

Seeing the Other in Mme de Graffigny's

Lettres d'une Péruvienne Christine Roulston

The figure of the exotic woman in eighteenth-century fiction, as Julia Douthwaite has argued, enabled certain writers "to imagine unconventional ways of negotiating women's concerns within the boundaries of ancien régime culture."¹ *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* exemplifies this paradigm through the figure of Zilia, who, as the exotic female other, offers an alternative model for the construction of female subjectivity within eighteenth-century French culture. In addition to "negotiating women's concerns," however, Zilia's letters explore the ways in which the question of the gaze, of seeing the other and of being seen, in both the literal and the figurative senses, underscores the organization of the social and the feminine.

In *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, the exotic gaze and the gendered gaze mutually define one another within Graffigny's narrative vision. Nancy K. Miller has argued that the novel allows "the gaze of the female Other ... to point to an important blindspot in the Enlightenment's project to reorganize knowledge—its failure to take the measure of female subjectivity," but equally that it "runs the risk of effacing 'the other woman' by writing in her place."² According to Miller, therefore, "the gaze of the female Other" is problematized by a doubleness that offers both a new way of seeing and a potential erasing of models of difference. The exploration

1 Julia V. Douthwaite, *Exotic Women: Literary Heroines and Cultural Strategies in Ancien Régime France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 2.

2 Nancy K. Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 133.

of the various uses of the gaze within Graffigny's text will serve to map out the terms of the problematic of the exotic female other. The gaze in *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* repeatedly shifts between the literal and the figurative and is determined by two cultural models that produce different ways of seeing. These models are themselves dominated by that which makes the conditions of seeing possible, the metaphor of light. While the light of Peru is natural, clear, and transparent, that of France is artificial, deceptive, and illusory. Peru is dominated by two natural sources of light, the sun and the moon, which are also the defining symbols of its religion and its political system. The motif of natural light therefore inhabits and determines the cultural and ethical landscape. The sun, which makes the world visible, becomes the spiritual "culte du Soleil," producing a model of selfhood that is transparent and clear. We learn from the Historical Introduction that prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, "il passait pour constant qu'un Péruvien n'avait jamais menti."³

In Peru, therefore, the tie to nature produces a philosophy of transparency, in which what one sees is what is. The Peruvian subject, in this sense, is always revealed in his or her essence. In turn, the political hierarchy of Peru is dependent on a direct descent from the sun, which is anthropomorphized and deified as the Peruvian "père" and "Dieu" (p. 7). *Mancocapac*, "le fils du soleil" (p. 10), is, we are told, the first Incan leader, and Aza, Zilia's future husband, is his direct descendant and therefore tied to the sun in a patrilinear line.

The figure of the moon, in turn, embodies the feminine principle: "Ils avaient aussi beaucoup de vénération pour la Lune, qu'ils traitaient de femme et de sœur du Soleil" (p. 11). By marrying Aza, Zilia will become the moon to his sun, completing the circle of natural light. However, already inscribed within this image of nurturing—"la mère de toutes choses"—is a narrative of destruction, "ils croyaient, comme tous les Indiens, [que la lune] causerait la destruction du monde en se laissant tomber sur la terre qu'elle anéantirait par sa chute" (p. 11). In contrast to the stability of the sun, the moon (the lesser light) is a source equally of creation and of destruction, an emblem of reversal and change. By occupying the symbolic position of the moon, Zilia is implicitly marked as an unstable figure in the narrative, as she becomes both the source of cultural memory and an agent of transformation. When Zilia lands

3 Mme de Graffigny, *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (New York: MLA, 1992), p. 13. References are to this edition. For an analysis of the ways in which Graffigny offers a very one-sided presentation of Incan culture as innocent, passive, and rigorously moral, omitting the facts of its expansionist politics and its rigid hierarchical social structure, see Douthwaite, pp. 110-11. My reading is deliberately following Graffigny's idealized representation of "the other culture."

in France, the moon will reappear, no longer destructive this time but signalling a new kind of interpretation, in the form of a gentler light:

un astre moins brillant s'élève, reçoit et répand une lumière moins vive sur les objets, qui, perdant leur activité par l'absence du Soleil, ne frappent plus nos sens que d'une manière douce, paisible, et parfaitement harmonique avec le silence qui règne sur la terre. (p. 59)

Explicitly privileged over the sun, the moon is offered here not only as an alternative light but also as an alternative way of seeing and apprehending the world. The moon, initially associated with the feminine and potential destruction in Peruvian mythology, becomes a source of peace, producing "un calme délicieux ... une sérénité douce" (p. 59). Hence, reinterpreted through Zilia's gaze, the moon literally and figuratively displaces the sun, along with its coded masculine and cultural markers. The excessive light and powerful illumination produced by the sun's rays are no longer privileged as a model for truth.

This movement from a greater to a lesser light will also inform Zilia's relationship to her romance narrative. Initially, Aza's identity is indelibly linked to the sun; repeatedly described by Zilia through metaphors of light, he embodies intellectual light, "ton génie lumineux" (p. 23) as well as being the light of her life, "ô lumière de ma vie" (p. 23). By constructing Aza as pure light, pure visibility, Zilia makes him indistinguishable from knowledge itself. Hence, the knowledge produced by Aza is entirely bound up with Zilia's representation of him as ideal lover. Within the romance paradigm, therefore, knowledge and love are mutually sustaining and form part of the same vision. It is precisely this rhetoric of illumination she employs to describe Aza that she will eventually be forced to question, just as she will learn to give preference to the moon over the sun.

If the light that defines Peru initially produces transparency and knowledge, France is presented as the place of illusory lights, of literal "feux d'artifices," artificial fires that displace the natural sun. Zilia writes to Aza:

Le feu, mon cher Aza, le feu, ce terrible élément, je l'ai vu, renonçant à son pouvoir destructeur, dirigé docilement par une puissance supérieure, prendre toutes les formes qu'on lui prescrit; tantôt dessinant un vaste tableau de lumière sur un ciel obscurci par l'absence du soleil. (p. 118)

Once again there is a displacement of the sun, but this artificial light, a "lumière éblouissante" that lights up the sky and deceives the senses,

becomes the source of deception as well as of beauty. In contrast to Peru, France is defined by its endlessly shifting and illusory surfaces. If Peru privileges the state of being, France privileges the art of seeming. As Zilia points out: "leurs vertus, mon cher Aza, n'ont pas plus de réalité que leurs richesses. Les meubles que je croyais d'or n'en ont que la superficie; leur véritable substance est de bois; de même ce qu'ils appellent politesse cache légèrement leur défauts sous les dehors de la vertu" (pp. 85-86). From the material object to social relations, French culture is traversed by artifice and by the pleasure of surfaces, so that what one sees is precisely never what is.

As inverted images of one another, Peru and France articulate two cultural visions which, while appearing radically opposed, in fact produce a dialectical meditation on the most valued of the five senses, that of sight. Indeed, the trajectory from sixteenth-century Peru to eighteenth-century France foregrounds the fact that the journey is as symbolic as it is real. Zilia travels from the West to the East, from where the sun sets to where it rises, from the "culte du Soleil" to the "siècle des lumières." It is through the mutual gaze between these two realms that the codes which respectively privilege natural and artificial light are themselves transformed.

The story begins with a string of inversions, describing a world turned inside out; it is the morning of Zilia's wedding to Aza, by which she will become the joint ruler of her country. Instead, Zilia is hiding behind the altar and watching the Spaniards enter the exclusively female space of the "temple du Soleil." They steal its gold and eventually lay hands on her and drag her through the temple gates, through which she should have emerged as a bride (p. 21). Aza therefore functions as an ongoing presence in her letters that signals, on the one hand, personal and cultural loss and, on the other, the symbolic recuperation, through language, of that loss. As a paradoxical sign of presence and absence, of cultural meaning and of its negation, Aza is also Zilia's other self, symbolized by the dyadic models of moon and sun and sister and brother. These dyads, in turn, need to be simultaneously sustained and transcended for Zilia's narrative to move forward. It is this tension that Zilia's writing is repeatedly negotiating.

Initially, Aza is the only stable referent in a world dominated by chaos: "Mais quel horrible spectacle s'offrit à mes yeux! Jamais son souvenir affreux ne s'effacera de ma mémoire. Les pavés du temple ensanglantés, l'image du Soleil foulée aux pieds, des soldats furieux poursuivant nos Vierges éperdues et massacrant tout ce qui s'opposait à leur passage" (pp.

19–20). This vision of destruction is also Zilia's first glimpse of the outside world from the sheltered space of her temple. In this sense, the "horrible spectacle" of the effacement of her culture becomes the founding memory of her future narrative, that which can never be forgotten: "Jamais son souvenir affreux ne s'effacera de ma mémoire." Just prior to this scene, however, Zilia had run to her *quipos*, the Incan substitute for writing which uses variously knotted coloured threads, telling Aza: "je me hâtai de les nouer, dans l'espérance qu'avec leurs secours je rendrais immortelle l'histoire de notre amour et de notre bonheur" (pp. 18–19). In this sense "writing" operates both as a recording of and as an escape from the real, a desire to inscribe and to displace the "horrible spectacle" with a vision of "amour" and "bonheur." While the love narrative competes with the public, national narrative in Zilia's text, it is through the recording of private desire that cultural memory is sustained. In this sense, Zilia maintains the fiction of the fidelity of her beloved as a way of maintaining her cultural identity. Aza becomes an absolutely necessary addressee, but as the source of knowledge and light for Zilia he also signals the paradox of her blindness, her inability to acknowledge his gradual seduction by another culture. Although she warns Aza in her early letters, "Je vois autant de signes d'esclavage dans les honneurs [que les Espagnols] te rendent que dans la captivité où ils me retiennent" (p. 24), her insight into the conduct of the Spaniards reveals a parallel form of denial concerning Aza, as she continues to read him as seducible only by her text.

Ultimately, it is only by moving away from Aza that Zilia can begin to recognize what has been negated by the Peruvian privileging of light, that to see and to know is also to acknowledge the unseen and the unknowable, as Zilia admits to Déterville at the end of the narrative: "Cet Aza n'est plus le même Aza" (p. 158). As Aza becomes unfamiliar and other, Zilia's private journey into unfaithfulness and uncertainty is paralleled by the broader exploration of knowledge that takes place in the novel. What the narrative discloses through Zilia's simultaneous private and public gaze is the opaqueness of all knowledge, the inevitable shadow cast by any form of light. In turn, while Aza's public seduction by the Spanish simultaneously becomes a private betrayal of Zilia, it will be Aza, rather than Zilia, who accepts a European spouse and who is circulated as an object of exchange between the two cultures. This cultural assimilation and feminization of Aza will contribute to the overall feminization of Peru, as a realm which has been conquered and which now only exists as a product of Zilia's nostalgic

imagination. Both Peru and Aza will also function as a narrative backdrop to Zilia's more sustained engagement with European culture in the form of her French suitor, Déterville.

The meeting between Zilia and Déterville is staged in terms of an encounter between two cultures as well as initiating a potentially new romance narrative. Having been kidnapped by the Spanish and then captured by the French, Zilia has become a passive observer of her destiny, and yet she reveals an ongoing resistance to her fate. In turn, if Zilia has been blind to Aza, Déterville will reveal an equal blindness towards Zilia. Unable to communicate through language, Déterville can only respond to Zilia's physical appearance and he is blinded by her beauty. Zilia herself now exists in and through silence, except for her ongoing correspondence with Aza. To him she communicates her alienation: "L'impossibilité de me faire entendre répand encore jusque sur mes organes un tourment non moins insupportable que des douleurs qui auraient une réalité plus apparente" (p. 34). Here, the loss of language is articulated through the physicality of the body, in an attempt to communicate, through the referent rather than the sign, the loss of all signifying systems. For Déterville, however, the body becomes both referent and sign, framing Zilia within the universally recognizable category of gendered subject. The encounter with Déterville is therefore necessarily determined by the parameters of the erotic and the play of seduction.

It is also at this point that Graffigny's novel causes the implosion of the romantic tale, for Zilia's silence becomes a way of resisting interpretation, and hence resisting the "universal" markers of heterosexual relations. Indeed, she insists on reading the signs of romance put out by Déterville as signs of cultural otherness, that is, as a language that cannot be shared. When Déterville mopes around her sighing and crying, she reads his body language but concludes ironically that "peut-être [les hommes français] prennent-ils les femmes pour l'objet de leur culte" (p. 39). This comic misreading on Zilia's part of how French women are treated in French society places the romantic tale with Déterville on a plane radically different from that of Zilia's romantic involvement with Aza.

Furthermore, Zilia's refusal to read Déterville's behaviour accurately signals a resistance to the way in which he wants her to read the French language. In eighteenth-century European culture, French was the acknowledged language of gallantry, and Zilia is introduced to it on those terms. Déterville has her repeat the phrases "oui, je vous aime" and "je vous promets d'être à vous" (p. 48), and responds to this repetition "avec

un air de gaieté" (p. 48), as if these words, uttered by Zilia, were embodied with meaning. There is a further *dédoublement* when we consider that as the translator of her own letters into French, Zilia reinscribes this scene with full knowledge, hence underlining its parodic quality. Therefore, what was initially a scene in which the colonizer, Déterville, had full narrative control is reconfigured as a parody in which Zilia, the colonized, uses the colonizer's language to undermine the process of seduction. In addition, Déterville's authentic reaction to this technique of artifice—"la joie se répand sur son visage, il me baise les mains avec transport, et avec un air de gaieté" (p. 48)—prefigures what will be French culture's seductive privileging of the apparent over the real. As Katharine Jensen has accurately pointed out, by having Zilia echo his language, "Déterville seeks to create an ideal woman who merely reflects him"⁴ and yet it is precisely this construction of the feminine as reflected image that Zilia will expose and unmask. In the final analysis, it is Déterville rather than Zilia who is willing to be deceived.

In this scene, therefore, Déterville's behaviour embodies the contradictions that will define French cultural identity. While Zilia's insertion into French culture takes place through this act of linguistic deception, it also signals the beginning of her transition from silence to speech, a speech that she will master more completely than her female peers: "Elles ignorent jusqu'à l'usage de leur langue naturelle; il est rare qu'elles la parlent correctement et je ne m'aperçois pas sans une extrême surprise que je suis à présent plus savante qu'elles à cet égard" (p. 141). As Jensen has also pointed out, Zilia learns the French language during Déterville's six-month absence,⁵ thereby signalling her willed separation of the erotic and the pedagogical. For Zilia, learning French is a way of achieving autonomy and independence, not a process of seduction. It is a form of mastery, finally, that will enable the shift from the discourse of romance to that of cultural criticism.

This criticism is centred upon French society's investment in the culture of the gaze, which, Zilia argues, privileges the exterior over the interior: "Pour peu qu'on les interroge, il ne faut ni finesse ni pénétration pour démêler que leur goût effréné pour le superflu a corrompu leur raison, leur cœur et leur esprit" (pp. 118–19). In fact, the price of keeping up appearances at the expense of necessity corrupts the whole social fabric, producing a society that becomes a slave to the gaze, "La vanité dominante des Français est celle de paraître opulents" (p. 119).

4 Katharine Ann Jensen, *Writing Love: Letters, Women, and the Novel in France, 1605–1776* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), p. 119.

5 Jensen, p. 120.

At the same time, the gaze Zilia directs upon the other culture becomes itself subject to mastery and seduction. While Zilia's rhetoric repeatedly seeks to expose the superficiality of French culture—"je ne puis me défendre de penser que les Français ont choisi le superflu pour l'objet de leur culte" (p. 117)—it is also the very prevalence of this superficiality which she admires. The superfluous becomes that which makes France both a civilized nation and an ethically ambivalent one. Zilia's admiration lies precisely in the superfluity of the superfluous, in the fact that a culture can move beyond utilitarianism towards pure aesthetic pleasure. The things she praises are those that embody aristocratic excess, such as the fireworks mentioned earlier, eighteenth-century gardens and landscaping that manipulate nature for the pleasure of the viewer, and water fountains, perhaps the most artificial of all artifices: "L'eau, si facile à diviser, qui semble n'avoir de consistance que par les vaisseaux qui la contiennent, et dont la direction naturelle est de suivre toutes sortes de pentes, se trouve forcée ici à s'élaner rapidement dans les airs, sans guide, sans soutien, par sa propre force, et sans autre utilité que le plaisir des yeux" (pp. 117–18). Here, Zilia makes explicit the civilizing factor of French culture; it is its very ability to produce artifacts that have no other use than "le plaisir des yeux." This pleasuring of the gaze marks France out as a culture capable of manipulating and dominating the natural world in a way that signals its independence from it and hence from necessity itself.

Equally critical and admiring, Zilia appears to be the ideal objective observer of the other culture. Nevertheless, this ideality is complicated by her gendered subject position. In contrast to a male observer, such as Montesquieu's Usbek, who can claim a universal subject position, Zilia is haunted by her own femininity throughout the narrative. The greater part of her critique of French culture is devoted to its female inhabitants, from whom she is at pains to distinguish herself, even as she remains subject to the same kinds of prejudice. It is in her relationship to the question of female identity that the problem of seeing and not seeing the other is at its most acute. In attempting to see clearly, Zilia takes up a position of mastery with regard to her own gender which repeats the structure of oppression she is seeking to criticize. Idealizing her own cultural past, where she was enclosed in a temple for her entire life, Zilia both sees and refuses to see the ways in which she is implicated in the female condition.

As Graffigny carefully points out in her *Avertissement*, the act of seeing the other is fraught with difficulties. Using the paradigm of cultural otherness, Graffigny warns the reader against the problem of "le préjugé," of pre-judgment or prejudice, writing: "Mais toujours prévenus en notre

faveur, nous n'accordons du mérite aux autres nations qu'autant que leurs mœurs imitent les nôtres, que leur langue se rapproche de notre idiome" (p. 3). Acknowledging another culture, Graffigny argues, involves translating that culture through models of "imitation" and "rapprochement," thereby making its idiom familiar and readable. This movement towards recognition, however, also involves an erasing of the site of difference itself, as the "other" becomes readable only in terms of the "same." The process of erasure which Zilia participates in is less that of denying her cultural otherness than her gender difference, in so far as her sustained identification with the lost realm of Peru, which is also an idealized feminine realm, enables a powerful dis-identification with her own gender. Zilia is repeatedly emphasizing her difference from, rather than her similarity to, the women she encounters.

From the perspective of Graffigny the author, this double move is also already inscribed in the *Avertissement*, in the fact that she cites Montesquieu's famous question from letter 30 of the *Lettres persanes*, "Comment peut-on être Persan?" On the one hand, her use of his question functions paradigmatically as the question of the other; how can one be or take the place of the "Persan," how can one represent cultural difference? On the other hand, it is also an appropriation of authorship. By asking Montesquieu's question, Graffigny is borrowing his idiom, and claiming his question for herself. "Comment peut-on être Persan?" becomes "Comment peut-on être Montesquieu?" or "how can one claim Montesquieu's authority?" In this sense, Graffigny speaks doubly; she is the other, the one on the margins of the canon, and she is also taking the place of the other, of the Persian or Peruvian subject. In a parallel and yet inverted fashion, Zilia, the fictional character, both is the other—the Peruvian subject—and is taking the place of the other, the French woman. In turn, while it is through her cultural difference that Zilia can be shown to operate independently of the codes that define gendered behaviour and to carve a place for a new model of femininity, she also never escapes being a woman who is gazed upon.

Indeed, when Zilia is introduced into Parisian society, she becomes the object, rather than the subject, of the gaze: "l'étonnement général que l'on témoigna à ma vue me déplut" (p. 52). Zilia's resistance to becoming the object of the gaze is linked to the loss of power it involves as well as the fact that it isolates her in her otherness. This surface difference, however, also marks out her uniqueness. She responds by saying: "je crus démêler que la singularité de mes habits causait seule la surprise des unes et les ris offensants des autres: j'eus pitié de leur faiblesse; je ne pensai plus qu'à leur persuader par ma contenance que mon âme

ne différait pas tant de la leur que mes habillements de leurs parures" (p. 53). Zilia distinguishes herself from Parisian women precisely by underlining her similarity to them, by moving from an external to an internal value system. Her "âme," she argues, "ne différait pas tant de la leur" and yet this act of "rapprochement" and identification is equally a way of separating her gaze from theirs. While Parisian women cannot see beyond the surface of her clothing, she can see into their souls.

The paradox of this double gaze is foregrounded in the episode of the mirror, in which Zilia sees her image for the first time: "j'ai vu dans l'enfoncement une jeune personne habillée comme une Vierge du Soleil; j'ai couru à elle les bras ouverts. Quelle surprise, mon cher Aza, quelle surprise extrême, de ne trouver qu'une résistance impénétrable où je voyais une figure humaine se mouvoir dans un espace fort étendu!" (p. 50). The shock of this encounter lies in the deception of the gaze and the way in which it transforms substance into mere surface; in reflecting Zilia back to herself, the mirror becomes a figure for uncertainty and doubt: "Ces prodiges troublent la raison, ils offusquent le jugement" (p. 50). While here Zilia is commenting on the confusing technology of the mirror, this doubt also concerns the question of identity, for she sees herself as familiar and yet as other, as both known and unknown. The experience of the mirror, indeed, operates as a metaphor for the construction of otherness in the novel. The moment of recognition and of cultural identification is also a moment of self-alienation. If Zilia is both herself and not herself in the mirror, her reaction to what she sees, although confusing to her, nevertheless serves to distinguish her from a very specific kind of female gaze; for the mirror, as the traditional symbol of female vanity, in fact fails to seduce Zilia by its reflection. She reveals a greater interest in how the mirror works than in her own image. Her detached response locates her on the outside, or as external to, the operations of the narcissistic female gaze that defines French society. This allows her to become a critical observer of this gaze, in terms of both French culture's engagement with the superficial and the ways in which femininity is implicated within it.

"Toutes les femmes," Zilia writes, "se peignent le visage de la même couleur; elles ont toujours les mêmes manières, et je crois qu'elles disent toujours les mêmes choses" (p. 73). It is precisely Zilia's otherness that allows her to see the desire of French women for homogeneity and their fear of being seen as unique or different, in other words, of occupying Zilia's position. This conformity, in turn, is the result of their education, based as it is on the study and refinement of surfaces: "Régler les mouvements du corps, arranger ceux du visage, composer l'extérieur, sont

les points essentiels de l'éducation" (p. 139). Echoing the smoothness of the mirror, French women present themselves as perfect sculptures, exquisite representations of human beauty. Zilia goes on to explain that in terms of marriage, "Elle ne participe au tout de ce petit univers que par la représentation. C'est une figure d'ornement pour amuser les curieux" (p. 142). As domestic subject, the wife becomes the ornament, the external sign of the husband's status and wealth. As with the water fountain or the "feux d'artifices," which signal cultural prosperity, the wife is a marker of domestic prosperity. Defined in terms of artifice, the function of the feminine is to reflect back to society an ideal vision of itself. According to Zilia, therefore, women are nothing more than the reflection in the mirror, the insubstantial subject *par excellence*.

Zilia's critique of female education forms a part of the broader exploration of the relation between nature and art. The female subject, argues Zilia, is separated from her "natural" self by becoming an ideal object of beauty: "il y a peu de rapport entre ce qu'elles sont et ce que l'on s'imagine qu'elles devraient être" (p. 137). The female subject, in fact, is simultaneously constructed as natural and artificial, or rather as naturally artificial, as if artifice were part of her nature. To reveal a nature that rejects the codes of representation by which femininity is defined, in turn, is to risk becoming unfeminine and hence unnatural. In this sense, there is no place for the female subject outside these codes of artifice.

However, if Zilia's gaze is indeed different from that of other women, it is not through a rejection of artifice as such, but through a desire to occupy the position of subject within the culture of the gaze. In fact, the overdetermined construction of difference between Peru and France, between the authentic and the artificial, masks an implicit cultural identification with France in the figure of Zilia herself. As Jack Undank has argued, in terms of the markers of sensibility, Zilia already inhabits a French idiom.⁶ Her cultural difference is subsumed, to a certain extent, by her identification with the French aesthetic of sensibility, which celebrates an idealizing and refinement of the real, already present in Zilia's own idealized inscription of the world. Zilia becomes, in this sense, the ideal other *within* French culture or, to quote Undank: "Grafigny ... wants us to know that Zilia's exquisite sensibility dwells among us as an otherness" (p. 299). Indeed, Zilia's representation of French culture repeatedly reinscribes her own identification with its terms, where art does not simply imitate nature but improves and perfects it.

6 See Jack Undank, "Grafigny's Room of Her Own," *French Forum* 13 (1988), 297-318.

For example, even when Zilia discovers nature for the first time, her encounter with it is highly mediated. Looking out of the windows of a coach, she acknowledges the superiority of nature over art: "Il faut ... que la nature ait placé dans ses ouvrages un attrait inconnu que l'art le plus adroit ne peut imiter" (p. 58). At the same time, this initial encounter with nature remains uncannily artificial. Zilia experiences it fleetingly, in a "man-made" coach that produces a cinematic relationship to the outside world: "Les campagnes immenses, qui se changent et se renouvellent sans cesse à mes regards, emportent mon âme avec autant de rapidité que nous les traversons" (p. 59). This series of views or images emphasizes the mediated quality of the experience, producing a string of "tableaux" framed by the coach windows and then translated into the discourse of sensibility. Zilia's relationship to nature, therefore, is already interpreted and experienced in terms of the categories of art and sensibility. The contradictory arguments concerning nature's superiority over art, and vice versa, are diminished when it becomes apparent that art and nature, in fact, are already framed by the same gaze. Like art, nature is not perceived in its radical otherness but gazed upon as a beautiful painting, or as what Zilia calls "les ouvrages de la nature" (p. 60).

It would seem, therefore, that when Zilia is gazing upon the new and the other, her gaze has already been structured in a particular way. Although what is emphasized at the beginning is the unmediated gaze, that of seeing things as they are, which is the way of seeing that defines Peruvian culture, this transparency is nevertheless already intermingled with an aesthetic sensibility that places art, history, and nature within the same frame. Therefore, although the novel uses different types of gazes or ways of seeing, it also seeks to assimilate models of otherness into a comprehensive vision for its heroine. Zilia seeks the position of the observer of beauty in order to avoid being reduced to an undifferentiated object of beauty, as are Parisian women. Once again, this resistance to being objectified separates her out as a unique woman, but it does not lead to a dialogue with her own gender. Parisian women remain circumscribed by her critical discourse as the objects they have always been.

What Zilia does offer is a personal rewriting of her position as a woman made possible by her journey between two cultures. From the opening letter, she reacts to her context and to her decontextualization through the act of writing; her lack of political, economic, and social authority is sublimated into an ongoing process of self-authorship, by means of which the self acquires meaning. Writing, in this sense, not only represents Zilia's experience but also makes possible the authoring of her identity, hence its privileged status throughout the narrative. What Zilia

undergoes, in fact, is the translation from one culture to another through the process of translation itself, from the *quipos* to the French language. In this sense, the writing of her experiences becomes the experience of writing: "Il me faut un temps infini pour former très peu de lignes. Il arrive souvent qu'après avoir beaucoup écrit, je ne puis deviner moi-même ce que j'ai cru exprimer ... je recommence, je ne fais pas mieux, et cependant je continue" (p. 79). The physical quality of this description reveals how the struggle for inscription is implicated in the material world and how writing and living have become inseparable acts.

Indeed, writing both allows Zilia to enter French culture and distinguishes her from it. In letter 18, which is her first letter written in French, Zilia imagines covering her world with words: "A peine puis-je encore former ces figures, que je me hâte d'en faire les interprètes de ma tendresse ... Je voudrais tracer [mon sentiment] sur le plus dur métal, sur les murs de ma chambre, sur mes habits, sur tout ce qui m'environne, et l'exprimer dans toutes les langues" (p. 78). This multilingual celebration, in turn, would project Zilia back to her original love, Aza, in a public and visible way. Zilia's fantasy, therefore, is to have her otherness recognized by making it intelligible "dans toutes les langues." However, rather than being confirmed through Aza, this otherness signals instead a new autonomy, for Aza will be unable to read Zilia's new French text. Aza is simultaneously included in and excluded from Zilia's new language, thereby revealing that her pleasure in the beloved has subtly shifted to the pleasure of the text, and to what Zilia devotedly calls her "tendre occupation" (p. 78).⁷ Therefore, while the public authoring, in French, of Zilia's desire for Aza creates a space of resistance to the forces of French culture, it also produces a new model of female authorship. Zilia's narrative of love transforms Aza into a textual event which, in turn, enables her to be the author of a lost romance rather than being authored by a new romance in the form of a marriage with Déterville. In this way, Graffigny has effectively used the romance structure against itself, following its rhetorical logic of faithfulness and fidelity in order to produce a site of cultural and gendered resistance.

The ending of the novel continues to exploit this structure of desire as self-invention and self-authorship through a permanent enshrinement of specific cultural artifacts. The novel concludes, as it began, with the construction of an ideal space, in which Zilia is secluded from the world, as

7 I am grateful to my student Clarissa Bégin for pointing out this shift from lover to text at this critical juncture in the narrative.

she was in her temple. We are presented with a scene in which Déterville gives Zilia the keys to a house of her own paid for by her Peruvian gold. The scene is set in an idyllic pastoral landscape, with singing and dancing servants who, acting as intermediaries between Déterville and Zilia, present her with "les clefs de la maison" (p. 148). The transference of the keys in this episode defies conventional literary symbolism, in so far as it represents the opposite of a marriage contract, an opening up rather than a closing down of Zilia's independence and autonomy. While the landscape in which the keys are offered points to the staging of a pastoral romance, it is in fact a de-eroticized space in which Zilia can step outside the system of patriarchal exchange and share a friendship with Déterville.

At the same time, the gold used to buy Zilia's house comes from the gold chair where Aza's father used to sit. This translation of the father's throne into French currency and property, as Nancy Miller has argued, disperses rather than erases the symbolism of patriarchy.⁸ Indeed, the most valued material signifiers of both Peru and France are reinscribed within Zilia's new home. First, Déterville shows her a French library, described by Zilia as follows: "une assez grande chambre entourée d'un grillage d'or, légèrement travaillé, qui renfermait une infinité de livres de toutes couleurs, de toutes formes, et d'une propreté admirable" (p. 151). What is emphasized here is the materiality of the books, their colours and cleanliness, rather than their content, which implicitly brings us back to Zilia's initial admiration of a culture that privileges "le plaisir des yeux" (p. 118).

Next, Déterville brings her to a small reproduction of the "temple du Soleil":

C'était un cabinet tout brillant de glaces et de peintures : les lambris à fond vert ornés de figures extrêmement bien dessinées, imitaient une partie des jeux et des cérémonies de la ville du Soleil, tels à peu près que je les avais dépeintes à Déterville [...] Les ornements du temple que j'avais laissés dans la maison religieuse, soutenus par des pyramides dorées, ornaient tous les coins de ce magnifique cabinet. (p. 152)

Here, Zilia's original cultural space and scenes from her old life are reconstructed as an extravagant museum piece, a shrine that both invokes and displaces the original "temple du Soleil." As with the books, this new temple functions as a representation, as image rather than substance. Zilia's house, in fact, is a house filled by artifice, in which the treasures

8 See Miller, p. 156.

of the cultures she has passed through are framed as ideal artifacts. By accepting the key from Déterville, Zilia has become a pillager of cultures, appropriating objects in order to inhabit her own ideal world, in an echo of the greater imperial project. Yet this pillaging also reveals a form of female appropriation of the male cultural landscape. Rather than occupying the position of cultural object, which would ultimately have been her function in a marriage with Déterville, Zilia borrows the markers of male cultural dominance and domesticates them, reducing them to the parameters of her own home. In this sense, she makes possible the conditions within which a new female gaze can take place. Rather than being inside the temple, Zilia can gaze upon it from the outside.

This construction of an ideal domestic space that does not include the model of the family places the novel itself within new parameters. The problems eighteenth-century and present-day critics have had with the novel's ending are a testament to this newness; whether we consider the rewritings of the novel's ending after its publication, well documented by English Showalter,⁹ or the conclusions of Isabelle Landy-Houillon, the current editor of the Garnier-Flammarion edition of the text, who writes: "le repos tant vanté en 1747 par la Zilia des *Péruviennes* rappelle de bien près, malgré les élans rousseauistes, la grisaille augustinienne de Mme de La Fayette,"¹⁰ we can detect a refusal to accept Graffigny's chosen ending. In addition, although she added three new letters to the 1752 edition of the text (letters 29, 30, and 34), she left her conclusion untouched, underlining her adherence to it. Indeed, perhaps it is precisely the ideal quality of Graffigny's ending that appears disturbing, in that it articulates a desirable fantasy of female autonomy and not a narrative of entombment.

The fact that Graffigny concludes her novel with a discourse on friendship rather than love deserves particular attention in terms of the novel's interweaving critique of marriage and imperialism. Indeed, the sustained paralleling of marriage and imperialism as mutually enhancing models of oppression leaves little room for a conventional romance ending. Marriage is described by Zilia in terms that resolutely echo those of Aza's relation to the Spaniards: "Enfin ... il semble qu'en France les biens du mariage ne soient réciproques qu'au moment de la célébration, et que dans la suite les femmes seules y doivent être assujetties" (p. 144).

9 See English Showalter, "Les Lettres d'une Péruvienne: compositions, publications, suites," *Archives et Bibliothèques de Belgique* 14 (1983), pp. 14–28. See also Douthwaite's critical analysis of these alternative endings, p. 126.

10 Isabelle Landy-Houillon, ed., *Lettres portugaises, Lettres péruviennes et autres romans d'amour par lettres* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1983), p. 18.

As with the Spaniards' false honouring of Aza, the wife is superficially honoured by her husband, until she is "assujettie" or colonized. Zilia's careful negotiation of the interdependent relationship between imperialism and patriarchy within the novel therefore requires a rethinking of the very premise of the conventional romance ending.

The model of friendship established between Déterville and Zilia not only renegotiates the marriage ending but also maintains Zilia in an authorial position. It is she who institutes the language of friendship, offering, in the place of love, an exchange of value systems. She tells Déterville:

Vous me donnerez quelque connaissance de vos sciences et de vos arts; vous goûterez le plaisir de la supériorité; je la reprendrai en développant dans votre cœur des vertus que vous n'y connaissez pas. Vous ornerez mon esprit de ce qui peut le rendre amusant, vous jouirez de votre ouvrage; je tâcherai de vous rendre agréables les charmes naïfs de la simple amitié, et je me trouverai heureuse d'y réussir. (p. 167)

In this balanced to and fro between "vous" and "je," the ideal model of friendship is established in which each subject is mutually improved by and is of benefit to the other. Although this exchange is presented within cultural parameters—the exchange of European science for Incan virtue—it is equally an exchange of the gendered qualities of feminine virtue and masculine reason. Jensen goes as far as to suggest that, in this exchange, Zilia offers Déterville "knowledge ... of feminist consciousness,"¹¹ but it seems rather that this knowledge works implicitly in the very proffering of friendship in the place of marriage, rather than explicitly as part of the terms of the friendship. In this final sharing-out of value systems, culture and gender are assimilated, as Peru is confirmed as an allegorized space for female sensibility. Nevertheless, the model of "the other culture" remains critical to the construction of Zilia's identity if she is to establish a female gaze that is not merely a reflection in the mirror. To see femininity in another light, as the novel suggests through the light of the moon, the female subject must occupy the space of the exotic other in order to be seen to be seeing differently. Zilia's speech on the value of friendship as that which institutes a certain balance addresses questions of both gender and culture, even if it does so in a conventional way. The potentially new vision offered by the privileging of friendship is that, unlike marriage, it is based on agreement

11 Jensen, p. 123.

rather than on possession. While this only seeks to address a transformation in heterosexual relations and does not offer a rethinking of relations between women, it nevertheless produces an important new language of negotiation.

At the same time, Graffigny's vision for Zilia, grounded as it is in economic and aristocratic privilege, retains the traces of an idealized romance form. While French culture has sought to produce an acceptable reality through polished surfaces, reflecting back to itself a desirable image, Zilia has sought a reality based in ideality, the ideality of the lost Peru and the lost romance. Her home, as we have seen, is the material representation of this idealized fictional space and hence the marker of a certain excess. Indeed, it is only through this model of aristocratic abundance that the material can be transcended and produce the conditions of its own effacement, allowing the movement towards aesthetic pleasure and fulfilment to take place. In this sense, Graffigny's radical social critique is simultaneously strengthened and undermined by the idealized frame of the novel's closing pages. Zilia's decision to become a philosopher instead of a lover, and to taste "*Le plaisir d'être; ce plaisir oublié, ignoré même de tant d'aveugles humains*" (p. 168), requires the material privileges of an Incan princess or a French aristocrat, in this sense reinscribing an earlier romance ideology. Graffigny's heroine ultimately embodies the contradictions and paradoxes of a female subjectivity searching both for social transformation and self-empowerment. This search, in turn, produces a way of seeing that puts into question, once and for all, models of mastery that seek to circumscribe the question of the other.

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