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The Turkish Spy: a Peripatetic Novel

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The Turkish Spy: A Peripatetic Novel

by

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Master of Arts in Liberal Arts, 2003
Masters of Arts in Eastern Classics, 2010

DISSERTATION
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Abstract

Beginning its published life in a short Italian version featuring 30 letters in 1684, Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy grew into 102 letters in a French version published in 1686, and between 1687 and 1694 turned into a monumental eight volumes English Edition featuring 632 letters. The hero of the novel, a Muslim Arab spying on Louis XIV’s France for the Ottoman sultan undergoes a transformation by his contact with the Christian world, and his reflections on man, society and God seized the imagination of the public. The novel’s popularity helped its rapid spread over European nations in the first half of the 18th century but it fell into oblivion by the time some of the ideas it had helped spread were reprised by the consequential writers of the Enlightenment.

This study sets out to trace the evolution of the Turkish spy’s ideas, from the character’s arrival in Paris in 1637 as a naïve young man at the service of the “Grand Signor” to the cosmopolitan evangelist of Deism and proponent of the Republic of Letters he becomes over the 45 years of his stay in the French capital. This thesis argues that the Turkish Spy presented to its readers a model of internationalist and post-religious or supra-religious attitude long before such ideas became a generally acceptable mode of discourse and a plausible way to look at the world.
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The Turkish Spy: A Peripatetic Novel

*Introduction: New Lights for Old*

Volume I of the epistolary novel *L’espion du Grand Seigneur* appeared at Paris in 1684, first in Italian and about a month later in French. It comprised 30 letters, purportedly written by an Ottoman spy living incognito in Paris during the reign of Louis XIV. Some of the letters are reports to the spy’s masters in Istanbul; others, addressed to a variety of correspondents including members of his family, present his reflections on a wide spectrum of topics. The publication marked a first in many respects: it was the first epistolary novel with multiple letter recipients, the first spy novel, and the first work of fiction to adopt the trope of the naïve foreigner commenting on European politics.

The titular character—an ethnic Arab named Mahmut—is presented as an exceptionally learned man, as well-versed in theology as in Greek and Roman literature. Mahmut’s *nom de guerre* in France, for instance, is Titus—a name inspired by his reverence for the Roman historian Titus Livius. Mahmut also acknowledges his ambition to be a new Plutarch, whose admirable work, interrupted for sixteen hundred years since his death, he wishes to continue. In addition to being steeped in the classics, Mahmut is quite conversant with the philosophical and scientific theories that animated salon and coffee house conversations in the seventeenth century. For example, he addresses the
questions that the apparition of the great comets of 1664 and 1680 raised in a public still uncertain as to what they were. “Tell me,” he writes the astrologer to the sultan,

Whether [these comets] be only exhalations drawn up in the Higher Region of the Air, by the Force of the Sun; Or, whether they be more solid and durable Substances? Whether they be of a Posthumous Origin like the Clouds, Hail, Rain, Snow, and other Meteors, the daily product of Nature, the Upstart Offspring of the Elements? Or, whether they are in the Rank of those Beings, whose Antiquity is untraceable, which are as Old as the World; such as the Sun, Moon, Stars, and this Earth whereon we tread? (T. S. Vol. VI, 239)

He wonders whether the moon or the planets could be habitable (T. S. Vol. II, 92). He praises the great Astronomer Descartes, saying: “I have been often conversant with him, and took unspeakable delight in his refined Notions of the World” (T. S. Vol. II, 111). He often corresponds with Abdel Melec Muli Omar, President of the College of Sciences at Fez, and in one letter that refers to Muli Omar’s new “System of the Heavens” he both banters lightly about and displays his knowledge of astronomy:

Were Ptolemy alive, thy System of the Heavens would put him to the blush. And Tycho Brahe would sneak out of his Planetary Frame, by some wild and more than Eccentric Motion, ashamed that he had been such a Botcher in Astronomy. Copernicus himself would sink under the Burden of the Moon . . . (T. S. Vol. VII, 92)
All the current questions of French society interest him, be they of scientific, religious, philosophical or societal nature. He comments on the growing phenomenon of educated women:

There is a new Star risen in the French Horizon, whose Influence excites the Nobler Females to this pursuit of Humane Science. It is the Renowned Monsieur Des Cartes, whose Lustre far outshines the Aged, winking Tapers of Peripatetic Philosophy, and has eclipsed the Stagyr1te, with all the Ancient Lights of Greece and Rome. ‘Tis this matchless soul, has drawn so many of the Fairer Sex to the Schools. And, they are more proud of the title [Cartesian,] and of the Capacity to defend his Principles, than of their Noble Birth and Blood. I know our grave and Politick Mussulmen, will censure the Indulgence of the French to their Women, and accuse them of Weakness, in giving such Advantages to that Witty Sex. But, notwithstanding this Severity of the Eastern Parts, I cannot altogether disapprove of the Western Gallantry. If Women are to be esteemed our Enemies, methinks it is an ignoble Cowardice thus to disarm them, and not allow them the same Weapons we use ourselves; But, if they deserve the Title of our Friends, ‘tis an Inhumane Tyranny to debar them the Privilege of Ingenious Education; which would also render their Friendship so much more delightful both to themselves and to us. [. . .] I see no Reason, therefore, why we should make such Bug-Bears of Women, as not trust them with as Liberal Education as ourselves. (T. S. Vol. II, 36-37)
*L'espion du Grand Seigneur* was an instant best seller in France, even though the letters’ acknowledged translator and most likely author, the Genoese exile Gian Paolo Marana, failed to profit from the work’s success: he lived in obscurity and died in relative poverty, leaving little trace of himself. In 1686, volume II and III were published in Paris, adding 72 letters to the 30 contained in volume I. In 1687, all letters appeared in a fairly accurate English translation, which was published at London under the title *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy*. This edition too met with immediate success, being avidly read by a public eager for the novelty it brought: a view of European affairs through the eyes of a Muslim Ottoman subject.

Between 1691 and 1694, seven additional volumes of *The Turkish Spy*—as the novel is now generally known—were published in London. These volumes added 530 letters to the 102 contained in the earlier volumes. Between 1696 and 1699, a French edition avowedly translated from the English, was published by Erasme Kinkius at Cologne (a false imprint) and by George Gallet at Amsterdam. It was titled *L’Espion dans les cours des princes chrétiens*. It also featured 632 letters but they were spread over six volumes instead of the eight volumes of the English edition, and the order of the letters was changed, sometimes inexplicably so in terms of chronology. (Other later editions featured 698 letters because 64 letters written by Daniel Defoe in 1718, *A Continuation of Letters written by a Turkish Spy at Paris*, were added. There is even a Dutch edition [N. Van Daalen, La Haye 1748] that features 744 letters, including all the originals plus Defoe’s text plus additional letters of uncertain origin that go up to year 1697 in the tale.) There was a Dutch edition of the first two volumes translated from the English, *Brieven geschreven door een Turkse Spion*, printed in Amsterdam in 1699, and
again in 1710, and in Rotterdam in 1737. *L’Espion dans les cours des princes chrétiens* was translated into German as well and printed in Frankfurt am Main in 1733: *Der Spion an den Höfen der Christlichen Potentäten, Oder Briefe und Nachrichten eines geheimen Absesandten der Pforte an denen Europaïschen Höfen*.

In all its various linguistic avatars *The Turkish Spy* struck the same chord: it was felt to be breaking new grounds, both in literary form and in boldness of ideas. As a result, it was much imitated: besides Montesquieu’s *Lettres persanes* (1721), perhaps the most famous of all satiric tales told by a foreigner sojourning in France, there was a profusion of works exploiting the novel idea of an undetected spy: *The French Spy* (1700) translated from the book by Gatien de Courtiz de Sandras; *Mémoires de Messire Jean-Baptiste de la Fontaine* (1699); Ned Ward’s *The London Spy* (1698-1700); Charles Gildon’s *The Golden Spy in the Courts of Europe* (London 1709); Wieliam King [Captain Bland]’s *The Northern Atalantis or York Spy* (London 1713); the anonymous *The German Spy* (1738); *The Jewish Spy* (1737) translated from the French *Lettres juives ou Correspondance philosophique, historique et critique entre un Juif voyageur à Paris et ses correspondans en divers endroits*; the anonymous *l’Espion chinois, ou l’Envoyé secret de la cour de Pékin, pour examiner l’État présent de l’Europe. Traduit du chinois* (1745); Eliza Haywood’s *The Invisible Spy* (1755); and Peter Markoe’s *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* (1787) were clearly inspired by *The Turkish Spy*. The novel itself continued to enjoy wide interest well into the middle of the eighteenth century, until it gradually fell into oblivion.

While a study of *The Turkish Spy*’s multiple editions and translations would be valuable, this dissertation will focus exclusively on the French and English editions
published between 1684 and 1694—the novel’s “formative period,” so to speak—to contextualize their production history and illuminate the cultural environment in which they were born. In the late decades of the seventeenth century, theories and concepts that had long looked like self-evident truths—geocentrism, the divine right of kings, or the great chain of beings—were increasingly under question. The work of Galileo Galilei in Italy, Blaise Pascal in France, and Robert Boyle in England had brought new legitimacy to the scientific approach of contemporaries such as Isaac Newton and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. René Descartes and Baruch Spinoza, whose writings were put on the Index of forbidden books by the Catholic Church (Spinoza had also been excommunicated by the Jewish community), were still stirring controversy. Pierre Bayle and John Locke were advancing ideas that would shape the Enlightenment. Finally, the accounts of famous travelers such as François Tavernier and Antoine Galland in France or Paul Ricault in England were bringing home the reality of other cultural and religious habits and modes of life.

One of the striking features of *The Turkish Spy* is its complexity. At once an epistolary novel, a panegyric to Louis XIV, an historical chronicle, an adventure story, and a piece of journalistic reporting, it combined psychological portrait with social commentary, politics, and philosophy. The novel’s genesis was similarly complex. The very first 30 letters were composed in Italian. The next 72 letters were either translated from a lost Italian original or composed in French. The 530 letters that followed were either translated from an Italian or French original, now utterly lost, or composed directly in English. The whole series might have been authored or reprised by multiple writers of
different nationalities. And yet, the 632 letters that make up *The Turkish Spy* strike the reader as a fully coherent work.

This coherence stems from several characteristics: firstly, the epistolary format provides a continuous thread bonding Mahmut’s comments and observations into a coherent whole. The character’s views seem not so much to change as to evolve; the liberal and deistic tendencies that we see in the English editions from 1692 onward are already present—albeit in fledgling form—in the Paris editions of 1684 and 1686.

Secondly, Mahmut’s observations consistently and repeatedly address the same questions, some of which are representative of the great debates of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: nationalism vs. internationalism, state religion vs. freedom of religion, tradition vs. modernity, faith vs. reason, private vs. public life, received dogmas vs. scientific enquiry. For example, Mahmut’s search for a middle way between monastic life – such as his Christian friend William Vospel settles into (T.S. Vol. I, 37, 343) – and secular life will be stated again and again in all subsequent volumes. His vision (expressed as early as Letter III of Volume I) of the absurdity of the French thanking God for a military victory over the Spaniards while soon enough the Spaniards thank the same God for a reverse victory over the French will serve as the foundation of his later argument for a deist God beyond the sectarian interests of men. Mahmut’s reverence for books as the most potent instrument of education (T. S. Vol. I, 60) will be a recurring theme in the spy’s correspondence. His love of Herodotus, Plutarch, Pythagoras, Seneca and all the Stoics, expressed unambiguously in the first volume will never abate through the eight volumes of the complete collection. The character drawn by Marana (the acknowledged author of the first 102 letters) will be scrupulously continued
and fleshed out in an organic way throughout the entire series. The character’s struggle to eke out a living in an unforgiving city, his strength and foibles, his hopes and fears, his growing skepticism, all speak to the reader and make of him a fellow human despite his alien religion and disreputable mission. Marana’s conceit of letting the French look at themselves through the eyes of an “other” offered such potential for new perspectives that the hero of the novel, the Arab Mahmut, assumed a life of his own; as if the character that had sprung to life under Marana’s pen was demanding other pens to continue his story after the initial author turned silent.

Modern scholars have approached *The Turkish Spy* from a variety of perspectives. Most of the earliest studies dealt almost exclusively with issues of authorship. Chapter 1 will present a more in-depth review of the main arguments for authorship but the main scholarly approaches can be defined by the positions of two of the earliest commentators: Henry Hallam, who in 1837, attributes most letters to an unidentified Englishman (only the first fifty are Marana’s, he thinks); and Bolton Corney who in his 1841 rebuttal “On the Authorship of Turkish Spy,”\(^3\) ascribes the whole work to Marana. Subsequent scholarship will roughly fall into the Hallam or the Corney camp.

The early debate initiated by Hallam and Corney did not yield hoped for answers and more recent scholarship has begun to shift the debate to the value of the content and the impact the book has had on contemporary readers. Guido Almansi and Donald A. Warren\(^4\) have focused on the historical aspect of the novel while Robin Howell\(^5\) emphasizes the character of the “exile” and secrecy’s implication of either truth or falsehood. Bernard Bray and Virginia Aksan\(^6\) for their part have stressed that the novel’s protagonist acts as a “conscience awakener.”
While reprising some of these scholars’ arguments, I will focus exclusively on Mahmut’s theological views—and more specifically on his turn from established religion to skepticism and from skepticism to a personal brand of Deism. It is my contention that *The Turkish Spy* advances an argument for Deism, understood as a personal belief in the existence of God without the corrupting fallout of codified religion. In this respect, I build on Christopher J. Betts’s assertion that *The Turkish Spy* fostered “the propagation of deistic attitudes.” Because of its wide circulation, the novel effectively brought Deism into the mainstream, paving the way for later publications such as John Toland’s *Christianity Not Mysterious: A Treatise Shewing, That there is nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, Nor Above It: And that no Christian Doctrine can be properly called A Mystery* (1696) or Anthony Collins’ *A Discourse of Freethinking, occasioned by the Rise and Growth of a Sect called Freethinkers* (1713). In so doing, *The Turkish Spy* also reshaped the meaning of religion, ushering its transformation from God-given truth to human custom.

The impact of *The Turkish Spy* is perhaps best grasped by reference to Bernard Picart and Jean Frederic Bernard’s *Religious Ceremonies of the World* (1723-1734), a seven-volume work that marks “a major turning point in European attitudes toward religious belief.” An encyclopedic survey of the world’s creeds, *Religious Ceremonies of the World* opened by examining Judaism and Catholicism (Vols. I an II); parsed American, Asian, and African religions (Vols. III and IV); surveyed the Protestant faiths (Vols. V and VI); and ended by tackling Islam and Deism (Vol. VII). It was therefore cast in a very different mold from the more subjective tale told by Mahmut. And yet, its production history is remarkably similar to that of *The Turkish Spy*. Both works were
instant best sellers, frequently reprinted for over a century. Both were widely translated, thus exceeding the confines of national literary history. Finally, both advance a view of religion as a human construct rather than divine revelation. As Lynn Hunt, Margaret C. Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt have recently proposed, *Religious Ceremonies of the World*

sowed the radical idea that religions could be compared on equal terms, and therefore that all religions were equally worthy of respect – and criticism. It turned belief in one unique, absolute and God-given truth into “religion,” that is, into individual ceremonies and customs that reflected the truths relative to each people and culture. (Hunt, Jacob, Mijnhardt 1)

The same can be said for *The Turkish Spy*. Mahmut’s approach to life is neither exclusively secular nor dogmatically religious. After wondering if things proceed from chance, or the stars, or God’s working out of “that Infinite Pell-Mell of Atoms”, he tells his friend Gnet: “Thou wilt perceive by this that I am religiously disposed: and rather than not adore some *Supreme Being*, I would make a deity of that which to others is the fountain of *Atheism*” (T. S. Vol. V, 166). The Muslim spy always presents Islam as a religion enhanced, so to speak, by a healthy dose of reason. Here, he pushes the boundary by imagining that even atheism could be part of God’s works. Aware of the loaded connotation of the word, he hastens to add: “do not esteem me an *Atheist* because of the liberty I take in discoursing of these *mysterious* things” (T. S. Vol. V, 169). He sets religious beliefs and non-religious (i.e. atheist) beliefs on an equal philosophical footing, something that Picart and Bernard did not conjecture although by presenting Islam right before deism in the series, they seemed to suggest that Islam served as a point of
departure for the discussion of deism; secondly, Picart and Bernard implied that deism (understood as a personal belief in the existence of God unsupported by dogma) was the logical outcome of an objective survey of all religions, a position that the *Turkish Spy* in effect staked out 40 years earlier.

Reading *The Turkish Spy* from a Deist perspective means paying attention to the novel’s double encircling movement around religion, like the arms of a galaxy closing in on the central black hole. The first movement makes systematic parallels between Islam and Christianity, thus relativizing the tenets of each faith. Both religions claim to be divinely inspired, and both rely on trained specialists to interpret scriptures and edify the masses. It is this reliance on interpretation that leads, according to Mahmut, to different and contradictory rules of life: a man can have only one wife, or can have four; one may eat pork or may not, etc. If there is a truth to discover, he reasons, it cannot be found in man-made rules that don’t have universal acceptance. He points out that the goal of knowing and serving God is best achieved by personal endeavors tailored to the needs and abilities of the individual worshipper.

The second movement takes the reader out of the religious sphere altogether by embracing a thoroughly material understanding of life, and adopting libertine ideas concerned with justice and truth in this life and this polity. Doubts are revealed when he invites his friend Vospel (who wants to join a Capuchin monastery) to consider that “their [the Capuchins’] life is accounted a continual hell; and they will be finely choused, if they find not a heaven, when stripped of their mortality” (T.S. Vol. I, 261). While expressing doubt as to the existence of heaven or the necessity to suffer in this life, Mahmut admires the material order that reigns in a monastery where everything is owned
in common, and “mine and thine” are obsolete notions. (T. S. Vol. I, 344) In this back
and forth between a transcendent truth of God and a practical organization and betterment
of society, The Turkish Spy identifies organized religion as a problem. Thus, while these
movements may seem to run in opposite directions, each reinforces and is in turn
reinforced by the other.

Whether one mastermind or a collaboration of various minds was involved in the
creation of the Turkish Spy, the same questions can be asked: What makes this novel such
a good vehicle for the dissemination of new ideas? Does the novel represent an attempt to
make the content of exchanges within the Republic of Letters accessible to a wider
audience? Is Mahmut a character teaching the readers to extract themselves from their
culture? By what process does a deceitful spy become a messenger of truth? What makes
a Muslim spy a good choice as the harbinger of a new understanding of religion? These
questions will form the framework of the present study.

The introduction has given a glimpse of the extraordinary nature of the tale, and
of its wide-ranging reach. The Turkish Spy, although generally considered today a very
minor text of the end of the 17th Century – a judgment I hope to help rectify --
nevertheless served as inspiration to numerous works of literature from the 18th century.
Looking at this text in the early decades of the 21st Century, one can see that the
questions raised in the Turkish Spy have not lost their acuity and relevance. Mahmut the
spy puts us right in the center of the unresolved tensions that have so far accompanied
humanity’s march to the future.

Chapter I introduces the story of the text and reviews the question of authorship.
It seeks to show 1) the subjective nature of all authorship hypotheses and 2) why this
question is not necessarily helpful in understanding the text. It hypothesizes that the book’s aim is to introduce to the public unfamiliar notions of internationalism and deism as a way to understand the human endeavor at large. The Muslim spy asserts appurtenance to the Republic of Letters, a remarkable claim that upsets conventional understanding of this very European phenomenon, and this chapter will tease out the implications of such a claim. Mahmut affirms a World Republic of Letters where the “Orient” holds a legitimate place, and this new member at the conversation table, I will argue, is one of the radical changes the Turkish Spy heralds. It transformed the Turks, or the Orientals in general, into valid interlocutors to the European thinking public. The chapter will also delineate the parameters of this dissertation and it touches on the main theme that will be developed: the relevance and utility of religion in society. Since the Turkish Spy is arguably the first ever ‘spy’ novel, and its popularity was largely based on this particular novelty, the chapter sets the context for what a ‘spy” meant in the 17th century and reflects on the enlarged meaning the word assumes in the novel: the spy as both a culture discoverer and culture ambassador. Although not the first or only book attempting to bridge an East-West divide, the Turkish Spy can be firmly placed among the harbingers of a new internationalist vision.

Chapter II will focus on the various prefaces that frame the discourse and contend that they reveal the shifting paradigms operating in European society at the end of the 17th century. It will analyze the mechanism of translation that plays an important role in this text. The first known (and short) version of the Turkish Spy is in Italian. There were actual translations from Italian to French, from French to English and from English back to French, while the prefaces claimed translation from the Arabic, and later in the English
editions, straight from the Italian to English. The focus on translation serves as a background that reinforces the universal value of the text; the thoughts expressed are intelligible to people of different cultures and religions and prepare the way for an acceptance of internationalism. This chapter will briefly analyze each preface of the various volumes published over ten years and show that despite their varied tone, they persistently invite the reader to consider in earnest the thoughts that the Turkish spy proffers. This chapter argues that the very topical questions surrounding translation from one language to another that the prefaces insist upon are in effect exposing the very condition that makes possible the appearance of a Turkish spy in the literary world of Europeans: a new desire to discover their identity by viewing themselves through the eyes of a stranger and assess their position in the world. A consideration of what was involved in the mental operation of translation led to an acceptance of the new and at times shocking vision of French culture and religion that the spy brought forward. By emphasizing translation -- that is making the undecipherable comprehensible, or the foreign commensurable -- the prefaces acted in two ways: one, they reminded readers of the exotic, extraordinary, far away origin of the text; and two, by the same token they induced indulgence concerning the controversial statements coming from a foreigner who could not possibly know all the intricacies of the host culture. The technical aspect of translation mentioned so abundantly in the prefaces prepared the reader for a translation of another sort -- beyond language though using language -- that consisted in interpreting thoughts not yet clearly formulated, let alone accepted, such as the notion that all men are created equal, a phrase not used literally by the Turkish spy, but one whose power permeates his entire expression.
Chapter III will set the literary context in which the Turkish Spy appears, focusing on three authors: Cyrano de Bergerac, Gabriel de Foigny and Denis Vairasse, whose utopias pave the way for the emergence of a text like the Turkish Spy. These works adopt the metaphor of the voyage of discovery in order to introduce new ideas. They break conventions by establishing imaginary, almost unthinkable sets of facts like being able to make a voyage to the moon, or finding a world made up entirely of hermaphrodite humans, or dreaming up a society where the body expresses automatically the state of the soul, rendering thus the telling of lies impossible. In each case, having established the extraordinariness of the facts, the writer is free to pursue the logic inherent in these imaginary worlds and develop new ideas. These works use imagination as a way to open the mind to new possibilities. They were implausible enough to avoid (for the most part) the censors’ scrutiny but they were also fertile enough to allow the seedling of thoughts not articulated before, thoughts with potential practical applications. The same characteristics apply to the Turkish Spy, a work of imagination that barely stretches the bonds of plausibility and in the process allows the possibility of looking at the world anew. This chapter will argue that the Turkish Spy is the natural heir of these popular texts, although it is not itself a utopia in the same mold.

Chapter IV contends that the kind of spying in which Mahmut engages in France leads the hero to consider nations and men as part of large historical movements potentially capable of shaping the destiny of the world. The problem is that men lack the kind of history that could unify their thinking. Mired in a world of competing versions of history, Mahmut argues that only a universal history could provide an objective foundation to start solving the problems of the world. Religion, which should unite
people, does in effect the opposite because religions are plural, each one competing for supremacy and thus destroying the unity of God. This chapter will argue that the act of spying (or to put it more simply of observing) inevitably turns the thoughtful Mahmut into an aspiring historian, philosopher and religious reformer.

Chapter V will postulate that Mahmut’s wide-ranging interests inevitably lead him to his own brand of Deist philosophy. Each concern of his forms a building block of the new edifice the spy constructs: the wisdom of the ancient Greeks and Romans, particularly of historians like Herodotus and Plutarch who left inestimable treasures to humanity; the discovery of Eastern thought, particularly that of ancient Indians, that will complement and complete the wisdom of the ancient Greeks; the necessity of a universal history applicable to the whole of mankind; the respect for all life, including animal life, that leads the protagonist to advocate vegetarianism; the promises of science; the falseness of organized religion; the need for individual freedom of conscience, and the desire to know God. This chapter argues that these concerns and interests converge in one synthetic view that is very close to Deism, but is essentially representative of the unique view that Mahmut puts forward.

Finally, the conclusion will attempt to tie together the many threads that the text has woven, and show how the Turkish Spy, acting as a genuine laboratory of thought, gathered in its pages all the elements necessary to project the picture of a new type of man, cosmopolitan, free of prejudices, curious about the world, and ready to sever what he considers the false ties between religion and God.
CHAPTER I

The Invention of the Turkish Spy

Most of the Western literary tradition since Homer can be understood through the lens of Aristotle’s Poetics, which described and sanctioned an enduring articulation (not opposition) of poetry and history; according to this model, the poet adds his inventions to the renowned heroes and events of history so as to make a good plot. The second regime starts around 1670 and lasts until roughly the turn of the nineteenth century. During this time, novelists cease posing as Aristotelian poets and instead pretend to offer their readers real documents ripped straight from history—found manuscripts, entrusted correspondence, true stories, and all the rest. Following Barbara Foley, I will be calling this type of novel pseudofactual, in that it masquerades as a serious utterance.”

Nicholas Paige Before Fiction

The authorship of The Turkish Spy has beguiled and bedeviled scholars for almost as long as the novel has been in print. Determining with certainty the identity of the author was especially important to the earliest reviewers as a way of addressing the perplexity that was then foremost in the readers’ minds: were the letters in The Turkish Spy really the letters of a Turkish spy? The question appeared as early as 1692 on the pages of the British periodical The Athenian Mercury: “Query: Whether the letters and story of The Turkish Spy be a fiction or reality? If true, whether past, and how long since?” The answer, provided by an anonymous expert (perhaps the bookseller John Dunton, who was the magazine’s editor and founder) is symptomatic of the ambiguity that has historically accompanied the novel:

Answer. Is all a fiction, as we are most inclined to believe, ‘tis yet so handsomely managed, that one may rather suspect, than prove it so.

Whoever writ it, ‘tis plain he was exquisitely acquainted with the Oriental customs and languages: he appears a person of clear sense, wit, and very
good humour, and has a valuable collection of history by him. The objection by some brought against it that many passages therein contradict publick accounts of the transactions which the world has seen, has but small force, for the book may in some instances be false: a secret historian seems not, generally speaking, to have that temptation to lying which those have who write a publick chronicle. But supposing it true it would necessarily follow that it must be past, because it is a history of such persons and actions as are sometime since gone off the stage; unless any one would fancy there’s a sort of mystery in it for which we can yet see no reason.

On the one hand, the magazine’s expert admits that “the book may in some instances be false”—that is, that the book may be a fiction. On the other hand, he undermines this admission by defining the author of the *Turkish Spy* as a “secret historian”—an attribution that seems to rule out the possibility of fiction, for a historian would not make up people and events. While seemingly delivering a reasoned judgment, the anonymous expert of *The Athenian Review* leaves the reader as confused as ever. If the letters and story of *The Turkish Spy* are false, then they are fiction. If they are true, then they are history. But readers are never told with clarity where the work falls since it cannot be proven that it “is all a fiction.” Almost since the beginning, publishers, editors, and reviewers acknowledged with a wink the fictional element in *The Turkish spy*—they couldn’t pass for naïve idiots in the eyes of an increasingly sophisticated readership—while simultaneously implying that the work was “truer” than mere fiction.
Nicholas Paige defined three approaches, or regimes, to literary invention; in chronological order: the Aristotelian, the pseudofactual, and the fictional. The *Turkish Spy* finds itself on the cusp of a shift between regimes: it adheres to the conventional Aristotelian esthetics, in that the author adds his own inventions to the renowned heroes (Louis XIV, Mazarin, Richelieu, etc.) and events of history (Spanish wars, the taking of Dunkirk by the Duke of Enghien, etc.) he chooses to highlight; and of course it also adheres to the pseudofactual approach because the text is supposed to be retrieved verbatim from history. Within the pseudofactual conceit that frames the text, the content of Mahmut’s letters can be as Aristotelian as the authors wish. This ambiguous positioning between regimes blurs the distinction between poetry (literature) and history that until then had marked literary production.⁹

This straddling of regimes is a function of the work’s founding conceit. In accordance with the prevailing aesthetic of the times, *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy* masqueraded as non-fiction. The claim to historical truth is seen as an essential part of the novel: it bathed the more fictional elements of the tale in an aura of legitimacy. When the spy referred to an historical character or event and placed himself in some relation to that character or event, it conferred on him a reality indissociable from the historical circumstances mentioned. The far-fetched storyline of a Muslim Turk able to spend 45 years unnoticed in Paris acquired thus the appearance of truth. The historical context of the tale by extension insured that the rest of the spy’s comments -- especially his controversial opinions -- all came from the same desire for objective truth.

The fiction/history ambiguity was also a function of the work’s epistolary form. As Robin Howells notes, the anonymous *Lettres portugaises* (1669) had established
letters as the mode of authenticity. Epistolary novels feel “real” because they are composed of private letters, a mode of expression exuding authenticity. No matter how fictional, they seemingly provide an unvarnished view of the writer’s mind. Indeed, truly uncovered letters not meant for anybody else than the recipient might reveal thoughts untainted by any consideration of politics or reputation, or propriety, and give the sense: “Oh, that is how the letter writer truly feels, or sees things.” And so, even if the reader disagrees with the view expressed, he can only acknowledge the authenticity of the expression and engage with it. Marana, in the preface of the first French edition, had made a parallel claim: because Mahmut was a foreign enemy, one could be certain that no obsequiousness to power would taint his tale with comments designed to please rather than to state the truth. The private (as opposed to public) nature of the letters guaranteed a higher level of truth.

Until the moment the letters got revealed to the public at large, they were secret communications. Secrecy, especially in the case of a spy, can easily be construed as a desire to hide a transgression. The revealing of what was secret becomes then an act of truth telling, a movement that is extremely satisfying to readers. Nobody likes to see the triumph of lies. Of course the “revealing of truth” has to be considered in the context of a novel that is a work of imagination. If the documents are real, there is an actual uncovering of what was hidden. If the documents are fictional, the whole edifice of truth becomes a subjective construction. The *Turkish Spy*, it seems, wants to play both sides of the divide. The text is asking readers to keep both truth and fiction in mind, perhaps as a way to derive maximum enjoyment from the story. The ambiguity that is studiously
pursued by the authors, publishers, and reviewers adds a level of mystery that is integral to the appeal of the *Turkish Spy*.

This ambiguity was also a byproduct of the work’s publication history, which shrouded the “origins” of the work in a veil of mystery. The very first known edition appeared in Paris in the Italian language: *L’Esploratore turco e le di lui relazioni segrete alla porta ottamana, scoperte in Parigi nel regno di Luiggi il Grande. Tradotte dall’Arabo in Italiano, da Gian-Paolo Marana e dall’Italiano in Francese da ***.*


In 1686, Claude Barbin publishes three volumes in French, totaling 102 letters, followed in 1688 by Henry Wetstein in Amsterdam, who also prints 102 letters but divided into four volumes. All these letters are attributed to Marana, but we don’t know if the additional 72 letters were written directly in French or are a translation of a lost
Italian original since an Italian original has only been found for the first 30 letters. The title page of every volume published on the Continent between 1684 and 1693 mentions the Italian refugee Giovanni Paolo Marana as the person responsible for finding Mahmut’s letters and turning them from Arabic into Italian. The subsequent volumes published in English in London between 1691 and 1694 further becloud the origin of the text as a new explanation is offered in the preface of the 1691 edition: the letters were found by a traveling English gentleman, but this time they are in the form of printed and bound volumes in the library of a generous Italian nobleman, and brought to England for translation. In these volumes Marana has become an anonymous Italian somehow responsible for translating Arabic into Italian.

In a way, the complexities of this publication history are but a fitting complement to the many layers of translatio—displacements occurring across temporal, spatial, linguistic, and cultural terrains—on which the novel builds. One can find a certain playfulness in *The Turkish Spy*, like that of a magician who delights in beguiling the spectators though they never fully forget they are watching a “performance.” *The Turkish Spy* beguiles us through a series of shifts that involve language, geography, and identity. The Italian edition of 1684 presented itself as a direct translation from the Arabic, and the French edition of the same year as a translation of the Italian translation. The English editions of 1687 billed themselves as translations from the French. And the continental editions of 1696 in turn billed themselves as translations from the English. As for the Arabic letters that the novel claims to reproduce, an Arab who lived in France, worked for the Ottoman government, and pretended to be a Moldavian allegedly wrote these. The spy is portrayed as fluent in so many languages that his cultural identity itself becomes
uncertain. Our Arab-Ottoman-Moldavian not only can speak the languages of these nations, he speaks French and Italian, and also knows classical Greek and Latin. Indeed the spy can masquerade as a scholar when, at one point in the story, he is asked by Cardinal Richelieu, Prime Minister of France, to translate a Turkish text into Latin.

As it is often the case with works that rely on the conceit of the found document, *The Turkish Spy* was never fully convincing as non-fiction. As early as 1684, the Huguenot writer Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) questioned the very existence of the Arabic manuscripts allegedly found and translated by Marana, suggesting that the latter might well be the work’s true author: “Un Italien natif de Gènes, Marana, donne ces relations pour des lettres écrites aux ministres de la Porte par un espion Turc qui se tenoit caché à Paris. Il prétend les avoir traduites de l’Arabe en Italien: et il raconte fort au long comment il les a trouvées. On soupçonne avec beaucoup d'apparence, que c'est un tour d'esprit Italien, et une fiction ingénieuse…”¹ The “Privilège du Roy” to be found in volume II of *L’Espion du Grand Seigneur* is one incontrovertible proof that Marana is the person responsible for the text of the first 102 letters:

Par la Grace & Privilège du Roy, donné à Versailles le 19. Jour de Novembre l’an de Grace mil six cens quatre-vingt trois, signé par le Roy on son Conseil D’ALENCE, Il est permis au sieur JEAN-PAUL MARANA, de faire imprimer un Livre intitule L’ESPION TURC, en deux Langues, Italienne & Françoise, traduit de l’Arabe, pendant le temps de six années consécutives, à compter du jour qu’il aura esté achevé d’imprimer pour la première fois; & défenses sont faites à tous Imprimeurs, Libraires, & autres, d’imprimer, vendre & débiter ledit Livre,
sous quelque prétex que ce soit, sans le consentement dudit sieur MARANA, sur peine d’amende arbitraire, confiscation des Exemplaires contrefaits, & de tous dépens dommages & interests, comme il est plus amplement porté par lesdites Lettres de Privilège.

Et ledit Sieur MARANA a cédé & transporté son Privilège à CLAUDE BARBIN Marchand Libraire, pour en jouir suivant l’accord fait entre eux.

Registre sur le Livre de la Communauté des Marchands Libraires & Imprimeurs de Paris, le 29 Novembre 1683.

Signé C. ANGOT, Syndic.

Achevé d’imprimer pour la première fois, le quatorze Août 1686.

Another document that points to Marana’s authorship of the French version of 1686 is an excerpt from the royal censor and member of the Académie Française, François Charpentier who demands some cuts in the text that Marana submitted for the Privilège du Roi.¹ No other document has been found that would explicitly state that Marana was in fact the author of the letters, and as far as we know, he never abandoned the pretense that he was the mere translator of these discovered documents. Born from a noble Genoese family in 1642, Marana had emigrated to France in the early 1680s. Some details of his early life in Genoa have been recorded, in particular a run-in with the law that cost him four years in prison¹⁰, but his life in France and especially his literary life in Paris is relatively obscure. What little we know of it comes mainly from Jean François Dreux du Radier (1714-1780), a French journalist and homme de lettres who penned a short biography of the Genoese émigré more than fifty years after his death. One thing seems certain: despite its success, The Turkish Spy failed to earn Marana much money or
recognition. Perhaps because of Marana’s obscurity, Bayle’s attribution failed to stick; and even Bayle himself was later proposed as the author.

As we turn to England, we find that the bookseller John Dunton, for one, attributed the work to William Bradshaw, "the best accomplished hackney-author” of late seventeenth-century England.¹ As for the subsequent English volumes, the number of candidates for authorship seems to grow in proportion to the number of studies devoted to this text. According to Joseph Tucker in “Etats Présents:” more claimants are set forth: Dr. Robert Midgely (Licenser of the Press) and his brother John, a quite different Robert Midgeley (sometime Cambridge scholar), and Dr. Charles Fraser (or Fraizer). In 1756, Samuel Johnson ascribed their authorship to “one [Richard] Sault,” who would have written them “at two guineas a sheet” at the direction of English editor Robert Midgley.¹

Nowadays, there is critical consensus that Giovanni Paolo Marana was the author of The Turkish Spy, even though scholars disagree on the extent of his authorship. More specifically, while Marana is widely recognized as the author of the Continental editions published between 1684 and 1686, the authorship of the English editions (as well as their later Continental translations/adaptations) remains an open question.

Henry Hallam, whose 1837 Introduction to the Literature of Europe in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries first revived critical interest in The Turkish Spy, credits Marana for the first fifty letters but attributes the rest to an Englishman, most probably the hackney writer Mr. William Bradshaw under the direction of a certain Dr. Midgley “for which the doctor was to pay him 40s. per sheet.”¹ This Dr. Midgley was related to the family of Roger Manley by marriage and somehow he appropriated the manuscript of the Turkish Spy. Hallam’s evidence stems from the
publication in 1714 of *The Adventures of Rivella, or the History of the Author of The New Atalantis*, an autobiographical novel by Mrs. Delarivier Manley where she asserts that her father, the Governor Sir Roger Manley, was the author of the *Turkish Spy*:

. . . and yet upon recollection, since the *Turkish-Spy* has been translated into other Languages, I must likewise tell you that our Governour was the Genuine Author of the first Volume of that admir’d and successful Work. An Ingenious Physician, related to the Family by Marriage, had the Charge of looking over his Papers amongst which he found that Manuscript, which he easily reserved to his proper Use; and both by his own Pen, and the assistance of some others, continu’d the Work until the Eighth Volume, without ever having the Justice to Name the Author of the First.¹

Hallam discounts a French original (apart from Marana’s initial letters) mainly because of the fact that when a complete French edition appears in 1996, it is avowedly translated from the English. He views the protagonist of the novel as a hybrid being, a character in a fluid transition between identities. This forgotten text, he says, features a hero who was not meant to be a full-fledged “Oriental.” In a more nuanced way, “Mahmud has something not European, something of a solitary, insulated wanderer, gazing on a world that knows him not, which throws, to my feelings, a striking charm over the *Turkish Spy*” (Hallam 314). That particular position in the world emphasized by Hallam is to my sense expressive of more than “striking charm.” It is the foundational experience of life that allows Mahmut to look at the world in a unique way, originating in but different from either his purported native Muslim culture or his adopted French Christian culture.
A few years later, in 1841, Bolton Corney responded to Hallam’s view and reached an opposite conclusion: the entire work is Marana’s. Corney’s argument rests on internal evidence that the seven additional English volumes are actually translated from the Italian. He finds that Mr. Saltmarsh’s preface in Volume II is more truth than invention – that an Italian original was indeed found in Italy and was written by the Italian Marana -- that the friend in London Saltmarsh mentions is none other than Robert Midgley who, upon acquiring the Italian books, had then the text translated. He sees Gallicisms in Volume I, an observation that fits a volume avowedly translated from the French. Similarly, he notices mistranslations and Italianisms in the text of volume II such as “temporize with thy genius” or “diseases and dolors” and “the capricios of fortune,” which he views as clues in favor of the existence of an Italian original. Corney recognizes that due to lack of hard evidence this is only a hypothesis, but he thinks it’s more convincing than Hallam’s hypothesis.

Since then, scholarly views of the novel’s authorship have mostly taken side with either the Hallam or the Corney camp, varying only in exactly how many letters can be considered Marana’s. Some scholars have added a third option of a more synthetic view that envisages a collaboration of several writers, not necessarily of the same nationality.

In 1957, after a long hiatus in scholarly research into the *Turkish Spy*, William H. McBurney reprises the question of authorship. He acknowledges that until a French or Italian manuscript is discovered, no evidence is definitive, but he leans toward Marana being the sole author of the *Turkish Spy*. His sentiment is based on five indications: 1) Marana announced 500 letters. 2) The preface to a later work, *Les evenements les plus considerable.*... says he has written twelve “petits volumes” in Italian which are not yet
translated into French. 3) Another work attributed to Marana, *Entretiens d’un philosophe avec un solitaire*, presents striking similarities with the *Turkish Spy*. 4) The diverse claims made by British writers cancel each other out and rule out an original English writer. 5) There are Gallicisms in the English text that point to an actual (at times awkward) translation, not only in the first volume that was openly translated from the French but in subsequent volumes as well. Some examples of Gallicisms from the first English volume of 1687 are: “conserve” for “preserve,” “rendition” for “surrender,” or “voyage” for “journey.” In the second English volume of 1691 (for which no Italian or French original has been found) McBurney also finds either Italianisms or Gallicisms such as: “diseases and dolors,” or “porphyry” for “porcelain.” More dubiously, he also finds that an expression such as “run the Risque” is not an English idiom, that it is a literal translation from the French “courir le risque de. . .”

However, none of the indications given by McBurney has the force of a proof. The fact that Marana gave 500 as the total number of letters does not preclude the possibility of other writers adding to the first volume, a commercial success that invited a follow up. Besides, by 1694, a total of 632 letters had been published, exceeding Marana’s announcement of 500 letters. As to the question of the volumes supposedly ready in Italian; first of all, it is not clear how many letters “12 small volumes” might represent, and secondly there is no corroboration from any source that this might have been a fact. To say that another work by Marana presents similarities with the *Turkish Spy* is not much more persuasive than saying that the later volumes of the *Turkish Spy* present similarities with the first volume. If it is at all possible for a writer to imitate the style of another, then similarities cannot be taken as a proof of identity. Competing
claims by British writers do not necessarily rule out one or more British authors. As for claims of Gallicism, they would furnish good examples if an original was found, but in the absence of such original, they may simply point to the influence French literature exerted on an English style still in search of its own genius.

Joseph E. Tucker, examining much of the same evidence as Burney in his 1958 article: “On the Authorship of ‘the Turkish Spy’: An État Présent,” shows how there is supporting evidence for all sorts of names and at the same time contradictory evidence for the same hypotheses. Marana could be the author of the later volumes, but the anticlerical tone clashes with the “liberal Catholic” view of the first volumes. The author could be a French Protestant refugee in England (because it fits the assumed psychological profile of a Protestant sympathizer and it would explain why the text is in English) but Tucker rejects this hypothesis because there is no hard evidence of such a person and a French edition does not appear until 5 years after the English. On the English side there are no fewer than seven claimants, none of whom is the clear winner. There is no conclusive external evidence (such as printer’s receipts or payment vouchers, etc.) for any one candidate. Internal evidence is at best very subjective and often contradictory. For example, Tucker finds that there is not much said about England in the *Turkish Spy*, and what little is said does not show much sympathy, which is not quite congruent with an English author. This argument suggests that an English continuator of *the Turkish Spy* would necessarily shift the story toward England even though the spy is clearly established in Paris, and that such an English author would not be critical of England. If the success of the book is any indication, the English readership was quite happy with and interested in a book that spoke of French and continental affairs and
largely neglected England. A continuator of the story would have little incentive to change what had been working so well. Tucker finds a clue in favor of an English author in that the view of Protestants changes after the first 102 letters. However, this seems to be based largely on the contrast between Marana’s preface to the first volume where he appears to praise “l’application du Prince [Louis XIV] à détruire la Religion Protestante,” and the subsequent English volumes that adopt at times a Calvinist discourse. But it could be a misreading of the cautious irony displayed by Marana; in my opinion, certain Protestant views simply become more explicit in later volumes, mainly because these views are closer to Islam and more conducive to an acceptance of Deism. In any case, there were Protestants (and Protestant sympathies) all over Europe; one did not need to be English to advance a more positive view of the Reform Movement. Tucker argues that Deism was a movement that had some momentum in England, but not in France where it was much more of an underground belief. So, the fact that Mahmut confesses at one point to being a Deist would tend to show that the author is British. The argument is tenuous however, since Deism had existed in one form or another for a long time in France,¹ and the ‘momentum’ mentioned by Tucker is: one, a very subjective and arguable factor and two, it is far more observable in the early decades of the 18th Century than in the last decade of the 17th. On the whole, he sees internal evidence pointing to English rather than French or Italian authorship, but, to quote Tucker, “in an age when the République des Lettres had many international citizens it still seems unsafe to make any too positive assertions” (Tucker 47). Although he cannot pinpoint any author, he concludes tentatively that the Turkish Spy is a work of collaboration.
Hallam, McBurney and Tucker have unearthed most of the facts and arguments available to prove (or more precisely point to) possible authors. More recent scholars have added some clarifications and refined some of the hypotheses proposed earlier but have not changed fundamentally the debate about authorship.

Guido Almansi and Donald A. Warren, in the collaborative article: Roman épistolaire et analyse historique, L’Espion turc de G. P. Marana,¹¹ stress the importance of Marana’s novel beyond its possible source of inspiration for the later Lettres persanes by Montesquieu, a theory which, they feel, has been too much the focus of scholarly research so far.¹² According to them, Marana emphasized the study of history as training ground for political action.¹³ His methodology, they argue, consisted more in describing than in analyzing events, but occasionally Marana gives a personal interpretation to historical phenomena. Almansi and Warren feel that Marana was the first to give an independent value and significance to Islamic culture, and the first to give an interpretation of the reign of Louis XIV as an époque well before that of Voltaire.

Almansi, a major Italian scholar of the Turkish Spy, argued in 1966 for Marana’s authorship, even as he admits that only the first 58 letters can be undoubtedly attributed to the Genoese writer.¹ In 1981, Jean-Pierre Gaudier and Jean-Jacques Heirwegh tried to define a “network of plausibility” to throw some light on attribution of authorship. Like most other scholars, they credit Marana for the first 102 letters but attribute the others to an unidentified French Huguenot refugee in England, which, according to them, would explain the Protestant leanings of the later letters as well as account for the fact that England and the English are almost totally absent from the text.
In 1999, Robin Howells wrote an article titled “The Secret Life: Marana’s Espion du Grand-Seigneur (1684-1686)”\textsuperscript{14},” in which he briefly mentions the mystery of authorship and concludes that a collaboration or successive revisions is more likely to underlie such vast compilation. He concentrates on the first 102 French letters and wants to “bring out the fascination for this piece of literature,” where “Marana the exile creates Mahmut the exile.” Playing on the ambivalence of secrecy’s double implication of truth and falsehood, the author, whom Howells calls a dependent ‘publicist’ paid to laud the regime of Louis XIV, was able to write a politically dangerous fiction through the persona of an exile. Whether it was Marana or other writers who carried forward the tale, I will argue that the text continued to take advantage of the foreign perspective granted to its Muslim hero as well as of the Falsehood/Truth dichotomy pointed out by Howells to pursue a free thinking agenda well ahead of its time.

Finally, Bernard Bray and Virginia Aksan have focused on the novel’s protagonist as a “conscience awakener.”\textsuperscript{15} As Bernard Bray points out, Mahmut initiates readers into an Ottoman world that is unsettlingly like that of seventeenth-century France. The novel thus “awakened” in audiences the awareness that Louis XIV’s power easily resembled that of Ottoman despots, and that the power of Muslim Imams matched the might of the Gallican Church. For her part, Aksan sees The Turkish Spy as part of a concerted effort to change the common way of thinking, a notion I will use in presenting Mahmut as a new international model human being.\textsuperscript{16}

If I have discussed the debate on The Turkish Spy’s authorship in some detail, it is not because I hope to resolve the question. Rather, I want to emphasize the extent to which The Turkish Spy has historically resisted analysis. It is not that the arguments are
necessarily unconvincing; it is just that *The Turkish Spy* is work constantly on the move, and as such does not fit comfortably into any mold. As the survey above has shown, the novel’s complex publication history greatly complicates the search for extrinsic evidence. As for intrinsic evidence, every clue that the text seems to afford—whether in terms of stylistic unity, theoretical coherence, artistic quality, linguistic difference, or chronological discrepancy—points in a different direction. Depending on one’s scholarly proclivity or on the passages one focuses on, the author of *The Turkish Spy* can be variously imagined as a Roman Catholic, a Protestant, a Deist, or an atheist. He could be Italian, French, Dutch or English. He can be thought of as a philosopher, perhaps even a visionary. Or can be thought of as no single person at all, but rather as a series of scriveners, writers, or translators. The difficulty scholars face in the attribution of authorship may be the result of a willful obscuring, intended from the start by the authors, publishers or printers to shore up the conceit of an unreachable Arab writer; it may also be that time alone effaced whatever formal trace of authorship existed at one point. We can only marvel that in this case the grey area of authorship serves admirably well the purported secrecy of the spy hero.

The absence of any firm name to tag onto the text (apart from Marana’s initial impetus) could lead to an obsessive search for an author in the hope perhaps of uncovering deep motivations and assigning definite value judgments. A well-known Calvinist author would suddenly color the whole text in a very different way from a Catholic or Libertine author. Even Marana’s name, firm as it is, does not tell a whole lot about the kind of text he wrote. Was he a “dependent publicist, paid to laud the regime of Louis XIV”1 as Robin Howell tentatively depicts him? Was he, as Meslier saw it, “a
master of the deepest wisdom, a true sage”?17 The uncertain origins of the _Turkish Spy_
force us to evaluate the text itself, shorn of any connotation that an author’s name might
induce us to consider.

Even if in time the long-sought entire manuscript of an original Italian or French
text were discovered, proving beyond doubt that Marana was the sole author of the whole
series, the work’s multiple iterations, the many shifts of meaning implicit in translation,
the impact of disparate paratexts, and the effect of distinct editorial frameworks suggest a
constant process of localization through which Italian, French, Dutch, and German
readerships could each receive the work as if it were their own. In this sense, _The
Turkish Spy_ has no “original”: it is a radically cosmopolitan text whose ultimate origins
are unknowable. However many hands joined in the creation of the _Turkish Spy_, the text
wants to be considered as a unified work, with all volumes being treated as a logical
continuation of the story. The few plot elements that are set up in Marana’s version are
faithfully integrated in the later volumes: Mahmut’s mother Oucomiche and his cousin
Iusuf reappear all along the eight volumes. His dalliance with Daria, the beautiful and
unattainable married woman, started in Volume I, continues through the series and even
gives the opportunity of an unexpected plot twist: in Volume VI, Mahmut accidentally
kills a man who had attacked him in the streets of Paris and learns only later in Volume
VII that the man was Daria’s husband. Most of Mahmut’s correspondents in Volume I
appear again in subsequent books like his friend Dgnet Oglu with whom he shared
captivity as a slave and to whom he dares confide his most private thoughts. It is fairly
obvious that great care was taken to make the tale appear as a coherent story and that the
last writer of the series (in the unproven but likely hypothesis of a collaboration of
writers) consciously worked on continuity. A Muslim Turkish spy character was such a rich invention, such a fountain of new perspectives that the conceit could be used and indeed was used and built upon over ten years to examine in depth the big questions of the time. Once the character was invented, the possibilities that such an unusual hero afforded could not fail to attract writers who had something to say from a new vantage point about their society.

For this reason, I propose that the evolution of The Turkish Spy from the Paris editions of 1684 to the London editions of 1694 can be viewed as the elaboration of a new internationalist vision, a reflection or condensation of the burning subjects treated in the varied correspondence in which European intellectuals, scientists and philosophers who constituted the diffuse group known as the Republic of Letters were engaged. The unique phenomenon of this virtual assembly of enquiring European spirits was the first transnational effort at sharing new knowledge. The spirit of enquiry the members of the Republic of Letters all shared was slowly radiating to the public at large through various publications, the most famous being Pierre Bayle’s Nouvelles de la République des Lettres. This publication, incidentally, featured the very first, and very positive review of L’Espion du Grand Seigneur.¹⁸

The hero of the Turkish Spy is a believer in the Republic of Letters. When he is asked by Cardinal Richelieu, prime minister of France, to spy on the Turks, he dodges the question by flattering the cardinal and proposing a grand endeavor:

I would propose to you a Palace, I say, of miraculous Architecture, the like was never seen or imagined, and which you may with your own hands rear up in Paris, which must be of a square Form, whose Corners shall regard
Europe, Asia, Africa and America, and whose Richness shall draw all Nations to it. You will not need Stone, Sand, Wood nor Iron for this Work. The Architects which you shall employ shall have the Secret, with their Pen, Ink, and Paper to raise this Edifice, which shall be of a more lasting Durance than the Pantheon of Agrippa, and whereon, as on the Temple of Solomon, there should be no noise of Hammers. (T.S. Vol. I, 198)

The metaphorical palace is the continuation of Plutarch’s work, the creation of a universal history for which Mahmut envisages a “College of the Learnedest Men in Europe, consisting of Spaniards, French, Italians and Germans,” who are, according to him, “the most polished Nations who have furnished the world with the most able Men” (T.S. Vol. I, 204). These were the nations (with the glaring absence of England) most involved in the Republic of Letters. If Marana (this letter is a French original) snubbed England, he nevertheless had his hero enlarge the circle of exchange by begging Richelieu to remember “the Turks, thy sworn enemies, being persuaded thou mayst find amongst the Ottoman Emperors, Bassas and Vizirs wherewithal to enrich the New Plutarch” (T.S. Vol. I, 205). If Richelieu does what Mahmut so earnestly requests, then “all the World will bless the Name of Armand Cardinal de Richelieu, Restorer of the Republic of Learning” (T.S. Vol. I, 205), an apt turn of phrase translated from the French original: “Restaurateur de la République des Lettres.”

The fact that the Muslim Ottoman hero of the *Turkish Spy* claims kinship with the Republic of Letters is in itself a somewhat unexpected factor. It suggests that the circle of conversation was not (or should not be) confined to European intellectuals, and was at least imagined to be large enough to include some “Eastern” thinkers. From this
perspective, *The Turkish Spy* ascribes a larger international dimension to a phenomenon that was mainly encompassing a handful of powerful European nations. Mahmut is a polyglot, able to straddle many cultures with relative ease, and eager to see a world order where polyglossia is viewed as enrichment. The palace proposed by the spy is a daring enterprise, a fresh assault on conventional wisdom, a kind of Babel in reverse. If, as the legend records it, the multiplicity of languages used by the builders of the Tower of Babel led to incomprehension and to the collapse of the whole enterprise, the multiplicity of languages evoked by the Turkish Spy served on the contrary to shore up a new cosmopolitan understanding that sought to put in perspective the cultural boundaries separating nations. The book managed to convey this international aspect in an enticing format accessible to a large public beyond the preserve of the highly educated readers of Pierre Bayle’s journal or the exclusive circle of salon frequenters.

The hero is represented as an ardent believer in free exchanges of ideas between people of different cultures, but he is a spy, an instrument of powers that don’t particularly believe in the free spread of knowledge and information. Is Mahmut changing the very definition of a spy? The Italian word “esploratore,” a hybrid term that includes both spying and exploring is perhaps more appropriate to describe Mahmut’s mission in France. Under the guise of giving the Ottoman sultan an exploitable advantage over France, Mahmut’s story opens up avenues of understanding for the French, and by virtue of its fluid adoption of and acculturation into Italian, German, Dutch and English languages, for all Europeans. By conducting a sort of anthropological and sociological enquiry from an Ottoman perspective, the hero of the *Turkish Spy* inevitably invited his readers to perform a kind of reverse engineering. The French could be observed and
studied in their customs, policies and religion by a culture apparently as advanced as their own. Reciprocity of attitudes was implied into the very fabric of the story. The possibility of reciprocity could only become actualized, however, after people learned what kind of “spy” Mahmut was.

The notion of spy encompassed several very different kinds of characters in 17th century France. At the bottom of the scale were the local informers, often people of low extraction, frequenters of taverns and other establishments of pleasure, who for a few pennies (or in exchange for a blind eye toward their own unsavory dealings) reported to the authorities the uninhibited – and occasionally revealing - tirades imprudent revelers let slip. Louis XIV’s police used this type of spy to uncover and quell any seditious talk deemed dangerous to the kingdom. As the use of spies at the service of the government grew, so did the paranoia. Foreign agents were everywhere in the eyes of the police who naturally tended to assimilate the behavior of a spy with dissolute ways: a spy had to be a character of loose morals.

Besides these low level snitches, the government also employed more educated persons whose geographical situation seemed of great strategic interest. They could be merchants in a town suspected of religious deviance, or innkeepers in a border town often visited by strangers and, especially in times of war – not a rare occurrence – bilingual citizens of enemy kingdoms who could report on rumors whispered abroad. These informers were usually established citizens that few could suspect and whose observations were generally handed to the authorities in the form of written reports.

A third type of spy, the foreign adventurer, often was, or pretended to be, of some noble origin. He could speak two or more languages. He was (or looked like) a person of
means, able to travel throughout Europe, and he reveled in international intrigues, offering his services or ingratiating himself to a prince, but his allegiance was often dubious; he was likely to serve two, three or even four masters at the same time. Nevertheless, officials in the government followed such individuals with interest trying to find the rare “homme intelligent et fidèle” they could recruit.

A fourth type was an “official” envoy, someone carefully sought and selected for his qualities: a noble man of considerable means or a retired military officer, of irreproachable education and manners, and a very proficient writer. These were the ambassadors, special envoys, attachés of all sorts who often had some secret mission beside their appointed duties, but who had to act with the utmost discretion not to compromise their status. François de Callières, in *De la manière de négocier avec les souverains*. . .

20 called ambassadors “honorable spies.” They were involved in high level talks with foreign powers and although they could not afford to be caught themselves in an actual act of spying, they depended on information supplied by the lower level spies to negotiate successfully on behalf of their sovereign.

These four types, in all the variations that human nature could produce, were the characters that came to mind when the word “spy” was evoked by the end of the 17th century. The “Dictionnaire de l’Académie française, 1st Edition” of 1694 defines spying as: “Observer secrettement & adroitement quelqu'un pour luy nuire” and explains: “On dit fig. qu'Un homme ne despense guere en espions, pour dire, qu'il n'est pas bien adverti.” The definition emphasizes the harm perpetrated on the one being spied upon rather than the advantage incurred by the one doing the spying. On a very immediate level for French citizens of all classes, spies could harm you or harm your family. Spying
was not just the stuff of international intrigues; its reality to the humblest of subjects was shockingly present.

Spies for the state (or some wealthy patrons) were potentially everywhere and even a slightly unusual behavior could lead to accusation and reports to the authorities. From the simplest of folks to princes at the court, no one was above suspicion. The intolerance for Protestantism fostered by the state and all too frequent baseless denunciations to the police engendered a climate of suspicion and fear in a large portion of the population. Of necessity, people learned to separate private and public sphere. The more one learned about secrets being divulged and perpetrators punished, and the more one feared for one’s privacy.

Spies had been employed by private and public patrons for as long as history has been recorded but under Louis XIV, France saw the greatest expansion and systematization of the trade to date. Information gathering necessitated the formation of a veritable corps of spies, and the government began to define the competences needed for the job and to look for the “perfect” spy. Paradoxically, spying, a despicable occupation, was gradually acquiring its “lettres de noblesse.” It was in this climate that the Turkish Spy appeared.

Of all the possible targets, foreigners, especially in times of war, were prime suspects for the police, and of all possible foreigners, a Turk would be much more likely to attract attention. How does the Turkish spy manage to escape detection? The author knew that the plausibility of the character depended very much on his capacity to melt into French society and in the first paragraph of the first letter of the series he immediately proceeds to establish these credentials. Upon arriving in Paris, Mahmut cuts
the hair he had let grow, rents a room “si petite que le soupçon mesme n’y pourra pas 
entrer,” and refrains from hiring a servant who could only snoop on him. The spy then 
describes himself:

Comme je suis assez mal fait, que je suis laid de visage, & que je ne suis 

pas grand parleur, je me cacheray facilement. Au lieu de mon nom, 
l’Arabe Mamut, je me fais donner celuy de Tite de Moldavie, & et avec 
une petite soutane de serge noire, qui est la sorte d’habit que j’ai choisi, je 
fais deux figures; je suis dans le cœur ce que je dois estre, & à l’exterieur 
je parois ce que je ne seray jamais. (E.G.S. Vol. I, 3)

Mahmut is definitely not the noble adventurer type of spy, nor is he a common tavern 
frequenter. His anonymity is protected by his looks, an ungainly frame topped with an 
ugly face, and by his demeanor, reserved and solitary. His assumed name, Tite, and 
origin, la Moldavie, represent a clever admixture of fabulation and semi-truth: Tite, a 
francization of the Latin Titus, evokes either the famous historian Titus Livius (Tite-Live 
in French) or the later Roman emperor Titus who completed the Coliseum, a sign not 
only of Marana’s erudition in classical lore, but also perhaps of his aspiration to literary 
immortality. Moldavia, a small Christian Orthodox nation East of the Black Sea, paid 
tribute as a vassal to the Ottoman Empire whose capital, renamed Istanbul by the 
Ottomans but doggedly referred to as Constantinople by Christians still smarting from the 
loss of the Byzantine Empire, was the seat of the Patriarchate of the Christian Eastern 
Orthodox Church. As a Christian Orthodox, Tite was not subjected to the ardent 
discrimination that targeted the apostate Protestants, nor was he assimilated with the 
religion of his overlords, the Muslim Turks. Thus, the spy could claim knowledge of, but
distinct separateness from the Ottoman Empire. The book does not tell whether Mahmut spoke French with a foreign accent, or whether his looks -- besides being ugly -- betrayed any foreignness, but reasonably assuming that he did melt into French society, his clever new identity seems perfectly designed to avoid the suspicions that strangers in France almost automatically raised.

Spies, then, were a major preoccupation in all strata of society. So, when the new book published by Barbin in 1684 took its place in the “vitrine” of the bookseller, the first word of the title: *L’Espion*, immediately seized the imagination of the public. Such a title promised an insight, or at least an inside look at what the international world of spying looked like. The next words of title: *Grand Seigneur*, refers to the Ottoman Sultan. The combination of those words, rarely seen together, immediately attracted a consequential readership. Spies and Turks were each hot topics in themselves when the book appeared in France in 1684. Spies were everywhere and the “Turks,” widely feared and abhorred for their military prowess and false religion, were beginning to be viewed with more curiosity after 1683 when they were defeated at the walls of Vienna. Their aura of invincibility shattered, they could turn into an object of study for inquisitive Europeans. A book combining in its title two of the most interesting topics of the time could not fail to arouse interest.

The Ottomans did have spies, especially in the realm of their inveterate enemies the Hapsburgs and in the Republic of Venice, their main rival in the Mediterranean, but these spies were Christians working for the Turks. We don’t know if the Ottomans had spies in France which was not a declared enemy like the Hapsburg Empire, and in fact had concluded many open and secret alliances, both commercial and military, with the
Turks since king Francis I (1494-1547). An actual Muslim Arab might have found it hard to protect his incognito in a Christian land. At any rate, Mahmut manages to look like a Christian Frenchman outwardly while remaining (at least for the length of five volumes) a Muslim Arab inwardly. The inner persona revealed by the text, the Arab Muslim, is the one who from the very first volume by the hand of Marana claims kinship with the Republic of Letters. As the story of Mahmut progresses through the years, his avowed affinity with the thinkers and scientists of Europe sets him apart from his Arab/Turkish Muslim roots. His role as an instrument of Ottoman power and hegemony becomes gradually that of an explorer, an anthropologist of sorts who reveals traits of the society he observes, as well as documents his own inner change. Perhaps a reason for the success of l’Espion was that it redefined, enlarged and ultimately relativized the notion of spying. Spying could be a harmful act, but as in Mahmut’s case, it could also lead to cultural discoveries. A thoughtful and literate enemy gave one more pause than a viscerally belligerent foe.

As one reads into the long life story of Mahmut the Arabian/Tite the Moldavian, a fuller picture of the spy’s actions and thoughts emerges. His association with the Republic of Letters is made clear to the reader, not just because he says so, but because his whole interest in scientific discoveries, his openness to philosophical questioning and his undeniable teleological view of history are powerful and constant reminders of his aspiration for a world of progress, justice and truth. He avers to be a model of independent thinker. His admiration for Descartes, reiterated in several passages throughout the series, does not prevent him from disagreeing with the philosopher’s conclusion regarding animals. His reverence for the prophet of Islam is tempered by a
sober view of the self-serving dogmatism Mullahs of that religion too often live by. His veneration for saints and ascetics is no hindrance to a vigorous questioning of the aims and methods adopted by the religions of the world. In other words, the spy is more concerned with the future of humanity in general than with safekeeping the interests of the Ottoman Empire. A new kind of spy indeed!

His refusal to be limited by narrow doctrines, be they religious, philosophical or political, leads him to search for answers far and wide. His eclecticism is revealed in the profusion of varied correspondents he communicates with. As a functional spy, he of course deals with high government officials in Turkey and in France. Military commanders as well as subaltern janissaries are recipient of his routine communications, and he describes at length army movements and battles as befits an aspiring historian. He communicates with savants and scholars of all sorts, astronomers and astrologers, physicians and professors of philosophy, lawyers and educators, preachers and theologians, gardeners and botanists, antiquarians and historians, weapon experts and shipbuilders, students in the sciences and men of letters. Not only are his interests wide-ranging, his geographical reach is unparalleled: he writes to all parts of Turkey, to Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Russia (Astrakhan), Austria, Venice and various parts of France. Even when communicating with members of his family, he is apt to broach topics as varied as the nature of cold in the Arctic region (T.S. Vol. V, 338), or whether planets are habitable (T.S. Vol. II, 89). If for nothing else, his avid curiosity about the world and the various mechanisms that make the world run the way it does would qualify him as an outstanding member of the Republic of Letters.
Maybe most readers were aware that no actual Turk lurked behind the writings of this eloquent character but there were enough examples of the writer’s acuity in his observations of the Western world to attribute some credence to his portrayal of Turkishness. The plausibility of a Turkish/Arab character claiming participation in the Republic of Letters had portentous consequences. By the end of the 17th Century, educated readers in Europe had grown into the belief that reverence for science, philosophy and progress were essentially European qualities. In discovering a contemporary Easterner adopting the kind of discourse they were familiar with, they were caught almost by surprise in their spontaneous prejudice. Europe (perceived as a psychological more than geographical region) was perhaps larger than they had thought, or represented only one way of looking at the world, one way among other equally valid ways. The Turkish Spy, of course, was not the only factor in tilting the scale: ever since the discovery of America, the growing belief that science would eventually explain everything away was developing into a transnational movement that could unite all sorts of minds; curiosity about other people and cultures that had been awakened by travelers’ accounts was really the first step toward an acceptance, then an understanding of other ways of life. But in the Turkish Spy’s case, it felt like a voice from the “other side” was telling a story never heard before. Someone from the “other side” was reaching out in comprehensible ways and bringing out the sense of a common destiny for all of humanity, from the East or the West, from the Americas or from Europe.

The protagonist of the Turkish Spy, with his Arab/Turkish/Italian/French connections was uniquely placed to represent cosmopolitan aspirations. These aspirations did not take the shape of a distinct philosophy. Mahmut really speaks only for himself but
as he contains within himself all these contradictory – and normally incompatible – elements, Christian versus Muslim, French versus Turk, man of honor versus spy, his reach obtains a more universal quality. Mahmut is a being undergoing many transitions, from ancient to modern, from Eastern to Western, from dogmatic religion to spirituality. His whole endeavor is to persistently translate for the reader what it means to undergo these transitions, and through the very act of translation to offer a new model of being for his contemporaries. He is able to translate because he uses what he feels are universal commonalities: observation and deduction using reason. Through the magic of translation, the utter stranger, foreign by upbringing, by geography, by culture, by language, by religion becomes a neighbor, a partner in stimulating conversations, a fellow seeker striving to understand his place in the world. Somehow, the tale worked equally well for Italian, French, Dutch and German readers in periods ranging from the apex of absolute monarchy to the eve of the French Revolution.

The idea of an East-West conversation was not entirely far-fetched in late seventeenth century Europe. As Aleksandra Porada has noted, *The Turkish Spy* was published at a time when the fame of the Ottoman Emperor Suleiman the Magnificent was at its peak and the receding threat of Ottoman expansionism allowed for a widespread fascination for all things “Oriental.” To our twenty-first Century eyes, the *Turkish Spy* can easily be seen as a refreshing look on the world, harking back to a time when curiosity and wonder could begin to widen the horizon and dare to think new thoughts of internationalism.
CHAPTER II

The Prefaces:

I tend to believe that the preface-writer’s role consists of expressing what the author, from a sense of propriety, modesty, discretion, etc., cannot say. Now, despite the words, I am not referring to psychological scruples. An author can certainly say “I,” but it is hard – without causing some vertigo – for him to comment on this I with a second “I,” necessarily different from the first. An author can speak of the knowledge of his time, can indeed adduce his own relations to it, but he does not have the power to situate himself there declaratively, historically, he cannot assess himself. [...] The preface-writer, acting as a second voice, maintains with the author and the public a very special, particular speech-relation, inasmuch as he is ternary: as preface-writer, I designate one of the places where I would very much like [the author] to be recognized as a third party, who is his reader.

Roland Barthes, Preface to La Parole intermédiaire by François Flahault

The discourse on the paratext must never forget that it bears on a discourse that bears on a discourse, and that the meaning of its object depends on the object of his meaning, which is yet another meaning. A threshold exists to be crossed.

Gérard Genette, Paratextes

a) Framing the discourse

Almost all scholars have focused on the letters themselves, the obvious foundational text on which critical discourse can be applied, but I want to begin by considering more specifically the interplay between the text and the prefaces (in the French and English editions) that seek to give the letters a referential structure. Answering real or imagined questions raised by a supposed readership, the prefaces (and accompanying paratexts such as a glossary of Turkish words, or a letter from the ‘discoverer’ of the Italian edition) address readers with an authoritative insight into what
they, the readers, want to know. Whether the prefaces were written by the author(s) of the letters or by the editor, printer, or whoever invested time and work in the production of these books, they are an integral and inseparable part of the work referred to in these pages as the *Turkish Spy*, a simplified name that refers to the eight volumes of the English editions from 1687 to 1694. The prefaces can be seen as snapshots of the rapidly evolving concerns of a society in ferment. There is a discernible movement in the prefaces that consists in orienting the readers towards an acceptance of the new internationalist ideas Mahmut puts forward, culminating in the exposition of deist ideas. The preface to the first English volume links the *Turkish spy* to the scientific revolution. The preface to the second volume stresses the authenticity of the text and seeks to affirm an English genius. The preface to the third volume reflects on the open interplay of pretense and authenticity and invites readers to hold both views in order to appreciate the text. This element is reprised in the fourth volume where reflections on translatability point to a universal metonymy in expression. The universality of human responses the text advocates opens the way for deism as a form of universal religion. In the fifth volume the preface tackles the “fear of turning Turk” and the fear of Deism, and questions the validity of these fears. The preface to the sixth volume returns to the problem of translation (a growing concern given the appetite for books that an emerging literate class was eager to satisfy by turning to foreign publications.) This preface also hints at the political relevance of the text, given that it speaks of events that took place a mere 26 years before, well within the lifetime of many readers. The preface to the seventh volume takes pains to justify controversial ideas (i.e. deist ideas) and makes a pre-emptive defense against censorship. Finally, the preface to the last volume seeks to
make a clear distinction between Deism (an acceptable belief) and Atheism (an indefensible position).

Because the preface is inseparable from the letters, indeed *is* the letter to the Reader that justifies the existence of all the others, the whole book is altered when the preface is modified. A survey of French and English editions will give a sense of how this text was approached at different times and in different languages and circumstances. The preface to the French editions of 1684 and 1686 is written by the author who presents himself as a mere compiler of Mahmut’s letters. The prefaces to the English editions are anonymous, a third voice added to that of the equally anonymous compiler of the text and the apocryphal writer of the letters. Marana’s French preface emphasized the conceit of the discovered letters and the fact that they happen to tell a history of Louis XIV even though it was far from the aim of the letter writer. The English editions emphasized the conceit of the letters as true documents, but not the personal history of Louis XIV, casting the whole tale in the larger net of European history with the unique perspective an international protagonist like Mahmut can bring: that of an intelligent Muslim who gets his schooling in Western culture from an extended stint as a slave in a Christian country. No explicit mention of Christian literature is offered to explain the spy’s intellectual formation – he mainly studies logic and history, the writer reports -- but the following quotation by St. Augustine, “Where Love is, there is no Labour; and if there be Labour, the Labour is loved,” reinforces the notion that Mahmut has absorbed Christianity along with his acculturation of Western mores. An “Oriental” who can, among other things, quote Augustine and boast of a classical knowledge that is the hallmark of learned doctors in the West will be in a privileged place to render judgment on the society he
observes. Mahmut’s profound understanding of Christian culture as pointed out in the preface will be contrasted in the letters themselves with the naïve comments he makes about the many contradictions inherent in the day-to-day expression of organized religion. A consequence of this contrast between knowledge and sophistication (preface) on the one hand, and simplicity and naivety on the other (letters) is that the latter virtues seem all the more appropriate and powerful, stemming, as they are presented, from a deep well of considered knowledge.

Barely two weeks before the first French edition of *L’Espion du grand seigneur* came out in Paris, the printer Barbin had published the Italian original: *L’esploratore turco e le di lui pratiche segrete con la Porta Ottomana. Scoperte in Parigi nel regno di Luiggi il Grande.* Both the Italian and the French volumes contained 30 letters. We don’t know what prompted Barbin to print an Italian book, a rare venture into foreign language publication for a *libraire* known mainly for his flair in pleasing the French public. It is remarkable that out of 314 books printed under his name between 1672 and 1692, *L’Esploratore turco* is the only book in a foreign language (Reed 97-112).

Exemplars of the edition of 1686, published by Claude Barbin, although rare, are still to be found today and constitute the original text generally attributed to Marana. The title page of the volumes printed that year states that the text was translated from Arabic into Italian by “le Sieur Jean-Paul Marana,” a francization of Giovanni Paolo Marana’s real name. The 1686 edition contained 102 letters, divided into three volumes. The first volume, in which there is no mention of the *Privilège du Roi*, consists of the 30 letters published two years earlier. Volume II features letters XXXI to LXVIII with an “Extrait du Privilège du Roi” that shows that Marana obtained the *Privilège* on November 19,
1683 and that he ceded that privilege to Claude Barbin “pour en jouir suivant l’accord fait entre eux.” Volume III includes letters LXIX through CII but the table of contents erroneously tabulates the volume as containing only 25 letters, from LI to LXXVI. Barbin then published a fourth volume, still in 1686, that starts at letter LXXVII and ends at letter CII, as if no one had noticed that the third volume already contained these letters. In parallel to the 1684 Barbin edition, the Dutch publishers Henricus Wetstein and Henry Desbordes, sympathisers to the Republic of Letters, printed in Amsterdam another copy of Marana’s book featuring letters I to XXX. In 1688, Wetstein published again a copy of the 1686 Barbin edition with its 102 letters. The layout and pagination of the Wetstein edition are different so we know he had the whole text recomposed.

Irrespective of the printing differences, these first 102 letters are identical in all editions and almost unanimously attributed to Marana.

The first volume of the 1686 Barbin edition begins with an “Epistre,” a dedication to Louis Le Grand signed Jean-Paul Marana. In it, Marana slyly links the extraordinariness of his account to the extraordinary reign of the Sun king and then proceeds to tell briefly of the supposed author of the letters whom he, Marana, translated into Italian, his “langue naturelle.” The author of the letters, Mahmut, an Arab working for the “Emperor of the Turks,” lived undiscovered in Paris for forty-five years under the nom de guerre of “Tite de Moldavie,” died there (possibly of a violent death) at an advanced age and left a trove of letters relating to his masters in Constantinople the principal events of Louis XIV’s reign. The Epistle writer highlights the fact that the letters could pass for the annals of Christendom were it not for their broken-up nature caused by a multiplicity of addressees. The “annals” aspect of the letters offers a text of
historical value demonstrating for all the greatness of the reign being recounted. The “broken-up” nature of the work, presented by the translator as a jarring element in what would otherwise be a great panegyric to the king, is rendered unavoidable by the obligation to faithfulness with which the conscientious Marana translates the text. Thus, the preface argues, the fact that the letters address all sorts of topics in a seemingly haphazard way should not be seen as the author’s weakness in composition but as a proof of the authenticity of the document.

The Epistle writer seeks the approval of the King to continue the task of translation, a huge work he would not undertake without the express royal authorization to do so, i.e. the financial support he needs. He highlights the fact that Mahmut, being an enemy, could not possibly talk like a flatterer. He extols Mahmut’s impartiality and presents it as further proof of Louis’ greatness, for it so happens that the Arab elevates the Sun King above all others. The Epistre is meant to amuse by its “tour d’esprit.” It is also conceivable that the epistle is meant to throw off any suspicion the censors might have. Marana must have been aware of the audacity of certain thoughts in his book and may have feared the censors’ scissors. At the same time, he had every reason to be genuinely grateful to France for sheltering an exile such as he. Like his protagonist, he must have sought to harmonize within himself his sincere admiration for Louis XIV and his need for creative independence. And it is of course not the sycophant writer, but the critical observer of French society who will ensure the success of the book.

Marana ends his epistle by ambiguously talking about himself, or rather not talking about himself: “Je ne dis point à V. M. de quelle Nation je suis, ni quelle est ma condition, parce que les Hommes qui ont peu de fortune ne sont d’aucun Païs.” The
author chooses to efface himself, and thus both to downplay his own foreign origin (for readers other than Italian) and to allude to the sense of a truly international authorship. By claiming the anonymity of a lack of fortune Marana made it possible for other anonymous writers to continue his novel. We know from what he announced that Marana’s original intention was to continue his tale for at least 500 more letters. We may never know if he had a hand in this effort, but we do know that the letters kept coming, even beyond his grave (he died in 1693 but new volumes kept appearing until 1694) and beyond the borders of his native Italy (or his adopted France), and that his aspiration to go farther than the confines of national discourse bore fruits. Perhaps, Marana himself is telling us that the search for an “author” is not a productive endeavor. He does give some factual information: he was born in Genoa but left his country to serve the king of France, and as such he implores the “Royale Protection.” Marana’s situation in France may have been precarious. Genoa was Spain’s ally and an enemy of France at the time L’Espion du grand seigneur was first published. Marana may have been at risk of passing for a spy. He is very insistent in his claim that the novel is a disguised history of Louis XIV, but if his letters do recount -- and praise occasionally -- some actions of the king, they reveal to a far greater degree a history of Mahmut’s thinking over the years; and that thinking often aligns with controversial ideas antagonistic to monarchical power. One may conclude that the sycophantic remarks in the preface were bait thrown to the censors in order to allay suspicions of sympathy with ideas dangerous to the church and the crown.

The “Epistre” is followed by an “Avertissement” where the writer/compiler humbly avows that his only merit lies in the serendipitous discovery of the letters. This reticence to admit any talent fits in with what Geoffrey Turnovski calls the defining
paradox of literary life at the end of the 17th century: “How to construct a self that would be admired for its humility; how to stand out through self-effacement before the group; and how to command attention by seeking to deflect it away” (Turnovski, 52).

After the Avertissement comes the table of contents and then the preface, entitled: Au Lecteur. In it, the narrative voice assumed by Marana, speaking in the first person, takes responsibility for bringing the book to the attention of the public. He announces the aim of the preface: to preempt any question the reader might have about the actual author. That first person voice then identifies a certain “man of letters” who left Italy to settle in Paris. The narrative voice tells briefly of the circumstances that brought that Italian to Paris and how, having rented a room in the capital, he found a bundle of old papers lying in a corner. After identifying the written characters as Arabic, “dont la langue ne luy estoit pas tout-à fait inconnue” (E.G.S. Vol. I, 6), our Italian recognizes that the letters deal with “affairs of the State.” Having ascertained the value of the documents, the Italian takes the whole bundle to a secure location. This extraordinary precaution titillates the sense of anticipation and predisposes readers to accept right away that the yet un-assessed documents are of immense value. The affairs of State hinted at are all the more enticing in that they are couched in an undecipherable script and language, giving thus enormous authority to the rare person capable of rendering it in plain French: the translator. Marana chose to conflate Arabic and Turkish, a mistaken but common conception. (Turkish and Arabic belong to distinct language families, not at all mutually intelligible, but both languages used the same basic script then). Official documents were drafted in Ottoman Turkish but since the script looked the same and much of the Arab world was under Ottoman domination at that time, the conflation of these terms was an accepted trope in
the public at large. For the more literate or punctilious readers, however, the result is that
the author has added yet another layer of translation: from Ottoman Turkish to Arabic,
then Arabic to Italian, then Italian to French, raising questions about the origin and
destination of this text.

At a time when France was very keen on exporting her culture and her language,
*l’Espion* takes an opposite direction, importing attributes of foreignness that seem to blur
national distinctions. The centralized power of the government under Louis XIV along
with the growing dominance of the “Moderns” in the cultural war that opposed them to
the “Ancients” contributed to fostering a strong sense of a French identity. *L’Espion du
Grand Seigneur* ran a contrary course, extolling the virtues of relativism and
internationalism ahead of its time. The spy, however, does not advocate a rupture with
the past - as his love and reverence for the works of Antiquity clearly shows; his ideas try
to synthesize views still considered antagonistic in Europe. The preface gently insists that
both the so-called author (Mahmut) and the translator (the Italian) are in transience,
people uprooted from their native place, at home nowhere and everywhere, prototypes of
a more cosmopolitan type of human beings. The distinction between author and
translator is blurred: the discoverer of the letters is himself a foreigner, a displaced visitor
who is serendipitously led to rent the very room in which the Arabian spent 45 years. The
Italian possesses the expected attributes of a writer/translator: he is a man of letters and
knows Arabic, but his main credential, perhaps, is the uncanny trajectory that links his
destiny to that of the Turkish spy. He literally retraces the footsteps of his protagonist,
putting himself, unwittingly at first, in the same environment. Talking to the host from
whom he rents the room, the translator learns that the previous occupant had only three
books in his room: St. Augustine, Tacitus and the Koran. Mahmut’s letters will often put great emphasis on history and it is significant that Marana clues the reader in by placing Tacitus, the historian, between a Christian apologist and the Revelation sacred to Muslims. History is the impartial mediator between different faiths and the one objective viewpoint from which Marana wants to look at the world. Significant as well is the only painting hanging in the room, a portrait of Masaniello that Mahmut reportedly called “the Moses of Naples,” Moses being a figure recognized as a prophet and leader of the people by both Islam and Christianity. We see here the first clue that Marana’s tale is not some anodyne story concocted with the sole aim of flattering the reigning king. Masaniello was a dangerous revolutionary who defied the authority of the Viceroy of Naples (then acting on behalf of Hapsburg Spain) by organizing the populace and leading a revolt against the privileged nobility and the unjust taxation system that affected principally the poor of the kingdom. He was a simple fisherman who enthused people with his call for justice and who, for a while, became the master of Naples. Massaniello’s charisma was recognized by Spinoza, John Locke and Thomas Paine among others, but it is doubtful that the censors of the French monarchy would be equally enthused by the leader of a popular uprising. The mention of Massaniello however, did not raise any flags.

The preface writer praises “l’application du Prince à détruire la Religion Protestante.” This may sound to the modern reader like the language of a rabid fundamentalist, of an intolerant fanatic, quite the opposite of the wise Mahmut revealed in the letters themselves; however, the sentiment that a strong nation should be represented and unified by one religion was widespread at the time. Many Catholics thought France would be better off without the damaging spread of iconoclastic
Protestant ideas. Political unity required religious unity. The religious intolerance manifested in the preface might seem to justify Almansi’s view that Marana can be of a “bassesse révoltante” (Almansi, Warren, 64). Given the tenor of some of the letters, however, Marana might have thrown onto the preface this gratuitous appraisal of Louis XIV’s official policy for the benefit of the royal censors who, hopefully blinded by this obsequious approval, would not notice other, more controversial elements in the writing. Indeed, the reader does not have to wait long to see the more subversive Mahmut show his face. For example, in Volume I, Book I, letter VII, addressed to the Invincible Vizir Azem, Mahmut talks about the siege of La Rochelle, a Protestant port town that Louis XIV’s father, Louis XIII, captured in 1628: “Il semble que ce Roy veuille imiter nos puissans & formidables Empereurs, & qu’il veuille regler sa conduite sur la tienne, en ne voulant point souffrir dans ses Estats, deux Religions qui soient opposées” (E.G.S. Vol. I, 58).

The comparison advanced by Mahmut here is based on false premises: the Ottoman Empire accommodated a multiplicity of religions under the Millet system, a policy of tolerance established by the conqueror of Constantinople, Mehmet II. Nevertheless, comparing a King of France to a Vizir of the Ottoman Empire is in itself a bold move, and praising a Catholic policy because it is modeled on a supposed Muslim policy could be construed as the height of impertinence. The irony works two ways: if the Ottomans do not tolerate other religions, the king of France is a mere imitator of a wrong practice; if the Ottomans do not discriminate against other religions, then the king of France is not even half-enlightened in comparison with his Muslim counterpart. Mahmut, who often refers to the ideal of a Republic of Letters, is one of the first fictional heroes to
bring the topic of religious tolerance openly to the fore with his unorthodox comparison between vastly different regimes. It is a matter of conjecture how many readers in France perceived the irony in Mahmut’s declaration since the revocation of the Edict of Nantes was widely approved by the French public at the time. In the rest of Europe, however, especially in majority Protestant countries, Mahmut’s reflections were probably received very differently; comparisons between Louis XIV and Ottoman despots were not uncommon after the fateful revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Did Marana willfully mentioned the ‘destruction of the Protestant religion’ as an eye opener for his readers? His hero, a supposed Muslim who fears retribution from the French — were the secret of his religion brought to daylight — belies the stance adopted in these few lines. By both approving the policy of one state one religion in the preface, and mocking it in the actual content of the letters, the author clearly raises the issue of religious intolerance and establishes a potential readership beyond the borders of Catholic France.

The hero Marana created is portrayed as living on the cusp of two worlds, one of deceit, hidden identities and fraud, and one of virtuous aims and fidelity to one’s duty. The uneasiness and ambiguity of this situation do distress Mahmut’s conscience in many a letter, and it does not seem unreasonable to imagine Marana tormented by the same kind of questions as he seeks the royal protection he needs to express himself. Marana has too many and too valuable things to say to risk a rejection of his work. He has to navigate the conditions under which a writer strove to get published in the late seventeenth century: to pass through an army of book censors who were looking for any sign of disparagement or criticism of the church or the king and suppressed the printing of such works, often at great risk for their author. Then, there was also a genuine, though
by no means universal feeling that France’s rising pre-eminence in Europe was largely
due to the extraordinary personality and radiance of the king. Besides, the State, that is
the king – at least till 1690 -- replaced in large measure the princely patronage that
traditionally allowed artists to live and produce. To praise the king who bestowed such
bounty was the accepted form that all artists of the time adopted. We cannot be surprised
that some did it with more grace than others. Marana’s dedication to the king is not
blatantly obsequious, and it insulates the writer by adding the slight distance that his role
as an intermediary “translator” allows.

The author (speaking as the translator, or, as Roland Barthes points out, as a
vertigo-inducing different “I”) comments on the style of the letter writer:

Son stile fait remarquer une grande liberté d’esprit, & jamais de
passion, & s’il paroit qu’il s’accommodoit aux manieres des
Cours, on voit que c’estoit moins à dessein de plaire, que parce
qu’il croyoit sagement qu’il falloit quelquefois se conformer au

Beyond the question of who exactly is speaking here, the thought seems to be that nations
have a particular genius, a unique way of expressing truths, and what matters to the writer
is not the changing form that times and regimes may impose but rather the essence of
what he has to say. One can sense a Platonic and libertarian streak in the man (or perhaps
more appropriately termed for the time, a libertinist streak). He is very aware of the
limitations and constraints to which he has to conform.

The translator establishes the main paradox that underwrites all the letters to
come: whereas the natural tendency of the reader would be to trust a fellow Christian and
a French compatriot based on the sense of shared community and common interests, the writer highlights this tendency as a likely source of bias. Rather trust an enemy’s assessment if you want the truth! This warning does more than set the author apart from his fellow writers, it establishes a questioning mode potentially very dangerous to the powers that be.

At the end of the preface, Marana acknowledges that he is, indeed, the *homme de Lettres* who discovered the letters, perfected his Arabic, translated and edited “les Relations de ce sage Mahometan.” Marana’s false confession is emblematic of the whole work; bits of truth are revealed here and there, teasing the reader into searching for a more comprehensive truth. Thus, every statement in the text can be read two ways: as plain truth or as self-irony. Marana ends by summarizing Mahmut’s mission: to save humanity from ignorance and idleness, associating himself (as the translator) quite modestly in this formidable task. Finally, he tries to reconcile God, the King and reason (the last word of the preface) in a sweeping statement:

> Remerciez Dieu, cepandant qui fait naître des gens qui s’occuppent à vaincre l’ignorance & l’oisiveté, & en rendant justice à Mamut, Esclave passionné pour les intérêts de son Maistre, & pour la vérité, ayez quelque bonté pour son Traducteur qui estant né libre, ne connoist point d’autre Maistre que Dieu, le bon Prince, & la raison. (E.G.S. Vol. I, 34)

Mahmut passionately serves the Ottoman Sultan and truth; Marana serves God, the Prince, and reason. Marana’s whole dilemma is encapsulated in this passage: Mahmut is a slave but his translator is free, or at least born free. The ambiguous collaboration of the
slave with the free is what gives birth to the text. Mahmut is slave to his master but also slave to the truth, two masters not necessarily compatible. Marana (the translator) is free but nonetheless has to answer to a master, the King. So, the slave is free, and the free-born is a slave. The writer thus enjoins readers to contemplate this double nature as they proceed through the spy’s narrative and enter a world of mixed signals that implicate readers themselves: who is free, and who is a slave?

THE TEXT PUTS ON AN ENGLISH GARB

The French text as well as the preliminaries will remain the same for the next few years in both the Paris and the Amsterdam edition, and we must now cross the Channel to see the first important transformations happening. In England, the religious tension was the reverse of that in France with the Protestants being the vast majority of the population. When James II, a Catholic who acceded the throne in 1685, began promoting religious tolerance and stacking the parliament with Catholics – while Louis XIV revoked the religious liberty of Protestants in France--these tensions reached a climax.

In particular, James was suspected of harboring anti-Protestant sentiments and of trying to forge an alliance with Louis XIV at a time when the revocation of the Edict of Nantes had made most of Northern Europe very wary of France. And so, the animosity against Catholics was raging in 1687 when the first English edition of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy, featuring a translation of the first 102 letters minus letter XCIX, was published. Letter XCIX, dated “le vingt-quatre de la sixième Lune de 1642” (June 7th, 1642) and addressed to “L’Invincible Vizir Azem” tells of the English Civil War (1642-1651) that opposed king Charles to parliament, an explosive mix of religious and political
sentiments. Although the letter dealt almost exclusively with England, a topic of obvious interest for English readers, the editors of the text must have thought it more prudent (to no avail, it turned out) in the pre-revolutionary and troubled period of 1687 not to revive the strife that had torn apart the kingdom 38 years earlier. All the other letters, rather faithfully translated, appear, including those that present Protestants as a danger to the kingdom of France, such as letter VII mentioned earlier. Whereas the French could perceive the irony of a Muslim faithful denouncing Protestants, the English perhaps took it as a proof of the narrow-mindedness of Catholic France, made quite clear in the views of this “honest stranger.”

Where the English edition begins to differ noticeably from the French version appears most clearly in the title and in the preface. The book’s full title specifies that the spy lived 45 years undiscovered in Paris, and omits the name of Louis XIV. The author’s name has disappeared but mention is made that the book was “written originally in Arabick, first Translated into Italian, afterwards into French, and now into English.” Even before reading the first word of the story, the reader knows from the title page that what he has in hands is the product of a long peregrination, validated by a sort of international imprimatur testifying to the relevance and value of a text so widely received. In fact, the text has taken a voyage not unlike the physical traveling one would experience by coming from the Ottoman Empire (whether from the East or from North Africa) through Italy and France to finally reach the shores of Albion. The “original,” the title page announces, is in Arabic, a mysterious and exotic language that very few people could comprehend. “In translation the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air, as it were” (Benjamin 257), says Walter Benjamin in his essay: “The Task of the
Translator.” We find this view in the preface itself where the English editors have put Marana’s words from “Au Lecteur” more succinctly than in the French: “And, if the Translation be not Elegant as the Arabick, do not accuse the Author, seeing, it is not possible to reach the Force and Beauty of the original.” By devaluing the translation, the original soars into an inexpressible perfection that in turn deflects some of its newly acquired light back to the admittedly poorer translation. The mere fact that this is a translation enhances rather than diminishes the impact of the narrative for readers.

The English preface intentionally leaves out a good portion of Marana’s French preface. There is no mention of Paris being the hub of the universe, of the power of ministers Mazarin and Richelieu, of the excellence of French laws, of the great victories of French armies. The word ‘religion” is studiously omitted. The reference to the death on the scaffold of Charles I, King of England, is however faithfully translated. One can sense the dance the editors performed, balancing the need for historical truth – a necessity to gain legitimacy and authority with the readers - with the desire not to inflame unwelcomed passions. Entire paragraphs are pared down:

Ayez, Lecteur, encore quelque respect pour la memoire d’un Mahometan, qui ayant vescu long-temps en France, aura pû profiter de la pieté des Catholiques, -ce qui paroist dans les dernieres Lettres, où il fait des plaisanteries qui marquent assez qu’il commençoit à estre moins persuadé de la Religion des Turcs. (E,G.S. Vol. I, 10)

The translation is very succinct: “Have moreover some Respect for the Memory of this Mahometan,” and nothing more. The suggestion that Catholic piety could exert such an
inspiring influence as to lead to the conversion of a Muslim is giving too much weight to a religion generally despised in Protestant England.

The cuts, omissions and simplifications in the English version of Marana’s preface follow a perhaps predictable pattern: two countries, each with its own language, religion, historical background and political concerns inevitably color a narrative in a different way. Yet, the book itself is quite accurately and completely (minus one letter) translated. The unknown scribe of the *Turkish Spy*, or the publisher Henry Rhodes must have felt that the text of the letters themselves could be offered to the reading public without further modification.

What the translator has kept are: the main conceit of the book, that is, the story of the fortuitous discovery of the letters by an Italian visitor who happens to know Arabic; the scope and international nature of the letters; the praise of the supposed author, Mahmut the spy, and of his erudition, philosophy and worldly wisdom; the emphasis on the spy’s objectivity because he is an enemy. But because the English preface is much shorter than the French, some details strike the reader more powerfully. For example, the short biography of Mahmut makes very salient the fact that he had been made a slave by *Christians* and brought to Sicily where he “applied himself to Learning.” Thus Mahmut is more forcefully presented as an effective bridge between alien cultures, a man capable of communicating with Christians, although himself of a profoundly foreign nature. The success of the book in France and in England was due no doubt to a similar reaction to the extraordinary nature of the narrative, an eye-witness account of European affairs (and here the British could identify as a European culture as much as the French did) consisting of the verbatim reproduction of letters written by an almost unimaginable
‘Other.’ But beyond the common response to a conceit that spoke vividly to both nations, the preface of the London edition illustrates the sense of an English identity, expressed in a style less wordy than the French, and less mired in a convoluted avoidance of censure. The first English preface thus seemed more conducive to an open, international outlook on the world, a trend that will only amplify as we go into the prefaces of the gradually expanding volumes.

The Evolution of the *Turkish Spy* through the prefaces

**The First Volume of 1691**

The preface to the first English edition of 1687 stressed the rigor of the translator who, aware of the subjective tenor of the letters, took great pains in comparing the version of events as told by Mahmut to the objective, historical telling of the same events. The preface assures us that the text can be trusted to tell the truth precisely because of the exacting journalistic standards held by the translator. A researched, almost scientific approach to the text is a guaranty of its authenticity and veracity. The edition of 1687 imitated the format of the French edition of 1686, but when the next edition appeared in London in 1691, it added one element that had not been there before: a frontispiece featuring a representation of the spy in his room, a “room so small, that jealouse itself can scarce enter” (T.S. Vol. I, 2). The engraving represents a small bearded man dressed with a “a cassock of black Serge” (T.S. Vol. I, 2). The spy pretends to be a Moldavian, that is a Christian Orthodox, and he dresses like an ecclesiastic. As the Moldavian church was under the authority of the Patriarchate of Constantinople at the time, this disguise allows Mahmut the spy to not only hide his Muslim identity, but also
to justify both his lack of familiarity with Catholic rites and his knowledge of the capital of the Ottoman Empire, a bit of truth to cloak the lie of his identity all the more effectively. As befits a letter writer, Mahmut sits at his desk, quill in the right hand, a letter underneath his left hand. Behind him we see a bookshelf with the three books mentioned in the preface prominently displayed: Alcoran, Tacitus and Augustine. On the wall behind the desk hangs the portrait of the fisherman Masaniello whom Mahmut was said to admire so much. The portrait, a simple drawing of a walking man carrying a pole with a fishnet over his shoulder, resembles closely the tarot card The Fool. Tarot cards, which had originated in Italy in the 15th century and had been used all over Europe, especially France, for gambling and playing games, were beginning to be employed for divinatory practices at the turn of the century. Perhaps the (unknown) engraver purposely established a connection between the spy’s very practical powers of divination and the representation of the “Moses of Naples” as the walking Fool of Tarot cards, which in Tarot lore is a positive card, full of potentialities.

Apart from these pictorial elements drawn directly from “To the Reader,” the engraving adds some touches not found in the text. A large globe sitting on the floor next to Mahmut and a ruler, compass and right angle lying on the writing desk allude to the international interests of the writer and the precision of a geometer, the tools of a scientific mind at work. Science had just made big inroads with the publication of Newton’s *Principia* in 1687 -- the same year as the *Turkish Spy* first edition in England. The public was increasingly aware of the power of the scientific approach, and the personage cleverly depicted on the frontispiece as a thoughtful savant at work suggested a professional analyst more than a shady foreign agent. The table cloth that looks like a
Persian carpet reminds us of the spy’s eastern origins. A small clock hangs on the wall and an hourglass sits on the table, symbolic reminders of time inexorably going toward death, and worthy objects of contemplation for a spy as philosophically minded as Mahmut is. In the Second Volume, Book III, a few years later in Mahmut’s life, we will learn that he actually makes watches “not knowing how better to spend my vacant Time, than in framing an Instrument, whereby I may perceive how Time passes away” (T.S. Vol. II, 300). As the eye lingers around the engraving, however, discordant elements rectify the viewer’s initial impression of thoughtfulness and rigor: rolls of paper litter the floor at the spy’s feet. Drafts of unfinished letters? Another element adds to the confusion: two rather large bags of gold coins on the floor next to the desk reinforce the element of venality attached to the spying profession. “Making visible the fact that information can be purchased and that the portrait is of a spy under an assumed identity, the visualizations generate the contradictory impression of self-revelation alongside imposture” (Aravamudam, Fiction 59), observes Srinivas Aravamudam. Thus, the engraving tries to encapsulate the ambiguity of the character of the spy by adding pieces totally absent from the text, such as the bags of money. Indeed, Mahmut hardly derives any material benefit from his spying, as his austere lifestyle and many letters begging his superior for money can attest. Yet the tension between honesty and dishonesty, honor and dishonor that exists in the text is well represented in this one image which is partly a literal translation of the text into pictorial elements and partly a creation of its own. Another level of translation is operating here. This frontispiece depicting Mahmut will be used in most of the subsequent English and French editions, but will undergo a mutation of sort in 1741. In that edition, a far more refined spy in an ecclesiastic garb sits in the
esthetic pose of a thinker, one of his feet resting on a document unrolled on the floor. Other rolled-up documents stand by a single large bag of coins in a corner. The bookshelf still reveals the three books dear to Mahmut, but gone is the hourglass, although the square, partly obscured by the book the spy is writing on, and the compass, disappearing beyond the edge of the frame, remain. The portrait of Masaniello slightly enlarged hangs on the wall above a large watch, and the globe still sits prominently on the floor. Mahmut’s introspective, refined attitude is subtly contrasted with his negligent trampling of a document on the floor. This spy is a sophisticated sort of man.

(Fig. 1) 1691 London Edition
Later, in a London 1801 edition, the frontispiece undergoes one last modification. The spy is portrayed in the same attitude as in the 1741 edition but his environment is a bit different. There is a bookshelf full of books, but their spines do not reveal any title. The portrait of Masaniello has turned into a very indistinct painting, partly obscured by the back of the chair, and a map of unknown contours is affixed on the right side of the wall. Another map on the floor has replaced the unidentified document Mahmut was so negligently trampling before. The globe and the maps suggest the international reach of the spy, perhaps even a desire for hegemony. The quality of the drawing reflects, of
course, advancements in printing technology but the sophistication is not entirely technical. The Turkish spy has become a world thinker.

The Second Volume of 1691

By and large, with the modifications and shifts that we have seen between the French and the English, readers on both sides of the Channel had read the same story of Mahmut the Spy by the beginning of 1691. Within a few months, however, English readers were presented with a continuation of the letters that has no traceable original in either French or Italian. The Second Volume of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy, published by the same Henry Rhodes who produced The First Volume of the First Edition in 1687 and of the Second Edition of 1691, came on the market with 95 hitherto unpublished letters divided into three books, a new preface To the Reader and an appended Letter from a certain Mr. Saltmarsh, the discoverer of an “original” Italian manuscript.

An intensive search for the “original” continuation of the Turkish spy’s letters had been underway for 3 years, the preface tells us, when the serendipitous discovery was made by the well-connected Mr. Saltmarsh, then on a visit to relatives in Florence. The spy’s letters are found in the library of the visitor’s host, properly printed and bound in seven volumes, and graciously offered by the host to Mr. Saltmarsh since the books did, due to their unprecedented success, run out of print at the moment. Thus, we have here a new genesis of the work, bypassing entirely a French origin, the Italian provenance being the only link to the unnamed, and not even indirectly mentioned Marana. The source is now a fully published book, not a bundle of discovered letters. The preface does not say anything of the original Arabic, or of the Author but it insists on one particular point:
I shall only add, That if his Style may seem in this Part, to vary sometimes from the First Volume, it must be attributed to the Difference of the Languages from whence they are Translated; it being impossible to observe an equal Idiom, in following Two such different Languages, as French and Italian: The One dancing in soft Measures, delicate Cadencies and Smooth Periods; the Other, advancing in lofty Strains, keeping a Roman Pace, full of Masculine and Sententious Gravity. (T.S. Vol II, 4)

These new letters all came from the same Arabic “original,” seemingly unavailable now, and differences are only due to stylistic – that is, non-fundamental -- particularities of French and Italian. New in this Second Volume is the first person narrative from Mr. Daniel Saltmarsh, an Englishman of whom no trace was found by subsequent scholarship. Having secured the gifted volumes, the English gentleman tells of his intentions:

I brought them along with me through Germany into Holland, where I keep them as a Secret Treasure; being desirous, if possible, that the Six Volumes which are not yet Translated out of Italian, might first speak my Native Tongue, that so we may not always be obliged to the French, for the most acceptable Products of the Press. (T.S. Vol II, 6)

The same trope of secrecy that Marana had used in the French preface is employed here again to titillate the potential reader. The remark about not being obliged to France seems to bear on the political situation in 1691. England had been under the rule of the anti-Catholic William III for two years now and was at war with France. Mr. Saltmarsh knew better than to irk English Protestant sensitivities in such an era. At the
same time, French novels were highly valued by the English public. Bypassing the French while still offering a whiff of continental taste, as Mr. Saltmarsh proposed, gave the public a sense of one-upmanship on their cultural rivals. The high-minded Englishman, regretfully, has to spend the winter in Amsterdam, but he entrusts his correspondent with the translating and publishing of this rarest of finds, the continuing saga of Mahmut the Spy. So here, in Daniel Saltmarsh’s preface, the rationale for presenting the work to the English public does not rest anymore exclusively on the novelty of a translated secret Arabic manuscript full of potential revelations, but on the established financial and literary success of the book in the famed region of Tuscany. The success of the book abroad is viewed as the harbinger of success in England, a fact that highlights the universal value of the text. The tale can be enjoyed by the Italians, the French, the Dutch or the English, suggesting some common ground of appreciation outside of national characteristics. Saltmarsh, whose personal testimony is supposed to lend authority to the tale, seems to be a pure invention of the new writer/translator of the *Turkish Spy* who uses this device to ensure continuity with the first 101 letters while responding to a veritable thirst for an unconventional hero.

The Third Volume of 1691

From now on, every new volume published after the Second Volume will feature its own preface, with novel reflections on the fate of the text in England, on religion, philosophy, history, alterity, all the while reiterating observations on the difficulty or impossibility to exactly render in English a text written in another language. *To the Reader* of the Third Volume begins in a lighthearted banter:
Our Arabian having met with so kind Entertainment in this Nation, since he put on the English Dress, is resolv’d to continue his Garb, and visit you as often as Convenience will permit. […] It will be pity to affront this Honest Stranger, by raising Scandals on him, as if he were a Counterfeit, and I know not what. This will appear Inhospitable and Unworthy of the English Candor and Generosity. (T.S. Vol. III, 2)

The text is compared to the body which, although itself unchangeable, can put on different garbs. The metaphor creates opposing pairs such as the essential vs. the superfluous, the soul vs. the body. Such comparisons had become more common in prefaces of translated texts in the 17th century. As Massimiliano Morini points out in Tudor Translation in Theory and Practice, the metaphor of the dress had undergone a shift since the 16th century. By the end of the 17th century, a new patriotic feeling of superiority superseded the earlier subjection to other continental languages, above all French. In earlier accounts, translators were forced to substitute the rich and sumptuous clothes of the original with the poor and base wardrobe of the English idiom. This situation was radically reversed after the mid-seventeenth century. The English garment was still considered plain and simple, but this was now interpreted as an advantage rather than a shortcoming. Plainness had become a sign of great value, “not to be lightly swapped with the fickle, effeminate elegance of foreigners” (Morini 41). This new pride in English expressiveness is clearly at play in the tone of badinage adopted here. Contrary to the preface of the second volume, where the letter from Mr. Saltmarsh seemed to emphasize historical authenticity, the new mode invites the reader to share in the pleasure of a well-concocted and entirely fictitious tale. The editors may have understood that the
success of the first letters did not depend so much on accepting the letters as “real,” but rather on the interplay between fiction and reality, pretense and authenticity that Mahmut embodies.

The preface of the Third Volume introduces the content of the book that is “an exact continuation of Modern History” that Volumes I and II had started, and reiterates the point that the peculiar style of the Arabians cannot be matched in English. As for the philosophy the protagonist expresses, “If [it] will not abide the test of our Learned Virtuosi, yet it may pass Muster in a Mahometan. [. . .] They may have the same ideas of Natural Things as We, but they express themselves in a different Manner.” For the first time since the Turkish Spy hit the English market, the preface explicitly states the universalism that supposedly suffuses the text. Eastern or Western, men of solid morals really share the same values, and it is only in the details of expression that they differ. At the same time, the preface acknowledges, the Arabian writer patronizes his religion, “it being Natural for all Men, to adhere to the Notions, they have suck’d in with their Mothers Milk.” Religion is not seen as the expression of a Truth, but as a natural consequence of upbringing. Change the environment and Man’s ideas will change accordingly. In this, the writer seems to have been influenced by the writings of John Locke who famously said: “I think I may say that of all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education” (Locke, 10). Locke’s thoughts on education were first expressed in a private correspondence with a friend started in 1684 but were only published as a treatise accessible to all in 1693, more than two years after the third volume of the Turkish Spy. The preface writer’s apparent familiarity with the new concepts expressed by Locke may indicate that he knew the
philosopher, or at least that he moved in an intellectual circle aware of the new thinking. Playing on a common prejudice, the writer affirms that in his letter “you will find some Expressions, discovering a certain Fineness and Strength of Thought, which is not very Common in Christian Writers. Which is an Argument, That the Mahometans are not all such Block-Heads, as we take’em for.” The preface writer is clearly framing the tale in a transnational context and inviting readers to set their sight beyond national borders.

The Fourth Volume of 1692

“Expect no more Commendations of our Arabian Author; or Apologies for any Thing that may seem liable to Censure in his Letters,” begins the preface to the Fourth Volume, answering real or fabricated criticism. Nevertheless, the preface writer, once again, will belabor a point made earlier: “What is wanting in the Style [. . .] , must be laid to the Italian’s Charge, who undertook the First Version of so Remote a Language.” The author of To the Reader then goes into a pseudo-philological justification of certain features of the text. Why, for example, did the translator leave some words un-translated, words like Vizir or Bassa?42 The reason is that such words “better express the Thought of the Turkish Author,” by virtue of being peculiar to the Ottoman Empire, “where the Credulous People are made to believe, That their Monarchy, with all its Officers of State, is exactly Modell’d according to the Pattern of the Celestial Court and Kingdom” (T.S. Vol. IV, 4). This statement, which would be highly offensive in Louis XIV’s France, may not have quite the same edge in post Glorious Revolution England. Nevertheless, even if the idea of the divine right of kings had lost its force among the English by 1691, mocking a fundamental precept of monarchical hierarchy carried its own revolutionary
seed. There was a risk involved in stating such ideas and this may be why the preface
writer buries his ironic criticism in a philological analysis. Perhaps to mitigate the effect
of irony, he adds:

Besides, not to let this passage fall, without due Remarks; is it not
Common in our Bible to call God, [Lord of Lords?] And how can this be
otherwise expressed in Arabick, but by the Title which is appropriated to
the Principal Governours of Provinces, whom in their Language they call
Beglerbegs? It is equally usual in Scripture, to style God [King of Kings]
a Title frequently assume’d by the Eastern Monarchs. (T.S. Vol. IV, 5)

This passage seems to undo the argument for leaving some words un-translated, not only
by giving understandable equivalent terms, but by supporting the idea of a universal
metonymy at work in the creation of expressive thought, whether from the East or from
the West. If men everywhere describe God and the Heavens with terms taken – for lack
of a better tool -- from their earthly life, then there is at least one translatable element in
Eastern thought graspable by a Westerner. Is this passage really about translatable? In
effect, the text questions the view that earthly life, specifically human government, is (or
should be) the reflection of a heavenly reality.

In this preface, we find on the one hand the idea of a universal approach to
language: men think alike, they just produce different sounding words to express those
thoughts. On the other hand, in order to preserve the richness of the thought, some words
need to remain in their original form, which alone embodies the particular culture that
produced that form. The preface seems to state an irreconcilable opposition: because of
man’s universality everything is translatable, but because of cultural particularities, not
everything is translatable. The further away a culture appears to be, like the Oriental
culture referred to, the more untranslatable it becomes. Ironically, these reflections on the
translatability of languages frame a text that is far from being an acknowledged
translation. The likelihood of the _Turkish Spy_ being a translation from the Arabic is very
slim. Several clues rule out an Arabic original. First, the conceit of the ‘discovered
letters’ is a familiar device in 17th century pseudo factual novels; second, not only has no
Arabic original been found, there are not even comparable texts in that language from the
period. Third, the Ottomans were largely disdainful of Western culture (insofar as their
interest was not at stake) and very suspicious of printing technology. By making earnest,
contemporary arguments about translation in the preface of a fictive translation, the
writer strongly legitimizes the ‘truth” of the Arabic original.

**The Fifth Volume of 1692**

The preface of the Fifth Volume begins with an apology for “some Things which
may seem liable to Censure:” the protagonist either displays too much zeal for Islam, or
is too great a “sceptick.” Worse, his influence can be misconstrued as proselytizing,
although: “We need not fear that any Christian, or any Man of Sence will be Proselyted
by his Letters, to a Religion which he himself, tho’ professing it, yet so often doubts of,
and ridicules” (T.S. Vol. V, 4).
The warning that the reader “need not fear” being proselyted suggests that there is a real
possibility that precisely such a conversion could take place. Indeed 17th Century
European imagination was replete with the fearsome image of the “Renegade,” a
Christian who converted to Islam, or in the parlance of the day, someone who “turn’d
Turke.” From the beginning of the century, many popular plays performed in London featured a renegade character.⁴³ “In order to magnify the heinousness of apostasy to the English audience, writers showed that the renegades not only renounced their Christianity but their Englishness too,” writes N.I. Matar, and since dress was the most potent symbol of belonging to a culture, “to wear a turban was to be the enemy, both religiously and politically” (Matar 493). The renegade was a worrisome figure because of the apparent absence of any moral or spiritual anxiety associated with the act of apostasy (Matar 490). On top of it, reports from travelers showed that the renegade, far from suffering divine punishment for his action actually often prospered as a Muslim. As N. I. Matar points out: “Unlike other villainies in the popular imagination, however, apostasy pointed towards a fearsome historical inevitability: as Christianity had replaced Judaism, so would Islam replace Christianity” (Matar 501). The revulsion that apostasy elicited was precisely the cause of the perverse pleasure audiences felt when confronted with such deliciously dangerous individuals. Speaking from an Ottoman perspective, the Turkish spy himself had mentioned early on in the first volume a famous renegade, the Old Renegado of Dalmatia, casting him as an unjustly imprisoned Muslim hero and begging the Kaimakam for some indulgence (TS Vol. I, 101). The preface thus addressed a very real concern of the time. The popularity of the novel, and consequently the influence a sympathetic Muslim protagonist could yield may have led the writer or publisher to preempt suspicions of proselytism. In the same “defensive” mode further down the preface, readers who find perhaps too many failings in the character are invited to “consider, that he [Mahmut/the author] was a Mortal like other Men,” a very broad justification, but one in keeping with the constant emphasis on the universality of human beings.
The one new, and potentially radical element found in this volume that the preface, without naming it, obliquely refers to is that Mahmut the Muslim Spy is slowly but surely turning into (or gradually admitting to being) a deist. Despite the relative freedom with which intellectuals and scientists exchanged their ideas and philosophies within the frame of the Republic of Letters, deism was still a dangerous word to utter at the end of the 17th century, as loaded with connotations of utter depravation as the words Islam or Mahometan were. In the terminology of the time, the word encompassed a wide range of attitudes, from utter atheists to detractors (and sometimes even proponents) of Christianity. All adherents to that strange notion of deism, however well disposed toward Christianity, were eminently suspect of attempting an overthrow of the church, and consequently an overthrow of all the values that held society together. Deism, with its recognition of a creator god, implied a revolution almost more dangerous than pure atheism, still widely viewed as an actual impossibility. Charles Kors summarizes the perspective on atheism thus: “As the Jesuit Rapin put it, early in the eighteenth century, ‘Of all natural truths, the most deeply engraved in the heart of man is the existence of God . . . All times, all nations and all schools agree on it.’” Thus, “there is nothing more monstrous in nature than atheism” (Kors 17). Atheists were an aberration, lost souls who would only see the error of their way at the approach of death. Deists, on the other hand, threatened the status quo. Their belief in the existence of God, the obvious truth shared by all humanity, made them insidiously close to established religion, and therefore capable of the greatest havoc. No wonder, then, that the preface writer thought it more prudent to warn the reader of changes ahead, changes expressed more explicitly than ever before.
The Sixth Volume of 1693

In 1693 the Sixth Volume appears, “Printed by J. Leake, for Henry Rhodes” like all five preceding books. The obligatory To the Reader returns to the question of translatability, defending Denham’s theory that a translation should sound native to a native ear. As the preface writer explains: “to Translate Verbatim from so Remote a Tongue would sound as harsh as French does in an Englishman’s Mouth, when he pronounces it as ‘tis writ’” (T.S. Vol. VI, 5). He also points out that the present volume tells of a time “within the Memory of most Men now living.” Indeed, the last letter in this volume is from 1667, chronicling events that happened 26 years earlier. This timely reminder was surely meant to bolster the readers’ potentially flagging interest by linking causes in the past to effects in the present. In fact, the preface promises no less than to reveal the

true source of the Present War between the Emperor of Germany and the Grand Signior; and give a Glimpse of the Private Machinations and Springs which have put all Europe into the Hurly-Burly ‘tis now in. (T.S. Vol. VI, 6)

The tale must have struck the reader with the immediate relevance of the information disclosed in its pages. Not only does the fiction weave in and out of historical events, the consequences of the reported past actions can be observed by today’s reader. Marana had always claimed historical relevance in his tale, and the situations he highlighted in his first 102 letters were constructed so as to show cause and effect in the unfolding of events, so the thrust here is not new. Nevertheless, both the causes and effects depicted in the French edition were of the past; for the first time now, we have causes in the past
affecting the reader’s present. As an extension to this thought, the preface seems to imply that present actions, and the thinking that subtends these actions, will affect the future as well, hence the necessity of developing the right kind of thinking.

The Seventh Volume of 1694

The Seventh Volume was printed by two different presses from London in 1694 and was presented to the public by two different editors, the tried and true Henry Rhodes and a new-comer in the Turkish Spy’s franchise, J. Hindmarsh and R. Sare. This shows that the sales prospect must have been bright for a simultaneous offer to be commercially viable. The preface of this volume merely imputes the long delay between Vol. VI and VII (a whole year) to the thoughtfulness and perfectionism of the translator, and it ends by warning the Christian world that their internecine conflicts might result in the Turks conquering them.

The Eighth Volume of 1694

Eventually, toward the end of 1694, The Eighth and Last Volume of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy appears, Printed by J. R. for J. Hindmarsh and R. Sare. The end of the series had been announced since Volume II, when Mr. Saltmarsh, the lucky repository of the Italian copy, set to eight the number of tomes he “discovered” in Italy and the fact that there is no variance from the initial announcement gives credence to the reality of the Italian text’s existence. The preface to the eighth volume finds it necessary to smoothen an aspect of the text that might be shocking to readers. Unknown objectors, the preface
says, lay the charge that Mahmut ridicules all religions though at times he appears “extravagantly Devout and Zealous.”

In Answer to this; ‘Tis desir’d That these Gentlemen [the critics] will please to consider, That our Author, tho a profess’d Mahometan, yet is a Man endu’d with Sense and Reason, which he had much improv’d by Reading of Histories, by the Studies of Natural, Moral, and Political Things, and by his own Experimental Observations in the World. That therefore, when he seems to descant with an unwarrantable Libertinism, profanely Glancing with a Religious Kind of Wantonness on Divine Matters; it ought not to be taken so much for his own proper direct thoughts, as the Result of other Mens Errors, and Epidemical Mistakes and Superstitions which have infected the World. So that he rather hints at what may be said by Way of Inference from Groundless Opinions of men; than to assert any Thing positively himself in Dishonour of the Deity, or True Religion. And he banter’s the Abuses that are every where found in the Service of God, not the Service it self. In a Word, he appears, in all his Letters, a Deist rather than an Atheist; as some would represent him. (T.S. Vol. VIII, 4)

This ironic apology (a man endowed with sense and reason parrots the errors of other men!) was probably meant to pull the wool over the censors’ eyes while giving savvier readers a good laugh. At any rate, the preface tries to make a clear distinction between deists and atheists who tended to be lumped together. One of the tenets of Deism was that religions are an invention of the human mind. From a Deist perspective, Truth or God is
one, but religions being inventions are many. The relativization of the many forms
religion takes was tantamount to questioning the truth of Revelation that is a fundamental
pillar of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. The precautions the preface to *The Turkish Spy*
takes in softly landing the daring proposition of Deism shows how controversial the topic
was.

The renowned traveler Paul Rycaut had claimed the existence of a large number
of atheists in the world, and his testimony made a deep impression on a Western society
that asserted the existence of God largely based on the argument of “universal consent.”
Rycaut’s shocking (and not quite correct) revelation signaled the need for a reassessment
of the universality of belief in God. Disbelievers were too many in too many places to be
dismissed as ignorant fools. Of course Mahmut (notwithstanding his own declarations) is
not clearly an atheist, although a number of his letters question tenets associated with
belief in God. He does not claim to be of their number but he avows his respect and
admiration for deists, a point the preface cautiously advertises. We also learn that the
protagonist “was snatch’d away by some sudden and surprising Fate, tho not altogether
unforeseen,” which explains both the abrupt end in the stream of letters and the lack of a
neat conclusion that ties together the strings of the story.

**The Eight Volumes of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy -1694**

Soon after the Eighth Volume came out, the publishers H. Rhodes, J. Hindmarsh
and R. Sare joined forces to have the entire series of eight books printed in one collection,
a monumental piece of writing spread over 2882 pages⁴⁴ appropriately called: *The Eight
Volumes of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy*. A new *General Preface To the Whole* was
generated for the occasion acting as a docent inviting the reader to tackle the text with an eye for transgression. The new introduction features “An Index Interpreting Some Turkish and Arabick Words, which may seem Obscure and Unintelligible, either in these Letters, or in their Titles.” With this edition, The Turkish Spy reached the form known to English readers henceforth.

The portrait of the protagonist is not anymore that of the original spy, ill at ease in his particular station in the world, prey to doubt, solitude and despair. According to the preface, a new Mahmut has emerged, a Renaissance man who boldly takes advantage of all discoveries, inner (as in philosophy) or outer (as in science), past or modern. Yet this man is not entirely new: the observer of human nature and of history, the anonymous philosopher and critic, the unabashed internationalist, unacknowledged by the world because of the obligatory secrecy of his life situation were present in the very first letters penned by Marana.

The prefaces fulfill many functions: they tempt readers to read on by underlining the uniqueness of a text that is not a clever invention but an actual document written by a foreign enemy; they point out the relevance of the spy’s observations and frame his discourse in a contemporary context; they reveal the vigorous questioning of society’s conventional ideas that made the impact of the Turkish Spy so timely. They steer the readership toward an iconoclastic understanding of religion that verges on the revolutionary. The focus on translation reveals a deep-seated desire for the discovery and understanding of other inhabitants of the earth. Even though the text is not a translation from Arabic, all the questions surrounding the capacity of translation to truly communicate point to what is perhaps the underlying theme: the introduction of a
paradigm shift so huge that Western societies will never be the same after the 17th century. The prefaces set the stage for a book that is giving birth to a new and untested philosophy, a cosmopolitan deism of sorts that restores dignity and agency to every human being, irrespective of race, nationality and religion. The public was ready to take in what this ungainly stranger had to say as is shown by the fact that Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy went through at least 10, and maybe as many as 26 editions over the next decades in England alone.
CHAPTER III

The Voyage of Discovery
As the Great Metaphor for Progress.

*The century that began with Galileo and ended with Isaac Newton laid the foundation for modern physical science. Galileo and his mathematical peers actually saw themselves as voyagers, using the imagery of exploration to explain their exploits as astronomers. They spoke metaphorically of sailing into the unknown, avoiding shoals, and finding gems of knowledge at the end of their quests. Galileo’s admirers extended the comparison by calling him “Florence’s second Amerigo.”*

Joyce Appleby  *Shores of Knowledge*

The great explorers of the 15th and 16th century, Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, Ferdinand Magellan, and others changed the world in many ways. They not only discovered new lands and opened new commercial routes but also signaled a shift in perception: travel and exploration became the principal metaphor of progress through discovery. Along with access to desirable goods, voyaging offered new vistas to the eyes and new ideas to the mind. Aided by a spreading literacy and improved book-printing technology, travelers’ accounts became very popular in the 17th century. Many accounts, written by missionaries or merchants, were generally meant to both instruct and entertain, while keeping for the most part within the bounds of truthful – if subjective -- reporting; others, seizing on the attraction that a journey into the unknown exerted on curious minds, used the device to tell an imaginary journey and throw in fresh perspectives on their own society. The *Turkish Spy* thus belonged to a line of imaginary journey stories; but it adapted the powerful metaphor of the voyage of discovery by reversing the ingredients: instead of a Westerner observing foreign lands and drawing conclusions
about his native land, it featured an Easterner visiting the West. This reverse metaphor might not have seized the public’s imagination if other works had not established the imaginary journey as a tool for opening new vistas. Among such works published in the second half of the 17th Century were three accounts that paved the way for the *Turkish Spy*: Cyrano’s *Histoire comique* published in 1657, Gabriel de Foigny’s *La terre australe connue* from 1676, and Vairasse’s *History of the Sevarites*, also published in 1676 but across the Channel from France. These texts, presented here in their chronological order, will help us understand the *Turkish Spy* better because they address the fundamental questions that Mahmut the spy will use as a starting point of his argument towards deism, questions such as whether organized religion is an expression of truth or a mass of man-made conventions, or some mixture of both. These three seditious texts prefigure the more thorough arguments made in the *Turkish Spy* and yet fall short of its scope and reach. In a sense, the *Turkish Spy* completes the thoughts intimated in these texts. It does this by toning down the flippant humor and satire, by presenting more plausible circumstances surrounding its protagonist, and by offering a serious analysis of Europeans’ dissatisfaction with government and religion at the end of the seventeenth century.

In all these works, the protagonist’s journey is a mere pretext for pertinent societal observations and the *Turkish Spy* fits neatly in that tradition. Whether these works were known to Marana or to later writers of the *Turkish Spy* is a matter of speculation, but all these books present similarities that bespeak of a current of thought running through the last decades of the 17th century. They all try to break away from the ideological sanctions of monarchy and revealed religion. They break from convention by using the metaphor of
discovery through a physical journey to other lands. They all feature a protagonist with a curious mind who happens to be disillusioned with the prevailing conditions of his country of origin and who, to various degrees, is a misfit everywhere, in the old as in the new land he discovers and tries to settle into. They all voice sharp criticism of European governments and religions that is able to pass censorship because controversial statements are put in the mouths of aliens. These works were chosen as predecessors to the *Turkish Spy* because of the similarity in format, in attacks against organized religion and, each in its own way, in generally breaking with the conventions of the day.

Naturally, many other works could be said to have led to or influenced the *Turkish Spy*’s multi-faceted commentaries, like all serious travel accounts, or early expositions of the religion of Indian Brahmins like Abraham Rogerius 1670 translation from Latin: *Porte ouverte pour parvenir à la connaissance du paganism* (somehow Hindu beliefs could be considered as an ethnographic study, whereas Islam tended to carry too prominently the stigma of a false religion led by a false prophet), or notions of vegetarianism advocated by, among others, the British Thomas Tryon (1634-1703). But the three works suggested here seem in my view to belong to the same lineage of transgressive thought spiced with humor. The *Turkish Spy* engages in a dialogue with these texts, answering, developing, and arguing with many of the ideas first presented in these pretend travel accounts.

The first account in that lineage was Cyrano de Bergerac’s *L’autre Monde ou les Etats & Empires de la Lune*, written around 1650 but only published in 1657, after the author’s death. The conceit of the tale is based on transference of ideas: what if the moon is a world for which the earth is a moon? The *Turkish Spy* operates on the same principle: what if a Turk’s view of a Frenchman is as valid as a Frenchman’s view of a Turk? In
this sense, Cyrano’s book can be seen as the natural antecedent to the post-national consciousness favored by Mahmut. The narration follows the customary practice adopted by most travel tales: it is written in the first person by a man of obvious intellectual capacity and sound judgment. However, since the tale describes a highly imaginative and fantastical trip to the moon, a feat most readers readily understood to be quite impossible, the author dispenses with establishing fabricated proofs of veracity contrary to the way the preface to the *Turkish Spy* belabors the fact.

De Bergerac’s narrator begins with light philosophical banter, but he is soon dead serious about attempting an actual journey to Earth’s satellite. He peppers his tale with mock scientific notions mixed in with more serious ones like gravity or heliocentrism, a theory that was still very shocking to Cyrano’s contemporaries. Even though the banter is light, all the scientific notions he employs reinforce the appearance of rationality in his discourse, an important factor since the systematic study of how the natural world works was gaining acceptance as a legitimate mode of explanation. Faith in the truth of science, even though science was still in its infancy, began to vie with religious faith, and Cyrano’s story – as the *Turkish Spy* would do even more completely 30 years later – seized the opportunity to prop its arguments with a semblance of science.

After as few adventures, the voyager meets the actual inhabitants of the moon, the Selenians. The moon dwellers (who walk on all four) think he is some kind of monkey and have him exhibited in the streets by a circus master. One day, he meets Socrates’ Daemon who tells him how, after many lifetimes spent as various incarnations of wisdom, he grew disillusioned by the stupidity of men, and eventually took refuge on the moon. The satire becomes even more evident when the protagonist, confronted with a
The Selenians are different from men in their morphology, but their society is ruled along similar hierarchical lines and beset by the same kind of prejudices common to all men. The fact that the narrator walks on two legs classifies him as an ape despite his use of language and reason. When he befriends a native woman, she does not dare meet him publicly because, she says:

Les prêtres avaient prêché au dernier sacrifice que c’étaient les femmes principalement qui publiaient que j’étais un homme, afin de couvrir sous ce prétexte le désir exécrable qui les brûlait de se mêler aux bêtes, et de commettre avec moi sans vergogne des péchés contre nature. (Cyrano, 51)

The priests of this undefined lunar religion are of course nothing like the Catholic priests of France and the readers are not conspicuously invited to draw parallels between them; it is just that their discourse evokes similar arguments advanced by an all too real clergy. De Bergerac portrays a topsy-turvy world that, once the basic premise of an impossible voyage is accepted, leads the reader to acknowledge and countenance the surprising yet
inherent logic of the discourse. For example, Selenian parents show utter respect for their children:

Votre père consulta-t-il votre volonté lorsqu’il embrassa votre mère? Vous demanda-t-il si vous trouviez bon de voir ce siècle-là ou d’en attendre un autre? Si vous vous contenteriez d’être le fils d’un sot, ou si vous auriez l’ambition de sortir d’un brave homme? Hélas! Vous que l’affaire concernait tout seul, vous étiez le seul dont on ne prenait point l’avis! [. . .] Voilà, ô mon fils! A peu près les raisons qui sont cause du respect que les pères portent à leurs enfants. (Cyrano, 59)

The shocking behavior of the lunar inhabitants is after all not so absurd. Parents show utter respect for their offspring as a sort of compensation for their previous lack of respect in not consulting them about their present conditions. The reasoning, no doubt, is meant with some humor, but behind the jocular aspect of the proposition lies an entirely new philosophical conception: life is viewed as a total continuum encompassing both birth and death. Religious people may hold the hope of an eternal life after death; Cyrano raises the question of a life before birth, and whether that life possesses any consciousness or any agency. Influenced by Eastern notions of reincarnation, the Turkish Spy follows parallel fanciful tracks of thought when for example the spy explains his fear of spiders with the notion that he was subjected to spider attacks in a past life as a fly! (T. S. Vol. IV, 350).

Cyrano’s attacks against the priestly class focus on what he considers a myth of sexual purity, a tale advanced by the priests who need to keep control over their unruly
flocks. A true religion would not suppress Nature but work with it, as Socrates – who has made his life among the Selenians, explains:

Cependant il [Dieu] n’envoie point chez vous d’eunuques que par accident, il n’arrache point les génitoires à vos moines, à vos prêtres, ni à vos cardinaux. Vous me direz que la nature les leur a données ; oui, mais il est le maître de la nature ; et s’il avait reconnu que ce morceau fût nuisible à leur salut, il aurait commandé de le couper, aussi bien que le prépuce aux Juifs dans l’ancienne loi. Mais ce sont des visions trop ridicules. Par votre foi, y a-t-il quelque place sur votre corps plus sacrée ou plus maudite que l’autre ? Pourquoi commettrai-je un péché quand je me touche par la pièce du milieu et non pas quand je touche mon oreille ou mon talon ? [. . .] En vérité, je m’étonne, vu combien la religion de votre pays est contre nature et jalouse de tous les contentements des hommes, que vos prêtres n’ont fait un crime de se gratter, à cause de l’agréable douleur qu’on y sent.

(Cyrano, 60)

Cyrano employs here a reasoning that the *Turkish Spy* will use in its turn and expand upon: if God had wanted man to shun certain activities or pleasures, he would not have given him the physical means to perform such activities or enjoy such pleasures. A new view of nature inseparable from the being of God is developing, with the consequence that any movement perceived to take place in a ‘natural’ way becomes a legitimate movement not just authorized by but originated from and willed by God.

Finally, when Socrates’ Daemon learns that in Cyrano’s world carrying a sword is a mark of nobility, he again puts his own twist on that convention:
Malheureuse contrée, où les marques de génération sont ignominieuses, et où celles d’anéantissement sont honorables. Cependant, vous appelez ce membre-là les parties honteuses, comme s’il y avait quelque chose de plus glorieux que de donner la vie, et rien de plus infâme que de l’ôter!

(Cyrano, 82)

A new kind of theology is sketched here, in between a return to the innocent paradise from before the Fall and a pagan48 conflation of nature with God. Mahmut the spy will advance a similar theology as well, pining for a mythical past of perfect simplicity and at the same time elevating reason, curiosity and science as direct tools of progress toward divine knowledge.

In *Etats de la lune*, the voyager learns that one of the Selenians, an old philosopher, eats neither meat nor vegetables because he views both kinds of food as capable of pain. Though surprised, the narrator admits that there are Pythagoreans and anchorites who follow such practice, but “de n’oser par exemple couper un chou de peur de le blesser, cela me semble tout à fait risible.” The retort is swift: “Et moi, répondit le démon, je trouve beaucoup d’apparence à son opinion, car, dites-moi, ce chou dont vous parlez n’est-il pas autant créature de Dieu que vous?” (Cyrano, 62). For comic effect, De Bergerac pushes to the extreme the concept that God being all things, all things are of equal value in God’s eyes. Behind the provocation and laughter lies a very serious shift of perspective and the Turkish spy reprises the idea, albeit without comedic exaggeration. Mahmut believes in some essential equality of all the living creatures that manifest sentience, but cabbages or other vegetables do not rise to a sufficient level of sentience to be considered “equal” with humans and animals. To him, the fact that animals of all sorts,
not just domesticated animals but wild ones as well, are capable of responding to human communications shows that they are indeed endowed with a consciousness similar to our own, more limited in scope, no doubt, but composed of the same essential governing principles. That philosophical position means that the spy is an ardent vegetarian. Cyrano de Bergerac hints at the theory of reincarnation to flippantly justify the equality of man and cabbage; Mahmut believes in the transmigration of souls, but more sensibly does not attribute soul to the cabbage.

Cyrano de Bergerac’s book managed to slip through censorship perhaps because its author was dead and because it hides the seriousness of its criticism under a farcical mask. In a similar vein, Marana camouflages his criticism under the questionable conceit of a sycophantic Turkish spy in Paris earnestly praising Louis XIV while serving the Porte. By virtue of his Ottoman background, Mahmut is almost as foreign as a Selenian, but he is from earth, and his barbs against religion take on a more urgent aspect. There is an arc of thought linking these two original writers, separated by 30 years of absolute monarchy but brought together by their common confidence in the discoveries of science, by their absorption of Eastern thought, by their imagination of a deity beyond the limiting strictures of religion.

A conceit of 17th century book-publishing of which many examples could be found was to pretend that a fiction (a term that was not used then to describe a piece of writing born of the imagination of its author) was in reality an actual document. The text was often supposed to have been retrieved under mysterious or fortuitous circumstances by a would-be benefactor of humanity who took the occasion of his serendipitous find to share with his compatriots a document of contemporary relevance. The Turkish Spy,
therefore, was not the first book to exploit the pretend realism of a discovered document: imagination was generally suspect and did not carry the weight needed to impress readers with thoughts of some import. Gabriel de Foigny, an ex-Catholic, then ex-Protestant about whom we know very little save his name, may be said to have extended the literary genre of the fantastical voyage⁴⁹. In 1676, he published his *La terre australe connue*,⁵⁰ the purported autobiography of a Jaques Sadeur, adventurer and explorer.

*La terre australe connue* is an imaginative work that seeks to root itself in the popular genre of travel writing. Its conceit is framed along the same lines as the conceit of the *Turkish Spy*: the existence of the book is due to a fortuitous encounter between a would-be compiler and a sick and exhausted traveler named Jaques Sadeur who claims to have discovered new lands and seen things almost unimaginable. The traveler dies and his extraordinary tale would be lost had he not bequeathed his precious journal to the Good Samaritan that eases his last hours on earth. Jaques Sadeur’s journal, then, like Mahmut’s letters, is the actual document the compiler presents to the public in the form of a book. The preface begins with a mature philosophical observation:

*L’Homme ne porte aucun caractère plus naturel que le désir de pénétrer dans ce qu’on estime difficile, et de comprendre ce qui paraît à plusieurs inaccessible. Il est né avec cette passion, et il en donne autant de preuves qu’il entreprend de nouveaux desseins. Il veut même monter dans les Cieux et non content de raisonner et discours des qualités des étoiles, il s’efforce d’approfondir dans les secrets de la Divinité.* (Foigny, 53)

The reader understands immediately that this text is meant for would-be Prometheus, or at a minimum for people who don’t feel that all their questions about life have been
answered. Marana and the presumably English preface writers of the *Turkish Spy* set Mahmut’s letters in the same light. The spy is always presented as an intelligent, indeed even wise observer whose pithy observations should not be missed by readers eager to deepen their understanding. A second characteristic that makes *La terre australe connue* a worthy antecedent to the Turkish Spy is the position regarding religion taken by the compiler/author. Foigny lets us know that Christians should be the most likely to act in an enlightened manner because they are the particular recipients of Divine grace. However, as one discovers more and more of the earth and its people -- all God’s works -- it becomes more difficult to believe that wisdom is confined within the realms of Christianity alone.

Foigny’s iconoclastic work created legal troubles for its author and the defense he used to clear himself of charges illustrates how crucial, on the one hand, was the conceit of a real document found serendipitously and on the other, how useful as a precedent this defense turned out to be for, among others, the *Turkish Spy*. The apparent author was not an author at all, Foigny argues, he was merely translating or reproducing someone else’s ideas and opinions. He could not be held responsible for someone else’s statements even when they seemed contrary to Holy Scriptures and religion. One is reminded of the preface to the Eighth Volume of the *Turkish Spy* where the writer justifies Mahmut’s attacks on religion by explaining that the letter writer’s “libertinism” and “wantonness on Divine Matters” was simply “the result of other men’s errors.”

Was Marana aware of Foigny’s work, published eight years before the first volume of the *Turkish Spy*? Did subsequent English continuators of the spy’s saga know of the book? All we can say is that the present state of scholarship cannot give a
definitive answer to this question. An English translation of the work: *A new discovery of Terra incognita Australis, or, The southern world, by James Sadeur* was printed for John Dunton in London in 1693, one year before the end of the *Turkish Spy* series. Whether Foigny’s book was known to the author of the *Turkish Spy* or not, we can see that his deist spy reprised ideas gleaned in the philosophy of the Australians and that a lineage of ideas links these two works. For example, Sadeur makes lengthy and somewhat repetitious points that eating the flesh of animals is bad for man. The arguments are perfectly in keeping with the new tendencies toward vegetarianism that some in Europe were beginning to experiment with after travelers’ accounts of the mysterious practices of the East revealed the utter feasibility of a vegetarian diet. Mahmut the spy is an ardent vegetarian too, but he will develop the argument with a more sophisticated reasoning than the almost shamanistic contention Foigny puts forward (you become what you eat). Sadeur’s ideas about diet, society, religion prefigure in many ways ideas that Mahmut will expound upon, but the two characters share more than their ideas: they are misfits of sorts, uneasy about their place in society. Sadeur is an oddity, a libertine hermaphrodite in a straight-laced Catholic or Calvinist world, and too much of a questioning free thinker to be fully accepted in the perfect but staid society of the Australians. Mahmut is another oddity, a scholar, admirer of Greek and Latin literary masterpieces in an Ottoman world that rejects the foreign influence of Greek and Roman thought. His knowledge of foreign cultures and languages point to his usefulness as a spy, but he is temperamentally ill equipped for the life of dissimulation it entails. Sadeur is ultimately condemned to death by his hosts and saves his life only by fleeing Australia. In the *Turkish Spy*, Mahmut lives under constant threat of being unmasked and he neither fully joins French society nor
makes a return to the native land he pines for. In the end, he disappears, probably murdered, leaving behind, like Sadeur, a memento of his extraordinary but dissatisfied life. These two creations, Sadeur and Mahmut, are two rare examples of a 17th century hero with shocking characteristics: a hermaphrodite freethinker and a Muslim spy. The oddity of their character, far from repulsing the sympathy of their audience, seemed to have lent them the authority to discourse about European society. In a sense, Foigny’s creation made Marana’s creation not only possible but also acceptable.

Jaques Sadeur, the voyager/narrator/protagonist is a hermaphrodite, a condition that will prove fortuitous in Australian lands since the inhabitants are also of both sexes. This shocking intimate fact sets a tone of confession, enhancing on the one hand the honesty of the writer, and on the other setting him up as a transgressive character. Similarly, Mahmut’s revelation in the very first letter of Book I that he is an incognito foreign spy both shocks and incites the reader to discover more. Both men occupy an ambiguous position in their respective tale. The Arab, for example, admires honesty and generosity, and yet these are qualities that he cannot professionally, so to speak, manifest. The dichotomy between his aspirational state and his actual state is perhaps what gives him authority to pronounce on the virtue of characters he depicts. Jaques Sadeur sees a lack of justice in the oppression of the human female and his authority stems in large part from the fact that he partakes of both sexes himself. Both characters show an appealing naivety in their approach to the new society they have joined, and it is precisely this quality that makes them more malleable to the new ideas they are confronted with. Sadeur, in a conversation with an old Australian for example, can be convinced to look at things in a new way:
Mes pensées me fournissaient alors cent raisons pour appuyer ce vieux Philosophe, et je me voyais forcé de croire que ce grand empire que le mâle avait usurpé sur la femelle, était plutôt une espèce de tyrannie, que de conduite de justice. (Foigny, 101)

Mahmut also, faced with the amazing freedom women seem to have in France, reviews his own cultural prejudice and admits of a central equality between the sexes, an equality that deserves the same kind of education men receive. As they are faced with a totally different mode of life, both voyagers realize the arbitrariness of social conventions and the persistence and force of habitual behavior. In a preview of the spy’s sentiments Sadeur admits to the power of habituation: “Il connut sans difficulté que la coutume faisait tant d’effort sur nos esprits qu’on croyait nécessaire ce qu’on pratiquait de naissance, et qu’on ne le pouvait changer sans se faire une violence aussi grande que de se changer soi-même” (Foigny, 103).

Sadeur, like Mahmut, is both naïve and eager to learn. They both also realize that the condition for perfect learning is perfect freedom. Mahmut cherishes his freedom, in fact for him, lack of freedom is worse than “being a slave of Turkey.” As for Sadeur, it is his Australian mentor that shows him the light:

Il me fit comprendre que c’était la nature de l’homme de naître libre, qu’on ne pouvait l’assujettir sans le faire renoncer à soi-même ; qu’en l’assujettissant il devenait pire que la bête, parce que la bête n’étant que pour le service de l’homme, la captivité lui est en quelque sorte naturelle.

[. . .] Il me prouva que l’essence de l’homme consistait en sa liberté et que
The political freedom described by the wise Australian extends to freedom of religion as well. Both Sadeur and his mentor agree on the existence of a Being without beginning or end and supreme origin of all that is. However, this widely recognized First Being, the voyager has to admit, does not lead in Europe to harmonious co-existence and proves powerless to eliminate fights, murders and wars. The old man has a plain answer to this sorry state of affairs: there is a wide diversity of views on the topic of God, simply because God being incomprehensible to us, no thought or statement can ever capture what It is. “Aussitôt qu’on s’expose d’en entamer la matière [de Dieu], comme on n’en peut parler que par conjectures, on satisfait plutôt son esprit qu’on approche de la vérité” (Foigny, 111). How then do the Australians deal with this diversity of opinions without giving occasion for strife? They do have religious services where people assemble to worship but these priestless services are utterly silent. No one utters a word, thus leaving “un chacun dans la liberté d’en penser ce que son esprit lui en suggère” (Foigny, 111). Whereas Foigny imagines a situation of silent collective worship to deal with divergent religious opinions, the Turkish spy abandons all collective manifestations of religious service and remains fiercely centered on the freedom of the individual to worship as he pleases.

Sadeur, who represents the Christian point of view in his discussions with the old philosopher, is countered at every turn in his apology of the Christian religion. When he argues that people are persuaded of the truth of their belief because they have faith in some prophets to whom God disclosed his designs, his host replies: “Mais comment
croire que le Haab [God] a plutôt parlé aux uns qu’aux autres? Et d’où peut provenir cette acception de personnes, qu’il préfère plutôt les uns que les autres pour les favoriser de ses lumières” (Foigny, 113)? Mahmut also belabors this point, claiming the freedom to pick out from among all prophets and scriptures whatever seems good and true. Both characters are fictitious of course, but in the case of the Australians, their land, their society and language, and their faith are utter figments of imagination; in Mahmut’s case, Turkey, the Arabic world and language, and Islam are inescapable realities that give the tale and the questions it raises an urgency not felt before. The Turkish Spy is really in dialogue with texts like De Bergerac’s and Foigny’s, responding to the issues they raise, amplifying and fleshing out certain ideas, and rejecting others. The Turkish Spy takes up the aspirational ideas that were almost occulted under a farcical mask in La terre australe connue and in Etats de la lune, and grounds these ideas in a contemporary debate between actual nations and religions.

Another relevant pretend real-life document that paves the way for the Turkish Spy can be found in a popular work that was published in England and in France less than 10 years before the appearance of the first Turkish Spy: The History of the Sevarites or Sevarambi by Denis Vairasse. Vairasse was a French Protestant from the Southern region of Provence who, partly due to the fractious religious policies of Catholic Louis XIV, exiled himself to Holland and England for several years. He published the first part of his History in English in London in 1675 as he was making his way back to France. In 1677 he supervised the printing of the French edition published by Barbin, the influential Libraire who will print L’Espion du Grand Seigneur a few years later. He then wrote the
second part, in French, and had it published in 1678 by the same printer. The second part was then almost immediately translated into English.

This book is a significant precursor to the *Turkish Spy*, not least because of the trajectory of its peripatetic spread: Marana, an Italian exile, writes a French book -- certainly a book for the French, even if the words from his pen come out in Italian first. Vairasse, a French exile, writes the first part of his book in English -- certainly for English readers, even if his thoughts came out in French first, something history does not seem to have recorded. The *History* is first successful in England before moving to France. *The Turkish Spy* follows the reverse route: first France, then England. The protagonist from the *Turkish Spy* travels from the East to the West whereas the discoverer of the land of the Sevarites travels from the West to the far away *Terrae Australis Incognitae*. In both cases, however, the protagonist is an explorer, confronting new situations foreign to his habits and general outlook. Captain Siden, Vairasse’s protagonist, experiences the wonder of a society more harmonious than that of Europe; Mahmut the spy experiences the contradictions and weaknesses of a society inferior in many ways (at least at first brush) to the Ottoman Empire he comes from. Siden is an obvious anagram of Denis (and Sevarias, the mythical founder of the orderly society of the Sevarambis, is also an anagram of Vairasse). Mahmut’s nom de guerre is Titus, derived from Marana’s admiration for Titus Livius, the historian. Both authors inject themselves into their work. Both also belabor the fact that the texts are discovered authentic documents. Vairasse’s story uses the familiar trope of the dying man who bequeaths his precious journal to the Good Samaritan who gave him succor in an hour of need.
Like Mahmut’s letters, the journal left by Captain Siden happens to be written in a foreign tongue, in fact in many of them: Latin, French, Italian and Provençal. The Captain’s journal is not his own private divagations but a piece of history retrieved verbatim from the horse’s mouth so to speak. The valiant captain was so keen on recording an objective reality that he did not bother to translate the various languages, although he obviously understood them perfectly. As is the case in the *Turkish Spy*, the protagonist is a polyglot, a qualification that hints at a man of wide interests and superior mind. The narrator of the *History* spends some time concocting his proofs of veracity and takes an evident pleasure in the construction of his “proofs.” As any savvy reader could perceive, all corroborations of the story come from the same voice, that of the narrator who -- we must trust -- tells the truth. As in the *Turkish Spy*, the voice of the preface gives us two alternatives: to accept what it says at face value and passively absorb the text, or share in the creation of the tale, and by becoming an engaged participant in the conceit, enjoy and partake of ideas that break conventions.

Siden’s journal only mentions “his country” without naming it. Is he English or Dutch, or French? The blurring of origin suggests a wide criticism of Western society in general. One thing is certain, the protagonist is European and Christian, the same way Mahmut is an Arab and a Muslim, very wide categories that have the effect of transforming the protagonists into test-case characters. Both authors are concerned with re-defining Nature’s aims, but whereas Marana views that question as concerning the proper behavior of the individual, Vairasse asserts that the recognition of Nature’s aims is the proper work of government:
But every Government ought to be established as much upon Natural
Reason as possibly can be, that every Member of that Society may freely
enjoy his natural liberty, and the moderate use of all those good things
which Nature hath appointed for the welfare of Mankind. For if any
Government make those good things bad and unlawful, which in
themselves are good and innocent, we may conclude that such
Government is unjust, and contrary to the Eternal Laws of God and
Natural Reason. (Vairasse p. 79)

The declarations of the host sound dangerously subversive, especially the mention of
people’s right to deem their government unjust. The “Eternal Laws of God and Natural Reason”
Vairasse advocates could very well lead to a revolution. The Turkish Spy espouses those very
notions but does not put the onus of their practical application on the responsibility of state
government. The meaning of Natural Reason is being explored in these two works but the
Turkish Spy’s adherence to the notion is grounded in a world of real strife and uncertainty and it
manifests in a less militant fashion than it does in Vairasse’s work. The secular power of
government can neither oppose nor impose Natural Reason in Mahmut’s opinion, it is Religion
with its tentacular reach that is responsible for diverting people from the wisdom of Reason.

One of the first things readers learn about the paradise of sorts Vairasse imagines,
the land of Sevarambé, is the place of women and marriage in that society: “The Air and
nature of this Country is such, that it sets a mark upon all men that touch any other
women than their own. And such Virgins as forget themselves, are spotted visibly to the
eyes of all beholders” (Vairasse, 140). A rigid, albeit not man-initiated, law ensures the
smooth and harmonious functioning of society. Fidelity in marriage is one of the visible
manifestations of the “Eternal Laws of God” and does not suffer any exception; thus illicit sex bears physical consequences: the culprits immediately see appendices of flesh grow out of their face and nose, to such a degree that it is impossible to hide. The rottenness of the body corresponds exactly to the depravity of the soul. The inner and the outer are so perfectly unified that any movement of the soul translates immediately into a physical manifestation. In a sense, justice is already and automatically done. The court can only verify the crime and mete out the sentence. The *Turkish Spy* is more nuanced about the place of women in society; Mahmut observes French women and marvels at their apparent freedom, independence and intellect. He comes to the conclusion that women, possessors of a mind as capable as that of men, deserve as much education as men get in order to compete on equal terms in the field of ideas. In responding to the probing ideas Vairasse put forth, the authors of the Turkish Spy set education as a clear mechanism to rectify the effects of injustice, which, in Mahmut’s world (and our own) do not magically and materially reveal themselves automatically, however aspirational the notion appears.

Vairasse’s main attempt is to set the parameters of what could be an ideal society. In order to avoid the ordinary pitfalls that plague society such as inequality, envy, theft, and murder, he creates a static world devoid of strife. The Australians do not ask questions; rather, they have answers that they find so satisfying that there is never any reason to change anything. The Turkish spy’s probing is almost the opposite of the self-satisfied perfection of the Australians. His life is full of questions, but his questions are set in motion so to speak by the imaginations of predecessors like Vairasse. The dream of an evermore-perfect union in society (a dream embodied for example in the constitution
of the United States, however imperfectly actualized so far) is certainly a motivational force in Mahmut’s views, but the spy did not invent that dream. It had been articulated in various forms, comical, satirical, and political, by some of Marana’s predecessors. The shaping of new ideas is not a strictly individual endeavor. New thoughts do not arise out of a vacuum and the works considered in this chapter are special representatives of the main ingredients that form the basis of the Turkish spy’s ideas.

The last and important question that remains in considering the influence of The History of the Sevarites or Sevarambi is the place of religion in that idyllic Australian society. Captain Siden is curious to see the inside of the Sevarites’ imposing temples but before his request is granted, he has to satisfy his host’s conditions:

Are you not, said he, desiled [riven?] with Idolatry, I mean with the Worshipping of Images; for I must tell you, that this is a great abomination amongst the Devarambi. We have Pictures and Images in our Houses, but none in our Temples: we adore a great and glorious Being, the Creator and Author of this Earthly Paradise: he is an Infinite Spirit, not to be consigned within our walls; therefore our Temples are open on the top, when we are at our Devotions. He is not to be likened to any outward Image or Representation; therefore our ever blessed Sevarias commanded us to have no Images in our Temples, nor to liken God to any Creature or Representation visible to the eye. If therefore you have never dishonored yourself with such kind of practices, you may be admitted to see and walk in our Temples. (Vairasse, 201)
It sounds as though Calvin visited the Sevarambis before Captain Siden did. At any rate, the host is happy to hear that the Captain is not from a country that admits of such abomination. Satisfied with the answer given by the voyager, the host explains that the great respect shown to religion that is observable throughout the city is due in part to the fact that the Sevarites have schools in every corner to train the youth and teach them the principles of religion. Consequently, cursing, blasphemies and the like are not proffered in this land; drunkenness and villainies are unheard of; murders are excessively rare.

“We have many things that we believe,” continues the host, “but I must tell you, that our reason directs us, and rules our judgments in all matters of faith as well as practice” (Vairasse, 207). Vairasse does not explain how reason is able to rule in judging all matters of faith, something that the Turkish spy, who also believes in “natural reason” and “natural religion,” will try to parse with serious, albeit tentative, arguments. The spy knows that the world will not change magically and he reposes his faith in a gradual enlightenment of individuals. He does not propose governmental schemes but he urges his readers to question the status quo, and especially to question any doctrine that shocks reason, something, he says, that is to be found abundantly in the religions of the world.

Beneath the utopian and occasionally farcical elements Vairasse presents in his tale, a new understanding of what ‘Nature’ might mean is proposed. Baruch Spinoza, the most influential philosopher of his days (his master work, the Ethics, was published the same year as the History of the Sevarites) had redefined the term “Nature,” and sparked controversies in the entire Christian world. Was Nature something separate from God, a manifestation of God, God in disguise? Was Nature good, bad, indifferent? Was man meant to be “natural”? And what would the process of becoming natural look like? The
very understanding of Nature was at stake, and works such as Vairasse’s *History* did raise the question in provocative and humorous ways. The *Turkish Spy* tackles the same question and adds food for thought on the subject of nature. Reason was the highest tool that Nature had given man, and that tool was capable of understanding what “Nature” meant; therefore that tool was able to guide man toward an ever-expanding understanding of himself and of the world.

The free format of the *Turkish Spy* (the spy’s letters can broach any subject in the universe; they can jump from topic to topic unconstrained by the necessity of plot development or consistency of theme as in an essay) made it possible to explore all the important concerns of the day. Like the works that preceded it, the *Turkish Spy* is grounded in the theme of traveling, exploring, discovering new things. Vairasse’s text is more directly inspired from the (true) travel accounts that became so popular in the 17th century than Marana’s work which turns the tables on traveling by having his protagonist not just come from the East on account of curiosity but come on a mission as an enemy scout. Both texts rely on a certain culture shock, a sense of disorientation that makes the mind more malleable to the impact of new ideas. The Protestant influence and the criticism of Catholicism that color the *History of the Sevarites* can be found in the *Turkish Spy* as well, although in the latter, it serves as a springboard to more audacious libertine ideas of Deism. Taking a clue from the Eastern philosophy that was beginning to permeate travel accounts in France and England, the *History* hints at reincarnation in its invention of the *Sevarites*’s theology but the general framework of its ‘paradise on earth’ remains fairly conventional: wild beasts who come to the shores of *Sevarambé* become as gentle as sheep, which, ironically, does not prevent the inhabitants to kill them and make
use of their fur, which they are very fond of wearing; in contrast, the *Turkish Spy* will seek more coherence between the philosophical beliefs of its hero and his actual actions in the world. His assessment of sentience in animals will lead Mahmut to respect all animal life and become a total vegetarian.

The emergence of the idea of Natural Reason, of the tempering influence of reason on faith and religion, of reason as the common ground that could and should unite humans in the creation of a just government, in a word all the pre-enlightenment ideas that begin to question the divine right of kings, are present in both works, but the *History of the Sevarites* ends like a fairy tale and loses some of its political punch whereas the *Turkish Spy* keeps growing in scope and boldness. One work sets the political and religious reality of European societies against an imagined idealized commonwealth where individuals spontaneously know their place. Although there exist a few individuals who pervert the natural propensity toward goodness, that society manages to deal with these cases, mainly by ostracism, so as to preserve order and harmony for the majority. In the *Turkish Spy*, the political and religious reality of Christian kingdoms is set against the (also partially imagined) reality of an existing Ottoman society. At first, Mahmut portrays Islam as a rational religion to justify his appeal to natural reason as the supreme judge of men’s actions. Later, as his thinking soars beyond organized religion, he points out contradictions within Islam that undermine its aura of rationality, but he always takes care to ground his argument in real-world examples. Captain Siden’s implicit criticism of European society stems from the comparison with an aspirational commonwealth and a reformed human nature, but Mahmut proffers verifiable comparisons between existing cultures and his conclusions, by virtue of their factual
premises, have a greater impact. The irony and implicit criticism of the politico-religious complex of the West rampant in Captain Siden’s journal turns into a full-fledged argument in Mahmut’s letters.

The sheer quantity of letters gathered in the eight volumes of The *Turkish Spy* allowed the authors to tackle an unprecedented amount of topical questions. The topics the protagonist chooses to engage in are directly inspired by and responding to the subversive literature that was just reviewed. These works created through humor the first breach in the formidable fortress of monarchy by divine right ruling with the support of organized religion. Humor is an ancient and effective mechanism of defense against the encroachments of arbitrary governments as has been demonstrated throughout history in many authoritarian regimes. The story of an anomalous Muslim spy undetected in Paris could only be received as well as it did because tales like De Bergerac’s, Foigny’s or Vairasse’s had first implanted in the public a sacrilegious desire to take the world apart, and put it back together on the wings of imagination. By daring to imagine what was physically impossible, these works revealed the power of the mind to envisage new possibilities and fashion a new future. Ideas of change always precede actual change, and the authors of the *Turkish Spy* set down earnestly to the task of providing a new outlook to the public. Precisely because Mahmut is presented as such an earnest seeker – though not devoid of humor -- does the impact of the *Turkish Spy* seem such a revolutionary act. Mahmut’s ardent desire for human unity, for bringing together the peoples of the earth is a message that has not lost its relevance and acuity. More than 330 years after the publication of the Turkish Spy, we (humans) are still imagining a future wonderful world of peace and co-operation among nations, and we are still failing to achieve that dream.
Although there were different strands to the Enlightenment approach to religion – some writers mounted an attack on all religion, whereas others hoped to rid religion of irrational elements – no one disputes that a more secular stance toward religion was a characteristic of the Enlightenment. It has therefore been assumed that the change in the view of Islam derived from this stance and was an achievement of secular thought. According to this historical narrative, those who threw off the shackles of revealed religion could look at Islam calmly, something Christian thinkers were too prejudiced to do. [...] The many perspectives that writers of the Enlightenment adopted from an earlier era included these: the interpretation of Islam not as loathsome Christian heresy but as a valid Unitarian alternative to Western, Trinitarian Christianity; the proposition that Islam was a more rational form of Christianity, closer to natural religion; the idea of Muhammad as a legislator; and the concept of Islam as a civilization whose achievements in philosophy, science, poetry, and the arts were worthy of investigation.

Alexander Bevilacqua  The Republic of Arabic Letters

The *Turkish Spy* shines as an early example of what Alexander Bevilacqua describes as one of the motors of the larger movement of the Enlightenment: the spy begins his philosophical journey by stressing the rationality of Islam and he eventually does “throw off the shackles of revealed religion.” However, his dismissal of revealed religion is a far more complex process than an utter rejection of what religion offers. Mahmut does not reject revealed religion as much as he rejects organized or, as he puts it, historical religion. He accepts revelation as a potentially true process, as long as he can choose which revelation accords with his highest conceptions of virtue and truth. He basically views religion as a double-edged sword: a path to knowledge of God for sure, as his respect for hermits and saints demonstrates, but also a wayward path of error and falsehood as his exposition of the human corruption of the religious apparatus shows. This chapter will retrace the steps that lead our rational Muslim to a new appreciation of what he calls natural religion.
If the novel idea of a Turkish spy was the initial conceit that first grabbed the attention of the reading public, the gradual revealing of the persona of the spy, a man of varied interests and wide ranging opinions, was what ensured a faithful readership eager for a continuation of Mahmut’s saga. The spy in question was far from one-dimensional; his erudition, his love of history and his avowed desire to emulate some of the most renowned writers of the past immediately set him apart from the conventional ideas the notion of spying would conjure in his contemporaries’ minds. The would-be historian, combining solid research into the past with naïve remarks such as a freshly arrived Muslim foreigner would make in observing the Christian world, in turn became a critic of that world. Extending his criticism of Christianity to all religions, the spy ultimately professed a philosophical deism that would remain his message for posterity. This chapter will follow the stages that turned Mahmut into a Deist and show the continuum of his thoughts as spying, history, criticism and skepticism all blend into one another in an evolution that points the way to the 18th century.

Tragedy was well suited to interpret the dark tales of dynastic murder that emerged from the Ottoman Empire, but comedy too could offer some relief from the anxiety these powerful neighbors provoked. In 1669, an envoy from the Grand Seigneur carrying a letter for Louis XIV was erroneously taken for a full-fledged ambassador and given an extraordinary reception on that account, based on what the French knew then of Ottoman etiquette. When it turned out the man was a simple (albeit exotic) messenger, the king was mortified. He subsequently asked Molière and Lully to work on a play that would mock the pretensions of grandeur of the Ottomans. The play, Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, was performed for the king the following year. It is not certain Louis
appreciated the play that made as much fun of the mores of French bourgeoisie and nobility as it did of Turkish customs but the whole episode, widely known, reinforced the public impression that everything Turkish was quite fashionable. From the end of the 16th century onward, well-to-do ladies had not disdained dressing “à la turque” in a display of extravagant fashion. The visit to Paris of the Ottoman envoy in 1669 exacerbated the engouement with Oriental things. Profitable ventures in the commerce of colorful and alluring goods from the East brought enticing new products to the West and facilitated a more open view of these former enemies with their strange and exotic customs, manners, language and religion.

*L’Espion du Grand Seigneur* was published at the threshold of the renewed and deeper interest in the “Orient,” of which the Turks were widely considered typical representatives, and Marana’s work benefited thus from perfect historical circumstances. His spy was historically plausible and, reflecting the dichotomy of attitudes the ambivalent French felt toward Ottoman culture, he was both somebody who could potentially harm France, by definition the essential motive and raison d’être of the spy, and someone conducting an almost anthropological study of the French, an “esploratore” as the Italian original calls him. From the very first pages, the book set up a character whose harmful intent on the one hand justified the fears felt at the evocation of the bellicose Ottoman power but whose observations, gentle turn of mind and refined expression on the other hand seemed more congruent with the rising spirit of open-mindedness and curiosity that published travelogues did much to feed. Readers from all strata of society could find a good reason to pick up this book, and many did, ensuring thus the initial success of *l’Espion du Grand Seigneur.*
One of the first questions readers wanted answered was: how did that Turkish spy evade suspicions? A successful spy of course had to be undetectable. As dress was the most eloquent indicator of someone’s class or origin in the 17th century, a disguise was an essential part of a successful change of identity. Foreigners, especially exotic ones like the Turks, had been depicted in drawings and paintings for a century. Nicolas de Nicolay, a “valet de chambre & géographe ordinaire du Roy” who accompanied in 1546 Gabriel d’Aramon55, ambassador to Istanbul during the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent, was a gifted sketch artist who published one of the first and most read illustrated book about the Turks56 of the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th century. He captured high officials, religious figures, Janissaries and ordinary men, women and children in their daily occupations. Not every French person was literate in the 17th century. Few people had read De la république des Turcs, a scholarly account written by Guillaume Postel, the
first “orientalist” as Ina Baghdiantz McCabe calls him, but
even illiterate people could get an impression from Nicolas de Nicolay’s depictions of another world. These strangers were soldiers (Fig. 1), mothers (Fig. 2), ascetics (Fig. 3) and drunkards (Fig. 4), the familiar panoply of human types, but they were other by the way they dressed (or undressed). The Turks may have seemed less exotic by the end of the 17th century – European nations had increasing exchanges with the Ottomans – but de Nicolay’s images still carried a lot of weight for a poorly informed public. Contrary to the dictum of popular wisdom: “l’habit ne fait pas le moine,” clothes do make the man in these early representations of the “others.”

How do you tell a Turk, or an Arab in Mahmut’s case, if he sheds his characteristic costume? “L’habit religieux était le meilleur des déguisements,” says Lucien Bély in his thorough study of spies in the 17th century. Mahmut, who perhaps
cannot totally disguise the fact that he is a foreigner, adopts a non-denominational black cassock such as low-echelon Christian Orthodox priests would wear. This is a well thought-out costume that deflects curiosity in the first place but also offers a strong justification in case Mahmut’s lack of familiarity with Catholic rituals would be questioned. If indeed, an Ottoman spy were to spend time in Paris incognito, the persona of Tite, the Moldavian cleric, is a good foil.

The success of l’Espion hinged on a playful suspension of disbelief. The enormity of the idea of an undiscovered Muslim Turkish spy, an outlandish proposition on the face of it, had to be counterbalanced by a credible account of how this could be achieved. The Turks, characterized in drawings by their extravagant headgear, in novels by their lascivious behavior, in theater by their ridiculous customs, in pamphlets by their misguided faith in a false and decadent prophet, were the most unlikely candidates for anonymity in the midst of the cultural capital of Europe. And yet, by the mere fact of his presence in Paris – even if only literary presence – Mahmut defied the cultural borders that seemed so well established and almost inviolable. The Turkish Spy challenged the simple dichotomy that divided the world in clearly defined “us” and “them,” all the more so that his own situation as an Arab serving the Turks already blurred the contours of national identity.

Because the text is carefully nonchalant about establishing firm and incontrovertible proofs of authenticity, savvy readers knew the letter writer was no Turk and no spy. This hardly detracted from the revolutionary speech act the novel represents; the very act of inventing the point of view of a Muslim observing Christendom may well have been as transgressive (if not more) as the discovery of actual documents from a real
spy would have been. A real spy would have remained “other,” locked in his assumed allegiance and culture, an object of contempt or hatred, forever impenetrable to Western psychology. Here, we have instead, however distorted or removed from “objective” reality the portrayal of this Turkish spy may have been, the first exemplar of a non-Western, utterly foreign character carving his place in a literary European imagination that had not yet dared make such a leap.

“Is there a Turk in the Turkish Spy?” asks Virginia Aksan in her 1994 essay. The answer is yes and no. Mahmut calls himself an Arab but he used to live in Istanbul; like a majority of the Turks, he is a Muslim but his initial doubts about religion slowly turn him into a deist. He serves the Grand Signor faithfully and he knows some of the working cogs of the Ottoman government, but he makes occasional errors about Turkish culture that betray a lack of familiarity with on-the-ground facts, a factor not inconsistent perhaps with his claim of an avowed Arab nationality. His correspondence with officials of the Ottoman Empire stretches the bonds of plausibility by extending to practically anybody with a title: besides his obvious superiors such as the Vizir and the Kaimakam, the two most powerful men in the hierarchy, he writes officially to the chief treasurer, the secretary of State, the chief Eunuch of the Women, the Sword bearer of the Empire, the preacher of the seraglio, the Basha of Damascus among others, and, like one utterly familiar with the entire apparatus of the court down to the least detail, to a white eunuch, a black eunuch, a simple eunuch page and even the gardener of the Sultan. A well-connected spy, indeed! Mahmut’s network of powerful (and not so powerful but still part of the inner circle) acquaintances seems too good to be true. In addition, the spy’s fortuitously acquired classical education makes him more of a philosophe and a skeptic.
than a Muslim scholar. For these reasons, Mahmut can be doubted to be who he says he is. On the other hand, he displays more than a casual knowledge of Islam, of the Turkish world in general, and of the Arab writers and philosophers known (and barely known sometimes) to the Western world. In the end, though, proving that Mahmut is either fictional or real feels like a secondary concern. What would a “real” Turk add to the story for European readers? Very few readers anyway were equipped to dispute the veracity of a portrayed Ottoman world that seemed true enough. The cross-cultural leap that the very idea of a Turkish spy bolsters is the fundamental act of the novel. The mere possibility that Mahmut was a real Oriental was sufficient to make the Orient a real presence in occidental imagination.

What remains though, is the fact that a Muslim foreigner could live in France undiscovered, and this has a major implication: that an undetected foreigner is not that different from a native. The fact that the Turk is actually an Arab enlarges even further the circle of uncertainties. If that Muslim foreigner could be not just undetected but understood by French Catholics, the existing enmity and suspicion that many still harbored in Europe could give way to a wider, universal understanding of man’s travails on earth. By presenting the spy as a thoughtful human being, the text inevitably legitimized Islam as a valid worldview. The Turkish Spy helped create a breach in the insular Western culture, by staging in a first-person narrative a Turk as a realistic, even if fabricated, person, with whom the reader could identify. The project of making the “other” more approachable had been attempted before, of course; almost a century earlier, Montaigne had demonstrated the validity of a different perspective on life by inviting his readers to consider Cannibals with fresh eyes. Montaigne had clearly laid out
the legitimacy and common sense inherent in what at first sight looked like a shocking worldview. The essay attempted to broaden a European mentality unaware of its own prejudices but his cannibals, however judicious they turned out to be, were to remain foreign forever. One could admit, even understand that there were sound principles underlying the good functioning of their society, but these principles could not be applied to French society. The essay opened the mind to new paradigms but, ultimately, the cannibals were as unable to become French as the French explorers were unable to become cannibals (with the caveat that in exceptional cases, such a transformation may have happened). In a similar vein, the author of the *Turkish Spy* attempts at first to depict Islam as a rational religion and he appeals to the same kind of lucidity Montaigne so clearly evidenced. But by having his protagonist, a tangible fellow human being, speak in his own voice, and more importantly, undergo changes of opinion, he adds an emotional content to the rational discourse. It is as if the cannibals, having miraculously mastered the language of the French, had been able to voice their own evolution without the mediating expression of the essay writer. Of course, the cannibals were real, brought in person to the very shores of France for all to see and marvel; Mahmut was also brought to the shores of France, but as an idea or a projection of what such a character would say and do, and he became real enough to enter other parts of Europe.

In a way, the long and enticing title promised more than it delivered. This *Espion* does not lead an adventuresome and exciting life. Unlike the flashy gentlemen adventurers who hopped from court to court, Mahmut seeks complete anonymity. One gets the sense that he spends a lot of time in his tiny room, and that his main occupation is reading. He is generally very unspecific about the sources of the information he
transmits to Istanbul. He has ‘contacts,’ mainly Jews who seem to know a lot about current affairs, though how they in turn get their knowledge is not revealed. Many of his reports begin with a generic: “‘Tis said here, . . .” or “some say. . . and others say. . . .”62.

As the reader penetrates Mahmut’s mind and begins to appreciate his observations of French society, the suspicious act of spying recedes in the background. In fact, the spy does not engage in direct spying; he gets his information from two sources: he exchanges letters with fellow expatriates disseminated throughout Europe, and he reads books, gazettes and pamphlets the way any citizen desirous to understand his government’s policies would. The timeframe of the tale (Mahmut is in Paris from 1637 to 1686) happens to be a period when the spread of news is undergoing a change from informal mouth to ear news gathering to regular official and non-official information through printed matter. By the time of the creation of the tale (1684-1694), the collective force of information reaching many scattered recipients within a very short time was revolutionizing knowledge of public affairs. Private citizens now had access to information that used to be the reserved and exclusive terrain of the privileged few. The authors have the advantage of hindsight in their retelling of history: the day to day chronicles that make up the bulk of Mahmut’s letters are informed by knowledge of what lays ahead. Volume I relates events that happened 40 years earlier, and Volume VIII events that happened a decade or so earlier. Since many affairs the spy reports to Istanbul may not have been known by the public at the time, they do take on the appearance of secrets revealed. However Mahmut gathers his news, the spy appears to be the prototype of the politically active, well-informed citizen who will constitute a growing and influential class in the 18th century.
Marana’s ostensible intention was to write a panegyric of Louis XIV’s reign. Underneath that intent was the slightly more ambitious project of writing a history of the times. Nested in the safety of an objective narrative history a third layer rested, the author’s personal quest for meaning, a quest that would be taken all the more seriously that its context was unimpeachable. In the preface, Marana defines the methodology employed by the discoverer of the letters to ensure the most factual account possible:

L’Italien [Marana] examina avec soin la vérité des choses que le Moldave [Mahmut] a écrites, en confrontant les évènemens qu’il raconte avec les Histoires de ces temps-là, et pour y mieux réussir, il a recherché tous les Mémoires les plus approuvez, et il a fouillé (pour ainsi dire) dans le Cabinet des Princes, et de leurs ministres. (EGS. Vol. I, p. 6)

Historical truth is employed to validate the truth of fiction. That framework of linear history, however, allows the author to almost surreptitiously introduce novel ideas. Marana bemoans the fact that his century has not produced historians of Plutarch’s caliber, but suggests his Turkish protagonist may be able to help. In a letter to the Vizier, the highest Ottoman official who is a recipient of his letters, Mahmut dutifully reports an exchange he had with Cardinal Richelieu, copying to the Vizier the letter he wrote to the cardinal. Richelieu, the powerful prime minister of France under Louis XIII, basically wants Mahmut to spy on the Turks for him. In order to extricate himself from that dangerous situation, he tries to convince the French minister to undertake the construction of a metaphorical palace, a project that will give him and France eternal glory:
Hear then the Design of this Majestical Palace, whose Foundations are already laid by Plutarch, with Materials more precious than Gold or Rubies. Thou Knowest the Happiness this Philosopher had, of rendering immortal the Actions of so many Great Men, of whom perhaps there might have been no Mention, had Plutarch lay silent. [. . . ] You are not ignorant of the Esteem which Solyman the Great had of Pompey, Caesar, Pyrrhus, and Alexander, and that he never undertook any Military Enterprise, till he had consulted these great Masters in the Art of War; being wont to say, he knew not whether Alexander or Pyrrhus had showed more Valour in Engagements than Plutarch had showed Wit and Judgment in describing them. (T.S. Vol. I, 198-200)

Plutarch, as a man of Richelieu’s culture certainly knows, is a universally hailed genius; the adroit spy continues: “And this is the Stately Building which I offer you to finish, who are so great a Lover of Glory; for God has given you a Mind with a necessary Power to finish what Plutarch has so profitably begun” (T.S. Vol. I, 201).

This is a very clever maneuver for the author. He first places his protagonist in the untenable position to betray either the Vizier or Richelieu, with no middle ground possible. Mahmut then tells the Vizier about a stratagem meant to throw the French minister off the scent of his own double-dealing. By letting the sultan in on the joke, so to speak, of offering Richelieu the glory of sponsoring the new Plutarch, he thwarts any suspicion of his loyalty to the Ottoman Empire. By flattering the powerful French minister, -- “if thou wilt have Titus Livy’s, become Maecenas” -- he allays French suspicions of his foreign origin and possible intentions. But by placing Mahmut in the
inextricable quandary of betraying one or the other of his overlords, and then solving his problem by a clever playing off of one against the other, Marana gives himself a superb occasion to voice a theme dear to his heart. He hails Richelieu as the “Restorer of the Republic of Letters,” while convincing the Vizier that even though the project proposed to the French minister is a feint, the new Plutarch, if such a project would ever see the light of day, would undoubtedly feature the great Sultans of the empire. Thus, the French and the Ottomans would gain something. Marana is proposing no less than the telling of a transnational history amounting to a re-evaluation of each country’s contribution to world culture, a notion so utopian that it practically effaces borders as it envisages a truly international history of the human race.

The “letter within the letter” that Marana employs in reporting his exchange with Richelieu is the first example of a literary device that will be used much later to great effect in Choderlos de Laclos’ epistolary novel Les Liaisons Dangereuses. The incorporated letter takes on a different meaning depending on who the intended recipient is, and the device allows the reader to view simultaneously multiple frames of reference. The result is that beyond all the feints and counter feints to which Mahmut has to resort to avoid detection – he could be exposed as a spy on one side, or as a liberal apostate on the other – the project of creating a universal history of mankind emerges as a synthetic endeavor transcending both his personal allegiances and the stark dissensions that afflict the world. In this audacious thought Marana undermines the supremacy of contemporary France’s nationalist outlook that views nation, language, and religion as the defining elements of identity.
Mahmut sees history as the great touchstone to which even religion should be subordinated. How exactly does he “improve,” as he says, by the reading of history? Mahmut has a platonic idea of history as a truth teller. He wants to raise history to the level of a science, a way to look at men and events in a universal and incontrovertible manner:

I think it wou’d be for the Honour and Benefit of the Mussulmans,\textsuperscript{64} That a Complete History of the World, should be collected out of the most Ancient and Sincere Writers, and digested into Annals, from the very Beginning of Time, down to the Reign of our present Emperour. (TS Vol. VII, 104-105)

Mahmut believes that the facts of history are raw material to which a questioning human being must give some sense. There has to be a direction to the unfolding of history. His idea of annals extending from the beginning of time to the present day implies some kind of graspable order to the march of time. The passionate desire to melt into some divine ethereal peace that he expresses in times of discouragement and disillusionment is counterbalanced by an equally fervent desire to give meaning to the mystery of history. He believes the world was created with some purpose in mind. He sees history as a slow return to knowledge, now forgotten, the ancients had. His four great antique monarchies, African, Persian, Macedonian (or Greek), and Roman, offer the flavor of a Translatio imperii progression from South to North and East to West culminating in present day France and, at the risk of evoking an unwelcome rivalry, in the Ottoman Empire\textsuperscript{65} as well. Bossuet, the greatest Catholic preacher of Louis XIV’s reign, also believed in a teleological progression of history but its culmination was the
triumph of Christianity, a view evidently not shared by the Muslim/Deistic Mahmut. He does express a tension between the eternity of a cosmic deity and the temporal trudging along of history but he does not explicitly draw conclusions from the acknowledgement of these two poles.

His world history will rectify a common prejudice: it will include people rarely considered. In a letter addressed to a Bassa, he remarks on the nobility of an African king who sent an embassy to Louis XIV and concludes:

*These Europeans*, because they first found out the Art of *Navigation*; or at least, first improv’d it to the Discovery of many Remote Countries, value themselves too high; imagining, that all the Nations, formerly Unknown, are Fools, and know not themselves, and their own Strength. They thought ‘twas impossible to find in *Africk or America*, Empires, Kingdoms and Commonwealth, as strong and well Govern’d, as those in the Heritage of *Japhet*: But, ‘tis a damn’d Mistake. For, the most High is Impartial in the Distribution of his Gifts and Favours. Those despicable *Blacks*, whom all the Princes, and Nobles of *Europe* and *Asia*, buy as Slaves, being born of the *Vulgar*, are, nevertheless, come out of Regions, where Power, Riches, and Wisdom, are as much in their *Zenith*, as in these *Western* Countries.

(TS Vol. VII, 219)

Mahmut finds (or wants to find) in history the validation of one of his precepts; to wit, that all men are equal in the eyes of the divinity. In a letter to the Mufti, he affirms his intention “to relate the *Actions of Famous* Men, the *Wise Sayings* of the *Ancients*, with such other Remarks, as may be at once Delightful and Instructive” (TS Vol. VII, 249).
Mahmut justifies his lack of commentaries by reminding his interlocutor “Thou hast forbidden me to augment the Bulk of these Historical Letters, with Glosses, or Remarks of my own, or else it were a proper Occasion to put thy Holiness in Mind, how great a Value ought to be set on a Faithful Man” (TS Vol. VII, 253). The faithful Mahmut cleverly inserts this rare comment to guard against aspersions on his character that the Mufti may have heard, and to keep the reader anchored in the conceit that he is a spy sent by the Ottomans, something that could be forgotten after so many letters devoted to religion and ancient history.

The historical passages, which the twenty-first century reader finds overly long and at times tedious, must have been fascinating to contemporary denizens. The events reported had been lived through by adult readers of the tale, and the spy often gives detailed and anecdotal accounts of diplomatic and field battles that were not usually accessible to ordinary citizens. The novel made readers aware that the period in which they were living was part of a greater historical movement, a slice of life between a causal past and an unknown but perhaps foreseeable future. As Almansi observed, the Turkish Spy was the first novel to give an interpretation of the reign of Louis XIV as an époque well before that of Voltaire. That aspect alone might have been sufficient to ensure the success of the Turkish Spy in its French and English editions.

The spy introduces a novel concept: one can look at scriptures and at religious art from a historical perspective: “For, it seems to me unreasonable, to debar those who believe the History of the Gospel, the Privilege to read it in what language they please, whether this of Images and Pictures, or that of Letters” (T.S. Vol. II, 22). Mahmut advances here a view that shows how ready he is to break the bonds of doctrinal rigidity:
“It seems as easie to me, to look on a Picture or Image without the Danger of Idolatry, as ‘tis to read a Chapter in the Alcoran without adoring the Letters that compose it” (T.S. Vol. II, 22). Mahmut wanders away from Islamic and Protestant orthodoxy with the expression of thoughts that could pass for a defense of Catholicism. Why then does Islam forbid the use of images? Reflecting perhaps on the audacity of his last pronouncement, our thinker amends his thought in order to justify the doctrine:

Yet every one cannot do this without Danger of Idolatry; neither is a Publick Toleration of Images and Pictures in Temples to be approved. For, tho’ some Men may look on them without Hurt, yet ‘tis hard for the Generality to avoid falling into a Culpable Reverence. For, while the Eye is drinking in the fair Idea, the Soul is apt to lose her force, and fall into Admiration of the Carvers or the Painters Art, adoring the elegant Symmetry of a Beautiful Picture or Image, instead of the Original and Increated Beauty, the Majesty which has no Resemblance (T.S. Vol. II, 22).

The author catches here a fundamental tenet of Islamic faith, itself not that far from an austere Calvinism: an aspiration to purity, the desire to reach a supreme essence undefiled by human concerns, a tendency which can lead to an utter contempt for the things of this world and is as old as Islam itself, manifested to this day in the cult of Martyrs and in the admiration for selfless acts that disdain human life.

Along with this psychological insight into an otherworldly religion, the author shows us an ambiguous character, an elitist Mahmut, one who sees clearly the necessity of certain rules, although he himself, having achieved a superior understanding, stands
above the rules. Those who stand above the rules, in France or in England, are of course royal heads, nobles, churchmen, and in descending order their appointees, executives of power by proxy. Mahmut, a person of low extraction, nevertheless has a claim to this exalted position, a claim not based on his birth or circumstances, but on his intelligence and understanding. The *Turkish Spy* encroaches on this exclusive circle of elites by claiming a novel requirement for membership, one based on the royalty of the intellect and the nobility of the mind. Molière ridiculed the aspirations of the Bourgeois Gentilhomme (though he did not spare the nobles either); the Turkish letters writer legitimizes these aspirations and asserts them as worthy equals to hereditary privilege.

There is another layer of narration, though, that runs through the novel, surfacing here and there and giving the whole work its thematic unity and drawing power. That layer stems from his belief that a truly universal history would teach men wisdom whether they are from the East or from the West. He believes in a god that is neither Christian nor Muslim (or is both and more) and the kind of history he envisages is the history God (who cannot be partial) wants to teach men. Thus, the spy is able to go smoothly from history to deist philosophy and back because for him these are inseparable manifestations of the one Deity. History helps him probe faith and reason, religion and God, in one synthetic attempt to see the “big picture.”

Particularly in Louis XIV’s France after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, discoursing dispassionately on religion was a risky business. England could perhaps boast of a more liberal outlook on these matters but the Glorious Revolution (1688) had unleashed religious tensions, and there too, prudence was required to talk about religion. In this context, the *Turkish Spy* was admirably placed to initiate a conversation on the
meaning, necessity, and place in the world of organized religion. First of all, Mahmut was a Muslim. His views on Christianity did not have a threatening authority. He was of necessity neither a Papist, nor a Calvinist, nor a Lutheran, and benefited thus from a relative impartiality. His views, whatever they were, came from outside of Christianity, and therefore could be summarily dismissed. The ease with which one could disregard the opinions of a Muslim worked both ways: it was equally easy to take in what he had to say. No sense of subversion or treason could arise from the –undoubtedly preposterous-- statements of an admitted follower of Mohamed. Even in France where censorship was fiercer and the power of the Church unchallenged, the public could turn to this text without fear of disapproval. Their curiosity awakened by the premise of the work, readers began to absorb what this “Turk” had to tell.

The “Turk” turned out to be of a gentle disposition, possessor of Belles Lettres and appealingly naïve in his approach to the Catholicism he discovers in France: “A Church-man, term’d at Rome a Cardinal, is the principal Minister of State; his name is Armand du Plessis, Cardinal of Richelieu. He is esteem’d a great politician, a Man of Wit and Action, and every way fitted for the place he holds (T.S. Vol I, 3). It’s interesting to note that the original French for “every way fitted for the place he holds” is a far more biting phrase: “au reste, il suffit de dire que c’est un prêtre” (besides, suffice it to say: he is a priest). On the one hand, Mahmut instructs his correspondent, the “Chief Treasurer to his Highness,” in a manner that suggests the latter’s ignorance of the hierarchy in the Catholic Church. The spy has to spell out what a cardinal is. On the other hand, he summarizes Richelieu’s political skills with one word, a Priest, which is loaded with connotations for one familiar with the workings of the church. The political aspect of the
priesthood is emphasized in this remark. From the very first letter, the reader is presented
with Mahmut’s suspicion of the whole priestly class, irrespective of the religion they
serve. This will be a strong current flowing through the letters, eventually arriving at a
full-blown rejection of organized religion in the subsequent English editions.

Mahmut’s prerogative in assessing France rests on two attributes uniquely
combined in one character: first, he offers a fresh, even naïve perspective on peoples and
events; he often proffers the kind of reflections that makes people pause for a second
before – reluctantly or not -- acknowledging the truth of what was said. The naïve
remarks favored by the spy manage to present new ideas in a very unthreatening way,
leading readers to realize they too had had such thoughts, only buried under a mass of
conventions and habitual acceptance. Secondly, Mahmut, perhaps somewhat deceitfully,
attributes characteristics to Islam that properly belong to Catholicism. He is then able to
criticize Catholicism under the guise of criticizing Islam. In a letter to the Mufti, he
declares himself ready to suffer the most terrible torments for the sake of his faith, but,
since his command is to live and not die: “I beg of Thee, Sovereign Prelate, that thou
wilt be pleased to conserve my Innocence, in giving me ample Absolution, or in imposing
a Penance that may cancel all my Crimes” (T.S. Vol. I, 20). Since absolution can only
come from God in Islam, the spy is transferring Catholic concepts onto a religion that
does not give Muftis (there are no Sovereign Prelates either) the authority to grant
absolution to sinners. If Marana was not ignorant of Islamic practices, then he purposely
alluded to the formidable and potentially deceitful power of priests to help sinners
conserve their “innocence” as his protagonist unabashedly demands. The selling of
Indulgences was a major topic of contention between the Protestants and the Catholics.
Marana, though nominally an Italian Catholic, was putting his finger on one of the great hypocrisies of the church.

At least with certain interlocutors, the spy seems genuinely concerned that faking the religion of the Christians might affect his eternal salvation. That trait, paradoxically, gives a certain authenticity to his voice. First of all, it mirrors the very Christian concern for apostasy. The phenomenon of renegades figured among the most alarming, and at the same time incomprehensible and threatening movement Christianity could face. How could one risk eternal damnation in the after-life? The fear of eternal hell propounded by Christian doctrine mirrors the one the Muslim spy is suffering from. Of course, similarities between Reformed Christianity (Calvinism in particular) and Islam had already been widely observed: among others, a rejection of idolatry in all its forms and a commitment to the primacy of God’s revelation were common grounds. For readers of the *Turkish Spy*, however, the fear of apostasy revealed by Mahmut forced them to establish uncomfortable parallels between the two faiths. Subtly and subversively, Mahmut throws bridges between worlds on each side of a chasm.

Finally, Mahmut’s voice assumes the authority due to an intelligent observer and a connoisseur of Western classical culture. In a story recalling Marana’s imprisonment in Genoa, Mahmut reveals that he spent four years as the slave of a Christian master, years he put to good profit by reading classic Greek and Roman works. Mahmut knows the East and the West, but unlike the travel writers of his time, he comes from the East and settles in the West. He is not the first (literary or real) character to display an international mindset. Spanish, Italian, Dutch, German, or English adventurers and ambassadors who formed an elite international community of intrigue and diplomacy could be found in
Paris, but their internationalism was mostly restricted to Europe, to the countries that seemed to constitute the hub of the universe. The Turks had occasional presence in these diplomatic circles. There were a number of Ottoman envoys sent to France during the reign of Francis I, Charles IX, Henry III, Henry IV and Louis XIII but the envoys soon returned to Istanbul once their mission was completed. The first semi-permanent Ottoman embassy in France (lasting eleven months) was the embassy of Mehmet Effendi in 1720. Before that, in 1669, the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet IV did send a so-called ambassador, Suleiman Aga, to transmit a letter to Louis XIV, but the embassy was somewhat of a fiasco. The French were not even able to find a competent translator to talk to Suleiman, and when they finally deciphered the letter, the “ambassador” turned out to be a simple courier without the traditional authority of a full-fledged ambassador, and the king was greatly offended.

The Ottomans had many articles they could sell to Europe like silks and spices, but they did not buy many goods from Europe in exchange, preferring payment in silver and gold for their wares. They could not ignore European powers, potential rivals in commerce and enemies in war but they generally cared little about the cosmopolitan values of the rest of Europe. If the French were fascinated by the Oriental Turks, adopting fashions and customs (such as coffee drinking or lavish carpets) from the Ottoman Empire, there was no equivalent movement by the Turks adopting French customs or foods. The cultural exchanges were largely flowing in one direction only. By representing that the Ottomans had a great interest in the way of life and intricate affairs of Europe, the *Turkish spy* narrowed the gap that separated these two cultures. Whether truly or erroneously portrayed in the novel, the Turks are depicted as people on a par with...
their European counterparts, intelligible and rational on the one hand or narrow-minded and bigoted on the other, but still part of a family of nations, perhaps closer than their alien culture and religion seemed to indicate.

Religion is the prime factor behind Mahmut’s allegiance to the Ottoman Empire. The French, the Spaniards and others are more often referred to by the general term “Christians” than by their nationality. Similarly, “the Turks” is used interchangeably with “the Mahometans.” The spy never lets the reader forget the religious affiliation of each group referred to in his letters while almost surreptitiously establishing parallels between the behaviors of these enemy groups. It is as though Mahmut constantly proclaims: “See, I am other!” while subverting this message by revealing an underlying unity behind antagonistic appearances.

That the nation was an entity defined by religion was something easily understood by contemporary audiences, whether French or English. Louis XIV had forcibly implemented a vision of “one people, one religion” by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, tantamount to the expulsion of tens of thousands of educated, hardworking business owners and intellectuals. If today the business of a spy might seem primarily political, Mahmut, as a man of his time, does not necessarily draw a line between political and religious attitudes, a separation that did not yet make much sense in the 17th century. Nevertheless, he acknowledges the tension inherent in the way church and government are inextricably linked. In a letter to the Chief Secretary of the Ottoman Empire, he bemoans the necessity of lying when he pretends to be Christian: “I fancy I see Mahomet in a Rage, and believe my soul lost; though I am from my Heart more
faithful in my Religion than all the Mahometans put together” (T.S. Vol. I, 19). Mahmut already enjoys a partial absolution for the false oaths he may have to proffer but he seeks a positive, blanket absolution from the Grand Mufti for all the false actions he may be forced to perform as a Christian cleric. The Mufti, in the invented Islamic world of the author, will eventually grant him that total immunity. Thus Mahmut at first defines himself as a Muslim as much as he defines himself as a spy.

As a spy, Mahmut harbors no doubts as to the validity of his mission; he is in Paris to gather all the information that could benefit the Ottomans. Whereas he is obsequious with his political bosses, the sultan, the vizier, the treasurer, etc., he is inquisitive and he manifests a more independent spirit when he addresses himself to religious authorities. In an early letter to the Mufti, he reflects on the differences between Islam and Christianity:

The God of the Christians is the same that we adore; but Their Religion is quite opposite our Ours: There is a great Difference betwixt their JESUS crucify’d, with all the Ignominies possible, as these Infidels do believe, and a Mahomet Immortal and Triumphant, a great Legislator and the Angular Stone of the first Empire of the World. (T.S. Vol. I, 22)

The idea that the God of the Christians is the very one Muslims adore was familiar to the followers of Mohammed. It was also expounded on the Christian side more than a century earlier by Guillaume Postel who dreamed of a unified religion under the banner of Christianity. In practice for most Christians in the 17th century however, the Mahometans adored a false prophet and a false god. While Louis XIV made unholy alliances with the Turks in order to keep the Hapsburgs at bay, a coterie of fervent
Catholics were advocating an invasion of Turkey in order to free the supposedly oppressed Christians.\footnote{72}

Mahmut is no theologian but he makes a very controversial argument that questions the fundamental concept of Christ atoning for the sins of humanity by his suffering on the cross. What is the difference, he asks, between an ignominiously crucified prophet and a victorious one? The author, whoever he is, is not a Muslim Turk; he is a European writer, well versed in Christian lore. The question he puts in the mouth of his protagonist -- is the true prophet the one to whom god gives victory or the one whom god abandons to suffer at the hands of non-believers? -- compels readers to evaluate contradictory models. Marana does two things here: first, by referring to Christ as a prophet – a normal appellation for a Muslim -- he demotes him, so to speak, from his exclusive divinity as “Son of God.” Secondly, as Christianity and Islam both exalt the personalities of Jesus Christ and Mohammed respectively as examples to follow, he points out an inherent contradiction on the Christian side: the model of Christ accepting ignominy, defeat and the sufferings of the flesh in order to redeem humanity may be a profound spiritual lesson to understand, an awesome cosmic sacrifice, but it is no good when it comes to gaining earthly victories. The Christians certainly felt that God was on their side when they won a battle, although they never felt that God was on the side of the Turks if the latter happened to win a battle. This question is at the heart of the theologies that vie with each other to this day since God apparently takes sides in human affairs. Mahmut had earlier remarked: “When the French beat the Spaniards they Sing the Te Deum, and when these vanquish their Enemies they do the same” (T.S. Vol. I, 6). Marana does not question the existence of God, but he certainly questions the human tendency to
see God’s hand behind every seemingly favorable action. In this, he is very much at odds
with the most famous and powerful theologian of his time, Bossuet, who saw history as
the unfolding of God’s plan leading inexorably to Christian victory. In a reversal of
traditional labeling, he emphasizes his point by calling Christians “infidels,” and
Muslims “true believers.” He also calls Christians les Sectateurs du Nazaréen, an
appellation that must have annoyed the good Catholics of France.

The question of religion forms a persistent background to all the topics raised by
the spy in the early letters. Religion is presented as the cause of the hatred that tears up
nations: “. . . learn how far their Malice does extend, who are Enemies to our Religion,”
he writes to Brededin, Superior of the Convent of Dervises (T.S. Vol. I, 27). He quotes a
Jesuit whom he heard “vomit injurious and fearful Imprecations against Mahomet,
against his Law, and against all true Believers (T.S. Vol. I, 29). There follows a long list
of reproaches against Islam, from the absurdity of a heaven filled with sensual pleasures
to the earthly violence advocated by the prophet against the non-believers. The tone is
that of an honest Muslim shocked at the intolerance of the Christians. It may have been
good psychology on the author’s part to give voice right away to all the recriminations
that could be gathered against Muslims, and let time and a growing empathy for the
character of Mahmut give the appropriate response.

Mahmut was only recounting the Jesuit episode by way of coming to the question
that really concerns him: “Dost thou believe, thou, who are a Dervis, the most
illuminated, that a Man, of what Religion so ever he be, provided he be a Good Man, may
be happy after his Death?” (T.S. Vol. I, 31). Mahmut asks many questions in his letters,
but rarely does he mention the answer that his correspondent might have given. This, of
course is in keeping with the author’s aim; what is important here is not the answer that the Dervis or anybody else for that matter could give to this kind of metaphysical question; it is the fact of asking this question that really matters, and after all the theologians have expertly discoursed on the subject, the reader is ultimately the one left to ponder. Long before the English editions give us a more outspokenly Deist Mahmut, we can see his groping questions shaping up into an uncertain but increasingly coherent philosophy. In the same letter, the spy summarizes pithily the relative value of each religion: “we are lost if we are not Christians, or they are damned if they are not Mahometans” (T.S. Vol. I, 32). But the Mahmut of Volume I is not yet ready to reject all forms of organized religion, rather he imagines a promised future prophet of Islam adopting a universalist stance: “. . . to unite with Jesus the two Religions that they may make but one” (T.S. Vol. I, 32).

The young Mahmut still dreams of the grand unification of the “People of the Book” at this stage of the story. Although Mahmut has pointed out contradictions within Christianity and highlighted differences in theology with the Islamic faith, he has treated these differences so far more like subaltern impediments to a perceived greater unity to be found in the being of God, one and indivisible, than as a cause for skepticism. His tone will gradually change and even in the course of the first original French letters, he will voice sharper attacks, both on Catholicism and Islam, and begin to doubt many aspects of their respective doctrines.

Mahmut feels free to voice his intimate thoughts to the Dervis and he is emboldened enough to criticize the Prophet. He contrasts the extreme generosity of the Duc de Guise who pardoned his would be assassin with the bellicose stance adopted by
Mahomet in a notorious line from the Koran, where the Prophet advises his followers to slay infidels. Mahmut is far from satisfied with his religion and wishes some aspects of it to disappear, or perhaps to change. But this wish goes against a fundamental precept: when a scriptural text is a revelation, it cannot be changed; it has to be accepted whole. The fictional character created by Marana tackles one of the unsolved quandaries of the human mind: faith vs. reason. The Muslim spy stranded in a Christian country will grapple with this dilemma and seek a comprehensive synthesis his entire life.

Considering the stories of afterlife told by the priests Mahmut concludes that it simply shows that there are paradises and hells of all sorts, according as there are men of all sorts: “Believe me,” he writes to a Student in the Sciences, “these doctrines are the pure effect of Anthropomorphism, or the Religion of those who represent God under the Form of a Mortal Man” (TS Vol. VIII, 249). This sentiment echoes the views of Calvinists on the Christian side and of Muslims, but it is not necessarily representative of all English Protestants. As we have seen before, Mahmut is not deadly set against representing God in images. Images can inspire devotion, he pointed out earlier, in the same way that the words of the Koran can. His point here is not to attack a certain form of religious practice, but to re-affirm the subjective intervention of the human mind into Divine affairs. In one of his last words at the end of Volume VIII, written to the Kaimacham with all due humility, he says: “I am of an untainted Race, a True Believer, a Mussulman in all Senses: But I hate Phanaticism, and factious Bigotry” (TS Vol. VIII, 345). The word Mussulman becomes a stand-in for the ideal man of faith Mahmut imagines.
One of Mahmut’s correspondents, Guillaume Vospel (a name perhaps meant to evoke Guillaume Postel), is a Christian who has decided to become a monk following the untimely death of his wife. Mahmut strongly discourages him from taking such a step by laying out his reasons: Vospel’s decision is too hasty, due to the distress caused by his wife’s death. The monks and nuns of the convent where he is supposed to be cloistered have flaws, in a word they are human, not divine. The life style will be much too austere for a grown man unaccustomed to such rigors. Vospel would have to obey blindly a man (the superior of the convent) without shirt or shoes who possesses no army or real power. And perhaps, the strongest argument of all: life will be a constant struggle and there is but little certitude of the crown that should be the reward. Mahmut here seems intent on playing the skeptic. His aim is not to favor a religion by belittling the other one, but rather to incite the reader to think for himself. The question of religion evidently troubles him and he is trying to find his position between two alternatives: 1) there is an afterlife, but its happiness depends on how virtuously you have lived, irrespective of your religion, and 2) there may not be an afterlife, and adherence to specific, ordained behaviors conducive to the promised reward loses its relevance. Mahmut does away with his metaphysical doubts by the end of his letter:

Turn thee from East to West, from the South to the North, thou wilt find on all Sides impious Men, who Blaspheme against the Deity ; but true Virtue has that of singular, That She is always Respected, and even by the most Profligate. (T.S. Vol. I, 40)

Virtue may be the path to eternal reward and a pleasant sight in the eyes of god, but perhaps more importantly, Mahmut says, virtue is recognized and revered by men
everywhere. He warns Guillaume Vospel of the pitfalls he may encounter “if thou
persuade thyself that thou canst not find the Way to Heaven, but out of the noise of the
World (T.S. Vol. I, 40). Mahmut does not elaborate at this point\(^{74}\), but his language
indicates that there may be another path to heaven, one that does not require abandoning
the world.

Mahmut might actually consider for himself the life Vospel leads, save for a
crucial detail:

> I could willingly embrace a *Monastick* Life, were it not for the *Vow of
Obedience*. Those of *Chastity* and *Poverty*, are not so frightful. But to be
absolutely resign’d to the Will of a *Superiour* (who may be a Thousand
Times more Vicious than my self) is far more irksome, than to be a *Slave* in
*Turky*. (T.S. Vol. II, 244)

Mahmut is already living a life of chastity and poverty, not by his own choice but by the
force of circumstances, and he may rightfully feel that he fulfills some of the external
conditions of monastic life. What really irks him is the total surrender of one’s own will:

> What will then become of me, after such an unreasonable Forfeiture of my
Native Liberty? I will tell thee in one Word: from a Rational Creature, I
shall be changed to a Brute; from a Man to a Sot; and, having now some
Sparks of Vertue, I shall then be made the Rendesvous of all Vice. (T.S.
Vol. II, 245)

Mahmut had revealed earlier his tendency to live like a recluse, something he cannot do
because he is a spy, a *slave of Turky*. Many aspects of the monastic life seem to seduce
him, because they facilitate the life of contemplation he envisages for himself. “Thou
wilt say, that a *Regular Life* is the Way of Perfection. I grant it; but cannot a Man lead a *Regular Life*, unless he be immur’d in a Convent?” (T.S. Vol. II, 245), he asks rhetorically. The spy agrees with Vospel’s aims in joining a Convent, but he thinks there is a chance of achieving those aims without being confined to a monastery.

Assuredly, ‘tis not impossible for a Man (let his Condition be what it will, Publick or Private, Servile of Free) to conduct himself evenly and by a Rule, through all the *Meanders* and *Mazes* of Humane life. I must confess, This is very difficult, and all Men have not that *Divine* Art. Few can walk on Pinnacles, and not make false Steps: such is our Life, and happy is he that makes the fewest. Yet, there is a Dexterity, with which whosoever is acquainted, need not go to a *Monastery*, to enquire the Way to Bliss. (T.S. Vol. II, 246)

Readers may wonder what the “Dexterity” that leads to “the Way of Bliss” is. Mahmut seems to speak from a personal experience he has not shared yet with his readers, but his words ring like the pronouncements of a sage. Does God exist outside of religion, he seems to ask. What would the world look like without any of the entrapments that seduce men into joining the ranks of an organized religion? If the author suggests that that dexterity is to be found within oneself and cannot be taught by sacred scriptures or rules of behavior, he is advocating some form of Deism, that is a personal relationship with God independent of any social frame. He is inviting readers to follow along with an inquisitive mind on a journey of self-discovery.

Mahmut heard that the new Sultan who just succeeded Murat IV at the *Grande Porte*, is not such a devout man that he has to be the implacable enemy of Christians: “If
this be necessary to salvation, to persecute a Religion contrary to Ours, what will become of all those who are dead and never did it?” (T.S. Vol. I, 290). This is another example of Marana’s subversiveness. A French reader in 1686 could not possibly miss the real message of such a passage: what looks like a depiction of the internal affairs of the Muslim Turks is in fact a direct commentary on the situation in France. Protestants were being persecuted; many had already fled and those who could not flee were living in constant misery and fear. Perhaps shockingly to our contemporary sensibilities, the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes was in fact widely approved of in France. For some, there must have been of course some tension between the individual sufferings of Protestant neighbors who had never harmed them in any way and the perceived necessity of making France one land under one god exclusively represented by the Catholic church, but that tension was suppressed in the name of a greater good that would make France a better, stronger, more unified nation. Besides, sympathy for Protestants could be misinterpreted as a seditious tendency, if not downright treason. Yet, the double-entendre in which the Turkish Spy excels addressed itself to the deeply buried feeling of unease ordinary, good Catholics experienced during these changing times. Some readers, and most Protestants, must have realized that the whole Espion du Grand Seigneur could be read like a Roman à clef, that the Sultan was the king and Islam was Christianity.

Mahmut is represented as a convinced Muslim at the start of his sojourn in France but he gradually turns into a skeptic. This change is caused by several factors that all point to the same problem: intolerance. First, the history that people learn is not the history of the world; rather it is a history designed to set one nation against the others. To Mahmut, this is no way to teach wisdom. Secondly, religion, which should be uniting
people, is actually the cause of the hatred that set people against each other. The Muslim hero, freshly arrived in a Christian country can view the Protestant/Catholic divide dispassionately. As his stay in France lengthens, cutting him off from his Islamic roots, he views the Muslim/Christian divide dispassionately as well, praising when praise is deserved (rarely), but rejecting when absurdities and contradictions abound (often). Other skeptics might lose all faith in a just and good God and turn atheists, but Mahmut somehow remains faithful to his idea of the Divinity. He is too independent minded to fit neatly within any religion, yet his aspiration to higher knowledge needs an outlet. He will find that outlet in embracing the ideals that fall within the appellation of Deism.
CHAPTER V

Building an Argument for a New Kind of Religion

*The motto of Enlightenment, Kant wrote, was sapere aude! which he took to mean”Have the courage to use your own understanding.”*

John Owen IV and J. Owen, *Religion, the Enlightenment, and the New Global Order*

Religious enlighteners participated in the apparently secular aspects of the public sphere. They wrote history, geography, philosophy, belles lettres, and political tracts because they discerned no barriers between these pursuits and their religious beliefs. In fact, they were convinced of the opposite: they thought the two contributed equally to what they believed were the compatible if not identical goals of Enlightenment and faith. Since the religious enlighteners recognized no unmistakable let alone unpassable boundaries between the secular and the religious, being a man of letters and a man of belief were entirely consistent. It was therefore common to find religious enlighteners who were as well if not better known for their “secular” as their religious works.

David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment*

If Kant really captured the essence of the Enlightenment with the motto *sapere aude!* then the protagonist of the *Turkish Spy* is an early representative of that spirit, for he is consistently portrayed as daring to use his own understanding in formulating his view of human life. Mahmut the spy can also be considered a religious enlightener, to use David Sorkin’s phrase, since he never abandons his belief in the compatibility of spiritual and material (i.e. scientific) research. As Sorkin points out, the Enlightenment is often considered a quintessentially secular phenomenon, the beginning of a vast movement meant to liberate man from the shackles of religion and the superstitions that accompany the notion of a creator God. In those terms the objective of the movement has floundered a bit since its 18th century onslaught and God, or rather the notion that men put into that word, is still the cause of avoidable suffering and strife – as well as joy and hope, we may
assume - in many parts of the world. The triumph of reason has not done away with a persistent belief in God as completely as was envisaged in the heady days of its emergence. The *Turkish Spy*, an early scout in the advancing troops under the banner of reason, is unabashedly seeking to integrate God and Reason.

This chapter will concentrate on the development of the protagonist’s thoughts in his effort to reconcile his idea of God with the enlightened use of reason. The protagonist at first makes comparisons between Christian and Muslim dogmas and shows how what applies to one religion applies to the other as well. Thus begins a transference that gradually turns into more and more pointed criticism of all religions. Confronted with the many contradictions he perceives in Islam as well as in Christianity, the spy experiences a crisis of faith and reveals openly his doubts and overall skepticism of organized religion. His crisis, however, does not imply a loss of faith in the being of God, but a loss of faith in the capacity of organized religion to express that being. In a parallel movement, we see the growth of Mahmut’s faith in the shared history of humankind, in the discoveries of science, in the power of reason. All these elements combine to help him define a new kind of religion, based on a purely individual appreciation of the divinity he says he still ardently believes in. The progression of the hero’s thoughts does not take place linearly and he does occasionally contradict himself. Yet the Mahmut character, coming, as he is portrayed, from a Muslim background to observe Christian (Catholic and Protestant) behavior, pursues a path of emancipation from all religions that follows an organic internal logic. Not only do different religions contradict one another, there is an accumulation of internal contradictions within each religion that offend the use of reason. This realization leads to the modeling of a new type of 17th century man, still
anchored in many ways into the prejudices of his century but irresistibly looking forward to a new way of thinking.

In Volume II, the first of the English-only series, Mahmut resolutely sets a philosophical tone in his first two sentences: “I know not whether it be a Vice or Virtue, to be fearful in my Circumstances. I am no Stoick, nor can I pretend an Exemption from the Common Passions of Men” (T.S. Vol. II, 1). As his new English avatar, he continues to draw parallels between Islam and Christianity, sometimes seeking to prove the superiority of Islam, sometimes trying to justify some controversial aspect of Islam. At times though, he characterizes certain aspects as superstition, or as rules that apply only to the multitude. He is generally much more critical of Christianity, especially in the way it manifests in the Roman Catholic Church, although he has a soft spot for ascetics or other saintly figures who seem to transcend their religion. What is always at work in Mahmut’s observations is the transference of subject that has been operating since the first letters, for example his attribution of certain Christian characteristics and modes of operation to Islam, or his denunciation of the Mullahs bad faith in explaining away certain features of sacred texts. His criticism of one religion usually applies to the other.

In his letters to the Mufti, Mahmut presents himself as a faithful Muslim who seeks to learn from a master theologian. His doubts, therefore, are not the symptom of a dangerous heretical tendency but the sign of an earnest desire to learn and be better able to confound the Christians. As for the Christian readers of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy, they perhaps feel vindicated by this Muslim character claiming support from the Gospels and from Christian theology in order to puncture some Islamic belief. Mahmut, however, is not embarked on the dichotomous task of raising one religion above another, and as
soon as his correspondent changes, so do his tone and content. In a letter to the physician Cara Haly, he seems to take exception to the idea that Islam is a rational religion: “I am dissatisfied in many Things pertaining to Religion. ‘Tis true, I cannot think or speak of our Holy Prophet, but with infinite Attach and Veneration; yet, I owe something to my Reason” (T.S. Vol. II, 115). And Reason tells him that if the Messenger of God was perfect, his successors assuredly were not. As he succinctly puts it: “Either the Persians [Shiite], or we [Sunni] must be in the wrong” (T.S. Vol. II, 115). Mahmut then hastens to add that Christians, though they all revere Christ, have nevertheless broken up into a multitude of sects. He does not exactly map the Sunni/Shiite split onto the Catholic/Protestant division, and indeed the comparison only holds to a point, but both schisms involve competing beliefs about religious authority. Did the Turkish Spy readers infer that either the Catholics or the Protestants must be in the wrong? Since Mahmut’s creator(s) wrote for the Europeans who killed one another in the name of Jesus Christ, the message at a minimum is a call for dispassionate reason.

The transference is at play when Mahmut asks how the body of Jesus Christ can be contained in a wafer, or ten thousand wafers. Such questions portrayed here as a dispute between Muslims and Christians are in fact the very real questions and taunts about the dogma of transubstantiation that characterized the Catholic/Protestant back and forth jousting, and no contemporary reader could have been oblivious to the transparent displacement. Turning to the common Christian criticism that Mohammed promises a ludicrous sensual paradise given to the pleasures of the flesh, the spy counters with a logical argument: “What use will there be of our bodies after the Resurrection, if not to enjoy Bodily Pleasures, or feel the Rigour of Infinite Pains?” (T.S. Vol. II, 143).
Determined to press on from the borrowed point of view of a Christian, Mahmut continues:

But they [the Christians] will say, that the Pleasures which they shall enjoy after the *Resurrection*, will be refined and Spiritual as their *Bodies* shall be: Whereas, they say, our *Prophet* intimates gross, carnal enjoyments; as, the Company of Beautiful Women, and such amorous Delights. (T.S. Vol. II, 144)

The enlightened Muslim that Mahmut represents to the mufti now employs an oft used argument to explain and defend the obscurity, or as the case may be the too blatant clarity of a scriptural passage:

Certainly, they [the Christians] are willfully blind, and shut their Eyes against the Light: or else, they would easily see through the Veil of *Allegories* and *Metaphors*, which our *Divine Prophet* uses in the *Alcoran*, to adapt the Doctrine of Heavenly Things to the dull Capacities of Men; even as all the *Prophets* and *Apostles* have done before him. (T.S. Vol. II, 144)

God, or his prophet, cannot be boxed in by a rigid interpretation of the sacred words. The thinking Christian, reading Mahmut’s defense about the meaning of certain passages of the Koran, may reflect in turn upon similar explanations of the Bible. How do we know whether God (or those who speak in his name) meant literally what he said, or was simply using literary devices to represent an inexpressible idea? By pointing out a grey area in the field of scripture interpretation Mahmut revives an old exegetical issue. If the message is not new, who the messenger is and who the audience is represent a new factor.
in the spread of ideas, a sort of democratization of rational relativism and skepticism. Unlike serious theological exegesis, the *Turkish Spy* was a widely read popular novel.

Mahmut the Turkish spy was presented to his readers as an enemy intent on unearthing any information that would benefit the Ottomans. Because his letters were fortuitously discovered, the spy unwittingly shared his observations of, and reflections on French society with an audience that was not meant to be the recipient of his thoughts. This gave readers the thrill of being spies themselves – albeit without risk of bad consequences -- and enhanced the perception suggested in the preface of discovering unfiltered, and hence genuine, thoughts. The protagonist often acts as a veritable ambassador of Islamic thought to the West, presenting the Muslim religion with a pretend naïve faith in its rationality, yet on the whole in a remarkably well-informed manner, able to cite the Koran as well as the Hadith. The so-called rationality of Islam is used more as a device than an article of faith, however. The author is not a proselytizing Muslim. His motivation in presenting Islam as a rational religion is precisely to steer away from questions of faith that have always proven very divisive. The device allows the author to go smoothly from Islam to a deist view that restores reason as the highest tool at man’s disposal without disposing of God as an antiquated notion.

Mahmut does not mention the word Deism until Volume V of 1692 but his theological questions have indicated all along his turn of mind. As can be seen in a letter to the Mufti written by Marana in 1686, his evolution into a full-fledged Deist was just a matter of time: “Tell me, I intreat thee on my bended Knees, Cannot a Man be a True Mahometan without hating eternally the Followers of Jesus?” Anticipating a well-worn answer from the religious authority, he pursues: “Thou wilt tell me, the Alcoran speaks
with great Clearness, yet how many obscure Passages do we find in the Words of our Holy Prophets, wherein we need thy Expositions” (T.S. Vol. I, 129). If, as the author no doubt intended, the reader takes Mahmut’s question about hating Christians as an earnest query, then the reverse question could be equally earnestly asked: *Is it necessary to hate Muslims?* Mahmut’s question seems so perfectly innocent that one does not feel a tinge of guilt in transposing the question to the Christian side. Having secured an opening into the mollified mind of the reader, the author can now advance other ideas that will be almost automatically transposed: the Koran could be the Bible, the obscure passages in one book could be the obscure passages in the other and the intermediary, the Mufti interpreter of the Book could be the priest interpreter of the Book. However opposed the two religions might seem, they are certainly similar in the structure of their organized form. Both religions need a special class of individuals whose task is to explain and clarify what might seem obscure in the Scriptures and serve as indispensable intermediaries between the Divine and the human. An important difference between Islam and Catholicism is that as an institution, Islam does not have a hierarchical structure with a supreme authority at the top the way the Pope exerts supreme authority over the entirety of the church. Each Imam has a certain autonomy of interpretation, a greater freedom than that allowed Catholic priests, and for that reason seems more conducive to a Deist view that leaves freedom of interpretation entirely to the individual.

In many passages, the spy offers an apology for Islam. In others, he seems to defend tenets of the Christian faith: his view that human beings are largely responsible for their destiny is perfectly in accord with the Catholic church but stands in direct opposition to Calvinist predestination, another view he will put forward at some point.
His admiration for anchorites of all faiths points to a desire to transcend the limitations he criticizes in existing religions. The various views the spy adopts in his long journey of self-discovery are considered by some to be the sign of a text written by multiple authors, an entirely plausible assumption. But it could be the sign of a mind aware that man’s desire for transcendence can take many forms, none of which necessarily complete and perfect in itself. Whatever the case may be, the persona of a Muslim spy is an ideal “neutral” ground to advance various religious ideas. In this context, the Turkish Spy became a veritable laboratory of religious experimentation.

Mahmut challenges one of his Jewish contacts to look more deeply into the precepts of his Rabbis, particularly the notion that salvation only comes to those born of the seed of Jacob. “Was it in their Power to chuse the Father that shou’d beget them, or the Mother that shou’d conceive them?” (T.S. Vol. IV, 263), the spy asks in a manner reminiscent of the Selenian’s argument in Cyrano de Bergerac’s *L’autre Monde ou les Etats & Empires de la Lune*. In another passage, the spy squarely attributes the invention of religion to Politicians:

> When I behold Mankind divided into so many innumerable Different Religions in the World, all vigorously propagating their own Tenets, either by Subtilty or Violence, yet few or none seeming by their Practice to believe what they with so much Ardour profess; I could almost think, that these various Ways of Worship, were first invented by Politicians; each accommodating his Model, to the Inclinations of the People whom he design’d to Circumvent. (T.S. Vol. II, 204)
Mahmut describes Christianity to the Mufti as having reached the height of absurdity with as many as two or three popes competing for the title,\textsuperscript{77} and various bodies within the church fighting for supremacy, “so much so that the soberer part of Christians begin to question the Authority both of Popes and Councils” (T.S. Vol. II, 180). This pitiful state of affairs leads to a new perception of individual consciousness: “‘Tis certain, the Christians now adays, have abated much of that Blind Obedience, which they formerly paid to the Roman Pontifs: they begin to see with their own Eyes, and not with those of their Priests” (T.S. Vol. II, 181). In a letter to William Vospel, a man who became a monk in spite of Mahmut’s advice, and who seems content with his life as a recluse, Mahmut savages the reigning Pope, Alexander VII.\textsuperscript{78}

Let him not pretend a Power to [. . .] dispense with the Laws of Nature, Grace, Reason, Morality, and the very Institutions of his predecessors, Men, without Question, as Infallible as he. This is not the way to make Proselytes to the Roman Faith, unless it be of Fools and Knaves. The World has receiv’d New Lights, Father William; and Men begin to hiss Religious Bantering off the Stage. (T.S. Vol. VI, 280)

This sounds like standard criticism from the Reform movement but in this text, Protestantism is a mere springboard to a much profounder reform. First of all, it suggests that religious polemics are theatrical in nature, an act, a pretense at raising fundamental questions that are not at all fundamental. Secondly, it suggests that the audience is getting sick of the “banter,” that the time has come for a better play with more substance. Mahmut chafes at all doctrinal constraints that seem contrary to his principled perceptions; to him, the dogma of the infallibility of the Pope is an obvious human
fabrication.\textsuperscript{79} The New Lights the world has received come from reason, liberated from
dogmas and scriptures. How to integrate reason with faith will remain the spy’s quest
throughout his life.

Perhaps even more devastating is Mahmut’s remark that he is tempted to think
“that Religion is Nothing but an effect of Education” (T.S. Vol. IV, 203), an assertion
that seems to derive from Hobbes’ pronouncement on Man’s nature. We see here the
sharp delineating of a very seditious Mahmut, the development of a philosophically
minded character already perceptible in the first letters penned by Marana. Religion is
one thing, God is another, according to the spy. Mahmut’s notion of the divinity is that of
one, indivisible truth, a vision in accord with Islam which stresses the unity of God. In
this optic, the multiplicity of truths propounded by various religious sects reduces the
truth to a farce. The older the character of Mahmut grows, the sharper his criticism of
religion becomes:

There are number’d Seventy and One \textit{Sects} of Christians, and Seventy
Two of Mussulmans. These are all at Odds about Words and \textit{Exteriour}
\textit{Ceremonies}; so Zealous for Charity and Peace, that they are in perpetual
Wars for its Sake, Murdering one another in the Love of \textit{God}: And such
stout Champions for the \textit{Truth}, that they scruple not to tell Ten Thousand
Lyes in its Defence. (T.S. Vol. V. 92)

Such bitter reflections leave our hero few options but to adopt a deist philosophy.

The author of the \textit{Turkish Spy} is not the first European to remark on the
entanglement of religion into politics – it had been observed for at least two centuries
before -- but he enhances his statement by giving it the force and authority of an outside
(therefore objective) observer. Statements by European explorers who brought back accounts from far-away lands were often accepted at face value. Their accounts had all the more power that they were -- apparently -- the result of dispassionate observation. The creator of the *Turkish Spy* capitalizes on the feeling of objectivity that the foreign traveler’s perspective brings to the tale.

Mahmut is trying to find his position between two alternatives: 1) there is an afterlife, but its happiness depends on how virtuously you have lived, irrespective of your religion, and 2) there may not be an afterlife, and adherence to specific, ordained behaviors conducive to the promised reward loses its relevance. Talking about the extreme asceticism that marks the life of Capuchin monks he remarks: “In fine, their Life is accounted a continual Hell; and they will be finely choused, if they find not a Heaven, when stripped of their Mortality” (T.S. Vol. I, 260). The spy is regularly beset by fundamental doubt of this kind, but he never forsakes his faith in an essential virtue independent of religious affiliation that he affirms is recognized by men everywhere. The skeptic and the man of faith alternate in his letters, leading him to a deist view of the universe: “Happy is he that lives satisfied with himself, assured he serves God in the Manner He will be served” (T.S. Vol. I, 263). Mahmut dismisses all liturgies; the individual is the only judge of how God wants to be loved. There is no litmus test ordained by this or that religion, only an individual appreciation of how to worship God.

At times the Muslim spy voices such un-Islamic thoughts that he feels the need to justify himself to his Muslim correspondents: “Think not, that I am going to turn Christian, because of this Liberty I take to search for Truth. For the Case is the same or worse among them” (T.S. Vol. II, 116). He goes on to describe various schisms that have
afflicted the Church and sighs: “Thus is the World at odds about Religion, persecuting, biting and devouring one another, because they cannot all think alike” (T.S. Vol. II, 116).

Now the guarded spy is about to reveal something to his doctor friend that few ears should be able to hear: “These Considerations have made me a Sceptick, in Controverted Points of Faith and Matters of Opinion. Onely in this I am fixed, That I believe in One Eternal God, and reverence his Holy Messengers and Prophets” (T.S. Vol. II, 117).

Mahmut accepts the Muslim faith only in that he does not doubt the existence of God and he recognizes that some men may have a special relationship with God, but he is otherwise a skeptic. Mahmut is neither an atheist, nor an agnostic; he wants to believe that there is some truth in each religion, but he reserves the right to adhere to whichever aspect appeals to his reason. This kind of cherry picking of the truth faces an insurmountable obstacle: each religion tends to view itself as representing the exclusive truth. Mahmut realizes this and pines for “the Golden Age, when the Infant World had not yet learnt Bigotry; when Humane Reason was not corrupted with Divine Fables; and, Natural Conscience was the Oracle to which all resorted for Solution of their Doubts” (T.S. Vol. II, 117). In this Golden Age “No Man was put to Death for Words or Thoughts of Things above his reach [. . . ] but, pure and undebauched Reason taught Men to lead Immortal Lives on Earth” (T.S. Vol. II, 117). Mahmut seems to refer to a state of innocence comparable to the life Adam and Eve led before the Fall, or to a state prior to revelation (the theological equivalent of a “state of nature” prior to the social contract) but in a twist away from the Bible, he attributes that innocence to the workings of pure Reason.
Mahmut fasts, prays, gives alms, loves all creatures -- in sum, performs every ethical action a man could perform. “If all this is not sufficient to acquit me a true and good Mussulman, no Man, I hope, will blame me, if I joyn with an eminent Man in these Western Parts, and wish my Soul among the Philosophers” (TS Vol. II, 118). The eminent man he wants to join seems to be a contemporary philosopher, probably Descartes, from whom the spy appears to have appropriated the notion that pure reason, whose faculty is present in every man, can lead one to the truth. And of course there is a deep irony in the author’s declaration, which vouches for the sanctity of our good Mussulman with the help of a contemporary French philosopher.

Mahmut is his own man; he borrows freely from ideas that seem right and rejects those that seem wrong. His allegiance is not to a particular thinker; still, Renatus des Cartes, as he calls him, is a great man and “Were not this admirable Genius stain’d with great impiety, in that he mocks the Book of Glory, the Holy Alcoran, true Guide to Paradise, I should believe he was inspired from above” (T.S. Vol. II, 112). Beneath the irony transpires the authors’ genuine admiration for the progress of science and the superiority of reason. Science and reason are concerned with the perfectibility of this life and as such may not be compatible anymore with a religious doctrine that persists in viewing life as a mere passage to another state of being.

Mahmut often refers to True or Pure Religion, what we might describe today by the name of Spirituality. These are dangerous words, for they imply that the established Religion is actually a False Religion. Mahmut explains the origin of established Religion:

But the Lawgivers and Governours of Nations observing, That there was a certain Religious Fear and Reverence of some Divine Power, as it were
planted in the Natures of all Men; and considering that this might be
improv’d, with good Management, to the Advantage and Interest of the
Commonwealth; they invented set Forms of Discipline, and exterior
Offices of Worship, which they term’d Holy Rites and Mysteries. These
they fortified with severe Laws and Sanctions, inflicting grievous
Penalties on the Contemners of the Publick Service perform’d to the Gods.
(T.S. Vol. VIII, 121)

God exists, but Religion is an invention, says Mahmut, one of several heretical statements
that caused the Catholic Church to ban the book within a few years. And yet, the
statement is perhaps not so heretical. Why should not natural religion (assuming it is a
fact of human life) be harnessed “to the advantage and interest of the Commonwealth”?
There is nothing inherently evil in this proposition, unless of course its application would
be harmful to some groups or individuals. And that seems to be the view the spy adopts.
Fearing all imposition of doctrine, Mahmut wants to leave religious sentiment to the
choice of the individual. In this passage, he is basically advocating a secular government.

Mahmut may love philosophy but he is not a consistent philosopher. Rather, he
takes the reader through an exploration of the various ways man and society could relate
to God. In another letter to Vospel, Chrestien d’Autriche, Mahmut finds some charms in
monastic life:

There is one thing, amongst others, which extremely pleases me, in the
Order thou hast entered; All Things are in Common amongst you; one Key
opens an Hundred Doors; you have no Meum & Tuum [Mine & Thine]; all
clad in the same Fashion, and all go bare-footed; you eat at the same table,
and nobody has better or worse Fare than another. In fine, your Prayers are the same, and so are your Vows of Poverty. (T.S. Vol. I, 343)

Mahmut does not stress the rigors of convent life but rather the idealized aspects of a life without personal possessions. As eulogized by the spy, the monastery becomes the microcosm of a utopian society. Monasteries established certain rules of conduct as means to the ultimate goal of finding God. In his letter, Mahmut practically reverses the situation. What he likes most is the way this micro-society defines its members’ interaction to each other and to the whole. The social functioning within the monastery supersedes the search for God. This is a kind of proto-communism that Mahmut admires here, and it is consistent with his probing of the established order of things, his questioning of the unbridgeable dichotomy he observes everywhere, in the East as in the West: secular life and religious life forever at odds, except in his idealized vision of Vospel’s monastery. Mahmut’s personal ethics, his sense of man’s ultimate responsibility to himself, his secular aspiration to live justly, his fantasizing about an ideal life of utter equality with his fellow humans, all point the way to the fiercely independent character the spy is becoming, beholden to no prejudice, to no nation, to no religion, a lone voice and a living question in a century in search of answers.

Mahmut searches for a way to link the world of spirit to the world of matter. Organized religion for him can only offer an ossified version of a real relationship with God, and his search for a third position between materialism and spiritualism manifests in his interest for alchemy. What fascinates Mahmut in the dubious enterprise of the alchemists is the attempt at bridging a gap between spirit and matter. Mahmut expresses
doubts about the feasibility of the attempt but he endorses cautiously the alchemists’
endeavors.80

Mahmut bristles at the vision of a jealous god who watches out for infractions to
his rigid code and forbids men to pursue a natural path of progress. He makes three
points: 1) it does not make sense that the Deity, being omniscient, should be envious of
men’s knowledge; it is precisely because the Deity knows all things that He can look
favorably upon men’s attempts to know all things. Would an able-bodied adult be
envious of an infant’s first steps and punish the child for trying? 2) There is a joy in
uncovering nature’s secret that is neither base nor tainted with self-interest. 3) The
“appetite” for science that man finds in himself must have come from the Deity because
the world that that Deity created, with its innumerable mysteries, is the perfect pendant to
man’s curiosity and desire to know. Thus, the author is establishing his own theology,
one that integrates faith and reason.

Mahmut is always prompt to defend himself from the charge of Atheism. In a
letter to his friend Dgnet, one of the few interlocutors with whom he can bare his
thoughts more frankly, he explains:

I only strive to rescue my Friend from the Attempts of Pious Frauds, the
Religious Burlesques of our Mollah’s and Mufti’s. Believe, my Dear
Dgnet, That there is a God, a First Cause, a Just Judge presiding over the
World. (T.S. Vol. VI, 34)

Here again Mahmut describes religious ceremonies with the vocabulary of theatre. To
him, religion is an act, a layer of performance that hides rather than reveals what he calls
with Aristotelian flair “the First Cause.”
As the tale progresses through the years, Mahmut’s early skepticism recedes in the background and a religious fervor seems to take hold of him. His political reports to the Porte – a professional obligation -- are more spaced out and no longer written with the urgency of one fulfilling a sacred mission. The premise of the unchanged title page since Volume I that announces: “An Impartial Account to the Divan at Constantinople, of the most Remarkable Transactions of Europe; And Discovering several Intrigues and Secrets of the Christian Courts [. . .]” applies sporadically to the changing content of the later volumes. The reader was initially lured by the promise of exciting revelations about the governments of Europe. By Volume VII, it is clear that the book’s only important revelation is the philosophical journey and transformation the protagonist undergoes, because that journey and the new point of view that emerges from it are the very ferment that begins to agitate Western society at the end of the 17th century.

Mahmut makes an important assumption: that religion and ethical life are intimately linked. In this view, the aim of religion is to provide a foundation for becoming a better person. Religion is thus subordinated to a higher ethical aim. In the spy’s view, then, anything conducive to a high ethical life is potentially acceptable: religion, certainly; the reading of ancient Classics, absolutely; the studying of history, definitely. One is reminded that one of the very first facts readers learned about Mahmut, on the occasion of the publishing of the first 30 letters in 1684, was that he had only three books, two dealing with religion, Augustine and the Koran, and one dealing with history (and ancient Classics), Tacitus. The synthetic view the hero develops over the eight volumes can be traced back to the very first, almost as if the entire story had been planned that way. This is not proof of a single authorship but it is certainly a sign that the
character invented by Marana, like all great characters of literature, assumed a life of his own.

“The Christians will not approve of any Philosophy, which interferes with that which they call the Bible” (T.S. Vol. II, 90), says Mahmut in reference to the latest scientific theories about the position of the earth in the cosmos. Heliocentrism was still condemned by the Catholic Church as false. On the other side of the Christian divide, the Reformation did not have a central authority like the Pope in order to make official statements, but neither Luther nor Calvin had accepted heliocentrism. However, educated people all over Europe were discussing the concept and the idea was gaining ground. One of the first books ever of popular science, *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*, written entirely in French and purporting to explain heliocentrism to laymen was a best seller in France when it was published in 1686. It was quickly translated into English and published as early as 1687 in London where it sold with the same success. The author of the *Turkish Spy* addresses himself to interested readers who knew about these theories of the cosmos. The *Turkish Spy* took advantage of the growing spread of science to explore actively the philosophical antinomies born of the clash between intransigent church doctrine and the revelations of a young and groping science.

The spy’s belief in the progress of science means that he corresponds and interacts with men of science, as befits an ardent supporter of the *Republic of Letters*. By the end of the 17th century, most people, even Mahmut’s hero Descartes (with some caveats), still accepted the biblical calculation of the age of the earth, supposed to be around 6000 years old; nevertheless, the topic was growing in importance among intellectuals and free thinkers, and various estimates, not yet sustained by empirical
proof, began to surface. Our inquisitive Spy cannot resist broaching the subject and he
turns his attention to some unattributed Arabic text that could perhaps shed some light on
the vexing question. The passage relates a mystical vision, perhaps that of the Prophet
Muhammad, who is shown the four Ages of the World with various kinds of living
creatures inhabiting the earth, Man appearing in the fourth and last age before Judgment
Day. This is of course not a very scientific account of the world’s duration, but Mahmut
finds a corroborating story in old Sanskrit texts from India that assert that the world is
above Thirty Millions of Years. The spy then states his own view:

> It will not be difficult then, to Interpret the *History of Moses*, by this
> *Register of the Bramins*, and reconcile the *Six Days* of the one, with the
> *Four Ages* of the other; since, a Day in the *Divine Sence*, may amount to
> Millions of Years, as well as to a Thousand. And, it will be more
> congruous and agreeable, to believe, that after the Birth of the *First
> Matter*, there elaps’d Many *Ages*, before it was wrought into such an
> Infinite Variety of Appearances, as we now behold; and that the *Five
> Days*, which *Moses* computes, before the *Production of Adam*, might be
> some *Millions of Years*: In which Time, the *Divine Architect* gradually
drew from the *Abyss of Matter*, the Sun, Moon, Stars, Plants and Animals.

*(T.S. Vol. III, 322)*

The intuition that the earth is much older than the Bible accounts for rests purely on the
concordance to be found among scriptures from other traditions that offer a longer view
of the creation. The field of comparative religion that 40 years later Bernard and Picard’s
book will do much to establish is already hinted at in the *Turkish Spy*. There is also in his
description a sense of how much the earth has changed since the first matter appeared, even though, of course, how the “infinity of appearances was wrought” is left unexplained. It will take another hundred years for Jean Baptiste Lamarck to offer the first rational hypothesis that an evolution of species did occur. Nevertheless, in presenting the scenario of a gradual formation of the universe over millions of years, Mahmut reveals himself as a new sort of Modern Man, unafraid to draw far-reaching conclusions, albeit highly speculative, from non-traditional sources. Some religious people find that the theory of evolution contradicts or is incompatible with the story of a God-originated creation. Mahmut boldly hints that evolution IS the way God manifests his creation through time.

1. The Orient as a Source of Knowledge

Although the spy’s letters jump from topic to topic, as would be the wont of a loquacious voyager reporting back home on the new things he sees everyday, there are four grand themes that emerge from his philosophical disquisitions: 1) history is the greatest teacher of mankind; 2) established religion is more false than true; 3) Reason, as the highest God-given faculty, subsumes all other modes of operation; and 4) everything, good or bad, reveals the hidden face of God. These four themes, interwoven throughout the letters from Volume I to Volume VIII of the complete series, give a vivid portrait of the Turkish spy as an experimental thinker, anchored in the knowledge of ancient classics and sensitive to the new currents of his time. Mahmut’s forays into linguistics, education, science, philosophy, Asian studies, and religious studies often pre-date the more exhaustive studies of the 18th century. His research into ancient wisdom from the East opened the way for the questioning and revolutionary thinking of the next generation.
For Mahmut, a key to the future might be found in the past, and nothing beats the antiquity of the “Gentile Indians’” writings “written in a Language which is now Antiquated, and has no Affinity with any other Speech in the World. And the Books that are extant in this Language assert that it was the First and Primitive Speech of Mankind” (T.S. Vol. VIII, 324). Sanskrit grammars and vocabularies compiled by Jesuits were already in circulation (albeit not in print) in the mid-seventeenth century. Abraham Roger’s work on Hinduism (available in Dutch, French and in English from 1670 onward) contained the first translation of Sanskrit literature. The author of the Turkish Spy must have been aware of some of these works and shown some prescience in guessing (correctly, it turns out) the importance that language would assume after Sir William Jones, in 1786, revealed the connections between Sanskrit and other so-called Indo-European languages.84

The past then, according to Mahmut, holds great wisdom that has been forgotten or ignored simply because it comes from the Orient. In the Turkish Spy, the “Orient,” the “East” or “Asia” are very loose terms that include any country east or south of Europe like Turkey, Palestine, Persia, India, China, Siam, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, as well as many faiths and customs. The Turkish spy claims an “Asiatic” status in many of his letters, a sort of philosophical and linguistic umbrella that turns the Orient into a massive entity without distinctions. Referring to translations of the Hebrew Bible he asserts: “It is impossible to screw up the Dull Phrases of Europe, to the Significant Idioms of Asia” (T.S. Vol. IV, 62). There is a way to cure this peculiar Occidental ignorance: “[it] is sufficient to direct any Man to the East, where Wisdom shines in her Perfect Splendor” (T.S. Vol. II, 197).
Mahmut corresponds with a cousin of his, a certain Isouf who presently lives in Fez, Morocco. Isouf, we learn, travelled extensively in Asia, and dutifully sent his relative in Paris an account of his observations. The trans-cultural Mahmut is delighted to learn about new lands and people and only regrets one thing, albeit an important thing for a seeker of wisdom: “I am sorry, thou hadst not Time to penetrate into the Religion and Secrets of the Indian Bramins. I am more ambitious, to pry into the Wisdom and Learning of those Philosophers, than into any other Species of Knowledge whatsoever” (T.S. Vol. IV, 165). In previous letters, Mahmut had mentioned Islamic philosophers such as Avicenna and Averroes, Greek and Roman classical historians and philosophers from Herodotus and Plato to Plutarch and Cicero, and modern French philosophers such as Descartes, but this is the first time that he draws on Indian wisdom, giving it a pre-eminent place in his seeking.

Mahmut is convinced of the essential equality of all beings: “I have been long an Advocate for the Brutes, and have endeavour’d both to abstain from injuring them myself, and to inculcate this Fundamental Point of Justice to others” (T.S. Vol. IV, 218). Mahmut thus challenges the Great Chain of Beings theory. The great chain of beings was the natural order of things arranged according to a strict hierarchy that had God at the top and inanimate things such as rocks at the bottom; man was below angels but superior to all animals and everything else in the creation. Mahmut’s insistence on a certain equality of consciousness between man and beast was a serious attack on the “natural” hierarchy that subtended the understanding of creation and served as a model for men’s institutions and practices: as the head was sovereign over the body, the king must be sovereign of the body politic. The hierarchy in the chain of beings was inflexible; to displace even a few
elements within it could make the whole edifice collapse. Alchemists, who were trying to subvert the natural order of things by creating noble metal out of base metals -- by definition inferior to gold -- were among the few to challenge the fixed order, and not surprisingly, Mahmut is depicted as sympathetic to the attempt, even if not utterly convinced of the reality of alchemical transformations.

Mahmut’s reverence for the East manifests in his belief in the transmigration of souls that he manages to link with respect for all animal life in one symbiotic argument. He asserts that men were originally only vegetable and fruit eaters, and that only through a chance tasting of cooked meat did mankind take to meat eating. Ancient Egyptians depicted their gods with animal heads, he says, to remind people not to kill any living creature. In the same manner, he continues, “Persian Magi, or Wise Men practiced Abstinence.” Not only that, but even

Their Garments were painted all over, with the Various Figures of Animals. Thereby insinuating the Doctrine of the Soul’s Transmigration; and Inculcating this Mystery, That the Spirit of Man enters successively into all sorts of Bodies. (T.S. Vol. IV, 20)

This pseudo-historical argument linking vegetarianism with metempsychosis is consistent with ideas the spy had expressed before. The reader knows of the one point of disagreement Mahmut had with Descartes, namely that the philosopher and his followers did not attribute any self-consciousness to animals. Descartes had a conception of the “beast-machine,” a mechanical entity incapable of feeling pain, an idea that gave rise to numerous cruel experiments with live animals in the 17th century. The Cartesian notion of the animal as an unfeeling machine was beginning to be challenged by the time the
Turkish Spy appeared in England but was still the dominant view: nature was seen as exclusively created for man’s use and pleasure. But animals, in Mahmut’s view, are only rougher versions of ourselves: “Doubtless, the Brutes are endu’d with a Faculty of Reason as well as we; but this Faculty in them is Weak and Imperfect for want of Discipline and Art, which polish all things” (T.S. Vol. IV, 309). He expounds his vision again in the last letter of Volume IV: “In a Word, let us love all of Human Race, and shew Justice and Mercy to the Brutes. For in so doing, we shall not be Unkind to ourselves” (T.S. Vol. IV, 359). Mahmut considers animals as sentient beings and he abhors the idea of exploiting the innocent creatures for the gratification of the stomach. Here he links vegetarianism with the purification of the soul, adding a theological -- and very Eastern – argument to his arsenal of reasons for treating animals humanely. The spy’s views on animals reflects his consistency in reconciling theology with the use of reason.

Mahmut does not know much about the Indian Brahmins he rhapsodizes about, but he is certain they are the repositories of an unmatched wisdom. First of all, their philosophical views accord with Mahmut’s:

They say, That the First Matter is Co-eternal with God, as Light is Co-eval with the Sun, produc’d also, and depending after the same Manner. For as the Light diffus’d through the Air, is not properly the Sun, but an Inseparable Effect of it; so the Universe is not God, but his Production, ever subsisting on him, and never to be divided from his Eternal Essence (T.S. Vol. VI, 248).
Perhaps even more importantly the Indians have a more acceptable view of the age of the earth, putting it at several millions of years, a view shared by our spy.

I tell thee, it appears much more Rational for me to believe this, than that the First Matter itself was produc’d out of nothing about Five of Six Thousand Years ago, as the Jews and Christians seem to teach. Rather than starve my Reason, with so short an Idea, of the World’s Age, I would embrace the Sentiments of Democritus and Epicurus, suppose an Infinity of Spaces and Worlds, an Eternity of Generations and Corruptions, a Continual Change not only of Individuals, but of the very Species of things, through the Fatal Concourse and Blending of Atomes; Yet not denying the Unity of the Divine Essence, nor undervaluing his Providence all the while. For these things are, in my Opinion, very compatible one with another. (T.S. Vol. VI, 249)

Mahmut not only rejects the biblical age of the earth, a belief that was beginning to be debated in his time, but he seems to intimate a notion of evolution with his vision of a continual change in species. However, the continual change he sees happening over eons of time is not just a play of chance, of atoms colliding and reconfiguring elements in a haphazard way. Unlike the ancient Greeks whose sentiments he otherwise embraces, he links the material whirling of atoms to Divine Providence guiding the whole movement. If there is order underlying the production that is the universe, then the mind (the highest tool given to man) can think about it, make it the object of scientific enquiry and grasp it. For these reasons, Mahmut considers faith and science utterly compatible, if not complementary, two faces of the same Janus.
Mahmut acknowledges an evolution in his ideas: “It was formerly my Opinion, and I pass’d it upon all my Friends, That not only the Matter of the World is everlasting, but its present Form also. But now I believe the contrary, on more rational Grounds” (T.S. Vol. VIII, 85). He does not conclude that the world will end in an apocalyptic Armageddon however, or that this painful human trajectory was just a vain play acted out by an indifferent deity, and destined to a brutal and senseless end. As he has done before, Mahmut intimates the notion of a material evolution of life and matter: “I do not believe it [the world] shall be annihilated, or reduc’d to nothing; Nature abhors that Thought: But it shall be chang’d, metamorphos’d and transform’d” (T.S. Vol. VIII, 86).

The protagonist thinks that Indian texts would rectify Christian prejudices on this subject and be of “Great Importance to True History.” An incontrovertible account of the past, forcing the whole of mankind to acknowledge its truth would change the course of history: “Methinks, I behold this Light glimmering from afar like Aurora, the Cheerful harbinger of Approaching Day. Methinks I see the Splendour of Historical Truth rising from the Orient, and Gilding the Tops of those Mountains” (T.S. Vol. VIII, 329). History as the truth of God, finally visible to all, provided the account is clear and complete. Perhaps aware of the mystical tone of his declaration, he adds: “And without Rapture of Hyperbole, I dare be bold to presage, That a little more Knowledge in the Indian Language and Histories, will bring those Things to Light, which have been hid for many Thousands of Years, from the greatest Part of Mankind” (T.S. Vol. VIII, 329).

The spy’s letters addressed to officials of the Ottoman Empire mostly deal with politics and history while his letters to friends, doctors, muftis and dervishes, etc. generally broach more personal and philosophical questions. This is not an absolute rule; but a recurring overriding theme is the exposition of his philosophical struggles: how to integrate faith with reason.

In a letter to the Preacher to the Seraglio, Mahmut gently, if not ironically, forces his interlocutor’s hand by asking a crucial question about the diversity of religious doctrines.

*Sage Effendi,* Tell me whether it be Heresie to affirm, That God has sent Prophets onto all Nations, each furnish’d with Instructions and Doctrines agreeable to the Genius of the People whom they were to teach? And that he is not displeas’d at the various Rites and Ceremonies by which every distinct Region and Climate adore his Divine Unity? Satisfy me in this, and then thou shalt be more than Apollo in my Esteem; for, I am full of Doubts. (T.S. Vol. VIII, 59)

Do prophets or scriptures voice the unadulterated, eternal, unchangeable expression of God’s will, or do they give an interpretation of that will? Mahmut cleverly turns around what could be a dangerous argument: It’s not that men distort – or worse -- invent a version of God’s will because of their own idiosyncrasies and preferences; no, the observable differences in doctrine may be due to God’s original intention to adapt his incommensurable wisdom to various limited human mentalities. In a sense, God may be heretical to himself, an impossible contradiction in terms; and so the inescapable
conclusion is that there are no heresies. The different religions may have been ordained by God, nevertheless, some religious practices are particularly abhorrent, and none more so than the selling of Indulgences. This was of course one of the great Protestant gripes against Catholicism, and by putting it in the mouth of a Muslim, it gave the argument a legitimacy and objectivity that was hard to counter: even foreigners and infidels could perceive the shamelessness and venality of absolving sin with money. Like a sociologist analyzing the forces that shape great shifts of attitude, the spy explains how certain factors have made possible the rise of the atheism he seems to deplore:

This Spiritual Merchandise of Souls in the Supreme Court of Christendom, has in no small Degree contributed to the Atheism of the Age. While Religion is thereby render’d Cheap and Vile, a mere Artifice of Government, a Stratagem of the Priesthood, to keep Fools in Awe and Subjection. And therefore, such as have a better Opinion of themselves, and would be thought Men of Sence, take Occasion to carp at the very Fundamental Principles of all Religion, and dispute against the Being of a God. (T.S. Vol. II, 331)

The hero is evidently sympathetic to those who “would be thought Men of Sence,” yet, he finds them lacking. There is, for Mahmut, a “natural religion” or “true religion” which is the manifestation of an innate sense of the Divine found in every human being. That innate sense, far from being nurtured, is actually being perverted by organized religion. He therefore finds himself in a peculiar position, agreeing with the Libertines’ view of religion but not on their disputing “against the Being of God.”
There is a suspicious libertine tone in the various arguments Mahmut propounds about religion, reason and their interface, and back at home murmurs are spreading regarding his fidelity to the Ottoman Empire. Some even believe, he writes, that he is becoming a Christian. A vigorous defense is called for: “If I give Virtue its due Praise, even in the Infidels, am I therefore a Nazarene? If I speak with Reverence and Modesty of Christian Princes, am not I therefore a Mussulman? Or, does the Book of Glory teach us Arrogance?” (T.S. Vol. III, 257). He continues in a decidedly liberal fashion: “I thought it no Crime, to receive a Kindness from any Man, or to return it, without examining his Religion” (T.S. Vol. III, 258). Mahmut feels free to declare what amounts to a veritable profession of faith: it is true, he says,

That I have discover’d a Mind free from Superstition; That I put a high Value on Reason, and have no low Esteem, for some of the Ancient Philosophers; That I endeavor to guard my Sense, and will not suffer it to be muzzled with the Impositions of Ignorance and Prejudice; That I do not think it a Necessary Qualification of a Mussulman, to pursue with Inexorable Hatred, all Men that differ from me in Opinion. (T.S. Vol. III, 259-260)

Mahmut is very suspicious of the theologians who can only throw “Metaphysical Dust in my Eyes.” His purpose is much more practical: “I seek not to dive into that which is Incomprehensible, but to be Instructed in the Plain and Intelligible Way to Happiness” (T.S. Vol. IV, 106). Alas, he has to confess, “Of all the Innumerable Sects, into which the Mussulman Empire is divided, I cannot expect entire Satisfaction from any” (T.S. Vol.
IV, 108). The spy then proposes a solution; he is hewing his own path through the forest of divergent opinions:

If *Truth* be no where to be found Entire, but has divided her self among the Different *Religions* and *Sects* in the World, then, rather than miss of this *Divine* Jewel, I will search for it in Fragments; and whatsoever is Rational and Pious in any *Sect*, I will embrace, without concerning my self in their Follies and Vices. (T.S. Vol. IV, 109)

These dispassionate observations on the multiplicity and vanity of warring religious doctrines justify Mahmut’s position as a skeptic. Not only is the sheer diversity of faiths a good reason for not believing in any of them, but each religion is of itself full of fables and unbelievable tales repugnant to a man of sense. One of these tales, according to our philosopher spy, is the idea of the resurrection of the body, a conceit shared by Muslims and Christians: “I give an Entire Credence to the *Doctrine* of the *Resurrection*, being Naturally desirous of *Immortality*” (T.S. Vol. V, 106), he explains, affirming thus a tenet of his “natural religion,” summarized here in a simple theology: if man happens to feel a desire for immortality, then it is a valid and attainable goal because the omniscient and benevolent Creator would not give man impossible ideas beyond the reach of his grasp. Mahmut’s faith in natural religion is tempered by some solid common sense, however. He continues: “But I cannot entertain the gross Conceit, which the greatest Part of *Mussulmans* have of the *Resurrection*; that is, that our very *Dust* shall be Rais’d again, and Organize’d into a *Body*. The *Nazarenes* are of the same Opinion” (T.S. Vol. V, 106). The atoms that once constituted a body, having been dispersed after death and decay
cannot be put together again in the same form, Mahmut’s reason tells him. There is a material impossibility to this movement.

Mahmut does not reject the notion of a Divinity from which all else is issued, a Creator God who sustains and pervades his creation. What seems wrong to him is to cut off Reason from the workings of the Divinity. Man has been endowed with reason, he argues, precisely because it’s the most capable tool at his disposal to understand God’s designs. A necessary corollary to this view is that what shocks reason cannot be divine.

It is impious to believe, that the Divine Apostle would impose any Thing on our Faith, repugnant to the Sence of Men, or the Express Will of Heaven. By the Soul of Pythagoras, Mahomet said Nothing but what was Rational, and Evident to any Unprejudiced Mind. (T.S. Vol. V, 360)

He definitely claims an “Eastern” heritage when he mentions the “Express Will of Heaven,” which makes him sound like Confucius or Mencius. But the core of his thought is really that reason is the tool needed to make the right choices. One cannot avoid chuckling at his swearing by the Soul of Pythagoras that Mahomet is utterly rational.

It is in Volume V that Mahmut for the first time claims allegiance to a fairly recent and barely out of the shadows movement comprised of people who call themselves Deists. In a letter to his friend Dgnet Oglou in which he declares his affinity with the Stoicks whose views he finds the most plausible of all, he suddenly realizes that his professed admiration for this group might be misconstrued:

My dear Gnet, do not esteem me an Atheist, because of the Liberty I take in discoursing of these Mysterious Things. There are a Sort of People here in the West, whom they call Deists, that is, Men professing the Belief of a
God, Creator of the World, but Scepticks in all Things else. They have no Implicit Faith in Historical Religion, but think it the Part of Men as they are endu’d with Reason, to call in Question the Writings of Mortals like themselves, though they had the Character of the Greatest Prophets. Thus they think it no Sin to canvass [all Sacred Books]: Chusing what is Agreeable to Reason, and rejecting the Rest as Fabulous, inserted either by the Craft of Men, or the Interloping of the Devil. I protest, there appears to me no Reason to call these Men Atheists or Infidels. They rather seem to deserve the Title of Philosophers, or Lovers of Wisdom and Truth. (T.S. Vol. V, 169)

Mahmut, whose enduring longing is for finding a way to reconcile Faith and Reason, seems to have found a movement after his own heart. His philosophical position throughout the volumes has always been along the lines of: why on earth was Man endowed with reason if the ultimate knowledge of God can only be gained by abandoning reason? Even “Revelation” should be subjected to the scrutiny of the mind. Now he claims proud membership in that loose confederation of free spirits, the Deists:

And ‘tis from them I have learn’d this Unwillingness to be impos’d on in Matters of Religion. I find them in all Things Men of great Morality and Goodness, far exceeding, the Zealots of the Age in true Virtue and Pious Actions. But they make no Noise of what they do: And whilst only their Human Fraillties are Conspicuous to all, their Perfections lie conceal’d under the Veil of an Unparallev’d Modesty. (T.S. Vol. V, 170)
Unlike many members of the corrupt clergy, the Deists are men of great integrity, examples of a virtuous behavior Mahmut emulates in his daily life. In passages like this, the Ottoman spy recedes far behind the ethical man who proposes to his audience a new way to live in the world. If Man is the only earthly creature endowed with reason, then it follows that the Creator wants Man to use it, argues the spy. As a result, the highest form of ethical life reason can conceive IS to serve God.

[I am . . .] firmly believing, That he who serves God according to the Dictates of his Reason; who is just to Men and Beasts, and in all Things conserves an Innocent Purity of Life; is as Acceptable to the Great Creator, and Impartial Judge of the Universe, as he that has had the Happiness to be instructed in the Positive Injunctions of Heaven, the Reveal’d Will of the Omnipotent. And this I take to be the Sence of our Holy Lawgiver, of the Messias, and of all the Prophets in General. (T.S. Vol. VI, 147)

As Volumes VII and VIII unfold from 1693 to 1694, Mahmut’s preoccupations center more and more on spiritual life. 14 of the 65 letters in Volume VII are addressed to religious or philosophical authorities, and all in all, a total of 18 letters discuss almost exclusively his views on the church, religion and God. Another 18 letters out of 60 in Volume VIII address the same concerns. The letters of Volume VII, dated from 1667 to 1673, mark the beginning of a new period for the spy’s lonely life. He now feels old and wistful as he contemplates his place in the world. “My whole Life has been but One continu’d Tragedy” (T.S. Vol. VII, 2), he writes. He laments his fate and aspires for the peace of the vegetable “if Vegetables have any feeling of their own State” (T.S. Vol. VII,
3). He waxes lyrical: “Oh! That I’d been an Oak, a Beech, a Palm or Cypress of the Forest” (T.S. Vol. VII, 3). His personal misery is compounded by the horrid state of the world: “The whole Earth is stain’d with the Blood of the Poor: [. . .] The generations of Men are corrupted with Fraud, Avarice, Perfidy, Ambition, Envy, and a Thousand other Vices” (T.S. Vol. VII, 3). He summarizes the whole situation: “An Universal Defection from Justice and sound Morality reigns every where” (T.S. Vol. VII, 32). Mahmut has always looked upon the world with dispassion and detachment, as suits an aspirant philosopher but his tone is now more pessimistic than ever. His long exile without hope of ever returning to more congruent climes is beginning to wear him down. He is suffering from what Indian philosophy calls Vairagya, a disillusionment or disgust with the world, a sometimes-necessary stage of being on the long road to perfect union with God.

Mahmut, however, does not find in the church the antidote to this grim view of life. In fact, the Roman Church has corrupted the ancient wisdom of the prophets so much so that “’Tis no wonder there are so many Libertines and Atheists in the World, when they find Christianity to be a mere Head of palpable Contradictions” (T.S. Vol. VII, 303). Mahmut is forced to admit that atheism is a reasonable response in the face of the absurd contradictions and downright frauds of the Church, although he always defends himself from the charge of atheism. Churches – a term the spy uses in a very general sense, inclusive of mosques, temples and synagogues -- offer no solution in part because they offer so many different solutions: “I should be most puzzl’d to know what Church to fix in, among so many, all pretending to the Right Way” (T.S. Vol. VII, 15). He writes
his friend Vospel, the monk, and explains lyrically what it means to unmoor oneself from doctrine:

The more thou labourest to fasten me in thy narrow Superstition, and bigoted Zeal for the Infallibility of the Pope and the Roman Church, the looser I grow. My Soul is like a Wild Colt of the Wilderness, that tosses up his Head, sniffs the Air in Indignation, and scorning the Bridle of Servitude, neighs for Joy at his Native Liberty, scampering at large through the solitary Waste; nor can he be wheeled by Humane Craft, to lose his beloved Freedom, or change it for a Tame Captivity. (T.S. Vol. VII, 301)

Despite the pessimism that overwhelms him at times, Mahmut’s spirit is not defeated. The ardent student of history has come to realize that “every Age improves itself in Knowledge on the Ruins of the Former” (T.S. Vol. VII, 99). The present ruin he sees in the world around him may therefore carry the seeds of a future improvement.

Well then! Must we despair of Remedy? Shall we decamp, and sneakingly retire to Hell, because we can’t take Heaven by storm, nor undermine it; nor have recourse to stratagems; nor bribe the Garrison; or make a Party amongst the Celestial Burghers? No: Let’s rather lie entrench’d within our Selves, till Heaven shall voluntarily open its Gates, and Sally forth in Love, to invite and lead us in. (T.S. Vol. VII, 203)

The fierce independence of spirit Mahmut manifests is what the author hopes to teach to his readership, an independence based on the idea that Man, bumbling as he is, carries within himself the freedom to sow the seeds of the future. This fragile potentiality is at
risk from many dangers, not least among them the “Higglers in Religion, Quacks and Empiricks in Matters of conscience” who always take advantage of the besotted masses. Organized religion is fraught with danger for the spy, and only a fierce individualism can potentially lead one to truth. “I have an idea of Religion far different from that which the Casuists, whether Mussulmans or Christians, would imprint on Men’s Minds” (T.S. Vol. VII, 280). Mahmut is not just indicting Christianity but all religions. As has often been the case in the past, Mahmut’s aspirations are pulled in two perhaps incompatible directions. Depending on his mood he leans this or that way: one, a mystic flight into realms afar from the sphere of our sorrow⁸⁵, as the poet Shelley would say, and the other, a more worldly endeavor, the resolute adoption of an ethical life guided by the study of History. The hero is seemingly aware of his different moods: “If thou chargest me with Inconstancy in my Opinions, I neither deny it nor am asham’d: It being better to change ones Thoughts every Day, than to be fix’d in Error all ones Life” (T.S. Vol. VII, 18).

The text takes pains to defend the protagonist from being an Atheist, even though the avowed skepticism expressed in its pages could at times be interpreted as such. Deists were misunderstood in the popular imagination, and commonly confused with Atheists. The Turkish Spy set about rectifying the prejudice by clearly pointing out the difference between Deists and Atheists. In the later volumes, the attacks on religion alternate with mystical passages praising God, brushing aside any notion of atheism and leaving the reader to ponder the true nature of the spy’s soul. In the past, Mahmut has doubted not only the reality of the heaven depicted by priests and mullahs – “metaphysical Dust in the eyes” --, but even the fundamental notion that there is some kind of life after the death of the body. He never categorically pronounced on such weighty subjects and at other times
he actually saw the world as the body of the eternal Divinity. The older Mahmut seems to have shed his doubts as to the finality of death. His most passionate letters are not written to the Mufti, a representative of organized religion, but to Recluses, Convent Superiors, Santones and Eremites, monks and ascetics of all sorts who have left the world behind in their search for an absolute.

At the apex of his pessimism, Mahmut expresses his desire to “retire.” He seeks release from his duties as a spy and in a larger sense release from bondage to an earthly life that has ceased to bring him joy. “We walk here on Earth in an Enchanted Circle of Shadows and Mockeries: Our whole Life is full of Vanity and Mistake” (T.S. Vol. VIII, 2), he writes in a letter from 1673. Gradually over the next nine years, his disgust with the world will recede in the background and his desire to reform religion and to establish the study of science and history as a potent tool of learning for humanity will take precedence. As his spirit perks up, Mahmut wants to leap beyond dogma. He professes a new sort of faith that would transcend the mounting battle between God and Reason:

Nothing shou’d confine my Search, less than Infinity. Is not our Sense, Fansy and Reason without Bounds? Are not these Parts of the Universe? And has God made any Part greater than the Whole? This is a Contradiction in Nature. He has given us Faculties, which, if rightly us’d, cannot err. (T.S. Vol. VIII, 39)

Such bold flight into what could be considered a heretical thought is addressed to someone whose tribulations and lot in life are similar to Mahmut’s: his friend Mehemet, the exiled eunuch. Exiles understand one another, and understand especially the appeal that words like infinity or without bounds exert on a solitary and misunderstood character.
The –presumably – English author of the last volume has certainly remained faithful to the concerns Marana, the Italian exile, already put forth in the first volume.

Whether one or several authors conceived him, the spy character has followed an entirely plausible emotional and intellectual path over the 45 years of his exile in France. His initial observations on the political and military state of European nations – the avowed purpose of the book – mentioned religion sporadically, treating the subject as one factor among many. Gradually, the theme of religion came to dominate the thinking of the spy, as if the approach to the idea of God was the root cause of humanity’s varied errors. In the view of the protagonist, the inescapable fanaticism engendered by organized religion becomes the main obstacle that prevents the study of history, the study of science, the expansion of freedom, the flourishing of man’s spirit. Under the appearance of a chronicle of Louis XIV’s reign, Mahmut’s letters are in effect a journal that documents his own growth from a Turkish spy to a religious enlightener.
Conclusion

In their 2010 work published by Harvard University Press, Hunt, Jacob and Mijnhardt argued that *Religious Ceremonies of the World* was literally *The Book That Changed Europe* in the sense that it transformed Christianity from the absolute vehicle of truth to one religion among many. After offering a tour of all known religions, the enormous compendium gathered by Bernard ended with an entire volume on *Islam*, followed, in 1737, by a last volume on *Dissent, Deism and Atheism*. As Hunt Jacob and Mijnhardt point out:

> By offering the most comprehensive account of the time, Bernard effectively made Islam into a test case for monotheism more generally. He used it to raise a series of troubling and even subversive questions. Since Muslim rulers offered toleration of Christians and Jews, might not Christian rulers learn at least to tolerate differences within Christianity, if not to extend the same toleration to Jews and Muslims? Did the enduring success of Islam suggest the validity of deism or even atheism? [. . .] If Muhammad was an impostor, as Christians believed, then was Jesus one as well, as *The Treatise of the Three Imposters* had argued? Many European critics of Islam at the time worried about the connection to deism, in particular.86

It can be argued that more than forty years before Bernard’s volumes on Islam and Deism appeared, the *Turkish Spy* had already visited these questions, and concluded, as Bernard did, that deism was a logical outcome for all those who both observed critically the phenomenon of religion and retained a belief in monotheism. The authors of
The Book that Changed Europe describe a general movement that began after the Turks retreated from Vienna in 1683 (the first volume of the Turkish Spy was published in 1684) and continued with growing force into the 18th century: “Islam came to be viewed less as a cesspool of sexual licentiousness, error, and imposture (though this portrayal still had its adherents, as it does today) and more as a kind of intellectual foil for European customs and religions.”

In what could summarize the thematic structure of the Turkish Spy, (although the book is not even mentioned once in their work!) Hunt, Jacob and Mijnhardt offer the following conclusion:

In short, Islam provided a shifting point of triangulation for European Christians; Muslims went from being the absolute other at the beginning—the despised enemy—to a potential political ally and religious touchstone. Islam, rather than Judaism, also served as a point of departure for the discussion of deism. […] Christianity had superseded Judaism, not negated it. Islam, however, claimed to have superseded Christianity, which posed an altogether different kind of problem for Christians and explains their insistence that Muhammad was an impostor. For Christianity to be true, he had to be a false prophet. Deists, by contrast, could view Muhammad as no more (or less) false than Jesus; both might be seen as prophets or wise men without special access, however, to revealed truth.

What is fascinating about the Turkish Spy is that it documents the tremendous shift in perception analyzed above in an almost day-by-day account. Mahmut experiences this shift in consciousness in his own self, and tells a story whose arc will only become
clear several decades later. The publishing success of the *Turkish Spy* showed that the author(s) had their finger on the pulse of European society, beginning as it did, in Italy, then France, then England and, after 1696 in France and in the continent again, growing its readership with every move across the borders.

Paradoxically, the text managed to achieve two contradictory purposes: it brought in a knowledge of and appreciation for aspects of Islam and even occasionally of Catholicism and Calvinism, and it attacked all religions in a fundamental way. In the pages of *the Turkish Spy*, the term ‘religion’ can refer to two different things. One is what the spy calls “Historical religion,” a construct instigated by man, a formidable structure developing over centuries with analyzable recorded doctrines and dogmas. That construct embodies for the authors everything that is wrong with religion, namely that despite its origin in God’s will, it has been taken over by man. The result, plain for all to see, is a system full of contradictions whose sole purpose is to take advantage of the masses’ credulity, and ensure the continuance and domination of a certain class of people. Rabbis, Muftis and Priests all participate in the great pretense and they deserve the harsh critiques Mahmut puts forward because they – of all men – should know better. What they know is that there is a God, and their sin is all the greater that they flout attributes of God, namely Truth and Justice, for the sake of some temporal profit. On the other end of the spectrum stand the atheists, a group ensconced in error in that they deny God’s existence, but that otherwise finds favor in Mahmut’s eyes, because many of their positions are derived from the use of reason.

The spy also uses the word ‘religion’ to signify an aspiration closer to what we might term now spirituality. One of his phrases is ‘Natural Religion,’ the notion that
religious knowledge is inborn in every human and (or) can be acquired by the use of reason, itself a God-given attribute. He expresses reverence for monks, anchorites, eremites, hermits and solitary ascetics of all brands, people who belong to one religion or another, yet seem to transcend the shortcomings that affect most members of their faith. Mahmut shares these seekers’ aspirations and he opens up in his letters to them. In the interaction with these saints, the protagonist reveals a mystical side that sets him far apart from the atheists he somehow respects. The tension between his reason-oriented self and his mystical self heightens the interest and encapsulates the attraction that this text exerts on the reader. Through Mahmut’s eyes, readers live the very questions that his century begins to ask. The spy becomes the representative of the new ‘thinking man,’ unafraid to probe controversial thoughts and share his lucubration with the public at large.

Mahmut prides himself to be a historian and this word has a special meaning for him. Much of the text consists of chronicles, linear descriptions of what happened to whom, where and when. This mode of story telling gets gradually enhanced by the addition of personal reflections on the events described. The spy’s reflections often bear on two things: one, that history is a great teacher, and two, that the history known so far in the West is incomplete, one-sided, and therefore not delivering the truth that should be the natural outcome of studying history. The protagonist is represented as pining for other points of views, particularly from the East, as if that could complement a missing element in Western thought. The text expresses an inchoate dissatisfaction with what Europe has been able to offer so far and aims at a universalization of history, which – according to its author -- will lead to the universalization of knowledge. If history is still subject to interpretation, our hero says, it is because men have not yet enlarged their views so as to
include the ‘other’ people’s accounts. Mahmut practices that inclusion to some extent by featuring the Ottoman point of view in his tales, but in general, the text spreads the idea of the inherent subjectivity of any historical account told from one side only.

The literary hero counts himself as a Deist, member of a group that had no official recognition or acknowledged spokespersons at the time the *Turkish Spy* appeared. The Deists whom Mahmut fervently praises in his letters were part of an underground movement in England, much maligned and misunderstood by the public at large. The author took a big risk in openly advocating a position considered by the majority to be an abhorrent belief, a perversion of the true faith. But the risk paid off. More people were turned on by the reflections of this intelligent spy than were turned off, as is shown by the fact that three more volumes followed his overt admission of Deism from Volume V. The mantel of Deism that the spy claims for himself is not the sign of his adherence to a set of fixed ideas. In many ways, Mahmut defines his own brand of Deism, his own theology that is wide enough to include many offshoots. The *Turkish Spy* put Deism on the table, treated it as a philosophy rather than a religious belief, and the topic was subsequently to be passionately argued about for the next fifty years.

The fact that it was probably written by multiple authors made the text become a place of reconciliation between opposing ideas, Faith and Science, Catholicism and Protestantism, Islam and Christianity, East and West. The novel can be viewed as a laboratory for evolving or creating a new internationalist vision that subsumes science, history and religion under a new trivium of knowledge for humanity as a whole. *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy* holds a special place in the history of literature and ideas. It came on the heels of the utopias of the 1670s that had made a first foray into a new mode of
thinking, sidestepping long held prejudices with fanciful yet thought-provoking humor. The bold ideas that the *Turkish Spy* offers were not entirely new at the end of the 17th century. Many had been presented to the public before, but these ideas were either reaching specific and restricted sections of the public (the vegetarians, the Atheists, the Deists) or were principally received as humorous flights of fancy with little bearing on real life.

With the advent of the *Turkish Spy*, the rumblings of dissatisfaction could be heard louder. Unlike the protagonists set forth by Cyrano, Foigny or Vairasse, heroes whose extraordinary adventures required a very willing suspension of disbelief, the Turkish spy character never offends any sense of the reality of his life in very concrete and well-known settings. Once readers accepted that such a spy could exist, every pronouncement or observation of his acquired a tangible immediacy. One could in all seriousness evaluate his opinion on history, science or religion. The entertainment value of the text receded in the background while the import of new ideas came to the fore. Under the guise of a spy novel, the most advanced ideas of the time were being propounded under the very nose of suspicious censors.

In 1696, two years after the last volume of the *Turkish Spy* was published, John Toland’s *Christianity not mysterious*, a query into the rationality of religion, proved to be the first of a series of more serious disquisitions on Deism, followed in the next decades by essays from more famous evangelists of Deism such as Anthony Collins (1676-1729), Matthew Tindal (1656-1733) and Thomas Chubb (1679-1747). Their works generated intense debates about Deism among theologians of all persuasions. Thus, *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy*, appearing as it does between the imaginative Utopias of the 1670’s and the
foundational treatises of Deism of early 18th century, could rightfully be seen as opening the way and normalizing a discourse heretofore too provocative for the sensibilities of the century.

What is remarkable about the *Turkish Spy* is how the text managed to integrate within its pages an enormous amount of reflections concerning all aspects of society. Not only does the *Turkish Spy* respond to the themes and questions raised by previous literature, it also creates its own internal dialogue. The long saga, created over ten years by – possibly -- multiple authors, is also in conversation with itself: the protagonist grows and revisits some of his earlier ideas, sometimes refining them, sometimes rejecting them. What begins as a spy story ends up as a text advocating the essential equality of all men and the necessity of looking at the whole world as one story of human endeavor. Some of the ideas propounded in the text were already being floated around, but others were new, or offered a new synthesis of older ideas. We may never know who the author(s) of this unique text were but one thing is certain: they were men of insatiable curiosity, alert to the currents of their time, and trying to fathom what the future had in store. The book was a success because contemporaries turned out to be eager to follow Mahmut on his path of self-discovery. Like his readers, the protagonist seeks to find his true place in the world, a quest perhaps as old as humanity, but a quest that also had immediate bearing on a society newly aware of the impact of science and of travelers’ tales from far away, and the impact of emerging ways to understand man, life, and God.


Endnotes

1 Stagyrite, a term meant to designate Aristotle, who was from the city of Stagira.

2 By the early eighteenth century, many of the ideas that had seemed so controversial twenty years earlier had gone mainstream, and *L’Espion dans les cours des princes chrétiens*, the title under which *The Turkish Spy* circulated on the Continent from 1696 onward, had lost its edge. I will therefore leave aside any treatment of the *Espion dans les cours des princes chrétiens*.

3 Extracted from *The Gentleman’s Magazine for March, 1841*.

4 See Chapter 1 for more detail on the work of these scholars.

5 *Idem*

6 *Idem*


9 *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), by Madame de Lafayette, is one of the first examples of the new pseudofactual approach.

10 Marana was implicated (perhaps unjustly) in the *Raphael della Torre* conspiracy, an attempt to overthrow the government of Genoa that came to light in 1670.


12 They refer in particular to two scholars: Pietro Toldo, the first to establish a catalog of parallels between *L’Espion* and *Letters persanes* in 1892, and G. L. van Roosbroeck, who published his study *Persian Letters before Montesquieu* in 1932. Contrary to Toldo, Roosbroeck seeks to show that any parallel between the two works is purely coincidental, and that Montesquieu was not inspired by the *Turkish Spy* which, according to him, is mainly an expression of Marana’s ambition to compile a “diplomatic history” of the reign of Louis XIV.

13 Not in itself a new idea since it already had some credence from the Renaissance onward.


The original review in French goes like this:

Cet ouvrage a été contrefait à Amsterdam du consentement du Libraire de Paris, qui l’a le premier imprimé. Il sera composé de plusieurs petits volumes qui contiendront les événements les plus considérables de la Chrétienté, en général, & de la France en particulier, depuis l’année 1637 jusqu’en 1682. Un Italien natif de Genes, nommé Marana donne ces Relations pour des lettres écrites aux Ministres de la Porte, par un Espion Turc qui se tenait caché à Paris. Il prétend les avoir traduites de l’Arabe en Italien, & il raconte fort au long comment il les a trouvées. On soupçonne avec beaucoup d’apparence que c’est un tour d’esprit Italien, & une fiction ingénieuse semblable à celle dont Virgile s’est servi pour louer Auguste. Ce Poète introduit tantôt Anchise, tantôt Vulcain, qui pour louer plus finement cet Empereur, prennent la chose d’un peu haut & tombent par degrés au panégyrique que le Poète avait en vue. Cela est beaucoup plus beau que d’aller louer un Prince de but en blanc. On croit donc que le Sieur Marana n’a point eu d’autre dessein que de faire l’éloge de sa Majesté tres-Chrétienne, & qu’afin de mieux cacher son jeu, & de lui donner du merveilleux, il veut mettre en la bouche d’un Turc ce qu’il a médité lui-même sur les actions glorieuses de ce grand Monarque. Mais avant que d’en venir là il fera dire à son Espion plusieurs autres choses. Peu importe que ce soit un Turc, ou un Genois qui nous parlent, pourvu qu’ils nous donnent un bon livre. Ce premier tome est bien agréable : il comprend l’Histoire des derniers mois de l’an 1637 & de la plus grande partie de l’an 1638.

See Lucien Bély’s *Espions et ambassadeurs au temps de Louis XIV*, a thoroughly documented study on the birth of diplomacy and espionage in the 17th century.


The modern definition has not changed much: to observe secretively or furtively with hostile intent.

*L’Espion du Grand Seigneur*, Book I. Letter I. 1686 Ed. The title will be referred to as E.G.S. in further citations.

In English, the sentence becomes: “My Room is so small that jealousy itself can scarce enter.”

French was far from standardized at the time and many dialects and accents must have been heard then in Paris. A survey conducted by Abbé Grégoire in 1790, more than a hundred years after the first publication of *l’Espion*, showed that France had no more than 11% of its population speaking...
“pure French,” and among those, even fewer could write it correctly, a paradoxical situation for the language of civilized Europe! (from *The Discovery of France, a Historical Geography*, by Graham Robb.) One can imagine that the police needed strong linguistic skills to sort out foreigners from regional broken French.


26 The Italian edition, printed in Paris a month before the French, features the same preface. The French was faithfully translated from the Italian.

27 There is one surviving book from the first 1684 French edition in one volume printed by Claude Barbin, kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris. BN: Z 14478

28 No Italian letter beyond the 30th has ever been found although it is generally assumed that the first 102 letters were originally written in Italian, and then translated into French.

29 Also written sometimes Gian Paolo Marana.

30 This error is all the more bizarre in that it mimics the later Wetstein edition of 1688 which will be published as one book instead of four, and whose Part III indeed contains letters 51 to 76.

31 This volume IV begins on page 137, which is exactly the page number of letter 77 in the third volume, proof that the printer used the same plate already composed for the printing of volume III.

32 A justified fear as we know from a document found in Charpentier’s papers and signed by Marana that he had to cut some passages – alas now lost -- from Volume III: “I, the under-written John Paul Marana, author of a manuscript Italian volume, entitled ‘L’Esploratore Turco, tomo terzo,’ acknowledge that Mr. Charpentier, appointed by the Lord Chancellor to revise the said manuscript, has not granted me his certificate for printing the said manuscript, but on condition to rescind four passages.”

33 The French would bombard Genoa for ten days in May 1684, not long after Marana’s appeal to the king appeared in his “Épistre.”

34 One should note that the “bassesse révoltante” is attributed to the preface of a later text by Marana: *Les Evènemens les plus considéirable du règne de Louis le Grand*, 1690.


36 There are exemplars of the first edition of 1687 and of the second edition of 1691 kept at the Huntington Library and Art Gallery in California.

37 *The First Volume of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy, Who lived Five and Forty Years, Undiscovered, at Paris: Giving an Impartial Account to the Divan at Constantinople, of the most Remarkable Transactions of Europe; And discovering several Intrigues and Secrets of the Christian Courts, (especially of that of France) from the Year 1637, to the Year 1682.*
These details may have evoked the story of Leo Africanus, a Granadan-born Muslim captured by Sicilian pirates and given as a gift to Pope Leo X. An English edition of Africanus’s Geography had appeared at London in 1600.

The engraver was the Dutch artist Frederick Hendrik van Hove (circa 1628-1698), who had just moved to England. Points to the dee internationalism of the publishing industry during the 17th c.


The so-called Nine Years War (1688-1697) that pitted England, Holland, the Holy Roman Empire and Spain against France.

Also spelled Basha, or Pasha.

Among others: A Christian turn’d Turke, or The Tragical Lives and Deaths of the two Famous Pyrates, Ward and Danisker. (1612) by Robert Daborn; All’s Lost by Lust (1619-1620) attributed to William Rowley and Thomas Middleton; The Renegado, or the Gentleman of Venice (1624) by Philip Massinger; Don Sebastian, King of Portugal (1689) by John Dryden.

The format of the edition is octodecimo or approximately 4 X 6 inches with an average of 200 words per page. By comparison, 20th Century books in roughly the same format have from 275 to 375 words per page, an increase made possible by the refinement in legibility of modern printing technology. A re-printing in an equivalent format of the integral text today would still have between 1500 and 2000 pages.

There are many editions between the 10th and the 26th for which no trace has been found. The 26th may have been a boast from the editors eager to stage a success in order to boost the sales.

Newton’s Principia, the irrefutable exposition of the law of universal gravitation, will be published in 1687, 30 years after Cyrano’s tale.

Fontenelle’s Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes, translated soon after in English as Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds, the first book to offer a graspable explanation of the concept of heliocentrism, will only be printed 30 years later.

Cyrano’s ideas seem to prefigure one of Spinoza’s essential arguments, that God and Nature are actually two names for the same reality.

One of the earliest example of fantastical voyage is A True Story, written by Lucian of Samatosa (120-180 C. E.)

The full title is: La terre australe connue : c’est à dire, la description de ce pays inconnu jusqu’ici, de ses mœurs & de ses coûumes. Par Mr Sadeur Avec les aventures qui le conduisirent en ce Continent, et les particularité du séjour qu’il y fit durant 35 ans et plus, et de son retour. Réduites et mises en lumière par les soins et la conduite de G. de F. (Gabriel de Foigny)

Foigny lived in Protestant Geneva when he published the Sadeur account and he was indicted by the Conseil de Genève, which eventually threw the impious author in prison and threatened to have him expelled from the country. Foigny fought the accusations and managed to remain free in Geneva.
Eventually he returned to France and to Catholicism although some scholars like Frédéric Lachèvre doubt the genuineness of Foigny’s conversions, the first into the Calvinist faith, the second back into Catholicism. Others, like Max Patrick see him as a man not devoid of faith but unable to find a true home in either religion.

52 The full title is: *The History of the Sevarites or Sevarambi: A Nation inhabiting part of the third Continent, Commonly called, Terrae Australes Incognitae. With An Account of their admirable GOVERNMENT, RELIGION, CUSTOMS, and LANGUAGE. Written By one Captain Siden, A Worthy Person, Who, together with many others, was cast upon those Coasts, and lived many Years in that Country. LONDON, Printed for Henry Brome, at the Gun at the West End of St. Pauls Church-Yard. 175*

53 The fairy tale ending is more pronounced in the case of the English version, which is abridged from the original French.

54 In this respect the 1669 ill-fated ‘embassy’ of Soliman Aga was instrumental in launching a new and lasting fashion in France: that of drinking coffee, an unknown beverage theretofore.

55 Gabriel d’Aramond’s (ambassador from 1546 to 1553) assembled an extraordinary group of scientists, artists and philosophers for his Istanbul embassy. The scholar and linguistic expert Guillaume Postel, whom Aravamudam calls ‘the first Orientalist,” was part of this group.


59 The Barbin edition only mentions in the epistle to the king the fact that Mahmut lived undiscovered in Paris for 45 years. The English editions from 1691 onward capitalize on the shock value of this information by stating it on the title page itself: *The First Volume of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy, Who lived Five and Forty Years, Undiscovered, at Paris.*


61 See Jean de Léry’s *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil*

62 This is typical of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century travel writing.

63 Published in France almost a century later in 1782.

64 Historically, the Ottomans did not allow the printing of books until much later in the 18th century.

65 After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 AD, Mehmed II declared himself Kayser-i Rum, literally "Caesar of Rome". Ottoman rulers saw themselves as inheritors of the Roman legacy, and they cared about translatio imperii.
The Eight volumes of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy (1694), a compendium of all letters previously published, features an index of Turkish and Arabic words. “Bassa,” also spelled “Pasha,” is defined as: A Title of Honour given to Governors of Provinces, and Privy-Councillors of the Grand Signior.

One of the few facts we know about the presumed author of the first 102 letters. Marana was suspected of aiding the conspiracy of Rafaello della Torre against the government of Genoa in 1672. His conviction resulted in an imprisonment of four years.

An anecdote reported by the Chevallier d’Arvieux, one of the translators attached to the delegation of Suleiman Aga, reveals the prevalent mentality of the Turks. Being pressed to give his letter to the Secretary of State, rather than the king, Suleiman Aga replied that he did not come to France to learn their system of government. It was enough for him to know that Louis XIV was a powerful monarch, for whom he had the greatest respect. His commission was to deliver a letter into the hands of the king, and relay the good will that the Sultan wanted to maintain with him. As soon as this had been accomplished, Suleiman would return home.

If the French government was officially making uneasy, much criticized alliances with the Ottomans (mainly to thwart the European designs of the Hapsburgs) the French population was far more divided in their opinions of the Turks.

Holland, Germany and England were the beneficiaries of this exodus and rose to economic prominence as France declined. History repeats itself: much later, Nazi Germany lost its scientific supremacy by persecuting the Jewish scientists, many of whom found refuge in America and contributed to American supremacy in the sciences.


Actually, Christians and Jews were not particularly oppressed under Ottoman rule. See Louis XIV et son projet de conquête d’Istanbul by Bilici Faruk. Société d’histoire turque. 2004.

And slay them wherever ye find them, and drive them out of the places whence they drove you out, for persecution is worse than slaughter... and fight them until fitnah is no more, and religion is for Allah.

Quran 2:191

The theme will be picked up in later volumes.

The Hadith is a collection of reports on the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad that is second only to the Koran.

Mahmut brings up various characters who suffered a violent death as a consequence of their actions, and he concludes: “We see hereby an Effect of God’s Will, accompanied with our Consent; because we search by our own Choice that which we might avoid.” (T.S. Vol I, 50)

This refers to the Papal Schism, a split within the Roman Catholic Church from 1378 to 1417 that divided Europe into at least two camps, each with their own claimant to the Papal throne.
Alexander VII was known for his luxurious nepotism and his theological writings, most notably on the issue of heliocentrism which he condemned as heretical.

The Catholic Church does have arguments to justify the infallibility of the Pope, but this theological dispute is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Alchemy was not yet characterized as a fringe element in early scientific experiments. Sir Isaac Newton himself, the quintessential scientist, immersed himself in alchemy for a good while.

Copernicus himself, the man at the center of the controversy, was a fervent Catholic.

“Serious” scientific books were still written in Latin at the time. Fontenelle, Bernard de. Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes. Gallica http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb30448123r

Lamarck posited an inheritance of acquired characteristics through use or disuse of said characteristics.

The first one to make this connection was the sixteenth-century merchant Filippo Sassetti (even though his letters from India were not published until much later)

A line from “One Word Is Too Often Profaned” a poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley, written in 1822 and published in 1824.


Idem, p. 252

Idem, p. 253
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