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## "LANGAGE INCONNU": MONTESQUIEU, GRAFFIGNY AND THE WRITING OF EXILE

Over the last fifteen years, Françoise de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, the novel about a cultural outsider who exposes the vicissitudes of *ancien régime* society, notably the constraints it imposes on women, has gradually been incorporated into the literary canon. Following upon the editorial work of English Showalter, Gianni Nicoletti and others, several feminist critics engaged in the revision of the academic canon have initiated a critical reevaluation. This reappraisal has frequently involved the comparison of Graffigny's novel with texts by more illustrious male predecessors and contemporaries, most notably the *Lettres persanes*, but also Guilleragues' *Lettres portugaises*, Voltaire's *L'Ingénu* and *Alzire* and Condillac's *Traité des Sensations*.

This critical practice raises several questions relating to the processes of canonization and revision. Are hitherto neglected women writers to be accommodated within an existing framework, given a "place" in the canon—"A Woman's Place in the Enlightenment Sun,"<sup>1</sup> as Janet Altman suggests in the title of one piece on Graffigny? Does the undoubtedly necessary process of canon revision inevitably depend upon the reception of texts as bearing determinate significations which can be compared and contrasted with those of other texts? I propose here to examine some of the ways in which the process of revision is played out in recent critical approaches to the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, and as a counterpart, to consider a further point of comparison between the *Lettres* and the work to which they are most often compared, the *Lettres persanes*. I shall focus on the emergence of a language which is described as unknown, new, foreign or strange, a "langage inconnu" or "langage nouveau" which in both texts is tied to the attempt to write about enlightenment, and suggest that this resistant, self-reflexive language constitutes an obstacle to the comparisons established in literary critical discourses.

In a recent work, Julia V. Douthwaite considers the binary production of texts about exotic others by male and female writers of the *ancien régime*. For example, she discusses Mme de Lafayette in relation to Prévost, and Mon-

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1. Janet Gurkin Altman, "A Woman's Place in the Enlightenment Sun: The Case of Françoise de Graffigny," *Romance Quarterly*, 1991, August, 38: 3. Since the title of a second essay on Graffigny is "Making Room for Peru," it appears that a kind of literary topology, making room within an existing space, is at issue. "Making Room for 'Peru': Graffigny's novel reconsidered," *Dilemmes du roman* (Stanford: Anma Libri, 1990).

tesquieu in the light of Graffigny.<sup>2</sup> She interprets the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (1747) as a feminocentric revision or rewriting of the *Lettres persanes* (1721), both among the many novels of the period in which foreigners lay bare the arbitrary and unstable foundations of French institutions and cultural practices. Her use of the concept of revision clearly reflects a feminist and new-historicist approach, though the move to comparison itself builds upon a long critical tradition which has considered the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* as a mere avatar of literary models inaugurated or exemplified by male-authored texts. Broadly speaking, Douthwaite locates the difference between the texts in each pairing in the sexual difference of their respective authors. She reverses the traditional view—that the male authors are more profoundly original or more philosophical than the women—while retaining the basis for this view, i.e. that writing is strongly determined by gender.

Douthwaite's account of the feminist revision performed by the later text depends on a representation of the *Lettres persanes* as a masculine prototype, and on many points this characterization is accurate. The Persian travellers are all men, and the male voice predominates throughout the text. More problematic is the identification of these male characters with Lévi-Strauss's ideal of the structural anthropologist, able to "suspend the prejudices of his own culture in mid-air and to look beyond the foreignness of the world's societies to perceive their universal similarities and laws of order. . . . This rhetorical strategy—which informs both structural anthropology and its intellectual ancestor, European travel writing—perpetuates the ontological advantage of the dominant European (male) observer over a passive, silent (feminized) Other."<sup>3</sup> To illustrate this view, Douthwaite points to the fact that in the *Lettres persanes*, women speak only from the marginalized locus of the seraglio, existing merely as the objectified ciphers of an erotic harem plot, a commonplace of French Orientalism. When, at the end of the novel, women finally emerge as speaking and writing subjects, the insurgency is rapidly shut down by the suicide death of the rebellious heroine, Roxane. The implication is said to be that it is death for a woman to speak in her own voice.

In the light of this interpretation of the *Lettres persanes*, the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* emerge as a radical rewriting. The fact that the first-person narrator is female reflects a transgressive privileging of the female voice, whereas the male response is excluded. The decision to represent a heroine from the new world suggests both a rejection of the erotic harem formula and an interest in the more radical cultural difference of Peru. The *Lettres persanes* deploy a technique of defamiliarization whereby the ingenuity of the Persian travellers opens up a space between perception and reality accommodating a perspective of cultural relativism. However, in the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*,

2. University of Pennsylvania Press: 1992. See also "Relocating the Exotic Other in Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*," *Romanic Review*, 1991, November, 82:4.

3. "Relocating the Exotic Other," 457–458.

the more radical alterity of Peru allows for an even more radical defamiliarization of French culture, since Zilia must learn the meaning of such everyday objects as a ship, a horse-drawn carriage, a pair of scissors and a mirror. Along these lines, Janet Altman observes that because of the close attention paid to the materiality of daily life, Zilia's perceptions appear to be grounded in the experiences of an individual and gendered body, rather than representing the detached neutrality of an anthropologist. In this sense, she rightly claims that Zilia's experiences constitute a more obvious *mise en scene* of Lockean empiricism, whose central tenet is of course the acquisition of knowledge through perceptual experience, than the *Lettres persanes* for example.<sup>4</sup> Lastly, the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* represent a new departure in that their dénouement avoids the conventional endings available to heroines in eighteenth-century novels, i.e. death and marriage, whereas Montesquieu's text ends with the death of Roxane.

The ending of the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* can be read as a subversive revision of the sentimental novel, since Zilia rejects Déterville's romantic advances while endorsing intellectual friendship between the sexes. Flouting social decorum, she achieves financial and domestic independence in the shape of a country house where she plans to live alone. Zilia gets what Jack Undank has called a "room of her own," two centuries before Virginia Woolf analyzed its importance for women writers. The most treasured room in her country house is a library, and it is doubtless here that Zilia translates her own letters, preparing their entry into the public space, the realm of publication.

As several critics suggest, this ending does represent a new and radical alternative. Its implicit rejection of sentiment, i.e. romantic love and marriage, elicited criticism even from those who applauded the work, notably Élie Fréron. In fact, though Fréron is disappointed by the lack of sentimentality in the *Lettres*, complaining about Aza's betrayal of Zilia, and wishing that she had wed the faithful Déterville, he still manages to finish his piece on the *Lettres* by praising them for being "naive" and "sentimental."<sup>5</sup> Though Enlightenment critics seem to have held generally favorable views of the *Lettres*, which were certainly a best-seller, frequently re-edited and translated, they began to fade from memory after the author's death in 1759, and the nineteenth century signalled their disappearance from the canon, with no new editions appearing between 1835 and 1966. One can speculate, as Janet Altman does, that social forces during the period of the Napoleonic code and the colonization of Algeria were unfavorable to a literary work whose heroine

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4. Cf. "Making Room for 'Peru': Graffigny's Novel Reconsidered," 44 and also "Graffigny's Epistemology and the Emergence of Third-World Ideology," *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Goldsmith (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989).

5. *Lettres sur quelques écrits de ce temps*, Lettre V, April, 1749.

seems to prefigure those of some post-colonial novels.<sup>6</sup> The nineteenth-century critics who do mention Graffigny tend to be hostile. Thus, in the *Causeries du lundi*, Sainte-Beuve, who approaches Graffigny as a witness to the world of Voltaire rather than as an author in her own right, nevertheless finds the time to dismiss both the proto-socialist environment of Graffigny's salon and the resonance in her novel of this literary milieu.<sup>7</sup>

Resistance to the novel's unconventional ending is perhaps most clearly expressed in the appearance of several sequels to the text. Critics generally discuss two examples: the *Lettres d'Aza* by Hugary de Lamarche-Courmont (1749), which not only supply the absent male voice but also end by marrying the two Peruvians and having them sail off into the sunset back to Peru (many editions of the *Lettres* actually include this "sequel") and the 1797 *Nouvelle Édition des Lettres d'une Péruvienne* by Mme Morel de Vindé, who, though she stresses the fact that she too is a woman author, also has Zilia obey social convention by marrying the French hero, Déterville.

The political and social threat implicit in the novel's ending thus elicits reactions which reject the text's dénouement and impose a more conventional form of closure. However, returning briefly to Douthwaite's discussion of these revisions, it is unclear whether an open-ended *écriture féminine* is being closed off by masculinist revisions, or whether the sequel-writers are reacting against the quite determinate but unorthodox closure imposed by the text. The issue of textual closure becomes more complex when juxtaposed with Douthwaite's reading of the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* as a revision of the *Lettres persanes*, a text which she claims is "closed" by the triumph of the patriarchal order, manifested in the suicide of the rebellious wife, Roxane. This tension in the argument raises a question as to which (if either) of the two sets of letters is really "closed," and how such closure might relate to the possibility of revision or rewriting.

In the context of this question, I would like to return to the *Lettres persanes* and to suggest that Douthwaite's synopsis of the text, which I summarized above, itself contains various revisions: I shall briefly mention the aspects of the *Lettres* which do not seem to me to fit her characterization, beginning with the travellers' self-presentation and ending with the ways in which the structure of the text undermines any self-positioning dependent on mastery and male hegemony.

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6. Janet Gurkin Altman, "A Woman's Place in the Enlightenment Sun," 267.

7. *Causeries du lundi*, 2 (Paris: Garnier, 1852) 162–75. The discussion of Graffigny is dated 17 June, 1850. English Showalter also initially published the elements of Graffigny's correspondence relative to Voltaire (in *Voltaire et ses amis*). In a similar vein, the 1883 Édition de Paris *Lettres de Madame de Graffigny*, a title which is somewhat misleading, since it actually contains letters to or about Voltaire by several contemporary women writers including Mme d'Épinay, was recently reprinted: *Mme de Graffigny, Lettres* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1972).

Firstly, I would suggest that the Persian travellers are not portrayed as abstract figures, mere vehicles for ideas, since their intellectual experience, like Zilia's, is anchored in the empirical experiences of the body. Usbek repeatedly bemoans the fact that his constitution is less suited to travel than that of his younger, more robust companion, Rica. Thus in Letter XXVII, he complains that ". . . mon corps et mon esprit sont abattus; je me livre à des réflexions qui deviennent tous les jours plus tristes; ma santé qui s'affaiblit . . . me rend ce pays-ci plus étranger." The experience of physical discomfort thus intensifies the experience of alienation in an unfamiliar world. A little later in the novel, Usbek theorizes this relationship between mind and body, sounding more like Nietzsche than like Locke:

il vaut mieux enlever l'esprit hors de ses réflexions, et traiter l'homme comme sensible, au lieu de le traiter comme raisonnable.  
L'âme, unie avec le corps, en est sans cesse tyrannisée" (Letter XXXIII).

This account of the tyranny of the body seems rather far from the neutrality of an observer who has abstracted his physical being from the process of perception.

In terms of the suggestion that Montesquieu's travellers view themselves as models of ethnographic impartiality, one could cite numerous letters in which they reflect on the partiality of moral and political judgments. Thus in Letter LII, Rica describes his encounter with several women aged between twenty and eighty. The twenty year-old mocks her forty-year old aunt for striving to appear youthful; in turn, the forty year-old mocks the sexagenarian and so on. The scene is a conventional satire, pointing to the difference between appearance and reality, and locating it in the feminine; however, the writer, Rica, universalizes the issue: "ne sentirons-nous jamais que le ridicule des autres?" (Letter LII). Several subsequent letters seem to supply an affirmative answer to this question; thus for example, in letter LIX, Rica suggests to Usbek:

Il me semble . . . que nous ne jugeons jamais des choses que par un retour secret que nous faisons sur nous-mêmes. Je ne suis pas surpris que les Nègres peignent le diable d'une blancheur éblouissante et leurs dieux noirs comme du charbon. . . .

In other words, he suggests that judgments invariably involve self-reference, and illustrates his point with an example articulating a perspective of cultural relativism. Lest it be thought that only the youthful and more flexible Rica acknowledges the relativism of judgment, in Letter LXXV Usbek reflects that "Vérité dans un temps" may well turn into "erreur dans un autre." The context of this disclaimer is another timely reference to inter-cultural relations, the reflection that although at one point in European history Christians freed their

slaves, they subsequently conquered foreign territories and enslaved their populations.

Both travellers ridicule authorities and authoritarian stances. In Letter LXXII, Rica encounters “un homme bien content de lui . . . Je n’ai jamais vu de dictionnaire si universel; son esprit ne fut jamais suspendu par le moindre doute. . . . Je lui parlai de la Perse. Mais à peine lui eus-je dit quatre mots qu’il me donna deux démentis, fondés sur l’autorité de MM. Tavernier et Chardin.” This jibe involves implicit self-parody, since both travel writers were among the ‘authorities’ consulted for both the *Lettres persanes* and *De l’Esprit des Lois*. The implicit criticism of Unigenitus in letter CI articulates a more serious, overtly political challenge to the very notion of authority or the power to judge and determine. Mocking the presumption of a theologian he has encountered, Usbeck writes that:

Quand deux hommes qui étaient là lui niaient quelque principe, il disait d’abord “cela est certain : nous l’avons jugé ainsi et nous sommes des juges infaillibles.—Et comment, lui dis-je alors, êtes-vous des juges infaillibles?—Ne voyez-vous pas, reprit-il, que le Saint-Esprit nous éclaire?—Cela est heureux, lui répondis-je : car, de la manière dont vous avez parlé aujourd’hui, je reconnais que vous avez grand besoin d’être éclairé.

This letter speaks to the issue of the marginalization of women as well as to the (related) issue of authority, since *Unigenitus* proscribed women’s reading Scripture, as well as foreclosing all interpretations of the Bible by proclaiming the absolute interpretative authority of the Papacy.

There is, of course, a more radical sense in which authority and authorial neutrality are challenged within the narrative, and this is the revolution which rends the harem at the end of the novel. The *Lettres persanes* is governed by a structure of double blindness by which the Persians see France better than it can see itself, yet remain blind to the vicissitudes of their own domestic arrangements. At the end of the text, the privileged voice of the male traveller gives way to the multiple voices of the subservient population of wives and eunuchs who pen the last six letters of the text. In his own last letter, Usbek reacts dramatically to the collapse of his authority, stating that “il me semble que je m’anéantis.” The self-assurance of the travel writer/philosophe crumbles when confronted with the multiple voices of disgruntled wives and eunuchs, as well as by the duplicity discernable in each one of these voices.

In the last letter of the text, Roxane confesses her perfidy in a writing which is equated with death. She exclaims that poison flows through her veins as she writes, so that the flow of ink is caught in a metaphorical exchange with both blood (the blood flowing in her veins and the blood shed in the harem), and with poison. Writing emerges as a *pharmakon*, a deadly venom as well as a force for life and change. Whereas at the beginning of the letter, Roxane says only that “le poison va couler dans mes veines,” she subsequently writes

that "le poison me consume," and the letter ends with a statement which, given the exchange between ink and poison, must be considered as a speech act: "je me meurs." In other words, the performative dimension of Roxane's suicide note overtakes its referential status as the writing comes to figure first rebellion and then death. Roxane's writing in this final note, the last letter of the novel, is performative—an intralinguistic praxis with perlocutionary effects—rather than transparently referential. The question arises as to whether this sacrificial death and the writing in which it occurs in fact constitutes a closure which seals the text. Is it anything more than a conventional "masculine" ending in which the heroine is killed off before she can cause more trouble?

The term closure assumes a particular force in the context of the *Lettres persanes*, a work in which mastery entails the right to enclose women. In the *Essai sur les mœurs*, Voltaire criticizes Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit des lois* for fabricating a radical difference between European and Oriental cultures. Voltaire himself limits this difference to the practice of sequestering women: "la plus grande différence entre nous et les orientaux est la manière dont nous traitons les femmes."<sup>8</sup> In fact, in the *Lettres persanes*, the political appropriation of the figure of Persian other to represent French self subtly reduces the distance between the two worlds, which comes to center on the contrast between the public life of European women and the domestic segregation of harem wives. As a result, the opening up of the sacrosanct space of the seraglio at the end of the letters bears a considerable charge. This opening, unveiling or unmasking takes several forms: a letter from an unknown writer makes its way into the enclosure; a young man is discovered in the grounds; Zachi lets her veil drop on the way to the Mosque, publicly exposing her face, and Roxane admits that she has had a lover.

In the context of these multiple openings, it is interesting to recall that, by contrast, the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* end in enclosure, with the depiction of Zilia's home and library. The library itself contains a secret and locked chamber filled with Peruvian treasures, artefacts stolen by the Spanish invaders and appropriated in turn by the French soldiers who overtake them. The walls of this treasure-chamber are decorated with frescoes representing Peruvian life, a lifestyle already destroyed by the conquistadors. The frescoes include paintings of the virgins of the *Temple du Soleil* and, unsurprisingly, these figures are said to resemble Zilia, quite possibly the sole survivor of the temple's sacking. This representation recalls an earlier scene which depicts an inverse version of the *stade du miroir*. Zilia sees her image in a mirror, but, since she doesn't understand how mirrors work, she mistakes her image for another Peruvian woman. Instead of being gratified by the wholeness of her bodily identity, Zilia is reminded of the fact that she has been rent from her cultural identity and exists only as a fragment. In the second image, the haunting figure

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8. Voltaire, *Essai sur les Mœurs* (Paris: Garnier, 1990) vol II, 807.

of the Peruvian sister has become a painting, a memory or souvenir, owned by a more Europeanized Zilia. In the title of one piece, Janet Altman praises the image of the chamber as "Making Room for Peru," but it could also be read as an allegory of the recurrent historical process by which cultures are conquered and dismantled and later reconstituted as decor or fetish. On this reading, the exotic other could be said to be *contained* rather than *accommodated*. It should at least be said that the image of the locked chamber which marks the end of the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* is overdetermined and *open to interpretation*.

In the final letter of the *Lettres persanes*, Roxane disabuses Usbek of his belief that he has enjoyed complete mastery over her mind and body. She taunts him that "ce langage, sans doute, te paraît nouveau," underscoring the new and unfamiliar power unleashed in women's writing. The status of this writing is particularly complex. We have already seen that it is both referential and performative, but it is further complicated by the fact that it is a confessional discourse in which Roxane admits her own lies, as well as a critique exposing the lie of lies, Usbek's self-positioning as the repository of truth. As I have suggested, the *Lettres persanes*, as satire, continually return to the distance between perception and reality or truth and illusion, yet at the end of the text, the notions of truth and lie on which these categories depend find themselves destabilized.

As Suzanne Rodin-Pucci has remarked, the "langage nouveau" in which Roxane destabilizes the categories of truth and lie is in fact not entirely new to the economy of the *Lettres persanes*.<sup>9</sup> In letter VIII, Usbek elucidates the reasons for his European voyage to his friend Rustan, claiming that he left Persia for fear of powerful enemies at court.<sup>10</sup> He had previously been forced to withdraw from the court itself because he refused to speak the language of flattery, choosing rather to unmask vice and speak the truth, which he characterizes as a "langage jusqu'alors inconnu." As Rodin-Pucci suggests, this *langage inconnu* grounds the technique of defamiliarization, opening up a space between signifier and signified which is also the space of exile from one's own culture and its entrenched meanings.<sup>11</sup> Later in the text Rica reflects on the fact that in Persia it is fear that speaks and "la crainte n'a qu'un langage (letter LXIII)." The language of fear does not allow for a multiplicity of voices or perspectives, and cannot express new visions or revisions of reality. Rica contrasts it to the diversity of nature: "la nature, qui s'exprime si différemment et qui paraît sous tant de formes" (LXIII).

9. "Letters from the harem," *Writing the Female Voice*, 127.

10. Again, this is slightly different from Douthwaite's account, since in order to contrast Usbek's scientific voyage with Zilia's enforced departure from Peru, she claims that Usbek travels with the blessing of his shah (op. cit., 129). In fact, the letter to Rustan explains that the decision to leave Persia was motivated by fear.

11. op. cit., 129.

Roxane's *langage nouveau* thus constitutes a repetition, even a rewriting of Usbek's original dissent. As such it destabilizes Usbek's claim to have definitively unmasked lies and spoken the language of truth: "je porterai la vérité jusques au pied du trône" (VII). Roxane's subsequent unmasking of this truth as a lie obliges the reader to reconsider the stability of such an unmasking of vice by virtue, appearance by reality. In other words, it becomes necessary to review Usbek's epistemological stance and any impression of anthropological neutrality which derives from it. Roxane's *langage inconnu* sends us back to re-read the *Lettres persanes* from a new perspective; for example, it becomes necessary to reinterpret Usbek's account of Roxane's "vertu farouche," her persistent refusal to cede to his sexual advances, as having been motivated by loathing, pride or the fact that she loves someone else, rather than by the charming feminine *pudeur* prized by her master. The appearance of *langage inconnu* and *langage nouveau* is thus tied to the necessity of reading and re-reading.

Throughout the *Lettres persanes*, Usbek's letters play on two registers. Those destined for male friends and acquaintances are referential and discursive, whereas those addressed to his wives draw primarily on the performative dimension of language. At the outset of his voyage, averted to a potential affair between Zachi and the white eunuch Nadir, he writes reproachfully to the *Premier eunuque blanc*: "Vous devez trembler à l'ouverture de cette lettre" (letter XXI). The letter itself is invested with a symbolic significance which does not seem to be dependent on reading: the eunuch need only open the letter for the desired perlocutionary effects to be realized. In response to the disorder which subsequently reigns in the harem, he once again demands that his written word assume the force of "la foudre qui tombe au milieu des éclairs et des tempêtes" (letter CLIV). He characterizes his written orders as "sanglants" (letter CL), identifying them with the perlocutionary effects which he anticipates, and overlooking the intermediary necessity of reading. On Usbek's despotic conception of language, the belief in magisterial authority is inseparable from a conviction in the authority of language to signify and to produce both unitary meanings and effects.

This portrayal corresponds to an established tradition concerning Oriental despotism. The accounts of travel writers such as Chardin, Baudier, Thévenot and Du Vignau reflect a popular conception of Islam as a literalist dogma which requires obedience to the letter of the sacred text. Needless to say, this view remains impervious to the fact that the Qu'ran, a noun which derives from the verb to read, opens with the imperative: "read!" In the context of the *Lettres persanes*, it recalls the critique of Unigenitus as the expression of Catholic dogmatism towards reading and interpretation, particularly when women are the reading subjects. In other words, the *Lettres persanes* draw an implicit relation between dogmatic conceptions of language in Europe and the Orient as between European and Oriental despotism.

On the despotic model outlined above, language is understood as pure signification: the orders of signifier and signified are fused in an allegory of the

*lettre de cachet* under Louis XIV. Unfortunately for Usbek, the force of the pure signifier is undermined by its imbrication in the material network of differences which expose it to being stolen or lost, as well as to interpretation and mis-interpretation. While Usbek struggles to regain control over the disintegrating harem, it emerges that his letters, intended to embody the master's power in his absence, are not even being read. In Letter CLI, the eunuch Solim reports that one of Usbek's letters was never opened, and in CLII, another eunuch, Narsit, reports, with a kind of kettle logic, that the letter has been stolen and lost: "J'ai envoyé un esclave pour la chercher; il a été *volé* à son retour, et la lettre est *perdue*" (Letter CLII, my italics). Dead letters, never arriving at their destination, their meaning must remain in abeyance. The implication of this failure is that writing demands a reading which alone supplies meaning. As a writer, Usbek represents himself as both author and authority, he places himself at the origin of meaning, forgetting his dependence on the material relays of the post, as well as on reading. Ultimately he learns that language does not directly translate his will, but instead constitutes a complex and alienating, foreign and unknown code.

In a much more obvious sense, the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* too is a text about the foreignness of language, since in this text, the representation of inter-cultural difference centers on problems of language and translation. At the beginning of the work, Zilia complains that she cannot understand French, and needless to say, her captors don't know Peruvian. The alterity of the two cultures becomes still more tangible when their writing systems are revealed to be different. As the "Historical Introduction" to the 1752 edition explains,

Les quapas ou quipos leur tenaient lieu de notre art d'écrire. Des cordons de coton ou de boyau, auxquels d'autres cordons de différentes couleurs étaient attachés, leur rappelaient, par des noeuds placés de distance en distance, les choses dont ils voulaient se souvenir. Ils leur servaient d'annales, de codes de rituels . . . Les finances, les comptes, les tributs, toutes les affaires, toutes les combinaisons étaient aussi traités avec les quipos.

Nancy K. Miller has provided an insightful reading of the quipos as a feminine weaving-for-survival (*texere*) in the tradition of Penelope and Arachne.<sup>12</sup> However, we should further note that they are also, more explicitly than writing, a sign system used to record everything from laws and annals to rituals and exchanges. The *Lettres* place considerable emphasis on the quipos, and as a result, our attention is drawn both to the materiality of the letter, and to the functioning of this code of exchange which in itself is arbitrary and meaningless (rather than symbolic) and thus potentially alienating.

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12. Cf. "The Knot, the Letter and the Book: Graffigny's *Peruvian Letters*," in *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

Graffigny's interest in the *quipos* reflects a broader European interest in ancient or originary and Oriental writing systems which began in the late seventeenth century and continued with eighteenth century orientalists. This interest may be interpreted as a desire to master the origins of language and to bring them within the parameters of an assimilable human history. At the same time, there is an obvious concern with tempering the potentially threatening alterity of contemporary foreign cultures. In this regard, it should be mentioned that the expression "langage inconnu" occurs at one other moment in the *Lettres persanes*, during one of several instances of the *récit dans le récit*, the tale of Aphéridon and Astarté.

This intratext is one of several instances in which the *Lettres persanes* refer to the existence of 'another other', acknowledging the non-binary nature of difference. Aphéridon and Astarté are guèbres or Zoroastrians, remnants of an ancient culture subjugated by Islam. Though brother and sister, they love each other romantically and wish to marry in accordance with the endogamous practices of their religion. This project is thwarted when the guèbres' father sells his daughter into the harem of a Moslem whose jealous wives marry her off to a eunuch. After several years have passed, Aphéridon succeeds in securing an interview with his sister, and relates that the eunuch "était bien embarrassé quand il vit que je parlais à ma soeur une *langue* qui lui était *inconnue*: c'était l'ancien persan, qui est notre langue sacrée" (Letter LXVII, my italics). Here a foreign and indeed ancient and sacred tongue is employed to subvert the dominant culture. This use of the unknown language clearly anticipates the downfall of Usbek, another harem master who, through the mediation of his eunuchs, attempts to thwart a pair of young lovers, only to be confounded by the duplicity of language.

Graffigny's Peruvian on the other hand does not attempt to use her knowledge of a foreign language to subvert either French or Spanish Imperialism. One problematic aspect of the text is that though it decries the brutality of the Spanish rape of the Incas, it tends to condone French foreign policy. In this sense, Graffigny's nationalism actually blunts the critical approach to issues of racial and cultural difference, Imperialism and slavery, which can be read in the *Lettres persanes*. Instead of relying on her knowledge of Peruvian to get the better of her captors, Zilia learns French, and associates the acquisition of knowledge or *lumières* with the acquisition of the French language and writing system.

Since Zilia is unable to communicate with either her Spanish captors or the French soldiers who board their ship, the *quipos* become her only means of communication. Although in her letters her thoughts are addressed to her absent lover Aza, there is clearly a strong sense in which this writing articulates a relation to herself. In her opening letter, Zilia gives a retrospective account of her capture: on the morning of her wedding-day, she was exploiting the stillness of the temple to tell, in *quipos*, the ongoing story of her love for Aza, when conquistadors broke into the temple and captured her. In other words, within the economy of this text, the love story is always already a story,

dependent on absence and temporality. A means of communication with absent others, Zilia's letter-writing also articulates a relation to the self, albeit to the self as other. As the novel progresses, the quipos become the means by which the heroine, isolated from her friends and unable to communicate with her captors, maintains her sanity and avoids a lapse into solipsism. However, the relation made possible by writing is predominantly self-reflexive, since for the greater part of the novel, Zilia doesn't know whether Aza is alive or dead. It is never altogether clear how the letters will reach him, given that until the end of the novel, Zilia is unaware that he is in Spain and not Peru. The fact that the private letters or quipos are subsequently translated and published once again draws attention to the indeterminacy of address, the question of who is writing to whom and why.<sup>13</sup>

In this sense, the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* do recall Guilleragues' *Lettres Portugaises*, in which the principal theme of the writer is her abandonment by her lover, a reflection on absence which is heightened by the absence of the male voice which might respond to this lament. In both works, the marked absence of the loved one conveys an impression of self-address and autarky. The letter, symbolic of absence and distance, mediates the relation to the other, yet also articulates the constitution of the self. For both Zilia and the Portuguese nun, the language of lament becomes a language of survival which bolsters their identity, such that the constitution of the self almost seems to *correspond* to the fact of separation and loss. As a form of autobiography, epistolarity thematizes the fact that the moment in which one says 'I', coming into being as a linguistic entity, also entails the splitting of the self and its alienation within a linguistic system.

When Zilia reaches the end of her supply of quipos (letter XVII) she is tormented by the thought that "mes pensées errantes, égarées dans le vide immense de l'absence, s'anéantiront désormais avec la même rapidité que le temps." Her concern that the mind shelter itself from self-erasure leads to the recognition that thought is dependant on the capacity for memory, itself conceived as a form of inscription. In his essay "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetic*," Paul de Man articulates a difference between two notions of memory which is expressed in the distinction made in German between *Erinnerung*, recollection conceived as the internalization of external events and objects (the empiricist, Lockean or Humean conception of memory), and *Gedächtnis*, which de Man, through a reading of Hegel, presents as memorization dependent on inscription and the rote repetition of arbitrary signs.<sup>14</sup> The implication here is that language, and in particular writing or inscription precede rather than being subordinate to sensation and recollection.

13. I am of course paraphrasing a fragment of Jacques Derrida's discussion of these fundamental questions about correspondence and address raised in *La Carte postale, de Socrate à Freud et au-delà*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1980), 9.

14. "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*," *Critical Inquiry*, 8: 4, Summer 1982.

This recognition seems to answer the question which Zilia poses herself in letter IX: "l'intelligence des langues serait-elle celle de l'âme?" In this early letter, she is reflecting on the fact that in order to understand what is happening to her she must learn French. As she writes in letter XI, "le seul usage de la langue du pays pourra m'apprendre la vérité. . . ." However in a broader sense, the rhetorical question expresses the immanence of language—thematized throughout the text as foreign language or as the foreignness of language—to thought. Thus in letter XVI she writes "Si je trouve à présent tant de difficultés à mettre de l'ordre dans mes idées, comment pourrai-je, dans la suite, me les rappeler sans un secours étranger?" This "secours étranger" is, of course, French writing, but it is also the concurrent necessity and foreignness of writing in general which is expressed here.

Having begun to master French writing, which she describes as ". . . la méthode dont on se sert ici pour donner une sorte d'existence aux pensées . . ." (Letter XVI), Zilia reflects that "A mesure que j'en ai acquis l'intelligence, un nouvel univers s'est offert à mes yeux. Les objets ont pris une autre forme . . ." (Letter XVIII). On this account, the realm of objects is not in the empiricist sense objective, but is determined by language, and indeed constituted in a particular form by language as the vehicle of cultural specificity. The priority of the natural or objectal world over language strongly articulated in, for example, Locke's *Essay*, finds itself reversed in Zilia's account of experience. Janet Altman has given us an important reading of the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* as a philosophical text, a text about epistemology, rather than as the sentimental novel which was long dismissed for reasons pertaining to the author's gender. In the light of this reading, we can now refine our understanding of Graffigny's relationship to the major currents in empiricism and sensualism. Altman compares the epistemology of her writing to that of Étienne de Condillac's *Traité des Sensations*, published in 1754, seven years after the first edition of the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*.<sup>15</sup> Both works address the acquisition of ideas through the senses, though the *Traité* has little to say about language, seemingly endorsing Locke's view that language is both secondary to perception and the formation of ideas, and transparent and adequate to experience. However, Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines*, published in 1746, paints a rather different picture. In this text Condillac, like Graffigny, emphasizes the importance of memory to the formation of distinct ideas. Though initially Lockean in his conception of language, Con-

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15. Condillac's account of epistemology in the *Traité des Sensations* depends on the fiction of a (female) statue who comes to life one sense at a time, i.e. on the ultimate model of defamiliarization. Altman compares the two works, which both depend on models of radical defamiliarization as the basis for epistemological investigation. She is particularly interested in the relationship between the prefaces of the two works since both urge the reader to suspend his or her own prejudices in order to identify with the perspective of an "other." ("Graffigny's Epistemology," 177–8.)

dillac soon runs into difficulty and almost reverses himself by suggesting that the formation of ideas requires difference and memory and that both are dependent on language.<sup>16</sup>

Zilia also gradually learns that problems of reference are not restricted to the relationship between language and objects, but that the relation of signifier to signified is also inherently unreliable. While she is still languishing on board Déterville's ship, her captor turned suitor teaches her to repeat phrases whose meaning is entirely opaque to her, i.e. "Oui, je vous aime" and "je vous promets d'être à vous." In a parallel scene in a nineteenth-century work, Nerval's *Voyage en Orient*, the narrator ungallantly teaches his newly acquired slave, Zaynab, to repeat the phrase "je suis une petite sauvage." In these scenes of sexual and colonial domination the colonized other, typically represented as female, is encouraged to repeat the words of the colonizer without having access to their meaning, and thus to any degree of power or control. Both scenes also seem to draw attention to the foreign, codified dimension of language rather than reflecting the assurance of a transparent referentiality. However, as Altman reflects, Zilia gets her revenge on the male colonist when in letter XXIII she assures him that she will always *love* him. She is referring to the love that stems from gratitude and friendship whereas what he has in mind is the romantic love she feels for Aza. Throughout the text, Graffigny emphasizes the difference between these two sentiments, paving the way for Zilia's unorthodox choice of friendship over love at the end of the text. This painful scene, in which Déterville's hopes are raised only to be destroyed, also highlights the indeterminacy of meaning and the constant need for interpretation.

I have attempted to show that both the *Lettres persanes* and the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* contain reflections on language and the necessity of reading. I would suggest that these reflections constitute a resistance to the kind of closure which is necessary in order to view the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* as a feminist or at least, a feminocentric rewriting of a masculinist model. The complexity of the question of the relationship between "original" and "copy," be it imitation or revision, emerges in the textual history of the two works. In 1754, Montesquieu published a new edition of the *Lettres persanes* prefaced by the famous *Quelques Réflexions sur les Lettres persanes* whose discussion of a "chaîne secrète" binding the letters has fuelled critical debates on the text.<sup>17</sup> One effect of this focus on a secret chain has been to dispatch critics on a quest for a determining chain of interpretation, a search for interpretative

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16. Étienne de Condillac, *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (Paris: Guillaume et cie., 1821). See in particular, Section II, chapter III, esp. 78 and section IV, chapter II, 196.

17. Cf. Theodore Braun "La Chaîne Secrète": a Decade of Interpretations," *French Studies*, July 1988, 42: 3, in which the author summarizes and evaluates three decades of criticism interpreting the "chaîne secrète."

closure. The *Quelques Réflexions* represented a new departure for Montesquieu in that they publicly and explicitly recognize the importance of the novel as genre, the utility of fiction to philosophy. The *Réflexions* state that "... ces sortes de romans réussissent ordinairement, parce que l'on rend compte soi-même de sa situation actuelle; ce qui fait plus sentir les passions que tous les récits qu'on en pourrait faire." The text proceeds to claim that "... c'est une des causes du succès de quelques ouvrages charmants qui ont paru depuis les *Lettres persanes*." (In a preliminary version, Graffigny's *Lettres* are cited as one of these charming works.) This statement conveys the implicit message that the *Lettres persanes* are the model whilst subsequent works are copies of the original, an opinion which, as Janet Altman remarks, has often been taken at face value.<sup>18</sup> However, it is worth noting that Montesquieu only publicly acknowledged authorship and wrote a preface praising the potentialities of the novel after the success of the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* and Graffigny's own addition (in 1752) of a Preface and Historical Introduction to the text.

It has often been suggested that this Introduction, which presents itself as a piece of ethnographic writing on Peruvian culture, was written not by Graffigny, but by her lover and fellow novelist Antoine Bret. Once again, determinism towards writing and gender leads to the presumption that the neutral, ethnographic tone could not be that of a woman writer. Even in the important critical edition of the *Lettres* which began the task of rediscovering the *Lettres*, Gianni Nicoletti reiterates this view without offering evidence to substantiate it.<sup>19</sup> Graffigny seems to anticipate precisely this kind of preconception when, in the Preface to the work, she suggests that only social prejudice against a more primitive culture could lead readers to doubt the authenticity of the letters and to assume that they are fictional. Here she uses the term "original" to signify authentic, by the author: "Avec autant de lumières sur les caractères de ces peuples, il semble qu'il ne doit pas y avoir lieu de craindre que des lettres originales . . . puissent être regardées comme une fiction." This apparent identification of author and origin is subsequently undermined in the description of the process of translation. Of course, the use of the term "original" also connotes the idea that these are not mere copies or reworkings of the *Lettres persanes* for example.

The editorial voice of the preface states that the published letters represent a translation of the Peruvian quipos into French, a translation which could only have been prepared by Zilia herself. However, the preface also includes a translator's note stating that a subsequent translator (obviously not Zilia), edited out "un grand nombre de figures hors d'usage dans notre style" (the first edition has "expressions et comparaisons orientales," reflecting the way in which, though Peruvian, the exotic Zilia conforms to the prevalent figure

18. Cf. "Making room for 'Peru': Graffigny's Novel Reconsidered."

19. "Avvertenza," *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, ed. Gianni Nicoletti (Bari: Adriatica Editrice, 1967), 27.

of "Oriental woman," and echoing the *Lettres persanes*, whose preface also speaks of expunging Oriental compliments), while apologizing that it is "un ouvrage qui . . . renferme de grandes beautés dans l'original."<sup>20</sup> According to this 'second translator', what is original and creative in the text is suppressed in favor of linguistic commonplace. This double act of translation itself bears at least two significations: it acts as a reference to the political suppression of the writing of the female, Peruvian other, and at the same time draws attention to the errance of any original language in the face of the attempt to translate, i.e. to impose a fixed meaning.

The translator's note thus seems to strangely paraphrase the sense in which, in these texts about exile and cultural alterity, self-expression constantly finds itself alienated in a language which is always the language of exile. The emphasis placed in both the *Lettres persanes* and the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* on the resistance of language problematizes the transparency and determinacy of meaning, and as a result, the concepts of original, copy and revision, which are among the building blocks of canon formation. The self-reflexive language of this text constitutes a resistance to its straightforward assimilation into a historical and philosophical categories such as empiricism or sensualism. In both sets of letters, enlightenment humanism, the acquisition of knowledge about the other, are tied to the non-human resistance of language. The drive to knowledge, associated in these texts with the possibility of mastery and domination, meets with resistance in the very medium of its formulation. The *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* should of course be rediscovered for literary history, yet this re-canonization should take into account the resistant force opposed by the wandering language of exile to both enlightenment and contemporary systems of knowledge and classification.

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20. Elie Fréron identifies the reference to "expressions orientales" as one of several historical or anthropological errors in the novel in Letter V of the *Lettres sur quelques écrits de ce temps* cited above.