

Gabriel Piterberg, *An Ottoman Tragedy: History and Historiography at Play, Studies on the History of Society and Culture, 50* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 2003) xv + 256 pp.

1.

In November of 1617, after a reign of fifteen years, Ahmed, sultan of the Ottoman empire, died. Because Ahmed's sons were considered too young to succeed him, the imperial grandees appointed his younger brother Mustafa to the throne. Unfortunately, Mustafa had a history of erratic—if not insane—behavior, and he showed no signs of improvement in his new capacity as sultan; while it may have been difficult at times to distinguish between madness and saintliness, the new sultan's conduct left little doubt about his true nature. By late February of 1618, after ruling for only three months, Mustafa was deposed due to his "lightness of mind," and the eldest of Ahmed's sons, fourteen-year-old Prince Osman, was raised up in his place. Osman, however, was soon to have his own set of problems. A nonconformist, Osman took several unconventional steps, such as fashioning himself in accordance with an obsolete image of rulership and choosing his wife from among the aristocracy, and initiated a number of radical reforms that collectively began to alienate many of his subjects. The execution of his younger brother at his command, together with an unsuccessful military campaign in Poland and the disciplining of his troops for their alleged incompetence, only widened the expanding rift between Osman and the backbone of his standing army, the Kapi Kullari or "kul." By 1622 relations had deteriorated to the point that Osman was finally persuaded by his main adviser, the chief black eunuch Süleyman Aga, to do away with his "worthless" kul and replace them with fresh recruits drawn from Anatolia, Syria, and Egypt. He was also to transfer the throne itself from Istanbul to Bursa, Damascus, or Cairo. On May 18, Osman initiated preparations to carry out these incredible, unprecedented plans, ignoring both the repeated pleas of his people and the portents from a strange dream. The kul, however, would take their own initiative. Rising up in open rebellion, they invaded the sultan's palace, found the crazed Mustafa confined in a harem deep within, and returned him to the throne. Süleyman Aga was soon discovered and then executed in short order. On the third day, May 20, the kul captured Osman and compelled him to undergo a public humiliation. Later that night, Osman was strangled in his cell. To dispel any lingering doubts, the young sultan's ear was offered as proof of his fate.

This sequence of events between 18–20 May 1622 is the narrowly defined "Ottoman tragedy" of Gabriel Piterberg's new book of the same title.⁴ What Piterberg does with these events is vaguely described by the book's subtitle, "History and Historiography at Play." In short, his study charts the articulation of a "playful" dialectic between two Hegelian poles—the hermeneutics of texts and the historical and conceptual problem of the state—in order to see if anything meaningful can be gained from the give and take. This is not the only

⁴On the increasingly popular genre of "incident analysis," see now the wary observations of R. Darnton, "It Happened One Night," *New York Review of Books* 51, no. 11 (24 June 2004) 60–66.

dialogue in the book, however, as the author also constantly engages all his texts, primary and secondary, in studied conversation with one another and with himself.⁵ The cumulative result, or “dialectical yield,” as Piterberg puts it, affords at best some startling interpretive insights and at worst the production of unfamiliar perspectives and fresh questions in a field that, through its traditional “adherence to what Dominick LaCapra terms a ‘documentary model of knowledge,’ and its sanctification of archival documents,” has largely ignored the subversive influence of the linguistic turn.⁶ Thus the book is at once a “stocktaking” of Ottoman history, an argument for a possible agenda that offers a new direction for the field, and a detailed example of how to proceed along this unbeaten path.

The book consists of three parts, entitled “Foundations,” “Historiography,” and “The State,” which are followed by an extended epilogue. In the first part, the narrative of the Ottoman tragedy, or “Haile-i Osmaniye,” of May 1622 is described in some detail (chp. 1) in order to show the ways and degrees to which it reflects the transformation of the Ottoman royal household over the century between 1550 and 1650. This sketch then gives way (chp. 2) to a survey of Ottoman historiography, a review of the modern study of this historiography, and a “sociological” portrayal of five seventeenth-century historians (i.e., as examples of the increasing institutionalization of the Ottoman bureaucracy) who figured prominently in the formation of the Haile-i Osmaniye: Hüseyin bin Sefer, better known by his pseudonym, Tugi Çelebi (d. ca. 1623–40); Hasanbeyzade (d. 1636); Ibrahim Peçevi (d. 1650); Katip Çelebi (d. 1657); and Mustafa Naima (d. 1716). Part one concludes with a remarkable chapter that outlines the interpretive framework of the study (chp. 3). Explicitly acknowledging his reliance upon Hayden White’s theories of history and narrativity, Piterberg problematizes White’s “modernist bias,” while simultaneously pulling Quentin Skinner and Paul Ricoeur into a methodological conversation regarding thorny questions of narrative, intertextuality, authenticity, authorship and authorial intention, reception, and interpretive contexts of writing-reading/speaking-hearing. The dialectical yield of all this is Piterberg’s proposal that it is possible for a text to have been both spoken and written, and to interpret it accordingly—in the context of a speech situation (i.e., as an oral address), and in a separate context and tradition as an instance of writing.

The second part of the book (chaps. 4–6) is a painstaking study of the historiographical tradition of the Haile-i Osmaniye that follows and explores the intertextual relationships—instances of borrowing and endorsement, elision and condemnation, internalization and recomposition—among the narratives of the five authors listed above. Moving in chronological order, Piterberg demonstrates how the “urtext” of the events, Tugi’s narrative, was worked and reworked by his successors Hasanbeyzade, Peçevi, and Çelebi until its formulation by Naima as a crucial component in the reification of the state in Ottoman historical consciousness. It is here that Piterberg provides evidence of Tugi’s

⁵For references to “dialectic,” “dialogue,” or “interlocutors,” see Piterberg 6, 9, 42, 59, 60, 64, 66, 141, 154–156, 183, 185–186.

⁶For the dialectical yield, see Piterberg 59, 64, 131–132, 144–145, 152. For the quotation, see 50.

narrative as having been an oral address (adducing instances of fictive speech, colloquial style, narrative asides, formulaic expressions, and lively, didactic digressions), argues that an extant manuscript (Austrian Nat. Lib., Vienna, MS Flügel 1044) is the very document used for the alleged address, and ultimately proposes that this address was delivered amidst the unfolding *Haile-i Osmaniye* itself. Other important topics covered within this sustained textual analysis are the “kul-centric” perspective of all the narrators (but for the important exception of Peçevi); the creation of an alternative, competing narrative by Peçevi that is favorable to Osman and hostile to the kul; the varying presence and absence of poetry within the prose accounts; the hermeneutic of “preordained inevitability” and its influence; and the existence in the texts of what we would now call “Freudian latency”—namely, a level of meaning lying “beneath” an author’s conscious, manifest intention. Running throughout these chapters and linking all the topics is Piterberg’s insistence on the importance of the specific spatial and temporal form of the narratives’ contents. Using the metaphor of a movie camera and filmmaking to underscore the significance of the narrator’s point of view and the sequential (but not always chronological) arrangement of the various “shots,” Piterberg cogently shows both “how texts can convey precisely the same information but produce completely different—indeed antithetical—meanings” (95) and that “the facts are where they are in a text not incidentally but because they sanction and make plausible certain interpretations” (125).

Part three (chaps. 7–8) deals with the world inhabited by the texts described in the preceding chapters. Focusing on the history of the Ottoman state and the development of its intimate relationship with certain Ottoman historiography of the seventeenth century, the section begins by opening up a theoretical dialogue with such scholars of the state as Philip Abrams, Perry Anderson, and Timothy Mitchell. Some pertinent remarks by Jack Goldstone on the Eurasian “Price Revolution” and the “crisis of the seventeenth century” then move the general conversation about the state into a particular historical context, which Piterberg problematizes by systematically introducing the voices of Halil Inalcik, Metin Kunt, Jane Hathaway, Tosun Aricanli and Mara Thomas, Rifaat Ali Abou-El-Haj, Ariel Salzmann, and Karen Barkey. “What underpins the whole discussion,” he explains, “is an attempt to take into account the reification of the state and to follow the ways in which the historiography at once reifies the state and reveals the fact of reification” (3).

The book concludes with an epilogue—certainly the most evocative chapter of the work—that takes several test soundings of the deep structures of Ottoman historiography. First, Piterberg reflects on the nature of tragedy, on what was “tragic” about the *Haile-i Osmaniye*, and on whether tragedy, like narrative, “might be a universal, cross-cultural way of telling stories and making sense of reality” (190). To punctuate this point, he repeats several passages from one of the epigraphs included at the beginning of his book—a lengthy quotation from Jorge Luis Borges’s brilliant tale “Avërroes’ Search.” Closing the study, he then probes the deeper layer of poetic and mythic meaning that sustains what Cemal Kafadar has characterized as the “schizoid” nature of the Ottoman political imagination—one split into dichotomous notions of center and frontier. Tugi, author of the “urtext” of the *Haile-i Osmaniye*, provides

Piterberg with a phrase that is shown to be emblematic not only of this Ottoman "schizoid mental topography" but also of an underlying, mythic code. When Tugi repeatedly stated that Sultan Osman intended "to go in the direction of Anatolia," he was expressing not just a move that would abolish the prevailing distinctions of center and frontier, but also a move that was ontologically in the wrong direction, transgressing a formative myth of water crossing firmly embedded in the collective memory and identity of the Ottomans (the crossing of the sea from Asia Minor into Europe). As Piterberg tantalizingly suggests, "at the level of mythic consciousness, it signified a *countercrossing*, a crossing 'in the wrong direction,' and hence a countermyth" (200, emphasis in original).

2.

Just as it is customary in the preface of one's book to absolve consultants of responsibility for any errors that follow, so too is it expected that in reviewing a book one does not criticize it for what it is not. In the case of *An Ottoman Tragedy*, however, I am pleased to disregard the latter convention, for the main problem is that the book is not long enough. Piterberg raises so many fascinating and complex issues in a scant two hundred pages that he can often only just begin to answer the questions he raises. For example, Piterberg refers repeatedly to the Haile-i Osmaniye as a "trauma" or as "traumatic." How would these same events appear when examined through what scholars have recently argued is a valid category of historical analysis: using notions of trauma for gaining insight into events that seem to "resist" representation?⁷ And what should we make of the existence of Peçevi's narrative that alone finds fault with the kul? If, as Piterberg amply shows, it was roundly rejected by later historians (who read it nonetheless), then why did it survive, and apparently in more than one manuscript?⁸ Likewise, Tugi's narrative raises questions of its own. Despite the disproportionate number of pages he devotes to showing that Tugi's written account was also delivered orally, Piterberg never gives a clear description of what the nature of this oral address would have been. How long is Tugi's account? Does its length undermine the possibility of its presentation as a speech? Indeed, what would the parameters or decorum regarding a speech's length have been within the particular historical and cultural context?⁹ The use of poetry is another topic that deserves closer scrutiny. Unlike its place in the Middle Ages, poetry appears to have been less esteemed than prose in Ottoman bureaucratic culture, as Piterberg keenly observes.¹⁰ But throughout the histo-

⁷See, for example, M. S. Roth, "Trauma, Representation, and Historical Consciousness," *Common Knowledge* 7 (1998) 99–111; C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (Baltimore 1996). For Piterberg's references to "trauma," see 1, 2, 29, 67, 71, 96, 165.

⁸On the number of manuscripts, see Piterberg 106; on the rejection of Peçevi's narrative by later historians, see 119, 131, 166, 176. Doubtless, such questions regarding transmission and reception are addressed in Piterberg's dissertation, "A Study of Ottoman Historiography in the Seventeenth Century" (Ph.D. diss., Oxford University 1993).

⁹Cf. P. J. Achtemeier, "Omne verbum sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109 (1990) 3–27.

¹⁰Piterberg provides a fascinating quotation (43) by Okçuzade Mehmed Sah Bey (d. 1630) on this point: "Numerous skillful poets capable of originality in rare and beautiful

riographical tradition of the Haile-i Osmaniye, the reproduction and omission of Tugi's poetry (which formed a significant component within his prose history) by later authors is simply evaluated as another measure of their reliance upon and faithfulness to Tugi's text. What functions did poetry serve when deployed within Ottoman prose accounts? How did it contribute to the truth-value of a text?¹¹ Still another sensitive observation by Piterberg regards the "culture conditioned" logic of the past and the respect that one should show for its otherness (124). Yet how does one draw the line in order to determine whether meaning produced by narrative logic of the past is unequivocally "obvious" (79, 126) or not (127)? How, exactly, does the linguistic turn resolve this problem and "result, to borrow Gadamer's term, in an engaged 'fusion of horizons'" (60)? Piterberg's succinct answer is that we must ultimately rely on our "historical imagination," or, similarly, evoke "Vico's fantasia."¹² Here, especially, one is left wanting more.

In Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*, Brother William reminds his young novice Adso that "often books speak of other books." To be sure, one of the most interesting things about *An Ottoman Tragedy* is the collection of books *with* which it speaks, for the conversation is not only with books on Ottoman history or theories about the state, but also to a considerable extent with books by historians of medieval Europe.¹³ The theoretical works of Nancy Partner and Gabrielle Spiegel on establishing an interpretive "middle ground" between transparent positivism and inter-reflective, ever-mediating postmodernism at first appear to be the strongest voices contributing to the discussion—that is, until one recalls that Hayden White began his career as a medievalist.¹⁴ This fact makes Piterberg's cogent critique of White's "modernist bias" (58–

expressions may always be found in every country, if not in every major city. But true prose stylists, those with natural talent, appear perhaps once in a generation. Hence there is a dearth of eloquent writers."

¹¹For remarks on poetry and its omission, see Piterberg 74, 99–100, 111, 116. Cf. E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. Trask (New York 1953) 145–159; O. S. H. Lie, "What Is Truth? The Verse-Prose Debate in Medieval Dutch Literature," *Queeste: Tijdschrift over middeleeuwse in de Nederlanden* 1 (1994) 34–65. I thank John Eldevik for the latter reference.

¹²See Piterberg 6, 68. Note also Piterberg's prefatory comments about his visit to Osman's cell, xiii. On sentiment and history, cf. the remarks of F. Lot in C.-E. Perrin, *Un historien français: Ferdinand Lot (1866–1952)* (Geneva 1968) 92.

¹³See Piterberg 4, 50, 55–56, 64, 198–199.

¹⁴Piterberg cites N. F. Partner, "Hayden White (and the Content and the Form and Everyone Else) at the AHA," *History and Theory* 36.4 (1997) 102–110; eadem, "The New Cornificius" in E. Breisach, ed., *Classical Rhetoric and Medieval Historiography* (Kalamazoo 1985) 5–59; eadem, *Serious Entertainments: The Writing of History in Twelfth-Century England* (Chicago 1980); and G. Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore 1997). On White as a medievalist, see his dissertation, H. V. White, "The Conflict of Papal Leadership Ideals from Gregory VII to St. Bernard of Clairvaux with Special Reference to the Schism of 1130" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan 1956); and his famous use of the *Annals of Saint Gall* in H. V. White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" in idem, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore 1987) 1–25.

60) ironic indeed. Yet the inclusion of medievalists in the broad discussion is interesting not merely for its novelty, but rather for the dialectical yield—the numerous comparative questions and perspectives—it offers medievalists in return.¹⁵ For example, Osman's portentous dream speaks in new ways to recent work on oneirocriticism in the Middle Ages, while Katip Çelebi's narrative compilation of natural disasters, which underscores the element of preordained inevitability within events, relates directly to what Paul Dutton has characterized as the "ordering of disorder" by Carolingian authors.¹⁶ The use of the "camera" and "director's seat" metaphors by Piterberg likewise recalls and supports the controversial study by Keith Hopkins that adopts the same conceit to explore early interactions among pagans, Christians, and Jews.¹⁷ The reification of the state and the dialectic between core area and frontier are topics that have also been receiving increased attention by medieval historians, though Piterberg's observations about the ways in which historiography is deeply implicated in this process of reification have not been commensurately addressed.¹⁸ One area in which medievalists *have* done extensive work is the realm of ritual; surely the unprecedented public humiliation of Sultan Osman, who was deprived of his turban, mounted on a workhorse, and subjected to taunts and abuse along a *via dolorosa* that led to his incarceration and murder (26–27), amounts to more than a manifestation of politics in the Istanbul public sphere. Reading this episode—or better, Tugi's report of this episode—through the work of Geoffrey Koziol, Philippe Buc, Gerd Althoff, or Ruth Mellinkoff would do much to enrich our understanding of it.¹⁹ Finally, like the genres of the medieval European *speculum principis* and Scriptural exegesis, the Ottoman "nasihat" literature (of advice to rulers) that flourished from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century doubtless advocated "a past that was ideologically

¹⁵On the advantages of such comparative conversations, see P. J. Geary, "Vergleichende Geschichte und sozialwissenschaftliche Theorie" in M. Borgolte, ed., *Das europäische Mittelalter im Spannungsbogen des Vergleichs* (Berlin 2001) 29–38; and Lin Yao-fu, ed., *Selected Essays on Court Culture in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Taipei 1999).

¹⁶On oneirocriticism, see P. E. Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire* (Lincoln, NE 1994); and P. Cox Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity* (Princeton 1994). For Osman's dream, see Piterberg 24, 86–87, 89–90; for Çelebi's compilation of natural disasters, see 124, 189. For the "ordering of disorder," see Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming* 85–91.

¹⁷Cf. Piterberg 77–79, 167–168; and K. Hopkins, *A World Full of Gods: Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Roman Empire* (London 1999) 53–77.

¹⁸See W. Brown, *Unjust Seizure: Conflict, Interest, and Authority in an Early Medieval Society* (Ithaca, NY 2001); M. de Jong, F. Theuvs, and C. van Rhijn, eds., *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden 2001); J. B. Given, *State and Society in Medieval Europe: Gwynedd and Languedoc under Outside Rule* (Ithaca, NY 1990). For historiography, the state, and the discipline of medieval studies, see now P. J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton 2002).

¹⁹See R. Mellinkoff, "Riding Backwards: The Theme of Humiliation and Symbol of Evil," *Viator* 4 (1973) 153–176. For a convenient introduction to the work of Koziol, Buc, and Althoff, and the polemics that now surround it, see G. Koziol, "The Dangers of Polemic: Is Ritual Still an Interesting Topic of Historical Study?" *Early Medieval Europe* 11 (2002) 367–388.

constructed as a golden age" (145–146, 153–154).²⁰ But what of its role in providing the ruler with a specific model or guide by which to live? How does this relate to David Carr's arguments of "living according to a plot?"²¹ Does this literature of advice, when compared with documented royal behavior, suggest any particular, emplotted form of royal self-fashioning?²² Rarely did rulers in the Middle Ages pay heed to Augustine's warning: "Hands off yourself. Build up yourself and you build a ruin."²³ Was Sultan Osman any different in this respect?

3.

Hegel famously observed that to develop consciousness regarding the untruth of phenomenal knowledge is to tread on the "pathway of doubt, or more precisely the way of despair."²⁴ Given Piterberg's explicit adoption of the dialectical method, perhaps *An Ottoman Tragedy* is also tragic in this larger, Hegelian sense. We gain an increasing awareness of our ignorance, and yet we are compelled nonetheless down the *via dolorosa* of negativity, doubt, and despair. *Quo vadimus?*²⁵

COURTNEY M. BOOKER, History, University of British Columbia

²⁰Cf. H. H. Anton, *Fürstenspiegel und Herrscherethos in der Karolingerzeit* (Bonn 1968); and the special issue on "The Power of the Word: The Influence of the Bible on Early Medieval Politics," *Early Medieval Europe* 7.3 (1998).

²¹Reprinted and criticized in G. Roberts, ed., *The History and Narrative Reader* (London 2001) 143–208. See also H. V. White, "Bodies and Their Plots" in S. L. Foster, ed., *Choreographing History* (Bloomington 1995) 229–234; J. A. Carter, "Telling Times: History, Emplotment, and Truth," *History and Theory* 42 (2003) 1–27; and J. S. Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (New York 2002).

²²For example, M. de Jong, "The Empire as *Ecclesia*: Hrabanus Maurus and Biblical *Historia* for Rulers" in Y. Hen and M. Innes, eds., *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge 2000) 191–226; eadem, "The Emperor Lothar and His *Bibliotheca Historiarum*" in R. I. A. Nip, et al., eds., *Media Latinitas: A Collection of Essays to Mark the Occasion of the Retirement of L. J. Engels* (Turnhout 1996) 229–235; and Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming* (n. 12 above).

²³*Sermo* 169, cap. 9 (11), "Impedis te: si tu te aedificas, ruinam aedificas" (PL 38: col. 921); as cited by S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago 1980) 2.

²⁴G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Introduction (78), trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford 1977) 49.

²⁵I wish to thank Eugene Sheppard, Allan Smith, and Kevin Attell for their kind suggestions and criticism.