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*Bound East for Exile:
The Case of Claude-Alexandre Bonneval alias Ahmet Pasha*²

Abstract: *Count Claude-Alexandre de Bonneval (1675-1747), turned, after conversion to Islam, Ahmet Pasha, is an exciting case of self-assumed exile with imbroglios involving the big powers of the day (Venice, Austria, Turkey, France) in the background. The politico-diplomatic and military components of these relations were far from alien to his personal life and public career. His (spurious) Memoirs do not simply raise auctorial doubts. They host material of genuine interest for the analyst of cultural identity/ies and of the imagological threads that go into their making. This paper deals with the long symbolic exile experienced by an exciting character subject to public metamorphoses. It also looks into the everyday observed by his interested eye spying customs, values, protocols and practices of the Western and Eastern cultures in which he lived.*

Key words: *exile, nostalgia, Occidental, Oriental, memoirs, chroniques scandaleuses, fabulations, acculturation, anecdotes*

Inasmuch as exile is a stepping out of one's native land / culture / condition, inasmuch as it means alienation from one's own status, whether natural or acquired, and inasmuch as it entails forms of acculturation and adjustment, adapting and adopting otherness in the face of, or, rather, for the sake of, sameness, the now little known eighteenth-century adventurer Claude-Alexandre, Comte de Bonneval, deserves that appellation. Born an aristocrat in the French region of Limousin, on the 14 of July, 1675, Bonneval was to be educated in the strictest Jesuit spirit, only to prove unorthodox in his conduct quite early in life. He had indeed been born on a revolutionary day *avant la lettre*, and up to all kinds of extravagances, not least of which a continuous chain of identity changes. His personal "turbulence of spirit, (...) insolence, and (...) insubordination" (Wilding 74) had been blamed on his family's eccentricity, the Bonnevals being reputed as entertaining "des relations à diverses reprises avec le Diable" (de Juniac 585). It is a fact that the image(s) we have of him today have come down via the *exilic conduit* of non-western quarters, as Turkish dignitary! (*Fig. 1*)

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In the prime of life he found himself happy in cosmopolitan Venice, the most serene republic (la Serenissima Repubblica) full to the brim with foreigners, among whom many exiles. Before long he was to be welcomed by imperial circles in Vienna. Unpredictable and difficult, he asserted himself as a supporter of the Pope, at the same time, playing the role of partisan of the *imperium* and the *sacerdotium*, in the aftermath of the 1699 Treaty of Carlowitz, which requested “the expulsion of the Turk from Europe” (Vaugahn 1). With the genius of military stratagems, he was active in campaigns in Italy, under the command of the Duke of Vendôme, the Netherlands and Austria, and got involved in hazy affairs leading, at one point, to his condemnation to court-martial. Bonneval extricated himself out of imminent death by escaping to other lands. His life was, in effect, a series of *military-political-diplomatic exiles* associated with always renewed strategies of clever compromise aimed at combating *personal exile*. Such were the meanders of his public existence that he fought against his native French land, as against his adoptive Turkish one. When Turco-Austrian interest in the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia grew prominent, he extended his *public exile* eastwards to the Balkans and reached as far as Belgrade and Sarajevo.



**Fig. 1. ‘Ce beau Turc’, Portrait accompanying
Mémoires du Comte de Bonneval...,
A Londres MDCCLV**

In his private life, the proud aristocratic military turned liaison officer among the powers of the day was equally spurred by some *exilic force*, at times very hard to master. He abandoned his bride in a matter of days after their wedding in Paris in 1717, and felt at home in Casanova’s company, from whom he seemed to learn the risky business of *amorous exile for life*. Lady Montagu remarked his “very bold and enterprising spirit” (266) in a letter sent to a Viennese abbot. After the Treaty of Passarowitz, the next year, he came very close to managing the status of Imperial Envoy to Constantinople by Prince Eugene of Savoy. In a letter to Leibniz Bonneval had prided in being asked by Eugene to stay in Vienna, “where it is maintained that I ought not to be badly off” (Brown 89). But he could

not avoid getting in trouble for meddling with a highlife lady's sentimental life. The incident unleashed attacks of the kind that feature in standard *chroniques scandaleuses*. There followed an interval in Brussels, with German, French and Spanish *picanteries* added to his private existence abruptly ending in prison, then some time in the Hague, still enjoying Prince Eugene's protection, curbed by a dramatic fall out of favour and banishment, and what definitely set in as a *prolonged exile*.

In his mid-forties, Bonneval returned to Venice with the conviction that he would make of this hive of exiles his adoptive home. This was a short-lived dream, for crazy plans of taking his revenge on the Emperor pushed him into ill-smelling Spanish manoeuvres in the city of so many canals "full of weighted sacks containing the bodies of those who [have] made powerful enemies!" (Wilding 89). These words were whispered in his ear by a masked gentleman during the carnival on Ascension Day in 1726. Banished from public dignities in the west, he began to look for an alternative across the Continent and all the way into its eastern end, leaving France and Switzerland behind, for Prussia and Russia, and into the Ottoman Empire. To the latter he paved his way by sending the Grand Vizir encomiastic letters in the honeyed language of Oriental praise, calling him a defender of "the sciences and arts, (...) known throughout the universe, and above all in Christian countries, which admire the great genius of Your Excellency" (91).

Formerly an exile from the Doges' city, then from the Czar's palaces, the French Count was now hatching the plan of a final and utter identity change as conversion to Mahommedanism. This newly acquired status was fed on his newly established conviction that Turks are "not such fools as they are made out in Vienna, London, and Madrid!" (96) With hardly any Turkish at all, Bonneval turned Ahmet put his *linguistic exile* to the use of clever *social, sartorial and culinary assimilation*. The pleasures of Oriental otium, heavy Ottoman garments, a bushy beard to counterbalance his voluminous turban (*Fig. 2*) and the habit of throwing opulent parties, with gentlemen treated to alcohol behind closed doors and ladies offered sherbets in ice-cool glasses became part and parcel of his new identity. "What a magnificent Turk I make dressed up in this rig!" (98), he confessed with delight.



Fig. 2. Claude-Alexandre, Comte de Bonneval, Alias Ahmed Pasha (1675-1747)

A similar metamorphosis was undergone by his contemporary, the Moldavian Prince Dimitrie Cantemir, a classic of Romanian culture, whose portraits in Occidental (*Fig. 3.*) and Oriental attire (*Fig. 4.*), respectively, have long been landmarks of cultural identity in Romanian history books. Ahmet was bestowed upon the title of pasha and turned on a new page in his life by enjoying Istanbul, ‘the’ City, to the utmost. He had stepped out of his Catholic faith into the faith of the Infidel (sic), clung to this safer condition, yet lived in the European section of onetime Constantinople. Still envenomed by hatred against the Austrian Empire, he travelled to the Asian side and back, across the Bosphorus, on a daily basis. The lifelong exile had grown into a promoter of Ottoman pride, an endeavour rewarded with the title of Pasha with three horse-tails. These honours entitled him to a position of command in the Ottoman army, where he showed the ambition of modernizing arsenals, strategies, attitudes and values according to western standards. Praised by the Sultan for having served the Sublime Porte like no European ever, he acclaimed Turkish victories over the Austrians and the Russians. Served by Janissaries and imperial guests, Ahmet Pasha now considered a smooth retirement in the not so hurried east. This made Voltaire wonder that he had not contemplated the yet more comfortable shelter offered by Persia!



Fig.3. Demetrius Cantemir (Occidental attire)



Fig. 4. Dimitrie Cantemir (Oriental attire)

The Bonneval under Ahmet’s skin gradually showed up again, dissolving the certainties of officialdom with the acids of *exilic longing*. His last years were spent between one westernized party and the next, with European visitors filling his house. He went back to his western gentlemanliness prone to stir the curiosity and wonder of non- westerners. Feeling more Bonneval than Ahmet, he hired a French cook whose *savoir faire* just amazed the distinguished company of his Istanbul *salons*. His gardener shared eastern with western skills in planting fruit trees for special desserts offered in the greenery outside his master’s residence, while the conversation was carried on in Italian! He was perfectly Ottoman and

Ahmet in observing the rules of the Koran, and graciously Bonneval in keeping a reserve of wines and liqueurs in a cunningly hidden little room, where special treats were offered to those worthy of his diplomatic confidence. As he fell under the suspicion of the Sublime Porte, he traversed his own Ovidian episode, shortly banished to the Black Sea coast, and grew more and more nostalgic of France and French manners. Bonneval died an exile among the Infidel, before he could ever make the final decision of reconverting to 'the' faith.

About two decades after Bonneval's death, Horace Walpole referred to him in his correspondence with Horace Mann, British minister to Tuscany, whom he had met during his Grand Tour in the company of Thomas Gray. The French Count appeared to Walpole as a metonym of his contemporary John Wilkes, whose life of dissipation and extravagance eventually secured him the status of member of the Medmenham Abbey fraternity. The ruined Cistercian abbey on the bank of the Thames had been converted by the clubbable 'brothers' into a meeting-place of conviviality, i.e. debauchery. The company came to be known as the 'Franciscans', after Francis Dashwood, owner of the place from 1755, or the Hellfire Club, and led an utterly libertine existence under the motto "Fay ce que tu voudras", reminding the visitors of the Rabelaisian Abbey of Thelema. This is underlined by Hogarth's parody of a Renaissance picture, to which the Protestant accent is added, to show St. Francis reading the *Bible*, instead of speaking to the birds. The 'new Francis' is gluttonously sweeping his eyes over a miniature female nude, rather than a doll, lying by the side of the seventeenth-century erotic book known as *Elegantiae Latini sermonis*, a text of fairly wide circulation among aristocratic circles in eighteenth-century France and England. Likewise, the new Francis's halo reveals the profile of the profligate Earl of Sandwich, whose life of gambling, drinking and womanizing prompted him to invent a type of fast food bearing his name to this day. The quality frequented the Hellfire Club, among which Frederick, the Prince of Wales, father of the future George III, the very Earl of Sandwich, and the cross-dressing Chevalier d'Eon, who lived half his life as a woman and the other half as a man and was later called the saint patron of transvestites!

Like Walpole, Bonneval himself engaged in a Grand Tour of the Continent, focusing on less typical places on the generally accepted agenda, yet not ignoring some of the musts, certainly not Italy. In his mediations as a *go-between* of immediate history, he was bound east for *personal and supra-personal exile*, reiterating, on a smaller scale, the century's drive eastwards in an ample colonial exercise of power. "Ce beau Turc" (de Juniac 600) is the caption engraved on his memorial monument. He died on the birthday of the Prophet, an irony which has not escaped sharp tongues in either the Christian, and the Muslim camp, rounding off the historical and historic symbolism of his birthday.

His existential vagaries remain excitingly doubled by his writings, whose textual looseness and rhetoric of diffuse authorial identity should not surprise in terms of eighteenth-century creative and editorial vagueness. His spurious memoirs are an indication in this sense. The 1736 *Mémoires du Comte de Bonneval*, as well as the 1740 *Anecdotes vénitiennes et turques, ou Nouveaux Mémoires du Comte de Bonneval depuis son départ de Venise jusqu'à son exil à l'Ile de Chios* have raised no few questions of authenticity. The former acknowledges that "écrire l'Histoire de ma Vie [c'est] une phantaisie, je le sais, mai je la suivie' for the sake of killing 'l'ennui de la solitude" (2). The latter announces in the *Preface* the author's irritation with westerners unable to understand the *anecdotes* of private highlife, i.e. a profusion of spicy stories about the great and the good who prove petty and

fairly bad in private. On his guard against writers ready to cook up fabulations, because of 'idées Romanesques' which make it impossible to distinguish "le vrai d'avec le fabuleux", Bonneval declares: "cette Histoire est un morceau rare; elle m'a paru du premier coup d'oeil une espèce de Roman, mais je n'ai pu m'empêcher de la croire véritable" (5). Let us recall that Fielding faced the same problem in his metatextual introductions to his novels, wondering about the way in which mere history *exiled* in the space of literature becomes 'history'.

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