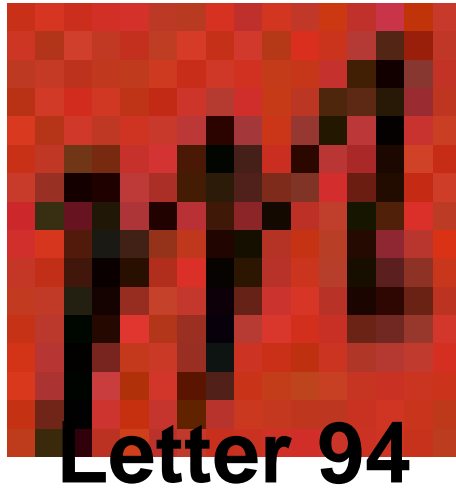


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*Usbek to Hassein, dervich of the mountain of Jaron*

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O thou wise dervich, whose curious mind shines from so much knowledge, listen to what I have to tell thee.

There are philosophers here who in truth have not attained the summit of oriental wisdom ; they have not been raptured to the luminous throne ; they have neither heard the ineffable words with which the concerts of angels resound, nor experienced the powerful surges of a divine fury ; but left to themselves, deprived of holy marvels, they pursue in silence the tracks of human reason.

You could not believe how far this guide has led them. They have sorted out the chaos [1] and have explained by simple mechanics the order of divine architecture. The author of nature has given movement to matter : it took no more to produce this prodigious variety of effects that we see in the universe. [2]

Let ordinary legislators propose laws to us to regulate societies of men, laws as subject to change as the minds of those who propose them and the peoples who observe them ; but these speak to us only of laws that are general, immutable, and eternal, which are observed without any exception, [3] with an order, a regularity and infinite promptitude in the immensity of space.

And what do you believe, divine man, that these laws might be ? Perhaps you imagine that, entering into the counsel of the Eternal, you are going to be astonished by the sublimity of the mysteries : you renouncing understanding in advance, intending only to admire.

But you will soon change your way of thinking. These laws do not dazzle by a false respect ; their simplicity long caused them not to be seen ; it is only after much reflection that all their fertility and breadth has been understood.

The first is that any body tends to describe a straight line [4] unless it encounters some obstacle that deflects it away ; and the second, which simply derives from the first, is that any body that turns about a center tends to flee it, because the more distant it is, the more the line it describes approaches a straight line.

And that, sublime dervish, is the key to nature. Those are fertile principles, from which consequences can be drawn as far as the eye can see, as I shall make clear to you in a private letter.

The knowledge of five or six truths has made their philosophy full of miracles, and has made them accomplish more wonders and marvels that all we are told of our holy prophets.

For in short I am persuaded that there is not one of our doctors who would not have been baffled if he had been asked to weigh all the air surrounding the earth in a scale, [5] or to measure all the water that falls each year on its surface [6] ; and who would not have thought more than four times before saying how many leagues sound travels in an hour [7] and the time a ray of light from the sun to reach us. [8] How many fathoms is it from here to Saturn, [9] Along what curve must a vessel be shaped to be the best sailing ship possible ? [10]

Perhaps if some divine man had graced the works of these philosophers with lofty and sublime words, and if he had added bold figures and mysterious allegories to them, he would have made a fine work second only to the holy Qur'an.

Yet if I must to tell you what I think, I do not think much of figurative style. In our Qur'an there are a large number of infantile things [11] which always so appear to me, although they are enhanced by the force and liveliness of the expression. At first it seems that inspired books are only divine thoughts rendered in human language ; on the contrary, in our holy books, we find the language of God and the thoughts of men, as if by some wondrous whim God had dictated the words, and man had supplied the ideas. [12]

You will perhaps say that I speak too freely about what is most holy among us ; you will believe that it is the product of the independence they live in here. No, thank heaven, the mind has not corrupted the heart ; and so long as I shall live, Ali shall be my Prophet.

*Paris this 15th day of the moon of Chahban 1716*

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[1] This is the term traditionally used to designate the earth "without form and void" of Genesis 1:2.

[2] An essentially Cartesian position : God is the *primum mobile* "who in his unlimited power had created matter with motion and stillness, and now preserves the universe" (Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, Part II, §36 ; *Ruvres et letters*, Paris : Pléiade, 1953, p. 632).

[3] Implicitly, this proposition with deistic overtones categorically excludes miracles.

[4] It would be more accurate to say any body that moves : this is the "second law of nature" according to Descartes, or the principle of inertia, from which centrifugal force derives (*Principles of Philosophy*, Part 2, §39, op. cit., p. 634-636) - Usbek's "second law" in the next sentence.

[5] Allusion, with some hyperbole, to numerous experiments on the weight of air and atmospheric pressure, notably those of Robert Boyle (*Exercitationes de atmosphaeris corporum consistentium*, 1673), Robert Hooke (a colleague of Boyle's at Oxford and inventor of barometers and anemometers), and Edme Mariotte (*De la nature de l'air*, 1679). The *Encyclopédie*, citing the theories of Boyle and Mariotte, will give a calculation of the weight of air on the entire globe (art. "Air", vol. I, p. 229).

[6] This subject was much discussed early in the century. The experiments of Philippe de La Hire to measure the quantity of rainfall in a year are reported in the *Journal des savants* in 1695, 1699 and 1703 ; cf. *Encyclopédie* (vol. XII, p. 794). Once divine attributes - "Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span [...] ?" (Isaiah 40:12) - now implicitly pass into human hands.

[7] Several people had worked on the speed of sound ; the *Encyclopédie* will mention several values proposed : 968 feet/second according to Newton, 1200 according to Boyle, 1142 according to Flamsteed and Halley, 1474 according to Mersenne (art. "Son", vol. XV, p. 344).

[8] Le *Journal des savants* reported in 1676 on the demonstration made by Danish astronomer Olaüs Roemer (Olav Römer) on the base of observations of a satellite of Jupiter, according to which light can travel a space of 3000 leagues (the diameter of the Earth) in less than a second ; the *Encyclopédie* concludes : "MM. Roemer and Newton have established beyond doubt [...] that light from the sun takes about seven minutes to reach Earth".

[9] Observations of Saturn by Huygens and Cassini in particular had appeared in the *Journal des Savants* in 1669, 1672 and 1677 ; see Huygens's *Systema Saturnianum* (1695).

[10] Bernard Renau d'Eliçagaray (1652-1719) had published in 1689 his *Théorie de la manoeuvre des vaisseaux* ; Huygens and Renau argued over it in a series of letters in the *Journal des savants* in 1695 and 1697. Voltaire will comment : "Today we know, after the long disputes between M.

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Huyghens and M. Renaud, the determination of the most advantageous angle for a rudder from the keel ; but Christopher Columbus had discovered America without any notion of that angle" (*Letters philosophiques*, 1734, letter 24).

[11] An audacious thought which, by implication, applies to the Bible as well.

[12] An ambiguous formula based perhaps on St. Paul's notion of the divine inspiration of men : "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (II Peter 1:21).