

MIRZA, OR LETTERS OF A TRAVELER

(1795)

PREFACE

The reader will readily understand, I think, that the preceding Essay on Fictions was written after the three short stories I publish here: none deserves the title of novel; situations are sketched rather than developed, and their only merit lies in the depiction of a few sentiments of the heart. I was barely twenty years old when I wrote them, and the French revolution had not yet occurred. I should think that, since then, my mind has acquired enough strength to devote itself to more useful works. It is said that misfortunes hasten the development of all moral faculties, but sometimes I fear that it has the opposite effect, that it throws you into a state of melancholy which makes you indifferent both to yourself and to others. The greatness of the events around us makes us feel the emptiness of general thoughts and the impotence of individual feelings to such a degree that, lost in the midst of life, we no longer know what road hope should follow, what motive must arouse our efforts, what principle will henceforth guide public opinion through the mistakes caused by blind allegiance to a party, what principle will mark again, in all carriers, the brilliant aim of true glory.

Allow me, Madam, to apprise you of an anecdote from my trip, which you may find interesting. A month ago, in the town of Gorée (1), I heard that the governor had persuaded a Negro (2) family to come and live a few miles away so as to establish a plantation (3) similar to the one found in Santo Domingo. He had imagined, surely, that such an example would incite Africans to grow sugarcane, and that, by drawing to their territory the free trade of this sugar, Europeans would no longer take Africans away from their homeland and make them suffer under the hideous yoke of slavery. In vain have the most eloquent writers attempted to obtain this revolution by appealing to the goodness of men. Thus, the enlightened administrator despairing to overcome selfish interest, would like to make it stand on the side of humanity, by no longer having this personal interest find its advantage in braving humanity; but the Negroes, who do not think of providing for their own future, are even more incapable of thinking about generations to come, and they refuse a present evil without comparing it to the fate from which it could free them. One single African, freed from slavery through the generosity of the governor, had agreed to take part in his project. A prince in his own country, he had been followed by a few Negroes of a lower station who farmed his land under his orders.

I asked to be taken there. I walked part of the day, and at dusk I arrived near a house which, I was told, had been built in part by French people, but which still had a primitive quality. When I drew near the Negroes were enjoying their moment of rest: for relaxation they were shooting with bows and arrows, perhaps longing for the times when this pleasure was their only occupation. Ourika, the wife of Ximeo (the Negro who was the head of the settlement), was sitting at some distance away from the games, and she looked distractedly at her two year old daughter who was playing at her feet.

My guide walked up to her and told her that I was seeking shelter for the night in the name of the governor. "Ha-Governor moo koo yooni. Doogoo silwaay da laal jam! Keurgui sa Keuria," she cried. (4) ["The governor sends him! Let him come in, welcome! Everything we have is his."] She came toward me with hurried steps, her beauty dazzled me; she had the true charm of her sex, that is, everything suggestive of delicacy and gracefulness. "Mo anaa zimeo?" my guide inquired. "He is not back," she replied, "he is taking his evening walk; when the sun is no longer on the horizon, when the very sunset no longer suggests light, he will come back, and it will no longer be night for me." After uttering these words, she let out a sigh, walked away, and, when she came back toward us, I could see streaks of tears down her cheeks. We went into the hut; we were served a meal composed of all the local produce. I tasted everything with pleasure, eager that I was to feel new sensations. Someone knocked at the door; startled, Ourika sprang up, opened the door, and threw herself in the arms of Ximeo, who kissed her without seeming to be conscious of what he was doing or seeing. I went up to him. You cannot imagine a more beautiful face; his features had none of the defects of the men of his color. His eyes produced an effect that I had never experienced before: they took hold of your soul, and the melancholy they expressed went directly into the heart of those he beheld. The proportions of the statue of the Apollo Belvedere could not have been more perfect than his: perhaps he could have been considered too thin for a man, but the sorrowful grief that every one of his movements indicated, that his face depicted, was more in keeping with frailty than with strength. He was not surprised to see us; he seemed impervious to any other emotion than his dominant idea. We told him who had sent us and what the aim of our journey was. "The governor earned the right to my gratefulness," he replied. "Can you believe that in my present state I still have a benefactor?" He

talked to us for a while about the reasons which had led him to run a plantation, and I was surprised at how sharp-witted and articulate he was. He became aware of my surprise. "You are surprised," said he, - "when we are not at the level of sheer brutes, although you treat us as such." "I am not surprised," I replied, "but even a Frenchman would not speak French better than you do."

"Ah, you are right," he added, - "one still retains a few rays when one has lived for a long time near an angel." And his beautiful eyes looked down and ceased to see anything that was outside him. Ourika was crying, and Ximeo finally noticed her. "Baalma," he cried and took her hand, - "Baalma! Tay sabisla sa-biis-la vaante maay noo nu fatiikoo." [forgive me; the present is yours, bear with my memories.] "Tomorrow," he said, turning toward me, - "tomorrow, we shall visit my plantation together; you will see if I can flatter myself that it meets the expectations of the governor. Our best bed will be readied for you; sleep peacefully. I would like you to feel comfortable here. Men whose heart is broken by misery," he told me in a low voice, "do not fear, and even long for, the spectacle of another's happiness."

I went to bed, but I could not sleep. I was full of sadness. Everything I saw carried its stamp. I did not know its cause, but I felt moved as one is when contemplating a painting that depicts melancholy. At dawn, I got up; I found Ximeo even more dejected than the previous day. I asked him what the cause of his sadness was and he answered: "my grief, fixed in my heart, can neither grow nor wither; but the uniformity of life makes it go away faster, and new incidents, whatever they may be, give rise to new thoughts, which always give rise to new tears." He showed me his entire plantation with the utmost care. I was surprised at the order that reigned there. The land yielded at least as much as a like surface farmed in Santo Domingo by as many men, and the happy Blacks were not overwhelmed with work. I saw with pleasure that in addition to everything else cruelty was unnecessary. I asked Ximeo who had advised him about the farming of the land, about the organization of the workers' day. "I was given little advice," he replied, - "but reason can lead to what reason has already discovered: since death was forbidden me, I had to dedicate my life to others; how else could I have lived? I abhorred slavery; I could not understand the barbarous purpose of the men of your color. I sometimes thought that their god, enemy of our god, had ordered them to make us suffer, but when I realized that a product of our country, neglected by us, was the sole cause of the cruel suffering endured by these unfortunate Africans, I accepted the offer to give them the example of growing sugarcane. May free trade be established between the two parts of the world! May my unfortunate compatriots renounce primitive life, devote themselves to work in order to satisfy your greed, and help save a few of them from the most horrible destiny! May those who could flatter themselves that they had avoided slavery apply themselves with an equal zeal to protect their fellow beings from such a fate." As he was talking to me thus, we reached a door that led to a forest on one side of the plantation. I thought that Ximeo was going to open it, but he turned away in order to avoid it. "Why," I said, "don't you show me?"

"Stop," he cried, "you seem sensitive, will you be able to hear the long story of my woes? It has been two years since I conversed with anyone. What I usually say is not really speaking. You can see it, I need to confide in someone. You should not be flattered by my trust; but still, it is your kindness which encourages me and makes me count on your pity."

"Ah! have no fear," I replied; "you will not be betrayed."

"I was born in the kingdom of Cayor. My father, of royal blood, was the chief of several tribes that had been committed to his care by the monarch. I was trained early in the art of defending my country and I had been familiar with archery and javelin throwing since I was a child. At that time I was promised in marriage to Ourika, the daughter of my father's sister. I loved her as soon as I could love, and this faculty developed within me for her and through her. Her beautiful perfection struck me even more when I compared her to other women, and I came back by choice to my first inclination.

We were often at war against the Jolofs, our neighbors, and as we both had the atrocious custom of selling our prisoners of war to the Europeans, a deeply rooted hate that even peace could not abate allowed no communication between us. One day, while hunting in the mountain, I was led further than I intended; a woman's voice, remarkably beautiful, reached my ears. I listened to her song and I could not recognize the words that our maidens enjoy repeating. The love of freedom, the horror of slavery were the subjects of the noble hymns that filled me with a rapturous admiration. I drew near: a young person rose. Struck by the contrast between her age and the subject of her meditations, I looked in her face for something supernatural that might reveal the inspiration which can be a substitute for the long reflections of old age. She was not beautiful, but her noble and regular stature, her enchanting eyes, her animated countenance left love nothing to wish for in her face. She came forward and spoke to me at length without my being able to answer her. Finally I managed to express my surprise; it became more pronounced when I learned that she had composed the verse I had just heard. "There is no need to be surprised," she said, "a Frenchman who settled in Senegal, discontented with his lot and unhappy in his own country, retired among us. This old man was so good as to tend to my youthful years, and he gave me what the Europeans have that is worthwhile: the knowledge that they misuse and the philosophy whose lessons they follow so poorly. I learned the language of the French, I read a few of their books, and, for my own delight, I come to these mountains and reflect in solitude."

My interest, my curiosity, increased with every word she said; she was no longer a woman that I was hearing, she was a poet. Never had those of my countrymen who devote themselves to the cult of the gods seemed filled with such a noble enthusiasm. When leaving her, I obtained her permission to see her again: her memory followed me everywhere. I left with more admiration than love, and trusting this difference for a long time, I saw Mirza (as this young Jolof was named) without meaning to offend Ourika. One day, at length, I asked Mirza if she had ever loved. I asked this question with trepidation, but her ready wit and open mind made all answers easy for her: "No, I have not," she said, "I have been loved sometimes; I may have wanted to feel; I wanted to know the feeling that takes over your whole life and rules every instant of the day, but I have reflected too much, I think, to feel this illusion. I feel all the movements of my heart and I can see them all in others. I could not to this day deceive nor be deceived." Her last words troubled me. "Mirza," I said, "how sorry I feel for you! The pleasures of the mind are not all absorbing; only those of the heart satisfy all the faculties of the soul." She taught me all the while with an inexhaustible kindness; in a short time, I learned everything that she knew. When I interrupted her with my praise, she would not listen; as soon as I stopped, she would proceed, and I could see by what she said that while I was praising her I had been the only object of her thoughts. Finally, intoxicated by her charm, her mind, and her eyes, I could feel that I loved her,

and I dared tell her: what did I not say to transpose in her heart the exaltation I had found in her mind! I was dying of passion and fear at her feet. "Mirza," I repeated to her, "bring me into the world by telling me that you love me; open up the heavens for me so that I may soar with you." As she listened to me, she lost her composure and tears filled her beautiful eyes in which, until now, I had only seen the expression of genius. "Ximeo," she said, "I shall answer you tomorrow. Do not expect from me the art of the women of your country. Tomorrow, you will read in my heart; in the meantime, think about yours." After saying these words, she left me well before sunset, the usual signal of her retreat. I did not attempt to detain her; the power of her personality bound me to her will. Since I had met Mirza, I saw less of Ourika. I deceived her. I invoked trips as pretexts. I delayed the moment of our union. I postponed the future instead of planning it.

At last, the following day, which seemed like an eternity, I went to her. Mirza moved first toward me; she looked dejected, either because of foreboding or tender thoughts. She had spent that day in tears. "Ximeo," she said to me with a soft but steady voice, "are you quite sure that you love me? Is it certain that in your vast country no object has fixed your heart?" I answered with promises. "Ah, I believe you; surrounding nature is the only witness to your promises. Everything that I know about you, you yourself told me. The isolation, the neglect in which I live provide all my security. What distrust, what obstacle have I opposed to your will? In me, you could only deceive the regard I have for you, Ximeo; you could only avenge yourself of my love. My family, my friends, my fellow citizens, I banished all to depend on you only. To you, I must be sacred as the weak, the young, and the wretched are. No, I have nothing to fear, nothing." I interrupted her: I was at her feet; I thought I was sincere; the force of the present had made me forget past and future. I had deceived; I had convinced her; she believed me. Gods! What passionate expressions she found! What happiness she felt in loving! Oh, during the two months that passed thus, all that exists of love and happiness met in her heart. My wishes were gratified, but my excitement was fading. How strange is human nature! I was so struck by the pleasure she had seeing me that I soon began going for her sake rather than for my own: I was so sure of her welcome that I no longer trembled when approaching her. Mirza did not realize this; she spoke, she answered, she cried, she brought herself solace, and her active soul acted upon itself. Ashamed of myself, I needed to go away. War broke out in another part of the Cayor kingdom; I resolved to go there directly. I had to tell Mirza. Oh, at that moment I felt again how dear she was to me; because of her trust and sweet feeling of security, I did not have the strength to reveal my plan to her. She seemed so much to live by my presence that my tongue froze when I attempted to tell her that I was leaving. I resolved to write to her; this art that she had taught me was to be used to bring her misery. Twenty times I left her; twenty times I went back. The unfortunate soul enjoyed this and mistook my pity for love. Finally, I left; I informed her that my duty was forcing me to leave her, but that I would come back at her feet feeling more tender than ever. What response did she give me! Ah, language of love, how charming you become when you are embellished by thought! What a despair at my absence! What passionate desire to see me again! Thinking then of the excesses to which her heart could go in loving made me shudder; but my father would never have called by the name of daughter a woman from the Jolof country. All sorts of obstacles were offered to my thoughts when the veil that hid them was lifted. I saw Ourika again; her beauty, her tears, the power of a first inclination, the entreaties of an entire family, and all sorts of things, everything that seems insurmountable when one no longer draws one's strength from one's heart, made me unfaithful, and my vows with Ourika were taken in the presence of the Gods.

In the meanwhile, the time that I had given to Mirza for my return was drawing near; I wanted to see her again; I hoped to soften the blow that I was going to strike; I thought it was possible. When one no longer feels love, one no longer suspects its effects. One cannot even rely on one's memories. Oh! I was filled with such feelings when walking over the very spot that had been witness to my promises and my happiness! Nothing had changed but my heart, and I could hardly recognize them! As for Mirza, as soon as she saw me I think she experienced in a single moment the happiness that one barely feels at different moments in the whole of one's life, and it was thus the Gods repaid her. Ah! How can I tell you through what horrible degrees I led the unfortunate Mirza to know the state of my heart? My trembling lips uttered the word friendship. "Your friendship," she cried out, -"your friendship! You barbarian! Is it to my soul that such a feeling must be offered? Give me death, that is all you can do for me now." The excess of her grief did seem to lead her to her death; she fell unconscious at my feet. What a monster I was! It was then that I should have deceived her; but it was then that I spoke true. "You are without feelings! Go now," she said to me. "The old man who took care of me when I was a child and who was a father to me may live longer. I must live for him. I am already dead here," she said, pointing to her heart with her hand. "But he needs my care, go away." -"I cannot," I cried out, "cannot bear your hatred."

"My hatred!" she answered, -"have no fear Ximeo, some hearts can only love and all their passion only turns against themselves. Farewell, Ximeo; you will thus belong to another woman."

"No, never, never," I said.

"I do not believe you now," she replied, -"yesterday your words would have made me doubt the light of day. Ximeo, hold me against you, call me your dearest mistress, let your voice find again the tone of the past, let me hear it again, not to enjoy it, but to remember it again: but it is impossible. Farewell, I will find it again alone, my heart will always hear it. It is the cause of death that I bear and keep in my heart; Ximeo, farewell." The touching sound of this last word, the effort she made when moving away, I remember everything; she is before my eyes. "Gods! Make this illusion stronger! Let me see her an instant so that--if it is still possible--I may feel more strongly what I have lost." For a long time, I remained motionless where she had left, distraught, troubled like a man who has just committed a great crime. Night overtook me before I thought of moving homeward; the remorse, the memory, the sense of Mirza's misery preyed on my soul; her shadow came back to me as if the end of her happiness had been the end of her life.

War against the Jolofs broke out; I had to fight against Mirza's countrymen. I wanted to shine with glory in her eyes, to justify her choice, and to deserve still the happiness I had given up. I had little fear of dying. I had made of my life such a cruel use that perhaps I risked that life with a secret pleasure. I became seriously wounded. While recovering, I learned that a woman came every day to the threshold of my door. Standing still, she would tremble at the slightest noise. Once I grew worse; she fainted. She was restored to animation, and said: "Do not let him know of the state in which you saw me. I am far from being a stranger to him; my interest will distress him." Finally one day, horrible day, I was weak still, my family and Ourika were with me. I was calm when I banished the memory of the one whose despair I had caused; I thought I was anyway; fate had driven me. I had acted like a man governed by it, and I feared so much the

moment of repentance that I used all my strength to restrain my thoughts, which were all too ready to brood over the past. Our enemies, the Jolofs, struck the village where I lived: we were defenseless; we sustained a fairly long attack, however, although at last they defeated us and took several prisoners. I was among them. What a moment for me when I saw myself in shackles. The cruel Hottentots only reserve death for the vanquished; but we, being more cowardly barbarians, we serve our common enemies and justify their crime by becoming their accomplices. A troop of Jolof soldiers made us walk all night; when day came to give us light, we found ourselves on the bank of the Senegal River; boats had been readied; I saw some white men, and I became certain of my fate. Soon my drivers began discussing the vile conditions of their heinous exchange: the Europeans checked with curiosity our youth and our strength to find there the hope of making us bear longer the wrongs that they held in store for us. Already I was determined; I was hoping that when passing onto this fateful boat my chains would loosen enough to let me throw myself into the river, and that despite the swift rescue of my greedy owners, the weight of my shackles would drag me to the bottom of the abyss. My eyes were fixed on the ground, my thoughts attached to the terrible thing I was hoping to do. I was detached from the objects around me. All of a sudden, a voice that happiness and sorrow had taught me to recognize made my heart beat faster and shook me out of my immobile meditation: I looked up. I saw Mirza, beautiful, unlike a mortal, but like an angel, for her face was irradiated by the soul within. I heard her ask the Europeans to listen to her: her voice was moved, but it was not fright or emotion that altered it; a supernatural movement transformed her whole appearance. "Europeans," she said, "it is to cultivate your land that you condemn us to slavery; it is your interest which makes our misfortune necessary; you do not seem to be evil gods, and tormenting us is not the goal of the suffering you will have us bear. Look at this young man weakened by his wounds; he will neither be able to withstand the long march nor the work that you will require of him; yet look at me, see my strength and my youth; my sex has not sapped my courage; let me be a slave in Ximeo's place. I will live, since it is at this price that you will have granted me Ximeo's freedom. I shall no longer think slavery degrading. I shall respect my masters' power, since I will have given it to them, and their benevolence will have sanctified it. Ximeo must cherish life; Ximeo is loved. I do not love anyone in this world; I may depart from it without leaving any void in a heart that would feel that I no longer exist. I was on the verge of taking my own life; a new happiness makes me outlive my heart. Ah, allow yourselves to be moved and, at a time when your pity is not at odds with your interest, do not resist my plea." As she finished speaking, this proud Mirza -whom the fear of death would not have forced to kneel before the kings of the earth -humbly bowed her knee; but in this attitude, she still kept all her dignity, and admiration and shame were the lot of those whom she was imploring. For a moment she may have thought I could accept her generosity. I was tongue tied and it was torture to be thus speechless. These Europeans all cried out in unison, "We accept the exchange, she is beautiful, she is young, she is courageous; we want the Negress and we let her friend go." I regained my strength; they were going to approach Mirza when I cried, "Barbarians, slavery is mine. Never, never; respect her sex, her weakness. Jolof Naax Naanguene Naagoo, weco seen none bu sax ak jigueenoo goxbi! [You Jolofs, will you allow a woman of your country to be enslaved in place of your cruelest enemy?"]

"Stop," cried Mirza, "stop being generous. You are accomplishing this act of virtue for your sake only; if you had cared about my happiness, you would not have abandoned me. I prefer you guilty when I know you insensitive; leave me the right to complain when you cannot take my

pain away; don't take away from me the only happiness that I have left, the sweet thought of being bound to you at least by the good I will have done you: I followed your destinies, I shall die if my days are of no use to you. This is your only means of saving my life; dare persist in your refusals."

Since, I have remembered every one of her words, and at the time I thought I did not hear them. I shuddered at Mirza's resolve; I feared that those vile Europeans would approve of it. I dared not declare that nothing separated me from her. These greedy merchants would have taken us both: perhaps, heartless as they were, they already counted on the effects of our hearts; even, they already promised themselves to choose for captives those whom love or duty could cause to be bought or followed; they studied our virtues to use them for their vices. But the governor, informed of our struggles, of Mirza's devotion, and of my despair, advanced like an angel of light: Who would not have thought that he was bringing us happiness! "Be free, both of you," he said to us. "I return you to your country and to your love. So much nobility of soul would have shamed the European who would have called you his slaves." My shackles were removed; I kissed his knees; I blessed his goodness in my heart, as if he had sacrificed legitimate rights. Ah, usurpers may thus attain the rank of benefactors by renouncing their injustices. I stood up; I thought that Mirza was at the feet of the governor like me. I saw her at some distance, leaning against a tree, caught in a deep reverie. I ran toward her: love, admiration, gratefulness, I felt all, I expressed all at once. "Ximeo," she said to me, -"it is too late; my grief is writ too deeply for your hand to even touch it: I can no longer hear your voice without wincing, and your presence freezes in my veins the blood that once flowed impetuously for you. Passionate souls can only know extremes; they cross the distance between the two without ever stopping. When you told me of my fate, I doubted it for a long time: you could still have come back. I would have believed that I had dreamed of your fickleness; but now, to destroy this memory, I have to cut through the heart from which it cannot be erased."

As she was speaking thus, the fatal arrow was in her heart. Oh, Gods who stopped my life at that moment, did you give it back to me only to avenge Mirza by the long agony of my suffering! The chain of my memories and my thoughts was broken during an entire month; I sometimes think that I am in another world made into hell by the memory of the first one. Ourika made me promise not to attempt suicide. The governor convinced me that I must live in order to serve my unfortunate compatriots, to respect the last wishes of Mirza who beseeched him, he said, on her death bed, to look after me, to bring me solace in her name: I obey, I have shut in a tomb the sad remains of the one I love when she no longer is, of the one I failed to appreciate when she lived. There, in solitude, when the sun sets, when all of nature seems to be overcast with my mourning, when universal silence lets me hear my thoughts, then only can I feel, prostrate before this tomb, the enjoyment of grief, the full feeling of its sorrows. My exalted imagination sometimes creates ghosts; I think I see her, but she never appears to me as an angry lover. I hear her consoling me and attending to my grief. Finally, uncertain of the fate awaiting us after life, I respect in my heart the memory of Mirza, and I fear that, by ending my life, I would destroy everything that remains of her. You are the only person with whom I have shared my sorrow. I don't expect you to feel pity; should a barbarian who caused the death of the woman he misses be of concern? But I wanted to speak of her. Ah! promise me that you will not forget the name of Mirza, that you will say it to your children, and that you will preserve after my death the memory of this angel of love, this victim of misfortune."

When he finished his story, a dark reverie spread over Ximeo's charming face. My eyes streamed with tears; I tried to speak to him: "Do you think," he said to me, "that you should attempt to console me? Do you think it is possible to have one single thought about my misfortune that my heart would not have already found? I have wanted to tell you my sorrows, only because I was quite sure that you could not ease my pain; I would die if it were removed from me; remorse would take its place; it would occupy my whole heart, and the pains of remorse are barren and burning. Adieu, I thank you for listening to me." His somber calm, his tearless despair, easily convinced me that all my efforts would be pointless. I no longer dared speak to him; misfortune inspires respect. I left him, my heart full of bitterness, and I tell his story to fulfill my promise and sanctify, if I can, the sad name of his Mirza.

1. Island off the coast of Senegal.
2. Although the term is now perceived to have a negative connotation in general usage, some historians still use it, and Stael herself uses the word "nègre," not the word "noir.". T
3. The term is used as a synonym for "estate." Plantations run by Blacks existed in the American Colonies as well as in Africa.
4. The French text does not use Jolof at all, but the translation does in an effort to restore the voice of the African characters. See chapter 1 for a discussion of this choice.
5. Famous Greek statue representing the ideal of classic male beauty.
6. Part of the Jolof kingdom.