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ORIENTALISM AND REPRESENTATIONS
OF EXTERIORITY IN MONTESQUIEU'S
LETTRES PERSANES

Suzanne L. Pucci

Je dirai de cet homme qui partit seul
et découvrit vraiment les terres nouvelles
de l'histoire, qu'il n'eut pourtant
en tête que de rentrer chez soi.

Louis Althusser, *Montesquieu* (1959)

Ces fautes, dans les éditions suivantes,
se sont multipliées sans nombre parce
que cet ouvrage fut abandonné par son
auteur dès sa naissance.

Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes*

Another work, much earlier than Edward Said's *Orientalism*, marks exteriority, exclusion, and separation as privileged signifiers in the representation of the Orient and Occident.¹ Personal exile also marks a figure in that other work whose commentary on eighteenth-century Western, and particularly French, institutions serves as well to dislocate European cultural and political practices from their framework of convention and assumptions.² Usbek, of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, occupies the position of an outside observer of Western culture.³ His letters and those of his friend Rica, written for the most part to friends in Persia, articulate the Western world of the early eighteenth-century.

Usbek does not redefine Persia from his progressively Western enlightened philosophical perspective, nor does he ever reexamine his own role in the institution of the harem. He undergoes the tragedy of his harem's rebellion and the suicide of one of his wives. As has long been observed, the juxtaposition of Usbek's letters and those arriving from his harem suffices to contrast Orient and Occident along lines of political and sexual despotism. According to Roger Laufer, Usbek's devastation could be read as "l'acceptation de l'Occident comme un moindre mal, d'une société malgré tout viable."⁴ Following Said's perspective, however, the *Lettres persanes* might rather be considered a fictional paradigm of European appropriation of the Orient for its own ends.⁵ Certainly, no one would contest that, from the outset, the two Per-

sian travelers to France think and write in recognizably Western ways, even when they represent a pole of extreme difference from, or contrast to, European thought.

The privileged signifiers of separation and exteriority ascribable to Usbek and to various other elements in the Persian world of the *Lettres persanes* operate as more than a contrast to the image of a tolerant Europe or an alter ego of Europe's darker, unenlightened aspects. The Persian model of difference and exoticism can be shown to erode in this text, in which Western culture itself is repeatedly inscribed in the exteriority, exclusion, and rupture constituting the language of Montesquieu's fiction. For Said, representation is the textual consequence of the West's exteriority to the Orient: "What he [the Orientalist] says and writes, by virtue of the fact that it is said or written, is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact. The principle product of this exteriority is of course representation" (*Orientalism*, p. 21).⁶ This essay proposes to examine Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* in terms of its representations of exteriority. In so doing, however, a static model such as Said's, which posits representation as a product of cultural, moral, and existential exteriority, must cede to a textual dynamics in which the boundaries of a self-identical structure of authority and exteriority are continually transgressed.⁷ The *Lettres persanes* is, at moments, a satire of Western Europe, particularly of French society and culture; at other moments, it is a series of meditations on issues as diverse as virtue, fashion, religious fanaticism/tolerance, depopulation, social mores and political abuse. The topics that multiply in the over 160 Persian letters overdetermine the representation of exile and separation.⁸

The most obvious signifier of separation in Montesquieu's text can be located in a figure who represents, at the same time, the most exotic and the most obvious sign of difference from the West. No entity is more forcefully excluded from Western culture than the barbaric eunuch.⁹ Already invoked in the second letter in the capacity of slave to whom the master Usbek entrusts his wives during his absence, the eunuch's presence overshadows and undercuts Usbek's growing claim to tolerance, his inquiries into virtue. In letters to Usbek or to others in the same condition, the eunuch's enraged and frustrated complaints spell out the degradation of his position which situates him at the pole opposite that of Western enlightenment. Critics like Aram Vartanian have discussed the political and cultural implications of the eunuch's

function within the *Lettres persanes* both as victim of despotism and as the furious avenger of his own loss in his victimization of the harem wives.¹⁰ The eunuch as a slave of the despot perpetuates the tyranny of his master. Critics such as Jean Starobinski, Michel Delon, and Alan Singerman have pointed out other parallels between the impotence of Usbek to maintain order and control in the harem from a distance and several aspects of Western politics.¹¹ I propose first to examine the language of the eunuch as he describes his plight of castration, for this discourse finds resonance throughout Montesquieu's novel: "Lorsque mon premier maître eut formé le cruel projet de me confier ses femmes, et m'eut obligé par des séductions soutenues de mille menaces, de *me séparer pour jamais de moi-même*; las de servir dans les emplois les plus pénibles, je comptai sacrifier mes passions à mon repos et à ma fortune" (p. 62, my emphasis).

The separation of self from oneself, while signifying specifically a physical loss in the eunuch's tragedy, reverberates in the discourse of the master. Despite his newly acquired predilection for Western thought, for religious tolerance, Usbek, near the end of the novel, articulates his own tragedy, that is, the revolt in the harem, in exactly those terms provided by the eunuch: "Une tristesse sombre me saisit; je tombe dans un accablement affreux; il me semble que *je m'anéantis, je ne me retrouve moi-même* que lorsqu'une sombre jalousie vient s'allumer et enfanter dans mon âme la crainte, les soupçons, la haine et les regrets" (p. 344, my emphasis).

Aside from the elements of fear, suspicion, hatred, and regret, repeated in the letters of all the eunuchs, the separation of self from oneself echoes in Usbek's letter. But it is more than the themes of despotism and explicit sexual control/impotence which bear the marks of this lexical emphasis. It is repeated at several levels of the master's discourse. As a traveler to the Occident, Usbek is cut off, alienated from his own religious and philosophical as well as cultural and social environment. The Persian experiences, even adopts, Western philosophy at the same time that he progressively asserts his situation of exile.¹²

Usbek's first letter qualifies the project of voyage to the Occident as a consequence of "l'envie de savoir," which cannot be contained within the borders of Persia. "Nous n'avons pas cru que ses bornes fussent celles de nos connaissances, et que la lumière orientale dut seule nous éclairer" (Letter 1). The intimate association of knowledge with voyage, a topos already firmly

established in Western literary and philosophical tradition (for example, in Montaigne's *Essais* and in Descartes' *Discours sur la méthode*, is complicated in Montesquieu's text by a second reason for Usbek's departure, given in Letter 8. Here we are informed that Usbek had already been living in a kind of self-imposed exile within his own land, before his journey to the West. From his country home to which he withdrew, Usbek reviewed the Persian court and its moral practices: "Dès que je connus le vice, je m'en éloignai; mais je m'en approchai ensuite, pour le démasquer. Je portai la vérité jusques aux pieds du trône, j'y parlai un langage jusqu'alors inconnu" (p. 60).

Already in exile, then, Usbek must take another step forced by political exigencies to distance himself in a more radical way from the court and culture of Persia. The "langage inconnu" which unmasks vice, in other words, which identifies the corruption of vice under the signifying masks of virtue, becomes synonymous with knowledge and at the same moment with exile and distance from one's own culture, language, from oneself. Distance, then, is already required of Usbek in order that he might unmask vice, in order that he might speak this unknown or foreign language; at the same time, distance and exile are also direct consequences of his action and language. The act of identifying vice by locating it behind the masks of virtue already implies Usbek's difference and distance from the conventions of his society. The "langage inconnu" first surfaces when virtue can no longer be recognized as similar to itself, when the signified or the concept of virtue becomes severed from its signifiers. The acts and expressions interpreted at the Persian court as virtue become, according to Usbek's perspective, no longer the "propre" of virtue, no longer virtue's own domain; rather, the signifiers have become so many translations or codes which do not resemble, which are not at one with, their signifieds.

Usbek dramatizes the paradoxes of knowledge acquired through travel. For the disruptions in the coherence of the sign (between signifier and signified) proliferate in this text as both cause and effect of the "langage inconnu." We do not have to wait until the fictional moment of contact between Usbek, his companion Rica, and Western society to witness the consequences of knowledge as separation. Already within his own domain, Usbek has taken up a position as foreigner. The voyage, as a metaphoric projection of eighteenth-century enlightenment ideals, carries, from its inception in Montesquieu's text, the properties of exile and self-

alienation, creating the very space of knowledge—as a gap—in the *Lettres persanes* and finding an analogue in the violent self-estrangement, in the repeated lack experience by the eunuch.¹³

The value of knowledge, of travel, is fraught, then, with both negative and positive connotations, which are employed strategically in Usbek's meditation on moral and social virtue in the distant and mythical society of the Troglodytes. The question "what is virtue?" is initially formulated in a letter to Usbek by Mirza, his Persian friend: "Je t'ai souvent ouï dire que les hommes étaient nés pour être vertueux et que *la justice est une qualité qui leur est aussi propre* que l'existence. Explique-moi, je t'en prie, ce que tu veux dire" (p. 66, my emphasis).

Four letters follow in which Usbek develops his theory of virtue through a recounting of the history or, rather, the mythical story of the Troglodytes, their atrocities and their reemergence as embodiments of virtue. And as already evident in the formulation of Usbek's statement, virtue and justice are designated as properties constitutive ("le propre") of man's existence. In fact, this episode strategically locates the notion of virtue/non-virtue within the complicated web of textual associations of separation and loss on the one hand and of resemblance and unity on the other.

Usbek's first letter demonstrates the Troglodytes' quarrelsome, nasty character in the murder of their foreign king and subsequent decision to follow the precept: "every man for himself" ("Je penserai uniquement à moi," p. 67). Their behavior reaps the opposite effect when, as Usbek relates, each individual loses his possessions: his wife, his food, his land, his life. Loss of self is attributed to an overemphasis on self, while, as we will see, the individual's commitment to the common interest will allow him to be fully integrated with others and with himself.

But there were Troglodytes who, different from the rest, retire to "un pays écarté" and there, "séparés de leurs compatriotes indignes," worked together and, with their wives, cultivated the land, raised families. "Toute leur attention était d'élever leurs enfants à la vertu. Ils leur représentaient sans cesse les malheurs de leurs compatriotes, et leur mettaient devant les yeux cet exemple si triste: 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*" (p. 71, my emphasis). The notion of separation here serves two opposing contexts. The first example of separation in the distancing of the two Troglodytes from their land and compatriots recalls Usbek's own withdrawal, first

from the court, then from his own country. And it is this distance which, in both examples, generates and is generated by a new concept, a new language. But, in exactly the converse of the above situation, separation in the example quoted above serves as a threat to the children through emphasis on the negative value of distancing oneself from the common interest. Furthermore, this distancing from the group is explicitly associated in the above passage with the vocabulary of self-loss (“se perdre”).

Extreme self-interest as well as the desire to know, to travel, and to found a new language and a virtuous society are marked with the attributes of separation and self-loss in Montesquieu’s text. The repetition of terms such as “se perdre,” “se séparer,” or “retour sur soi” find continuing paradoxical emphasis throughout the *Lettres Persanes* and confound the borders of those very terms conceived on the contrast between unity and separation, between resemblance and difference. At moments, a specific political strategy can be discerned in this overdetermination. For example, the formation of a Troglodyte society depicts a passage from individual self-interest to the common interest by evading the question of any necessary renunciation of one’s own rights to the collective. Instead of raising this question, Montesquieu presents an unproblematic extension of individual or, as we will see, family virtue and justice to an entire society, relegating self-loss only to those who remain outside the boundaries of an already formed society.

The text attempts to cover over any notion of difference, of self-renunciation in the passage from individual to social virtue by founding the new Troglodyte society on the transmission of virtue and justice from father to son. Virtue is represented as identical to itself through the parental bond of blood relations, becoming an almost inherited birthright of the son’s similarity to the father and continuing unbroken to constitute an entire society: “Ils eurent bientôt la consolation des pères vertueux, qui est d’avoir des enfants qui leur *ressemblent*. Le jeune peuple qui s’éleva sous leurs yeux s’accrut par d’heureux mariages: le nombre augmenta, *l’union fut toujours la même*” (p. 71, my emphasis).

Virtue, therefore, is not, as was the case at the Persian court or as it will be portrayed throughout French society, different from itself. In both Persian and Parisian society, the signifiers of virtue are represented in their difference and separation from their signified through a “langage inconnu,” a “foreign” perspective. In the far away land of the mythical Troglodytes, the signifiers of virtue

and justice resemble their signifieds as in a relation of biological or genetic necessity.¹⁴

Montesquieu and Vico were the only major political theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to remain unconcerned with the theory of social contract.¹⁵ Althusser attributes this reticence of Montesquieu to consider a contractual relationship between equal individuals as instrumental in maintaining the status quo of feudalism.¹⁶ The representation of man in his natural state as already socially predisposed effects a passage from individual to society, which indeed admits of no passage at all from one level to another. Within this context, a set of conventions such as those of contract, which would effect social change according to what society should be or become, must inevitably be regarded as an imposition of artificial and arbitrary convention.

Usbek's fourth letter on the Troglodytes concerns the development of their virtue into a monarchical structure which assumes textual attributes implicit in Althusser's thesis and which, as I have been demonstrating, can be located in direct opposition to the identity of signifier and signified. As the Troglodyte population grows, the people decide to choose a king. Once transferred from the family line of descendancy, once the resemblance between father and son no longer defines the parameters of virtue, virtue undergoes translation into a series of codes which are categorized in the text as exterior to, as separated from, both the concept and practice of moral excellence.

A crown is offered to a wise and just elder chosen to rule the Troglodytes. Tears springing to his eyes, the future king predicts the demise of his people's virtue at the moment it is to be inscribed in the codes and laws of monarchy: "Je vois bien ce que c'est, ô Troglodytes; votre vertu commence à vous peser...vous aimez mieux être soumis à un prince, et obéir à ses lois moins rigides que vos mœurs... Comment se peut-il que je commande quelque chose à un Troglodyte? Voulez-vous qu'il fasse une action vertueuse, parce que je la lui commande, lui qui la ferait tout de même sans moi, et par le seul penchant de la nature?" (p. 76). Virtue, whose similarity with itself lies in the identity of father and son according to the bonding of nature's laws of reproduction, becomes separated from its signified in the projected order of princes and kings: "Je vais bientôt revoir vos sacrés aïeux; pourquoi voulez-vous que je les afflige; et que je sois obligé de leur dire que je vous ai laissé sous un autre joug que celui de la vertu?" (p. 76).

This temporal break in the continuity of ancestral forms of virtue with that of subsequent rule is addressed in another intercalated story related in the *Lettres persanes*. Letters 67 and 68 present a story of the plight of the Guèbres, an ancient sect whose former rule of Persia has been supplanted by Muslim law. Similar difficulties plague the brother and sister, Aphéridon and Astarté, as they are obliged to conform to the new codes their own country has adopted. Like the early Troglodytes, brother and sister must flee to a faraway land in order to practice their beliefs; within Muslim society, they communicate in ancient Persian, their own language, which remains “inconnu” to anyone outside the Guèbre religion and culture.

The distance necessary to both Usbek, who goes into exile while still in Ispahan, and to the first families of Troglodytes, who must secure a distance between themselves and the rest of their tribe in order to found a new society, appears as well in the example of the Guèbres. However, the initial and ultimate gaps are here closed between ancestors and subsequent generations of similar beliefs and social, moral orientation. Across the ruptures and separation from the past, the story of Aphéridon and Astarté traces an unbroken line of resemblance between father and son by celebrating the union of the “same” through the vehicle of incest.

As members of the Guèbre religion, formerly the dominant religion of Persia, Aphéridon and Astarté are obliged to live according to Muslim law. The Guèbre religion, which is represented by Aphéridon as Persia’s own or “propre” rule, indigenous to the soil of their country, sanctifies above all else, in Montesquieu’s text, the notion of a unified, united family. A brother’s love for his sister is not merely accepted but encouraged by a society whose customs reproduce and re-present nature’s bonds: “qui sont des images si naïves de l’union déjà formée par la nature” (p. 170). Forced to renounce the Guèbre faith to enter a sultan’s harem, the sister, after a long separation from her brother, is chastised by him in the name of their fathers: “Est-il vrai que vous avez quitté la religion de nos pères?” (p. 172). The situation of Astarté who accepted marriage with a eunuch of the sultan’s harem, in order to be permitted glimpses of her brother, is contrasted by Aphéridon to her mother’s freedom within the bosom of Guèbre law: “Votre mère qui était si chaste, ne donnait à son mari pour garant de sa vertu, que sa vertu même: ils vivaient heureux l’un et l’autre dans une confiance mutuelle” (p. 173, my emphasis).

Indeed, virtue must only be defined by virtue. The union of the “same” bespeaks a code equivalent in the text to a series of tautological statements. After Astarté’s conversion back to the Guèbre religion, brother and sister escape Ispahan and, far from Muslim rule, they are united in marriage: “Ma sœur, lui dis-je, que cette union est sainte. La nature nous avait unis, notre sainte loi va nous unir encore” (p. 177). Insistence on the verbal and nominal expressions of unity (“union,” “unis,” “unir”), a term which returns again and again not only in the above passage but throughout this particular story, valorizes resemblance and identity in the repetitive use of the adjective “sainte.” A tautological litany of the same constitutes a bonding of the marked differences between nature/law, past/present, and male/female.

In the brother Aphéridon’s impassioned eulogy of their father’s religion, his mention of women’s equality introduces a contrast to the inferior status of women under Muslim rule to justify the union of what is already the same. The practice of incest is insinuated into this text through its identity with the principle of family blood union and ancestral ties, boldly clashing with the principles associated with the castrated husband of Astarté. For the eunuch, here as well as earlier in the text, marks a dramatic cleavage between nature/law, man/woman, and man/himself.¹⁷

Yet the tale of incest which explicitly honors a repetition of the “same” is embedded in a structure which contradicts it. Both geographical and cultural distance separate Usbek from Aphéridon. The religion and customs of the Guèbres differ strikingly both from Western culture under Usbek’s observation and from that of his own Muslim frame of reference. Furthermore, though apprised of Usbek’s existence through their common friend Ibben, Aphéridon writes memoirs not letters that would specifically address a reader. Separated in time (the past of Persia’s Guèbre religion, the past events of Aphéridon and Astarté) and space from the experience of Usbek or any Western reader, the Guèbre story, like that of the mythical Troglodytes, presents, across the chasm of the exotic, an ideal union of the signifier and signified in the familial.

Moreover, the Guèbre’s life story is not sent directly to Usbek; Ibben introduces it in his own letter to Usbek, which begins by reproaching the latter for his absence and neglect. Not surprisingly, this reproach revolves around and is cast in a familiar idiom: “si tu ne m’aimes pas dans un pays où tu n’es lié à rien, que sera-ce au milieu de la Perse et dans le sein de ta famille?” (p. 169).

Ibben, in Arabic the "son of," stresses the importance of union with one's own family and friends, as, within Aphéridon's narrative, the Guèbres insist on making a return to their past family ties within the hostile environment of an alien culture and religion. Ibben's insistence on Usbek's union with familial and familiar cultural ties implies a substitution of the ideals emphasized in Aphéridon's story for the positive value of knowledge associated with travel. For it is as an echo of the resemblance and union idealized in the Guèbre story that Ibben can agree to build a rapport with foreign peoples and cultures: "En quelque pays où j'ai été, j'y ai vécu comme si j'avais dû passer ma vie: j'ai eu la *même* compassion, ou plutôt la *même* tendresse pour les malheureux, le *même* estime pour ceux que la prospérité n'a point aveuglés" (p. 169, my emphasis).

In converting each new and foreign place to his own, Ibben continues to act and to judge according to the same categories and criteria, valid for every place and always in harmony with the principles of his own cultural integrity. "Compassion," "zeal," "tenderness," "estime" always resemble themselves despite the differences of milieu. The presentation of the Guèbre story of incest within the structure of Ibben's and Usbek's correspondence, like a stone's impression on the water, generates an unending series of concentric circles that reflect family similarity. The family ties, whose ultimate expression of intimacy is incest, redefine, through contiguity, even Usbek's relations to the foreign, enclosing them within the circularity of self-identity. On the other hand, the ideal model of unity and resemblance located within both Troglodyte and Guèbre society seems repeatedly in the *Lettres persanes* to be situated in the distant world of the exotic.

Montesquieu's text equates the notion of the individual's coherence with his similarity to himself and to blood relations in an unchanging society; nevertheless, this identity of signifier and signified is evoked in a text whose claims of enlightenment are specifically engendered by the ambivalent and ubiquitous notion of the "foreign." If the familiarization and familialization of the foreign resurfaces in this text as one of its constant currents, the insistent "retour sur soi," this repeated liaison with one's "own," unendingly cuts across the boundaries of difference, severing the concept and practice of enlightened knowledge from the voices which speak and hear it.

Montesquieu's text thematizes an opposition between unity and fragmentation. Castration and the series of painful separations

recurrently evoked in this text lead to the negative values of Usbek's personal tragedy of self-loss and to what is represented as the pure exteriority of political convention or contract. The lost and distant paradises or utopias (etymologically "no place") of the Troglodyte and Guèbre society are represented as embodying an integration of the individual with the social level, thereby representing the positive values of coherence and self-identity. Yet the negative fragmentation, whose signifiers multiply throughout the *Lettres persanes*, becomes textually inseparable from an articulation of the ideal or unified individual and society, indistinguishable from the representation of separation and distance which explicitly define the parameters of knowledge and virtue.

As mentioned earlier, critics have increasingly concentrated on illustrating the textual parallels between the castrated eunuch and Usbek, between the literal fact of castration and the metaphorical separations which can be traced in the hierarchy of political and social power in French culture, from courtesans, to ministers, to lackeys.¹⁸ Yet the "chaîne secrète et inconnue" which binds the fictional element of the oriental intrigue with an examination of the West, which situates the eunuch as the "propre" of castration figuratively transposed onto Western culture, does not take into account yet another notion of separation operating simultaneously throughout the *Lettres persanes* to orient the reader's perspective.

Whereas separation from one's own culture might be construed in this text as the most important condition for learning, separation also functions to cover over the impetus for discovery, becoming the function of the exotic. The exotic (from the Greek meaning "outside") predicates an inside, an integral cultural reality from which perspective the unknown or alien is appropriated. What is covered over or reintegrated in this new gaping distance is an exteriority which has been defined as inherent in critical examination and in the self. As long as the exotic can be located in a culture defined as "other," and viewed from the perspective of those who belong to the "same," the inherent danger of self-loss through knowledge can be recuperated and annulled. Identification of the reader with the perspective of Usbek consistently threatens to surface as the evolving philosopher speaks of strangely familiar institutions, practices, and ideals in his own and "unknown language." At the same time, if to recognize one's self in the "other" signifies the self-alienation of the reader, the traces of the Orient, such as those in the Harem intrigue, work also in

an opposite direction to situate Usbek as an exotic "other" whose presence within Parisian society evokes curiosity, disbelief, and the well-known question, which is an affirmation: "Comment peut-on être persan?" (p. 105).

Nowhere is this paradoxical orientation more explicit than in Montesquieu's "Quelques réflexions sur les *Lettres persanes*."¹⁹ The connotations of separation and unity proliferate in a dizzying spiral as the diverging significations of these terms coexist within the few dense pages of a preface. The signifiers of union and separation in this metatext remain thematized, constituting the axis around which literary, philosophical, and social questions revolve.

It is as a unity of its constituent parts that Montesquieu's supplemental preface identifies and valorizes the *Lettres persanes*. "On voit le commencement, le progrès, la fin: les divers personnages sont placés dans une chaîne qui les lie" ("Réflexions," p. 43). The individual characters as well as the diverse subject matter treated in the letters (termed "digressions" in any other work) do not depend on any previously conceived "dessein ou d'aucun plan déjà formé" (p. 43). Though Montesquieu alludes to the individual aspects of various subjects and characters seemingly treated without a preconceived design, all these elements mysteriously cohere in an unexplained unity: "L'auteur s'est donné l'avantage de pouvoir joindre de la philosophie, de la politique et de la morale, à un roman; et de *lier* le tout par une *chaîne* secrète et, en quelque façon inconnue" ("Réflexions," p. 44, my emphasis).

Like the fully integrated levels of the individual with familial, social, and political orders in the Troglodyte and Guèbre worlds, the linking in the novel's construction of individual characters with the social, political, and philosophical orders suggests an inherent connection: the diverse aspects of the novel are bound in ways similar to the organic bonds of blood relations. Montesquieu extols the merits of his novel by stressing its unconventional, original unity that goes beyond the codes or mere conventions of fiction. What would normally be considered digressive in a novel is integrated in this epistolary work. The "chaîne" of which the narrator speaks does not reside on the surface, is not exterior to but constitutive of the text, remaining "secrète et inconnue."

On the one hand, Montesquieu purports the cohesive unity of this work to go beyond formal conventions and to be organic to its creation. On the other, he emphasizes a disjunction between the individual letter-writer and the world he observes. As an apol-

ogy, Montesquieu's "Réflexions" understandably attempts to mitigate the Persians' perspicacious account of Western and French life by calling into question their criteria of observation. Not unexpectedly, it is in terms of separation and distance that Montesquieu represents the relation of the Persians to the Western world, evoking the familiar pattern of disjunction between the signifier and signified. Emphasis on the unity of the *Lettres persanes* gives way to the radical contrast sketched out between the perspective of the Persian letter-writers and the world they describe. Europe becomes "un autre univers" as the Persians are transplanted to a strange world. Their thoughts are "singulières," and, consequently, to be linked not to the referent but restrictively to their individual and alienated experiences. "Bien loin qu'on pensât à intéresser quelque principe de notre religion, on ne se soupçonnait pas même de l'imprudence. Ces traits se trouvent toujours liés avec le sentiment de surprise et d'étonnement, et point avec l'idée d'examen, et encore moins avec celle de critique" ("Réflexions," pp. 44-45, my emphasis). The remarks of Usbek in particular should always be linked with surprise rather than criticism, while, conversely, these comments display an absolute lack of union or tie with "nos autres vérités": "Et s'ils trouvent quelquefois nos dogmes singuliers, cette singularité est toujours marquée au coin de la parfaite ignorance des liaisons qu'il y a entre ces dogmes et nos autres vérités" (Réflexions," p. 45). A discrepancy posited between the signifying dogma and practices of Western culture, religion, and "our own truths" is strategically converted into the term of "liaison." Within the Western context, the liaison of signifier and signified remains unbroken.

Those terms of separation employed ambiguously throughout the novel to connote the consequences and the anxiety of self-loss and castration, and to engender the perspective necessary for virtue and knowledge, are reversed to impede such a reading. For separation is employed here to denote "ignorance" while "liaison," as used above, works to cover over the discrepancies that distance discloses. Yet the sought-after ideal of liaison and unity can be articulated, as in the example of the Guèbres and Troglo-dytes, only through the distance and perspective of the exotic. Terms such as "liaison," "union," "lié", emerge in this text under the tutelage of separation and exteriority.

In a final remark of the "Réflexions," Montesquieu beseeches his reader to "faire attention que tout l'agrément consistait dans le contraste éternel entre les choses réelles et la manière singulière,

naive, ou bizarre dont elles étaient aperçues" ("Réflexions," p. 45). The lack of coincidence between an individual perspective and "les choses réelles," which constitutes the point of departure and impetus for Usbek's journey from his own culture, here becomes the means to annul that discrepancy through a change in vantage point. Usbek's perspective of distance and separation from Western culture, which yields a critical difference, is reversible into a perspective which does not relate, which has no connection with "nos autres vérités." The very reversibility of these positions, however, threatens to confound the distinction Montesquieu appears, on one level, to seek. Emphasis in the above quotation on the collective "nos vérités," or earlier, on "notre religion" ultimately subverts the notion of cultural unity. For by identifying these truths precisely as a specific cultural entity and unity ("nos," "notre"), they fall into the same category of restrictive truths which Usbek identifies in French culture and which, simultaneously, tragically delimit Usbek's perspective on his own situation.

The epistolary form, in effect, acts as a pivot to insure the potential reversibility of knowledge into the exotic and vice versa. The literary benefits to be derived from the letter form also serve to estrange each correspondent from the truths and reality which lie beyond his/her individual purview. Montesquieu explicitly valorizes the spontaneity and authenticity of self-expression conferred on the novel by its epistolary form. "D'ailleurs, ces sortes de romans réussissent ordinairement, parce que l'on rend compte soi-même de sa situation actuelle; ce qui fait plus sentir les passions que tous les récits qu'on en pourrait faire" ("Réflexions," p. 43).

In rendering an account of one's own situation, each correspondent engenders an outside, the space of his own exteriority; for the letter, by dint of its personalized mark, also circumscribes each correspondent, isolating him/her within the confines of his/her own desires, interests, and truths. The discrepancy and separation between each partial and individual confession of thought and feeling and the readers in/outside the text constitute another kind of chain: one which links the Westerner with the Easterner, which binds and blinds an individual to his own culture and which links knowledge to the exotic.

The criteria of exteriority and separation, reiterated by Said throughout *Orientalism*, function to reinvent the East according to the needs and aims of the Westerner. Said directs his inquiries to the discrepancy between the image of the Orient created by and

for the West and the Orient's existence in itself. Speaking, for example, of the early Christian misunderstanding of Islam, he states, "Islam became an image—the word is Daniel's but it seems to me to have remarkable implications for Orientalism in general—whose function was not so much to represent Islam in itself as to represent it for the Medieval Christian" (*Orientalism*, p. 60).

Montesquieu's work revolves around and is caught within this very question. For each "image" of East and/or West is represented as a function of an "other" individual and separate context. Neither Islam nor French culture is represented "in itself." The reader can choose to observe the foreign world of the "other," noting the discrepancies between Usbek's growing enlightenment and simultaneous blindness; in so choosing, however, to undertake this journey, Montesquieu's novel obliges the reader to return with anxiety to his/her "own." It is not enough to say, with Said, that Orientalism exists and has always existed in the service of an imperialist perspective. It is also essential to understand that in works such as Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* the "oriental" functions as a bearer of disrupting differences and exteriority, which cannot be contained within the figure of exoticism; rather they operate textually, now as then, to constitute the Western notion of "knowledge" and "self."

NOTES

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
2. Said explores Western cultural, historical, and political institutions as they operate to invest and invent the Orient. The West's radical separation from "the 'real' or actual Orient" ("Interview with Edward Said," *Diacritics* 5 [1976]: 40) is related to the dimension of Said's personal feeling of exile (*Orientalism*, p. 27).
3. Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes*, ed. Jean Starobinski (Paris: Gallimard, 1973). All references to the *Lettres persanes* in my text are to this edition.
4. "La Réussite romanesque et la signification des *Lettres persanes* de Montesquieu," *Revue d'histoire littéraire* 61 (1961): 196.
5. "Orientalism is premised on exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West" (Said, *Orientalism*, p. 20).
6. On the one hand, Said imputes representation to the exteriority of the Orientalist's perspective due to ethnocentric bias, to the hegemony of the West. On the other, he invokes a poststructural principle of representation which supposedly functions, without contradiction, to support the former claim: "In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a *re-presentation*, or a representation" (*Orientalism*, p. 21). Ironically, this latter definition is, nevertheless, employed in the service of a traditional re-presentation. For representation derives paradoxically in Said's text from a pure difference, an unmediated exclusion which is always and fully present.

7. See Richard Klein, "That He Said that Said Said," *Enclitic*, 2 (1978). Klein speaks of the ways in which, for Said, there is "the same violent exclusion, the confirmation in reality of an always identical truth. The critical apparatus of Said excludes, not perhaps in practice (Said is open to many suggestions) but in principle, the intertextual function of overdetermination: the insertion of any figure in a vast textual network which not only dislocates the stable contours of a persona or fetish, but in the differential movement of its signifying activity, disrupts the presentation of any performing intention" (p. 92).

8. The term "overdetermination" should be understood here, as implied in note 7, as an extension of the Freudian category of "Überdeterminierung." Jacques Lacan, insisting on "overdetermination" as "un trait général des formations de l'inconscient," relates these formations to the functioning of language. The symptom, in its broadest sense, is "structuré comme un langage" ("Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse," *La Psychanalyse* [Paris: P.U.F., 1965], 1: 114). According to J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis (*Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* [Paris: P.U.F., 1967], p. 469), this formation "n'est jamais le signe univoque d'un contenu inconscient unique, de même que le mot ne peut se réduire à un signal."

9. Alain Grosrichard's excellent book, *La Structure du sérail: La Fiction du despotisme asiatique dans l'occident classique* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), surveys the position of the eunuch as represented in the works of eighteenth century writers and travelers. Not only, as in the case of the *Lettres persanes*, are eunuchs defined as totally foreign to Western society, they are presented by Chardin, for example, as foreigners excluded as well from oriental society: "Les eunuques comme... les filles du harem, viennent toujours d'ailleurs" (Grosrichard, p. 183). Chardin writes: "puisqu'ils sont tous nés de gens du néant, ils ne savent la plupart de quel pays ils sont." *Voyages en Perse* (re-edition of *Journal du voyage du chevalier Chardin en Perse et aux Indes orientales* [London, 1686]) (Amsterdam, 1711), 2: 284. From this perspective, the eunuchs are foreign to the West but are equally estranged from Persian society and finally as Grosrichard says: "ils sont aussi si l'on peut dire, coupés d'eux-mêmes" (p. 184).

10. "Eroticism and Politics in the *Lettres persanes*," *Romanic Review* 60 (1969): 23-33.

11. Starobinski, *Montesquieu par lui-même* (Paris: Seuil, 1953), pp. 53, 66, and "Préface," in *Lettres persanes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 24; Delon, "Un Monde d'eunuques," *Europe* 55 (1977): 79-88; Singerman, "Réflexions sur une métaphore: Le Sérail dans les *Lettres persanes*," *Studies on Voltaire and the 18th Century* 185 (1980): 181-198. See also Roger Kempf, "Les *Lettres Persanes* ou le corps absent," *Tel Quel* 22 (1965): 81-87. The question of the eunuch and the harem as related to the concept of the despot has been brilliantly treated by Grosrichard, *La Structure du sérail*. Though the entire book sheds light on this question in Montesquieu's novel, see particularly pp. 34-67.

12. Laufer connects Usbek's tragedy with the notion of "détachement de l'observateur objectif," *La Réussite romanesque*, (p. 63).

13. This lack, repeated in the eunuch's ongoing complaints and fury, must be understood in relation to his sexual desire which continues unabated: "j'espérais que je serais délivré des atteintes de l'amour, par l'impuissance de la satisfaisaire. Hélas! on éteignit en moi l'effet des passions, sans en éteindre la cause; et, bien loin d'en être soulagé, je me trouvai environné d'objects qui les irritaient sans cesse. J'entrai dans le sérail, où tout m'inspirait le regret de ce que j'avais perdu" (p. 62). The completely alien creature of loss, of self-exile in his relation to the law

and its interdiction, resembles the master. See also Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Paris: Desoer, 1820), 5: 253-260. Bayle's article "Combabus" places into question the notion of the eunuch as a complete alien, as inexorably other. As opposed to coming from a foreign culture (see note 9), Combabus is a beautiful Syrian gentleman who castrates himself to honor his sovereign, to protect himself from his sovereign's law. Bayle, in fact, questions the purity of Combabus' relation to the queen even given his castration.

14. In the discussion of letter 94, Usbek accordingly denies the necessity of inquiring into the origins of and reasons for society's formation because it already exists as an evident continuation of the initial, "natural" and necessary relation of father to son: "je n'ai jamais ouï parler du droit public, qu'on n'ait commencé par rechercher soigneusement quelle est l'origine des sociétés; ce qui me paraît ridicule. Si les hommes n'en formaient point, s'ils se quittaient et se fuyaient les uns les autres, il faudrait en demander la raison, et chercher pourquoi ils se tiennent séparés; mais ils naissent tous liés les uns aux autres; un fils est né auprès de son père, et il s'y tient: voilà société et la cause de la société" (pp. 220-221).

15. Charles E. Vaughan, *History of Political Philosophy* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1960), 2: 253.

16. Montesquieu: *La Politique et l'histoire* (Paris: P.U.F., 1964), pp. 15-18.

17. In letter 22, one eunuch speaks for the others, defining their collective role within society: "le désordre naissait entre les deux sexes, parce que leurs droits étaient réciproques. Nous sommes entrés dans le plan d'une nouvelle harmonie: nous avons mis entre les femmes et nous la haine, entre les hommes et les femmes l'amour." Grosrichard cites this passage, calling it "le condensé d'un discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité entre les sexes. Enfin, paraît l'eunuque, qui amenant les sexes à se 'dénaturer' tout à fait, restaure sur d'autres principes l'harmonie perdue" (p. 203).

18. For an explicit statement concerning the metaphorical transposition of Oriental despotism onto the Western world, see Claude Dauphiné, "Pourquoi un roman du sérail," *Europe* 55 (1977): 89; Delon, "Un monde d'eunuques," p. 95; Singerman, "Reflexions sur une métaphore," p. 183.

19. Added in 1754, thirty-three years after initial publication of *Lettres persanes* in 1721.