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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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*Rica to Usbek in ****

The other day I was crossing the Pont Neuf with one of my friends. He encountered a man of his acquaintance who he told me was a geometer ; and he bore every sign of it, for he was completely in a fog. My friend had to pull him by the sleeve for a long time and shake him to get him to come down to his level, so absorbed was he with a curve that might have been tormenting him for over a week. They mutually expressed many civilities, and exchanged some literary news ; and all this talk brought them to the door of a café which I entered with them. [1]

I noticed that our geometer was eagerly greeted there by everyone, and that the café waiters were much more attentive to him than to two musketeers who were in a corner. He for his part seemed to be in an agreeable place, for he unwrinkled his face somewhat and began to laugh as if he had not had the least familiarity with geometry.

Yet his exacting mind sized up everything that was said in the conversation ; he was like the man who in a garden cut off with his sword the heads of the flowers that rose above the others. [2] A martyr to his precision, he was offended by an irregularity the way sensitive eyesight is offended by too bright a light. Nothing was indifferent to him, provided it was true ; and his conversation for this reason was singular. He had arrived that day from the country with a man who had seen a splendid chateau and magnificent gardens, while he has seen nothing but an edifice sixty feet long by thirty-five wide, and a rectangular grove of ten arpents [3] ; he would much have wished the rules of perspective had been well enough observed so that the alleys of the avenues would seem to be of equal width throughout ; and for that he would have offered an infallible method. He seemed quite satisfied with a sundial he had discerned, [4] of most singular structure, and he became very angry at a scholar who was beside me, who unhappily asked him if that dial marked Babylonian hours. [5] A newsmonger talked about the bombardment of the chateau of Fuenterrabia, [6] and he gave us on the spot the properties of the line which the bombs had described in the air ; and delighted with knowing that, he was totally oblivious to the outcome. A man complained of having been ruined the previous winter by a flood : I am very glad to hear you say that, the geometer then said ; I see that I was not mistaken in the observation I made, and that at least two inches more rain have fallen on the earth this year than last.

A moment later he left, and we followed him. As he was walking rather briskly, and was forgetting to look in front of him, he was met head-on by another man ; they collided sharply, and from the impact they rebounded in separate directions in direct proportion to their speed and mass. [7] When they had recovered somewhat from their dizziness, this man, putting his hand to his brow. said to the geometer : I am very glad you ran into me ; for I have great news to tell you : I have just delivered my Horace to the public. How can that be ? said the geometer : he has already been in public for two thousand years. You do not understand, replied the other : it is a translation of that ancient author which I have just brought out. I have been doing translations for twenty years. [8]

Do you mean, monsieur, said the geometer, that it has been twenty years since you have thought ? You think for others, and they think for you ? Monsieur, said the scholar, have I not, in your view, rendered the public a great service by making the reading of the good authors accessible ? I am not exactly saying that ; I esteem as much as another the sublime geniuses you travesty ; but you are not like them : for if you always translate, no one will ever translate you.

Translations are like those copper coins which indeed have the same face value as a gold piece, and are even more widely used by the common people ; but they are always worn and of dubious weight.

You say you want to revive for us those illustrious dead, and I admit that you do give them a body ; but you do not restore their life to them : there is always a spirit lacking to quicken them.

Why do you not rather apply yourself to finding as many wonderful truths we discover every day by simple calculation ? [9] After this bit of advice they separated, I think, most displeased with each other.

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

[1] See letter 34 ; on cafés and newsmongers, see letters 36 and 126.

[2] The episode comes from Livy (I, 54) and is part of a stock of common references at the time. "Being somewhat severe to one of his sons, he went away to the Gabii, where having got great power, he sent to acquaint his father Tarquinius therewith ; who walking in his garden when he received the message, returned no answer, but struck off the heads of the poppies that stood before him. The son, when the messenger told him this at his return, understood very well what his father meant, and so cut off the heads of the chiefest of the Gabii." (Collier 1701, art. "Tarquin II").

[3] The arpent, a measure of area, varied by region ; the sense of the passage will be clear if it is estimated at about sixty square meters.

[4] If he must "discern" the sundial, it must be because it is integrated into the garden's design so that most people would not notice it.

[5] Babylonian hours are determined by sunrise and sunset and are therefore variable by season ; their incorporation in a sundial would be unexpected in an ornamental garden.

[6] Discreet homage to Marshall Berwick, governor of Guyana, who had besieged the citadel that surrendered on 18 June 1719 (this letter being dated 30 June).

[7] In other words, in accordance with Cartesian mechanics. In Newtonian terms, momentum would rather be the square of their combined speed ; at this time the Académie des Sciences was still very divided between the Cartesian formula (mv) and the notion of *vis viva* (mv^2).

[8] Probable allusion to André Dacier, who from 1681 to 1689 published a Horace in ten books, besides translations of Marcus Aurelius, Sophocles, Plato, and Plutarch.

[9] The opposition between calculation and translation is emblematic, for Joseph McAlhany, of a long debate since Antiquity over the status of translations : "Montesquieu's geometer and the tyrannical spirits of translation", *Translation and the intersection of texts, contexts and politics : historical and socio-cultural perspectives*, Cham (Switzerland) : Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 11-38.