

<http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article3387>



- Persian Letters - Letters -

Date de mise en ligne : mardi 14 avril 2020

Copyright © Montesquieu - Tous droits réservés

Letter 104	Letter 106
----------------------------	----------------------------

*Usbek to ****

There is a species of books that we do not know in Persia, and which seem to me much in fashion here : it is the newspapers. Indolence feels flattered as it reads them ; it is thrilling to be able to scan thirty volumes in fifteen minutes. [1]

In most books, the author has not finished the usual formalities before the readers are exhausted ; he makes them enter half-dead into a subject drowned amidst a sea of words. One author wants to immortalize himself with an duodecimo, another by a quarto, another, who has more refined inclinations, has in mind a folio, and must extend his material proportionately - which he does pitilessly, counting for nothing the struggle of the poor reader, who toils to reduce what the author took such pains to amplify.

I do not know, ***, what merit there is in writing such works ; I would do it too if I wanted to ruin my health, and a bookseller.

The great mistake of the journalists is that they discuss only new books, as if truth were ever new. [2] It seems to me that until a man has read all the old books, he has no reason to prefer the new ones.

But when they impose on themselves the rule of discussing only works still warm from the forge, they also impose another rule, which is to be very boring. They carefully avoid criticizing the books from which they give extracts, whatever reason they may have ; and indeed what man is bold enough to want to make himself ten or twelve enemies every month ?

Most authors are like poets who will put up with a round of blows without complaint, but who, not sensitive about their shoulders, are so sensitive about their works that they are unable to bear the slightest criticism. So one must be very sure not to attack them in such a delicate place, and the journalists know it well ; therefore they do just the opposite : they first praise the material that is treated, the first platitude ; then they go on to praise the author : forced praise, for they are up against people who are still exercising, quite ready to make sure they have their way, and to strike down a presumptuous journalist with their pens.

Paris this 5th day of the moon of Zilcadé 1718

[1] The *Dictionnaire des journaux* edited by Jean Sgard (1991) counts twenty-four literary magazines in 1700 and forty-eight in 1725 (vol. II, p. 1133). The principle of most of them was to review books and provide substantial extracts as soon as possible after their publication.

[2] Usbek's intellectual conservatism goes hand in hand with the image of a changeless Persia, contrasting with a Europe subject to change, as the question of fashion has already illustrated (letter 96).