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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Rica to the same

In the following interview, my scholar led me into a private study. Here are the books of modern history, he said : you see first of all the historians of the Church and the popes, books which I read for my edification, and which often have quite the opposite effect on me.

Over there are those who have written of the decadence of the formidable Roman empire, which had formed from the debris of so many monarchies, and upon the fall of which also so many new ones were formed. An infinite number of barbaric peoples, as unknown as the countries where they lived, [1] suddenly appeared, flooded it, ravaged it, tore it into pieces, and founded all the kingdoms you presently see in Europe. These peoples were not exactly barbaric, since they were free ; but they have become so since, most of them subjected to an absolute authority, they have lost that sweet liberty so consonant with reason, humanity, and nature.

Here you see the historians of Germany, which is but a shadow of the first empire, [2] but which is, I think, the only power there is on earth that division has not weakened ; the only one, I also think, that grows stronger in proportion to its losses ; and which, slow to profit from its successes, becomes indomitable through its defeats.

Here are the historians of France, where we first see the authority of the kings form, die twice, [3] likewise return, then languish for several centuries ; but gradually gathering strength, augmented in all directions, rise to its final apogee, like those rivers which in their course lose their waters, or hide underground, then resurface, swollen by the rivers that flow into them, rapidly sweep away anything that stands in their way.

There you see the Spanish nation emerge from a few mountains ; the Muslim princes defeated as gradually as they had conquered rapidly ; so many kingdoms brought together under a vast monarchy which became almost the only one, until the time when, weighted down by its false opulence, she lost her strength and even her reputation, and kept only the pride of her early power.

These are the historians of England, where we see liberty constantly emerging from the fires of discord and sedition, the prince always teetering on an unshakable throne, [4] an impatient nation, wise even in her folly, and which, mistress of the sea (something previously unheard-of), mixes trade with empire.

Close by are the historians of that other queen of the sea, the republic of Holland, so respected in Europe and so fearsome in Asia, where her traders see so many kings prostrate before them.

The historians of Italy describe a nation that was once mistress of the world, today the slave of all the others, its princes divided and weak, and lacking any attribute of sovereignty except a vain politics.

Here are the historians of the republics : of Switzerland, which is the image of liberty ; Venice, whose only resources lie in her economy [5] ; and Genoa, which is majestic only by its fortifications.

Here are those of the north, and among others Poland, which makes such poor use of her liberty [6] and the right she

has of electing her kings that she seems to want to console thereby the neighboring peoples who have lost both. [7]

Thereupon we separated until the morrow.

Paris this 2nd day of the moon of Chalval 1719

[1] See letter 79.

[2] *I.e.*, the so-called Holy Roman Empire is but a shadow of the first (Roman) empire.

[3] Under the two first dynasties, Merovingian and Carolingian.

[4] See letter 101 on the trial of Charles I. Montesquieu's principal source is doubtless Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, published in French in 1704.

[5] In the sense not just of commerce but also the "good use made of one's mind and other qualities" (*Trévoux*, 1704, art. "Rconomie").

[6] No doubt an allusion to abuse of the *liberum veto* and the frequency of changes : Augustus, elector of Saxe, was deposed in 1704 to the benefit of Stanislas Leszczyński, but returned and prevailed in 1709.

[7] Probably Denmark and Sweden.