



Traduction

*THE PERSIAN LETTERS*

[1721]

(Transl. by George R. Healy)

(1964)

LETTER CXX VIII

*Rica to Usbek, at*

As I was crossing the Pont-Neuf<sup>1</sup> with one of my friends the other day, he recognized an acquaintance who was, he told me, a geometer. And everything about him suggested it; he was in profound meditation, and my friend had to tug at his sleeve and shake him for some time before he descended to earth, so occupied was he with a curve which had tormented him for perhaps more than a week. They much complimented each other and exchanged some literary news. The conversation continued up to the door of a café, which I entered with them.

I noticed that our geometer was cordially received there by everyone, and that the café waiters were more attentive to him than to the two musketeers seated in a corner. As for him, he seemed to find the place agreeable, for he relaxed his face a bit and began to smile as if there was nothing of the geometer in him.

Yet his precise mind measured everything said in the conversation. He resembled a man in a garden who cuts off with his sword the head of every flower which rises above the others. A martyr to his own precision, he was as much offended by a witty remark as weak eyes are offended by too strong a light. Nothing was indifferent to him, provided it were true;

---

<sup>1</sup> The Pont-Neuf (finished in 1604) is the oldest of the extant Paris bridges; it joins the right and left banks of the city across the downstream tip of the île de la Cité.

accordingly, his conversation was remarkable. That day he had come from the country with a man who had seen a superb château and its magnificent gardens; he, however, had seen only a structure sixty feet long and thirty-five feet wide, and a ten-acre<sup>2</sup> park in the form of a parallelogram. He would rather have it that the rules of perspective had been so observed that the avenues would all have appeared to be of equal width, and for the purpose he would have supplied an infallible method. He was very pleased to show us a very curiously constructed dial he had discovered there, and he became very angry with a scholar seated near me, who unfortunately asked him if this dial marked the Babylonian hours. A news monger spoke of the bombardment of the castle of Fontarabia;<sup>3</sup> the geometer then quickly gave us the properties of the line that the bombs described in the air, and, charmed with this knowledge, he showed no interest whatsoever in their success. A man complained of having been ruined by a flood during the winter before. “What you tell me is most gratifying,” the geometer said, “for I see that I am not mistaken in my observation that at least two inches more rain fell this year than last.”

A moment later he left and we followed. As he walked rapidly and neglected to look before him, he ran straight into another man; they collided violently, and each rebounded from the blow in reciprocal proportion to their speed and masses. When they had somewhat recovered from their dizziness, this man, hand on forehead, said to the geometer, “I am delighted you ran into me, for I have great news to tell you. I have just finished my Horace.” “But what’s this?” said the geometer. “He was published two thousand years ago!” “You do not understand me,” the other replied. “It is a translation of that ancient author which I am bringing out. For twenty years I have been busy with translations.”

“What, sir?” said the geometer. “For twenty years you have not thought? You speak for others, and they think for you?” “Sir,” said the scholar, “don’t you believe I have done

---

<sup>2</sup> The measures given in the text are in arpents (1 arpent = 30 to 50 ares, depending on local custom; in modern measure 1 are is 100 square meters). This translation has arbitrarily made arpents and acres equivalent.

<sup>3</sup> Fontarabia (Fuenterrabia) is a small Spanish city on the French border, which the Duke of Berwick bombarded and took for France on July 18, 1719. France and England had allied against Spain in 1719, largely to force Spanish acceptance of a negotiated settlement of the confused Italian question. See above, p. 207, footnote 1.

the public a great service by familiarizing them with good authors?” “That was not exactly my point; I esteem as much as anyone those sublime geniuses you misrepresent. But you don’t resemble them at all, for were you to translate forever, no one will ever translate you.

“Translations are like copper coins which have the same value as a piece of gold: they are even of greater use to the people, but they are always light and of poor alloy.

“According to you, your intention is to revive in our midst those illustrious dead, and I concede that you do indeed give them a body. But you do not impart life; a soul is always lacking to animate them.

“Why not apply yourself instead to the search for the many beautiful truths which we discover every day by simple calculation?” Following this bit of advice they separated, each, I believe, most discontented with the other.

*Paris, the last day of the moon of Rebiab II, 1719*

---

Source : Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, transl by George R. Healy, Indianapolis / New York, The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1964, p. 214-216.