of publication?

The conjectures of these questions need not be affirmed for Woolf's narration of diplomacy to become 'realistic'. It does not require an historical association with the real life of a diplomat or the sanction of a real ambassador (is Nicolson's experience of Ottoman diplomacy any more realistic?). The evidence of such associations, however, may be more unsettling for those working within conservative and restrictive understandings of the empirical. The association of realism in conventional international theory with the rational empiricism of agents of power is founded upon a particular—not to say singular—interpretation of reality. Contrary to popular international relations (IR) rhetoric, critical theoretical approaches do not aim to destroy realism, or, if they do, seek to destroy a particular version of realism. In other words, these approaches seek to reinterpret and reconfigure realism, to deconstruct the epistemic conditions by which one form of realism gains prominence over another.³⁸ Employing the heterorealisms of art and literature is a means by which not only do we begin to read diplomacy and world politics differently, but also a way to extend and pluralise the claim of self-identified realists in IR that realism can be a broader paradigm.³⁹

Importing thus from literary theory, the Bakhtinian distinction between classic and grotesque realism could be of use for current purposes—which are, I argue, not simply inter-disciplinary but post-disciplinary. This is not to propose a new epistemic opposition for separating and thereby testing IR texts. It is rather to suggest that some of the representational limitations of classic realism (which I

here associate with Nicolson's problematic assumptions about a commonsensical, complete, and non-ideological vocabulary of diplomacy) can be challenged and recharged through more transgressive/aesthetic representations of diplomacy. Even though I have clearly laid down my preferences (and I am not retracting now), I also believe that the question is not simply one of endorsing one style over another. If—despite their ideological differences and emotional claims—Nicolson and Woolf could read, appreciate, and review each other's work on a regular basis, it was perhaps because they both recognised that writing is heteronomous; that is to say, it thrives in contest and it is conditional upon such differences and antinomies.

Classic realism, for Bakhtin, is the glorification of perfect and complete being, the idealisation of form. Grotesque realism, however, celebrates incompleteness and abundance. It always exceeds the 'official' boundaries of being, and in deconstructing finality, the claims of ideal form, it embraces becoming. The grotesque mocks authority, derides typology, subverts piety. Though its primary feature is degradation, Bakhtin insists that grotesque realism is never only—never in fact—negative. Its comic critique reforms, its laughter renews and regenerates. For it brings forth a festive or gay relativity, where one can shake routine practice, mock stasis, and temporarily be liberated from authoritative structures, be free to imagine change, and play with new forms. As imaginatively put by Bakhtin:

To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better ... Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of non-existence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place. Grotesque realism knows no other level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving.⁴⁰

In this respect, Bakhtin dissociates grotesque writing from cold humour, cynical irony and sarcasm, which degrade an object or individual, but place one 'above the object of his mockery', leave the author's beliefs intact, high and in a hierarchical position. Grotesque laughter is cosmic laughter, non-individual, post-egotistic, ambivalent, and thus 'expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it'.⁴¹ This collective spirit, far from romanticising the comic, was experienced, according to Bakhtin, in the Roman saturnalia, medieval festive culture, and early renaissance carnivals where distinctions, prevailing truths and authorities were suspended, 'establishing a special type of communication impossible in everyday life'.⁴² To that extent, grotesque realism 'discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life. It leads men out of the confines of the apparent (false) unity, of the indisputable and stable'.⁴³ But it comes with a caveat: its temporary, carnivalesque inversion of hierarchy can be a safety-valve, letting off steam, used instead to reinforce the prevalent order; its liberating promise may become the rhetoric of optimistic populism.⁴⁴ Put differently, the freedom it furnishes can be empowering, but its excessive gesture always takes place within specific historical conditions, carries with it its own limitations, and

potentially a new bondage. In short, grotesque realism emphasises temporality and ambivalence, contrasting to the realism of presence and ideal form, aesthetic representation and alterity.

V

The grotesque is an epistemological double agent: it subverts and degrades the scientific (ideal or complete) form, but at the same time, its excess displays the heterogeneity of forms, works to reconstitute them, joins their service. On the one hand, the grotesque alters, trivialises, exaggerates, and laughs at human experience; on the other hand, it is a means by which knowledge about such experience is gathered, recorded, and disseminated. Frivolity serves as its camouflage, making it easier to move across barriers and pomposities, like the dwarf eunuch in the Ottoman palace, who by being laughed at or ignored, gains access to forbidden chambers and corridors of power, and thus, intentionally or accidentally, bearing witness to the secret or unpublicised background, the heterology of events.

We need to study the grotesque as a way of investigating the fabrication of the normal. The grotesque should be restored as the *grotta*, the crypt that hides fragments of historical awareness, altered modes of being and becoming, conditions of (political) possibility. To give a few examples. The parodic embassies of Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* (with the Athenian and Spartan ambassadors holding effigies of their erected phalluses as maces, while negotiating with pacifist women abstaining from sex) prompt a reconsideration of the exclusion of women from the political realm, of the foundational distinction between private and public affair, of the mislocated male desire in war, and of experiencing the polis as an independent state with interests over and above the people that constitute it. Thomas Middleton's satire *Game at Chess* may have offered an exaggerated account of the influence of the Spanish ambassador in London, Gondomar (Black Knight), in the diplomatic chessboard of England (White Kingdom) and Spain (Black Kingdom), but it prompts also the need for reconsidering the politics of bilateral representation, specifically that rulers or their representatives unproblematically represent given national interests, and not conflicting and contradictory ones. Colonel Qaddafi's diplomacy—featuring a poststate jamahiriya, peoples' bureaux, student ambassadors, macho 'state' visits secured by women bodyguards, carrying abroad the official Bedouin tent and camels—has a true Almodovarian effect, being at the same time light and serious, shocking and operatic, unconventional and realistic. By not taking diplomacy 'seriously', by comically transfiguring specific typologies, grotesque interventions work to defamiliarise events, exploit similarities, and mix stories that review and criticise normal practice.

To that extent, whereas a genealogical narration helps to expose how in different historical moments diplomacy was viewed differently (i.e., that it did not always involve the interstate or the logocentric-negotiating mode commonly accepted as the standard today), a grotesque narration can in addition illustrate how people at the time were often both aware of the contingency of their condition and could imagine alternatives. For instance, consulting

the Delphic oracle was not just a sacred institution where the ancient Greeks sent their most solemn embassies, but also the site for comic and disreputable stories about Pythia. Theogamy was not only a mythic pact, a union guaranteeing ancestral lineage to a pantheon or divine protection, but also a narrative act by which humans derided their gods by overplaying their desires, and thus brought them down to size. As Bakhtin argues, in different historical periods comic protocols mimicking serious rituals, such as the coronation of a king, tended to flourish in parallel to official ceremonies. In some cases, serious and comic aspects even co-existed and ‘were equally sacred, equally “official”’; like in the case of the triumphant procession in early Roman history which included both the glorification and the derision of the victor.⁴⁵

We also need to employ the grotesque as a means of transgression. In other words, as part of the wider ‘project’ of providing a festive repertoire that challenges official and hegemonic discourses; of degrading dominant views and renewing vocabularies; of constantly inventing new modes of articulation and interpretation which more satisfactorily account for and do justice to the complex realities of the world we live in and act politically. Jorge Luis Borges once said that ‘comic truth’ has the advantage of being ‘able to tolerate cyclical and contradictory representations of reality’.⁴⁶ Perhaps, there was something in Abraham de Wicquefort’s old definition of the ambassador as ‘a kind of comedian’, for we are now, more than ever, in need of a newly appointed Orlando to expose the assumptions, intricacies, and absurdities of modern diplomacy. The language of clichés, the routine and normalised activity, the taken-for-real simulations of diplomacy have been common features of Orlando’s ambassadorial life but so they are of contemporary diplomatic practice too. Orlando’s turn is thus the epitome of diplomatic theory today. As a grotesque figure, as a transmogrifier of ‘natural’ or ‘real’ subjectivity, Orlando transgresses essentialist interpretations of male and female, occidental and oriental, public and private, political and literary, historical and fictive. Istanbul, the place where s/he comes to practise diplomacy is itself a topos of ambiguity—a civilisational hybrid as much as an imaginary meeting point of East and West. Orlando’s diplomatic-transgressive move exposes the need to substitute our dichotomous vocabularies with more ambivalent ones. More than a representative of sovereignty, therefore, Orlando exceeds formal identity to become an intermediary of opposites, mediating worlds of our making, while recalling the equivocality of diplomatic reality and of the conceptual media chosen to produce and investigate it.⁴⁷ In this other diplomacy, Orlando’s performance—more critical and less strange—stages the real anew.

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Notes

- ¹ All subsequent quotes from the novel are from Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Vintage, 1992), pp 74–96.
- ² On this point see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
- ³ Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. xiii.
- ⁴ I re-employ here a distinction drawn by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *On the Line* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 56. In more detail they suggest that ‘history has never understood nomadism; the book has never included the outside. Throughout a long history, the State has been the model of the book and of thought: the *logos*, the philosopher-king, the transcendence of the Idea, the interiority of the concept, the republic of minds, the tribunal of reason, the bureaucrats of thought, man as legislator and subject. Thus the State’s pretension to be the interiorized image of a world order, and to make man take root’.
- ⁵ Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 14.
- ⁶ See Martin Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions* (London: Leicester University Press, 1991), p. 180.
- ⁷ Anne O. Bell and Andrew McNeillie (eds), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. III, 1925–1930* (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), p. 145.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- ⁹ Early uses of *theoria* as journey—‘to go abroad to see the world’ and learn about the doings of others—can be found in Herodotus, where the importance of such journeys for legislators such as Solon is explained. Plato reiterates their importance for the polis in the *Laws*. In ancient Greece, *theoria* was also the name used for the most solemn of embassies sent to discharge a religious duty and/or consult the oracle. For a more detailed discussion of *theoria*, see Costas M. Constantinou, *On the Way to Diplomacy* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), pp. xvi–xvii and 51–64.
- ¹⁰ J.C. Hurewitz, ‘Ottoman Diplomacy and the European State System’, *Middle East Journal* (vol. 15, 1961), p. 143.
- ¹¹ Thomas Naff, ‘The Ottoman Empire and the European States System’, in Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 143–69; p. 158; emphasis added.
- ¹² Hurewitz, ‘Ottoman Diplomacy and the European State System’, p. 150.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- ¹⁵ Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 284–291.
- ¹⁶ Hurewitz, ‘Ottoman Diplomacy’, p. 141.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- ¹⁸ In his biography of Byron.
- ¹⁹ By Byzantine diplomatic theory Nicolson primarily refers to the system preoccupied with the ceremonial dimension of diplomacy and duplicity in negotiation. Nicolson generally views the input of Byzantine diplomacy negatively but nonetheless sees it as an important link for diplomacy’s institutionalisation as statecraft. See, Harold Nicolson, *The Evolution of Diplomatic Method* (London: Cassell, 1954), pp. 24–30 and *Diplomacy*, p. 47.
- ²⁰ Nicolson, *The Evolution of Diplomatic Method*, p. 25. For the practice of *mubadele*, see Norman Itzkowitz and Max Mote, *Mubadele: An Ottoman-Russian Exchange of Ambassadors* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970).
- ²¹ Nicolson, *The Evolution of Diplomatic Method*.
- ²² For a sustained problematisation of diplomacy in the form of a genealogy, and for its more extensive theorisation as the mediation of estrangement—able to accommodate a variety of historical paradigms from mythical to technological diplomacy—see James Der Derian, *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987). For a review of Der Derian’s work, see Costas M. Constantinou, ‘Late Modern Diplomacies’, *Millennium* (vol. 22, no. 1, Spring 1993), pp. 89–96.
- ²³ Philip Mansel, *Constantinople: City of the World’s Desire 1453–1924* (London: John Murray, 1995), p. 170.
- ²⁴ See Harold Nicolson, *Public Faces: A Novel* (London: Penguin, 1944); a satire of the Foreign Office and the politicking leading to a world crisis but where the career diplomats manage to save the day. On Nicolson’s style, moreover, his wife and author, Vita Sackville-West, commented thus upon reading his book, *Diplomacy*: ‘I have been reading it with the admiration and amusement your writing always arouses in me, and thinking how very different the subject would have become in anybody else’s hands—dry, dead and pompous. How you have contrived to make it so lively, I can’t imagine’. From a letter sent on February 8, 1939, quoted in Nigel Nicolson (ed.), *Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters* (London: Collins, 1966), p. 391.

- ²⁵ Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, p. 18.
- ²⁶ Nicolson, it must also be remembered, played his own part in the stigmatisation and securitisation of foreigners in Britain, as a Member of Parliament for Mosley's fascist party and as Mosley's confidant.
- ²⁷ See Menander Protector, *Roman Embassies*, a long passage of which is quoted in Z. Undaltsova, *et al*, *Byzantine Diplomacy* (Athens: Hellenika Grammata, 1995), pp. 210–213.
- ²⁸ Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, p. 111; emphasis in original.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14, emphasis added.
- ³¹ Harold Nicolson, *The Age of Reason, 1700–1789* (London: Panther, 1968).
- ³² Harold Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933), p. 35.
- ³³ Harold Nicolson, *Byron: The Last Journey April 1823–April 1824* (London: Constable & Co, 1924), p. 53.
- ³⁴ Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, p. 210.
- ³⁵ Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (eds), *A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol III 1923–1928* (London: Hogarth Press, 1977), p. 548n. In Nicolson's biography, however, Harold's discomfort is recounted: 'At the beginning of October Vita warned Harold that the secret of *Orlando* was already out. People were talking and speculating about the theme of the book. The news made Harold nervous ...' J. Lees-Milne, *Harold Nicolson: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), p. 350.
- ³⁶ Nicolson and Trautmann, *A change of Perspective*, p. 548n; emphasis in the original.
- ³⁷ Vita Sackville-West often complained to Harold Nicolson: 'You love foreign politics ... you ought never to have married me. I feel my inadequacy most bitterly. What good am I to you?' (13 December 1928); 'Oh God, how I hate the Foreign Office! How I hate it, with a personal hatred for all that makes me suffer.' (15 November 1928), in Nigel Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters*. Typically, Harold Nicolson could not escape from giving diplomacy the image of a woman, if only as a metaphor, in his writings. See *Diplomacy*, pp. 56–57.
- ³⁸ This has been suggested and elaborated in James Der Derian, 'A Reinterpretation of Realism: Genealogy, Semiology, Dromology', in James Der Derian (ed.), *International Theory: Critical Investigations* (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 370–373.
- ³⁹ See Barry Buzan, 'The Timeless Wisdom of Realism?' in Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski (eds), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 47–65.
- ⁴⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1968), p. 21.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- ⁴⁴ On this see Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 73 and Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 8–12.
- ⁴⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 6.
- ⁴⁶ J.L. Borges, 'The European Writer in Exile', in Richard Kearney (ed.), *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers on the European Mind* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 113.
- ⁴⁷ For further discussion on the ambivalent character of an archetypical diplomatic medium, namely Hermes, see Constantinou, *On the Way to Diplomacy*, pp. 147–153.