

## DIALOGUES WITH THE DEAD: ENLIGHTENED SELVES, SUICIDE, AND HUMAN RIGHTS

### *Diálogos con los muertos: yos ilustrados, suicidio y derechos humanos*

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RESUMEN: Desde antiguo, el tema del suicidio ha estado vinculado al concepto de «diálogo con los muertos». Este género, popularizado por Luciano y difundido durante los siglos XVII y XVIII, representa la posibilidad de transceder los límites del yo y las costumbres locales. En la literatura neoclásica, los contrastes y comparaciones inherentes al diálogo o en las epístolas ficticias permitieron explorar verdades universales acerca de la ley natural y los derechos humanos. El dominio de los muertos es en última instancia democrático. El desplazamiento narrativo de la escena a un encuentro en los márgenes con los antiguos o con los rebeldes heroicos del Nuevo Mundo hizo posible que los escritores políticos de la Ilustración, como Montesquieu, Voltaire o Condorcet, sortearan la censura. Al explorar los fundamentos filosóficos del pensamiento republicano, los escritores del siglo XVIII recurrieron a protagonistas suicidas que no son sólo el Otro en términos geopolíticos, sino también femeninos con el fin de dramatizar sus argumentos sobre los derechos humanos universales.

*Palabras clave:* antiimperialismo, derechos humanos, diálogo, Ilustración, género, suicidio.

**ABSTRACT:** Since ancient times, the theme of suicide has been linked to the concept of a «dialogue with the dead». That genre, made popular by Lucian and widespread in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, comes to represent the possibility of transcending the limits of selfhood and of local customs. In neoclassical literature, the contrasts and comparisons inherent in the dialogue form or in epistolary fictions enable the exploration of universal truths about natural law and natural rights. The realm of the dead is ultimately democratic. The narrative displacement of the scene to an encounter on the margins with the Ancients or with heroic rebels in the New World permitted Enlightened political writers such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, or Condorcet to escape censorship. In exploring the philosophic grounds for republican thought, eighteenth-century writers draw on suicidal protagonists who are not only geopolitically «Other» but female, to dramatize their claims to universal human rights.

*Key words:* anti-imperialism, dialogue, Enlightenment, gender, human rights, suicide.

To think about death is one way for a philosopher to think about how to narrate a life, as Walter Benjamin (1969, 94) famously argued. Like a literary boundary, it invites the imagination, while it structures what it contains. Death constitutes an outer limit, a boundary of the known and narratable. Literature about one kind of death –suicide as a symbol of liberty– held particular importance for enlightenment philosophers and French Revolutionary politicians, as numerous historians have noted (see Bayet 1922, McManners 1981, P. Higonnet 1991 and Minois 1999). Indeed, suicide has been important to philosophy across time. Novalis writes:

Der ächte philosophische Act ist Selbsttödtung; dies ist der reale Anfang aller Philosophie, dahin geht alles Bedürfniss des philosophischen Jüngers, und nur dieser Act entspricht allen Bedingungen und Merckmalen der transcendenten Handlung (Novalis 1987, 2: 223).

Novalis specifically avoids the term *Selbstmord* or *self-murder*, endowing the act of *Selbsttödtung* metaphorically with philosophic value rather than moral opprobrium. Suicide appears to him fundamentally philosophical or «transcendental», because it involves stepping outside the self. However shocking it may be, that step exemplifies, I suggest, comparative thinking about the self, narrative, and human rights.

Philosophers in the eighteenth century explored the idea of suicide in order to rethink the self, to think about the Other, and to test the cultural

boundaries that define the meaning of life and of human rights. They framed this project by drawing on dialogic modes – dialogues, exchanges of letters, and drama. I therefore argue here that their cross-cultural explorations of voluntary death across time and space offer a paradigmatic instance of comparative thinking, in which the transcendence of one's own self and culture permits a process of imaginative discovery, sometimes through a narrative journey across seas and time. The person who commits suicide appears voluntarily to remove him- or herself from the frame of life, becoming an outsider. Indeed, the position of the outsider held special interest for philosophers who sought to achieve a distance from their own culture that would foster rational inquiry and enable objective assessment of the familiar that had assumed the authority of the «natural».

Meditation on suicide permitted these philosophers to think about what it might mean to write the narrative of one's own life while observing its social, moral, and legal contexts. In his *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734), Montesquieu perceived the play in which each performed at the point he chose: «chacun faisant finir la pièce qu'il jouoit dans le monde à l'endroit où il vouloit» (1951, 2: 136). This frame of analysis may seem surprisingly individualistic. But because the personal and the political were so often intertwined, official sanctions on suicide in different communities acquired significance as a Rorschach test that could enable interpretation of particular social orders and their cultural values. In an age of secularization, rising individualism, and revolution, the debate over the meaning of voluntary death and its significance for understanding one's own culture spread throughout Europe. Some critics have traced the European spread of the dialogue form (Egilsrud 1934, Pujol 2005, and Weinbrot 2005), while others have focused on national traditions such as the German (Rutledge 1974) or British dialogue (Keener 1973). My materials in this essay come primarily from France, in part because of the centrality of the *philosophes* to this topic, in part because the French offer a striking set of shifts from neoclassical heroic and stoic themes, to histories and travellers' accounts about the New World, then to revolutionary French politics. At the same time, my study is comparative, since this discourse emerges over the centuries in Greek, Roman, and British texts, among others. My final section focuses on a few French texts and images that foreground an extra-national figure that we might call the subaltern: the colonial Other becomes a symbol of the essential human with immutable rights. And for narrative purposes, repeatedly writers turn to the surprising figure of a Persian wife, an Egyptian queen, a Chinese magistrate's wife, or an Inca princess. This subaltern figure, both

female and foreign, occasions further development of a discourse about human rights.

To imagine the Other may, of course, entail acts of ventriloquism, even when the intent is the opposite. As Claude Lévi-Strauss noted in *Tristes Tropiques* (1955, 337-338), our own culture haunts our ethnographic search for fundamentally different cultures. Inevitably, the theme of suicide therefore has become entangled with what we might call epistemological imperialism, exoticism, and appropriation. The imaginative projection of a writer's own preoccupations onto the screen of others is precisely what makes this body of material interesting to a cultural historian aware that her own cultural politics affect her selection of the evidence.

### 1. DIALOGUES OF THE DEAD

To journey to the land of the dead, and then to engage in conversation with them, is a trope for the pursuit of truth. Already in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates, preparing to take the cup of hemlock, foresaw that through embracing death he would find in Hades the home of «true judges» and heroes. «What would not a man give if he might converse with» such great figures, he asks. «I shall then be able to continue my search into true and false knowledge». «What infinite delight would there be in conversing with them and asking them questions! In another world they do not put a man to death for asking questions» (Plato 1937, 422). Historical and legendary references to such encounters punctuate ancient literature, from Homer and Plato to Virgil –to cite some of the best known authors. In Hades Achilles encounters Ajax, and Aeneas meets Dido, both of them suicides who turn away, cutting off any conversation, in a symbolic double rupture. Other old friends were more talkative. This literary form was developed by the second-century Syrian rhetorician Lucian of Samosata in his *Dialogues of the Dead* (*Νεκρικοί Διάλογοι*). The shade who has descended to the other world can serve as an obvious figure for the Other. In his dramatic encounters of the dead, Lucian structured dialogues to foster sympathetic exchanges of views or ironic contrasts. Not only were these stories part of the neoclassical school curriculum, figuring in «galleries» of heroic men and women, but so were journeys to the underworld retold in later histories of antiquity by authors like Charles Rollin, rector of the University of Paris.

By shifting the terrain away from the present, by writing about the glorious dead of the past or about distant countries and customs, the *philosophes* found license (as Socrates suggested) to ask the questions that preoccupied them. Popular in the late seventeenth century, this dialogue genre modeled on Lucian became assimilated in the course of the eighteenth

century to two important strands of Enlightenment thought: a literary desire to revive classical models and a political concern for social equality. The realm of the dead is democratic; death obliterates all worldly distinctions, as Diogenes explains in the opening statement of the first Dialogue. The satirist Menippus, mouthpiece of Lucian, later repeats, «Hades is a democracy; one man is as good as another here» (Lucian 1905, 147). Bones are all alike. Hades is an uncanny realm, the familiar unfamiliar, as Freud might point out. It speaks to us across a dividing line that we can cross only through our imagination; it therefore speaks necessarily about ourselves. The dead are both same and Other.

The literary-philosophic genre of the dialogue, a kind of closet drama, permits the juxtaposition of ancients and moderns, pagans and Christians, men and women, philosophers and politicians. This is the kind of border-work that makes the Enlightenment a quintessentially comparative domain. As Barbara Stafford has noted, the eighteenth century was «dominated [...] by the comparatist metaphor in the study of human activity» (1988, 6). These encounters exemplify the Enlightenment thirst to locate cultural differences that could reveal what were believed to be universal truths. The realm of the dead is a site of truth. Its inhabitants do not usually lie, even if they do not agree. Lucian's favored speaker is Menippus, whose favorite refrain, he proclaims, is the Delphic maxim, «Know thyself» (γνῶθι σεαυτόν) (Lucian 1905, 110). In the underworld, reason can triumph, if not for the speakers, then for the reader, who (like Rhadamanthus) judges the results of the debate. Perhaps it was the metaphoric journey across the threshold of death that invited discussions of suicide; perhaps the form also offers the illusion of giving a voice back to those whose act so often seemed inexplicable. The dialogue genre therefore helps prepare and frame the eighteenth-century fascination with suicide. Indeed, many of the characters in ancient as well as neoclassical dialogues are represented as suicides: Socrates, Cato, Brutus, Arria, Cleopatra, even Thomas More.

Among the succinct and graceful French dialoguists was Francis Fénelon de Salignac de la Mothe (1651-1715), author of the highly popular *Télémaque*, who published his first collection in 1683 (translated into English in 1685), reedited in 1700 and 1712, then six more times by the end of the eighteenth century, as well as five further editions in English, and editions in other languages such as Italian. Fénelon dedicated his humanist dialogues to the «education of a prince», the grandson of Louis XVI. Dialogue 42 presents Caton and César, who compare their wounds. When César claims he would have been generous in victory and wonders why Caton violated his own body, Caton affirms the fundamental principles that define his political significance for the eighteenth century. The death of the republic

is the death of liberty. Only by seizing death in the face of a tyrant –here César, of course– can one preserve one’s own liberty: «Il n’y a plus de république dès qu’il n’y a plus de liberté [...] Mes propres mains m’ont mis en liberté malgré le tyran, et j’ai méprisé la vie qu’il m’eût offerte» (Fénelon 1888, 149). In Dialogue 43 Caton and Cicéron offer competing claims to virtue. Cato boasts of his rejection of tyranny: «J’ai su me taire, et mourir» (Fénelon 1888, 152). By contrast, Cicero vaunts a more moderate and sociable virtue, preferring the republic to one’s own glory. He has chosen to live by accommodating the tyrant for the public good –vivre, et ménager le tyran pour le bien public» (Fénelon 1888, 153). In these Dialogues of the Dead, the exemplary figures of antiquity were distanced through time as well as space, enabling writers and artists to invoke grand themes that foreshadowed modern political ideas yet remain protected against censorship. The eminent voice of a Socrates or Cato gave philosophers a language to challenge social limits.

A similar debate between principle and pragmatism is staged in Matthew Prior’s dialogues (1721), admired in manuscript by Alexander Pope. Prior’s «Dialogue between the Vicar of Bray and Sir Thomas More» pursues an ironic strategy that foreshadows Voltaire’s subtlety in order to question suicide. While the Vicar of Bray argues that self-preservation is «a Principle of Nature» (Prior 1907, 206) Thomas More casts his acceptance of religious martyrdom as a kind of suicide of conscience: «You must never prefer your Safety to Your Honor, or Your life to your Conscience» (Prior 1907, 203). More invokes Socrates, Cato, and Brutus for his belief «that we should rather consent to Die than to do evil» (Prior 1907, 204), and conflates pagans with Christians. In another of Prior’s dialogues, Locke replies to Montaigne: «I studied to know my self. *Nosce Te ipsum*» (Prior 1907, 231, cf. 191). These imagined encounters of the great philosophers enable a testing of life, death, and the self.

The desire for access to truth through encounters with dead interlocutors (and eventually with oneself) helps to explain the Enlightenment popularity of the dialogue form, which encourages critical distance from one’s own cultural and social assumptions. Fénelon and Prior lay the groundwork for the great Enlightened debates over suicide. They set the natural law of self-preservation or the possibility of living to serve the public good, against death in defense of a higher principle.

Rare in fact and common in fiction, suicide became at once exotic and cliché. Eighteenth-century reflections on suicide are therefore framed by an orientalizing gaze on the other, at the very moment that they seek to defamiliarize the self and to escape censorship. Readers of suicides know that self-inflicted death may be a speech act through indirection, an accusation

leveled against society or against those who survive, as Cato's death is a reproach to both Caesar and Cicero. Discussions of suicide, especially in eighteenth-century France, serve an enlightened concern to displace local customs and beliefs. Through consideration of other cultures and other times, enlightened thinkers reach out toward more universal understanding of moral principles, especially natural law and natural rights. Finally, these discussions become intertwined with an enlightened critique of the impact of Europe on its colonies, in a translation of this discourse from the realm of philosophy to that of politics.

## 2. ETHNOGRAPHIES OF SUICIDE

One of the earliest eighteenth century reflections on this theme, and one of the most popular, was Boureau-Deslandes' *Réflexions sur les grands hommes qui sont morts en plaisantant* (1712), reprinted five times between its first publication and 1776. A precursor of the *Encyclopédie*, André-François Boureau-Deslandes (1690-1757) argued: «C'est une injustice que de traiter en criminel celui qui hâte sa mort. Mais les lois sont-elles toujours conformes au bon sens?» (Boureau-Deslandes 1714, 155-156). Son and grandson of colonial administrators in Pondichéry, Siam, Bengal, and Saint Domingue, and himself a naval administrator, Boureau-Deslandes was attuned to differences in legal customs, and asked of laws on suicide, «ne varient-elles pas selon le génie de chaque Nation?» (1714, 156). Thus his personal circumstances enabled his ethnographic understanding of cultural difference.

To weigh life in the scales of death impels many philosophers to assume what we might call a global perspective, whether secular or religious. The kind of cosmopolitan vision represented by Boureau-Deslandes was also embraced by Montesquieu. Confident that a globalized vision could expose cultural differences, Montesquieu also thought that this process would lead to an understanding of true reason and natural law. He comments that travel, conquest, commerce, the postal system, the compass, and print have created not only politics but the possibility of a world-view: «Chacun voit d'un coup d'oeil tout ce qui se remue dans l'univers» (Montesquieu 1951, 2: 1483n8). Typically he weighs an ethical issue like suicide by considering it across time, or by setting one culture in conversation with another. In his 1734 *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains* (Montesquieu 1951, 2: 69), Montesquieu focused his summary of the collapse of the Roman republic on the great suicides for which it was known. He interprets this action not as a moral absolute (either good or evil), but as a moral instrument whose conditions and meaning are historical. To explain

this custom among the Romans («cette coutume si générale») of taking their own lives Montesquieu points to the rise of the Stoic sect, the growth of slavery, the financial advantage for those who were condemned, and a sense of honor (1951, 2: 69). Similarly in Book 14 of the *Esprit des lois* (1748, 1757), Montesquieu distinguished between rational suicide among the Romans and the notoriously inexplicable despair among the English, who kill themselves in the midst of happiness («Ils se tuent dans le sein même du bonheur»; Montesquieu 1951, 2: 486). For the Romans the tolerance of rational suicide was «l'effet de l'éducation; elle tenoit à leur manière de penser et à leurs coutumes» (Montesquieu 1951, 2: 486). By contrast, he thought that suicide among the English was a «maladie» like scurvy, which might be influenced by climate. As a form of «démence» it should not be punished. Similarly in Book 29 he contrasts Greek and Roman laws, which he finds guided by different principles (Montesquieu 1951, 2: 870-871). Challenged by a reviewer of the *Esprit des lois*, who accused him of embracing «natural religion» and therefore of being an atheist, Montesquieu defended himself as a believer not in natural religion but in natural *logic* («la logique naturelle»; Montesquieu 1951, 2: 1134). Montesquieu was, of course, a forerunner of Durkheim in his belief in the character of nations and cultural specificity of suicide practices.

Voltaire follows Montesquieu's pattern of thought as a comparative ethnographer and philosopher. In his first writings on suicide, he cites English cases and agrees that suicide conformed to social characteristics, changing attitudes and customs. His essay *De Caton et du suicide* (1733) notes that customs or «moeurs» in England foster high rates of voluntary death. Yet he was skeptical about this line of analysis, since he knew of no ancient Britons in Caesar's time who had killed themselves (Voltaire 1878, 90-91). Indeed, he preempted the argument of historian Michael MacDonald that our awareness of suicide rates is proportional to the freedom of the press: English gazettes reported weekly deaths freely, while French papers were censored.

### 3. NEW WORLD HEROISM

In a surprising turn, nascent empire offered an analogy to the models that had been found among the ancients, and of course literary works constructed their dramatic effects by drawing on previous imaginative depictions of ancient heroism. In this newly embraced representation of the subaltern, the oppressed Other became a politicized role model. Scientist-mathematician Pierre Louis Moreau Maupertuis (1698-1759) was an Enlightened universalist and distinguished member of academies in France and Germany,



who found a mirror of himself in the African captives who were said to strangle themselves with their own tongues to escape the Middle Passage into slavery. A comparison in his *Essai de philosophie morale* (1750) collapsed former distinctions between ancient and modern, enslaved and exquisitely refined and urbane mentalities, and compared the admirable Negro to the philosopher: «Un vaisseau qui revient de Guinée est rempli de Catons, qui aiment mieux mourir que de survivre à leur liberté» (Maupertius 1749, 56-57). Like Montesquieu and Voltaire he ultimately concluded that the motives for voluntary death were «coutume et opinion» (1749, 57-58).

The revival of images of alterity coincides with an intensified interest in New World suicide. Neo-classical models do not vanish. But increasingly, in the decades leading up to the revolution, the political theme of republican «liberty or death» becomes tied to questions of empire. As Tzvetan Todorov and many others have noted, eighteenth-century thinkers turned to the history of the Spanish conquest for an example of imperialism that they might attack without becoming subject to censorship. With this goal in mind, the *philosophes* drew on Spanish texts by Bartolomé de las Casas, Pedro Mártir de Anglería, Antonio de Herrera, and others who had condemned the exploitation and extermination of indigenous peoples. These authors had recounted how the monarchy, Church, soldiers and settlers had driven the Indians to seek death in despair. The theme of death in an innocent new world enabled an indirect critique of French customs and institutions in French histories that revisited the violence of the conquest, such as Charlevoix's *Histoire de Saint-Domingue* (1730-1731) and Raynal's *Histoire philosophique et politique des Deux Indes* (1770).

The materials of New World history include many striking accounts of Indians taking their own lives, which have been compiled by Tzvetan Todorov and others. The son of Columbus, Ferdinand, had reported, for example, that prisoners from a chieftain's family who feared they would never escape from the ship, «hanged themselves from the bridge-poles, with some ropes they had managed to find there, bending their legs to do so» (qtd in Todorov 1984, 46). According to Pedro Mártir de Anglería, who knew Columbus, «many Indians perish because of their great fatigue in the mines; so great is their despair that many take their own lives and they will not rear children». He tells us that the Lucayos, inhabitants of the Bahamas brought in to replace the natives of Cuba and Hispaniola, when reduced to desperation by heavy labor, «either killed themselves or resolving to die of hunger and exhaustion resisted both reasoning and force to make them eat» (qtd in Todorov 1984, 117). Las Casas reported that mothers «drowned their babies from sheer desperation while others aborted using certain herbs which produced still-born children» (qtd in Todorov 1984, 134).

The key passages in these accounts were quoted repeatedly through the centuries by later historians and political thinkers. The Jesuit Father Pierre-François Charlevoix, for example, using manuscripts of another French missionary as well as Spanish sources, published in 1730-1731 a year by year account of the conquest of Saint Domingue in *Histoire de l'Isle espagnole*. In 1506, Charlevoix wrote, the Indians «convinrent de ne plus semer, & de se retirer dans les montagnes» (1730-1731, 1: 135). Citing Herrera, he continues:

On en vit qui blessés à mort par les arbalêtres de leurs ennemis, s'enfonçaient de rage leurs flèches dans le corps & après les avoir retirées, les prenoient avec les dents, & les mettaient en morceaux, qu'ils jetoient contre les Chrétiens [...]. D'autres ayant été faits prisonniers, & leurs vainqueurs les obligeant de courir devant eux, pour leur montrer les chemins, se précipitoient sur des pointes de rochers, pour n'être point forcés à trahir leurs compatriotes (1730-1731, 1: 263-264).

Charlevoix recounts that matters became even worse in the year 1514, when islanders collapsed of fatigue and grief. When some indigenous peoples took refuge in the mountains they were pursued and torn apart by dogs. «Quantité d'autres, pour prévenir une mort si cruelle, bûrent du jus de manioc, qui est un poison très puissant, ou se pendirent à des arbres, après avoir rendu ce triste service à leurs femmes & à leurs enfans» (Charlevoix 1730-1731, 1: 329).

These passages in turn are quoted verbatim by the abbé Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, in his 1770 *Histoire philosophique et politique* of the conquest and commerce with the West Indies. Raynal reports that men and women alike died of starvation and fatigue at their work. «Les pères s'empoisonnoient. Quelques-uns se pendirent aux arbres, après y avoir pendu leurs femmes de leurs enfans. Leur race n'est plus» (Raynal 1775, 3: 21). Writers like Raynal participated in an international anti-colonialist movement that had deep roots in European independence movements. In France, the Enlightened agenda was implicitly antimonarchic. Raynal, for example, criticized Ferdinand, arguing that «la Religion & la politique furent les deux voiles dont on couvrit ce système extravagant d'inhumanité» (1775, 3: 20). The oppressed men to whom the Spaniards denied humanity were lovers of liberty. The resulting social «disorder», Raynal explains, sprang from disparity of wealth. Tyranny's result was «ce profond abrutissement où la tyrannie peut plonger les hommes [...] Ils ont perdu tous les ressorts de l'ame. Celui de la crainte même, est souvent sans effet, par le peu d'attachement qu'ils ont à la vie» (Raynal 1775, 3: 153-154). Vice springs

from unequal distribution of property, since the love for life is the key to social balance:

Il faut le plus grand équilibre possible dans cette balance sociale. Mais de toutes les législations, la plus destructive & la moins durable, est celle d'une nation composée de grands propriétaires oisifs, & d'esclaves pauvres & surchargés. Ce n'est bientôt qu'une fainéantise générale: cruautés, givets & tortures d'une part; haines, poisons & soulèvements de l'autre; ruines & destructions des deux côtés; dépérissement & dissolution de la société (Raynal 1775, 3: 154).

Raynal's work was reprinted thirty times in three editions, translated into English, German, and Spanish and cited in works on the New World: his message about the empire without, reinforced a rebellion against the empire within, joining neoclassical references to the cult of the Roman republic, to be defended by suicide if need be.

Echoing Raynal on America and citing Olfert Dapper, Delisle de Sales in his *Philosophie de la nature* (1777), says European colonialism was responsible for suicidal despair in the Americas: «Ce n'est qu'à notre rage pour les conquêtes qu'il faut attribuer celle des Nègres & des Américains pour le suicide» (Delisle de Sales 1804, 317-318). Although he condemns suicide as a «fanatisme de la liberté» or an illness, he also accepts women who seek death to follow their husbands, or slaves who cannot face a life of grinding servitude. Perhaps a Negro slave breaks a pact with nature and with society, «mais qui oserait leur reprocher leur suicide?» (Delisle de Sales 1804, 354). References to Raynal by writers like De Sales sharpened a critique of French monarchic oppression; they appear in tandem with unreliable statistical estimates for the rising number of suicides in Paris, or in France in general.

By the time of the Revolution, the theme of suicide had been firmly attached to the issue of slavery. The Marquis of Condorcet (1743-1794), in his 1781 «Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres», printed under the pseudonym Joachim Schwartz, struggled to combat all the various justifications of African slavery, offering a gradualist compromise reform. While we may not agree with the solution he proposes, his attack on slavery itself is among the most forceful of the period. He accuses «l'incontinence, l'avarice et la cruauté des Européens qui dépeuplent les habitations» (Condorcet 1847, 88), necessitating the importation of alternative labor. The twin narrative of suicide and abortion that had previously been told about indigenous peoples of the Americas was in Condorcet's view the inevitable consequence of harsh slavery under European settlers.

Lorsqu'on prostitue les Nègresses pour leur voler ensuite ce qu'elles ont gagné [...] lorsqu'ils voient leurs camarades tantôt mis à la question, tantôt brûlés dans des fours pour cacher les traces de ces assassinats: alors ils désertent, ils s'empoisonnent, les femmes se font avorter et l'habitation ne peut se soutenir qu'en tirant d'Afrique de nouvelles victimes (Condorcet 1847, 89).

The political and economic turn taken by Condorcet's attack becomes manifest in his identification of slavery with rape and the theft of the Negro woman's offspring, both violations of the woman's basic human rights. He refutes the racial stereotypes that had been deployed to justify slavery, attributing the vices of which slaves are accused—the appearance of stupidity, corruption, and laziness—to slavery itself, as «le sort de tous les esclaves» (Condorcet 1847, 89). Slavery, he writes, quoting Homer, removes half one's brain. In liberty, these Negroes would establish a flourishing nation. The vices of which the slaves are accused are the product of slavery itself. Behind the attack on slavery, then, lies a larger argument concerned with the rights of the individual, including the individual woman, and the pursuit of liberty as the prerequisite of «une nation florissante» (Condorcet 1847, 89).

As we can see in Condorcet, on the eve of the Revolution, the incidence of suicide was routinely connected to political and social misrule. Indeed Condorcet, who was found dead in prison in 1794, is thought to have taken poison in order to reject execution by the Jacobins. It was assumed as a matter of course that the two high points of eighteenth-century suicide had been during the regency, with its financial convolutions, and in the last years of the reign of Louis XV, marked as they had been by financial incompetence and administrative authoritarianism. In 1782, in his *Tableau de Paris*, Mercier blamed «le travail du gouvernement des suicides nombreux, dont on n'avait pas entendu avant» (1782, 3: 192).

Implicitly these arguments assimilate the urban poor to the innocent unarmed Indian. Ostensibly ethnographic, as in Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois*, these double narratives are indirect autoethnography. They become part of the discourse legitimating the violent overthrow of the monarchy. Raynal, for one, prophesies a rebellion soon to come, by the descendants of mountain fugitives:

C'est dans ces montagnes que se régénère en secret une race légitime qui doit un jour, & peut-être bientôt, retirer ses biens, ses droits, & la liberté des mains avides et cruelles de l'usurpateur du nouveau monde (1775, 3: 293).

Not surprisingly, much of the literature on suicide written over the course of the eighteenth century will take the form of dialogues, in drama

as well as epistolary fiction. Famous exchanges include those in Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*: there the common-sense English gentleman Milord triumphs over the despairing passion of his friend Saint-Preux, arguing that social service trumps individual feeling. Readers tend to side with Saint-Preux, perhaps because the obligation to perform social services seems un-compelling, but the young lover is persuaded not to take his own life. Perhaps even more dramatic evocations of suicide figure in epistolary fictions that end in suspense without continuation or response, such as Isabelle de Charrière's *Lettres de Mistriss Henley* (1784). The fragment, one might say, offers a figure of suicidal writing, and in this novella about an interrupted woman's life, the absence of letters from Mistriss Henley's correspondent underscores the social isolation and repression of the heroine.

As a dramatic form, the ancient dialogue inevitably flowed into the dramas written by enlightened philosophers. Voltaire borrowed Roman models via both Shakespeare and Addison (who wrote his *Cato* while he was in France) to display the twin neoclassical themes of personal glory and political honor. In the familiar rhetoric of republican fervor, the hero of Voltaire's *Brutus* (1730) exhorts his son Titus to lavish his life for Roman liberty: «Donne ton sang à Rome et n'exige rien; / Sois toujours un héros; sois plus, sois citoyen» (Voltaire 1878, IV.vi). In *La Mort de César* (1731), freely translated from Shakespeare, Cassius vows to expire if Roman liberty does. Brutus likewise calls up the images of «immortal» heroes like his father-in-law, the «divin Caton» (literally represented before him as statuary on the stage); their spark of republican virtue still glows in his heart.

#### 4. FEMALE SUICIDE

So long as suicide remained under a cloud of social or religious opprobrium writers could displace the gesture not only to the past but to Persia, China, Peru, or Kentucky. Foreign and pagan figures permitted enlightened philosophers to think in a secular frame. Surprisingly, some of the most emphatic figures in this Enlightenment literature of voluntary death, however, are female, rather than male. We find heroic examples of suicidal virtue in Montesquieu's Roxane, Voltaire's *Alzire* and *Idamé*, or Marmontel's *Amazili*. Most critics such as Ruth Thomas and Dorinda Outram have approached the representation of the suicidal heroine as a figure whose motives are sentimental loss or the desire for free sexual choice. Faced with a social order that denies such choice, the suicidal heroines of fiction are «victims of their illusion» (Thomas 321) and hasten toward death. My reading here is more political, and is rooted in the truth-claims we have seen in dialogues with the dead.

Montesquieu carries these political and philosophical issues over into the epistolary dialogues of the *Lettres Persanes* (1721), where his outsider Usbek is doubled by an insider—the wife Roxane, who is in principle secluded in the harem, but ultimately rebels. Montesquieu's protagonist Usbek represents himself as one who travels in order to extend his knowledge and acquire enlightenment («lumière»; Montesquieu 1951, 1: 132), but whose status as foreigner also frees him to judge European customs. Jean Starobinski argues that the conceit of the outsider in the *Lettres Persanes* (1721), like a speaker in the underworld, satirically frees us from our prejudices, in order to unveil a more universal understanding of man. «C'est un spectacle que les hommes d'Occident se donnent pour se libérer des valeurs traditionnelles de l'Occident», he writes (Starobinski 1953, 63).

For the Persian Usbek, the ferocious European legal condemnation of suicide is unjust, irrational, impious, and absurd. By the close of the novel, however, another kind of dialogue erupts around suicide. The ultimate outsider, Usbek's favorite wife, Roxane, through her decision to die after her lover has been murdered, challenges Usbek's claim of enlightenment by speaking to him in a «new language». In a love-suicide that is at once a private and a public statement, at the moment when poison runs in her veins, she makes a Catonian declaration: «J'ai pu vivre dans la servitude, mais j'ai toujours été libre: j'ai réformé tes lois sur celles de la Nature, et mon esprit s'est toujours tenu dans l'indépendance» (Montesquieu 1952, 1: 372). In a neatly overlapping set of categories, slavery, imprisonment, and confinement of women in the harem all constitute a symbolic realm of death in life, from which paradoxically only suicide can liberate. Freedom and truth to human nature are guaranteed by death, as the pen drops from Roxane's hands. When the letter arrives in Usbek's hands, before the eyes of the reader, it is already a letter from the dead—a renewal of the old form of the «dialogue of the dead», in which the truth that comes from beyond the grave is spoken by a woman. Her truth requires a new and therefore surprising language. Strikingly, Montesquieu thereby establishes the pattern of a woman who seeks freedom of speech as well as sexual freedom, in which the body is the touchstone for the fundamental human right of self-determination. In Roxane's moving final declarations her private goals become representative of political goals, as the family and its constraining regime stands in for dysfunctions in the local rule of law.

In addition to Persia and England, of course, France had other Others, many of them orientalized and feminized in their practices of self-immolation. Voltaire, for example, cites the practice of *sati*: an obsession with marital fidelity caused the chosen deaths of widows in India, he thought, while a more masculine, martial honor was at stake in Japan. «Les femmes

de la côte de Malabar se jettent toutes vives sur le bûcher de leurs maris» (Voltaire 1878, 196). That motif was celebrated in Antoine-Marin Lemierre's *La Veuve du Malabar* (1770), as well as in an English version of the play by Mariana Starke and an American version by David Humphreys, *The Widow of Malabar*. Custom and opinion, Voltaire agrees, rule our fate: «Coutume, opinion, reines de notre sort, / Vous régnez des mortels et la vie et la mort» (Voltaire 1878, 96). Voltaire inevitably fit into this model of cultural diagnosis his conception of gender, as well as myths of modernity.

While that sociological approach might seem to strip female figures of agency, Voltaire's texts with exotic settings are the *pièces de résistance* in which his heroines' rejection of the laws on suicide enables an attack on a tyrannical, patriarchal and imperialist state, endowing them with symbolic power. Their geographic removal in no way masks the programmatic presentation of Enlightened French theses. In the «Peruvian» play *Alzire* (1736), love, liberty, and suicide become intertwined in a characteristic blend of sentiment and politics. The tyrannical Spanish governor Guzman plans to marry the Inca princess Alzire, who has converted to Christianity after the reported death of her betrothed Zamore. But Zamore has survived and now foments a rebellion. He exhorts other Indians to seek honorable victory or find glorious death before the walls of Guzman's fortress: «Après l'honneur de vaincre, il n'est rien sous les cieus / De plus grand en effet qu'un trépas glorieux» (Voltaire 1989, II.i).

The heroine Alzire herself would prefer death to the betrayal of her love, her nation, and her gods, but she feels that it is only by conversion and even marriage to Guzman that she can preserve her people. «Il fallait m'immoler aux volontés d'un père, / Au bien de mes sujets dont je me sens la mère» (Voltaire 1989, III.i). Thus submission to the father and conversion to Christianity are a form of self-immolation, a witty conceit worthy of Voltaire; moreover, the subversive idea that a woman could be the «mother» of her people gives a bold twist to the Aristotelian convention of paternalistic rule, in what may be an echo of Esther, who saves her Jewish people. Near the end of the tragedy, Alzire compares the harshness of the Christian God to the liberty offered by Inca gods:

Quoi, ce Dieu que je sers me laisse sans secours!  
Il défend à mes mains d'attenter sur mes jours!  
*Ab! j'ai quitté des dieux dont la bonté facile*  
*Me permettait la mort, la mort, mon seul asile.*  
Eh! quel crime est-ce donc devant ce Dieu jaloux  
De hâter un moment qu'il nous prépare à tous? (Voltaire 1989, V.iii)

Like Montesquieu, Voltaire uses the alien, feminine, ostensibly «primitive» eye, to challenge Catholic doctrine on suicide. Why should a religion that denigrates the body attach us to it at the moment when we seek release? Alzire's argument that those who tolerate war cannot condemn suicide leads her into a condemnation of Spanish cruelties in the conquest of Peru. Her attack on the Christian conqueror implicitly includes French imperialism. The enlightened themes of liberty and respect for the individual, when voiced by Peruvians, undercut European assumptions of cultural superiority. Alzire's complaint is spoken in a monologue, a declaration of her beliefs rather than a dialogue. While her readiness to embrace suicide with her lover veers toward the classic *Liebestod*, it also exemplifies her identification (and that of her lover Zamore) with the liberty of her people.

The most spectacularly successful of all Voltaire's exotic texts, much applauded for the *chinoiserie* of its costumes, was *L'Orphelin de la Chine* (1755), about the plight of a mandarin and his wife Idamé when the imperial palace in Peking falls to Genghis-Kan and his Tartar hordes. The complicated plot faces Idamé with a choice between saving the heir to the throne or rescuing her own son, as well as a choice between her former suitor Genghis and her husband. Ready to sacrifice herself for the higher good at every point, she sees independence in death: «Je dépendrai de moi; mon sort est dans mes mains» (Voltaire 2009, V.i).

Idamé claims autonomy, and proposes a double suicide modeled on Japanese honor-death.

Ne saurons-nous mourir que par l'ordre d'un roi?...  
Les mortels généreux disposent de leur sort:  
Pourquoi des mains d'un maître attendre ici la mort?...  
De nos voisins altiers imitons la constance; [Japonais]  
De la nature humaine ils soutiennent les droits,  
Vivent libres chez eux, et meurent à leur choix (Voltaire 2009, V.v).

Voltaire's heroine articulated ideals that would be central to the French Revolution. The Girondin Étienne Clavières recited lines from this speech as he stabbed himself, according to the report of a fellow prisoner, Honoré Riouffe (Voltaire 2009, 58). In each play the pagan protagonist endorses death as the higher moral action. Moreover, the threatened double suicide achieves the highest political and moral goal –the conversion of the tyrant. Confronted with the suicidal Idamé and her mandarin husband, Genghis is moved by their courage to pardon them. «J'ignorais qu'un mortel pût se dompter lui-même» (Voltaire 2009, V.vi). In Voltaire's melodrama, sentiment serves the high goal of political liberty, and cultural difference veils underlying sameness of values –whether Japanese, Peruvian, Chinese, or



Greek. At the same time, the feminization of suicidal political resistance is a double-edged sword. If it enhances the stature of Voltaire's heroines, it also softens the contour of rebellion (after all, suicide ultimately is unnecessary). It may even suggest the emotionalism of these writers' colonial Others, despite the speakers' insistence on reason, honor, and natural rights. As we can see in Voltaire, an orientalizing comparative vision sought to determine both underlying natural laws, and the particularities—even irrationalities—of customary laws. At the same time, Voltaire gave voice to women whose dialogues with themselves and with those whose powers as rulers are undercut when confronted with a combination of sentiment with an appeal to their fundamental rights.

Seven years later, Voltaire's protégé Jean François Marmontel prefaced his novel *Les Incas, ou la destruction de l'empire de Pérou* (1777) with an attack on religious fanaticism, intolerance, and persecution that could have been inspired by Alzire, especially if we understand this anti-colonialist critique as a narrative about France. Marmontel too cites Herrera and Bartolomé de la Casas, whose book was translated into French in 1687, and retells the story that the indignities forced upon the Caribbean islanders led them first to revolt and then to the final act of despair, driving their arrows into their bodies, before casting the broken debris back upon the «Christians»: «Ces malheureux s'enfonçaient de rage leurs flèches dans le corps, les retirait, les mordaient, les brisaient, et en jetaient les débris aux chrétiens, dont ils croyaient s'être vengés par cette insulte» (Marmontel 1819, 16). His prefatory address to Gustav III of Sweden declares the aim of the volume to make fanaticism detestable (Marmontel 1819, 19). His historical romance about Peru recapitulates this story as a preface to an «eye-witness» account brought to the court of the Incas by the Mexican Orozimbo. Defiant Indians rally their friends in the name of liberty: «La liberté, la vengeance, la gloire d'avoir bien servi votre patrie et votre roi, vous ne les trouverez qu'avec moi, au milieu de vos ennemis terrassés» (Marmontel 1819, 88). Young couples are united not only by passion for each other but by their passion for liberty. A young hero Télasco, for example, seeks his fiancée Amazili, and declares: «Il faut mourir, ou être esclaves. Choisis: nous n'avons qu'un instant», to which Amazili replies, «Il faut mourir» (Marmontel 1819, 96). Thus Marmontel translates the traditional double suicide of romance into a political act, a point that is underscored when the two are in fact seized alive, denying them their hope of freedom, glory, and union. The traces of Eurocentric condescension are most palpable when the narrative of Indian death is transferred from the genre of history to the genre of poetic epic or romance. The Virgilian tradition of the epic, of course, as David Quint has shown, celebrated empire. But the swerve into romance here by contrast

permitted Marmotel's open-ended, more sentimental discourse to carry denunciations of imperialist policies, a point that Alan Richardson has made (cf. Richardson & Hofkosh 1996, 266).

The celebration of women's heroism in embracing death for political ends continued through the French Revolution. Immediately translated into English in 1802, M. Louis du Broca's *Interesting Anecdotes of the Heroic Conduct of Women during the French Revolution* recounted the heroic suicides of a number of women who refused to live when their husbands had been condemned, and joined them at the scaffold or swallowed poison in order to be reunited in the afterlife. Madame Clavière, for example, upon learning that her husband had stabbed himself to escape the guillotine, took poison, then assembled her children and friends, to whom she explained her action, exclaiming: «Epoux généreux! [...] je suis digne de toi! [...] J'ai approuvé ta résolution républicane [...] Je t'ai imité» (1802, 31, 32). These women's reported language facing their judge or the executioner positions them in a dialogue that asserts their rights as citizens to speak in public and take possession of their own lives and deaths. This new turn in women's roles, both in imaginative works like Montesquieu's and Voltaire's novels and in historical anecdotes, underscores the importance of freedom of speech for the fulfillment of one's identity and the establishment of a republic. Their emphasis on speech links these figures to the African who swallows his own tongue, in a suicidal rebellion against enslavement. The loss of freedom of speech and fundamental human rights, when usurped and repressed, symbolically mirrors and requires suicide, as a silent form of speech.

To close, I would like to suggest that the representation of suicide in conjunction with cultural Others bears on the ultimate difficulty of representing death itself, as well as the taboos that govern this discourse. Like Diderot's pantomime, the representations of central Enlightenment themes require writing on the margins, a *didascalie*. That margin is geopolitical as well as rhetorical; it is also gendered. The strategy followed in many of the Enlightened texts about suicide is indirection. One reason is provided by La Rochefoucauld, who reminds us (as John McManners notes) in *Maxime* 26, «One cannot look directly at the sun or at death» (1957, 410). The arc of philosophic liberation is traced on the margin by subaltern figures, from Roxane to Alzire and Idamé and Amazili. Visually and verbally both, we could say that these imaginative attempts to occupy the position of suicide are forms of «anamorphosis». That is, they project a perspective that coheres around a position the viewer does not occupy. We must change position to the vanishing point (both literally and figuratively) to discover what is concealed.

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