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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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*Rhedî to Usbek in Paris*

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You went on in one of your letters about the sciences and arts cultivated in the Occident. You are going to think I am a barbarian, but I do not know whether the utility that we derive from them compensates men for the misuse that is made of them every day.

I have heard it said that the invention of bombs alone had deprived all the peoples of Europe of their freedom. [1] The princes being no longer able to entrust the guarding of their strongholds to the bourgeois, who at the first bomb would have surrendered, have had a pretext for maintaining large corps of regular troops with which they have subsequently oppressed their subjects.

You know that since the invention of powder, there is no longer any impregnable stronghold [2] ; which is to say, Usbek, that there is no longer any haven on earth against injustice and violence.

I still tremble lest someone finally discover some secret that will provide a quicker path to killing men and destroying peoples and entire nations.

You have read the historians. Mark this : almost all monarchies have been founded only on ignorance of the arts, and have been destroyed only because they were too much cultivated. The ancient Persian empire can furnish us a domestic example. [3]

I have not been long in Europe, but I have heard sensible people speak of the ravages of chemistry ; it seems to be a fourth scourge that ruins men and destroys them one by one, but continually, [4] whereas war, plague, and famine destroy them wholesale, but at intervals.

What good did the invention of the compass do us, and the discovery of so many peoples, except to communicate to us their diseases ? [5] Gold and silver had been established by a general convention to be the price of all merchandise and a gauge of their value, because of the fact that these metals were rare and useless for any other purpose : why then did we care whether they became more common, and that to designate the value of a commodity we should have two or three signs instead of one ? [6] That was just more inconvenient.

But on the other hand that invention has been highly pernicious to the countries that have been discovered. Entire nations have been destroyed ; and those men who escaped death have been reduced to such harsh servitude that the story has made Muslims shudder.

Happy the ignorance of the children of Muhammad ! Amiable simplicity so cherished by our holy Prophet, you always remind me of the naïveté of ancient times, and the tranquillity that reigned in the heart of our first fathers !

*Venice this 2nd day of the moon of Rhamazan 1717*

[1] It was supposedly the gunners of the Lowlands who invented the modern bomb, which was introduced into France in 1634.

[2] After the bomb, Rhedi goes back to the introduction of artillery, which had ultimately made the fortified city obsolete.

[3] Based on the next letter, this refers to the conquest of Alexander.

[4] Likely an allusion to *médecine chimique*, which "makes use of violent remedies derived from minerals by fire" (Furetière, 1694, art. "Médecin"). Opposed to this therapy, judged to be dangerous, is the methodic medicine inherited from Galien, based on gentle and ordinary remedies.

[5] Allusion in particular to the syphilis which the sailors in Columbus's expedition were thought to have contracted in America and spread to Europe : see *My Thoughts*, nos. 86 and 1813).

[6] By alluding to monetary "signs", Rhedi recalls the inflation produced by the massive importation of New World gold into Spain, and underscored the fact that the multiplication of specie entails an augmentation in uncertainty and variations in the value of monies. *Sign* here refers to a monetary unit ; cf. *Considérations sur les richesses de l'Espagne*, §3.