WRITING THE FEMALE VOICE

Essays on Epistolary Literature

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Letters from the Harem: Veiled Figures of Writing in Montesquieu's Lettres persanes

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What if, therefore, the crucial thing to do were rather, or especially, to conclude that the other exists—and the self in the other—from the fact of thinking? What if I thought only after the other has been inserted, introjected into me? Either as thought or as a mirror in which I reflect and am reflected?

Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*

CAN THERE BE a better place to view female passion than in the often torrid and suggestive letters of the harem wives in Montesquieu's eighteenth-century novel, the *Lettres persanes?* Written exclusively to their absent husband and lord Usbek—who, in self-imposed exile, is set adrift in the exotic culture and intellectual climate of the West—these letters allow the European reader to dream of those sacred and secret places where, protected, shielded, imprisoned, the intriguing and sensuous women of the Orient are cultivated like rare flowers for the exclusive adornment and pleasure of their master. Schooled to remain ignorant of all that lies outside the harem's well-guarded walls and bolted doors, the women of the harem seem knowledgeable only in the gratification of man's desire. From the novel's outset and from the very first letter from the harem, female passion is inscribed within the confines of a spatial, political, and epistolary structure whose discursive and virtual subject is determined by a male perspective.

Montesquieu's novel presents the world of eighteenth-century France through letters written for the most part by Usbek and Rica, two

Persian travelers on a prolonged visit to Europe. While these so-called Persians document their experiences and their often astonished reactions to the strange customs, practices, and beliefs obtaining in the West, their letters also provide the reader a fleeting glimpse of the exotic Orient, whose mystery is embodied in the representation of the harem, a realm of seemingly radical political, and especially erotic, alterity. But the dreams of the voyeur take on for Usbek the shape of a nightmare. Obsessive fears regarding his harem women's fidelity and what he deems their constantly threatened virtue are not abated by the army of eunuchs who govern them in his absence; nor are these fears mediated by Usbek's evolving tolerance throughout the *Persian Letters* in the domains of political, religious, and philosophical thought culled from firsthand experience during his sojourn in the West and particularly in Paris, the capital of the French Enlightenment. In his protracted absence from Ispahan and the seraglio, the erotic vision provided by letters from his harem wives, to be enjoyed or ignored by Usbek at will, is irrevocably transformed into personal tragedy with the ultimately overt infidelities and revolt of his harem and with the suicide of one of his wives.

Studies such as those of Alain Grosrichard, Aram Vartanian, Alan Singermann, and Michel Delon focus on the importance of the harem in the *Lettres persanes,* whose erotics of polygamy is demonstrated to retain characteristics integral to the representation of oriental despotism in Montesquieu's text—a structure that at the same time resembles that of eighteenth-century western institutions, particularly that of the absolute monarchy.[1] From 1711 to 1720, the scrupulously dated letters that fly back and forth from Usbek and Rica to their diverse correspondents of family, friends, and acquaintances at home and abroad reflect an experience of the French capital and of the western world that continuously dislocates and distances each social, political, religious, and philosophical practice from its conventional signified. The exotic in the text frequently displays, in effect, a disquieting reversibility into an uncanny similarity with familiar French eighteenth-century institutions of government and religion, and with western models of male and female sexuality.

Even the eunuch, that distorted portrait of male power and sexual prowess, whose monstrous appearance serves as a shadow necessary to flesh out the aggressive image of the master's power and potency, strangely resembles, as we will soon see, more familiar figures of erotic desire.[2] Even (and especially) this supremely exotic representation of absence and lack, as I have discussed in another essay, functions as a literal signified of castration that is inscribed at all levels of this very dense text as a signifier of the separation between a man and his culture; between virtue and its various appearances or masks; between a man's

own passions, loves, beliefs, and the exteriority of those truths as they exist beyond the frame of the individual letter; beyond the purview of *his* own epistolary self-expression and cultural, intellectual, erotic vision.[3]

His own, because the diverse epistolary subjects in this novel are almost exclusively male. No female voice disturbs the hegemony of the male perspective of Usbek and Rica or their various correspondents in Persia and abroad, apart from those few letters addressed to Usbek from the cloistered harem women, numbering a mere eleven out of 161. It is therefore not surprising that, despite some excellent studies on the importance of the harem as a metaphor and as a signifying structure central to the relation of western eroticism and politics in the *Lettres persanes*, there should be virtually no attention paid to those letters of passion written by women. They are usually treated as evidence of the larger political-erotic structures within which the female discourse of passion is enlisted in the imperial service of their lord and master Usbek and, simultaneously, in a male voyeuristic fantasy.

Precisely those elements that constitute the westerner's fascination with the women of the harem preclude or, better, occlude notice of and subsequent focus on the instance of women's writing. The conventions of letter writing and of the letter novel that position the individual within a text as an active writing subject who assumes the linguistic perspective of the first person—the enunciating "I" of autobiographical and/or reciprocal discourse—do not coincide with the representation of the seraglio.[4] These "oriental" images in the *Persian Letters* appear to retain the obscure female objects of desire within the secret precinct of their inhibiting and provocative confinement. How might the westerner's gaze fasten on this forbidden place of multiple pleasures from the individual perspective of a harem woman as the active subject of enunciation? And how would the collective entity of the harem relate to epistolary codes if not to subvert those claims inherent in this genre of literary discourse and in fact extolled by Montesquieu in the preface of the 1754 edition of the *Lettres persanes?* Here, Montesquieu signals the relevance of epistolary form to individualized, autobiographical expression and perspective: "Moreover, novels of this sort are usually successful because one takes account oneself of one's own present situation; which allows one to feel passions more than all the stories that could be written about them" (*Lettres persanes* 43).[5]

The project of this essay, to examine the particular language of women's passion and oppression in the letters from the harem, reveals the paradoxical status of epistolarity as it operates throughout Montesquieu's novel. Moreover, the narrative and rhetorical devices of women's epistolary writing are significant to the complex notion of the exotic as it is

demonstrated repeatedly to transgress the boundaries of the individual writing subject in the *Lettres persanes*. To anticipate our argument for a moment, representation of female passion in this novel derives from the nature of a writing subject whose very inscription within the rhetoric of male desire constitutes a prevalent textual strategy that ultimately undermines a distinction between a concept of knowledge and the exotic.

In the first letter from the harem (the third in the novel), Zachi, one of the wives, writes Usbek to lament his absence, and recounts an outing in the country that offers a respite from the confinement of the seraglio and from her obsessive reminiscence of past lovemaking with her now absent husband. The so-called pleasure trip into the countryside is presented by Zachi as a momentary escape from those high walls and carefully prescribed barriers, which are also denoted in this letter as the demarcations that enclose the intimate space of former lovemaking. The word *harem,* from the arabic *haram* or *harim,* signifies a place of interdiction as well as of holiness.[6] As both a prison and a sacred altar of love, the harem consistently ties the demonstration of female sentiment and passion to the thematic of confinement and prohibition.

In effect, the enclosure of the harem opens only long enough for the master's treasures to place themselves in the even more confining parameters of the boxlike conveyance that carries them on their outing: "We placed ourselves following the custom, in boxes" (3:53). The illusion of partial liberty is immediately dispelled not only by mention of the type of conveyance used to transport the sultan's women, but by the reflexive verb, which insists on the willing participation of the women in their own captivity.

More importantly, the epistolary attribute of individual self-expression advocated by Montesquieu, as we have just seen, is already attenuated by a plural female subject. In the short paragraph that introduces the perspective of a harem woman for the first time in the novel, the pronoun "I" is missing and, in its place, the subject of female discourse is presented as a plural entity. The pronoun "we" is repeated eight times in the initial two sentences of this letter in the capacity of both subject and object of painstaking preparation wherewith the women take the initiative of "placing themselves" within their well-guarded prisons of transport.

Continuing her letter, Zachi assumes the first-person singular pronoun, ostensibly to relate private, intimate feelings of passion to her husband and correspondent. Nevertheless, from the outset, Zachi's expression of intimacy is conveyed by a representation of a collective harem experience, that is, in a scene in which Zachi's perspective is doubled by the constant presence of the other women. Though Zachi's

memories of her first encounter with Usbek are briefly mentioned ("At moments I saw myself in that place where, for the first time in my life, I received you in my arms," [3:53]), they are overshadowed by her detailed reconstruction of a collective experience in which Usbek had selected her alone as the most beautiful woman of his harem. Zachi chooses to elaborate the scene of that "famous quarrel of the wives." For it is before the eyes of Usbek and her female counterparts that Zachi will see herself being desired, and where she recalls Usbek's exclusive desire through the "I"'s (eyes) of the other.

That supposedly most intimate and individual experience of passion finds expression in the necessary plurality of witnesses, all of whom await to see themselves in the "I"/"eye" of Usbek's desire. All the women, again the collective "we," present themselves to Usbek's view in a scene whose emphasis on male scopic pleasure is mirrored in the I's of the other harem women and in Zachi's own epistolary emphasis. The women's exhaustive preparations as they dress to elicit their husband's desire ("We presented ourselves to you [nous nous présentâmes devant toi], after having exhausted all that the imagination could provide in decoration and ornament," [53–54]) are related by Zachi in terms of their reflection in Usbek's visual pleasure: "You saw with pleasure the miracles of our art." And from art to nature's marvels, a subsequent scene of unveiling is recounted by Zachi, who recreates "her" experience from the exclusive visual perspective of Usbek: "We had to present ourselves for your view in the simplicity of nature" (54). Female charms, which are displayed "for your view," find an echo in Zachi's prose as she reflects Usbek's scopic pleasure and his visual perspective through her own insistence on the verbs of sight and locates herself as the visual object of his desire: "I saw myself slowly becoming [je me vis devenir insensiblement] the mistress of your heart" (3:54).

The subject of female passion is located elsewhere—in the desire, in the gaze of the *other*. And as the emphasis on sight becomes more pronounced, the multiple instances of the verb "to see" are concurrent with an insistance on the plurality of the female subject. Even as she becomes the unique visual focus of Usbek's desire, the same voyeuristic structure is sustained in the reflecting mirrors of Zachi's "I"'s, in the plural "we" of the other women's desire. Though the triumph was hers alone, though the ensuing sentences evoke the utter privacy of Usbek's and Zachi's subsequent shared moments from which the other women are now banished, Zachi rhetorically recalls them to the trysting place to witness, to *view*, the intimate, exclusive rewards of her personal victory. And in an emphasis on her singularly authentic feelings for Usbek, she once again conjures up this most private sentiment to be ascertained in the eyes of

the others. "If they had *seen* my transports, they would have felt the difference between my love and theirs: they would have *seen* that if they could rival my charms, they couldn't rival my sensibility" (54, my emphasis).

The locus of erotic pleasure—the eyes of the harem women—relay the phallocentric structure of Usbek's passion in their own reflections of the voyeur's gaze. Zachi communicates to Usbek, not through the reciprocity of epistolary dialogue, but through the representation of a scene or stage of passion where woman views herself as the object of the desire of the other. The figure of the voyeur is clearly mirrored in the reflections of women's "own" display of passion. In effect, the harem women's frequent use of the reflexive and/or reciprocal form of the verb does not seem to produce a folding back of the female epistolary subject on herself, as in a *prise de conscience,* or a heightened sense of self-awareness. Rather, the active writing subject turns back on herself *through* and *as* the other. The reflexive verb does not signal self-reflexivity but introduces instead a split in a writing subject which is exteriorized or externalized as object of the other's gaze, of the other's law. This structure that veils sexual difference inscribes women's passion within that of male scopic pleasure. Yet within this economy, where women substitute for each other in a reciprocal reflection of male sexual desire, a homosexual eroticism, which will become more explicit later on in the harem letters, is already intimated.

The apparent split that separates and veils the female writing subject from herself—as object of Usbek's point of view—is accompanied by a lack of epistolary exchange between Zachi, as well as every other female writing subject, and their unique correspondent. The third, fourth, and seventh letters of this text are avowals of passion from three different wives, each mirroring the statements of the other and each going without response from the addressee. For Usbek never answers the letters from his harem in the capacity of a lover, though such reciprocity is inherent in the epistolary communication of passion. On the contrary, he relates to his wives' text of passion from a position specifically outside the I–you relation of interlocutors. The first time and, with almost no exception, every time he addresses one of his wives, it is to speak in the name of his authority that governs the harem, with the finality of his law. In his first words directed to a harem wife, the same Zachi, Usbek conveys his displeasure at her infringement of a harem law: "You have offended me, Zachi; and I feel in my heart emotions that you would fear, if my remoteness didn't allow you the time to change your conduct" (10:84). Zachi's letter of passion to Usbek goes unanswered while, seventeen letters and nine months later, Usbek responds to a eunuch's report *on*

Zachi. His communication to this favorite wife is a chastisement containing the threat of further punishment. Usbek's letter to Zachi, which appears long after he has already exchanged several letters with other, male correspondents, intensifies, through its startlingly diverse subject matter as well as its estranged position, the gap between the sender and the receiver of these epistolary messages. The chain of letters that constitutes the text of this novel manifests repeated ruptures in the communication of female passion, which is broken off in its separation and difference from a persistently deferred and jarringly incongruous response.

Though he does not enter into epistolary dialogue in response to his women's desire, Usbek writes *about* his sentiments to others. Positioned after the third harem letter, Usbek's letter to his friend Nessir stands in the place of amorous dialogue. Overwhelmed by a feeling of exile from the friends, family, and customs left behind, Usbek suffers most acutely the distance from his wives. "It is not that I love them, Nessir. In this respect, I find myself in a state *devoid of feeling,* [dans une *insensibilité*], leaving me with no desires at all. In the well-populated seraglio where I lived, I anticipated love and destroyed it by loving. But from my very coldness there grows a secret jealousy that devours me" (57, my emphasis). *Sensibilité,* the same term used by Zachi to mark her privileged sentiments for Usbek, is here given inverse value in the opposing context of Usbek's confession to another.

Moreover, this letter situates Usbek outside the enclosure of the harem erotically and sentimentally, as well as geographically, outside the scene of the women's representation of his "own" desire. Within the structure of epistolary reciprocity and exchange, the harem wives occupy with respect to Usbek a position of the third person in discourse, that is, following Emile Benveniste's term, the *non-personne.*[7] Usbek does not enter into a reciprocal relation with the represented object of his desire, either with respect to linguistic or sexual intercourse, but relegates himself to a position on the outskirts of the stage or staging of passion. Usbek's geographical, erotic, and interlocutory distance from the harem resembles in effect the exotic difference and distance of the reader from this supposedly other culture.

The representation of desire is inscribed within the epistolary frames of portraits presented to Usbek, the nonreciprocal and nondialogical beneficiary, the absent subject in these portraits figuring his "own" desire. Implicated in his harem wives' repetitive tableaux as a viewing entity, as a gaze internalized in the woman's depiction of (her) his pleasure, Usbek subsequently reviews these moments from the distance afforded by the frames of epistolary correspondence and by a temporal, geographical discrepancy. As receiver of these letters, Usbek is provided

a place to view while being absent. At this juncture, Usbek and the reader become one and the same, for the position of the reader with respect to the world of the harem is articulated as a primary function of Usbek's own geographical, epistolary, and erotic distance. While she exposes herself to Usbek's exclusive gaze, the harem woman presents her portrait as well to the reader, allowing him secret entry to the interdicted seraglio, allowing him to see (himself) without being seen.[8] Usbek's geographical, erotic, and interlocutory distance from the harem provides a textual model of the voyeur that structures and is structured by the reader's difference and distance from this exotic, supposedly other culture.[9]

Detached, separated from the harem where he sees himself seeing, so the voyeur as foreigner in the western world is constituted on the model of this self-referential, self-reflecting "I"/eye that articulates Usbek's epistemological and philosophical as well as his erotic perspective. Usbek's analysis of particularly western religious, political, philosophical, and social practice and theory engages a distancing of the autoreferential subject who has removed, separated, severed himself from the field of inquiry that his perspective has simultaneously evoked. If women see themselves through and as the other, offering themselves as the reflexive, reflecting pronouns, the object pronouns in Usbek's act of seeing himself see, his numerous philosophical speculations, as we will examine further on, are also drawn on the model of this "objective," self-objectifying experience. Usbek relates an endeavor predicated on the similarity, the identity between himself as subject of discourse and desire, and as legislator of justice, virtue, and truth. Usbek's speculations thus are formally linked to the perspective of the exotic and coincide with the ubiquitous presence of the (western) voyeur.

In fact, the westerner is linked to the representation of desire and knowledge in the *Lettres persanes* in yet other far-reaching ways. This fascination with oriental polygamy casts in erotic terms an opposition between the one and the many, a principle that subtends western political, philosophical, and metaphysical structures. Though the West had renounced polygamy, a fundamental ambivalence as to man's constitutive right to possess many females persists in the early Christian fathers (for example, in Saint Augustine's *De Bono Conjugali*)[10] and survives into more modern times in such treatises as the one cited by Usbek himself: *La Polygamie triomphante* (35:111) written by a Protestant, Johan Leyser, and published in 1682.

Alain Grosrichard reviews the importance of polygamy as a concept fundamental to the philosophical distinction between man and woman. "In their plurality, women can not attain the One—the All that is the

master" (178). From the metaphysical assumptions made by Saint Augustine and earlier by Aristotle, the male is awarded the right to several wives and not the other way around, just as the master possesses several slaves, as a multitude of souls is rightly submitted to one god, as, following Spinoza, substance is qualitatively different from and superior to its modes. Only *he* is recognized as capable of actualizing all the potential of the human essence (178–79). Grosrichard insists that the conceptual apparatus of classical metaphysics promotes the notion of man as a male sexual being. "It is less the other sex in which the male takes pleasure than in its multiplicity which, compared to his own unicity, his uniqueness, characterizes the inferior" (178).

Usbek's anxiety concerning his harem wives is predicated not on sensibility, as we have seen, but precisely on his anguished fear of their infidelity. For, if women's desire in the harem letters always reflects the desire of the transcendent other, this indivisible, unique, and unalterable other, Usbek, is dependent on the innumerable reflections in the seemingly infinite number of "I"'s of the harem women. Usbek's gnawing jealousy then is a function of his need for these multiple portraits of passion, which must be continuously forthcoming even and particularly when they represent women's sorrow and frustration. Zachi's distress must be depicted by the laws of his desire. "I emit sighs which go unheard; my tears flow and *you do not take pleasure in them*" (3:55, my emphasis). Her sorrow is offered for Usbek's appropriation in the convention of voyeuristic pleasure. As visible products of emotion, tears are the external signifiers that remain faithful and transparent to the interior female sentiment of desire as well as to the frustrated anguish of subjection. Most of the letters from the harem entail an exposition of this theme of longing, sorrow, and lament. To please, to continue the role as object of pleasure that shores up and makes possible Usbek's all-seeing omnipotence as discursive, self-reflexive subject, the harem woman must present her desire in the form of a visual portrait of frustration and anger. Usbek's cruelty, of which all the women write, is integral to their portraits of desire and imperative to the male self-representation, to his fiction of female desire and virtue.

These portraits mark an interesting deviation from another female epistolary model, Mariane in the *Lettres portugaises*. Confined to her Portuguese convent, she repeatedly and obsessively addresses her frustrated passion, like the harem women, to the void of an absent lover who, unlike Usbek, remains anonymous, unseen, and unheard throughout the text. As Peggy Kamuf has demonstrated, the absence of her lover becomes ultimately unimportant to Mariane's relentless but gradually self-aware discourse of desire.[11] Letter writing leads Mariane out of the circle where "the articulation of the question of the other's desire no

longer operates a closure" (59). Within this textual dichotomy, we should note the harem wives' and Mariane's contrasting and complementary use of the reflexive verb and of self-reflexivity. Mariane takes account of the split operating within the discursive "I" of the letter, which leads, as Kamuf says, "to a self-awareness that she is producing rather than merely registering the events of a subjectivity" (61). The complaints and laments of the letters from the harem, on the other hand, are *dictated* by Usbek's absence as an integral part of this structure, which veils individual female sentiment and eroticism, appropriating it as the faithful portrait of fidelity in which the harem woman sees and writes herself as and through the other.[12] The text of female passion is designed by and for Usbek to offer a direct correspondence between the signifiers and signified of fidelity, virtue, and desire.

Each letter from the harem resembles the others in this respect, conjuring up always former pleasures and present suffering according to the "I" of the voyeur, according to conventions necessary to one man's pleasure and security, to one discourse of desire, always similar to itself. Unmarked by individual characteristics, the supposedly most intimate sentiments of female passion do not retain distinct voices but, like a series of echoes and unending reflections, mirror each other throughout the *Lettres persanes*.

Veils, which earlier were set in place by the harem women to be removed under Usbek's exclusive gaze, must continue to cover over and mask sexual difference. Yet those passionate epistolary avowals and complaints proferred in Usbek's absence and lack also constitute the linguistic conventions that serve to veil female erotic desire from Usbek's all-seeing gaze. This veiling of the "I"'s, drawn faithfully according to Usbek's perspective, shields female virtue and fidelity from the view of any other but also operates in the twists and folds of this textual fabric to mask deviant female erotic activity and transgression.

The very plurality and quasi-anonymity in the epistolarity of female passion, where each letter offers a representation for and according to the dominating perspective of male scopic pleasure, takes on textual value in an opposing context. The lack of differentiation in the female epistolary subject is accompanied by a growing lack of distinction between male and female object of desire, between castrated eunuch and phallic male, between an exclusive, single pleasure defined by Usbek's desire and a plural desire. As the female epistolary subjects proliferate in names that echo and reflect one another—Zachi, Zélis, Zélide, Zéphis—so a plural eroticism in the women's homosexual tendencies and other perversions of phallic desire are simultaneously veiled and unveiled in an increasingly unsettling rhetorical rhythm of female epistolarity.

Zéphis has been accused by her guardian eunuch of taking sexual

pleasure with her female slave Zélide. Writing to Usbek to express outrage and to reaffirm her exclusive love, Zéphis refuses to justify herself. "No, I have too much respect for myself to condescend to justifications: I want no other guarantee of my conduct than you yourself, than your love, than mine, and if I have to tell you, dear Usbek, than my tears" (4:55). Instead, she conjures up the image of tears as the synecdoche for her portrait that faithfully resembles the law of Usbek's desire. By evoking those tears to be inscribed within the conventional visual representation of female subjection and passion for her absent husband, she allows no space for another image, no discrepancy between the representation and its referent, between the signifiers and signified of virtue. And as these women remain imprisoned within the confines of the harem and within the narrow limits of a masculine, phallocentric discourse of eroticism, so Usbek remains bound until the last letter of the novel to his wives' repetitive, undifferentiated representation of his "own" desire. But a detour from this linear discourse is perceptible in these multiple reflections of the harem wives.

Zéphis is not the only wife accused of taking pleasure with her female slave. The first letter of Usbek to a wife, Zachi, chastises her for having spent time alone with a white eunuch. But in the same letter, Usbek also alludes to Zachi's suspect relations with her female slave Zélide, the same name of the slave mentioned in Zéphis' letter. Though it is Zéphis who had complained in her letter to Usbek of "this black monster," the head eunuch, for depriving her of Zélide, Usbek responds to the supposed complaints of Zachi, for which there is no text in the novel. "But what did your first slave do? He/she [*Elle*] told you that the familiarities you were taking with the young Zélide were against propriety! There's the reason for your hatred" (20:86).

Is this the same female slave, the same Zélide involved earlier with Zéphis? Or an "oversight" perhaps on the part of Usbek or Montesquieu? But what's the difference? To retain the same slave's name with respect to the conduct of two harem wives, whose own names are themselves so similar, intensifies the structure of replaceability of each harem woman for another. Yet this play of minimal differences between one woman, one name, and another, between slave, wife, and mistress, conflating female activity and identity according to a unique male perspective, serves simultaneously to minimize the discrepancies between one kind of erotic activity and another. The overdetermined similarity of female proper names is clustered in the text around multiple and indiscriminate erotic objects whose sexual characteristics lose their specificity in terms of gender difference. The eunuch in this passage also acquires the feminine gender in the term "slave" and in Usbek's subsequent

reference to his wife's "first slave" with the pronoun "she." From a neutered or neutral status, the eunuch functions as both male and female, not quite one or the other, assuming attributes of each sex.[13]

In a subsequent letter, Zélis writes to request Usbek's advice as to whether she should allow her slave (again the same?) Zélide to marry a white eunuch, proclaiming revulsion, which is also fascination with this deviance, this other, of erotic pleasure.

> I've heard you say a thousand times that eunuchs experience with women a kind of unknown voluptuousness; that nature compensates for her losses; that she has resources which remedy the defect in their condition . . . and that in this state, one acquires a kind of third sense so that one exchanges, so to speak, one pleasure for another. (53:144)

Borrowing Usbek's own words and perspective, Zélis evokes supplements to the unique pleasure of phallocentric love, which compensate for the absence, the lack in the eunuch, and which also evoke the lack inherent in Usbek's relation to his wives during his continuing absence. Indeed, these very circumstances are strangely similar to life in the harem under normal circumstances.[14] Zélis, like her almost identical slave, must be content with "the vain shadow" of marriage and a man. Her cry of disbelief that such a union could bring any happiness resembles an all too familiar, familial situation echoing throughout the letters from the harem, and emphasizes dreams of lost pleasure and of present frustration. As Zélis in the same letter protests in sympathy for her underprivileged slave: "What! to be always the prey of semblance and deceptions [*images et fantômes*]? To live only to imagine? to find oneself always near pleasure and never in pleasure?" (144).

And the eunuch, like the women, also addresses his frustrated complaints to Usbek's lack and absence. While standing in to echo the male law of women's necessary plurality, the eunuch repeats both the woman's plaint and Usbek's fear.

> The more women we have under our eyes, the less trouble they give us. A greater need to please, less opportunity to band together, more examples of submissive obedience—all of this forges chains for them. . . . But all of that, magnificent lord, is nothing without the presence of the master. What can we do, with this *vain phantom* of an authority that is never entirely communicated? We represent only weakly half of your own self. (226, my emphasis)

Here, as earlier, the eunuch as a representation of male authority resembles the shadows and phantomlike model of Usbek's own sexual representation as determined in the harem letters. He/she literalizes this model and, like the harem women, has internalized it as his/her own

lack. The eunuch, as an empty sign, assumes both male and female gender markings and provides the space around which such gender distinctions are effaced and undifferentiated sexual acts proliferate.

The shadows, the phantasms of erotic images that are represented by women's letters in and to their husband's absence, must remedy the loss of an actual encounter; they also function to supplement the singularity and nonreciprocity of scopic pleasure, which remains the property of Usbek's *imaginaire.* The letter, like the referent of the experience itself, becomes a stage of representation that displaces and substitutes for passionate exchange, for a dialogical model—a version or, better, a perversion of both sexual and epistolary intercourse. A lack of reciprocity between the writing subjects constitutes the visual stage of the "vain shadows and phantoms" of male sexual potency and of female passion. While Zélis repudiates the very image in which she is embedded, she is also evoking under the tutelage of Usbek's own words and perspective those compensations of "unknown voluptuousness" that indeed we see in the reported crimes increasingly taking place in the harem.

In effect, as a forerunner of this simultaneous critique and avowal, Zachi had already been accused in a previous letter of being found alone with a white eunuch, a behavior strictly prohibited by the laws of the harem. At the same time, then, that letters of female passion can be dedicated only to Usbek, insistent in their representation of one singular, dominant passion and erotic object, these letters reveal the simultaneous concealment of devious and deviant erotic desire and practice. But the ultimate subversion of Usbek's law and order finds a direct voice in the last letter of Montesquieu's text, that of Roxane.

Silent throughout the letters, this most virtuous of the harem women is first heard of through a description of her as an edifying example offered by Usbek in a rare letter to one of his other wives (letter 20). Usbek also writes one letter to Roxane (letter 26), his sole letter of passion to a woman in the novel and one that, specifically, does not reply to any avowal of Roxane's desire. In his letter, which evokes the stage of passion reminiscent of those letters of Zachi and the other harem wives, Usbek recalls Roxane as a paragon of virtue in her resistance to his sexual advances; her flight from his gaze and his caresses is rapturously represented within the conventional framework of woman's passivity as object of male desire. Indeed, Usbek outlines a scene of rape. In fact, Roxane's very silence, her almost complete lack of letter writing and therefore lack of pretext to epistolary and sexual reciprocity offer an incontestable model of female passion and virtue, which the other harem letters only approximate, simulate, and, as we have seen, also subvert.

Roxane's silence is, like the language of the harem letters, designed

to coincide with Usbek's limited vision, his blindness. When she speaks, it is to dispel this phantasm of Usbek's *imaginaire.* She reveals her reticence to be hatred; her modesty, disgust, and seemingly total obedience to be a mask for her love of another, a veil for her active role in transforming the harem into a place of "delights and pleasures" (161:350). As the head eunuch reports: "You suspected Zélis, and were completely sure of Roxane: but her savage virtue was a cruel deception. It was the veil of her betrayal" (159:348).

This reversal, which entails, says Roxane to Usbek, "a language which is new to you," constitutes the last letter from the harem and the final words of Montesquieu's text (letter 161). Roxane's letter redefines female passion, nature, and virtue according to their difference from and discrepancy with the meanings Usbek has attributed to them throughout his discourse on and to women. The eunuch in fact remarks on a generalized change throughout the harem in the female demeanor with respect to sexual (in)difference. "No longer is there to be found on the countenance of your women that *male,* stern virtue that reigned there previously" (151:341, my emphasis). This new perspective, which confirms the duplicity operating throughout the harem letters, affirms, as Luce Irigaray has said concerning the difference brought by women to male discourse and desire, "an other economy that upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarization toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse."[15]

Yet, how new to Usbek is this plural economy, this "new language" rendered explicit by Roxane? In the course of his travels in the West, Usbek's letters, as every critic concurs, manifest a decided evolution toward enlightened concepts of justice, religious tolerance, nature, and virtue; and his discussions and the principles he derives from them encompass not only the West but nearly every continent, while remaining unswervingly, rigidly faithful to the same oppressive and singular discourse of erotic and political despotism.[16] But do these contrasting facets of Usbek's discourse that produce the text's bitter irony necessarily constitute the radical contradiction to which most readers ascribe? For Usbek's self-reflexive discourse of erotic desire and despotism, integral to the definition of the voyeur, is also constitutive of his intellectual and philosophical project.

In his definition of the concept of justice, for example, Usbek introduces a metadiscourse that discerns an absolute, inflexible principle. "Justice is a relationship of appropriateness which truly exists between two things, and this relationship is always the same, no matter who considers it, whether it be God, whether an angel, or, finally, whether it be man" (83:203). Justice is "eternal" and does not depend on human

conventions of any kind, even when man's practice and understanding remain flawed. "And when it [justice] does depend on them [human conventions], it would be a terrible truth that would be necessary to hide from oneself" (204). By definition, according to this letter, justice is always similar to itself, not contingent on empirical situations nor on conventions of any kind, even when man's practice and understanding subvert these principles.

Usbek's discussion in this letter swings back and forth between the truth of preestablished principles and the truth that justice in its implementation indeed depends on a local context, on a culturally specific definition, on individual practice and self-interest. In effect, Usbek's logic is enunciated in the semantics of self-reflexivity that serve to establish the principles of absolute justice as well as to counter them. It is preferable to separate oneself from one's own knowledge, from the truth of man's inability to follow these absolute principles, than to incur the danger of recognizing others' and one's own difference from this judgment. Furthermore, the measure of man's incapacity to follow the eternal, self-identical postulates of justice is, following Usbek, the measure in which man makes "a return to oneself" in favor of self-interest (204). The very terms of separation of self from self articulate the notion of justice, distinguishing judgment from self-interest on the one hand and precluding self-knowledge on the other. In other words, at stake in Usbek's metadiscourse is precisely the definition of a subject as different from the thinking, legislating, and enunciating cogito. The perspective and distance necessary for maintaining these criteria of justice are eliminated by a "return to oneself"—a hiding from oneself of the truth of the dissimilar, plural nature of justice and of the plural, dissimilar nature of oneself.

So even as he refuses to know what he knows, Usbek repeatedly departs from the straight and narrow of a singularly coherent and self-identical logic on which he claims to erect his philosophical discourse. The letters from the harem are written from a perspective in which the subjects define themselves from the outset as multiple and identical signifiers of the discourse and desire of the other. Yet these plural voices become increasingly related in the text to the proliferation in the harem of multiple and dissimilar pleasures, of duplicitous desires that pervert the goal of a unique, unequivocal signified and discourse. The letters from the harem become the plural, shifting signifiers, the multiple and doubled voices that can no longer be bound and tied to one desire, to one signified. Rather, they proliferate in the discrepancy that separates Usbek from himself. Usbek relates an endeavor predicated on the ultimate identity between himself as subject of discourse and desire and as

transcendent legislator of justice, virtue, and truth—even when this necessitates and even engenders his separation from the world and from himself.

Roxane's letter discloses the women's subversive textual and sexual activity that has throughout the *Lettres persanes* defined a space lying outside and beyond each individual epistolary perspective in the letters of Usbek and others as well. And it is the distance opening between that individual writing viewpoint and what lies, precisely, beyond it that creates the space of the exotic in Montesquieu's novel, and that also troubles the reader's transparent self-reflection. For the discrepancy, the irreducible difference and distance in the sign between signifier and signified in the *Persian Letters,* conveys a notion of the exotic as a fantasy of political, cultural, and sexual alterity, while introducing exile, self-estrangement, separation of self from self as the unsettling basis of knowledge.

Usbek's departure from his native Persia is occasioned by two separate though related causes. He first gives as his reason for leaving a necessary search for knowledge: "We didn't believe that the boundaries of Persia should be those of our knowledge" (1:51). But we subsequently learn that Usbek's departure was precipitated by political problems at court due to his outspoken introduction there of a new discourse of virtue. In unmasking vice, in identifying the masks worn by the courtiers as so many deceptive images of virtue, Usbek recounts, "I spoke a language until then unknown" (8:60). Usbek transgresses not only the geographical and cultural boundaries encircling his country, but from within he dissolves the bonds cementing sacred, conventional practices to the concepts of virtue. The first indications of Usbek's desire to know and of his almost simultaneous need to *exile himself* from the familiar territory of his own culture, laws, etc., is associated in this text with a transgression of the laws of signification. Usbek's "unknown language" at the very beginning of the novel, like Roxane's "new language" at the novel's close, detaches the multiple signifying masks or veils from the accepted "truths" to which they are bound. It is this self-exile, a kind of death in the ensuing painful separation of self from oneself, like Roxane's suicide, that literally opens the space of knowledge and of new horizons in the gap where the multiple signifiers are severed and are liberated from their signified. In this space, a plural shifting discourse is dangerous and disruptive to the singular law and sanctity of Usbek's desire, as well as to the established conventions in what becomes in the course of these letters the scarcely more familiar realm of the absolute monarchy, the church, and the social, economic, and political entity of Paris.

But Roxane's suicide partakes of the same irreconcilable paradox we

have identified in conjunction with Usbek's discourse of knowledge and desire. On the one hand, it marks a violent separation between the conventional signifiers and signified of Usbek's justice, virtue, and nature. Roxane says, "I have reformed your laws following those of nature" (161:351), thereby inscribing her own and Usbek's discourse in the same movement of difference that Usbek had already opened at the novel's outset. On the other hand, is Roxane's act not the absolute because irrevocable gesture that precludes forever an otherwise shifting, plural self-identity? Her admission of previous duplicity and contradictory behavior is simultaneously remedied in an act that consummates and annihilates her self-assertion. Roxane's discourse in this last letter also bears resemblance then to Usbek's own singular and exclusive self-reflective speculation.

It is no coincidence that Usbek, earlier in the novel, had decried the severe punishment meted out in the Christian West to those who take their own lives. "It seems to me, Ibben, that such laws are quite unjust. When I am overwhelmed with grief, misfortune, scorn, why should they want to prevent me from putting an end to my troubles, and why cruelly deprive me of a remedy that lies in my own hands?" (76:191–92). The obvious irony that it is Usbek's harem wife who avails herself of this right to self-assertion and liberation should not prevent us from also seeing the similarity with Usbek's own perspective. For he sanctions suicide in the same way that he decrees the absolute, self-identical principles of justice and a self-identical discourse. To give birth to oneself as in Descartes's self-constructing cogito, where the self legislates and legitimates its own existence through its distance from the world, resembles after all the act of putting an end to oneself. In a certain sense, the act of suicide represents Usbek's intellectual/erotic discourse that insistently separates him from the world he is seeing himself see.[17] Suicide for Usbek as for Roxane is the reverse but companion side of a discourse and perspective that traverse the *Lettres persanes* as always already the "I" of the other.

The act of violent self-estrangement and self-exile integral to creating a notion of the exotic becomes the basis for a "new language" of knowledge and at moments becomes indistinguishable from the discourse of self-identity. Knowledge, in other words, derives in this text from the strategies of the voyeur and of the exotic. As the act of violent self-exile is linked to its apparent opposite, to the supreme affirmation of self-legislating identity, so these opposing valorizations of suicide should be understood in conjunction with the paradox of knowledge as a metadiscourse constructed on the principle of an enunciating "I" whose reflection is irrevocably deferred in the difference that defines the "I" in/as the other.

Montesquieu's text speaks its most overtly violent language in the last letter of Roxane's transgression. That most audacious statement must be read therefore in conjunction with Usbek's discoveries and own transgression as well as with his blindness. The multiple figures of the exotic—the eunuch, the ancient sect of the Guebres, the mythical tribe of the Troglodytes, as well as Rica and Usbek himself—are, like the text of women's letters from the harem, the detours that exteriorize the perspective of the reader and transgress the boundaries of the sayable in eighteenth-century Paris but that do so in the discourse and in the vision of the other.[18] As the initially anonymous author of these "Persians'" letters, Montesquieu avoids censorship by relying on plural discourse and by taking up the veil that separates him from these discrepancies of a singular logic and discourse that this text persistently reveals. Commenting on the numerous errors to be found in subsequent published editions of the novel, Montesquieu remarks in the idiom of his own text, "These errors, in subsequent editions, have multiplied innumerably because this work was abandoned by the author from its birth" (420).

In certain respects then this text recuperates or, rather, generates from the very impotence and lacks it reveals, the same singular law of the father, of self-reflexive and transparent specularity that appears to dominate the epistolarity of female eroticism. Yet inasmuch as this simultaneous veiling and unveiling of the signifying system resembles the plural economy of women's discourse and eroticism, inasmuch as the epistolary self-reflexive "I" is always and repeatedly becomes the "I" and the eyes of the other, it is perhaps appropriate to say that Montesquieu, author of those letters from the harem and of this "new language," is, indeed, throughout the *Lettres persanes*, writing like a woman.

NOTES

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1. Alain Grosrichard, *La Structure du sérail: La Fiction du despotisme asiatique dans l'occident classique* (Paris: Seuil, 1979); Aram Vartanian, "Eroticism and Politics in the *Lettres persanes*," *Romanic Review* 60 (1969): 23–33; Michel Delon, "Un Monde d'eunuques," *Europe* 55 (1977): 79–88; Alain Singerman, "Reflexions sur une métaphore: le sérail dans les *Lettres persanes*," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 185 (1980): 181–98.

2. Grosrichard speaks of the eunuch as well as other "negative" figures who inhabit the seraglio and who, following the western perspective, constitute its structure in the following terms: "All (the blind, the children, mutes, dwarfs, women, eunuchs) count only inasmuch as they exhibit in the negative, what the despot does and what he has" (204).

3. See my essay, "Orientalism and Representations of Exteriority in Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*," *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 23:3 (Fall 1985): 263–79.

4. For a good discussion of the first person in epistolary discourse, see Janet Altman, *Epistolarity: Approches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), esp. ch. 4.

5. I have consulted primarily J. Robert Loy for the English translation of the *Persian Letters* (New York: Meridian, 1961); however, I take responsibility for the many changes introduced in order to achieve a more literal rendering of Montesquieu's text. All references in my essay to Montesquieu's text indicate the number of the particular letter discussed but give page reference to the French edition of the *Lettres persanes*, ed. J. Starobinski (Paris: Gallimard, 1973).

6. The western notion of the harem as a forbidden place of closure and confinement can be traced even in the etymological development of the term *sérail*, in English *seraglio*. "From the Italian (with a double r, by attraction to *serrare*, to close, to lock up, *serraglio*, closure), from the turco-persian *serâï*, palace." *Nouveau Dictionnaire Etymologiqüe* (Paris: Larousse, 1971).

7. Emile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 1:226–36.

8. Thus, epistolary frames that situate Usbek and the reader in the perspective of the voyeur serve the same ends as framing devices of pictorial representations of women. The western tradition of painting, as John Berger was perhaps one of the first to point out, serves the interest of a dominant male voyeurism in the portrayal of women, particularly in the example of the female nude (John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* [London: Penguin, 1972], chs. 2 and 3). The epistolary frame, like the pictorial, situates the male viewer outside and beyond the frames that simultaneously enclose women and expose them to view—where she gives herself to be seen as object to an absent but dominant and transcendent male viewing perspective. See, for example, Sharon Willis's analysis in "Lettre sur des taches aveugles: à l'usage de celles qui voient" (*L'Esprit Créateur* 24:1 [Spring 1984]: 85–98) of the multiple pictorial representations of the biblical motif, Suzanne and the elders, in relation to Diderot's commentary on these paintings. She underscores Diderot's appreciation of Tintoretto's pictorial structure in which Suzanne, while attempting to hide behind robes from the depicted old men's lascivious glances, simultaneously exposes herself to the gaze of the male viewer situated beyond the frames of the canvas (85–92).

9. The interdiction of the seraglio in the *Lettres persanes* serves to exaggerate demarcations that articulate the closure necessary for constructing the voyeur's perspective. In fact, the western tradition of the voyeur has recently been explored in its "oriental" context by Malek Alloulah, *The Colonial Harem*, trans. Myrna and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). The French colonial presence in Algeria produced photographs taken by the French of Algerian women positioned in the role of harem women. Following Alloulah, these were strictly simulated scenes, the women having been paid to assume the pose of harem captives (18–20). Sent back home to French viewers as

postcards, these images constructed a notion of the harem from the exclusive perspective of the western male photographer's eye and lens; the image portrays and betrays the closure of an interdicted place where the photographer/voyeur, though the constructor as well as fabricator of these scenes, is not implicated visually anywhere in them. As Alloulah states, "Exoticism is always established as the gaze of the other" (19*n*.11).

10. Saint Augustine, "De Bono Conjugali," *Oeuvres*, trans., intro. Gustave Combes (Paris: Desclees de Brouwer, 1948), 2:69–71.

11. Peggy Kamuf, *Fictions of Feminine Desire* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), ch. 2.

12. The postcard of the harem, following Alloulah, functions as an "illustration" of colonialist discourse whereas the discourse of the harem letters functions as an exotic portrait. "But the postcard is also one of the illustrated forms of colonialist discourse, its chatty and self-satisfied imagery. In and of itself, it does not speak . . . : *it is spoken.* Its meaning resides elsewhere; it comes from outside itself" (120, emphasis added).

13. Following Grosrichard, the eunuch is "always much more or much less than a eunuch" (194). (S)he is also related by this author to the theory of the sign in classical discourse as "the power of the signifier as such" (193).

14. Usbek himself speaks of life in the harem under normal circumstances in the relation between polygamy and depopulation. Man is presented as not only surfeited with pleasure, but sexually inactive, exhausted (*épuisé*), and ultimately incapable of propagating (114:260).

15. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is not One,* trans. G. C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 30.

16. Tzvetan Todorov, "Réflexions sur les *Lettres persanes,*" *Romanic Review* 74 (1983): 306–15, speaks of this tendency towards "an immersion in the others that renders Montesquieu lucid about himself" (308). Yet, though Usbek in several instances does consider, as Todorov says, "all countries and all continents" (308), this seems due as much to a universalizing, singular perspective, a lucidity which remains blind, as to a definition of self conceived on plurality and differences.

17. As I have related the perspective of the voyeur and a visual stage or scene of women's epistolary voice to Usbek's philosophical project, so Jean-Joseph Goux ("Descartes et la perspective," *L'Esprit Créateur* 25:1 [Spring 1985]: 10–20) has introduced the relation of architectural and pictorial to philosophical perspective, specifically with respect to Descartes and the cogito. The perspective of *un seul* ("only one") appeared initially (then was eliminated) in Descartes's *Discours de la méthode* as a kind of prologue to and grounding for the articulation of the cogito (13–16). A discussion of the architectural unity of a city, conceived on a single plan and visual perspective as opposed to a city developed in time and through its many accretions (Goux uses the term *bricolage*), enhances the perspective of *un seul* and *precedes* as a model the introduction of a necessarily self-legitimating cogito. Goux also extends his discussion of Descartes's perspective in architecture and philosophy to include pictorial per-

spective as it evolved from the Greeks in the western tradition (18–20). See also Goux, "Société et sujet," *Les Iconoclastes* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 129–43.

18. For further discussion of these figures of the exotic in Montesquieu's novel such as the ancient sect of the Guebres and the mythic Troglodytes, see my "Orientalism and Representations of Exteriority," 267–73.