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G.J. MALLINSON

Usbek, Language and Power:
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Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*

When Montesquieu stressed the significance of the epistolary form given to his *Lettres persanes*, he was adopting a stance not uncommon among writers of satire eager to defend themselves against actual or potential criticism. Countering the charge that his characters served simply to voice his own irreverence,¹ Montesquieu set out to underline the link between the letters and those who wrote them. To a Persian observer, he argues in *Quelques Réflexions sur les Lettres persanes* published with the 1754 edition of the text, French religious and social customs would inevitably seem strange, and it is therefore quite plausible and justifiable that they should be the object of commentary. Seen in this light, the letters are important less for what they say about European customs than for what they reveal about the travelers themselves, and Montesquieu, like Marana or Bernard,² urges the reader to resituate the satirical comments in their context: "On prie donc le lecteur de ne pas cesser un moment de regarder les traits dont je parle comme des efforts de la surprise de gens qui devaient en avoir . . ." (5).³

Such remarks as these may appear as something of a strategy, an attempt to take refuge behind characters whose likeness to the author nevertheless remains evident. Indeed, many of the philosophical and political comments put into the mouth of Usbek particularly recur in the author's own subsequent *Pensées inédites*, or in *De l'esprit des lois*. However, Montesquieu's stress on the relationship between letter and writer has more far-reaching implications than those of a satirist's self-defense. The *Lettres persanes* stand out in different ways from earlier satires like the *Espion turc*, and it is clear that the character of Usbek is

too complex to be regarded as a mere representation of the author. Whereas in Marana's text, fictional elements are largely incidental to the exposition of Mahmut's political commentaries, in the *Lettres persanes* they impinge constantly on Usbek. Similarly, Montesquieu's choice of a form significantly more sophisticated than any seen in letter fiction before this time takes him away from a simple satirical or philosophical stance. In the *Espion turc*, authority is implicit in the letters of Mahmut which dominate the work and build up a coherent image of evolving enlightenment; in the *Lettres persanes* no such consistency is apparent.

The *Lettres persanes* announce at the outset their difference from the model of Marana, as they confront the reader with letters which offer conflicting images of Usbek. In the opening letter, his own, he presents himself as intellectually curious and open-minded, aware of shortcomings in the values he has been brought up with; he prizes wisdom above all else:

Rica et moi sommes peut-être les premiers parmi les Persans que l'envie de savoir ait fait sortir de leur pays, et qui aient renoncé aux douceurs d'une vie tranquille pour aller chercher laborieusement la sagesse. Nous sommes nés dans un royaume florissant; mais nous n'avons pas cru que ces bornes fussent celles de nos connaissances, et que la lumière orientale dût seule nous éclairer. (12)

Such an attitude is traditional, embodied by earlier satirical travelers⁴ but in the *Lettres persanes* it is immediately undercut by the second letter, written by Usbek to his eunuch. The familiar vocabulary of openness and quest is replaced by images of closure and authority; there is now no examination of values, but the confident expression of moral absolutes: "Tu es le fléau du vice et la colonne de la fidélité . . . tu commandes en maître comme moi-même, quand tu crains le relâchement des lois de la pudeur et de la modestie" (13). If letter 1 expresses a spirit of open philosophical inquiry, letter 2 suggests clearly defined and unquestioned principles: two versions of Usbek are immediately juxtaposed.

Letter 3, from Zachi, questions in its own turn the nature of the moral authority implicit in letter 2. Usbek's claims to be the guardian of *pudeur* and *modestie* are contrasted now with another image of him, in which he is seen to encourage not *pudeur*, but an erotic naturalness designed to satisfy his whim: "Il fallut nous dépouiller de ces ornements qui t'étaient devenus incommodes; il fallut paraître à ta vue dans la

simplicité de la nature. Je comptai pour rien la pudeur; je ne pensai qu'à ma gloire . . ." (15). *Pudeur* presented as an overriding moral principle in the previous letter is seen here to have not an absolute force, but a merely public significance; its meaning is redefined when, in this private context, the dominant images are of subordination, personal gratification and control:

. . . nous fûmes en un moment toutes couvertes de tes baisers; tu portas tes curieux regards dans les lieux les plus secrets; tu nous fis passer en un instant dans mille situations différentes: toujours de nouveaux commandements et une obéissance toujours nouvelle. (15)

By letter 8, this fracturing of Usbek's identity and his language reaches its climax, when quite different motives—political as well as philosophical—are revealed for his withdrawal from Persia. He repeats his own dissatisfaction with prevailing values, and yet his journey is no longer seen as a quest for knowledge; he leaves, it seems, not in spite of *douceurs* but because of political repression:

. . . quand je vis que ma sincérité m'avait fait des ennemis; que je m'étais attiré la jalousie des ministres, sans avoir la faveur du Prince; que, dans une cour corrompue, je ne me soutenais plus que par une faible vertu: je résolus de la quitter. (21-22)

The interest in other customs on which the philosophical justification of his journey is based is now seen from a different perspective; what dominates here is not the spirit of inquiry as such, but its expediency as a pretext, begun indeed as a *feinte* and exploited to escape oppression:

Je feignis un grand attachement pour les sciences, et, à force de le feindre, il me vint réellement. Je ne me mêlai plus d'aucunes affaires, et je me retirai dans une maison de campagne. . . . Je résolus de m'exiler de ma patrie, et ma retraite même de la Cour m'en fournit un prétexte plausible. J'allai au roi; je lui marquai l'envie que j'avais de m'instruire dans les sciences de l'Occident; je lui insinuai qu'il pourrait tirer de l'utilité de mes voyages. Je trouvai grâce devant ses yeux; je partis, et je dérobai une victime à mes ennemis. (22)

Traditional expectations of consistency in character and attitude are clearly undercut in these opening pages. Each letter, taken alone, suggests a particular image of Usbek, and yet set back in context, each loses its absolute force. The reader is constantly forced to revise his

judgment, unable to form a coherent view of the character or the values he holds; meaning is revealed to be relative, provisional, partial.

The fluctuation of perspective apparent in these early letters is sustained in different ways by Montesquieu throughout the text as he constantly draws into question the authority of the letters we read. At times, bold juxtapositions of different images both invite and repel attempts to reconcile them. In letter 9, the instability of Usbek's favor is the subject of complaint by the first eunuch, and in letter 10, Mirza appeals to his sound moral judgment for advice; in letter 19, Usbek confidently attributes the decline of the Turkish empire to the violent tyranny of its rulers, and in letter 20, he seeks to subdue Zachi, basing his authority on the inspiration of fear; in letter 46, he sets humanitarian values at the base of all moral and political action, and in letter 47, Zachi evokes the atmosphere in his harem, where fear of death accompanies the slightest transgression; in letter 61, he recalls the words of a priest who warns of fanaticism even in the pursuit of hallowed values, and in letter 62, Zélis outlines to him the complete subordination of women which his régime unremittingly imposes in the name of virtue.

On other occasions, Usbek's enlightened observations are invested with an irony, activated by the reader's awareness of their context. In letter 46 his arguments against the use of excessive force in government, and his pleas for essentially humanitarian values have linguistic coherence and philosophical authority:

... en quelque religion qu'on vive, dès qu'on en suppose une, il faut bien que l'on suppose aussi que Dieu aime les hommes, puisqu'il établit une religion pour les rendre heureux; que s'il aime les hommes, on est assuré de lui plaire en les aimant aussi, c'est-à-dire en exerçant envers eux tous les devoirs de la charité et de l'humanité, et en ne violant point les lois sous lesquelles ils vivent. (94)

Similar ideas are voiced by Mahmut,⁵ but whereas in Marana's text, the authenticity of this stance is unquestioned, in the *Lettres persanes* the comments contrast with letter 21 in which Usbek has proudly asserted dominant authority over the white eunuchs, reducing justice to his *fantaisie*, charity to the demand for obedience, and human beings to the level of *vils instruments*: "Et qui êtes-vous, que de *vils instruments* que je puis briser à ma fantaisie; qui n'existent qu'autant que vous savez obéir; qui n'êtes dans le monde que pour vivre sous mes lois ou pour mourir dès que je l'ordonne . . ." (51). Against this backdrop, ideals of

humanité and *charité* are denied a stable base in the character voicing them; they have coherence when taken on their own terms, but their context reveals the nature of this coherence, limited to the confines of the letter in which they are expressed, derived from language whose authority is not absolute. Similarly in letter 80, Usbek visualizes an ideal government based on moderation and a pragmatic sense of proportion: “Il m’a semblé que le plus parfait est celui qui va à son but à moins de frais; de sorte que celui qui conduit les hommes de la manière qui convient le plus à leur penchant et à leur inclination est le plus parfait . . .” (169).⁶ And yet in letter 20, he has regarded with clear suspicion the *inclinations déréglées* of Zachi, seeing repression as the only basis for stability and the only source of moral value: “Que feriez-vous, si, laissée à vous-même, vous n’aviez pour vous défendre que votre amour pour moi, qui est si grièvement offensé, et votre devoir que vous avez si indignement trahi?” (50). Set in its context, the compelling but illusory charm of the general statement is thrown into relief: *inclination* may appeal in theory as a basis for political order, but it collapses in the face of actual or assumed discord from values which already prevail.

The presence of one identity beneath another, undermining the autonomy of seemingly authoritative statements, is particularly clear in the tale of the Troglodytes. This tale may embody ideals to be cherished, but the reader is frequently aware of contrasting values in the one who imagines it; tale and teller are implicitly juxtaposed. The first Troglodytes will be condemned in letter 11 because they think only of themselves: “Vous avez dans l’âme un poison plus mortel que celui dont vous voulez guérir; vous ne méritez pas d’occuper une place sur la Terre, parce que vous n’avez point d’humanité, et que les règles de l’équité vous sont inconnues . . .” (31). But the opening of Usbek’s letter 2 has suggested in the writer precisely such sentiments: inhumanity and assertive selfishness: “Tu es le gardien fidèle des plus belles femmes de Perse; . . . tu tiens en tes mains les clefs de ces portes fatales qui ne s’ouvrent que pour moi . . . fais-leur en même temps sentir leur extrême dépendance” (12-13). It is onto this background that the utopian vision is projected. In his tale, Usbek evokes with evident approval the social and moral education of the people for whom virtue is the outcome of spontaneous and natural charity:

Ils aimaient leurs femmes, et ils en étaient tendrement chéris. Toute leur attention était d'élever leurs enfants à la vertu . . . ils leur faisaient surtout sentir que l'intérêt des particuliers se trouve toujours dans l'intérêt commun; que vouloir s'en séparer, c'est vouloir se perdre; que la vertu n'est point une chose qui doit nous coûter; qu'il ne faut point la regarder comme un exercice pénible; et que la justice pour autrui est une charité pour nous. (32)

In letter 2, however, there had been talk not of justice and *intérêt commun* but of incarceration and *dépendance*, and the term *vertu* described the fruit of constraint and force, not of freedom and moderation. Similarly, when Usbek stresses the preeminence of *pudeur* and delicacy in this ideal society:

C'était dans ces assemblées que parlait la Nature naïve: c'est là qu'on apprenait à donner le cœur et à le recevoir; c'est là que la pudeur virginale faisait en rougissant un aveu surpris, mais bientôt confirmé par le consentement des pères . . . (33)

the image evoked contrasts markedly with Zachi's portrayal of the harem in letter 3, where Usbek's conception of the *simplicité de la Nature* is the antithesis of all modesty. By the end of the tale the authority of this vision has been severely undermined. It is seen to be an empty linguistic construction, built on the expression of principles which are elsewhere explicitly flouted, or on terms—*vertu*, *Nature*, *pudeur*—which can be used to cover a wide range of conflicting meanings. Significantly, in the very next letter, 15, written by the first eunuch, the emptiness of this language is starkly underlined. References to nature and family bonds, so prized in Usbek's tale, are set now in a different context. In the harem, such terms have lost all their primary vitality:

Le temps vint où mon maître jeta sur toi les yeux. Il s'en fallait bien que la nature eût encore parlé lorsque le fer te sépara de la nature. . . . Je pris soin de ton éducation. La sévérité, toujours inséparable des instructions, te fit longtemps ignorer que tu m'étais cher. Tu me l'étais pourtant, et je te dirais que je t'aimais comme un père aime son fils, si ces noms de père et de fils pouvaient convenir à notre destinée. (38-39)

This lack of coherence in the characterization of Usbek and the moral foundations of his language may be seen to represent themes which will become familiar in Montesquieu's later writings—that the rift between theory and practice is great, or that virtue itself is inevitably subject to corruption.⁷ In letter 33 Usbek, like other satirical commen-

tators,⁸ implicitly recognizes the discrepancy between ideals and reality when he comments on the way physical factors can so easily disrupt our higher aspirations: “L’âme, unie avec le corps, en est sans cesse tyrannisée. . .” (73). And in letter 83, a crucial letter which stands almost at the center of the novel, he remarks on the power of the passions to dominate man’s actions and blind him to all else: “leur intérêt est toujours ce qu’ils voient le mieux. La Justice élève sa voix; mais elle a peine à se faire entendre dans le tumulte des passions” (175). Nevertheless, the linguistic instability through which such discrepancies are expressed may be seen to offer other insights into the nature of character and the power of language.

It is clear from the different letters addressed to Usbek that his “character” is not a monolithic whole, but a complex pattern of coexistent identities. In letter 7 Fatimé writes a note of cloying, if ironic sycophancy to a husband who fondly wishes to believe in his absolute authority, and in letter 10, Mirza can write to him as a spiritual mentor, *l’âme de notre société* (27), seeking advice on a moral problem; in letter 42, Pharan writes to him in confidence, counting on *les effets de cette vertu si respectée* (89), whereas in letter 62, Zélis proposes to her husband the early seclusion of their daughter, certain that such repression of natural instincts will meet with his approval; in letter 67, Ibben praises his *âme bien faite* (137), while in letter 79 the eunuch confidently anticipates his physical delight at the purchase of a beautiful slave: “Heureux Usbek! tu possèdes plus de beautés que n’en enferment tous les palais d’Orient. Quel plaisir pour toi de trouver, à ton retour, tout ce que la Perse a de plus ravissant” (169). This diversity of identity is reflected in the diversity of Usbek’s own comments on a single topic. On the subject of the harem, his expressions of opinion are particularly varied. In letters to his wives, he stresses the desirable probity of the régime, describing it to Zachi, in letter 20, as “un asile favorable contre les atteintes du vice” (50) and in letter 26, to Roxane as “cette douce retraite, où vous trouvez l’innocence” (60). Outside the confines of the harem, though, the view presented is quite different. In a letter to Ibben, 34, *innocence* becomes *subordination*, what was *doux* is now *grave* and *sévère*, and Usbek adopts a stance of enlightened detachment, implicitly evaluating the system not by standards of moral purity, but by those of personal freedom and fulfillment:

Il faut avouer que le sérail est plutôt fait pour la santé que pour les plaisirs: c'est une vie unie, qui ne pique point; tout s'y ressent de la subordination et du devoir; les plaisirs mêmes y sont graves, et les joies sévères. (73-74)

In letter 114, written to Rhédi, the contrast is even starker. Here the attitude is much more critical, as Usbek points out with confident assurance the political wastefulness of such a system: "Voilà comment un seul homme occupe à ses plaisirs tant de sujets de l'un et de l'autre sexe, les fait mourir pour l'État, et les rend inutiles à la propagation de l'Espèce" (241). It is clearly impossible to reconcile such different attitudes within any simple identity for Usbek, either as a Persian or a *philosophe*. Beneath the differences, though, a certain coherence is suggested. For all their diversity, each letter is characterized by the image of authority which it attempts to convey, an authority whose basis and language vary according to the recipient of the letter. It is as the embodiment of moral principle that Usbek so frequently asserts himself within the confines of the harem, and it is as the enlightened commentator that he so often writes to, and is perceived by others. Ibben's respect for his *âme bien faite* has already been noticed, and Rhédi's own constantly alert and probing letters to Usbek testify to the confidence which he has in his unprejudiced mind.

Through such constant shifts in perspective, the reader is invited to look beyond the immediate meaning of Usbek's letters and to see in each a different expression of his authority founded on the appropriation of a suitable language. This strategy is clearly apparent in letters to his harem, where the vocabulary of moral principle is visibly manipulated. In letter 20, Usbek admits that he is in the grips of a *violente jalousie* (48) at the behavior of Zachi, and yet he justifies his anger with reference to a concern for virtue, rather than to his hurt personal pride. Two languages are clearly contrasted in this letter, his and hers; what Zachi calls repression Usbek calls sanctity, what she calls *gêne*, he sees as the guarantee of her moral purity, and she is put under pressure to accept his terms: "Que feriez-vous encore si vous pouviez sortir de ce lieu sacré, qui est pour vous une dure prison. . . . Vous devez me rendre grâce de la gêne où je vous fais vivre, puisque ce n'est que par là que vous méritez encore de vivre" (50).

Similarly in letter 26 Usbek recalls with some irritation the *pudeur* of Roxane, his new bride. The quality he values in public is less

appealing when imposed on him, but he represents personal frustration in terms of reasonable displeasure: he contrasts her terms with his, *ennemi* with *époux*, *outrage* with *amour*, and attempts to assert the authority of his own language, just as he has earlier asserted his physical dominance: “Vous poussâtes trop loin vos chastes scrupules . . . vous me regardâtes comme un ennemi qui vous avait fait un outrage, non pas comme un époux qui vous avait aimée” (59-60). As the letter continues, repression is couched in and justified by the language of moral absolutes:

. . . quand nous vous enfermons si étroitement; que nous vous faisons garder par tant d’esclaves, que nous gênons si fort vos désirs lorsqu’ils volent trop loin: ce n’est pas que nous craignons la dernière infidélité; mais c’est que nous savons que la pureté ne saurait être trop grande, et que la moindre tache peut la corrompre. (61)

The developing harem rebellion serves in part to expose and undermine this linguistic tactic, revealing Usbek’s desire to exert power by assuming a stance of moral authority. In letter 148, his disguise is clearly apparent when expression of absolute values shades into that of violent tyranny. He begins with talk of purification and virtue: “Purifiez ce lieu infâme, et faites-y rentrer la vertu bannie” (324), but it merges visibly into a naked assertion of his force; threats are issued first against the eunuchs themselves and then against his wives: “dès ce moment, je mets sur votre tête les moindres fautes qui se commettront. Je soupçonne Zélis” (324). The language of virtue has become the language of terror.

Such strategies will be ruthlessly exposed also by Usbek’s wives. In letter 158, Zélis is proudly defiant as she sees degradation beneath Usbek’s image of authority, and in letter 161 Roxane uncovers the emptiness of his language, stripped away now to reveal selfish whim: what he calls *vertu* really means nothing more than *fantaisie*: “Tu devrais me rendre grâces encore du sacrifice que je t’ai fait . . . de ce que j’ai profané la vertu, en souffrant qu’on appelât de ce nom ma soumission à tes fantaisies” (334). The remark ironically recalls and reverses Usbek’s letter 20 in which he had demanded of Zachi the same *grâce*, the same acceptance of his terms. Significantly, though, this linguistic disguise is not confined to Usbek alone, but characterizes the power system which operates in the harem. Usbek is to this extent largely indistinguishable from the eunuch who, as early as letter 9, sets a model

for such behavior, openly confessing his delight in the power which language can bring:

Je me trouve dans le sérail comme dans un petit empire, et mon ambition, la seule passion qui me reste, se satisfait un peu. . . . Je m'arme de refus; je me hérise de scrupules; je n'ai jamais dans la bouche que les mots de devoir, de vertu, de pudeur, de modestie. Je les désespère en leur parlant sans cesse de la faiblesse de leur sexe et de l'autorité du maître. (24-25)

And when at the end of the novel Roxane claims her own independence, she draws on vocabulary familiar from Usbek's letters:

Comment as-tu pensé que je fusse assez crédule pour m'imaginer que je ne fusse dans le Monde que pour adorer tes caprices? que, pendant que tu te permets tout, tu eusses le droit d'affliger tous mes désirs? Non! J'ai pu vivre dans la servitude, mais j'ai toujours été libre: j'ai réformé tes lois sur celles de la Nature, et mon esprit s'est toujours tenu dans l'indépendance. (334)

Her assertion of authority coincides with her assumption of Usbek's vocabulary, and she can proudly proclaim it: "Ce langage, sans doute, te paraît nouveau" (334). Just as Usbek, in letter 8, had boasted of his enlightenment in speaking at court *un langage jusqu'alors inconnu*, so now Roxane justifies her superiority by the language she speaks.

It is significant that Usbek should be confronted in the harem by just those principles of natural freedom and independence which in earlier letters he has espoused. The *sérail* embodies the tensions and *dégoûts* which he had observed in Western marriages subject to laws against divorce, and the wives put into practice his views on suicide or on justified rebellion against tyranny, expressed in letter 76. What is liberty in one context, though, is seen as moral laxness in another, what is repression at one moment is virtue at another. Divergent points of view may all be clothed in the same language of moral authority, but such authority is revealed as an illusion, an image created by words. In letter 75, Usbek mercilessly uncovers this kind of pretense in European attitudes to slavery:

Il y a longtemps que les princes chrétiens affranchirent tous les esclaves de leurs états, parce que, disaient-ils, le christianisme rend tous les hommes égaux. Il est vrai que cet acte de religion leur était très utile: ils abaissaient par là les seigneurs, de la puissance desquels ils retireraient le bas peuple. (159)

Such is the power of language in political systems that self-interest is frequently concealed beneath a façade of enlightened liberalism; taken on its own terms the argument is flawless, but set in its context, its authority and moral value are lost.⁹

What Usbek sees in others, though, is clearly enacted in his own letters. In letter 129, for instance, he reflects on laws and lawmakers and makes an eloquent defense of conservatism over reform; the political, even moral wisdom of rebellion is brought into question:

Souvent ils les ont faites trop subtiles et ont suivi des idées logiciennes plutôt que l'équité naturelle. Dans la suite, elles ont été trouvées trop dures, et, par un esprit d'équité, on a cru devoir s'en écarter; mais ce remède était un nouveau mal. Quelles que soient les lois, il faut toujours les suivre et les regarder comme la conscience publique, à laquelle celle des particuliers doit se conformer toujours. (271)

The words have their own political logic, and indeed they will be echoed subsequently in the *Esprit des lois*.¹⁰ In their fictional context, though, the force of the argument is more subtly ambiguous: against the background of rebellion, adumbrated already in letter 64, enlightenment and personal interest become inseparable and the compelling autonomy of his language is fractured. In the same letter he can speak approvingly of coercion, defended in the name of stability. Earlier talk of spontaneity and the general will is replaced with references to a more centralized figure of authority, invested with quasi-divine status; abstract theorizing serves also as self-justification:

On remarque que, dans les pays où l'on met dans les mains paternelles plus de récompenses et de punitions, les familles sont mieux réglées: les pères sont l'image du Créateur de l'Univers, qui, quoiqu'il puisse conduire les hommes par son amour, ne laisse pas de se les attacher encore par les motifs de l'espérance et de la crainte. (271-72)

Just a few letters later, in 134, a parallel to such linguistic disguise is ironically suggested during Rica's visit to the library of St. Victor, where he sees a wide range of different commentaries on the Bible. Such texts, he is told, tell us less about the Scriptures than they do about the commentators, who so often coldly exploit the moral authority of their source to defend their own attitudes:

Ces auteurs, me repartit-il, n'ont point cherché dans l'Écriture ce qu'il faut croire, mais ce qu'ils croient eux-mêmes; ils ne l'ont point regardée comme un livre où étaient contenus les dogmes qu'ils devaient recevoir, mais comme un ouvrage qui pourrait donner de l'autorité à leurs propres idées. (283-84)

Significantly, in his last letter, 146, Usbek laments the degeneration of a people which takes its most disturbing form in their cynical manipulation of moral values to justify unjustifiable action: language is seen as the key to authority and power:

J'y ai vu tout un peuple, chez qui la générosité, la probité, la candeur, et la bonne foi ont passé de tous temps pour les qualités naturelles, devenir tout à coup le dernier des peuples; le mal se communiquer et n'épargner pas même les membres les plus sains; les hommes les plus vertueux faire des choses indignes et violer les premiers principes de la justice, sur ce vain prétexte qu'on la leur avait violée.

Ils appelaient des lois odieuses en garantie des actions les plus lâches et nommaient *nécessité* l'injustice et la perfidie. (321-22)

Set in their fictional context, these words, ostensibly concerned with France, could be seen to refer also to Usbek's own régime, where revolt is taking place in the name of virtue, independence and nature. Paradoxically, though, his letter enacts the very strategy which it condemns. The moral authority implicit in his analyses of foreign customs coincides with and is harnessed to justify his own displeasure at rebellion at home. Usbek, no less than his wives, no less than the people he observes, creates an image of enlightenment to authorize his own particular interests; the illusion of moral logic is achieved by the manipulation of language, superficially convincing but whose fragility is clearly exposed.

The consistency of character required by Classical theorists from Chapelain to Le Bossu is implicitly undermined in this fiction and Montesquieu exploits the liberty allowed by the epistolary form to leave without narratorial comment stark and challenging discrepancies in his text. Indeed, in his portrayal of Usbek, he suggests more clearly than any epistolary novelist before him, the protean nature of character, its multiple facets determined as much by the way the self is perceived by others, as they are by simple changes of mood. Through letters, the author explores the nature of such images, whose individual promises of coherence are undermined by the novel's structure. At the same time, though, this constant denial of authority to any individual letter exposes

the role of language in the exercise of power. Ideals themselves may not be called into question, but their expression in words, seemingly absolute and unchanging—*vertu, nature, pureté, liberté*—is revealed as dangerously misleading, susceptible to misuse, to appropriation as a means of transforming self-interest into self-justification. In the *Esprit des lois* XI, 2 Montesquieu will uncover the wide range of conflicting meanings attributed to the term *liberté*, and in XII, 18 he will comment on the depravity of the ancient Romans, who disguised violence beneath the rhetoric of peace: “on est désolé de voir les sophismes qu’employa la cruauté” (218). It is here, perhaps, that the underlying harmony of form and theme, character and letter is suggested in this novel. The world of traditional fiction, like that of political theory, creates an illusion of coherence, designed to persuade the reader of its authenticity. By disrupting this pattern in the *Lettres persanes*, by attributing to a character so fragmentary and elusive so many enlightened ideals, Montesquieu conveys on them the same illusory authority, an authority which is created by and confined to their status as theory, but which loses its force on contact with men.

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¹ Such accusations were made particularly by the abbé Gaultier in *Les Lettres persanes convaincues d’impiété* (1751).

² Cf. G.F. Marana, *L’Espion dans les cours des princes chrétiens* . . . , 9 vols. (Amsterdam, 1756) II, ii-iii: “La Philosophie de l’Auteur ne sera peut-être pas du goût de nos Philosophes chrétiens. Il raisonne souvent selon les principes des Mahométans. . . . On ne doit pas trouver mauvais, qu’il soutienne les intérêts de la religion dans laquelle il a été élevé; puisqu’il n’y a rien de plus naturel que de défendre les idées qu’on a sucées, s’il faut ainsi dire, avec le lait.” Or J.F. Bernard, *Réflexions morales, satiriques et comiques sur les mœurs de notre siècle* (Amsterdam: Bernard, 1713) 86: “ces fragmens consistent en quelques descriptions de nos manières Européennes. Le Persan conçoit presque toujours les choses selon le génie des Orientaux.”

³ Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes*, ed. P. Vernière (Paris: Garnier, 1975). All subsequent references are to this edition of the text.

⁴ Marana’s Mahmut expresses a similar attitude to Gery Boinou in III, 8, 46: “je te conseille de bien employer la vie présente . . . à chercher dans les élémens de quoi perfectionner la science & ta vertu,” and again in VII, 67, 435-36: “nous nous attachons aux opinions dont nous sommes imbus dans l’enfance; rien n’est capable de nous en faire démordre, & tout cela afin qu’il ne semble pas que nous doutions de la sagesse de nos ancêtres. . . . Mais toi & moi devons être plus raisonnables dans nos principes & dans notre conduite”; and so too does the Persian observe in Bernard’s *Réflexions*: “Quand je partis de notre commune patrie, je te communiquai mon dessein,

de voyager chez les infidèles dans la pensée que je pourrais écarter de mon esprit les préjugés qui comme autant de brouillards obscurcissent notre jugement & lui dérobent la vérité” (244).

⁵ Cf. *L’Espion turc* IV, 47, 257-58: “Laisse-toi conduire à la nature. . . . Ne fais que ce que l’humanité t’inspire”; or IV, 82, 451-52: “Vivons selon la nature & selon la raison, en tant qu’hommes; & soyons persuadés que nous plairons au bon Père de toutes choses, si nous vivons conformément à cette règle.”

⁶ This idea is itself developed in the *Esprit des lois* XIX, 5: “nous ne faisons rien de mieux que ce que nous faisons librement, et en suivant notre génie naturel!” (ed. R. Derathé, 2 vols. [Paris: Garnier, 1973] 1: 330).

⁷ These arguments have been developed particularly in articles which analyze the *Lettres persanes* as a novel—for instance: R. Laufer, “La Réussite romanesque et la signification des *Lettres persanes* de Montesquieu,” *Revue d’Histoire Littéraire de la France* 61 (1961) 188-203; B. Picard, “La Pensée et l’action dans Les *Lettres persanes*,” *French Review* 42 (1969) 857-64; R. O’Reilly, “The Structure and Meaning of the *Lettres persanes*,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 67 (1969) 91-131.

⁸ Cf. Bernard, *Réflexions*: “rien sous les Cieux n’est exempt de la souillure du vice” (215).

⁹ Bernard makes a similar comment about the outward observance of Christian ceremony which often conceals inner corruption (138).

¹⁰ Cf. *De l’esprit des lois* V, 7 or VIII, 14.