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RESEARCH NOTES

MONTESQUIEU ON LOVE: NOTES ON *THE PERSIAN LETTERS*

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Among students of political philosophy, Montesquieu is chiefly honored as author of *The Spirit of the Laws*. His earlier important work, *The Persian Letters*, is more often cited than read and is considered primarily as a collection of fragments, some of which may be useful for clearing up some disputed point or other in the interpretation of the *magnum opus*. In these notes I propose to treat it as a meaningful whole—as a book which in fact has the theme which it purports to have, the theme of love and its relation to social institutions. This is not an altogether novel approach, even among political scientists. The late Franz Neumann, for example, has pointed out the importance of this theme in his introduction to the Hafner edition of *The Spirit of the Laws*.¹ Nevertheless, I believe that Montesquieu's conception of love is sufficiently important and the implications of his conception sufficiently interesting, so that a closer analysis will not be redundant.

In brief, I will argue that Montesquieu treats love as a decisive manifestation of humanity. The lover is more truly human than other men; his potentialities as man are then more fully realized. Both virtue and wisdom are opened to him in this happy state. But love is not always possible. In fact, it is truer to say that almost never can men find true love, for the *institutions of society* deprive man of the capability for love. This is a crucial point; Montesquieu tells us not only that social conditions may preclude the fruition of love, but that men's perception of themselves and others is so decisively influenced by the habits they acquire in society that the very emotion of love will be denied them, or be transformed into a parody of that love which fulfills man. A proper treatment of the theme of love, then, requires more than an examination of the immediate and personal feelings of individuals; it requires also a study of the social context in which individuals move, the conditions which will affect both the character and fate of love. In this way, the writer or artist who truly under-

stands love, whose sensibilities are developed, becomes at once a student of social reality and, perforce, a social critic. Furthermore, since no one himself incapable of love can know it, he shares at once the blessing and curse of the lover in a corrupted society. He alone can feel and know truly, but he must also be alone—a stranger and outcast in society. This last, on the role of the artist, is implicit rather than explicit in Montesquieu's work. The point emerges more openly in the work of Rousseau. It is, nevertheless, important to see it in relationship to Montesquieu because he is much clearer than Rousseau in pointing out that the love and sensibility which give special insight are not merely any strong passion, but "true" love and sensibility. This, I believe, was also Rousseau's position. The German *Sturm und Drang*, with admiration, and the anti-Romantic, with invective, misread him on precisely this point. But regardless of the strict validity of this last extension of Montesquieu's doctrine of love, this much emerges clearly: for Montesquieu, the theme of love is intimately tied to the problems of society, and specifically, to the problem of dehumanization.

What, then, is Montesquieu's conception of true love? In the first place, its object is frankly sexual. Montesquieu breaks decisively with the classical and Christian philosophical traditions, as well as with what I understand to be the dominant tradition in serious literature. Man's love is not directed toward Platonic ideas or the Christian God; its object is woman. Nor is love for woman sublimated into an ephemeral adulation; it seeks sexual gratification. There is nothing necessarily heinous in the life of the passions. When Montesquieu seeks to ascertain the quality of love in a society, he first directs his attention to the relationship between the sexes. He investigates the emotions attendant to courtship and marriage.

But obviously, not all sexual passion is true love, which involves fidelity and respect also. The lover must direct his desire solely at the object of his love, and remain steadfast in his dedication. (Incidentally, this does not rule out polygamy automatically. There is nothing in this which precludes love of more than one. The point is that the lover does not follow random sexual inclinations.) Steadfastness, however, is

¹ Franz L. Neumann, "Montesquieu," *The Democratic and the Authoritarian State* (Glencoe, 1957), pp. 103-4; cf. J. Robert Loy, "Introduction," to Montesquieu, *Persian Letters* (New York, Meridian Books, Inc., 1961).

not a sufficient condition for true love. The lover must respect his beloved, value her feelings and intelligence. She is no mere sexual object. Love implies at least the possibility of reciprocity and an essential equality between men and women. The love which enhances humanity presupposes a modicum of humanity, and this is at the mercy of society.

To see how social institutions may preclude love, we now turn to the story of *The Persian Letters*. The romance is written in the form of letters, and the tale is simple. Two Persian gentlemen, Usbek and Rica, decide to travel to the West in search of knowledge. They correspond with their friends about their impressions and meditations. Rica's letters are primarily satirical. He points up sharply the pretense of the French; and yet he is also changed by what he sees, and apparently decides to remain, particularly because of the freedom and attractiveness of women. The main protagonist, however, has no mind for such attractions. His observations, in general, are more speculative than satirical, and—most importantly—his attention is sharply divided between his new experiences and the events in his seraglio at home, which form the subject matter of many of his letters. During his absence, the discipline of the seraglio disintegrates and the process culminates in the discovery that Roxana, his favorite wife, bears him hate rather than love and has betrayed him with another man.

In the *Persian Letters*, Montesquieu tests the quality of love in two social contexts, the Persian seraglio and the Parisian *haut-monde*, adding some comments on Russia and Spain, as well as a tale of true love between brother and sister. Except for the last, all appearances of love disintegrate either under close scrutiny or under the pressure of the environment. They are illusory or doomed not because of "fate" or individual failings, but because social circumstances forbid them reality.

Seraglio love fails, despite its guarantee of gratification and at least external fidelity, because the seraglio rests on the principle of terror, force and general denial of individual dignity. Usbek, the master of the seraglio, admits "It is not so much that I love them: in this respect, I find in myself an insensible mood which leaves me empty of desires. In the well-stocked seraglio where I lived, I anticipated love and destroyed it by [the act of] love itself; yet, out of my very coldness, springs up a secret jealousy that consumes me."² His love is

little more than pride of possession. The objects which he possesses will be more valuable if they are beautiful, and more enjoyable if they love him. They are not human. The sole exception is his feeling for Roxana which has the element of desire because she has fought him, but it cannot be love because she too must be treated as a slave in the discipline of the seraglio. He is a humane and cultured man, who would rather persuade than terrorize, but his situation denies him the opportunity—and presumably the capacity—to love. Usbek is, then, after all not so different from the eunuchs whom at times he pities. For them, desire has been transformed into lust for power and bitter hatred. And if one should seek love despite his impotence, he must experience bitter frustration. But Usbek's situation parallels this exactly. They are all caught up in the logic of the system.

In some ways, the victims fare better than their master or his ministers. At least, the physical pleasure of gratifying real desires is not denied them. For Zachi, a former favorite of great beauty, this is almost enough. Yet if she can be contented in her slavery, she cannot be truly human. In punishment for some minor transgression she is spanked by a eunuch, and relates: "My soul, at first annihilated by shame, was rediscovering the feeling of its own existence and was growing indignant, at which time my cries made the vaults of my apartment resound. I could be heard beseeching mercy from the most abject of all humans."³ A self-awareness so located and so manifested betokens a complete dehumanization. Zelis, another wife, is less degraded. She consoles herself with her husband's fears, priding herself on his dependence on the wives. In many ways, she is the counterpart of the eunuchs. But the facts of power deprive her of this consolation. She shares Zechi's fate, and her sadistic pleasure turns into a hatred which must destroy her. Destruction is also the necessary punishment for Roxana, the most fortunate of the wives. By whatever chance, she is the one person in the seraglio capable of love. She bestows it

to Anne Dobbs, although final responsibility for the text rests with the author. There are two English translations of the *Persian Letters*: the first, by an anonymous translator, was published in a limited edition in London in 1897; it is charming in style, but often quite inaccurate; the second, by J. Robert Loy (cited in the note above) is very accurate, but tends to let a concern for literalness obscure the sense conveyed by overtones and style.

³ Montesquieu, *op. cit.*, Lettre CLVII, p. 400.

² Montesquieu, *Lettres Persanes*, ed. Antoine Adam (Geneva and Lille, 1954), Lettre VI, p. 20. The translations used here are greatly indebted

adulterously, with good cheer and hate deceiving Usbek. When she is discovered, and her lover slain, she kills herself, flaunting her freedom to her husband. The iron law of the seraglio is summarized in Zelis' last letter to Usbek: "You have degraded your soul and become inhuman."⁴ At best, this inhumanity may take the form of the happy assemblage of mares serviced by an angelic and superpotent stud, as set forth in Rica's idyllic tale; at worst, it will take the form of total terror described in glowing terms by the Black Eunuch. Love enters the seraglio only by accident, and those who can partake of it must die. Rule based on fear must destroy the humanity of both ruler and ruled.

But a society characterized by relative freedom and equality may crush humanity as well as a slave state. This emerges from Montesquieu's survey of love in France. As the seraglio promised much because of its sensuality and fidelity, France promises much because of the independence and equality of women there. But despite Rica's decision to remain, the import of Montesquieu's judgment is that love is impossible there too. Life is so artificial—directed by mode, opinion and pretense—that men do not trust their feelings for real love. Love becomes a matter of love-affairs, pursued for the sake of reputation as gallant and lady of mode. Rica jibes: "Here, a husband who loves his wife is a man who has not enough merit to make himself loved by another woman; who abuses the necessity of the law to make up for the charms he lacks."⁵ "A husband, who would want to be the only one to possess his wife would be considered a perturber of the public happiness, and a madman who would want to enjoy the light of the sun by himself, to the exclusion of all others."⁶ In interpreting such passages as these, there is always the risk of killing an exaggeration meant merely to amuse and sell books, but I do not believe that the risk is too great in this instance. Montesquieu sought to do all those things, but he also paints a consistent and widely detailed picture of a polished society in which men have lost self-respect, and with all conceivable freedom cannot arrive at a human condition of love.

Not only the lionized adulterer signals the bankruptcy of French marital institutions. Montesquieu also has Rica deride the legal structure of marriage (he says of a domestic relations court: "Love makes this court resound: here, nothing is spoken of but angered fathers,

seduced daughters, unfaithful lovers, and unfortunate husbands.") And, more seriously, he has Usbek analyze the Christian laws forbidding divorce in order to point out that this cuts the sexual core out of marriage by compelling parties who have no love for one another to remain married. French love is sterile rather than impotent, and it does not achieve the level of true love—again, not because of the individual faults of the would-be lovers, but because the habits engendered by a whole way of life and the demands made by the system preclude a human life.

In the romance of *Apheridon and Astarte*, a story told Usbek by one of his correspondents, Montesquieu presents a picture of true love. The pair are brother and sister, permitted by their religion to marry. The brother must surmount many obstacles to gain his sister who had been converted to Mohammedanism and placed in a seraglio (the seraglio of a eunuch, in fact). The first step is her reconversion to Zoroastrianism. Love achieves this task; she says to him: "You are loved, my brother, and by a Zoroastrian. I struggled long: But, O Gods! how love lifts difficulties! How relieved I am! I can no longer set bounds to my love; its very excess is legitimate."⁷ With truth revealed to her by the power of love, she throws herself wholeheartedly into a plan for her abduction. All obstacles are overcome and complications resolved, and the two live happily as man and wife.

This story is, in many ways, indistinguishable from countless tales of romance. Yet, if our analysis of the book is correct, its appearance there may tell much about Montesquieu's conception of love. First, it is an incestuous love: perhaps it is only between brother and sister that the equality and intimate respect requisite for true love can appear. (Montesquieu declared elsewhere that he could not believe that incest was a sin.) What is almost equally striking is that the brother and sister are *strangers* to the society in which they love. They belong to a small remnant of the original inhabitants of Persia, and are now outsiders. In their flight after marriage they wander far through the world, helped everywhere by other outsiders—either Guebres, like themselves or, in one crucial case, by an Armenian merchant. (Montesquieu remarks elsewhere on the separateness of the Armenians' state.) With some trepidation, one might push this analysis further to suggest that it is significant that the "outsiders" in each case are the original natives.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Lettre CLVIII, p. 402.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Lettre LV, p. 143.

⁶ *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Lettre LXXXVI, p. 223.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Lettre LXVII, p. 175.

Is it farfetched to infer that Montesquieu intends to suggest the irony of love becoming an outcast in human life to which it is natural? But it is not necessary to push this point to see that something significantly new is here emerging. That lovers live in a world of their own has been standard fare for comedies, and the basic framework of tales of love. The difference in Montesquieu's treatment is that the aloneness of the lovers has a social definition and is as much a condition for their love as of it. Again, we are forcefully reminded of the Romantic image not only of love, but of the artist as well.

In his analysis of Schiller's *Luise Millerin*, Erich Auerbach observes:

... middle-class tragedy was a genre wedded to the person, the domestic, the touching, and the sentimental, and it could not relinquish them. And this, through the tone and level of style which it implied, was unfavorable to a broadening of the social setting and the inclusion of general political and social problems. And yet it was in just this way that the breakthrough to things political and generally social was achieved: for the touching and, in essence, wholly personal love-alliance now no longer clashed with the opposition of ill-willed relatives, parents, and guardians or with private moral obstacles, but instead with a public enemy, with the unnatural class structure of society. In earlier chapters we have described how, in French classicism of the seventeenth century, love rose to rank highest among tragic subjects withdrawn from everyday reality, and how subsequently, in the Western European beginnings of the novel of manners and of the *comédie larmoyante*, love reestablished contact with the ordinary reality of life, but lost some of its dignity in the process. It became clearly erotic and at the same time touching and sentimental. It was in this form that the revolutionaries of the *Sturm und Drang* seized upon it, and following in Rousseau's footsteps, again gave it the highest tragic dignity, without abandoning any of its bourgeois, realistic, and sentimental elements. As the most natural and the most immediate of all things, it came to be sublime, in any life and in any setting. Its simplest and purest form appeared to be a condition of natural virtue, and its freedom in the face of mere convention was considered an inalienable natural right.⁹

Our examination of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* has shown us an early stage of the de-

velopment Auerbach described. (Apheridon is even precisely identified as a bourgeois tradesman.) The striking thing is that this view of love leads at one and the same time to careful attention to social reality, and to the most bitter rejection of that reality in the name of humanity. As a real human potentiality which exists in some form, however distorted, in every man, love, when used as a criterion of social organization, raises in the most immediate way the relationship between actuality and potentiality, between real and ideal. I do not maintain that this is completely worked out in Montesquieu. In fact, his realism in this work is very incomplete, even in contrast with Schiller. Rica and Usbek limit their examination of French society pretty much to the upper strata, and there is far less awareness of the total social picture (including the economic) than in Montesquieu's later theoretical work. Similarly, the seraglio is not really placed in its social context, except for a few sketchy remarks on the general spirit of Persian society. But the questions are asked. This is the crucial breakthrough.

Montesquieu's critique of the dehumanization of society eventuates in pessimism rather than radical reform. For him it is probably impossible ever to devise social institutions which will not take a significant toll of that full freedom and respect essential to a full humanity. All that can be done is to prevent further degradation. Perhaps some institutions are less harmful than others; it is clear, for example, that the terroristic rule of the seraglio is more destructive than the flighty freedom of French society—but it is equally clear that the previous experiences of men limit their capability of surviving in a different situation. This is the problem to which Montesquieu addresses himself in the *Spirit of the Laws*. Hence it is not surprising that the conception of love plays no further role in his work. The search for love has enabled him to define his basic problem. Having discovered true love to be an accidental phenomenon on the margin of modern society, he abandons it as a tool of analysis or as a goal to be sought. To evaluate society by the criterion of love reveals too much. More relative criteria are needed to discern the possible.

⁹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (New York, 1953), p. 389.