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Cosmopolitanism and abjection in Montesquieu's Persian letters.

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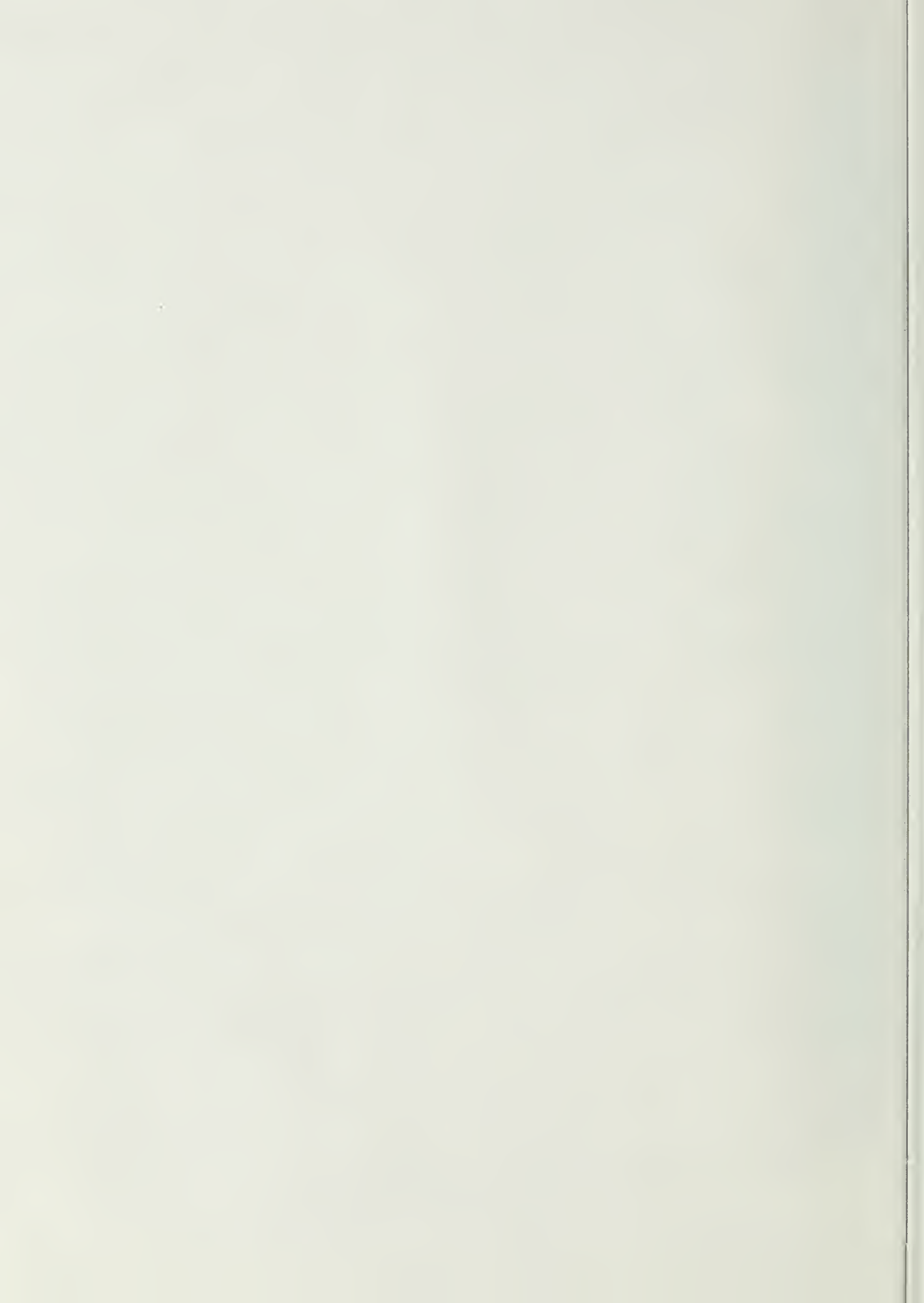
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COSMOPOLITANISM AND ABJECTION IN
MONTESQUIEU'S *PERSIAN LETTERS*

A Dissertation Presented

by

VERONICA A. O'CONNOR

Approved as to style and content by:

Nicholas Xenos, Chair

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Political Science

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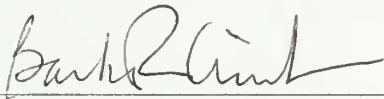
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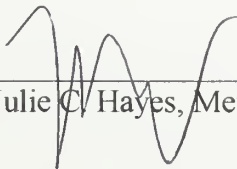
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DEDICATION

To my mother

ABSTRACT

COSMOPOLITANISM AND ABJECTION IN MONTESQUIEU'S *PERSIAN LETTERS*

FEBRUARY 2008

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One of the questions at stake in contemporary theoretical debates over the legacy of the Enlightenment is whether the political violence that has been carried out over the last two centuries is inextricably linked to the “rationalist” values promoted by the Enlightenment. This critique of the political and social legacy of the Enlightenment challenges us to consider how Montesquieu’s writings may inform our understanding of the disintegration and formation of social-political bonds and identities. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories, this dissertation explores how Julia Kristeva’s theory of the “demarcating imperative” of abjection illuminates both her claim for the critical significance of Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* and her argument for a cosmopolitanism based on an “ethics of psychoanalysis.”

The chapters that follow examine how the differences that produce the meaning of the subject and the symbolic order in the text—nature and culture; the pure and the impure; man and woman; human and nonhuman; violence and nonviolence; life and death—are articulated in relation to the figuration of the abject. Chapter one begins an exploration of two movements of the epistolary journey of the fictional foreigner.

During one movement of the epistolary journey, the production of critical knowledge has the effect of destabilizing the subject and the symbolic order. In a second movement, the articulation of knowledge functions to contain the uncanny strangeness of the enlightened subject.

Through a reading of the myth of the Troglodytes and the story of Apheridon, chapter two addresses how the signification of violence functions in the production and destruction of a symbolic order and how monetary exchanges offer the abject cosmopolitan an imaginary refuge from violent nondifferentiation.

Chapter three begins with an analysis of how rhetorical figures operate in the epistolary exchanges to both produce the meaning of the symbolic order of France and signify a crisis of political signification. This examination of how signifying practices function as sacrificial rites presents the paradox that the *Persian Letters* both allows for a critical analysis of abjection and participates in the demarcation of a symbolic order that functions to deny consciousness of our uncanny strangeness.

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INTRODUCTION

Many of the debates pervading contemporary political theory have been described in terms of a struggle over the legacy of the Enlightenment.¹ One of the questions at stake in this struggle is whether the political violence that has been carried out over the last two centuries is inextricably linked to the universal rationalist values promoted by the Enlightenment. With the opening lines of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno point to the possible paradox that leaves some contemporary theorists working to fulfill the promise of the Enlightenment and others helping to bring about what they believe is its protracted demise: “In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant.”²

When we turn to the work of theorists who believe that the critique of what is argued to be the political and social legacy of the Enlightenment infuses the ideas of the Enlightenment with new significance, we are challenged to consider how Montesquieu’s writings inform our understanding of the disintegration and formation of social-political bonds and identities.³ Julia Kristeva believes that Montesquieu’s writing offers a way to

¹ For an analysis of how the meaning of the Enlightenment has been a pivotal point of departure and return for political and social theoretical debates since the Enlightenment itself, see Karlis Racevskis, *Postmodernism and the Search for Enlightenment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993).

² Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 1986), p.3.

³ While Tzvetan Todorov condemns the violence that has been carried out over the last two centuries in the name of universal values, he rejects the conclusion that such violence is an inevitable consequence of the universal values and principles articulated during the

think through what she refers to as the confrontation between particular “political reason” and putatively universal “moral reason.” With accelerating global economic and social integration clashing with the preservation of the traditional political and legal jurisdiction of the nation-state, the political and ethical meaning of the “foreigner” casts into relief the limitations of the nation-state and the “national political conscience.” After considering the different forms of political, social, subjective and symbolic instability that have contributed to the production of the meaning of the “foreigner” as the other who threatens what is imagined as the proper unified identity of the subject, Kristeva comes back to how it is the nation-state that ultimately attempts to clarify and regulate the relation between the citizen and the foreigner. In short, Kristeva describes how the logic of exclusion that produces the meaning of the foreigner as the threatening other is the same logic that is a condition for the existence of the nation-state:⁴

Enlightenment. The belief that domination and violence are an inevitable consequence of the defense of universal values and principles, according to Todorov, reinforces the sterile and potentially dangerous conceptual oppositions that frame our understanding of the relation between humanity and the citizen, ethics and politics, the universal and the particular. Todorov describes how the belief that universal values are inseparable from domination and violence has led to a relativism that could also be used to justify violence: “What is more, a relativist, even a moderate one, cannot denounce any injustice, any violence, that may happen to be part of some tradition other than his own: clitoridectomy would not warrant condemnation, nor would even human sacrifice. Yet it might be argued that concentration camps themselves belonged, at a given moment of Russian or German history, to the national tradition.” Re-claiming the universalist spirit of the Enlightenment from what he claims are both its “relativist” and “false” universalist detractors and defenders, Todorov turns to the work of Montesquieu. Todorov argues that Montesquieu’s formulation of the relation between universal values and the diversity of particular political and social conditions disrupts the conceptual oppositions that frame the struggle over the legacy of the Enlightenment. Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, And Exoticism in French Thought*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.389.

⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers To Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p.96.

the problem of foreigners follows from a classical logic, that of the political group and its peak, the nation-state. A logic that, amenable to improvement (democracies) or degeneration (totalitarianism), acknowledges its being based on certain exclusions and, consequently, surrounds itself with other structures—moral and religious, whose absolutist aspirations it nonetheless tempers—in order precisely to confront what it has set aside, in this case the problem of foreigners and its more egalitarian settling.⁵

Kristeva describes how even when it grants foreigners political and legal rights, the nation-state constitutes both the “foreigner” as a term of exclusion and a form of “national political conscience” that does not question why there is a need to designate people within the nation-state that do not have the same rights as the citizen. It is this paradox that, according to Kristeva, makes the “foreigner” a “symptom” of our “national political conscience.”⁶

As she explores how the question of the foreigner has been considered throughout the history of religious, political, and social thought, Kristeva argues that Montesquieu’s writings challenge the logic of exclusion that regulates the relation between the foreigner and the citizen-individual. Kristeva quotes Montesquieu’s cosmopolitan idea that she claims can be invested with new meaning for contemporary politics:

All particular duties cease when they cannot be accomplished without offending human duties. Should one consider, for instance, the good of the homeland when that of mankind is at stake? No, *the duty of the citizen is a crime when it leads one to forget the duty of man.*⁷

⁵ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.98.

⁶ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.103.

⁷ Montesquieu, *Analyse du traité des devoirs*, 1725 Œuvres complètes 1:110 quoted in Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.131.

Kristeva describes how the value of the principle of a “human, trans-historical *dignity*” established during the Enlightenment and the basis for the freedoms guaranteed by the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* quickly became subsumed in the *Declaration* under the rights of the citizen of the nation-state. Kristeva presents Hannah Arendt’s observations of the historical process by which the principle of universal human dignity became enclosed within the nation-state:

The world of barbarity thus comes to a head in a single world composed of states, in which only those people organized into national residences are entitled to have rights. The ‘loss of residence,’ a ‘loss of social framework’ worsened by the ‘impossibility to find one’ are characteristic of this new barbarity issued from the very core of the nation-state system.⁸

Kristeva, however, is not satisfied with what she sees as Arendt’s turn away from her original defense of the notion of the “rights of man” because “‘the world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human [...]’”⁹ Instead, Kristeva claims that it is possible to preserve both the universality and political grounding of the eighteenth century principle of human dignity while modifying what she regards as the “optimism” of its content. Just as Kristeva suggests that even though Montesquieu’s articulation of the principle of human dignity is supported by particular social, economic, and political policies and institutions, the “symbolic value” of the principle remains distinct from such

⁸ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.151. Hannah Arendt, “Imperialism” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979), pp.295-96, quoted in Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.151.

⁹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp.299-300, quoted in Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.151.

“historical realities,” she also suggests that the renewal of the ethical value of cosmopolitanism is not limited by the existence of the nation-state.¹⁰

However, while the renewal of the ethical value of cosmopolitanism is not negated by the existence of the nation-state, according to Kristeva, it must be informed by what the violence that has been carried out in both the name of national origins and in the name of universal values over the last two hundred years tells us about our humanity.¹¹

Kristeva claims Freudian psychoanalytic theory can provide content to the principle of human dignity that reflects the complex meaning of the violent behavior of human

¹⁰ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.152. Kristeva’s position on the relation between cosmopolitanism and the nation-state shifts as she moves from utopian aspirations to pragmatic considerations. In *Strangers To Ourselves*, Kristeva claims that the “fundamental sociability and moderatable ideality” that is the basis for Montesquieu’s cosmopolitanism requires nation-states to “give way to higher political systems.” Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.131. However, Kristeva also describes how a cosmopolitanism that follows from an “ethics of psychoanalysis” can accommodate the nation-state, for the time being at least: “Such an adjustment, which may be described as a cosmopolitanism interior to the nation-states, appears indeed to be the middle way that democratic societies are already capable of following, before dreaming the utopia of a society without nations.” Kristeva, *Stranger*, p.154. In *Nations Without Nationalism*, Kristeva moves further away from this utopian dream to an acceptance and defense of the existence of the nation-state: “Beyond the opening of borders and the economic and even political integrations that are taking place within Europe and throughout the world, the nation is and shall long remain a persistent although modifiable entity.” Julia Kristeva, *Nations Without Nationalism*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp.5-6. Kristeva proceeds to defend the “idea of the nation,” even as she foresees its replacement: “Whatever its antecedent might have been, the idea of the nation was finally molded by the French Revolution. Nevertheless, in the very bosom of the West, this idea includes variations (French nation, German nation, American nation [or union], British nation [or Commonwealth], and so forth) that need to be recalled briefly, important as it is not to reject the idea of the nation in a gesture of willful universalism but to modulate its less repressive aspects, keeping one’s sight on the twenty first century, which will be a transitional period between the nation and international or polynational confederations.” Kristeva, *Nations*, pp.6-7. Also, when Kristeva’s claims in *Nations Without Nationalism* that she has “chosen cosmopolitanism” for herself, it becomes clear that she does not believe that the ethical “transnational principle of Humanity” is precluded by the existence of the nation-state. Kristeva, *Nations*, p.16.

¹¹ Kristeva, *Nations Without Nationalism*, p.27.

beings.¹² By being “wedded to the abstract notion of human nature, reduced in a now outdated manner to ‘liberty,’ ‘property,’ and ‘sovereignty,’” the conception of humanity that is heir to eighteenth century Enlightenment thought, according to Kristeva, does not take into account the complexity of a human subjectivity that is divided by conscious and unconscious processes.¹³ By giving us an account of the “uncanny strangeness” that divides the self, Freud’s analysis of the unconscious provides us with an insight into the psychical, linguistic, and political operations that both produce the category of the foreigner as a threatening *other* to be excluded and provides the basis for modifying the conception of humanity that is heir to the Enlightenment:¹⁴

¹² Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.153.

¹³ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.152.

¹⁴ Kristeva describes how Freud’s essay on the uncanny goes beyond its association with limited aesthetic problems and takes on universal significance as a consequence of its investigation into how the “other is my (‘own and proper’) unconscious:” “Indeed, Freud wanted to demonstrate at the outset, on the basis of a semantic study of the German adjective *heimlich* and its antonym *unheimlich* that a negative meaning close to that of the antonym is already tied to the positive term *heimlich*, ‘friendly comfortable,’ which would also signify ‘concealed, kept from sight,’ ‘deceitful and malicious,’ ‘behind someone’s back.’ Thus in the very word *heimlich*, the familiar and intimate are reversed into their opposites, brought together with the contrary meaning of “uncanny strangeness” harbored in *unheimlich*.” Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.182. See Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1981). For a discussion of relation between the Enlightenment and the emergence of the “uncanny” see Mladen Dolar, “‘I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night’: Lacan and the Uncanny,” *October* 58 (1991): 5-23. Eva Ziarek argues that despite the immediate political conditions in France and Europe that set the context for Kristeva’s consideration of the “uncanny,” by relying an essay where Freud’s primary focus is on aesthetics and not politics, Kristeva’s articulation of a form of cosmopolitanism based on an ethics and “politics of psychoanalysis” suggests a “displacement of politics.” However, by pointing to how Kristeva’s turn to the “aesthetics of the uncanny” disrupts the imaginary national identity that Benedict Anderson claims is “modeled” on the “linearity of realistic narrative,” Ziarek also brings into question the demarcation between politics and aesthetics that underlies the argument that Kristeva’s reliance on the concept of the uncanny in her articulation of cosmopolitanism risks

The ethics of psychoanalysis implies a politics: it would involve a cosmopolitanism of a new sort that, cutting across governments, economies, and markets, might work for a mankind whose solidarity is founded on the consciousness of its unconscious—desiring, destructive, fearful, empty, impossible.¹⁵

Kristeva believes that when we recognize how irreconcilable desires and fears are part of a subjectivity divided by conscious and unconscious processes, we will no longer be compelled to project them onto an external other.

Even as Montesquieu's writings articulate the universal values and conception of humanity that Kristeva claims requires modification with the Freudian psychoanalytic conception of the subject, Kristeva suggests that by introducing a "strangeness" into the national-political conscience, they also prepare the way for the critical social-political transformation that occurs with the recognition of the Freudian psychoanalytic notion of the "uncanny strangeness" of the subject.¹⁶ The fictional foreigner in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* is considered by Kristeva to be the mediator of the "positive value" and

"psychologizing or aestheticizing the problem of political violence." Eva Ziarek, "The Uncanny Style of Kristeva," *Postmodern Culture* 5, no.2 (June 1995). See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983). For further discussion of the question of the political significance of Kristeva's writings see the collection of essays in *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Routledge 1993); Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Nancy Fraser, "The Uses and Abuses of French Discourse Theories for Feminist Politics," *Boundary 2*, 17, no.2 (1990): 82-101; Judith Butler, "The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva," *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp.79-93; Linda M.G. Zerelli, *Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p. 192.

¹⁶ Kristeva, *Strangers*, pp.128, 132.

critical potential of Montesquieu's rational cosmopolitanism.¹⁷ That is, Kristeva suggests that the fictional foreigner in the *Persian Letters* contributes to the creation of the social, political, and mental conditions that fulfill Montesquieu's cosmopolitanism in its attempt to "turn politics into a space of possible freedom."¹⁸ The meaning of freedom in Montesquieu's work, according to Kristeva, must be understood alongside his arguments for particular political and social arrangements that "prevent the brutal integration of difference" from devolving into a "totalizing, univocal set that would eliminate any possibility of freedom."¹⁹ Kristeva sees this dual movement between Montesquieu's articulation of universal values and his analysis of particular social and political institutions and practices reflected in the "twofold journey" the figure of the foreigner in the *Persian Letters* provides the reader. Beginning with the *Persian Letters*, the foreigner in French philosophical fiction, according to Kristeva, "invited the reader" to "leave one's homeland in order to enter other climes, mentalities, and governments," but only in order "to return to oneself and one's home, to judge or laugh at one's limitations, peculiarities, mental and political despotisms."²⁰ The political, social, and psychic transformations that are made possible by Montesquieu's articulation of this dual

¹⁷ Kristeva contrasts the "positive value" of Montesquieu's cosmopolitanism with the "malevolent cosmopolitanism" of Foucheret de Monbron, the author of the 1750 text *Le Cosmopolite ou le citoyen du Monde*. The obligations and values that define humanity in Montesquieu's thought, according to Kristeva, are articulated in terms of a shared rationality and universal knowledge. In contrast, as a negative response to his failure to "recognize himself in the community of his own people," Foucheret's cosmopolitanism, according to Kristeva, "discloses the violence and strangeness of the subjective facet of cosmopolitanism." Kristeva, *Strangers*, pp.142-43.

¹⁸ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.133.

¹⁹ Kristeva, *Strangers*, pp.131-32.

²⁰ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.133.

movement between universal values and particular practices and institutions should, according to Kristeva, “encourage one to guarantee a long life to the notion of...’strangeness.’”²¹ For Kristeva, the confrontation of the citizen-individual with their “strangeness” has the potential to undermine the “national political conscience” that does not ask the ethical and psychological question of why we have difficulty with “living as an *other* with others” and the political question of why “there are foreigners, that is, people who do not have the same rights as we do.”²²

However, while the two-fold journey of the foreigner in the *Persian Letters* arguably has the potential to confront the citizen-individual with their own “strangeness,” Kristeva does not address how both the psychoanalytic theory that informs her claim for a modification of the eighteenth notion of human dignity with an “ethics of psychoanalysis” and her analysis of abjection complicate the significance of the critical potential of that journey.²³ This weakness becomes evident when we consider how

²¹ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.132.

²² Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.103.

²³ Referring to what she claims is Kristeva’s revival of the “Enlightenment project and Montesquieu,” Norma Claire Moruzzi argues that Kristeva’s earlier work on abjection in *Powers of Horror* “places into question an easy return to a national politics of humanely rationalized French identity.” Norma Claire Moruzzi, “National Objects: Julia Kristeva on the Process of Political Self-identification,” in *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva’s Writings*, p.136. I agree with Eva Ziarek’s response to Moruzzi’s claim that Kristeva is returning to “the traditional comforts of Enlightenment humanism” ignores the larger significance of the Freudian conception of the uncanny in Kristeva’s argument for cosmopolitanism. Eva Ziarek, “The Uncanny Style of Kristeva” in *Postmodern Culture*. However, even though the significance of the Freudian conception of uncanny strangeness in Kristeva’s “revival” of Montesquieu’s ideas undermines Moruzzi’s argument that Kristeva is proposing an “easy return” to the “rational optimism of the Enlightenment,” I agree with Moruzzi’s claim to the extent that she is correct in pointing out that Kristeva’s earlier analysis of abjection in *Powers of Horror* brings into question Kristeva’s claims in both *Strangers To Ourselves* and *Nations Without Nationalism* in

Kristeva's theory of the "demarcating imperative" of abjection, as well as the semiotic and psychoanalytic theory that she draws on to explicate her argument for a cosmopolitanism based on an ethics of psychoanalysis, points to the symbolic power of the signifying practices that function to deny consciousness of the unconscious desires and fears that take the form of a threatening other.²⁴ In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva presents a theory of "abjection" in her analysis of the different social and cultural practices that function to protect the symbolic order and the subject from the dissolution of the difference between self and other, inside and outside, subject and object, ego and non-ego.²⁵ Kristeva describes the abject as a "narcissistic crisis" that consumes the subject with the "violence of mourning for an 'object' that has always already been lost... It takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away—it assigns it a source in the non-ego, drive, and death."²⁶ While Kristeva does not address the issue of cosmopolitanism in her analysis of abjection, she does argue that even though it "assumes specific shapes and different codings" according to different particular social-historical conditions, by virtue of being "coextensive with social and symbolic order, on the individual as well as on the collective level," abjection "just like the *prohibition of incest*, is a universal

ways that Kristeva does not acknowledge in her argument for the critical significance of Montesquieu's writings.

²⁴ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.152.

²⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p.4.

²⁶ Kristeva, *Powers*, p.15.

phenomenon.”²⁷ The “signifying process” that articulates the conflicts and prohibitions specific to a particular social historical symbolic order also articulates the meaning of a subject that, for Kristeva, is always a “speaking subject.”²⁸ Kristeva brings this “dialogic” understanding of signification to her analysis of the “demarcating imperative” in contemporary literary texts.²⁹ Kristeva claims that as a result of the diminished role of religion in coding and containing the abject, contemporary literature performs the sacred

²⁷ Kristeva, *Powers*, p.68.

²⁸ Kristeva claims that her notion of the correspondence between the logic of the speaking subject and the logic of the social symbolic system presents only the subjective “effects” of a particular social symbolic system and “leaves out questions of cause and effect; is the social determined by the subjective, or is it the other way around?” Kristeva, *Powers*, p.67. According to Kristeva, abjection and the prohibition of incest share their universal significance by virtue of being a shared response to the threat from the incomplete separation from the “maternal entity” that is the precondition for the entry of the subject into the symbolic order. Kristeva, *Powers*, pp.13, 72. In her theory of the production of meaning, the significance of this incomplete separation from the “maternal entity” is explained by Kristeva in terms of the relation between the “semiotic” and the “symbolic” elements of language. According to Kristeva’s linguistic theory, significance puts the “subject in process/on trial” as the identity of the subject is created within a language where meaning is composed of the “semiotic” and the “symbolic,” two inseparable elements of the “signifying process.” Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 24, 37. While the symbolic, according to Kristeva, includes elements of the semiotic, it designates those parts of language such as the rules of grammar and syntax that establish the conditions for the speaking subject’s engagement in intelligible communication. The semiotic, composed of those elements that, while “necessary to the acquisition of language, but not identical to language,” preserves infantile bodily drives and processes that existed prior to the separation from the mother’s body. The heterogeneity between the symbolic and semiotic elements of language, according to Kristeva, destabilizes the distinctions and oppositions that demarcate and order meaning in relation to fixed unified identity positions. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution*, pp.21-51.

²⁹ Kristeva, *Powers*, pp.26, 57-58, 64, 74. In addition to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Kristeva’s theory of the “dialogic” character of signification is also indebted to her reading of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. See “Word, Dialogue and Novel” in Julia Kristeva, *Desire In Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp.64-91.

function of coding the abject and demarcating the limits of the identity of the subject and symbolic order.

Kristeva's claim for the universality of the "demarcating imperative" of abjection as well as her analysis of its particular social-historical manifestations underscores its significance for examining the potential for a form of cosmopolitanism that is based on the acceptance of our unconscious desires and fears of "the other of death, the other of woman, the other of uncontrollable drive."³⁰ Through an analysis of how the "demarcating imperative" of abjection operates in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, the following chapters will explore both Kristeva's claim for a psychoanalytic based modification of the meaning of cosmopolitanism and the critical significance of the "two-fold" journey the *Persian Letters* provides the reader. While Kristeva claims that the two-fold journey taken by the cosmopolitan foreigner has the potential to confront the citizen-individual with their "strangeness," she does not address how unconscious fears of the "other of death, the other of woman, the other of uncontrollable drive" might also be part of the meaning of the cosmopolitan journey of the foreigner in the *Persian Letters*. Therefore, the following chapters will ask how the coding of the abject figures into the production of the meaning of the epistemological journey of the foreigners in the *Persian Letters*. The examination of the operation of the "demarcating imperative" of abjection in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* that follows will draw on and explicate the Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories and the semiotic and literary theories of meaning underlying Kristeva's analysis of abjection and her argument for a cosmopolitanism based on an "ethics of psychoanalysis." In addition to providing the

³⁰ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.191.

basis for a critical understanding of Kristeva's claim for a psychoanalytic modification of the concepts that are heir to Montesquieu's political thought, both Kristeva's theory of abjection and the linguistic and psychoanalytic theories informing her analysis of how the meaning of the writing subject and the meaning of the text are "*in process*"—the effect of unstable conscious and unconscious processes—undermine traditional readings of the *Persian Letters* that are based on presumed knowledge of the rational intentions of the historical author. The latter readings of the *Persian Letters* that claim that the words of a fictional character are a direct representation of Montesquieu's ideas or represent Montesquieu's use of irony in order to criticize the ideas expressed by a fictional character assume that meaning preexists and remains unchanged by its specific textual articulation. As a result, such readings occlude how the meaning of the text is produced through an unstable differential process of signification. However, when we assume that the determinate meaning of terms in the text preexists their contingent textual articulation, we also fail to understand how such a term as "woman" functions as a fundamental part of the differential signifying process that produces the meaning of violence and religion. The chapters that follow will thus examine how the differences that produce the meaning of symbolic and subjective order in the text—nature and culture; the pure and the impure; man and woman; human and nonhuman; violence and nonviolence; life and death—are articulated in relation to the figuration of the abject and the meaning of the journeys of the fictional foreigners charged with mediating the relation between our critical enlightenment and our "strangeness."

CHAPTER 1

THE SUBJECT COSMOPOLITAN

Foreigner as Critical Metaphor

In the opening letter of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, Usbek writes to his friend Rustan, at Ispahan, of how his devotion to life in his native country could not compete with his desire for knowledge of what lies outside the boundaries of his home:

The kingdom in which we were born is prosperous, but we did not think it right that our knowledge should be limited to its boundaries, and that we should see by the light of the East alone (Letter 1, p.41).³¹

In this initial explanation for his journey, Usbek presents an image of himself and Rica as cosmopolitans animated by the "neutral serenity of philosophical wisdom that remains above borders" that Kristeva attributes to the "positive value" of Montesquieu's cosmopolitanism.³² Usbek's stated intentions for his journey West thus casts him in the role of the fictional foreigner who by allowing the reader to make what Kristeva describes as the "two-fold journey" across the boundaries of one's homeland is the "the metaphor of the distance at which we should place ourselves in order to revive the dynamics of ideological and social transformation."³³ However, when Usbek receives a

³¹Charles de Secondat baron de Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. C.J. Betts (New York: Penguin Books, 1983).

³² Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.142.

³³Kristeva, *Strangers*, pp.133-34. Kristeva gives two different, although overlapping, accounts of the meaning of foreigner and the meaning of distance and the relation between the two in *Strangers To Ourselves*. In her discussion of the foreigner in philosophical fiction such as the *Persian Letters*, critical distance is explained in terms of how knowledge of the other who lies outside one's national boundaries allows the reader to achieve critical distance in the form of an epistemological transcendence from the

letter from Rustan explaining how people in Ispahan are incredulous that Usbek could abandon his relations to friends, family, and country for the unknown climate of Paris and speculate that Usbek's departure is the result of "frivolity of mind" or "some disappointment," Usbek offers a second explanation that brings into question the critical function Kristeva attributes to the "twofold journey" of the fictional foreigner.

In his second explanation for his journey, we learn how Usbek's desire for knowledge that transcends the boundaries of his home was a consequence of his disappointment with an abject sovereign who failed to bring order to political and symbolic instability by recognizing the truth of Usbek's language and the virtue of his subjectivity. Usbek writes to his friend Rustan, at Ispahan:

I appeared at court in my earliest youth. I can truthfully say that my heart did not become corrupt. I even undertook a great project: I dared to behave virtuously there. As soon as I had recognized vice for what it was, I kept away from it; but approached it again in order to expose it. I took truth to the steps of the throne. I spoke a language hitherto unknown there: I put flattery

practices particular to one's homeland. In the context of the psychoanalytic notion of the uncanny strangeness of the subject, or the way in which Kristeva claims we are all foreigners to ourselves, the relation between the meaning of critical distance to the meaning of the foreigner is explained in terms of how the subject's alienation, or division between conscious and unconscious processes, provides the possibility for living with the other without rejecting the other as a "foreigner." Kristeva writes: "Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking, the impetus of my culture." Kristeva, *Strangers*, pp.13-14.

Kristeva claims that Freudian psychoanalysis is what provides the analytic tools for understanding our own foreignness and thus the potential for living with the other. Therefore, given that Usbek and the author of the *Persian Letters* predate Freud, I am not suggesting that if Usbek finds himself capable of living with the other that this will be a fulfillment of Kristeva's notion of a cosmopolitanism based on an ethics of psychoanalysis. However, the outcome of Usbek's journey can contribute to our understanding of both Kristeva's proposal for modifying the conception of humanity that is heir to Montesquieu's "cosmopolitical" thought with an "ethics of psychoanalysis" as well as our understanding of what has been read as Montesquieu's cosmopolitanism.

out of countenance and, at the same time, astonished both the flatterers and their idol (Letter 8, p.48).

In his explanation of how he “took truth to the steps of the throne,” Usbek reveals his belief that language functions as neutral vehicle for the representation of truth and has no effect on political meaning.³⁴ Positioned in opposition to the language of truth, the “flatterers and their idol” confront Usbek with the symbolic instability that is an effect of the rhetorical production of political meaning.³⁵ When combined with her theory of

³⁴Whereas political meaning is arbitrary and unstable as a result of being the effect of language, Usbek puts the blame for the instability of political meaning on the weakness of the occupant of the throne. Usbek’s explanation of his experience at court can be understood in light of what Samuel Weber, in his reading of Saussure, explains is the difference between meaning understood as a representation of a pre-linguistic entity and meaning as an effect of differential articulation: “Thought of in this way, signification is no longer conceived of as a process of representation, but as one of *articulation*. Instead of language being considered from the vantage-point of a hierarchically and temporally prior presence as its point of departure, it is construed as an *articulation*, determined and defined by a difference that produces identities only belatedly and retroactively: as concrete and individual signifiers and signifieds.” Samuel Weber, *Return to Freud: Jacques Lacan’s Dislocation of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Michael Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991), p.27. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Roy Harris (La Salle: Open Court, 1986), p.115.

³⁵Dena Goodman explains how Usbek’s attempt to challenge the rhetoric of the flatters with a language of truth was an apolitical move: “Usbek’s purpose was apolitical in two senses: first, because it disregarded totally the actual political system in which Usbek was operating, as he soon found out; second, and more fundamentally, because, Fénelon and Mentor notwithstanding, sincerity, virtue, and truth telling have less to do with relationships between human beings which are structured by politics than with those between men and objects structured by semiotics and epistemology. In other words, Usbek attempted to communicate with a language that, by his definition, was arhetorical and thus apolitical.” Dena Goodman, *Criticism in Action: Enlightenment Experiments in Political Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1989), p.30. Goodman examines how Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* actively engages the reading public, and, in the process, attempts to transform the public into critical and political agents of change. The *Persian Letters* is considered by Goodman to be a departure from the tradition of political writings that functioned to convey knowledge to princes. François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon’s *The Adventures of Telemachus*, with its depiction of Mentor in the role

abjection, Kristeva's theory of the "dialogic" character of meaning and subjectivity offers a theoretical context for understanding how the rhetorical production of political meaning poses a threat to Usbek's subjectivity as well as for understanding his subjective investment in a meaning for truth and virtue that remains independent of political dialogue.³⁶ Kristeva explains the instability of the speaking subject in terms of how "unconscious drives" associated with the "semiotic"—the "repressed instinctual, maternal element" of language—disturb the symbolic identity of the subject.³⁷ When Usbek takes his truth and virtue to the throne, he expects the sovereign will perform what Kristeva refers to as the symbolic "paternal function" of "separating and dividing" words, categories, things, and people in order to protect the "symbolic oneness" of meaning from the abject—what "does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."³⁸ However, when the sovereign fails to enforce the clear demarcation between truth and fiction, and thus demarcate the throne and the borders of Usbek's virtuous subjectivity from the ambiguous meaning of the rhetoric and

of the wise advisor to the prince Telemachus, is considered a primary example of the "mirror-for-princes tradition."

³⁶ Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press), pp.134-36.

³⁷ Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, pp.134-36.

³⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.4.

subjectivity of the flatterers, Usbek sees him as an idol, an abject embodiment of the very defilement that Usbek expected him to expunge from the symbolic order.³⁹

After the sovereign fails to bring stability to unruly political relations and meaning by demarcating truth from fiction and thus arresting the “dialogic” character of language, Usbek continues to believe that his own virtue can function as fixed referent for identity and meaning. However, in order to preserve the identity of his virtue, Usbek engages in fiction:

But when I saw that my sincerity had made enemies, that I had aroused the ministers’ jealousy, without gaining my sovereign’s favour, that, in a corrupt court, I could only preserve myself by my own feeble virtue, I resolved to leave. I pretended to be very enthusiastic about my studies, and, by pretending, actually became so. I took no further part in public life, and retired to a country house (Letter 8, p.48).

The false image Usbek presents to the king has the effect of both constituting Usbek’s desire for knowledge and providing Usbek with a pretext to withdraw from defiled political-symbolic bonds. However, when Usbek resorts to a fiction in order to save his virtuous subjectivity and truth from the symbolic instability associated with the rhetorical production of political meaning, he unwittingly reveals how the symbolic instability that he attempts to escape by removing himself from political life is part of his own subjectivity. Usbek’s belief in the autonomy and identity of his virtuous subjectivity and the truth of his language thus thrives on the misrecognition of difference for identity that

³⁹ Kristeva describes the place of the “idol” in the history of the relation between the sacred and the abject: “Defilement will now be that which impinges on symbolic oneness, that is, sham, substitutions, doubles, idols.” Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.104.

Lacan, in his explanation of the mirror stage, tells us is indebted to place of the imaginary in the constitution of the subject.⁴⁰

After receiving “secret information,” Usbek believes that withdrawal from public life is not sufficient to protect him from his enemies and decides that self-exile is necessary. However, in order to save himself from the violent intentions of his enemies, Usbek continues to mimic the other who threatens his life when he engages in the language of flattery in order to gain permission from the king to embark on his journey to the West for knowledge:

I decided to exile myself from my home country, and my withdrawal from court itself provided a plausible pretext. I went to the king, indicated that I wanted to instruct myself in Western knowledge, and implied that he might derive some benefit from my travels. I found favor in his eyes, departed, and deprived my enemies of their victim (Letter 8, pp.48-49).

Usbek’s attempt to have a sovereign other distinguish his virtuous identity and truth as well as his reliance on a fictional image and the rhetoric of flattery in his move to save his virtuous subjectivity reveals Usbek’s dependence on a signifying process and the desire of an other for his subjectivity. Instead of establishing a clear demarcation between truth and fiction, self and other, Usbek’s explanations for the reason for his journey West undermines the illusion of the unity and identity of his virtuous subjectivity and reveals how the language that constitutes him as a rational cosmopolitan subject of Western knowledge also alienates him from himself. Usbek’s fear that the enemies of truth pose a threat to his life thus raises the specter of the “paranoiac structure of the ego” that Lacan

⁴⁰Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 1977), p.2.

tells us is an effect of a subjectivity that clings to the illusion of unity and identity at the same time that its constitution in the image of the other alienates it from itself.⁴¹

With Usbek's self-exile and desire for Western knowledge the consequence of the sovereign's failure to perform the symbolic paternal function of demarcating the borders of Usbek's subjectivity and expelling abject confusion from political meaning, we can see how Usbek's friends back in Ispahan are correct in thinking that Usbek's decision to leave his home and journey into unknown lands was the result of a disappointment. The abject disappointment that propels Usbek's journey to the West for knowledge brings to mind Kristeva's account of the dialogue between the philosopher and the Nephew in Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*:

Myself the philosopher generalizes human instability, which he suspects lies with all as soon as there is dependency on the other. More pragmatic, however, the Nephew comes out with it: the king must walk if the kingdom is to be. Or else—and *Myself* confirms the royal poverty—there no longer is a kingdom where to stand.⁴²

In Kristeva's analysis of the "cosmopolitanisms of the Enlightenment," Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* is discussed in terms of its depiction of "negativity" or the "subjective facet of cosmopolitanism."⁴³ According to Kristeva's reading of *Rameau's Nephew*, the "strangeness" of the cosmopolitan is depicted as the effect of the relation between political instability and the symbolic instability of the subject: "political institutions that are undergoing a crisis no longer insure the symbolic identity of the power and the

⁴¹Lacan, *Écrits*, p.20.

⁴² Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.140.

⁴³ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.142.

persons?”⁴⁴ With political and symbolic instability functioning as the starting point for both Usbek’s journey across the boundaries of his home and the starting point for the “strangeness” of the cosmopolitan who traverses the “borders of wobbly sovereignties,” we can read Usbek’s epistemological journey in terms of both what Kristeva refers to as the “positive value” of cosmopolitanism and the “negativity” that comprises the “subjective facet of cosmopolitanism.” After describing the different existential and psychological states that characterize the life of a “foreigner,” Kristeva raises the following question: “Split identity, kaleidoscope of identities: can we be a saga for ourselves without being considered mad or fake? Without dying of the foreigner’s hatred or of hatred for the foreigner?”⁴⁵ By depicting the alienation of the fictional foreigner who also embodies what Kristeva reads as the “positive value” and critical potential of Montesquieu’s conception of a rational cosmopolitanism, Usbek’s story begins to bring into question the meaning of the critical function Kristeva claims for the fictional foreigner in the *Persian Letters* as well as raising interpretive possibilities she does not examine. We can thus ask what effect Usbek’s split identity has on the role Kristeva claims for him as the reader’s “alter-ego” who by departing knowledge of what lies beyond national boundaries creates the critical distance that allows the reader to examine and possibly transform his own “mental and political despotisms” in relation to universal human values and principles. In light of both Kristeva’s claims for a cosmopolitanism based on an ethics of psychoanalysis and the alienation that marks Usbek’s subjectivity and journey to the West for knowledge, we can also ask how the letters he writes and

⁴⁴ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.140.

⁴⁵ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.14.

receives during his journey contribute to our understanding of the limitations and possibilities of Kristeva's argument for adding the psychoanalytic notion of the uncanny strangeness of the subject to the principle of human dignity and the universal human values Kristeva associates with the "positive value" of Montesquieu's rational cosmopolitanism. Such questions can be addressed by examining how the relation between Usbek's desire for Western knowledge and his alienated subjectivity is made evident throughout his journey. These questions can, in part, be considered in light of the possible outcomes Kristeva considers for the subject who is a foreigner to himself. Do we find Usbek, the alienated rational cosmopolitan subject, dying of the foreigner's hatred, hating the foreigner, or does he show himself capable of "living with the other" because he no longer denies and attempts to expel the uncanny strangeness that inhabits his own subjectivity?

Fear of Becoming Profane

While in Persia, the threat posed to Usbek's subjectivity by symbolic instability and abject non-differentiation appeared in Usbek's paranoid fear for his life. However, once Usbek crosses the boundaries of his home, the frailty of the borders of Usbek's subjectivity takes the form of his fear of the loss of the difference between the meaning of his sacred identity and the meaning of the profane identity of the faithless:

I must admit, Nessir, that I felt a secret pain when I lost sight of Persia, and found myself among the faithless Osmanlis. As I penetrated further into this profane land, I had the impression that I was becoming profane myself (Letter 6, p.45).

Usbek's fear of becoming profane compels him to write a letter to the Mullah Mohammed Ali where Usbek's request for sacred demarcations reveals his expectation

that the Mullah will occupy the symbolic paternal position left vacant by the sovereign at Ispahan:

I am in the midst of a profane people. Permit me to purify myself with you; allow me to turn my face towards the sacred place in which you live; distinguish me from the wicked, as at the coming of dawn the white thread can be distinguished from the black (Letter 16, p.62).

Usbek, impatient for the requested sacred demarcations, sends the Mullah a second letter before the Mullah has time to reply. The questions Usbek addresses to the Mullah in his second letter establish a link between Usbek's subjection of the practices of his religion to rational inquiry and the fear of the loss of sacred demarcation that Usbek feels as he crosses the borders of his home. Usbek confesses that although it would "overthrow the distinctions established by our divine Prophet," he "cannot conceive of any inherent quality in objects" that could uphold sacred distinctions such as that between the pure and the impure (Letter 17, p.63). We can understand the association that is made between Usbek's fear of becoming profane with his questions about the rational basis for the sacred prohibition against touching a corpse and the ritual of washing bodies for the purification of the soul in terms of the fragility of the symbolic order in relation to what Kristeva, referring to the corpse as the "utmost of abjection," claims is "death infecting life."⁴⁶ In *Power of Horror*, Kristeva offers an analysis of how sacred rituals function to contain meaning that exceeds clear demarcations and identity positions. Both "within our personal archaeology" and within the symbolic order, the excess of meaning that sacred rituals and their substitutes are designed to contain, according to Kristeva, is associated

⁴⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.4.

with the ambiguous, incomplete separation from the semiotic maternal body.⁴⁷ Kristeva claims that when the paternal agent responsible for enforcing the prohibition against the semiotic body is “weak or nonexistent,” the fragility of the border between self and other leaves the subject vulnerable to “perversion or psychosis.”⁴⁸ Usbek’s confession to the Mullah that he can feel his “reason going astray” points to how both the exposure of the sovereign as an abject idol and Usbek’s subjection of the religious practices of Persia to rational examination leave Usbek vulnerable to the abject confusion of the boundary between self and the other. The weakening of Usbek’s belief in an absolute basis for sacred prohibitions and demarcations and the intrusion of the abject on the unity of Usbek’s rational subjectivity after he crosses the border that separates him from his home reflects Kristeva’s claim that it is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order.”⁴⁹ Usbek’s subjection of the sacred prohibitions, rituals, and demarcations that form his own religion to rational scrutiny thus has the unintended effect of undermining the oppositions—here between the pure and the impure—that function to maintain the illusion of the identity of a rational subjectivity.

Although Usbek’s confesses that the loss of sacred demarcations is subverting his reason, he continues in his pursuit of Western knowledge. Usbek begins his letter to Hosain, a dervish of the mountain of Jahrum, by reassuring him of the supremacy of “Eastern wisdom” in allowing one to feel the “fearful onset of divine ecstasy” and hear

⁴⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp.13, 57-59. See also Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, pp. 133-134. In her reading of the meaning of the “chora” in Plato’s *Timeus*, Kristeva describes the meaning of the semiotic body in terms of the “heterogeneity” that stands in either a “negative or surplus relationship” to the symbolic oneness of meaning.

⁴⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.63.

⁴⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.4.

the “words resounding from angelic choirs”(Letter 97, p.180). However, after paying homage to the religion of his home, Usbek proceeds to praise the power of the natural scientists as they “silently follow the path of human reason”(Letter 97, p.180). Nature, according to Usbek, displays a “prodigious variety of phenomena,” but natural science has surpassed the accomplishments of the holy prophets by discovering the general laws that bring order to what appeared to be the chaotic diversity of nature (Letter 97, p.180). Usbek then suggests the application of the method of natural science for understanding social and political phenomena:

It is for ordinary legislators to suggest laws for the regulation of human societies, laws which are as changeable as the minds of the men who invented them or the nations which invented them; but these others tell us only of general laws, immutable and eternal, which are observed without any exceptions, with infinite regularity, immediacy and orderliness, in the immensity of space (Letter 97, pp.180-181)

At the end of his letter, Usbek writes to his holy correspondent that “thanks be to Heaven, my mind has not corrupted my heart,” reassuring him that his praise of the power of human reason and Western knowledge does not mean that they have replaced his devotion to the prophet Ali.

However, if Usbek feels the need to reassure the dervish, and perhaps himself, of his loyalty to the prophet Ali, it is because he has already applied the method of natural science in his analysis of diverse religious phenomena. After comparing Christian practices and rituals with Muslim practices and rituals in his letter to Jemshid, his cousin and a dervish, Usbek discovers an essential identity between the two religions, claiming to “see Islam everywhere, though I cannot find Mohammed”(Letter 35, p.89). In his letter to Rhedi, at Venice, Usbek argues that one’s devotion to God is not to be measured

by observance of particular rituals, for, according to Usbek, “ritual has no degree of goodness in itself” (Letter 46, p.101). Just as the natural scientists Usbek describes in his letter give order to apparent natural chaos by discovering general principles, Usbek brings order to the apparent chaotic diversity of religious practices and objects of worships through his discovery of a few unifying principles: “for, whatever religion one may have, obedience to the laws, love of mankind, and respect for one’s parents are always the principle acts of religion”(Letter 46, p.101). During his stay in France, Usbek continues to walk in the steps of the natural scientists that he praises. However, we will read how the exchange of letters between Usbek and the seraglio reveal how each step Usbek takes in applying the method of natural science to bring order to the apparent chaos of social and political phenomena brings him closer to the uncanny strangeness that subverts the apparent identity of his rational subjectivity.

Nostalgia For the Feminine Other

In his letter to Nessir, when Usbek describes his fear of the loss of the demarcation between his sacred identity and the profane identity of the faithless, he mentions feeling a “secret pain” when he loses sight of Persia. However, given that we have already learned that Usbek’s journey to the West for knowledge is an attempt to save himself from a Persia defiled by the faithless and their idol, Usbek’s report of a “secret pain” brings into question the meaning of what Usbek imagines he has lost sight of at the moment he crosses the border. A possible answer to this question can be found in the coincidence of Usbek’s fear of the loss of sacred demarcations with what he describes to Nessir as his consuming fear of sexual disorder in the seraglio:

But what troubles my heart above all is my wives: I cannot think of them without being eaten up with worry.

It is not, Nessir, that I loved them. I find that my insensibility in that respect leaves me without desire. In the crowded seraglio in which I lived, I forestalled and destroyed love by love itself; but from my very lack of feeling has come a secret jealousy which is devouring me (Letter 6, p.45).

The coincidence of Usbek's fear of the loss of his sacred identity with his fear of sexual disorder and his loss of the sight of Persia introduces us to the sacred significance of the scopophilic field in the enactment of the "infernal dynamics of estrangement" at the core of Usbek's rational cosmopolitan subjectivity.⁵⁰ Usbek constantly reminds his wives of how the seraglio is not designed for sexual pleasure, but, as he chastises Zashi, is "a welcome asylum against the onslaughts of vice, a sacred temple, where your sex loses its weakness and becomes invincible, despite all your natural disadvantages"(Letter 20, p.68). In the same letter to Zashi, we learn that Usbek considers the "natural disadvantage" and the natural "weakness" of the feminine sex to be their subjection to "uncontrolled" and "impure" sexual desires.⁵¹ Writing on how the seraglio strengthens the women against

⁵⁰ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.153.

⁵¹ We also find references to the immoderation of feminine sexual desires in the letters Usbek receives from the seraglio. However, whereas Usbek claims the seraglio functions to restrain the natural excesses of woman's desire, the wives, in addition to referring to the natural violence of their desires, also suggest that the restraints of the seraglio and Usbek's absence are either responsible for the violence of their desires or intensify the natural violence of their desires. For example, Zashi writes Usbek of how the seraglio is a place "which constantly reminded me of past pleasures, and stimulated my desires with renewed violence everyday" (Letter 3, p.43). Fatme, in her letter to Usbek, refers to herself as "a free woman, by accident of birth, but enslaved by the violence of her love" and of how "wretched a woman is, having such violent desires, when she is deprived of the only man who can appease them" (Letter 7, p.47). Zelis, in her letter to Usbek, describes how nature is responsible for the immoderation of feminine desire and the natural moderation of male desire: "Nature...made us feel the heat of passion so that [men's] lives should be quiet. If they emerge from their state of

the natural excesses of their desires, Usbek tells Zashi that she “ought to be grateful for the restraints that I impose on you, since it is only because of them that you still deserve to live”(Letter 20, p.68).

If woman can live only as long as her sex remains invincible, it is not, as Usbek explains to Roxana, because of his fear of “the final infidelity,” but because “we know that purity can never be too great, and that the slightest stain can spoil it” (Letter 26, p.77). The coding of woman as invincible functions to erect an imaginary barrier between Usbek and the instability of meaning in a symbolic order where the oppositions that structure the symbolic order—between pure and impure, nature and culture, masculine and feminine—remain arbitrary because they are the effect of a language divided between semiotic and symbolic elements and composed of differences with no positive terms. When Usbek writes to Roxana that in the seclusion of the seraglio “you can love me without the fear of ever losing the love that is due to me” (Letter 26, p.76) he points to how the production and containment of the meaning of woman in relation to the sacred meaning of virtue and love preserves what Kristeva tells us is the fantasy that structures the child’s relation to the mother prior to the discovery of castration and the introduction of the lack that begins the child’s ambiguous separation from the mother and entry into the symbolic order:

As the addressee of every demand, the mother occupies the place of alterity. Her replete body, the receptacle and guarantor of demands, takes the place of all narcissistic, hence imaginary, effects of gratifications; she is, in other words, the phallus.⁵²

indifference she provided us as a means for them to regain it, although we can never enjoy the good fortune that we ensure for them” (Letter 62, p.128).

⁵² Kristeva, *Revolution*, p.47.

Like the demand placed on the imaginary phallic mother of primary narcissism, the unconditional love Usbek imagines is due to him is for the imaginary complete gratification of self-presence and a fundamental signified. Through signifying practices that produce the sacred meaning of woman, an imaginary home is created where the production of the undistorted reflection of Usbek's self-identical identity functions to deny the uncanny strangeness of a subjectivity that is constituted through the "dialogic" structure of language. We read how Usbek's desire for knowledge was an effect of his attempt to flee a home where the "proper" boundaries of political meaning were not demarcated by a symbolic paternal agent. As Usbek progresses along his epistemological journey, his constitution as a subject of Western enlightenment runs parallel to the erosion of the sacred demarcations and oppositions that function to ward off the abject defilement that he believed he was escaping when he left Persia. The "secret pain" Usbek feels when he loses sight of Persia reveals how the fear of uncanny strangeness that divides Usbek's enlightened cosmopolitan subjectivity re-produces the nostalgic fantasy that his eyes once gazed on a place that gave him refuge from the "uncertainty of his borders and of his affective valency as well."⁵³

Usbek's claim that within the seraglio the feminine sex is transformed from being by nature vulnerable to immoderate sexual desires into a sex that is "invincible" raises the question of how the staging of what Zashi, in her letter to Usbek, describes as a beauty contest is related to the sacred fortification of the feminine sex:

⁵³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.63.

You enjoyed looking at the miracles that our skill had produced, and you were surprised at the lengths to which we had gone in our eagerness to please you. But you soon made these borrowed attractions give way to more natural beauties, and destroyed all our handiwork. We had to strip off our ornaments, which were now getting in your way; we had to let you look at us in the simplicity of nature (Letter 3, p.43).

Diana Schaub argues that through its depiction of both a “sexualized rendition of God’s omniscient knowledge of the human soul” and a “deliberate vulgarization of the love of God to sexual passion” the beauty contest scene conveys Montesquieu’s critique of “Christianity’s offenses against human nature.”⁵⁴ However, when we consider that Zashi’s letter presents Usbek with a depiction of the staging of himself in the position of an “unseen and absolute God” from the perspective of Zashi’s memory of the scene, we are reminded of the asymmetry that Lacan claims characterizes the relation between the look of the subject and the gaze of the object: “The subject is presented as other than he is, and what one shows him is not what he wishes to see. It is in this way that the eye may function as *objet a*, that is to say, at the level of the lack.”⁵⁵ Schaub’s reading of the beauty contest in terms of Montesquieu’s critique of Christianity’s offenses against human nature does not account for how the sacred meaning of the specular sexual signifying practices described by Zashi operate on the level of lack and its denial rather than on the level of a transcendent identity. A reading that puts the staging of the specular signifying practices of the seraglio in the context of what Kristeva suggests is the aspect of the sacred that is “oriented toward those uncertain spaces of unstable

⁵⁴ Diana J. Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism: Women and Revolution in Montesquieu’s Persian Letters* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995), p.72.

⁵⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), p.104.

identity, toward the fragility—both threatening and fusional—of the archaic dyad, toward the non-separation of subject/object, on which language has no hold but one woven of fright and repulsion”⁵⁶ can, however, offer an explanation of how the excesses of impure feminine desire are contained and purified when the wives pose before Usbek in what Schaub describes as the “nudity of Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy*.”⁵⁷

The “handiwork” and “borrowed attractions” that Usbek destroys are sartorial signifiers of the women’s desire for self-differentiation.⁵⁸ However, as long as the women appear before Usbek as subjects of signification and desire they threaten him with the loss of the invincible phallic mother and the imaginary boundary that separates him from the feminine other that inhabits his split subjectivity. For Usbek, the feminine other signifies a surplus of feminine desire that, as Usbek confesses to Nessir, is the death of his desire (Letter 6, p.46). The surplus of meaning associated with the feminine other, however, must be contained in order to preserve what Usbek imagines is the autonomy of his unified identity. When Zashi reminds Usbek of how “your inquisitive eyes investigated our most secret places; at every moment you made us pose in a thousand different ways; new commands came all the time, and were constantly obeyed”(Letter 3, p.43), she depicts how as a substitute for Usbek’s lack of desire for the women, a voyeurism with sadistic implications functions to deny the “emptiness” that, according to Kristeva, “is nevertheless also the barely covered abyss where our identities, images, and

⁵⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.58.

⁵⁷ Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, p.46.

⁵⁸ For a reading of how clothes function as a form of symbolic communication and self-differentiation, see J.C. Flugel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950).

words run the risk of being engulfed.”⁵⁹ After Usbek destroys the handiwork of the women, if the feminine sex loses its “natural disadvantage” and no longer threatens Usbek with a surplus of unrestrained desire, it is because under Usbek’s voyeuristic look, the “simplicity of nature” signifies the coding of woman as a phallic presence that protects the imaginary symbolic oneness of Usbek’s identity against the alienation and sexual disorder that marks his lack of grace.

Immediately after reading the letter where Usbek explains himself in terms of a rational cosmopolitan in pursuit of knowledge beyond the boundaries of his home, we read his letter to the First Black Eunuch, at his seraglio in Ispahan, defining the powers that the eunuchs are to deploy in Usbek’s absence. As a guardian of the sacred temple where the feminine other is rendered invincible, the First Black Eunuch becomes a surrogate for the sadistic voyeurism that provides Usbek with an imaginary reprieve from the sexual disorder that threatens his subjectivity as he journeys towards Western enlightenment. Usbek writes:

You are the faithful guardian of the most beautiful women in Persia. I have entrusted to you the most valuable thing that I have in the world; your hands hold the keys of those fateful doors that are opened for me alone. As long as you are watching over this precious treasure of my heart, it remains at rest, in

⁵⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p.42.

In light of the way the abject semiotic body is associated with a lack in the symbolic order, Laura Mulvey’s analysis of how woman is coded in cinema to give the male spectator pleasure and assuage castration anxiety contributes to our understanding of the sadistic implications of the beauty contest scene. According to Mulvey, the “second avenue, fetishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. The first avenue, voyeurism, on the contrary, has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness.” Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp.21-22.

complete confidence. You keep guard both in the silence of the night and the tumult of the day. Virtue, when it falters, has your untiring care to support it...If they wish to visit the country, you may take them, but see to it that any man who might appear before them is put to death (Letter 2, pp.41-42).⁶⁰

The appearance of another man before the women introduces the desire of an other onto the scopical field where Usbek's voyeurism codes woman with the sacred meaning that purifies the meaning of feminine subjectivity and the meaning of Usbek's subjectivity from the threat of abject semiotic disorder. This break into the imaginary unmediated reflection of the symbolic oneness of Usbek's identity brings the threat of the abject non-differentiation associated with the feminine other. Thus, the murder of the man who interferes with the sacred coding of woman can be understood as an attempt to purify the symbolic borders of Usbek's identity through a sacred sacrifice of the agent viewed as responsible for introducing the defilement of the abject. When Usbek ends the orders relating the powers the eunuch is to exercise in relation to the women by instructing the First Black Eunuch to "exhort them to be clean, since cleanliness symbolize purity of soul," he is referring to the sacred rituals that code woman as a marker of the "clean and proper" boundaries of Usbek's imaginary home within the seraglio (Letter 2, pp.41-42).⁶¹

⁶⁰In addition, see Letter 26 where Usbek writes to Roxana of her good fortune of having eunuchs put to death any man who appeared before her during trips to the country. Also, in Letter 47 Zashi gives Usbek an account of how during a recent trip to the country the eunuch killed two men who, on two separate occasions, appeared before the women: "your faithful eunuchs sacrificed this unlucky pair to your honour and to ours" (p.103).

⁶¹ See also Letter 148 where Usbek, after learning of the disorder in the seraglio, instructs the First Eunuch to "interrogate the whole seraglio, beginning with the slaves. Do not spare the women whom I love; each of them must undergo this terrible investigation. Expose the darkest secrets, purify this place of infamy, and bring back virtue from its exile" (p.271).

If the eunuchs can function as surrogates for Usbek's voyeuristic power and agents of sacred purification, it is because they are marked by a castration that signifies their symbolic blindness and death. Kristeva's reading of Oedipus's blinding of himself suggests an interpretive context for understanding how the castration—Kristeva reminds us of the symbolic equivalence between blinding and castration—of the eunuch functions to demarcate an "invisible" abjection:

Blinding is thus an image of splitting; it marks, on the very body, the alteration of the self and clean into the defiled—the scar taking the place of a revealed and yet invisible abjection. Of abjection considered as invisible. In return for which city-state and knowledge can endure⁶²

Usbek points to how the symbolic death and invisible abjection of the eunuch functions as a barrier against the sexual disorder that threatens to engulf him in his warning to the First White Eunuch. Usbek writes of how the eunuchs are "mere tools...who breath only as long as my happiness, my love, or even my jealousy, requires your degraded selves" and of how if the First White Eunuch fails in his duty, Usbek will "take no more notice of your life than of the insects that I tread beneath my feet" (Letter 21, p.69). Fatme suggests that the castration of the eunuch marks them with an "invisible" lack or, in Kristeva's words, abjection, that is the basis for the exclusion that signifies the imaginary phallic presence of masculine identity when she writes to Usbek that "you are still the

Kristeva describes how sacred rituals function to guard the subject from the dissolution of the boundaries of symbolic identity: "A whole facet of the sacred, true lining of the sacrificial, compulsive, and paranoid side of religions, assumes the task of warding off that danger. This is precisely where we encounter the rituals of defilement and their derivatives...The function of these religious rituals is to ward off the subject's fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother." Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.64. See also *Powers of Horror*, p.100 and Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p.138.

⁶² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.84.

only one [man] whom I have been allowed to see, for I do not count as men those horrible eunuchs, whose least imperfection is that they are not males” (Letter 7, p.47). When Zelis writes Usbek requesting him to explain his past statements that eunuchs experience a form of sexual pleasure that demonstrates how “it is possible to stop being a man, but not to stop feeling, and that being in that state is like having a third sense, so that they simply exchange one pleasure for another,” she points to how the eunuch signifies an abject “surplus” of sexual meaning in relation to the phallic symbolic oneness of masculine identity (Letter 53, p.115). In his letter to Zashi, when Usbek writes that it “is no use to say that eunuchs are not men, and that your virtue puts you above any ideas that you might get because of their incomplete resemblance to men,” he reinforces how the castration that excludes the eunuch from a masculine identity also functions as a symbolic barrier between masculine identity and an invisible “incomplete” abjection (Letter 20, p.67). In Letter 42, Pharan, a black slave in the seraglio, writes Usbek pleading to be spared from the condition that will transform him into a surrogate for Usbek’s gaze as well as an instrument for the violence behind the enforcement of sacred virtue in the seraglio: “if I were expelled from humanity, or deprived of humanity, I should die of grief, if not from the barbarous act itself” (Letter 42, p.97). When the First Eunuch writes to Jahrum that the “voice of nature was far from having yet made itself heard when the blade of a knife separated you from nature,” the meaning of nature in terms of an imaginary phallic wholeness is produced through the exclusion that is an effect of the castration of the eunuch (Letter 15, p.61). The castration of the eunuch thus renders him symbolically dead and marks off the boundary of an “invisible” abjection

that locates the meaning of humanity, nature, and masculine identity in the “myth of natural fullness” associated with the symbolic oneness of phallic identity.⁶³

In the same letter where Usbek instructs the eunuch on the violence that is to be deployed in order to preserve the sacred virtue that protects Usbek from the threat of the uncanny strangeness of his subjectivity, he also describes the positioning of the eunuch on the abject boundary between master and slave: “It is with fear and respect that you submit to their lawful commands; you serve them as the slave of their slaves. But their power is transferred, and you are master like myself, whenever you fear some relaxation of the laws of chastity and modesty”(Letter 2, p.42). As a symbolically blind and dead surrogate for Usbek’s voyeuristic gaze and power, when the eunuch occupies the position of master over the women, his power, like Usbek’s power over women in the seraglio, takes the form of sadism born out of the absence of sexual desire. Thus, the First Eunuch writes that words “like *duty, virtue, delicacy, modesty*, are always on my lips” and of how “it is as if I become a man again on the occasions when I now give them orders.”(Letter 9, pp.50-51).⁶⁴ The “secret joy” the eunuch derives from the sadistic power he exercises over the women thus contains the “secret pain” of the threat of abject sexual disorder Usbek feels when he loses sight of Persia.

⁶³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp.83-84.

⁶⁴ In his discussion of how Usbek and the eunuchs take turns parodying each other, Frederick Keener points out that when the eunuch explains the motivations behind his use of virtue to subjugate women in the seraglio, he demonstrates a self-understanding that Usbek, despite what Keener claims is the progress in his thinking, fails to achieve. Frederick M. Keener, *The Chain of Becoming: The Philosophical Tale, The Novel, and a Neglected Realism Of The Enlightenment: Swift, Montesquien, Voltaire, Johnson, and Austen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp.162-63.

A Violent Mourning

After Solim informs Usbek that the “wives have lost all restraint” and how the seraglio has fallen into a state of sexual chaos (Letter 151, p.272), Usbek gives Solim orders that recall Zashi’s account of the sacred meaning and sadistic power invested in the staging of the beauty contest:

I am putting the sword in your hands...I am writing to my wives to tell them to obey you blindly; in their guilty confusion of all their crimes they will fall to the ground beneath your gaze. I must rely on you to restore my happiness and peace of mind. Make my seraglio what it was when I left it; but begin by expiation: exterminate the criminals, and strike dread into those who contemplated becoming so (Letter 153, p.274).

Solim accepts the orders he receives from Usbek in a letter where he describes to Usbek the “secret joy” he feels at the thought of punishing the women in the seraglio for their crimes and then proceeds to lament that he cannot bring all women “crowding into this unhappy seraglio, and see you stupor at blood I’m about to shed here!” (Letter 160, p.280). Thus, while the sadistic power that contained feminine sexual subjectivity behind the sacred veil of virtue allowed the First Eunuch to pretend at being a man, with Solim sadism takes the form of physical violence against the women. The substitution of physical violence against the women for the sacred signifying practices that Usbek and the eunuchs believed contained the violence excess of feminine desires in the seraglio exposes the complete loss of the symbolic demarcating power of the sacred. The exchange of Letters between Usbek and Roxana that we read at the end of the novel depicts the symbolic and sexual disorder that accompanies the violence that follows from the loss of sacred demarcations.

The last epistolary exchange between Usbek and Roxana contains Roxana's description of her own suicide as well as the murder of the "sacrilegious guards" who under orders from Usbek killed the lover that Roxana tells Usbek was "the only man who kept me alive" (Letter 161, p.280). Roxana writes Usbek:

Such language is new to you, no doubt. Is it possible that after having overwhelmed you with grief I could force you to admire my courage? But it is all over, the poison is destroying me. I am losing my strength, the pen is falling from my hands, I can feel my hatred growing weaker; I am dying" (Letter 161, p.281).

Roxana's concluding words—"Such language is new to you, no doubt"—recall Usbek's own account of the symbolic instability at court in Ispahan that marked the beginning of his journey to the West for knowledge: "I took truth to the steps of the throne. I spoke a language hitherto unknown there"(Letter 8, p.48). In the language that is new to Usbek, Roxana informs Usbek of both her sexual activities outside of marriage and of how the meaning of her rejection of a sexual consummation of her marriage with Usbek is found in her lack of desire and hatred for Usbek. Under the "Name-of-the-Father," a "symbolic paternal agency" enforces the prohibition against incest by regulating the orderly exchange and control of women and children.⁶⁵ By taking up a position as a subject of signification and sexual desire and, thus, stepping out of her function as sign and object of exchange at the moment that she is positioned on the boundary between life and death, Roxana's new language signifies the threat of what "does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p.259. Lacan, *Écrits*, pp.201, 207.

⁶⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.4.

Roxana writes Usbek of how she “profaned the name of virtue by permitting it to be applied to my acceptance of your whims” and of how instead of expecting her to be “carried away by the ecstasy of love” if “you had known me properly you would have found in me all the violence of hate” (Letter 161, p.281). When Roxana refers to Usbek’s failure to understand that it was hate and not virtue that was behind her resistance to him, she is responding to the letter where Usbek conveys his understanding of Roxana’s resistance to his repeated attempts to sexually consummate their marriage. In describing to Roxana what he believes is her good fortune, in contrast to the women in Paris, of living in a seraglio where her virtue and love for him are guaranteed, Usbek presents his understanding of the scene referred to by Roxana:

The struggle between love and virtue lasted two months. You carried the scruples of chastity too far: you did not surrender, even after you had been conquered; you defended your dying virginity at the very last extremity; you considered me as an enemy who had inflicted an outrage on you, not as a husband who had loved you (Letter 26, p.76).

By speaking a language where “virtue” and “love” no longer reflect what Usbek imagines is the symbolic oneness of identity and meaning, but signify instead symbolic and reproductive instability, Roxana thus confronts Usbek with the semiotic surplus that he imagined was contained in the “sacred temple.”

Tzvetan Todorov reads Roxana’s rejection of the despotic conditions of the harem as an example of Montesquieu’s articulation of the formal absolute and universal value of freedom.⁶⁷ Liberty, as a “distinctive feature of the human species,” according to Todorov, is depicted in Montesquieu’s work as the “ability to *reject*” particular cultural

⁶⁷ Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, p.361.

determinations of behavior.⁶⁸ By virtue of its abstraction from a particular cultural content, freedom, according to Todorov, demonstrates Montesquieu's formulation of universal values that do not deny particular differences, thus fulfilling Montesquieu's political principle that the "unity of the human race must be recognized, but also the heterogeneity of the social body."⁶⁹ Todorov cites Roxana's dying words in order to demonstrate what he reads as the movement from particular values to the articulation of the universal value of freedom: "And Roxana, standing up to Usbek, explains: 'I have amended your laws according to the laws of nature' (letter 161, p.280)—that is, according to the laws that postulate the right to be free."⁷⁰ Todorov, however, does not account for why the words that articulate the universal value of freedom are written as Roxana's is dying and will only be read by Usbek after Roxana's death. While Roxana's new language signifies the rejection of the despotic conditions of the harem, the imagery of Roxana's pen falling out of her hand as she vacillates on the boundary between life and death, points to the possibility that the meaning of what Todorov considers the universal value of freedom is articulated through the containment of a language that signifies the threat of symbolic and reproductive chaos.

Immediately after the letter where Usbek informs his wives of the orders that will engulf the seraglio in blood, we read Usbek's letter to Nessir at Ispahan. Usbek writes to Nessir of how he longs for the "quiet and tranquil life" of his home and of his intolerance for "living in a barbarous region, in the presence of everything that I find oppressive, and

⁶⁸ Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, pp.390-91.

⁶⁹ Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, p.391.

⁷⁰ Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, p.361.

absent from everything I care about” (Letter 155, p.275). After describing to Nessir his intolerance for what strikes him as foreign and of how his fear of the sexual disorder consumes him to the degree that he seems “not to exist anymore,” Usbek stops addressing his friend Nessir and speaks to an absent addressee who we can only assume is an imaginary eunuch: “Contemptible rejects of the human race, degraded slaves whose hearts are closed for ever to any feelings of love, you would no longer bewail your fate if you knew the misery of mine” (Letter 155, p.276). The glimpse Usbek catches of himself in the image of the figure whose castration marks the boundary of an “invisible” abjection reveals how the loss of the sacred meaning of woman in the seraglio triggers the disintegration of the abject boundary between self and other and Usbek’s plunge into the uncanny strangeness of his own subjectivity.⁷¹ The “fascinated rejection of the foreigner” that accompanies Usbek’s understanding of himself in terms of the figure that marks the invisible abject boundary is a symptom of his denial of his own uncanny strangeness as well as the loss of the sacred demarcations that gave him an imaginary reprieve from it. Usbek’s intolerance for what strikes him as foreign can be read as an illustration of Kristeva’s point that our intolerance or hatred of the foreigner outside of our self reflects our struggle and denial of the foreignness that inhabits our subjectivity in

⁷¹Usbek’s address to the absent eunuch can be read as his confrontation with the “invisible” abject double that Kristeva refers to in her reading of Freud’s analysis of the confrontation with the uncanny: “While it surely manifests the return of a familiar repressed, the *Unheimliche* requires just the same the impetus of a new encounter with an unexpected outside element: arousing images of death, automatons, doubles, or the female sex....uncanniness occurs when the boundaries between *imagination* and *reality* are erased. This observation reinforces the concept—which arises out of Freud’s text—of the *Unheimliche* as a crumbling of conscious defenses, resulting from the conflicts the self experiences with an other—the ‘strange’—with whom it maintains a conflictual bond, at the same time ‘a need for identification and a fear of it.’ ” Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.188.

the form of our unconscious desires and fears of “the other of death, the other of woman, and the other of uncontrollable drive.”⁷² If we find Usbek’s journey to the West for knowledge coming to a close with him on the verge of dying of hatred for the foreigner as he falls into the abyss of signification, we can ask how his denial of the uncanny strangeness of his subjectivity and his hatred for the foreigner is related to his role as the “alter ego of national man, one who reveals the latter’s personal inadequacies at the same time as he points to the defects in mores and institutions.”⁷³

A Species of Uncanny Knowledge

Much of the commentary on the *Persian Letters* has severed the meaning of Usbek’s enlightenment from the meaning of the violent sexual dynamic of the seraglio.⁷⁴ In his analysis of Montesquieu’s work, Tzvetan Todorov offers an explanation for why the fictional foreigner who invites the reader on what both Kristeva and Todorov consider a twofold epistemological journey is also the agent depicted as responsible for the violent

⁷² Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.191.

⁷³ Kristeva, *Strangers*, 133.

⁷⁴ For example, Diana Schaub reads the contiguity of the letter where Usbek claims Western enlightenment as his reason for his journey (Letter 1) to the letter where Usbek gives the First Black Eunuch orders to put to death any man who appears before his wives (Letter 2) as an illustration of how “Enlightenment and cruelty are juxtaposed. Far from abating, this split between Usbek’s head and his heart, his wisdom and his women, increases as the novel progresses.” Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, p.15. The severance of the textual production of the meaning of Usbek’s enlightenment from the signifying practices that produce the meaning of violence in the seraglio is also apparent in readings that identify the ideas and words of the fictional character Usbek directly with the ideas and words of Montesquieu, the historical author. For examples of readings that identify Montesquieu’s ideas with those of Usbek’s, see the discussion of commentary on the Troglodyte myth in chapter two.

sexual dynamics of the seraglio.⁷⁵ Todorov reads the letters that depict how “the same Usbek who understands the Western world so well is blind to the realities of his own life: his harem, his relationships with his wives” in terms of an epistemological lesson.⁷⁶ When we compare the letters that illustrate Usbek’s life in the seraglio with the letters that convey Usbek’s knowledge of the West, Todorov claims that we learn the value of the epistemological method that is behind Montesquieu’s articulation of universal values that also recognize the “heterogeneity of the social body.” In the discontinuity between the results of Usbek’s knowledge of the West and what Todorov reads as Usbek’s failed knowledge of life in the seraglio, Todorov finds an illustration of how separation from the object of knowledge—either through the epistemological privilege of the foreigner, in the case of Usbek in the West, or through the comparative method practiced by Montesquieu—when combined with a “genuine love of knowledge” are the necessary conditions if one is to liberate oneself from the “prejudice” that “constitutes the unconscious portion of a society’s ideology” and approach “Objective knowledge of things ‘as they are.’”⁷⁷

⁷⁵Todorov’s claim for the critical epistemological function of the fictional foreigner reflects Kristeva’s claim for the epistemological journey the fictional foreigner provides the reader. Therefore, a reading of the letters that Todorov’s presents as evidence in his explanation for why the same agent that is behind the violence in the seraglio is also the agent of the knowledge that conveys what Kristeva associates with the positive value of Montesquieu’s cosmopolitanism also allows us to understand the implications of Kristeva’s argument for modifying the universal values that are heir to Montesquieu’s political thought with an ethics of psychoanalysis.

⁷⁶ Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, p.355.

⁷⁷ Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, p.355.

In his explanation of how Montesquieu's epistemological "detour by way of Persia" gives him the critical distance and comparative knowledge that allows for his articulation of universal values that are not based on the suppression of particular differences, Todorov refers to the series of letters Usbek writes on the reasons for depopulation of the globe:

Just like his protagonist, but with even greater 'love of knowledge,' he has read Chardin and Tavernier, and this plunge into otherness is what has enabled him to be lucid about himself. That is why *Persian Letters* teems with information not only about the Persians (and the French) but also about Russians, Tartars, Chinese, Turks, and Spaniards; in the series of letters about the causes of depopulation (letters 112-122) as in the series about the world of books (letters 133-137), all countries and continents are taken into account.⁷⁸

Usbek writes the series of letters on the causes for depopulation in response to Rhedi's request for an explanation for the loss of the original "prodigious fertility" of nature. According to Rhedi, this loss "indicates that there is some internal defect, some secret, hidden poison, some wasting disease, which is attacking human nature"(Letter 112, pp.203-04). Kristeva's claim that disease, as an equivalent to excrement, functions as a metaphor in literary texts for the abject threat to identity draws our attention to how the language of Rhedi's question links what Todorov claims is a successful example of Usbek's knowledge of the West—and, by extension, Montesquieu's comparative method—to the abject threat that is behind the violent sexual dynamics of the seraglio.⁷⁹

In his response to Rhedi's question, Usbek separates the factors contributing to the depopulation of the globe into two categories: natural causes of depopulation and

⁷⁸ Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, p.356.

⁷⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.71.

causes of depopulation that can be attributed to customs. In addressing each category, Usbek articulates two different conceptions of nature. When explaining the natural causes of depopulation, depopulation is explained by Usbek as the result of the human race living in a natural environment that “is subject to a perpetual inner conflict between its constituent elements. Sea and land seem to be eternally at war, and at every moment new combinations emerge”(Letter 113, p.204). However, when Usbek moves on to address the social causes of depopulation, the violent conflict that is part of his articulation of nature in his explanation for the natural causes of depopulation is written out of the meaning of nature that he uses as a standard for judging social customs:

Nature always acts slowly, and with economy, as it were. She never operates violently; even when producing she demands restraint; she always moves regularly and temperately; if she is hurried, she soon becomes sluggish, using all her remaining strength for self-preservation, and completely losing her productive abilities and powers of generation (Letter 114, p.207).

Usbek’s critique of the despotism of polygamy is thus based on what he claims is its violation of a natural nonviolent reproductive economy. Usbek offers himself as proof of how male reproductive capacity is damaged when sexual desire exceeds the standard of nonviolence and moderation established by a natural reproductive economy:

It is to this state of debility that we are always reduced by the large number of wives we have, which is more likely to wear us out than to satisfy us. It is very common with us to see a man with a vast seraglio and a minute number of children. In most cases the children themselves are weak and unhealthy, having been affected by their father’s lethargy (Letter 114, p.207).

Usbek’s reference to himself as an example of the detrimental effects of polygamy seems to support Todorov’s claim that Usbek’s acquisition of knowledge of what lies outside

the boundaries of his home is what allows him to gain a critical perspective on the social practices of his home.⁸⁰ However, Usbek's self-reference also points to how the conception of a moderate natural nonviolent reproductive economy and the conception of a surplus of desire that violates the natural reproductive economy are both articulated along gendered lines. This gendered articulation of the meaning of excess and moderation is confirmed when the terms of Usbek's critique of polygamy are compared with the terms of his critique of the Christian prohibition of divorce. In order to illustrate what he regards as the detrimental effects the Christian prohibition of divorce has on the propagation of the species, Usbek draws a comparison to the Romans whose practices he claims favored it:

Divorce has been abolished; unsuitable marriages can no longer be readjusted; wives no longer, as with the Romans, pass through the hands of several husbands in succession, who make the best possible use of them along the way (Letter 116, p.210).⁸¹

In his critique of polygamy, Usbek considers the large number of wives that husbands are required to satisfy in terms of a surplus of female desire that violates the moderation of a natural reproductive economy. However, in his example of the Roman practice of

⁸⁰ In his analysis of Usbek's ideas, Keener refers to the series of letters on the depopulation of the globe as an example of the progression of Usbek's ideas away from moralistic and idealistic explanations for human behavior towards a critical assessment of social and political conditions. Given the way that Usbek's critical analysis of the "social and political system that has given him so much misery" takes place from "a high scholarly viewpoint," Keener claims that it demonstrates a "general, though insufficiently particular, understanding of himself." Keener, *The Chain of Becoming*, pp. 175, 186.

⁸¹ Usbek proceeds to imagine how the exchange of women among Spartan men might have increased population: "I would go so far as to say that if a republic such as that of Sparta, where the citizens were always encumbered with odd and ingenious laws, and where there was only one family, which was the republic itself, had decided that husbands would change wives every year, it would have produced countless numbers of citizens" (Letter 116, pp.210-11).

circulating wives between men, Usbek does not view the large number of men that women are required to satisfy in terms of how a surplus of male desire would violate the moderation of a natural reproductive economy. Thus, unlike how polygamy is criticized by Usbek for the way it weakens the reproductive potential of men, the reproductive practices of the Romans are not considered harmful to the reproductive potential of women. This difference reveals how in Usbek's analysis of different reproductive practices, an excess of sexual desire is only associated with women and the moderation of a natural reproductive economy is associated with men. This gendered articulation of the meaning of the violent surplus of desire as female and the gendered articulation of the natural nonviolent reproductive economy as male evinces Usbek's unconscious fear that a desiring semiotic body unrestrained by paternal control over reproduction spells the death of the species. For Usbek, the source of human subjectivity in an "archaic economy" where the violent excess of what cannot be brought to order through clear demarcations—the vacillating boundary between nature and culture, life and death, ego and non-ego—can only make itself known as the gaping hole that threatens to engulf the human species as well as his enlightened subjectivity.⁸²

In the second letter in the series of letters that Todorov claims depict how Usbek's and Montesquieu's "plunge into otherness" is responsible for their successful acquisition of knowledge of universal values that do not deny difference, we find the abject figure of the eunuch functioning, once again, as a barrier against Usbek's fall into sexual and symbolic chaos:

⁸² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp.15, 27. For additional support of this point, see chapter two for my discussion of the eclipse of the mother in Usbek's argument for a natural basis for human sociability in the letter where he addresses the subject of international law (Letter 94).

But what a loss for society there is in this multitude of men who are dead from birth! What a decline in population must result...This is how the pleasures of one man monopolizes so many citizens of both sexes, so that they are dead as far as the State is concerned, and useless for the propagation of the species (Letter 114, p.207).

The claim that the non-reproductive body of the castrated eunuch renders them dead to both the State and to the human species positions the eunuch on the abject boundary between life and death. Dead to the state in terms of their exclusion outside of a phallic reproductive economy that Usbek claims is necessary for the economic viability of the State (Letter 115), yet alive solely in terms of being a biological organism, through their exclusion/inclusion the eunuch signifies how the symbolic “clean and proper” boundaries of the state, the citizen-individual, and the human species are generated by an imaginary natural phallic reproductive economy. While the eunuch might, as Todorov claims, be central to Montesquieu’s critique of despotism, by marking the boundary of an invisible abjection and locating the meaning of the citizen-individual and humanity in terms of the “myth of natural fullness” associated with the symbolic oneness of a phallic identity, the place of the eunuch in the articulation of what Todorov reads as the universal value of freedom reveals what Todorov claims Montesquieu’s comparative method avoids: the particular masquerading as the universal. The letters Todorov cites as examples of the success and failure of Usbek’s knowledge—as well as the success of Montesquieu’s comparative method—thus reveal how fear of the “non-separation of subject/object” is contained in the meaning of both Usbek’s Western knowledge as well as the violent sexual dynamics of the seraglio.⁸³

⁸³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.58.

The journey of the fictional foreigner brings us back to Kristeva with the following questions: How can an “ethics of psychoanalysis” induce the citizen-individual to accept the uncanny strangeness that is part of one’s subjectivity as well as the symbolic order in a way that will allow the citizen-individual to live with the other if the meaning of the critical potential of the enlightened citizen-individual has been produced through the exclusion of the uncanny strangeness of the subject? Is it possible to modify universal values such as freedom and the concept of humanity with a conception of human solidarity based on an ethics of psychoanalysis, when the fictional journey that is charged with conveying the “positive value” of Montesquieu’s cosmopolitanism reveals how the concepts and values that produce the meaning of humanity have been articulated in relation to the included/excluded abject boundary between self and other?

CHAPTER 2

THE POLITICS OF SACRIFICE

Epistolary Rites: On Proper Political and Ethical Boundaries

During the same time that his subjectivity is being undermined by the loss of the sacred demarcations that ward off the threat of the abject boundary between self and other, Usbek receives a letter from his friend Mirza, expressing frustration with “the mullahs” and “their quotations from the Koran” (Letter 10, p.53). Mirza complains that since he is “not consulting them as a true believer, but as a man, as a citizen, and as a father,” the mullahs fail to give him satisfactory answers to his “moral questions”(Letter 10, pp.52-53). Mirza recalls that when Usbek was in Ispahan and the “soul of our circle of friends” he made the statement that “men were born to be virtuous, and that justice is a quality which is as proper to them as existence” (Letter 10, p.53). Mirza requests Usbek to explain his past statement, believing Usbek will provide a more satisfying answer than the mullahs to the recent question under discussion among his friends: “whether men are made happy by pleasure, and the satisfaction of the senses, or by the practice of virtue” (Letter 10, p.53). In response to Mirza’s question, Usbek offers an alternative to the mullahs’ appeals to faith in absolute truths by writing the myth of the Troglodytes. Usbek justifies his choice of myth over philosophy—here Usbek considers philosophy to be the more obvious alternative to knowledge of the “celestial library” that ultimately leaves one relying on their faith to find their way in the “shadows and darkness”—by

claiming that it is necessary to appeal to feeling in order to convince one of the kind of truth Mirza is requesting:⁸⁴

To comply with your request, it seemed to me that there was no need to use any very abstract arguments. With truths of a certain kind, it is not enough to make them appear convincing; one must also make them felt. Of such a kind are moral truths. Perhaps this fragment of history will make a deeper impression on you than philosophical subtleties (Letter 11, p.53).

Kristeva's claim that narrative myth "mimes the process of the subject in significance" as it invests heterogeneous drives into familial structural positions lends insight into why Usbek relies on a mythic narrative to address Mirza "as a man, as a citizen, and as a father."⁸⁵ If myth, as Usbek believes, makes a deeper impression than "philosophical subtleties," it might be an effect of how the myth Usbek writes engages both Mirza and Usbek in a process of signification that demarcates the symbolic borders of their subjectivity.

Both the story of Usbek's journey to the West and the story of the Troglodytes begin at the same place: the rejection of a sovereign whose ability to maintain the proper boundaries of the symbolic order is cast into doubt. In Usbek's second explanation for his journey, we read how Usbek's rejection of the sovereign in Ispahan was the consequence of the sovereign's failure to both demarcate the borders of Usbek's

⁸⁴ This was part of the Mullah Mohammed Ali's answer to Usbek's confessed doubts about sacred rituals and prohibitions (Letter 17, p.63).

⁸⁵ Kristeva writes: "In narrative, the social organism is dominated, ruled by, and finally reduced to or viewed through the structure of the family. The family or the clan (in primitive societies and up until feudalism), the exchange of women, conjugal relations, and those associated with conjugality and kinship are the prism through which the flow of drives invests social structures." Kristeva, *Revolution*, pp.91-93.

subjectivity and maintain the proper boundaries of political meaning. In the story of the Troglodytes, the precariousness of the sovereign's position in the symbolic order is alluded to when he is described as a "king of foreign origin" who resorts to severe measures in "an attempt to reform their natural wickedness" (Letter 11, p.53). However, whereas Usbek's rejection of the sovereign and withdrawal from socio-political symbolic bonds is depicted as an attempt to save his virtuous subjectivity from symbolic and political instability, the Troglodytes' violent liberation from sovereign rule and severance from socio-political symbolic bonds functions to signify the Troglodytes' lack of virtue and justice. Both the structural similarities between Usbek and the Troglodytes in relation to socio-political symbolic bonds and the difference between what the rejection of such bonds signify in relation to the meaning of virtue establish a division between Usbek's story and the story of the Troglodytes that, as we will read, reflects Usbek's alienated subjectivity. Just as Usbek's explanation for his reason for leaving Ispahan revealed him engaging in fiction in an attempt to save his virtuous identity from symbolic instability, the fictional narrative he writes in response to Mirza's letter can be considered in terms of how it functions to expel the semiotic surplus and symbolic instability that undermines the imaginary self-identical identity of his virtue and reason.

The story Usbek writes to address his past statement about the qualities that are proper to men contains the Troglodyte, a rhetorical figure reflecting Usbek's own abject status. However, whereas the abjection of Usbek's subjectivity is revealed gradually from the letters that tell the story of Usbek's life, the Troglodytes' "in-between," "composite" status is established at the start of Usbek's myth.⁸⁶ Usbek introduces the

⁸⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.4.

Troglodytes by describing them as a “small nation of people” and descendents of “those Troglodytes of former times who, if we are to believe the historians, were more like animals than men” (Letter 11, p.53). After describing how in regard to their physical characteristics the Troglodytes were not as “deformed” as their ancestors, Usbek suggests that in regard to their moral qualities the Troglodytes share their ancestors’ animal leanings: “but they were so wicked and ferocious that there were no principles of equity or justice among them” (Letter 11, p.53). Usbek then proceeds to give examples of how the lack of justice and virtue that signifies the Troglodytes’ “natural wildness” takes the form of the destruction of the social, economic, and political arrangements that form their lives. As we read the examples Usbek gives of the Troglodytes’ “natural wildness,” we might also consider that if the depictions of the Troglodytes’ destruction of social, political, and economic relations function to signify their animal leanings or lack of humanity, then what must have been their past participation in these relations points to how the Troglodytes also possess, if only precariously, the human qualities that these relations signify.

Usbek’s myth describes how the Troglodytes rebel against the precarious rule of the foreign king by murdering the king and his family. After the murder of the foreign king, the Troglodytes elect ministers only to murder them and reach a unanimous agreement to a life free from sovereign control and complete individual autonomy and equality among the members of the Troglodyte nation: “Each individual agreed that he would not obey anybody any more, but that each one would look after his own interests exclusively, without considering those of others” (Letter 11, p.54). In his reading of the Oedipus myth, René Girard compares regicide to the act of patricide in terms of its

relation to the destruction of the distinctions that structure the social order. According to Girard, in “both cases the criminal strikes at the most fundamental, essential, and inviolable distinctions within the group. He becomes, literally, the slayer of distinctions.”⁸⁷ When considered in light of Kristeva’s theory of abjection, René Girard’s study of the mythical formulation of a “sacrificial crisis” brings additional analytic insight into how, beginning with the depiction of the Troglodytes’ murder of the foreign king, the myth produces the meaning of the figure of the Troglodyte and the meaning of virtue, humanity, and justice in relation to the included/excluded abject boundary.⁸⁸

Usbek’s account of the Troglodytes under the rule of their “natural wildness” includes a description of the abduction of the wife of one of the “leading citizens” among the Troglodytes. After fighting over the wife, the Troglodytes agree to “abide by the decision of a Troglodyte who, while the Republic had lasted, had a certain amount of influence” (Letter 11, p.54).⁸⁹ However, when the Troglodytes attempt to present their arguments, the chosen adjudicator refuses to hear their case, claiming that his mediation in their affairs would impinge on his ability to manage his own affairs. The failed attempt to have a fellow Troglodyte bring order to the sexual exchange of women reveals

⁸⁷ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p.74.

⁸⁸ According to Girard, “The sacrificial crisis can be defined, therefore, as a crisis of distinctions—that is, a crisis affecting the cultural order. This cultural order is nothing more than a regulated system of distinctions in which the differences among individuals are used to establish their ‘identity’ and their mutual relationships.” Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p.49. Even though Girard, as Kristeva points out, “rejects the sexual nature of this violence,” Kristeva considers Girard’s analysis of sacrifice consistent with her own analysis of the place of sacrifice in the production of meaning. Kristeva, *Revolution*, p.250n100.

⁸⁹ This example emphasizes the past participation of the Troglodytes in the symbolic order that is in the process of being destroyed by their “natural wildness.”

how what Girard refers to as a crisis of distinction is in Usbek's story of the Troglodytes also a symbolic crisis of the Name-of-the-Father. According to Lacan, it is by virtue of its association with the imaginary phallus that provides a negative ideal of symbolic wholeness through its disappearance that the "paternal metaphor" enforces the prohibition that give the "law to desire."⁹⁰ The absence of an identity between the Name-of-the-Father and a particular referent or signified is referred to by Lacan when he states that the "Other does not exist."⁹¹ If we read the murder of the king in the Troglodyte parable as the symbolic equivalent of a patricide, then we can expect that the prohibition that establishes the orderly exchange of women will be in force after the murder.⁹² However, the depiction of the Troglodytes' futile search among their equals for a mediator to restore the orderly exchange of women tells us that the myth confuses the murder of the king with the loss of the paternal metaphor. The collapse of the orderly exchange of women that follows the regicide thus reveals how the myth identifies the symbolic paternal function of the Name-of-the-Father with an embodied king.

⁹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, pp.198-99, pp.281-91. According to Samuel Weber, "while the name-of-the-father is the signifier of that place from which desire receives its law via prohibition, this law is enforced only by virtue of another signifier, which structures desire and which perhaps can only be named *improperly*, as the 'phallus.'" Samuel Weber, *Return to Freud*, p.138. See also Kristeva, *Revolution*, p.47.

⁹¹ Lacan, *Écrits*, p.317.

⁹² Lacan writes: "How, indeed, could Freud fail to recognize such an affinity, when the necessity of his reflexion led him to link the appearance of the signifier of the Father, as author of the Law, with death, even to the murder of the Father—thus showing that if this murder is the fruitful moment of debt through which the subject binds himself for life to the Law, the symbolic Father is, in so far as he signifies this Law, the dead Father." Lacan, *Écrits*, p.199.

As a result of the chosen arbiter's refusal to put his own interests aside and mediate the sexual conflict, the abductor keeps possession of the other man's wife. The wifeless Troglodyte then enacts revenge and compensates himself for the theft of his own wife when he abducts the wife of the judge who refused to mediate the conflict (Letter 11, p.55). The implications of including a depiction of the Troglodytes' disruption of the orderly exchange of women in the examples Usbek gives of the "natural wildness" of the Troglodytes can be understood in terms of Claude Lévi-Strauss' analysis of how the exchange of women that occurs with the prohibition of incest and exogamy establishes the transition from nature to a cultural order. According to Lévi-Strauss, the exchange of women establishes a system of communication where communal obligations are understood in terms of a subject's position in relation to the social familial differences established by the sexual exchange—between husband and wife, father and son, mother and daughter, sister and aunt, etc.⁹³ By marking the collapse of the differences that comprise the symbolic system of communication among the Troglodytes, the depiction of the Troglodytes' disruption of the orderly exchange of women is a pivotal moment in the

⁹³Explaining his understanding of kinship structures, Lévi-Strauss states: "These results can be achieved only by treating marriage regulations and kinship systems as a kind of language, a set of processes permitting the establishment, between individuals and groups, of a certain type of communication. That the mediating factor, in this case, should be the *women of the group*, who are *circulated* between clans, lineages, or families, in place of the *words of the group*, which are *circulated* between individuals, does not at all change the fact that the essential aspect of the phenomenon is identical in both cases." Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 61. Lévi-Strauss claims that the incest taboo and exogamy mark the transition from nature to culture: "Before it, culture is still non-existent; with it, nature's sovereignty over man is ended. The prohibition of incest is where nature transcends itself...It brings about and is in itself the advent of a new order." Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer, ed. Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p.25.

production of the meaning of their lack of virtue, justice, and humanity in relation to the abject boundary.⁹⁴

The first example of the destruction that follows from “natural wildness” of the Troglodytes depicts the Troglodytes inflicting death by starvation on each other when they refuse to exchange crops from regions of the country with different climatic and soil conditions. Usbek describes to Mirza how during a dry season the Troglodytes living in the arid mountainous region died of hunger after the Troglodytes living in the irrigated low ground refused to share their surplus of crops. The next year, the Troglodytes living in the low ground died of hunger when their crops were destroyed by excessive rain and the Troglodytes living in the fertile mountainous region refused to exchange their crops. The next example of the failure of the exchange of goods and the violent state of nondifferentiation that characterizes the life of the Troglodytes occurs, according to Usbek’s myth, when a fertile piece of land is stolen from a Troglodyte by two of his neighbors. After the land is stolen, another set of thieves steal the land, with a final fight between the remaining thieves resulting in a series of fights that ends in the mutual death of all the thieves involved. The next example of how violence and death are at stake in the destruction of exchange relations between the Troglodytes depicts a merchant of

⁹⁴ The Troglodytes violation of the rules of sexual exchange demonstrates Girard’s claim that once an isolated individual—or, in the case of the Troglodytes, an isolated group of individuals—is regarded as responsible for the destruction of the distinctions that structure the social order, they will also bear the responsibility for violating the rules of kinship: “The process that links violence to the loss of distinction will naturally perceive incest and patricide as its ultimate goals. No possibility of difference then remains; no aspect of life is immune from the onslaught of violence. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, pp.74-75.

wheat threatening a merchant of wool with starvation after price inflation and a disagreement on the terms of exchange of their goods (Letter 11, pp.54-55).

Usbek's depiction of the life of the "naturally wicked" Troglodytes comes to a close with his account of the "cruel disease" that spread throughout the nation. The first time the disease spread throughout the country, a doctor from a neighboring country provided the Troglodytes who went to him with a treatment that saved their lives. However, the next time the disease spreads throughout the community, it turns fatal when the same doctor refuses to provide the Troglodytes with medical treatment because they denied him payment for his previous medical services. Usbek writes:

This time the Troglodytes went to him, instead of waiting for him to come to them. 'Away with you!' he said, 'for you are unjust. In your souls is a poison deadlier than that for which you want a cure. You do not deserve to have a place on earth, because you have no humanity, and the rules of equity are unknown to you. It seems to me that I should be offending against the gods, who are punishing you, if I were to oppose their rightful anger' (Letter 11, p.56).

Considering the myth's suggestion that at one time the Troglodytes participated in the social, political, and economic relations that they destroyed, at least before the doctor's condemnation, the Troglodytes can be considered as belonging to humanity. This is true even if the meaning of their "natural wildness" is included in the meaning of their humanity. When we recall that the doctor is from a "neighboring country" and his experience with the Troglodytes is limited to their nonpayment for the medical services rendered to them by the doctor on his last visit, then the incongruity between the doctor's condemnation of the Troglodytes to death on the grounds that they have "no humanity" and his limited experience in the affairs of the "small nation" becomes evident. By living

outside the community, the doctor lacks the contact or experience with the violence and destruction that might lend legitimacy to his judgment of the Troglodytes. If the doctor's judgment of the Troglodytes were drawn from his limited experience with them, he would only be able to comment on their inability to engage in equitable economic exchanges. When the limited nature of the doctor's experience with the Troglodytes is measured against the implications of the words of his condemnation and the consequence of refusing them medicine that could cure them of the otherwise fatal disease, we are left with the question of why the myth would depict an outsider with so little contact with the community performing a role that, with the exception of two families, results in the annihilation of the "small nation." Girard's analysis of how the rhetorical device of the plague is deployed to resolve the "violent reciprocity" of the sacrificial crisis in literary texts provides a possible answer. Both the plague and the doctor's refusal to provide the Troglodytes with life saving treatment employ two motifs of the sacrificial crisis that Girard claims characterizes a state of nondifferentiation. The plague, according to Girard, is a symbol of the sacrificial crisis and illuminates "the collective character of the disaster, its universally contagious nature."⁹⁵ In light of the contagious nature of the Troglodytes' violence, the doctor's refusal to provide them treatment that could save their lives is the means through which he, cloaked as an outsider, performs a sacrificial murder without the risk of being contaminated by the Troglodytes' violence. Girard writes:

To do violence to a violent person is to be contaminated by his violence. It is best, therefore, to arrange matters so that nobody, except perhaps the culprit

⁹⁵ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, pp.76-77.

himself, is directly responsible for his death, so that nobody is obliged to raise a finger against him.⁹⁶

Through his refusal to administer medicine that could cure the Troglodytes of the potentially fatal disease, the doctor thus performs a sacred sacrifice that brings a resolution to the “contagion of violence” consuming the symbolic order of the Troglodytes. The doctor’s condemnation of the Troglodytes to death before the gods on the grounds that they have “no humanity” not only brings an end to the reciprocal violence, but by purifying the meaning of humanity through the expulsion of the abject—“The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite”—also reveals how the myth is in the service of a “demarcating imperative” of abjection.⁹⁷

Kristeva’s analysis of how both the sacred and writing function to contain the abject border that is both a condition and threat for the subject and the symbolic order reveals how Usbek derives a “subjective benefit” from writing a myth that culminates in the sacrificial death of the agents responsible for the violation of orderly exchange relations, the threat of incest, and the outbreak of a violent crisis of distinctions.⁹⁸ According to Kristeva, in literary texts, the metaphor of disease, as an equivalent to excrement, signifies the “danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death.”⁹⁹ If writing the abject, as

⁹⁶ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p.27.

⁹⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.4.

⁹⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp.63-64.

⁹⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.71. This point is discussed in chapter one in relation to the series of letters on depopulation and in chapter three in relation to the depiction of the crisis in France following the announcement of the king’s death.

Kristeva claims, “implies an ability to imagine the abject, that is, to see oneself in its place and to thrust it aside only by means of displacement and verbal play,” then we can see how Usbek, at the same time that he is frustrated by the loss of a symbolic paternal agent and the sacred demarcations that function to maintain the illusion of the identity of his virtuous subjectivity, imagines the abject confusion that undermines his subjectivity in the place of the sacrificed Troglodytes.¹⁰⁰ In Usbek’s myth, the Troglodytes’ rejection of their sovereign is associated with the disruption of the orderly exchange of women. In Usbek’s story of his own life, we read how after fleeing the sovereign’s court in Ispahan in an attempt to “preserve” himself by his “feeble virtue” and crossing the boundaries of his home in pursuit of Western knowledge, the fear of the loss of sacred demarcations coincides with Usbek’s consuming fear of sexual disorder in the seraglio.¹⁰¹ We also read how the denial of the uncanny strangeness of Usbek’s subjectivity is at stake in coding semiotic surplus as the feminine other rendered “invincible” by the rituals and practices that produce the meaning of sexual sacred order of the seraglio. Thus, in addition to signifying their own lack of virtue, the depiction of the Troglodytes violating the rules of kinship and introducing the sexual disorder associated with violent nondifferentiation also signifies the disruption of the coding of woman in relation to the sacred meaning of virtue. The plague that decimates the agents responsible for the violation of the rules of kinship thus signifies and contains the abject semiotic surplus that threatens the self-identical identity of Usbek’s rational virtuous subjectivity. Usbek, abject exile, splits in two as he writes the story of the Troglodytes, occupying both the

¹⁰⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.16

¹⁰¹ The relation between the sacred coding woman within the seraglio and the denial of the uncanny strangeness of Usbek’s subjectivity is discussed in chapter one.

place of the foreign doctor who performs the sacrifice by withholding life saving medicine and the place of the sacrificed diseased Troglodytes. The sacrifice of the abject confusion signified by the violent undifferentiated state of the diseased Troglodytes thus functions to purify and expel, if only temporarily, the abject confusion that threatens to engulf Usbek's subjectivity. Thus when Mirza writes Usbek complaining that religion does not address him "as a man, as a citizen, and as a father," he gives Usbek the opportunity to respond by writing a myth that in the process of explaining his past statement about the qualities that are as "proper to [men] as existence" functions to signify and expel the semiotic surplus that undermines the proper boundaries of Usbek's virtuous subjectivity as a man, citizen, and father.

In his second letter to Mirza, Usbek continues his response to Mirza's question about the qualities that are proper to men with the story of the life of the two Troglodyte families who remained immune from both the violent reciprocity and the plague that engulfed the country. This immunity is attributed to both the physical isolation of the two Troglodyte families, their possession of moral qualities lacking in the perished Troglodytes, and a bond forged out of pity for the perished Troglodytes:

There had been two very extraordinary men in this country. They were humane; they understood what justice was; they loved virtue. Attached to each other as much by the integrity of their own hearts as by the corruption of others, they saw the general desolation and felt nothing but pity: which was another bond between them. They worked with equal solicitude in the common interest; they had no disagreements except those which were due to their tender and affectionate friendship; and in the remotest part of the country, separated from their compatriots, who were unworthy to be with them, they led a calm and happy life. The earth seemed to produce of its own accord, cultivated by these virtuous hands (Letter 12, p.56).

The surviving Troglodytes, like their “compatriots,” live free from the rule of a king. However, the myth tells us that, unlike the “wicked” Troglodytes, the surviving Troglodytes possess virtue. The immunity of the two remaining families from the “general desolation” of their compatriots is attributed to a love of virtue that, with no reason provided by Usbek, was possessed by only two families out of the nation of Troglodytes. The myth also attributes the unity between the two surviving Troglodyte families to the pity they felt when witnessing the violent actions of the perished Troglodytes. However, if the two remaining families witnessed the general desolation of their fellow Troglodytes, they must also have been exposed to the plague and witnessed how the death of their compatriots followed from the doctor’s refusal to administer medicine. The myth, however, does not explain how the virtuous Troglodytes were able to witness the desolation of the diseased Troglodytes, yet escape the fatal contagion. Instead, when the myth describes how the virtuous Troglodytes felt pity when witnessing the corruption and desolation of their compatriots, but leaves out any reference to the virtuous Troglodytes’ knowledge of how their compatriots ultimately perished as a result of the doctor’s refusal to administer medicine, it reveals how the meaning of the virtue of the Troglodytes relies on the production of the fiction that the death of their compatriots was solely the consequence of their own corruption and lack of virtue—“they fell victim to their own injustice”(Letter 12, p.56). The mythical erasure from the communal memory of how the violent “wicked” Troglodytes ultimately perished from the refusal of a cure for their disease in the mythical formulation of the Troglodytes virtue points to what Girard, in his analysis of the Oedipus myth, refers to as a “transferral of violent undifferentiation”:

If the crisis has dropped from sight, if universal reciprocity is eliminated, it is because of the unequal distribution of the very real parts of the crisis. In fact, nothing has been truly abolished, nothing added, but everything has been *misplaced*. The whole process of mythical formulation leads to a transferral of violent undifferentiation from all the Thebans to the person of Oedipus. Oedipus becomes the repository of all the community's ills.¹⁰²

According to Usbek's myth, the Troglodytes' exceptional virtue allows them to live independently of both the rule of a king and the violent nondifferentiation that characterized the freedom of their compatriots. However, the meaning of the Troglodytes' virtue is indebted to the transferral of violent undifferentiation carried out through the sacrificial murder of the part of the community designated as responsible for the outbreak of violent reciprocity. The association the myth makes between the fertility of the earth and the virtue of the Troglodytes suggests that their virtue is in harmony with nature. However, the omission of how the "naturally wicked" Troglodytes ultimately perished from a disease after they were denied medicine reveals how, like the myth's description of the produce of the earth, the harmony that exists between the Troglodytes' virtue and nature while appearing autochthonous is part of a social symbolic process.

In Usbek's description of the happiness the virtuous Troglodytes enjoy, justice and virtue are depicted as impartiality and lack of differences in relation to the common interest. The harmony that characterizes the relation between the interests of the Troglodytes and their virtue and justice recalls Girard's reading of Greek tragedy:

¹⁰² Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p.77. According to Girard's account of the mythical formulation of the sacrificial crisis, myth operates to occlude the place of human participation in the sacrificial transference of violence: "At a single blow, collective violence wipes out all memory of the past. Now we see why the sacrificial crisis is never described in myths and rituals as it really is." Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p.82.

If perfect equilibrium invariable leads to violence, as in Greek tragedy, it follows that the relative nonviolence guaranteed by human justice must be defined as a sort of imbalance, a difference between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ parallel to the sacrificial difference between ‘pure’ and ‘impure.’¹⁰³

Girard claims that the “modern ideal” of justice as perfect equilibrium and impartiality obscures the lesson tragedy offers on how the resolution of violence and the institution of justice is carried out through the transfer of violence and the establishment of the differences that establish partiality of interests between members of the community. If we suspend what Girard refers to as the “modern ideal” of justice as perfect equilibrium, we can see how the “equal solicitude” that the virtuous Troglodytes are described as having for the common interest is based on the inclusion/exclusion of a fundamental imbalance between the Troglodytes.¹⁰⁴ The love of virtue that the myth tells us is demonstrated by the Troglodytes when they practice a form of justice that is depicted as the impartiality of each Troglodyte before the common interest and before each other is based on the sacred sacrificial separation—the incompleteness of which will become more apparent as the myth progresses—that creates the distinction between the “evil” perished Troglodytes and the surviving “virtuous” Troglodytes.

The transferral of the violent “undifferentiated state” that produces the meaning of freedom, virtue, and justice in the symbolic order of the Troglodytes does not end with the sacrificial murder of the “wicked” diseased Troglodytes. Instead, the daily rituals that

¹⁰³ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p.51.

¹⁰⁴ Describing the notion of justice depicted in tragedy, Girard claims that the “idea of justice as a balanced scale, an exercise in exquisite impartiality, is utterly foreign to this theory, which sees the roots of justice in differences among men and the demise of justice in the elimination of these differences. Whenever the terrible equilibrium of tragedy prevails, all talk of right and wrong is futile.” Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p.51.

Usbek tells us are performed to honor the gods routinely displace violent undifferentiation from the social symbolic order of the virtuous Troglodytes into a mythical past marked by the sacrificed Troglodytes. Usbek tells us that as soon as the surviving families “opened their eyes to know the gods, they learnt to fear them, and religion appeared, to soften any roughness of manner left over from nature”(Letter 12, p.57). However, at this point, there is no evidence that there is anything in the life of the virtuous Troglodytes that would arouse the anger of the gods and thus evoke fear among the virtuous Troglodytes for the gods. The fear the Troglodytes have for the gods can only be attributed to the words of the doctor who condemned the “wicked” Troglodytes to death on the basis that their lack of justice had aroused the fatal anger of the gods. Usbek refers to the ritualistic repetition of the “misfortunes” that destroyed the Troglodytes in his description of the stories that function to perpetuate a religion based on fear for the gods and sacrifice:

In the evenings, as the herds came in from the fields and the tired oxen brought in the ploughs, they would gather together, and over a simple meal they would sing of the injustices of the first Troglodytes, their misfortunes, the rebirth of virtue with a new generation and its happiness (Letter 12, pp.57-58).

The ritualistic repetition of the story of the misfortunes of the perished Troglodytes can be read as a myth within the myth that erases the doctor’s refusal to give the diseased Troglodytes medicine and attributes the death of the original Troglodytes solely to their lack of virtue, justice, and honor for the gods. In addition to learning that death is the punishment sanctioned by the gods for those who dishonor the gods through their lack of justice and virtue, the surviving Troglodytes also actively engage in the demarcation of the symbolic order by displacing the violence of nondifferentiation onto the “wicked”

Troglodytes now located in the mythical past. The difference between the “wicked” Troglodytes and the “virtuous” Troglodytes enacted in the rituals thus reproduce the occluded imbalance that functions to reproduce harmony, justice, and virtue among the surviving Troglodytes and their progeny.

The mythical reproduction of the difference between the “wicked Troglodytes” and the “virtuous” Troglodytes is fundamental for the signifying practices that produce the proper distinctions between family members. Whereas the myth within the myth teaches the “virtuous” Troglodytes that the perished Troglodytes’ lack of virtue—signified by their destruction of the orderly exchange of women and goods—unleashed the fatal anger of the gods, we learn that the virtuous Troglodytes show their honor for the gods with festivals that facilitate orderly sexual exchanges and demarcate the sexual and familial differences that produce the symbolic order:

They instituted festivals in the honour of the gods. The girls, adorned with flowers, and the youths celebrated them with dancing and the music of rustic harmonies. Then came feasting, and joy reigned equally with frugality. It was at these gatherings that the innocence of nature spoke. There the young people discovered how to give their hearts, and how to receive the gift; their virginal delicacy, blushing, made a confession obtained by surprise, but soon confirmed by the parents’ consent; and there the affectionate mothers took pleasure in foreseeing a tender and faithful union from afar (Letter 12, p.57).

The proof of the success of these sacred rituals in demarcating the symbolic differences that were destroyed by the abject agents of violent nondifferentiation is found in Usbek’s depiction of prayers the virtuous Troglodytes make to their gods:

They had come to the alter only to ask for their fathers’ health, unity among their brothers, their wives’ affection, love and obedience of their children. The young girls came with tender sacrifice of their hearts, and asked no favour except to be able to make a Troglodyte happy (Letter 12, p.57).

The prayers the virtuous Troglodytes make to their gods confirm the distinctions that communicate the meaning of each family member in terms of the obligations and affections appropriate to each relation within their patriarchal symbolic order. Violent reciprocity does not plague the harmonious justice and virtuous humanity of the Troglodytes living free from sovereign political authority as long as sacred rituals continue to contain abject defilement in the mythical past. The respect the Troglodytes show for the familial and sexual differences—between man and woman, husband and wife, father and son—that define and reproduce the patriarchal symbolic order functions as proof that the meaning of virtue and humanity is purified of the violent semiotic excess signified by the sacrificed diseased Troglodytes.

The transferral of the meaning of violent undifferentiation to the mythical past that is carried out in the Troglodyte myth is reproduced in commentary that severs the meaning of virtue, justice, and humanity from the differential signifying process of the text. Alessandro Crisafulli argues that the Troglodyte myth, starting from a negative meaning of virtue, sketches a picture of the social and political consequences that would result if men, as Hobbes claimed, were not born to be virtuous and lacked a natural sense of justice. By depicting the destruction of the Troglodytes as the consequence of life in a “primitive condition of civilization” where men are motivated only by selfishness and lack any sense of right and wrong, the first part of the myth of the Troglodytes, according to Crisafulli, functions as proof of the weakness of the principles on which Hobbes’s

political system is based.¹⁰⁵ After discounting Hobbes's theory, Montesquieu, according to Crisafulli, turns to depicting the relation between human nature and political society in terms diametrically opposed to Hobbes's principles and based on the "Stoic tradition, deeply admired by Montesquieu, according to which man is born with a sense of right and wrong, has mutual affection for his kind, and is naturally inclined to promote the public good."¹⁰⁶ However, when Crisafulli argues that the Troglodyte myth represents two different "state of nature" theories, he ignores how the meaning of virtue and the meaning of violence are produced through the differential signifying process of the myth and thus assumes that the meaning of the qualities "which are as proper to [men] them as existence" preexists their articulation in the text.

Nannerl O. Keohane argues against reading the Troglodyte myth as representing two opposed state of nature theoretical traditions.¹⁰⁷ The depiction of the experience and rejection of political authority that informs both the "unrestrained individual pursuit of selfish interest" that characterized the life of the perished Troglodytes as well as "leaderless condition" of the Troglodytes who pursue the "good of others instead of his own" leads Keohane to conclude that the "tale is almost precisely the mirror opposite of the social contract device in the work of such theorists as Hobbes and Locke."¹⁰⁸ Instead, with the "conservative tone" of the Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* as her

¹⁰⁵ Alessandro S. Crisafulli, "Montesquieu's Story of the Troglodytes: Its Background, Meaning, and Significance," *PMLA* 58, no.2 (June 1943): 372.

¹⁰⁶ Crisafulli, "Montesquieu's Story of the Troglodytes," p. 378.

¹⁰⁷ Nannerl O. Keohane, "Virtuous Republics and Glorious Monarchies: Two Models in Montesquieu's Political Thought," *Political Studies* 20 (1972): 383-96.

¹⁰⁸ Keohane, "Virtuous Republics," pp.385-86.

backdrop, Keohane argues that as a work of “political fantasy,” the *Persian Letters* allows Montesquieu to depict the radical potential for social and political organization when “ordinary realistic constraints of time and place are relaxed.”¹⁰⁹ However, while Keohane’s argument that the life of the virtuous Troglodytes does not represent Montesquieu’s view of a “common ‘state of nature’” refutes Crisafulli’s reading of the Troglodyte myth as representative of two opposed theoretical traditions, her reading, like Crisafulli’s, severs the meaning of virtue and the meaning of violence from the signifying process of the myth. Keohane argues that the life of the Troglodytes depicts the “unusual conditions” that must be present if the natural potential in humans for virtue is to be fulfilled.¹¹⁰ The Troglodytes in the first part of the myth, according to Keohane, provide one of these conditions by giving the virtuous Troglodytes incentive to create a “leaderless condition” free of political authority as a third course for social organization after the two courses followed by the perished Troglodytes—life under political authority and a life of complete individualism—ended in complete destruction.¹¹¹ The Troglodyte myth, like the ideal polity in the *Republic*, according to Keohane, depicts the belief that it is only through careful social design and proper education that men can fulfill their natural potential for virtue, justice, and happiness. According to Keohane, “The prerequisite condition was that, as Plato had said, the slate had to be wiped clean: new material, a new situation, a free hand for the virtuous founders.”¹¹² Keohane is careful to

¹⁰⁹ Keohane, “Virtuous Republics,” p.384.

¹¹⁰ Keohane, “Virtuous Republics,” p.385.

¹¹¹ Keohane, “Virtuous Republics,” p.386.

¹¹² Keohane, “Virtuous Republics,” p.386.

state that Montesquieu is “not describing the state of nature” or “positing a social contract” in the depiction of the virtuous life of the Troglodytes.¹¹³ However, by failing to recognize how the meaning of what she refers to as the Troglodytes’ natural potential for virtue is produced through the differential signifying process of the myth, Keohane misses the point that the appearance of a clean slate is the effect of the transferral of violence from the one part of the community of Troglodytes to the sacrificed part of the community. Keohane mentions that part of the social conditions that allow the Troglodytes to fulfill their natural potential for virtue includes a “national myth.”¹¹⁴ However, Keohane argues that the “restraining influence of a national myth” functions by appealing to the best interests of the Troglodytes by “presenting very cogently the costs of abandoning the virtuous order, repeated incessantly.”¹¹⁵ If Keohane only assigns a rational pedagogic role to the national myth, it is because her reading does not recognize how the myth occludes the sacred sacrifice of the diseased Troglodytes in its production of the meaning of the virtue, humanity, and justice of the surviving Troglodytes. In her description of how the slate is wiped clean for the fulfillment of the natural potential of the Troglodytes for virtue, Keohane states that the reign of the Troglodytes under nothing but their “own savage natures” brought “the Troglodytes to universal ruin. Only two families escaped destruction, headed by two extraordinary men who were humane, just, and lovers of virtue.”¹¹⁶ As with the “national myth,” there is no mention in Keohane’s

¹¹³ Keohane, “Virtuous Republics,” p.385.

¹¹⁴ Keohane, “Virtuous Republics,” p.385.

¹¹⁵ Keohane, “Virtuous Republics,” p.385.

¹¹⁶ Keohane, “Virtuous Republics,” p.385.

account that the final destruction of the “wicked” Troglodytes was brought about when the foreign doctor condemned the Troglodytes to death by withholding medicine from them during the plague. Keohane thus does not explain how while witnessing the “general desolation” as well as the doctor’s condemnation of the Troglodytes to death before the gods on the basis that they had “no humanity,” part of the small nation of Troglodytes remained immune from the disease and “escaped the national misfortune” (Letter 12, p.56). As a result of this omission, Keohane’s “clean slate” reading of the virtuous life of the Troglodytes mimics the sacred rituals and practices that within the myth function to transfer violence to the mythical past marked by the “wicked” Troglodytes. The limitations of commentary that omits the place of the transferral of violence in the signifying processes that produce the meaning of freedom, virtue, humanity, and justice considered fundamental to the symbolic order of the Troglodytes becomes more apparent when we read Usbek’s final letter on how the virtuous subjectivity of the Troglodytes is under threat from the violent otherness signified by the “misfortunes” of their ancestors.

Usbek’s fourth and final letter containing the story of the Troglodytes begins by stating, “Since the nation was daily increasing in numbers, the Troglodytes thought that it would be right to choose themselves a king”(Letter 14, p.60). However, a previous statement by Usbek brings into question the role population growth plays in the Troglodytes’ decision to choose a king. In the second letter in the Troglodyte series, Usbek described how the virtue of the Troglodytes was strengthened as their population grew. According to Usbek, “As their numbers grew larger, they remained just as closely united, and virtue, so far from becoming weaker among the multitude, was on the

contrary fortified by a greater number of examples” (Letter 12, p.57). The contradiction between Usbek’s two statements on the relation between virtue and population size implies another reason for the Troglodytes’ decision to choose a king.¹¹⁷ In his lament over the Troglodytes’ decision to replace the reign of virtue for the reign of a king, the chosen king reveals how the rituals and myths are losing their symbolic power to demarcate the difference between the virtuous Troglodytes and the wicked Troglodytes:

I see what is quite well, oh Troglodytes! your virtue has begun to burden you. In your present state, without a ruler, it is necessary for you to be virtuous despite yourselves. Otherwise you could not continue to exist, and you would fall into the misfortunes of your first ancestors. But this imposition seems too hard for you. You would prefer to be subject to a king, and obey his laws, which would be less rigid than your own customs. You know that you would then be able to satisfy your ambitions, accumulate wealth, and live idly in degrading luxury; that, provided you avoided falling into the worst of crimes, you would have no need of virtue (Letter 14, pp.60-61).

The chosen king’s words—“it is necessary for you to be virtuous despite yourselves”—reveal how the Troglodytes’ virtuous subjectivity contains an otherness in the form of the destabilizing violence that destroyed their ancestors. The sacred rituals and myths that function to create the illusion that the Troglodytes were identical to their virtue by transferring violent nondifferentiation to the mythical past are thus losing their symbolic

¹¹⁷ In her reading of this part of the myth, Diana Schaub also argues that both the earlier claim that the increase in population strengthened the virtue of the Troglodytes and the absence of any reference to the increase in population size in the chosen king’s speech bring into question the second reference associating the increase in population with the choice of a king. The absence of a clear explanation for the choice of a king leads Schaub to speculate that the Troglodytes’ experience of war might have “eroded the pity that served to unite the Troglodytes.” Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, p.35. While this is an interesting speculation, what Schaub acknowledges is the absence of a textual explanation linking war to the weakening of the Troglodytes’ virtue suggests the possibility of another reason for the Troglodytes’ decision to substitute their virtue for a monarch.

demarcating power. In her explanation of the Troglodytes' decision to live under the reign of a sovereign—what Keohane describes as the “decline of his [Montesquieu's] good society”—Keohane speculates that the “memories of the misery of the early Troglodytes become more remote so that the myth loses its power to restrain.”¹¹⁸ However, the Troglodyte chosen to be king has a clear recollection of the misfortunes of the perished Troglodytes and willingly conveys that recollection in his address to the general population. In the absence of a plausible reason from Usbek for why the myth within the myth is losing its symbolic demarcating power, we return to the role of Usbek's subjective investment in writing the myth of the Troglodytes. The prospective king's reference to the alienation of the Troglodytes' virtuous subjectivity recalls the alienation of Usbek's virtuous subjectivity at the time he writes the myth of the Troglodytes. When Usbek, as he writes the myth, occupies both the place of the foreign doctor performing the sacrifice and the place of the diseased agents of nondifferentiation, he signifies and expels the abject confusion destabilizing his subjectivity. The prospective king's observation of the division that marks the Troglodytes' virtuous subjectivity reminds us of how Usbek's virtuous subjectivity, like the virtue of the Troglodytes, is an effect of the signifying process of the myth and thus remains in process, unstable, and threatened by the otherness that it produces but can never fully expel. A consideration of how the Troglodyte myth addresses the first part of Mirza's question reveals how whereas the sacrifice of the diseased Troglodytes contained the abject confusion destabilizing Usbek's identity, the depiction of the symbolic order of the

¹¹⁸ Keohane, “Virtuous Republics,” p.386.

virtuous Troglodytes undermines the sacred demarcations that produce the illusion of the symbolic oneness of Usbek's virtuous identity.

When Mirza asked Usbek to explain his past statement that "men were born to be virtuous, and that justice is a quality which is as proper to them as existence," he prefaced his request with the question that was recently under discussion within his group of friends: "whether men are made happy by pleasure, and the satisfaction of the senses, or by the practice of virtue" (Letter 10, p.53). Mirza raises the question of the fulfillment of happiness by setting up a conflict between virtue on the one side and pleasure and the satisfaction of the senses on the other. Thus for the myth to answer Mirza's question on its own terms, the achievement of happiness would have to be depicted as the consequence of either virtue or pleasure and the satisfaction of the senses, but not both. The descriptions of the actions and deaths of the "wicked" Troglodytes create the impression that the Troglodytes' lack of virtue led to their unhappiness. However, in order to understand how the Troglodyte myth answers Mirza's question on its own terms, we will also consider if the depictions of the actions of the wicked Troglodytes indicate that their attempt to achieve pleasure and the satisfaction of the senses was responsible for their failure to achieve happiness. When the Troglodytes who perished in the first part of the myth each agreed to follow only their individual self-interest, one of the Troglodytes proclaimed "I shall be happy, what does it matter to me if the others are or not? I shall get all I need, and provided that I do, I shan't care if all the other Troglodytes are miserable" (Letter 11, p.54). In the depictions of the violent conflicts over the exchange of goods that follow there is no indication that pleasure is either motivating the Troglodytes or the consequence of their actions. The procurement of water for essential

crops, the acquisition of fertile land, wheat for food, and wool for warm clothing fulfill the Troglodytes' basic needs and it is the survival of the Troglodytes, not pleasure, that is depicted as what is at stake in the outcome of the conflict over these goods. It is only when Usbek describes how the beauty of the wife of a Troglodyte triggers a series of reciprocal abductions that the myth associates pleasure and the satisfaction of the senses with the "misfortunes" that deprive the Troglodytes of their proclaimed goal of happiness. According to Usbek, "One of the leading citizens had a very beautiful wife. His neighbour fell in love with her and abducted her" (Letter 11, p.54). After the judge refuses to hear the case, the Troglodyte whose wife was stolen abducts the wife of the judge: "he came across a young and beautiful woman returning from the fountain. He no longer had a wife; he found this woman attractive...He carried her off and took her to his house"(Letter 11, p.55). When the abduction of the wives is considered in light of the condemnation of the Troglodytes to death on the grounds that they lacked virtue, this part of the myth demonstrates how pleasure and the satisfaction of the senses does not bring men happiness. However, while the examples of the Troglodytes' reciprocal abduction of each others wives depicts how pleasure and the lack of virtue is associated with the unhappy ending of the Troglodytes, the myth never makes the claim that happiness, in the absence of pleasure and the satisfaction of the senses, is the reward for virtue.

Instead, the myth's depiction of the happiness of the virtuous Troglodytes challenges the opposition between virtue and pleasure framing Mirza's question. The festivals and rituals where the Troglodytes show their "honour for the gods" are occasions for both the enjoyment of sensual pleasures and for exercises in virtue. Instead of sacrificing pleasures, the virtuous Troglodytes honor their gods by engaging in

pleasures that foster the reproduction of the family. When Mirza claims that he is not a “true believer” and the “mullahs with their quotations from the Koran” fail to address his moral questions in terms of his identity “as a man, as a citizen, and as a father,” he points to how he understands himself to be independent from the beliefs of his religion.

Usbek’s depiction of the happiness of the virtuous Troglodytes, however, might be a way of showing Mirza that his assumptions about the relation between virtue and pleasure remain indebted to the religion of his home. Usbek’s examination of how Muslim and Christian practices are among the “moral” causes for the loss of the “prodigious fertility of nature” indicates his own attempt to free his knowledge from the beliefs of his religion. Usbek’s critique of how Islam and Christianity are hostile to the “propagation of the species” focuses on how practices and prohibitions surrounding the regulation of sexual relations demand the sacrifice of sensual pleasures in the name of virtue.¹¹⁹ In his letter to Ibben, Usbek points to how the conflict between pleasure and virtue underlying the sacred meaning of the seraglio manifests itself in either the denial of pleasures altogether or their transformation into signifiers of power:

¹¹⁹ By referring to the “great number of eunuchs” in Christian countries, Usbek emphasizes the similarity between Christian and Islamic practices that sacrifice pleasures in the name of virtue: “I refer to the priests and dervishes, of both sexes, who make a vow of perpetual chastity. This, for the Christians, is virtue in its purest form; I cannot understand it, not knowing what sort of virtue it is that produces nothing” (Letter 117, p.211). Writing on how polygamy restricts pleasures, Usbek states: “This is how the pleasures of one man monopolizes so many citizens of both sexes, so that they are dead as far as the State is concerned, and useless for the propagation of the species” (Letter 114, p.207). Describing how Christian marriages are void of pleasure, Usbek writes: “They do not define it as consisting in sensual pleasure, which they seem, on the contrary, to want to banish from it as far as possible, as I have already told you; instead it is an image, a symbol, and something mysterious which I cannot understand” (Letter 116, p.211).

It must be confessed that the seraglio is more conducive to health than to pleasure; it is an equable life, without stimulus. Everything is based on subordination and duty. Even pleasures are taken seriously there, and joys are severely disciplined; they are hardly ever indulged in except as a means of indicating authority and subjection (Letter 34, p.87).

Zashi's letter on the staging of the beauty contest has already revealed how the transformation of pleasures into signifiers of power in the seraglio functions to code woman as the imaginary phallic presence that shields Usbek from the uncanny strangeness of his subjectivity (Letter 3, p.43).¹²⁰ Thus, by subverting the opposition between pleasure and virtue framing Mirza's question and, in the process, undermining the basis for Islamic practices Usbek considers hostile to the "propagation of the species," the Troglodyte myth also undermines the sacred demarcations that uphold the fortifications of Usbek's imaginary home in the seraglio.

Just as the "secret pain" Usbek felt when he lost sight of Persia reveals how the threat of the uncanny strangeness of his subjectivity reproduces the nostalgic fantasy that his eyes once gazed on a place that gave him refuge from the "uncertainty of his borders and his affective valency as well," his journey into the signifying process of the Troglodyte myth reproduces his nostalgic fantasy for an imaginary home that guards him from the frailty of the symbolic borders of his subjectivity. Mirza's request to share Usbek's enlightened knowledge is the occasion for the writing of a myth that functions to signify and expel the threat of nondifferentiation at a time of when the instability of sacred demarcations confronts Usbek with the threat of sexual disorder. However, the choice of the Troglodytes to replace their "customs"—the sacred rituals and practices that produced the demarcations and distinctions of their social symbolic order—with a king

¹²⁰ See chapter one for a discussion of the beauty contest scene described in Zashi's letter.

reveals Usbek's fear that in the absence of a sovereign paternal agent writing the sacred leaves his rational subjectivity prey to the semiotic surplus of meaning. However, while the myth reveals how the threat of symbolic instability feeds the illusion that a permanent reprieve from the uncertainty of symbolic borders can be achieved if the Name-of-the-Father is fixed to a crown, the reluctance of the chosen king to accept the Troglodytes' decision also points to the futility of attempting to identify the symbolic paternal function with the political rule of an embodied king. The king, however, is not the only reminder in the myth of the Usbek's nostalgia for the security of the borders of his imaginary home. When expressing his reluctance to take the crown, the elder Troglodyte invokes a monotheistic god—"God forbid," he said, "that I should do such a wrong to the Troglodytes" (Letter 14, p.60).

In the speech that follows his reference to the Troglodytes' transition to monotheism, the king raises the specter of the unhappiness—"misfortunes"—of the sacrificed diseased Troglodytes. However, the chosen king does not conclude that a return to the misfortunes of their ancestors is inevitable if the Troglodytes substitute their compromised virtue for the reign of a king. Instead, when he tells the Troglodytes that under the laws of a king "you would then be able to satisfy your ambitions, accumulate wealth, and live idly in degrading luxury; that, provided you avoided falling into the worst of crimes, you would have no need of virtue," he holds out the possibility that under a king the formerly free and virtuous Troglodytes might be able to indulge in pleasures and retain their happiness (Letter 14, pp.60-61). Thus, while the depiction of the happiness of the virtuous Troglodytes honoring their "gods" undermined the opposition between virtue and pleasure, the reference to their defiled virtue in the

presence of a monotheistic god confirms the terms of Mirza's question. Mirza can now find an incomplete answer to his question on happiness in the myth; yes, in the absence of virtue, pleasure can bring happiness, if one lives under the laws of a king, but avoids "falling into the worst of crimes." After reading the prospective king's speech, Mirza might be left wondering how the Troglodytes might avoid falling into the worst of their ancestors' crimes. In light of the pivotal role the "wicked" Troglodytes' violation of the rules of kinship plays in the production of the meaning of the Troglodytes as abject agents of violent nondifferentiation, the "worst of crimes" signifies the threat of incest that accompanies the Troglodytes' disruption of orderly sexual exchanges. However, when the Troglodyte chosen to be king claims that under a king the Troglodytes would then be able to satisfy "ambitions, accumulate wealth, and live idly in degrading luxury," he associates the risk of abject defilement with pleasures that were neither depicted in the life of the sacrificed Troglodytes or the life of the surviving Troglodytes who enjoyed a natural harmony between pleasure, virtue, and happiness. The Troglodytes that perished were depicted as driven by greed and self-interest; however, in the depictions of the "misfortunes" of the Troglodytes there is no mention of pleasures associated with accumulated wealth, luxury, or ambition. In his reading of the prospective king's reference to ambition, wealth, and luxury, Crisafulli claims that "Montesquieu ascribes three psychological motives to the change of the Troglodytes, but he gives no explanation as to why these motives should have appeared at this point of their social development."¹²¹ Crisafulli, however, believes that the reference to the increase in population size at the beginning of the final letter allows for the inference that the

¹²¹ Crisafulli, "Montesquieu's Story of the Troglodytes," p.386.

Troglodytes evolved out of the “primitive agricultural life” into a “more economically complex society which brought about a greater opportunity and incentive for wealth.”¹²² However, both what Crisafulli acknowledges is the absence of any depiction in the myth of this evolution, as well as the king’s reference to the Troglodytes’ risk of “falling into the misfortunes” of their ancestors, work against an evolutionary reading. If the Troglodytes have evolved out of what Crisafulli refers to as their “primitive” state, then there would be no risk of them repeating the worst of their ancestors’ crimes. Crisafulli’s evolutionary theory thus cannot account for the association the chosen king makes between the risk of committing the worst of their ancestors’ crimes with what has not been depicted in the myth—the accumulation of wealth, idle luxury, and satisfied ambition.

The riddle of the king’s speech thus returns us to the writer of the myth. When Usbek is further along on his journey and living in Paris, he takes up the issue of the relation between idleness and the integrity of the masculine identity of the citizen and nation when he responds to Rhedi’s letter describing the destruction that he believes is the result of the “development of the arts, science and technology in the West” (Letter 105, p.192).¹²³ Usbek begins his account of the how the cultivation of pleasures in Paris

¹²² Crisafulli, “Montesquieu’s Story of the Troglodytes,” p.386.

¹²³ Whereas Usbek states that Rhedi claims that “knowledge and culture make nations soft” and it was “effeteness” that caused the “destruction of the ancient Persian empire,” when we read Rhedi’s letter we find that he does not associate the destruction he claims is caused by knowledge and culture with a compromised masculinity. Instead, Rhedi writes of how it was because the arts and science were “cultivated to excess” that the ancient Persian empire fell. Rhedi also writes of how the “discovery of so many peoples” that followed the invention of the compass “conveyed to us not so much their wealth, but their diseases”(Letter 106, p.192). It is thus Usbek, not Rhedi, who associates the

turns one man's life of luxury into a spring of productivity where "a hundred others must work without respite" by stating that when "people say that the arts of civilization make men effeminate, they cannot at any rate be referring to the men who practice them; for they are never idle, and of all the vices idleness is the one which does most to diminish a man's courage" (Letter 106, p.194).¹²⁴ Usbek's description of the quantity of hard work that is generated by the circulation of wealth and luxury makes the point that the integrity of the masculine identity of the individual and the nation is at stake in the difference between wealth and luxury that is idle and isolated and wealth and luxury that is interdependent and mobile. When we return to the myth of the Troglodytes with the gendered meaning of idleness and pleasure articulated in Usbek's letter to Rhedi, we can see how it is not the pleasures associated with wealth, luxury, and ambition that threaten the nation and men with the abject nondifferentiation associated with the "worst of the crimes" of their ancestors, but the feminine taint of unproductive pleasures that accompany accumulated wealth and idle luxury.

Since the prospective king both locates the threat of idle pleasures in the Troglodytes' future and suggests the unexplored possibility that the Troglodytes can avoid the abject defilement of their ancestors, the meaning of his warning remains elusive. Instead of completing the answer to Mirza's question by depicting how the

destruction that Rhedi claims resulted from the arts and sciences being "cultivated to excess" and the spread of disease with a threatening femininity.

¹²⁴ Usbek adds that the interdependence of people and production in developed countries where "those who enjoy the products of one skill are obliged to practice another if they are not to be reduced to poverty and disgrace" reveals how "idleness and effeminacy are incompatible with the arts of civilization" (Letter 106, p.195). After describing how Paris is as an example of the "universal industry and ingenuity" that results from the circulation of wealth and luxury, Usbek asks: "Where then is the effeminate nation which you talk about so much?" (Letter 106, p. 195).

happiness of the Troglodytes might be saved from the violent state of nondifferentiation that was the occasion for the sacrifice of their abject ancestors, the myth ends on a question:

Oh Troglodytes! I am at the end of my days, my blood is frozen in my veins, I shall soon see your blessed ancestors: why do you want me to grieve them, and to be obliged to tell them that I have left you under the rule of something other than your virtue ? (Letter 14, p.61).

Usbek prefaced his response to Mirza's question with a friendly admonition and humble disclaimer: "You abandon your own powers of reason in order to try out mine; you condescend to consult me; you believe me capable of instructing you" (Letter 11, p.53). While Usbek's disclaimer might be a show of humility, we also know that during the same time period that he writes the myth he confesses to his "Divine Mullah:" "I can feel my reason going astray" (Letter 17, p.63). By ending the myth with the prospective king's question, the myth not only emphasizes its own incompleteness, but the fragmentation of Usbek's rational subjectivity. By coming to a close with the image of the ailing prospective king raising the threat of the Troglodytes falling into the worst of the crimes of their ancestors, the myth signifies the threat that undermines Usbek's subjectivity—the abject semiotic surplus of the uncontained feminine other associated with the threat of idle pleasures. The image of the impending death of the prospective king bringing the myth of the Troglodytes to a close recalls how it was ultimately the withholding of medicine that brought an end to the "wicked" diseased Troglodytes. The king thus signifies how the now defiled virtue of the Troglodytes exposes them to the prospect of the same disease and sacrifice that gave birth to their virtue and happiness. However, the precipitous ending leaves Mirza—and perhaps the writer of the myth—

waiting for an answer that would reveal how the Troglodytes might, once again, escape the fatal plague.

A Monetary Return to Origins

The second letter we read from Usbek, after his last letter on the Troglodytes—the first is his letter to the divine Mullah requesting sacred demarcations—is to his friend Rustan, at Ispahan (Letter 19, p.66). Usbek tells Rustan that as he traveled between Tokat and Smyrna he found the Ottoman Empire to be “a diseased body” where “the towns are deserted, the countryside laid waste, and agriculture and trade completely abandoned” (Letter 19, p.66). With the myth of how the Troglodytes’ misfortunes included the violent destructions of exchange relations and sacrificial death by disease fresh in the reader’s mind, Usbek’s description of an empire with its “diseased body” imploding from the lack of trade raises the question of how the myth of the Troglodytes and Usbek’s commentary on the Ottoman Empire might address one another. The commentary on the Ottoman Empire is included in Usbek’s broader analysis of the social causes for the depopulation of the globe—what Rhedi refers to as the “wasting disease, which is attacking human nature” (Letter 112, pp.203-04). After describing the adverse effects Muslim religious practices have on what he claims is the interdependent relation between trade and population growth, Usbek states that despite being the “two greatest empires in the world,” Persia and the Ottoman Empire are “perishing of their own accord” (Letter 114, pp.207-208). However, just as Usbek’s myth of the Troglodytes includes a description of two families who were immune from the violence engulfing the nation, his initial description of the Ottoman Empire includes a reference to a town that resists the disease ravishing the empire:

In all the vast extent of land that I have crossed, the only town I have found which could be considered rich and powerful is Smyrna. It is the Europeans who have made it so, and it is through no fault of the Turks that this town does not resemble all the others (Letter 19, p.67).

At the end of Usbek's myth, the Troglodyte chosen to be king warns his compatriots of how their defiled virtue and the prospect of accumulated wealth, idle luxury, and satisfied ambition exposes them to the temptation to repeat the worst of their ancestors' crimes. In light of the parallels between the Troglodyte myth and Usbek's commentary on the Ottoman Empire, the contrast Usbek makes between Smyrna with its power and riches and the surrounding devastation of the Ottoman Empire invites us to consider how Smyrna might address both the question Mirza raised on the relation between virtue, pleasure, and happiness as well as the warning the king issued at the end of the Troglodyte myth.

Unlike the virtuous Troglodytes whose isolation in a "remote part of the country" was given as a reason for their survival, Smyrna's immunity from the "diseased body" of the Ottoman Empire is attributed to openness and commerce with "foreigners." However, while Usbek states that the Europeans and not the Turks are responsible for Smyrna's power and riches, he is not explicit about why or how Smyrna, unlike the rest of the Ottoman Empire, welcomes "industrious and enterprising" foreigners. While the brevity of Usbek's remarks on Smyrna only hint at how it might address issues raised in the myth of the Troglodytes, a letter Usbek receives from Ibben, a friend Usbek made during his stay in Smyrna, unfolds the meaning of Smyrna's exceptional status. In the opening of his letter, Ibben draws attention to what the reader already knows is the

relation between Usbek's poor health and his inability to engage in friendships outside of his home country:¹²⁵

Three ships have put in here without bringing me news of you. Are you ill? or does it amuse you to make me anxious?

If you do not show me friendship in a country where you have no ties, what will it be like in the middle of Persia, surrounded by your family? But perhaps I am mistaken: you have the ability to make friends anywhere. The heart is a native of any country; how could someone with a fine nature prevent himself from forming friendships? (Letter 67, p.135).

However, while Ibben might be disappointed with Usbek's failure to meet the responsibilities of friendship, he is willing to give Usbek's ability to form new friendships the benefit of the doubt when he forwards Usbek the life story of a friend who has settled in Smyrna. In an attempt to forge a new friendship between his friend Apheridon and Usbek, Ibben impresses on Usbek and the reader the affinity that he believes already exists between Apheridon's story and Usbek's own life when he tells Usbek that "I show him all your letters, and have noticed that he enjoys them; I can already see that you have a friend who is unknown to you" (Letter 67, p.135). By introducing Usbek to the story of the unknown friend who "has greater heroism in his heart than the greatest of kings," Ibben hints that Apheridon's story might address Usbek's nostalgic fantasy that a paternal agent in the form of a king offers refuge from

¹²⁵ Writing to Nessir, at Ispahan, after arriving in Paris, Usbek contrast Rica's "perfect health" to his own poor health: "But myself, I am not well; I am cast down in body and mind. I am giving in to thoughts which become more unhappy every day. My health, as it grows worse, takes me back to my country, and makes this one seem more alien" (Letter 27, p.78). As discussed in chapter one, Usbek's growing aversion to friendships while in Paris and his claim to be "living in a barbarous region, in the presence of everything that I find oppressive" are symptoms of his denial of his own uncanny strangeness as well as the loss of sacred demarcations that gave him an imaginary reprieve from it.

the abject threat of symbolic instability. Thus, in addition to offering a possible remedy for the disease threatening the Troglodytes and the disease threatening human nature, Apheridon's story might also offer Usbek relief from the "secret pain" that culminates in his "fascinated rejection of the foreigner."¹²⁶

Apheridon begins his life story by describing how he and the sister he fell in love with before "acquiring the use of reason" were both born into a religion that ordains "these holy alliances...in which the bond already formed by nature is so exactly mirrored" (Letter 67, p.136). According to Apheridon, their father was inclined to follow the "ancient Gabar custom" and marry the brother and sister, but fear of violating the Muslim prohibition against incestuous marriages compelled him to separate the brother and sister from each other. Apheridon then gives an account of how his father's separation of the incestuous couple embarked them on journeys that entailed a series of separations and reunions. Apheridon describes how two years after he reproached his father for separating him from his sister by placing Astarte in a harem where she was obliged to change her religion and "look on me with horror," he gained entry into the seraglio where Astarte lived with her eunuch husband. Apheridon attempts to persuade Astarte to return to him and their natural religion by describing the happiness enjoyed by their parents as they followed the customs of their natural "ancient religion:"

How did you come to be deprived of the pleasures of being free, which your ancestors had? Your mother, who was so chaste, gave her husband no other guarantee of her virtue than her virtue itself. They lived in mutual trust and happiness together, and to them their simple way of life was more valuable by far than the false glitter which you seem to be enjoying amidst the luxury of this house (Letter 67, pp.138-39).

¹²⁶The relation between Usbek's "secret pain" and his rejection of the foreigner is discussed in chapter one.

When Apheridon claims that a return to the natural religion practiced by their parents will allow him and Astarte, like their parents, to have the happiness that results when virtue, pleasure, and freedom exist in natural harmony, he recalls Usbek's depiction of the happiness of the Troglodytes who honor their gods by living a life where virtue and pleasure serve the reproduction of the family. Apheridon describes how during his attempt to convert Astarte, both he and Astarte debate the merits and meaning of their respective religions. Astarte defends her new religion, Islam, on the grounds that "it worships God alone, whereas you worship in addition the sun, the stars, fire and even the elements." Apheridon, however, tells Astarte that she has been "taught to calumniate our sacred religion" and that the stars and heavens are not considered separate divinities, but rather "emanations and manifestations of the divinity" (Letter 67, p.139). After reading the "book of our lawgiver Zoroaster" Apheridon gave her in an attempt to return her back to their original religion, Astarte proclaims her religious conversion, her love for her brother, and her desire to liberate herself from the seraglio that she now views as a prison. Apheridon and Astarte's disagreement over whether the religion of Zoroaster is monotheistic or polytheistic is never resolved between them.¹²⁷ However, both the depiction of Astarte taking up a position as a subject of signification as she reads the sacred book of Zoroaster and the proclamation of her desire to liberate herself from the seraglio have the potential to confront Usbek with the precariousness of the sacred

¹²⁷ When Apheridon gives Astarte the book of the "lawgiver Zoroaster," he refers to a monotheistic god: "But in the name of God who gives us light, sister, take this book that I have brought for you." However, after reading the book given to her by Apheridon and professing her conversion, Astarte suggests she still believes their natural religion is polytheistic: "It was a long struggle, but oh gods! what obstacles cannot be removed by love?" (Letter 67, pp.139-140).

demarcations that produce the imaginary unity of his identity. In the letters between Usbek and the seraglio, we read how sacred signifying practices contain the excess of meaning associated with the feminine other by coding woman as a phallic presence.¹²⁸ However, just as Usbek's own depiction of the life of the virtuous Troglodytes honoring their gods undermined the sacred fortifications of his imaginary home, both Apheridon's description of the happiness and freedom promised by a return to the religion of Zoroaster and the description of Astarte's religious conversion have the potential to further destabilize the imaginary unity of Usbek's identity.

In her reading of Apheridon's story, Schaub points out that when Montesquieu addresses the question of incest in the *Spirit of the Laws*, he informs us that it was mother/son incest that was practiced by the followers of Zoroaster. Schaub explains the substitution of brother/sister incest for mother/son incest in this story of a couple's return to the religion of Zoroaster as an attempt by Montesquieu to "stress the fundamental equality of the partners."¹²⁹ According to Schaub, "Flattery and jealousy—the fear-based manifestations of a relationship in which power is lodged in the hands of one—are absent from this relationship."¹³⁰ However, we can also consider how what Schaub observes is the substitution of brother/sister incest for mother/son incest functions to mitigate the threat the feminine other poses to Usbek's subjectivity. Like the compromise articulated

¹²⁸ This point is discussed in chapter one in the context of a reading of the fetishistic signifying practices described in Zashi's letter on the staging of the beauty contest scene in the seraglio.

¹²⁹ Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, p. 107.

¹³⁰ Schaub makes the argument that Montesquieu is presenting this vision of "marital equality based not on complementarity, but on likeness" as a model for a form of republicanism. Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, p.107.

in Usbek's letter on the natural foundation for society, Apheridon's story of the natural origin of his social union with his sister eclipses the mother from the bond that is ordained by the religion of Zoroaster.¹³¹ The substitution of brother/sister incest for mother/son incest in Apheridon's story enacts a compromise where birth in the home of the father signifies a natural foundation that produces the illusion of arresting symbolic and subjective instability. At the same time, the threatening ambivalence of what Kristeva refers to as the "maternal" principle—"the identity catastrophe that causes the Name to topple over into the unnamable that one imagines as femininity, nonlanguage, or body"—is contained by the substitution of the sister for the mother.¹³² As we read Apheridon's story, we find that the compromise substitution of brother/sister incest for mother/son incest marks the first in series of substitutions that function to contain the semiotic surplus that threatens to undermine Usbek's rational subjectivity.

Apheridon describes how after they are married, the lack of money forces him to seek help from his family and leave Astarte in Georgia. When Apheridon returns, he learns that the town his sister remained in was raided by Tartars who, "finding her beautiful," stole Astarte and then sold her to Jews. Then, after listening to his pleas, the Jews, according to Apheridon, demanded thirty tomans from Apheridon for Astarte's

¹³¹ As discussed in chapter one, in the letter Usbek writes to Rhedi, Ibben's nephew, on international law (Letter 94, p.175), birth signifies the natural association that Usbek, out of fear of the symbolic instability associated with the death of the sovereign, claims is the foundation for social order. However, just as fear of symbolic instability compels Usbek to articulate a natural foundation for the social symbolic order, it also compels him to efface the mother—with her association with abject semiotic excess—from what he claims is the "natural" origin of society.

¹³² Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp.234-35. See chapter three for further discussion of what Kristeva considers the ambivalence of the "maternal" principle.

return (Letter 67, p.141). The theft of Astarte recalls the theft of the wife of the Troglodyte in Usbek's myth. In the Troglodyte myth, the absence of a mediator in the sexual conflict signifies a sacrificial crisis and the destruction of orderly sexual exchanges. However, in Apheridon's story, money—with its imaginary potential to return the couple to their lost original "natural" bond—functions to regulate and contain a potential crisis of signification. Pointing to how money takes the place of monotheistic religion in regulating sexual desire, Apheridon writes how after pleading to the Jews for Astarte's return, and begging the Turkish and Christian priests for their protection, he sells himself and their daughter for thirty-five tomans to an Armenian merchant in order to buy Astarte back from the Jews. Astarte, upon learning of both her freedom and Apheridon's and their daughter's new bondage, then sells herself back to the Armenian merchant in order to be with her husband and daughter and exchange both her labor and the money she received from the sale of herself for the freedom of her family.¹³³

Lacan writes that Name-of-the-Father regulates the symbolic order by signifying the prohibition against incest.¹³⁴ However, even though the violation of the incest taboo signifies a challenge to both monotheistic religion and the father as "guardian" of the law

¹³³ The collapse of a clear distinction between the gender of Apheridon and the gender of Astarte is depicted when Apheridon and Astarte alternate between subject and object positions in the series of commercial exchanges that deliver them to their prosperous life in Smyrna. In her discussion of how the "androgynous marriage" between Apheridon and Astarte represents Montesquieu's model of a republican form of government, Diana Schaub also points to the sexual role reversals of Apheridon and Astarte, with Astarte "entering into theological disputes and business agreements," and Apheridon taking "more of a hand in the household." Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, p.107.

¹³⁴ According to Lacan, "the attribution of procreation to the father can only be the effect of a pure signifier, of a recognition, not of a real father, but of what religion has taught us to refer to as the Name-of-the-Father. Of course, there is no need of a signifier to be a father, any more than to be dead, but without the signifier, no one would ever know anything about either state of being." Lacan, *Écrits*, p.199.

in Apheridon's account of his journey, it does not signify a crisis in the symbolic order.¹³⁵ The importance of the operation of the rule of reciprocity and exchange in the successful return of Apheridon and Astarte to the custom of their natural religion and attainment of their prosperous life in Smyrna indicates that conditions for cultural and commercial activity have not been abandoned or destroyed by their violation of the incest taboo. According to Levi-Strauss, "the content of the [incest] prohibition is not exhausted by the fact of the prohibition: the later is instituted only in order to guarantee and establish, directly or indirectly, immediately or mediately, and exchange."¹³⁶ While Levi-Strauss claims that the end of the "sovereignty of nature over culture" is marked when the incest taboo institutes the law of reciprocity and exchange, in this tale we find the boundary separating and differentiating nature from culture—a boundary that, according to Kristeva's theory, guards the subject from the unsignifiable maternal body—suspended, with both nature and culture sharing and reflecting each other's sovereign position. However, in the town that gives refuge to the incestuous couple who rebelled against the authority of Islamic law to follow the custom of creating those "holy alliances" in which the "bond already formed by nature is so exactly mirrored," there is no indication of either the "death" or the state of "nirvana" that Kristeva associates with the "temptation to return, with abjection and jouissance, to that passivity status within the symbolic

¹³⁵ In his reading of Lacan, Samuel Weber explains how while Lacan considers the father as the "original representative" of the law and the personification of the Other of desire, it is only through his name that father functions as the "guardian," not the "Legislator," of the prohibition on incest: "The law is not given by anyone, 'there is the Law,' and 'there' marks the place of the Other." Weber, *Return To Freud*, pp.137-38.

¹³⁶ Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, p. 51.

function.”¹³⁷ In an attempt to understand how Apheridon and Astarte’s challenge to the Name-of-the-Father through their violation of the incest taboo brings them to their happy harmonious prosperous family life in Smyrna, we turn to a consideration of how their engagement in monetary exchanges functions to regulate and produce the meaning of their incestuous relation.

Prior to Apheridon and Astarte’s entry into the monetary exchanges that return them to each other, the relation between the brother and sister is described as a “powerful attraction” formed before “acquiring the use of reason” (Letter 67, p.136). When Astarte returns to the religion that sanctions her incestuous union with Apheridon, she says, “I am no longer afraid of loving you too much. I can love you without restraint; even loving you to excess is legitimate” (Letter 67, p.140). However, after Apheridon and Astarte are forced to separate, the excess associated with the incestuous bond is regulated and contained when the unmediated natural attraction and value each had for the other is substituted for a monetary value that transcends the particular natural value of their relation. The transcendent monetary value is then invested with the imaginary potential of returning Apheridon and Astarte to their lost natural bond. After buying back Astarte from the Jews for thirty tomans, Apheridon takes the remaining five tomans he received from the Armenian merchant for the sale of himself and their daughter and offers it to Astarte as a signifier of his value: “You are at liberty, sister, and I can embrace you; here are five tomans that I have brought for you. I am sorry that they did not pay more for me” (Letter 67, p.142). The loss and imaginary return of Apheridon and Astarte to their original bond through a fetishistic monetary process produces the illusion that money,

¹³⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp.63-64.

like the phallus, by virtue of its withdrawal in a process of exchange, offers the return of a lost original natural unity.¹³⁸

Apheridon's description to Astarte of the happiness her return to the religion of Zoroaster promises them reflects Usbek's depiction of the happiness enjoyed by the virtuous Troglodytes. However, whereas Usbek depicts how the symbolic order of the Troglodytes is produced through the sacred rituals the Troglodytes perform in honor of the gods, the symbolic order of Smyrna is produced through the exchange of money. After writing how business affairs led him to a life in Smyrna where "Harmony reigns in my family, and I would not change places with any king on earth," Apheridon concludes by confirming the symbolic bond formed between him and the Armenian merchant who both purchased Apheridon and his family and gave them their freedom: "I have been lucky enough to find the Armenian merchant to whom I owe everything, and I have done some important services for him (Letter 67, p.143). Apheridon's description of the labor generated by the monetary exchanges that returned him to his family and brought them to their life of prosperity in Smyrna indicates that, unlike what the chosen king warns is the possible fate of the Troglodytes at the end of the myth, there is no danger that the happiness enjoyed by Apheridon's family in Smyrna will succumb to the abject defilement associated with excess of idle pleasures. Ibben writes Usbek that after reading all of Usbek's letters, Apheridon has become a friend who is unknown to Usbek. However, when the happiness Apheridon enjoys from his commerce and friendship with

¹³⁸ See Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economics: After Marx and Freud*, trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), for an exploration of the correspondence between Marx's analysis of the significance of money and Lacan's analysis of the significance of the phallus in the production of "general equivalents of value."

foreigners while living in a foreign land is contrasted with the “poor health” that culminates in Usbek’s lament that he is living in “barbarous region, in the presence of everything that I find oppressive” (Letter 155, p.275), there seems to be more of a basis for enmity than friendship between Usbek and Apheridon. However, Usbek might find that an affinity exists between himself and Apheridon if he considers how the familial happiness and economic prosperity Apheridon enjoys with his family and friends in Smyrna confirms his own vision of how a moderate natural reproductive economy is necessary for the political and economic health of the state—in this case the town—and the reproduction of the species.¹³⁹ Apheridon’s story also offers Usbek the possibility of friendship in a foreign land by allowing him to see how in a foreign land the exchange of money is invested with the potential to return one to the natural fullness of the imaginary phallic mother.¹⁴⁰ If monetary exchanges function, like the fetishistic signifying practices in the seraglio, to code the threat of uncanny strangeness that now fills Usbek with the nostalgia for the imaginary fortifications of his home, Usbek might find a reprieve from the abject hatred he feels for the foreigner and himself as he advances towards the end of his journey.

Apheridon’s story of the journey that brought him to his cosmopolitan life in Smyrna brings us back to Kristeva’s claims for the critical potential of the journey of the fictional foreigner in Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*. In her discussion of Montesquieu’s

¹³⁹ This point is discussed in chapter one in the context of Usbek’s letters on the causes for depopulation (Letter 114, p.207, Letter 116, p.210).

¹⁴⁰ Kristeva writes that prior to the “discovery of castration,” the “mother occupies the place of alterity. Her replete body, the receptacle and guarantor of demands, takes the place of all narcissistic, hence imaginary, effects and gratifications; she is, in other words, the phallus.” Kristeva, *Revolution*, p.47.

conception of freedom and cosmopolitanism, Kristeva refers to the importance of trade in Montesquieu's articulation of a "cosmopolity" in the *Spirit of the Laws*. When Montesquieu's thought moves from consideration of the "nation" to the "totality of the species," Kristeva points to how he "conceives the political fabric of the globe on the basis of the sociability and 'general spirit' that govern the human species finally restored to its actual universality through the modern expansion of trade."¹⁴¹ Apheridon's story of his family's engagement in trade relations is also the story of how his own cosmopolitanism allows him and his family to prosper and of how the cosmopolitanism of Smyrna is the source of its economic and political health. However, both by depicting how money functions to regulate and contain the threat of semiotic excess and by depicting how the eunuch functions to mark the meaning of Astarte and Apheridon's journey, Apheridon's story also points to how a universality that is "restored" through trade follows the same demarcating imperative—"logic of exclusion"—that Kristeva claims is the condition for the existence of the nation-state and the basis for transforming the foreigner into a threatening excluded other.

Perhaps the most obvious example of the affinity Ibben believes exists between Apheridon and Usbek is found in how the abject figure of the eunuch figures into the production of the meaning of the freedom, happiness, and harmony Apheridon's family enjoys in Smyrna. Before Apheridon returns from the relatives his father sent him to in an attempt to separate him from his sister, Astarte is married off to a eunuch. On his return, when Apheridon gains entry into the seraglio and attempts to convince Astarte to convert from Islam back to their natural religion, he asks Astarte if she has abandoned a

¹⁴¹ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.129.

religion that enables him to love her for a eunuch, “a wretch who is still disgraced by the chains he has worn, who, if he were a man at all, would be the most abject of them all” (Letter 67, pp.137-38). The words Apheridon uses to convince Astarte to return to him are familiar to Usbek. In both Apheridon’s story and the letters that convey the story of Usbek’s life, the abject eunuch functions as an imaginary barrier against the semiotic surplus of the feminine other inhabiting masculine subjectivity. Astarte’s description of the abject eunuch recalls how the figure of the eunuch signifies both Usbek’s potential for violence and the potential of individuals to be transformed into living dead men when the health of a state is invested in the interdependent economies of biological life and commercial trade.¹⁴² We read how when the sacred signifying practices in the seraglio lost their symbolic power to contain the surplus of meaning associated with the feminine other, the impotent signifying practices gave way to uncontrollable violence.¹⁴³ Apheridon’s story thus points to the possibility that if money loses its symbolic power to contain the threat of uncanny strangeness, Smyrna, like the seraglio, might find itself engulfed by violence and Apheridon, like Usbek, might find himself on the verge of either dying of hatred for the foreigner or dying of the foreigner’s hatred. Apheridon’s story demonstrates Usbek’s claim that Smyrna thrives from its openness to foreigners. However, as long as the interdependent relation between trade, economic prosperity and population growth functions as the measure of the health of the symbolic order and the value of the individual, Apheridon’s story also suggests that at times of symbolic

¹⁴² Usbek’s description of eunuchs as living dead men in his analysis of the causes for depopulation is discussed in chapter one.

¹⁴³ This point is discussed in chapter one.

instability, Smyrna's cosmopolitanism might sentence an individual to a political, social, and, ultimately, real death.

CHAPTER 3

A STATE OF NON-EXISTENCE

While Usbek's alienation manifests itself in the deterioration of his mental and physical health, the alienation of his travel companion, Rica, is revealed through a playful experiment. As long as Rica remained dressed in traditional Persian garb, he remained the center of attention in Parisian society. Rica claims to have heard "people who had hardly ever been out of their rooms saying to each other: 'You've got to admit, he really does look Persian'" (Letter 30, p.83). Considering the attention he received from the Parisians excessive and beyond what he deserved in a city where he was unknown, Rica decided to perform an experiment with his clothes. After stepping out of his Persian dress and changing into the dress of a European in order to see if his value in French society would remain constant, Rica reports the outcome of his experiment with the sartorial signifiers of his identity:

The experiment made me realize what I was really worth. Free of all foreign adornments, I found myself assessed more exactly. I had reason to complain of my tailor, who, from one instant to the next, had made me lose the esteem and attention of the public; for all at once I fell into a terrible state of non-existence. Sometimes I would spend an hour in company without anyone looking at me, or giving me the opportunity to open my mouth. But, if someone happened to tell the company that I was Persian, I would immediately hear a buzz around me: 'Oh! oh! is he Persian? What a most extraordinary thing! How can one be Persian?'" (Letter 30, p.83).

In Rica's experiment, we can see Saussure's claim that in language there are "only differences, and no positive terms" played out with the different sartorial signifiers that position Rica in the

symbolic order as either a foreigner or as a citizen.¹⁴⁴ Rica's fall into "non-existence" is a reminder of the constitutive moment of the initial recognition of oneself in an image that, as Lacan elaborates in his theory of the mirror stage, "symbolizes the mental permanence of the I, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination."¹⁴⁵ In Rica's experiment, the demarcation between foreigner and citizen is an effect of both the gaze of the other and of the differential articulation of sartorial signifiers. According to Lacan, while the recognition of oneself in the image of the other is the condition for the entry of a subject into a symbolic order composed of the differential articulation of signifiers, both the fantasy of a unified identity as well as its alienating effects remain a constitutive part of future identifications in the symbolic order.¹⁴⁶ For Rica, the alienating gap opened by the gaze of the other and the movement between different sartorial signifiers undermines the illusion that a natural fundamental signified could provide a definitive answer to the question "How can one be Persian?"

The Sovereign Simulacrum

Rica's plunge into a "state of nonexistence" reflects the symbolic instability he observes undermining identity in France at the time of his visit. In his first letter to Ibben, Rica begins to point to the destabilization of meaning and value when he claims that the fast pace of the city has left him with only a superficial idea of European ways and customs. Rica's admission to Ibben of his inability to offer anything more than a superficial account of European ways and customs is not a comment on the limitations of his own knowledge, but rather an allusion to the

¹⁴⁴ Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p.118. For an analysis of the symbolic and political significance of sartorial signifiers in Rousseau's *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, see Zerelli, *Signifying Woman*, pp.27-30.

¹⁴⁵ Lacan, *Écrits*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁴⁶ Lacan, *Écrits*, pp. 2-3.

diminution of land and other naturalized material referents that had provided the illusion of a fixed grounding for identity and value.¹⁴⁷ In his comparison of the political power of the king of Spain to the political power of the king of France, Rica depicts the political effects of this displacement of identity and value:

The King of France is the most powerful ruler in Europe. He has no goldmines like the King of Spain, his neighbor, but his riches are greater, because he extracts them from his subject's vanity, which is more inexhaustible than mines. He has been known to undertake or sustain major wars with no other funds but what he gets from selling honorific titles, and by a miracle of human vanity, his troops are paid, his fortresses supplied, and his fleets equipped (Letter 24, pp.72-73).

Both the king's own limited material resources and the loss of land and other traditional referents of social distinction among the nobility created a situation where the more the king "replaced real rewards by imaginary ones," the more he increased his political power as well as the power of the state.¹⁴⁸ Unlike goldmines, vanity it is not limited by measurable material properties with naturalized meaning and value. Instead, the insubstantiality and the insatiability of vanity make it an inexhaustible source of power for the occupant of the position of the other of the imaginary, the vestige of the mirror-stage that, according to Lacan, is the "moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other."¹⁴⁹ However, the replacement of naturalized fixed referents for meaning and value by new "imaginary" signifiers of distinction threatens the illusion of a stable unified identity by bringing into relief the dependence of identity on arbitrary signifying processes and the desire of the other. Thus, Rica

¹⁴⁷ See Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edward Jephcott (New York: Pantheon, 1983), p.73.

¹⁴⁸ Saint-Simon, *Memoiren*, vol.2, p.84, quoted in Elias, *Court Society*, p.120.

¹⁴⁹ Lacan, *Écrits*, p.5.

points to how the social and economic conditions that increase the power of vanity as well augment the power of the state also have the effect of undermining the illusion of the autochthonous desire essential to the identity of the nobility.¹⁵⁰

With the displacement of traditional social and economic referents for identity in France, meaning and value in the symbolic order now appear to Rica to depend on the king's performance as a "great magician." Rica depicts how the sovereign's successful manipulation of the specular machinery establishes him as the central, transcendent mediator of the desires of his subjects:

Moreover, this king is a great magician. He exerts authority even over the minds of his subjects; he makes them think what he wants. If there are only a million crowns in the exchequer, and he needs two million, all he has to do is persuade them that one crown is worth two, and they believe it. If he is involved in a difficult war without any money, all he has to do is to get it into their heads that a piece of paper will do for money, and they are immediately convinced of it. He even succeeds in making them believe that he can cure them of all sorts of diseases by touching them, such is the force and power that he has over their minds (Letter 24, p.73).

Rica's last example of the king's magical power to cure disease through his touch alone is a reference to the commonly held belief in the sacred gift of the king to "touch for scrofula." The regular practice of the "touch for scrofula," one of the sacred rituals practiced by Louis XIV at the great festivals, upheld the belief that the disfigured body of the scrofula victim could be returned to health after receiving a purifying touch from the sacred body of the king.¹⁵¹ Rica's reference to the belief in the king's powers to restore the integrity of the disfigured body of the

¹⁵⁰ For a discussion of desire, vanity, and the nobility during the reign of Louis XIV, see René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1984), p.116.

¹⁵¹ Marc L. B. Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, trans. J.E. Anderson (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1973), p.3.

scrofula victim in his account of the king's "magical" powers to produce financial value underscores both the performative basis and the sacred significance of the sovereign's symbolic power to generate inexhaustible political and economic resources.

The belief in the sovereign's power to purify the abject diseased body through the sacred ritual of the touch for scrofula was a continuation of the medieval doctrine of the "King's Two Bodies." According to medieval theology, the body of the King was not confined to the person of the king, but also served as the body for the entire kingdom.¹⁵² Ernst Kantorowitz describes how the king's symbolic body provides the idealized site for the unity, self-identity, and continuity of the entire country:

The King's Two Bodies thus form one unit indivisible, each being fully contained in the other....Not only is the body politic 'more ample and large' than the body natural, but there dwell in the former certain truly mysterious forces which reduce, or even remove, the imperfections of the fragile human nature.¹⁵³

The sacred rituals that surrounded the body of the king thus functioned to substitute an idealized, transcendent symbolic body for an imperfect corporeal body. While the "body natural" remains one of the king's two bodies, the idealized symbolic body politic that contains the "body natural" transcends the weakness of a corporeal body subject to death. The "spectacle of royal absolutism" that Rica alludes to in his letter thus produced the symbolic masculine body of the

¹⁵²Ernst H. Kantorowitz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p.9. See also, Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p.20.

¹⁵³ Kantorowitz, *The King's Two Bodies*, p.9.

king as a continuous supernatural referent for the mediation and organization of the desires of the entire country.¹⁵⁴

The “touch for scrofula” mentioned by Rica is only one of the sacred rituals that produced the sacred symbolic body of the king. When Usbek reports that the king “often prefers a man who unclothes him, or hands him his napkin when he sits down at table, to another who captures towns or wins battles for him,” he is alluding to the ceremony of the *levée*, the getting up of the King, one of the many ceremonies that composed the intricate system of Court etiquette upholding the symbolic power of Louis XIV (Letter 37, p.91). In *The Court Society*, Norbert Elias describes how etiquette and sacred ceremonies upheld the spectacle of the sovereign before his subjects only to confirm the distance between the singular sacred identity of the sovereign and his subjects’ lack of symbolic sacred significance.¹⁵⁵ This sacred status of the king thus relied on a series of hierarchical differences ritualistically enacted around the body of the king. In his memoirs, Louis XIV confirms the importance of such sacred rituals in creating the illusion of spiritual distance between the sovereign and his subjects:

As it is important to the public to be governed only by a single one, it also matters to it that the person performing this function should be elevated above the others, that no-one can be confused or compared with him; and one cannot, without doing harm to the whole body of the state, deprive its head of the least mark of superiority distinguishing it from the limbs.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere*, p.5.

¹⁵⁵ Elias, *The Court Society*, p. 118. Girard also discusses the importance of distance and separation for the creation of the power of Louis XIV: “The Sun King is the mediator for all who surround him, and this mediator remains separated from his faithful followers by an immense spiritual distance.” Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, pp. 117-18.

¹⁵⁶ Quoted in Elias, *The Court Society*, p.118.

The king's body thus functions as a "phallic" body in the sense described by Lacan as a "simulacrum."¹⁵⁷ As Samuel Weber elaborates in his reading of the signification of the phallus in Lacan, the phallus is the "perfect simulacrum: one that can claim to be utterly self-identical in the pure ideality of representation."¹⁵⁸ Sacred rituals create the illusion that the king's phallic body, like the "total form of the body" found in the mirror, is the site of a self-identical identity and complete gratification.¹⁵⁹ Sacred spectacles that put the body of the king on display before the public only to confirm the transcendent inaccessibility of the sovereign's symbolic phallic body exemplify Lacan's claim that the phallus as a simulacrum can "play its role only when veiled....as the sign of the latency with which any signifiable is struck, when it is raised (*aufgehoben*) to the function of signifier."¹⁶⁰

The production of the phallic sovereign body positions the sovereign in the structural symbolic position of what Lacan refers to as the Other of the "Name-of-the-Father." Expanding on Freud's analysis of the foundational sacrifice of the primal father in *Totem and Taboo* in his elucidation of the operation of language, Lacan states that "if this murder is the fruitful moment of debt through which the subject binds himself for life to the Law, the symbolic Father, in so far as he signifies the Law, is the dead Father."¹⁶¹ Rica's letters point to how the symbolic sovereign functions as the Other that "gives the law to desire" through the inscription of the symbolic system of discriminations and differences that expel the horrific abject body from the

¹⁵⁷ Lacan, *Écrits*, p.285

¹⁵⁸ Weber, *Return to Freud*, p.146. See Lacan, *Écrits*, pp.285-288.

¹⁵⁹ Lacan, *Écrits*, p.2. See also, Kristeva, *Revolution*, p.47.

¹⁶⁰ Lacan, *Écrits*, p.288.

¹⁶¹ Lacan, *Écrits*, p.199.

symbolic order. In *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, Marc L. B. Bloch describes how the horror evoked by the sight and smell of the diseased body of the scrofula victim was exploited in the ritualistic production of the belief in the purifying touch of the sovereign:

The frequent suppurations had something repulsive about them, and the horror they engendered is naively expressed in more than one ancient account. The face became 'putrid' and the sores gave forth a 'foetid odour.'¹⁶²

Bloch's description of the horrific sight and smell of the decomposing body of the scrofula victim recalls Kristeva's depiction of the abject horror of the corporeal decay that places subjectivity on the "border of my condition as a living being."¹⁶³ We can see the coding of the abject that Kristeva claims is coextensive with the inscription of the social and symbolic order and points to the weakness of the paternal function in mapping the boundaries of the "self's clean and proper body" in the sacred purification ritual of the touch for scrofula.¹⁶⁴ Kristeva refers to defilement as a coding of the abject that includes "excrement and its equivalents." According to Kristeva, "Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death."¹⁶⁵ The sacred symbolic body of the king thus holds the promise of purification for not only the abject body of the scrofula victim, but for a symbolic order vulnerable to the abject disintegration of the border between life and death, nature and culture.

¹⁶² Bloch, *The Royal Touch*, p.3.

¹⁶³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.3.

¹⁶⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.71.

¹⁶⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.71.

Thus, the sacred rituals that appear in Rica's depiction of the symbolic powers of the sovereign perform what Kristeva refers to as the "two-sided formation" of the sacred. The sacred production of the symbolic sovereign body repeats what Kristeva, agreeing with Freud and Lacan, sees as the first aspect of the sacred: the founding sacrifice of the primal father in the creation of the social and symbolic bond. Kristeva claims that the second aspect of the sacred is simultaneous with the ritualistic inscription of the differences and discriminations of the symbolic order and is "oriented toward those uncertain spaces of unstable identity, toward the fragility—both threatening and fusional—of the archaic dyad, toward the non-separation of subject/object, on which language has no hold but one woven of fright and repulsion?"¹⁶⁶

Thus, Rica's letters depict a world where the king's exploitation of the collapse of the symbolic configuration that gave his subjects the illusion of a self-identical identity independent from the signifier does not plunge his subjects into the abject collapse of symbolic meaning and identity as long as signifying practices perpetuate the fiction that the desire for a transcendent fixed identity can be gratified by the sacred symbolic masculine body of the king. Rica's reference to the king as a "great magician" reflects this belief in the power of a symbolic, spiritualized sovereign transcending the limitations of substance and materiality.

Following his depiction of the king's magical powers, Rica continues with his account of the discriminations and differences that demarcate the symbolic order in France in his portrayal of the pope and the rebellion of women. Just as the king's symbolic power allows him to produce value and meaning in the absence of material referents, according to Rica, the pope, a stronger "magician" than the king, will "make the king believe that three are only one, or else that the bread one eats is not bread, or that the wine one drinks not wine, and a thousand other

¹⁶⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.58.

things of the same kind”(Letter 24, p.73). Rica reports that periodically the pope sends the king “articles of belief” in order to exercise the king’s belief in the pope’s superior magical powers. When the pope sent the king articles of belief known as the *Constitution*, the country became divided between those that submitted at once to the Constitution—the king and the subjects that followed his example—and those that rebelled against the Constitution. According to Rica,

The instigators of this revolt, which has split the court, the whole kingdom, and every family, are women. The Constitution forbids them to read a book which all the Christians say was brought down to them from Heaven: it is really their Koran (Letter 24, p.73).

Rica argues that the prohibition against women reading the bible is reasonable since it makes no sense for women to read a book that instructs them on how to enter Paradise after their death when, according to the principles of his Holy Law, women are created inferior to men and therefore will not enter Paradise. However, while Rica claims natural inferiority as the basis for the exclusion of women from Paradise, his letter reveals how the positioning of woman as both sign and object of exchange functions to demarcate the monotheistic symbolic order.¹⁶⁷ To be man in the monotheistic monarchic symbolic order depicted in Rica’s letter is to occupy the subject position in the exchange of signifiers that hold the promise of transcendent gratification. Denied access to a “book which all the Christians say was brought down to them from Heaven,” woman functions to signify a disruptive surplus that is both a threat and a condition for the unity of the monotheistic symbolic order. It is this disruptive surplus that is prohibited by the Name that gives the law to desire, and, as Kristeva states, is the prerequisite in the “symbolic sphere, to

¹⁶⁷ See Elizabeth Cowie for an analysis of how the meaning of woman and man is not a function of a natural gender position, but a function of a position within a system of exchange. Elizabeth Cowie, “Woman as Sign” in *The Woman in Question*, ed. Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), p.125.

isolate the principle of One Law—One, Purifying, Transcendent, Guarantor of the ideal interest of the community.”¹⁶⁸ Thus, sacred signifying processes that produce the symbolic power of the king by establishing an unbridgeable chasm between the sovereign’s sacred phallic identity and the rest of his subjects also create a second symbolic chasm between the sexes.

In Letter 92, Usbek writes Rhedi the “monarch who has reigned for so long is no more. He made many people talk in the course of his life; at his death all men were silent” (Letter 92, p.173). Usbek’s observation of the volubility of the country under the sovereign’s rule confirms the structural position of the symbolic sovereign as the Other, the inaccessible transcendent signifier, that by giving the law to desire compels the subject to seek compensation for its lack through language.¹⁶⁹ However, as Lacan says of the Name-of-the-Father who gives the law to desire through the prohibition on incest and the castration complex, “the Other does not exist.”¹⁷⁰ Just as the law of desire is located in the Name and not in an embodied real father, the symbolic function of the sovereign is not located in a real corporeal body. It is therefore not the death of the corporeal body of the sovereign, but the loss of the symbolic phallic body of the sovereign that Usbek signifies with his announcement. By seducing his subjects with the promise of an original fixed identity, the sovereign’s sacred performances generated the exchange of signifiers that produced the symbolic order. Usbek’s report of the country’s silence at the death of the sovereign thus reveals a crisis in the signifying practices that produced the sovereign’s symbolic power to organize political meaning and mediate desires through the generation of symbolic and social exchanges.

¹⁶⁸ Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Barrows (New York: Marion Boyars, 1986), p.19.

¹⁶⁹ Lacan, *Écrits*, pp.65-67.

¹⁷⁰ Lacan, *Écrits*, pp.317, 199.

The Fragmentation of the Imaginary Body

While all men were silent at the death of the sovereign, in a letter Rica writes during the same year as Usbek's announcement of the sovereign's demise, the "deceptive voices" of women in public announce that a crisis of political signification is also a crisis of the organization of desire. Rica's depiction of the betrayal of fathers and husbands by the public accounts daughters and wives give of the intimate details of their private lives illustrates his claim that in France, "Husbands have only a vestige of authority over their wives; it is the same with fathers and children, or masters and slaves"(Letter 86, p.166). In addition to their public voices, the public spectacles women make of their own bodies as well as the bodies of their husbands signify the collapse of social and symbolic differences in France. According to Rica, women attempt to terminate their marriage contracts and restore their "rights of virginity" by either offering their own bodies as evidence of the absence of sexual consummation or by putting the bodies of their husbands on public trial:

There are even those who dare to issue a challenge to their husbands, and ask for the encounter to take place in public, although it is so difficult before witnesses; it is a trial which is as humiliating for the wife who is successful as for the husband who fails (Letter 86, p.167).

Rica's claim that the pressure of a public performance undermines the husband's ability to perform a sexual act points to the changing meaning of the public spectacle in Rica's letters at the time of the announcement of the death of the king. While the public spectacle was associated in Rica's first letter from France with symbolic unity, political resources for the king, and the augmentation of the power of the state, here it signifies a breakdown in the organization of desire, a crisis of masculine identity, and a crisis of political signification. This change in the meaning of the public spectacle is produced in the text by the difference between the sacred

phallic body of the sovereign and the symbolically castrated body of the husband. The image Rica presents of the public failure of husbands to perform a sexual function that he alludes to as being inappropriate in public is the inverse image of the sovereign's successful deployment of the public spectacle in producing the unifying sacred powers of the sovereign's phallic body. In the depictions of the production of the king's symbolic and political power, the public and private distinction was not a factor in the success of the sacred rituals that invested the phallic body of the late king with symbolic power. The display of the king's partially naked body in the ceremony of the *levée* did not diminish the phallic symbolic power of the king (Letter 37, p.91). Instead, the rising of the king from bed and the dressing of his body was part of a signifying apparatus that invested the king and his body with the sacred power to expel the abject and produce the meaning of symbolic unity for the country. The unveiling of the symbolically castrated body of the husband in a public spectacle thus marks the absence of this imaginary phallic support for the negative ideal of symbolic wholeness and a crisis of signification. This unveiling of the fraud behind the identification of the phallus with the masculine body marks the division of the subject that, according to Lacan, is an effect of the subjection of the subject to the signifier.¹⁷¹ Kristeva argues that the moment when the "citizen-individual...discovers his incoherences and abysses, in short his 'strangenesses'—that the question arises...of promoting the togetherness of those foreigners that we all recognize ourselves to be."¹⁷² However, in Rica's letter, the exposure of the division of the masculine "citizen-individual" is not presented as the moment for accepting the uncanny strangeness of the subject and the other. Instead, the attempt to deny the "abyss" of identity occurs when the image of the disorderly faithless woman

¹⁷¹ Lacan, *Écrits*, pp. 198-99.

¹⁷² Kristeva, *Strangers*, pp.2-3.

is depicted as responsible for the loss of the illusion of the “unitary and glorious” masculine identity of the “citizen-individual.”

In the same letter where Rica describes how wives repudiate their marriage contracts in public, he also tells us that in France, “any child born in wedlock is to be considered as the husband’s; even if he has good reason not to believe it, the law believes it for him, and spares him any inquires or scruples” (Letter 86, p.167). Under the Name-of-the-Father, a “symbolic paternal agency” enforces the prohibition against incest by regulating the orderly exchange and control of women and children.¹⁷³ While Rica tells us that the law assigns paternity, he points to how the sexual activities of women outside of marriage as well as their public repudiation of their marriage contracts undermines the paternal function in upholding the prohibition against incest and enforcing the orderly reproduction of the social and symbolic order. Shortly after Rica’s letter on the husband’s loss of control over paternal agency, we read a letter Rica writes Rhedi where the threat of incest appears in Rica’s depiction of how vanity and the subjection of women to fashion results in the confusion between self and mother:

A son will fail to recognize a portrait of his mother because the dress in which she had been painted seems so alien to him; he will imagine that it is a picture of some Red Indian squaw, or that the artist decided to paint some fantasy of his own (Letter 99, p.184).

If sons lose the ability to recognize their mothers, they also risk the boundary that separates self from mother. During the stage of primary narcissism, the child does not recognize the mother because the boundaries between self and mother remain in a state of flux. This is the period during the mirror stage when, as Lacan explains, the substitution of the experience of corporeal

¹⁷³ Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p.259. Lacan, *Écrits*, pp.199, 207.

fragmentation for the spatial unity found in the mirror marks subjectivity with the “succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic—and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity.”¹⁷⁴ The fantasy of corporeal fragmentation that marks the division of the subject appears in the image Rica presents of the French woman for whom corporeal disfigurement is the cost of the collusion between vanity and the caprice of fashion. According to Rica, “There was a time when because of their enormous height a woman’s face was in the middle of her body. At another time her feet occupied the same position; her heels were pedestals supporting them in mid-air” (Letter 99, p.184). Thus, in Rica’s letter, the image of the abject fragmented body of a woman is invested with the anxiety and aggression that Lacan claims is an effect of the denial of the impossibility of self-identity.¹⁷⁵ In his letter comparing the power of the king of Spain to the power of the king of France, Rica described how the French king promoted and exploited the vanity of his subjects for his own political power as well as the power of the state (Letter 24, pp.72-73). In his first letter from Paris, Rica established an association between the symbolic powers that allowed the sovereign to exploit the vanity of his subjects for political and economic resources and the belief in the sovereign’s power to purify the abject body from the country. In the silence that follows the sovereign’s death, Rica once again returns to the relation between the meaning of vanity and the abject body. However, just as the meaning of the public spectacle shifted after Usbek’s observation of the silence at the death of the sovereign, the meaning of vanity also loses its association with symbolic and political unity. In the symbolic vacuum opened with the death of the king, vanity—with its subjection of the subject to the signifying process and the desire of the

¹⁷⁴ Lacan, *Écrits*, p.4.

¹⁷⁵ Lacan, *Écrits*, p.287.

other—is no longer a source of political and economic power. Instead, vanity is now depicted as threatening the subject and the symbolic order with the abyss of signification associated with the abject semiotic body. Thus, just as Rica showed us how the symbolic production of the sovereign's phallic body performed what Kristeva refers to as the "two-sided formation" of the sacred, now, at a time of a signifying crisis, Rica's letters point to how there is a corresponding failure of the sacred function to "ward off the subject's fear of his very identity sinking irretrievably into the mother."¹⁷⁶

Usbek, like Rica, depicted how sacred signifying practices produced the symbolic powers of the sovereign to provide the country with social and symbolic unity (Letter 37, p.91). Like Rica, Usbek also reveals a refusal to accept the loss of the illusion of the sovereign guarantee for social and political meaning. Two letters after his letter announced the silence at the death of the sovereign, we read a letter Usbek writes Rhedi that reveals Usbek's attempt to assuage his fear that language or signifying practices are the sole basis for the social and symbolic order by figuring the father as a natural, pre-social, pre-linguistic guarantee for social and political unity:

Every discussion of international law that I have ever heard has begun with a careful investigation into the origin of society, which seems to me absurd. If men did not form societies, if they separated and fled from each other, then we should have to inquire the reason for it, and try to find out why they lived apart from each other: but they are all associated with each other at birth; a son is born into his father's home, and stays there: there you have society, and the cause of society (Letter 94, p.175).

Usbek claims that the fact that men do not separate from each other is evidence of a natural sociability. Here, birth functions as a signifier of both the natural basis for paternity and for the associative meaning of the father's house. However, this natural associative meaning of

¹⁷⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.64.

paternity is produced through the effacement of the mother from the birth scene. In order to make the case for a natural association—a case all the more necessary after his announcement of the silence that followed the death of the king—Usbek attempts to contain the threat from the maternal body that, according to Kristeva,

no signifier can uplift without leaving a remainder, for the signifier is always meaning, communication, or structure, whereas a mother would be, instead, a strange fold that changes culture into nature, the speaking into biology.¹⁷⁷

Usbek's argument for political unity makes a clear demarcation between an asocial fearful separation and a natural basis for association. However, the maternal body by virtue of being both the biological basis of the reproduction of the species and the basis of the semiotic drives that produce thethetic break necessary to initiate the subject into the symbolic order, according to Kristeva, threatens the subject with the abject, the ambiguous border that disrupts clear demarcations. By placing birth and the relation to the child under the exclusive control of the father, Usbek's letter reveals the need for a paternal agency to contain the disruptive surplus of what exists on the boundary between nature and culture, association and separation. The threatening instability of signification marked by the silence at the death of the sovereign triggers a demarcating imperative in Usbek's letter; birth can be deployed for the meaning of a natural foundation for association only by eclipsing the ambiguity of the relation with the maternal body where "our identities, images, and words run the risk of being engulfed."¹⁷⁸

In his first letter from Paris, Rica described how the King in his position as a "great magician" convinced people to believe that "one crown is worth two," and that "a piece of paper

¹⁷⁷ Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *Tales of Love*, p.259.

¹⁷⁸ Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p.42.

will do for money”(Letter 24, p. 73). In letter 141, Rica once again takes up the issue of the place of magic in the generation of financial values. Here we read a letter Rica sends Usbek containing an allegory that depicts John Law in the guise of the son of Aeolis and Louis XIV in the guise of Saturn (Letter 142, p. 256). We are told that during his reign, the son of Aeolis was “made very unwelcome by Saturn.” However, “once the god had departed from the earth,” the son of Aeolis mirrors Rica’s depiction of the king when he uses magic to convince people to believe that financial value can exist in the absence of backing from fixed naturalized material referents. According to the allegory, the son of Aeolis urges people to take his advice and

‘leave the land of worthless metal and enter the realms of the imagination, and I promise you such riches that you will be astonished.’ He immediately opened a large number of the balloons he had brought and distributed his wares to anyone who wanted them (Letter 142, p.256).

Two letters prior to this letter, Rica already depicted how magic had lost its power to produce symbolic unity. The great swing in economic fortunes that results from John Law’s financial policies, where “Everyone who was rich six months ago is now in poverty, and those who had no bread then are gorged with riches,” according to Rica, leaves people proclaiming, “The nobility is ruined! the State is in chaos! the classes are in confusion!”(Letter 138, p.245). In Rica’s first letter, the belief in the sovereign’s magical power to produces financial value and meaning in the absence of fixed material referents was associated with his power to purify a diseased body. However, whereas the sovereign’s magical power to both produce financial values and expel corporeal decomposition signified the efficacy of the monotheistic monarchic sacred signifying system in the production of the symbolic unity of the country, the image of a body with its distinct form ravaged by disease in Rica’s depiction of the effects of John Law’s financial

schemes makes the point that after the departure of “the god” from the earth magic can only plunge the country further into an abject state of nondifferentiation:

France, on the death of the late king, was a body which had succumbed to a multitude of ills. N***, scalpel in hand, removed the excess flesh and applied some local remedies to the outside, but an internal fault still remained to be cured. A foreigner arrived and undertook to treat it. After administering many drastic medicines he thought that he had got the country back into shape, but all he had done was swell it up (Letter 138, p.245).

Speaking of Paradoxical Pleasure

Three letters after Rica’s depiction of the country’s fall into an abject state of nondifferentiation, we read Rica’s letter to Usbek containing a story he translated for a lady at court with a fondness for reading fiction, with the recommendation, “You may perhaps enjoy reading it in a new guise” (Letter 141, p.247). Rica’s presentation of a story with its meaning potentially altered by a “new guise” recalls the social, political, and symbolic instability that, beginning with his own experimental change of sartorial signifiers, was associated with transient forms of display in France. However, unlike his suggestion of pleasure to Usbek, Rica’s various accounts of the fluctuation of guises in France did not lead to pleasure, but to the dissolution of the boundary between self and other and the abject fall into a state of nonexistence. Rica’s suggestion of pleasure to Usbek thus raises the question of how Zulema’s story might ameliorate the abject threat of the instability of signification associated with new guises in France.

The story begins with a description of Zulema as a woman with extensive knowledge of the sacred word of the Koran. Zulema’s theological knowledge “combined the sort of humorous attitude which made it almost impossible to guess, when she was talking to someone, whether she wanted to entertain them or instruct them”(Letter 141, p.248). This combination of entertainment with knowledge brings to mind the method

Usbek applied in his response to Mirza's request for an explanation of Usbek's past statements on virtue. In response to Mirza's moral question, Usbek offered the mythical narrative of the Troglodytes, claiming that "With truths of a certain kind, it is not enough to make them appear convincing: one must also make them felt" (Letter 11, p.53). Zulema, like Mirza, is dissatisfied with religious authority on the question of virtue and challenges its claim that the souls of virtuous women do not have a place in Paradise. When she claims that the restriction of Paradise to men "is the common view" and that "nothing has been neglected in order to degrade our sex. There is even a nation spread throughout Persia, called the Jews, which maintains on the authority of the holy books that we have no soul," Zulema suggests that her challenge is not just against the Persian religious tradition, but against the sexual hierarchical divisions of all three monotheistic religions (Letter 141, p.248). By stepping out of the proper positioning of woman in monotheistic symbolic order, Zulema mirrors the French women in Rica's account of women rebelling against their exclusion from reading the Bible as well as his other depictions of the disorderly woman in France. The story of Zulema, like the Troglodyte myth, thus appears in the context of a crisis in the sacred demarcations of symbolic identity. Kristeva maintains that in Western culture writing has taken the place of religious "structurings" that once demarcated the limits of social and subjective identity. The inscription of a boundary between categories such as nature and culture in a text, according to Kristeva, operates to demarcate the symbolic and subjective order and to contain the fear of the uncanny strangeness of the subject.¹⁷⁹ Just as the Troglodyte myth provided Usbek with the opportunity to deploy fiction to retrace the sacred

¹⁷⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp.15-18.

demarcations that defined his own subjectivity as a man, citizen, and father, Zulema's story, by mirroring Rica's accounts of the abject confusion that threatens the monotheistic symbolic order, suggests that the pleasure Rica expects Usbek to enjoy from the new guise of the Zulema's story will be an effect of its performance of the role Kristeva claims is performed by sacred rituals and discourses: "*coding* the other taboo that the earliest ethnologists and psychoanalysts viewed as presiding over social formations: beside death, *incest*."¹⁸⁰

The Paradise that awaits women who have lived a virtuous life, according to Zulema, is a celestial seraglio guarded by faithful celestial eunuchs and filled with "god-like" lovers who exist only to keep virtuous women in an incessant state of sexual ecstasy (Letter 141, p.248). To illustrate her argument, Zulema tells her female companions in the seraglio the story of Anaïs's challenge to her husband's brutal reign over his wives in the seraglio. According to Zulema's tale, Anaïs rebels against her jealous husband's attempts to paralyze his wives with fear by telling Ibrahim that she does not even wish him death, but instead looks upon her own death as a pleasant alternative to her wretched life with him (Letter 141, p.249). This defiant proclamation sets up Anaïs for a violent murder by Ibrahim who, after becoming enraged by her words, "seized his dagger and plunged it into her breast." While dying, Anaïs promises her companions in the seraglio that "if Heaven has mercy on my virtue, you will be revenged" (Letter 141, p.249).

In the story's depiction of how heaven has mercy on Anaïs's virtue by providing her spirit with unlimited sexual pleasures from "god-like men," we read the proof of Zulema's claim for the equality of the sexes before god:

¹⁸⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.58.

She was taken to her room, and after she had been undressed once more she was carried to a sumptuous bed, where two men of entrancing beauty took her in their arms. It was then that she was intoxicated with delight, and that her ecstasies surpassed even her desires. 'I am beside myself,' she told them; 'I should believe myself to be dying, if I were not certain of being immortal' (Letter 141, pp.249-50).

Zulema's story of the paradisiacal experiences of Anaïs's spirit has been read not only as the proof of Zulema's challenge to the unequal division of the sexes under monotheistic law, but also as proof of Montesquieu's correction of the sexually repressive virtue disseminated by Biblical religions. Referring to the depiction of the sexual ecstasies of the immortal Anaïs as "one of the most erotic passages in the literature of modern political philosophy," Sanford Kessler argues that Zulema's story is part of Montesquieu's "feminist" effort to prove the equality of the sexes in "their capacity for virtue," and "free the female from her unjust subjection to men sanctioned, in his view, by Biblical religion."¹⁸¹ Whereas Kessler finds Montesquieu's radical challenge in what he reads as the physical eroticism of Anaïs's experiences in heaven, Pauline Kra focuses on the depiction of Anaïs's possession of a soul when she claims that Montesquieu's own refutation of theological arguments that degrade women is given voice in Zulema's tale of the heavenly vindication of Anaïs's virtue.¹⁸² According to Kra, the Mohammedan tradition Zulema criticizes for claiming that women will not enter paradise reflects the Christian literature that was used to support eighteenth century arguments that women had no souls. Kra tells us that, according to this literature, "Woman was created to aid man in his physical existence on earth, but at the end

¹⁸¹ Sanford Kessler, "Religion and Liberalism in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*," *Polity* 15 (Spring 1983): 380, 390.

¹⁸² Pauline Kra, "Religion in Montesquieu's *Persian Lettres*," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 72 (1970): 116-17.

of time, since men will no longer need female companions, women will cease to exist.”¹⁸³ Both Kra’s and Kessler’s reading of the vindication of Anaïs’s virtue in heaven as part of Montesquieu’s project to free woman from her subordination under Biblical religion is echoed in Schaub’s claim that in the story of Zulema “Religious and sexual revolution are linked” through “the establishment of female rule in heaven.”¹⁸⁴ Just as Kessler reads the depiction of the erotic experiences of the spiritual Anaïs in heaven as if they were depictions of the sexual experiences of an embodied, live woman, Schaub makes the point that the “eroticism of this letter is more purely physical” in contrast to the “sexual violence present in the erotic letters of Zachi and Usbek.”¹⁸⁵ However, unlike Kessler, whose argument for Montesquieu’s challenge to monotheistic virtue rests primarily on what he reads as a woman’s experience of physical eroticism in heaven, and unlike Kra, whose argument focuses on Zulema’s account of a woman’s possession of a soul, Schaub sees Montesquieu’s challenge to “Christianity’s emphasis on the control of the passions” in Anaïs’s demonstration of an “alternative conception of virtue: spiritedness in defense of political liberty.”¹⁸⁶ Spiritedness, according to Schaub, is demonstrated by Anaïs when she both rejects her subjection to her husband while on earth and when, “possessed by a ‘truly philosophic spirit,’” she eventually rejects the sexual pleasures she receives in heaven in order to fulfill her promise to the women in the seraglio. Schaub claims that the “‘force of spirit’” that compels Anaïs to eventually free herself from the sexual passions

¹⁸³ Kra, “Religion in Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*,” p.118.

¹⁸⁴ Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, p.91.

¹⁸⁵ Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, p.96.

¹⁸⁶ Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, p.103.

she experienced in heaven is what led her “to despise both fear and death, and so break the bonds of earthly despotism. Anaïs proves herself superior to both pleasure and pain.”¹⁸⁷

Whereas Kessler, Kra, and Schaub’s arguments each differ in regard to their focus on what they read as the significance of Zulema’s depiction of Anaïs’s soul, body, or spirit in Montesquieu’s challenge to monotheistic or Biblical virtue, they all ignore how the depiction of the sacrificial murder of a woman functions as the starting point for what they each argue is Montesquieu’s project of liberating woman from her subjugation under Biblical religion, and, more specifically, Christian virtue. Kessler’s argument, with its primary emphasis on the physical eroticism of Anaïs’s experience, is most obvious in its dependence on the eclipse of the fact that it is not the embodied Anaïs that is depicted as experiencing ecstatic pleasure with celestial lovers, but the spirit of the murdered corporeal Anaïs. However, if it is true, as Kra, Kessler, and Schaub all argue, that Zulema’s story carries out Montesquieu’s project of liberating women and sexuality from monotheistic and, particularly, Christian virtue, then we can ask what kind of liberation is it that has the depiction of the violent murder of a woman as its starting point and condition. This question is further complicated by the question of how, as Rica suggested to Usbek, the new guise of Zulema’s story will provide Usbek with pleasure. Thus, the question becomes, what kind of liberation from religion is it that has the violent murder of a woman as its condition and starting point and how is this liberation through a violent sacrifice of a woman connected to the promise of pleasure offered by the new guise of the story?

Prior to her murder, Anaïs proclaimed her desire to separate from her husband through death. This proclamation positions Anaïs on the abject threshold between life and death; nature and culture; biology and the social, that, in Kristeva’s words, “takes the ego back to its source on

¹⁸⁷ Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, p.98.

the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away.”¹⁸⁸ Positioned on the boundary between self and other, Anaïs signifies the place of the semiotic where the “archaic economy” of “rejecting, separating, repeating/abjecting” is under the sway of the violent heterogeneity of the life and death drives.¹⁸⁹ Anaïs thus mirrors the abject threat that in Rica’s letters appeared in images of corporeal excess and fragmentation and functioned to signify the crisis of nondifferentiation between classes, values, and sexes threatening the monotheistic symbolic order. However, when Anaïs is violently murdered by her husband she functions as a sacred sacrifice that, as Kristeva explains, demarcates the social and the symbolic:

For sacrifice designates, precisely, the watershed on the basis of which the social and the symbolic are instituted: the thetic that confines violence to a single place, making it a signifier. Far from unleashing violence, sacrifice shows how representing violence is enough to stop it and to concatenate an order.¹⁹⁰

Purifying the symbolic order of the abject state of nondifferentiation through the sacrifice of the mortal Anaïs thus inscribes the demarcations that constitute an order. However, when the immortal Anaïs deploys magical powers in order to duplicate the appearance of her former husband Ibrahim, we begin to see how the depiction of a founding sacrifice is just the beginning of how “Montesquieu’s new theology”¹⁹¹ mirrors the psychical and symbolic operations and demarcations that produced the monotheistic symbolic order depicted in Rica’s letters.

According to Zulema’s story, Anaïs is not content with celestial rewards limited to sensual and sexual pleasures. Possessing the mind of a “true philosopher,” Anaïs is able free

¹⁸⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.15.

¹⁸⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp.15-16.

¹⁹⁰ Kristeva, *Revolution*, p.75.

¹⁹¹ Kessler, “Religion and Liberalism in Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*,” p.380.

herself from her sensual intoxication and secludes herself with only the "thoughts about her former existence and her present happiness" (Letter 141, pp.251-52). Such contemplation compels the immortal Anaïs to help the companions in the seraglio that the mortal Anaïs swore by her virtue to vindicate. When the immortal Anaïs orders one of her celestial lovers to "take on the appearance of her husband, go down to his seraglio, take charge, and drive him out," she deploys a magical power that mirrors how the magical power attributed to the king in Rica's letter on France attempts to sever meaning and value from the limits of natural, corporeal, and material referents (Letter 141, p.252). However, in Rica's depiction of symbolic hierarchy in France, the magical powers of the king and the pope were enacted through the positioning of woman as sign and object of exchange between men. According to Rica's depiction of the production of the meaning of masculine subjectivity within the symbolic hierarchy in France, to be a man is to exchange signifiers that show the way to eternal life and to be a woman is to signify the corporeality that remains excluded from symbolic significance. If Zulema's story now depicts a woman in the position of a subject of signification, it is because the production of the immortal Anaïs out of the violent sacrifice of the mortal Anaïs purifies the symbolic order of the threat of the boundary—between self and other; nature and culture—associated with the abject semiotic body and places an abstract, spiritualized feminine figure under the control of a paternal agency (Letter 141, p.251). However, while the production of a spiritualized feminine figure expels the threat of the dissolution of identity from the symbolic order, the sacrifice of a woman also destroys the corporeal basis for the reproduction of the symbolic order. When the celestial Ibrahim descends to take his place among Anaïs's mortal companion in the seraglio, we read an attempt to resolve a dilemma in the text that can be understood in terms of the ambivalence of the maternal principle that, according to Kristeva, "is bound to the species, on the

one hand, and on the other stems from an identity catastrophe that causes the Name to topple over into the unnamable that one imagines as femininity, nonlanguage, or body."¹⁹²

In the guise of the earthly Ibrahim, Anaïs's celestial lover is able to carry out Anaïs's orders, gaining entry into the seraglio by winning the allegiance of his wives with his "polite and gentle manner" and by "his ardour and the speed of his operations." According to the story, they "all had their share of the general astonishment, and they would have taken it for a dream if it had not been so real" (Letter 141, p.252). By fooling the eunuchs who held the women captive and by acting in the manner of Anaïs's celestial lover even while appearing in the guise of the earthly Ibrahim, the celestial Ibrahim causes a scene of semiotic chaos:

While these unprecedented scenes were going on in the seraglio, Ibrahim was banging on the door calling his name, storming and shouting. After meeting with many difficulties he got in, plunging the eunuchs into the greatest confusion. Striding forward he fell back as if the ground had given way beneath his feet on seeing the false Ibrahim, his exact copy, taking all the liberties of a master. He called for help, tried to make the eunuchs help him kill the imposter, but was not obeyed. His only resource was a poor one: it was to appeal to the judgement of his wives. In one hour the false Ibrahim had seduced all his judges. The other was driven out and dragged outside the seraglio in disgrace, and would have been killed a thousand times over if his rival had not ordered that his life was to be spared (Letter 141, p.252).

The semiotic confusion over Ibrahim's identity parallels the crisis of masculine identity and the abject loss of differentiation between self and other depicted in Rica's letters on France. In Rica's depiction of the law court scene, the sexual impotence of the husband during a public trial stripped him of the name husband. When Ibrahim returns, he first appeals to his name in order to regain his position in the seraglio. By appealing to his name, Ibrahim appeals to the temporal dimension of identity that, according to Lacan, affords a more lasting—albeit perishable—unity than the "fundamental discordance" of the spatial unity of the imaginary. Lacan explains how

¹⁹² Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *Tales of Love*, pp.234-35.

the temporal dimension of the name establishes it as the “joint between the imaginary and the symbolic:”

Naming constitutes a pact, by which two subjects simultaneously come to an agreement to recognize the same object. If the human subject didn't name—as Genesis says it was done in earthly Paradise—the major species first, if the subjects did not come to an agreement over this recognition, no world, not even a perception, could be sustained for more than an instant.¹⁹³

By refusing the name of husband to Ibrahim, the wives abandon him to the imaginary world of semblance where, according to Lacan, the object is “always ready to be dissolved in an identification with the subject.”¹⁹⁴ However, unlike Rica's depiction of the courtroom scene in France, the attempt to project the decomposition of identity onto the faithless woman appears undercut by the splitting of Ibrahim into two by his “exact copy.” The lack of a clear, original, self-identical image in the confrontation between the two Ibrahims at first appears to challenge the possibility of a monotheistic virtue that demands the absolute faithfulness of wives to their husbands. However, the apparent inclusion of women in the symbolic pact, depicted when the women declare to their god-like lover that “You are more of an Ibrahim in one day than he has been in the course of ten years,” lasts only long enough to displace the corporeal Ibrahim and place the sexual pleasures of women under control of a symbolic transcendent paternal agency (Letter 141, p.253). While Ibrahim's exact copy first undermines the notion of an original identity independent from desire and the signifier, he quickly closes the division of the subject when, after banishing the mortal Ibrahim, he declares the independence of his true identity from

¹⁹³Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II The Ego in Freud's Theory and the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 1991), pp.168-70.

¹⁹⁴ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II*, pp.169-70.

fiction. When the wives asked the celestial Ibrahim how they will avoid being deceived by the earthly Ibrahim if he returns, the celestial Ibrahim replies: “‘It would be difficult, I think,’ he answered, ‘to deceive you. It is scarcely possible to keep up the position I hold toward you by pretending’”(Letter 141, p. 254). Behind Ibrahim’s claim for the independence of a masculine identity from the fictional dimension of subjectivity and the signifying process we find the fantasy of the imaginary phallus functioning to guarantee the virtue of women. Ibrahim declares to his wives that, “I am sufficiently convinced of my abilities to believe that you will be faithful to me; if you are not virtuous on my behalf, could you be virtuous for anyone?”(Letter 141, p.253). By offering complete gratification to the wives as proof of the truth of his identity as husband, the celestial Ibrahim attempts to close any lack that might bring his identity into question, thus upholding the fraud of the identification of the phallus with the male body. Secure in his symbolic oneness, the celestial Ibrahim proclaims that his independence from narcissistic jealousy allows him to give his wives the freedom to exercise a virtue that proves their faithfulness to him. Thus, a form of virtue based on the positioning of woman as sign and object of exchange in a phallic economy regulated by the Name-of-the-Father is both guaranteed by the symbolic oneness of masculine subject and, at the same time, functions to reflect back the imaginary fantasy of this phallic self-identical identity.

This inscription of the phallic identity of the husband mirrors the sacred function performed by the double body of the king of France. Just as the sacred meaning given to the two bodies of the king of France provided the symbolic unity for the identity of the country by transcending and containing the imperfect corporal body, the celestial Ibrahim creates the illusion of the closure of the division of the subject. The transcendent imaginary phallic body of Ibrahim with his proclaimed power to fully gratify desire is thus functioning as a substitute for

the incomplete corporeal Ibrahim, impotent French husbands, and the loss of the imaginary phallic body of the sovereign. In Rica's letters on France, the sacred symbolic power of the sovereign to expel the disruptive corporeal excess of the abject threat to symbolic unity relied on the creation of the illusion of a transcendent inaccessibility. Functioning according to the same metaphysical monotheistic symbolic logic as the signifying apparatus that inscribed the sacred powers of the sovereign, the disappearance of celestial Ibrahim confirms his sacred powers to expel the abject from the symbolic order and resolve the ambiguity of the "maternal principle." Zulema's story tells us that the disappearance of Ibrahim is discovered at the same moment as the appearance of his progeny:

With immense prodigality he used up the wealth of the jealous husband, who, returning three years later from the distant land to which he had been transported, found nothing left but his wives and thirty-six children (Letter 141, p.254).

In "Stabat Mater," Kristeva reminds us of how the belief that a woman's gratification is her child is upheld in both religious and psychoanalytic representations of motherhood.¹⁹⁵ With the image of the thirty-six children signifying both woman's gratification as well as the vindication of the virtue of the sacrificed mortal Anaïs, Zulema's story parallels elements of Kristeva analysis of how "femininity" is reabsorbed "within the Maternal" in Christianity.¹⁹⁶ By sacrificing the relation with the semiotic body for a relation with a "child-god," the myth of the Virgin in Christianity, according to Kristeva, contains the threatening ambiguity of the boundary between self and other during primary narcissism.¹⁹⁷ With the conception of what can

¹⁹⁵ Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *Tales of Love*, pp.246, 255.

¹⁹⁶ Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *Tales of Love*, p.236.

¹⁹⁷ Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *Tales of Love*, pp.257, 261.

only be god-like children in Zulema's story the result of, first, the sacrifice of the corporeal Anaïs, and, second, the substitution of celestial Ibrahim—a “god-like” lover—for the corporeal Ibrahim, the wives with the thirty-six children at their side mirror the way the Virgin functions according to Kristeva's account of the Christian myth:

The Virgin assumes her feminine denial of the other sex (of man) but overcomes him by setting up a third person: I do not conceive with *you* but with *Him*. The result is an immaculate conception (therefore with neither man nor sex), conception of a God with whose existence a woman has indeed something to do, on condition that she acknowledge being subjected to it.¹⁹⁸

Thus it is only through the sacrifice of both a corporeal feminine figure and the sacrifice of the semiotic maternal body for a symbolic relation to purely spiritual maternal figure that Zulema's story achieves what has been read as “Montesquieu's new theology” and a revision of Biblical religion for the purpose of woman's liberation from a sexually and socially repressive virtue.

If the new guise of Zulema's story fulfils Rica's suggestion of pleasure, this would be the effect of its symbolic power to tame the threatening disruptive semiotic body through an idealization of the relation of primary narcissism. In its new guise, we read how the threat of the abject border between self and other, nature and culture—depicted in Rica's commentary on the instability of the monotheistic symbolic order in France—is covered over through the absorption of a semiotic maternal by a symbolic maternal under the control of a transcendent paternal agency. This absorption of a semiotic maternal by a symbolic maternal in Zulema's story has the effect of re-inscribing the sacred demarcations that in Rica's letters functioned to expel the disruptive surplus that threatens the unity of the symbolic order and the identity of the subject.

¹⁹⁸ Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” in *Tales of Love*, p.257.

In the letters discussed in this chapter, symbolic instability in France is figured in the guise of the disorderly woman and the abject maternal body—rhetorical figures associated with what Kristeva refers to as our “infantile desires and fears of the other.” Rica’s observations of symbolic instability in France thus contribute to an understanding of the psychical and symbolic processes and practices that function to deny the acceptance of the uncanny strangeness of the subject that is the basis for the cosmopolitanism proposed by Kristeva. However, Zulema’s story complicates the critical significance of the depictions of symbolic instability in Rica’s letters. By performing the role of the sacred in demarcating a symbolic order through the sacrifice and purification of the figures associated with the abject state of nondifferentiation, Zulema’s story presents the paradox that even as the *Persian Letters* brings us closer to an understanding of our symbolic and subjective divisions, it also participates in the inscription of a symbolic and subjective order that functions to deny the complexity of a desiring, destructive, illogical, irreconcilable human subjectivity.

CONCLUSION

At the end of *Strangers To Ourselves*, Kristeva returns to a consideration of the political and social conditions in France that set the context for her call for modifying Montesquieu's cosmopolitanism by supplementing it with an ethics of psychoanalysis. Kristeva describes how France has been thrown into a "crisis of national identity" as a result of the unprecedented number of foreigners living in modern France amidst the increasing social-economic pressures of European integration. Confronted by both immigrants whose particular cultural values resist what Kristeva claims has been the "homogenizing power of French civilization" and the conspicuous absence of a "new community bond" that would "include particularities while transcending them," France has fallen under the sway of violently disintegrative and integrative forces.¹⁹⁹ However, while the political crisis in France sets the particular context for her explication of "strangeness," Kristeva argues for the universal significance of an ethics and politics of psychoanalysis. Specifically, if Montesquieu's cosmopolitanism is supplemented with the psychoanalytic conception of the subject divided by a "desiring, destructive, fearful, empty, impossible" unconscious, Kristeva claims that it can provide the basis for a "new community bond" that might end the violent persecution of those who do not share our national or religious origins. The recognition of how we are all foreigners—in the psychoanalytic sense of the uncanny strangeness of our unconscious—is therefore the cosmopolitan starting point for addressing political questions concerning the rights and duties of foreigners and citizens living in nation-states.

¹⁹⁹ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p.195.

The fictional foreigner in the *Persian Letters* is considered by Kristeva to be both the "alter ego of national man" and the "double" onto which the mind of the philosopher is delegated. However, as the philosopher's double, the fictional foreigner is a manifestation of his uncanny strangeness. And it is the denial of his uncanny strangeness that turns the journey of the figure Kristeva considers the "alter ego" of national man into a paranoid quest to secure the boundaries of his imaginary home. From the moment he picks up his pen and takes us on the epistemological journey that Kristeva claims provides us with the critical distance that gives rise to the possibility of "social and ideological transformation," the fictional foreigner responds to social, political, and symbolic instability by attempting to demarcate the abject. For the fictional foreigner in pursuit of Western knowledge, writing performs the sacred function of producing the fragile boundary between ego and non-ego; life and death. When read in light of the psychoanalytic and linguistic discourse that informs Kristeva's theory of abjection, the myths, fragmented body images, and violent sacrifices that are part of the articulation of the knowledge, reason, and values that produce the meaning of humanity in the *Persian Letters*, reflect the "alienations, dramas, and dead ends" that are "our condition as speaking beings." A reading of the *Persian Letters* that draws on Kristeva's theory of abjection allows us to understand how rhetorical figures, such as woman, are deployed to signify the crisis in political signification and the crisis in desire that threatens the symbolic order and the subject with the loss of the boundary between life and death; nature and culture. It is true, we had to wait for Freud to provide the analytic discourse that Kristeva claims allows us to understand how violence against the other who does not share our imagined origins is the effect of the denial of the violence that is a

constituent part of the “human psyche.” However, psychoanalytic discourse also permits us to understand how the desiring “death-bearing” other is a constituent part of the meaning of Montesquieu’s cosmopolitanism. This means that we can not add the meaning of the desiring “death-bearing” other to the meaning of humanity that Kristeva describes as a product of the “eighteenth century’s optimistic naivety;” it is already there.

Of course, understanding how the coding of the abject is part of the signifying process that produces the meaning of humanity and the symbolic order is not the same as bringing the abject to consciousness. Yet, it is not only with the psychoanalytic knowledge of our unconscious that Kristeva attempts to revive the meaning of humanity that underlies Montesquieu’s cosmopolitanism. Kristeva also claims that the interpretative task of bringing to consciousness the “desiring, destructive, fearful, empty, impossible” unconscious is the starting point for a revived cosmopolitanism. However, it is also the case that Kristeva’s psychoanalytic discourse tells us that the fulfillment of such a task threatens symbolic communication. Thus, what does Kristeva’s belief that the meaning of humanity that is the basis for Montesquieu’s rational cosmopolitanism was not already laden with desire and death, and her further claim that the meaning of humanity can be informed by the consciousness of an “erotic, death-bearing unconscious” without being destroyed by it, suggest? It seems that part of Kristeva’s response to what she identifies as a both a crisis in national identity and a “values crisis” in the West includes overlooking how the *Persian Letters* retains its critical significance by allowing us to understand how the meaning of humanity is produced through signifying processes that takes the place of the sacred in protecting the subject and the symbolic order from the threat of abject nondifferentiation.

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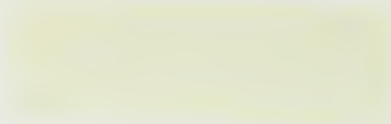
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