

# BEYOND EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONFINEMENT: THE SENTIMENTAL *ETHOS* OF LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU'S *THE TURKISH EMBASSY LETTERS*

## MÁS ALLÁ DEL CONFINAMIENTO EPISTEMOLÓGICO: EL *ETHOS* SENTIMENTAL DE *THE TURKISH EMBASSY LETTERS*, DE LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU

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### Abstract

In the eighteenth century sentimentalism emerged as an ideological and artistic movement highlighting the value of an alternative *episteme* that posed a challenge to the cult of reason. *The Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763), by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, are permeated by a sentimental rhetoric aimed at materialising an *ethos* based on openness, cultural symbiosis and epistemological expansion that contributed to destabilising patriarchal Anglocentric narratives. Following Yuri M. Lotman, in her fruitful mediating position between two different cultural «semiospheres» (Eastern and Western), Montagu could be described as a frontier writer who used her physical journey as a vehicle for literaturising a vitalist cosmivision enabling her to transcend epistemological and emotional constraints. The ideology of her epistolary narrative was effectively encoded by using sentimental motifs, tropes and ideas that generated a unique textuality, the anatomy of which is analysed in this article.

**Keywords:** Sentimental *ethos*; Sentimental rhetoric; Travel writing; Happiness; Alternative *episteme*; Empowerment narrative; Feminist cosmivision.

**Resumen**

En el siglo dieciocho el sentimentalismo emergió como un movimiento ideológico y artístico que subrayó el valor de una *episteme* alternativa que desafió el culto a la razón. La narrativa epistolar de *The Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763), de Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, está permeada por una retórica sentimental orientada a materializar un *ethos* basado en la apertura, la simbiosis cultural y la expansión epistemológica que contribuyó a desestabilizar las narrativas patriarcales anglocéntricas. Siguiendo a Yuri M. Lotman, desde su fructífera posición mediadora entre dos «semiosferas» culturales diferentes (la Oriental y la Occidental), Montagu se configuró como una escritora de frontera que convirtió su viaje físico en un vehículo para literaturizar una cosmovisión vitalista que le permitió trascender limitaciones epistemológicas y emocionales. La ideología de su narrativa epistolar se codificó, de manera efectiva, a través de motivos, tropos e ideas sentimentales que generaron una textualidad única cuya anatomía se analiza en este artículo.

**Palabras clave:** *Ethos* sentimental; retórica sentimental; escritura de viajes; felicidad; *episteme* alternativa; narrativa de empoderamiento; cosmovisión feminista.

## 1. LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU'S DEPARTURE: THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF CONFINEMENT AND CLOSURE VERSUS THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

The *ethos* inspiring the composition of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763) encapsulates a vitalist revolt against an epistemology of intellectual confinement and of emotional and artistic closure that became culturally relevant in the eighteenth century. This restrictive ideological background, affecting many aspects of reality, was probably aimed at creating an artificial myth of stability in a period that critics such as Lawrence Lipking have characterised «as an era of cataclysmic change», marked by «the building of a colonial empire, growing class conflicts, and the relentless undermining of old certainties by modern philosophy and science» (10). The complex dynamics of the Age of Reason, articulated around «diadic oppositions such as reason versus sentiment, practical versus aesthetic, public versus private, the masculine versus the feminine and so forth» (Bender 67), nurtured a cultural attitude of impermeability to all those elements that were perceived as generators of instability. This attitude was fostered by the cult of reason, which

appears intensely reflected in many documents of the period that undervalued «the moral authority of the passions» (Ellis 35) and advocated «strategies of containment» (Irlam 35) to minimise their effects<sup>1</sup>. Likewise, Anglocentrism, which stressed the superiority of ‘civilised’ Britain to the neglect of cultural symbiosis with other ‘uncivilised’ nations, also demarcated impermeable boundaries between the East and the West. Closely linked to Anglocentrism, patriarchal Orientalism mythically constructed Britain as an idyllic *locus* for women who, in comparison with those from the Orient, should feel happy about the advantages of their ‘freer’ status, a *grand récit* analysed by critics such as Bernadette Andrea (2007). From an aesthetic point of view, literary creativity was also contaminated by the impermeability to innovation. In his *Essay on Criticism* (1711) Alexander Pope presented the «the justest *Rules*» as «useful *Arms*» (456) against unrestrained experimentalism, an ideal that later in the century would lead writers such as Laurence Sterne to wonder whether we are «to follow rules—or rules to follow [us]» (*Tristram Shandy* 253).

However, these manifestations of epistemological and aesthetic closure dialectically coexisted with the sentimental philosophy, which became extremely popular in the second half of the century. Sentimentalism, «which embodied some of the most vital, dynamic and productive elements in eighteenth-century civilisation» (Brissenden 10), encouraged permeability towards the diversity of life, cultural symbiosis and the pursuit of individual happiness. Its wide social acceptability ruled out the possibility of a rationalist hegemony and equally validated the characterisation of the period as an Age of Sensibility. As Jerome McGann argues, «the words ‘sensibility’ and ‘sentiment’ name a momentous cultural shift», articulated around the emergence of «new and non-traditional modes of expression» and the belief that «no

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1. The divinisation of reason is materialised in ‘macro-documents’ such as John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), where reason is described as a faculty that «penetrates into the Depths of the Sea and Earth» and «elevates our thoughts as high as the stars» (274). It is also immortalised in more ‘domestic’ documents, as in one of the letters that Philip Dormer Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield, addressed to his son in 1749: «consult your reason betimes; I do not say that it will always prove an unerring guide; for human reason is not infallible; but it will prove the least erring guide that you can follow. Books and conversation may assist it; but adopt neither, blindly and implicitly; try both by that best rule, which God has given to direct us, Reason» (1307).

human action of any consequence is possible—including ‘mental’ action—that is not led and driven by feeling, affect, emotion» (5-6).

The *ethos* behind sentimentalism advocated a reaction against the unhappiness inherent in epistemological closure and in emotional restraint, which minimised the possibility of human completeness and engendered constrained subjects. The unhappiness potentially generated by these ideological constructs and their impermeable compartmentalisations of reality—an unhappiness labelled ‘spleen’ in many documents of the period or described as «the English malady of the eighteenth century» (Doughty 257)—intersected in Montagu’s case with her personal circumstances. In her introduction to Malcolm Jack’s edition of Montagu’s *Letters* (1994)<sup>2</sup>, Anita Desai has described her as confined to an aseptic life deprived of enthusiasm, where the institutionalised objects of pleasure for women of her social status were «the social round of teas, cards, gossip, opera and the play-house» (xiv). Montagu spent her time in literary circles where «an urbane, sophisticated, anti-romantic and even cynical literature that delighted in witticism, satire and innuendo» (Desai x) alienated her from the unrestrained life-giving function of literature that, in compensation, she would later materialise in her *Letters*. In a country where, according to patriarchal ideologists, women lived in «paradise conditions» (Andrea 83), she had to suffer her fiancé, Edward Wortley Montagu, to enquire about «the size of her dowry» (Desai xi) and was later condemned to a cold marriage. Besides, «she lost her beauty, and nearly her life, to smallpox in late 1715» (O’ Loughlin 33), and «when she made an enemy it was the leading English poet of that age» (Grundy xx), Alexander Pope, who stimulated the myth of her scandalous reputation.

One of the elements interweaving the epistemological and emotional tissue of the *Letters* is Montagu’s frequent identification of ‘impermeable’ Great Britain with a *locus* of unhappiness. In letter XVIII, written from Hanover and addressed to Lady Rich, she declared that she was «much nearer London than [she] was some weeks ago, but as to the thoughts of a return, [she] never was farther off in [her] life» (36). Montagu challenged the notion that the British were the exclusive depositaries of «a right notion of life» (142). From

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2. References to the *Letters* in the article are to this edition.

Constantinople, she also defied the validity of reductive rationalist schemes when she addressed to the Abbé Conti<sup>3</sup> the lines below:

Considering what short lived, weak animals men are, is there any study so beneficial as the study of present pleasure? [...] I allow you to laugh at me for the sensual declaration that I had rather be a rich effendi<sup>4</sup>, with all his ignorance than Sir Isaac Newton with all his knowledge. (142)

The *Letters* disseminate an alternative *episteme* that was deeply inspired by the pursuit of happiness, an ideal that became central in the period. As Brian Michael Norton notes, «inquiries into the nature and means of attaining happiness were [...] published in a wide variety of forms. [...] The appetite for this literature was tremendous» (1). The need to escape from the limiting pessimism about human nature was rooted in the Latitudinarian movement, which challenged the belief that «happiness was really only found after death, and that to be a good Christian in this life was to embrace suffering» (Williams 123)<sup>5</sup>. The eighteenth century experienced «the validation of earthly happiness», which became «one of the Enlightenment's signal triumphs» (Norton 1). In a period in which «the desire to be an autonomous, free, rational, and liberated subject was in ascendance» (Yeğenoğlu 106), the search for personal well-being was legitimised. The individualisation of the ideal of happiness was strengthened by the sentimental philosophy, which located self-fulfillment in the enjoyment of the sensations and emotions derived from the personal exploration of the world beyond the authority of reductive ideological constructs. In this respect, «the sensationist view of happiness» as «something that is *felt*» (Norton 6) inspired many literary works, and Montagu's *Letters* were no exception.

However, the ideals of autonomy and freedom –the preconditions for happiness– emerged at the time as powerfully masculinised constructs. As Meyda

3. «Antonio Conti (1677-1749), Italian dramatist, savant and man of letters. He translated, among other things, Pope's poetry. He met Lady Mary in England in 1715» (Jack 174).

4. «Effendi was a term of respect given to a scholar, teacher or man of letters» (Jack 173).

5. In this respect, Carli N. Conklin mentions the contributions of preachers such as Joseph Butler, who saw «man's [...] pursuit of his own real and substantial happiness» as central to «the essential doctrines of Christianity» (30). Others, like the jurist William Blackstone, even proposed elevating the search for happiness to the status of «a jurisprudential science» (31).

Yeğenoğlu argues, «the assumptions that govern Enlightenment notions of individual imply a subject that is *rational*, *universal*, and, by extension, *male*» (106-107). In relation with this issue, Norton alludes to the century's «growing perception [...] that the happiness of one could never be the happiness of another» (3), which originated some interesting debates about «the critical role subjectivity and social context play[ed]» in the articulation of «the new model of happiness» (4). Inspired by these debates, some women writers condemned «the colonization of the space of subjectivity by phallogentrism» (Yeğenoğlu 107) and argued that their individual happiness was hindered by the constraints imposed by a patriarchal society that was not hospitable to the expansion of their autonomy. As Isabelle Bour notes, «the traditional conception of female subjection», diametrically opposed to «the new ideology of rights and progress» (146), was still valid. Norton uses Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) to exemplify how, like the protagonist of her narrative, many women felt like «'insulated' being[s]» (124) who, due to «a corrupt process of socialization and education» (118), were alienated from participating in «the social world where virtue and happiness must be pursued» (16). Women like Montagu, Hays or Wollstonecraft, denounced «the 'false' universality» (Yeğenoğlu 107) of many Enlightenment ideals, that of happiness included. They saw their personal well-being as inseparable from female agency and from more democratised opportunities for the enjoyment of life. Accordingly, they outlined in their writings oppositional worldviews that unmasked the «male biases of traditional ethics: the privileging of reason over emotion, abstraction over particularity, and self-sufficiency over interdependence» (Norton 114).

The alternative *episteme* of Montagu's *Letters* had as its point of departure the desire to destabilise the centrality of this patriarchal ethics. It aspired to transcend the realm of individual catharsis and embrace the space of communality by literaturising possible *loci* of happiness for all women. As Katrina O'Loughlin has argued, Montagu's *Letters* were «self-consciously composed for circulation within a wider community» (34), using literary modes hospitable to her ideas and desires. In this respect, she seems to have been highly aware of some of the most important functions that, according to O'Loughlin, singularised travel writing in the eighteenth century: first, that it «represented a fertile genre of comparison, analysis, and reflection» (13) and, second, that

it could be used «to intervene in powerful contemporary discourses» that saw «a woman's position in a society as the index of that culture's progress and civility» (4). Montagu exploited in her *Letters* this potential of travel writing, a genre which was coincidental in many aspects with the principles of a sentimental *ethos* that advocated permeability and openness towards the immensity of the world. The *Letters* can be considered an example of female empowerment through literature, communicated with an intensity that only the meaningful confluence of literary modes such as travel writing and sentimentalism with her feminist cosmovision could achieve.

## 2. MONTAGU AND HER USE OF LITERARY MODES HOSPITABLE TO FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

Some decades before the adjective *sentimental* actually came into use in the second half of the eighteenth century<sup>6</sup>, when literary sentimentalism reached its zenith in Britain<sup>7</sup>, Montagu pioneered in the composition of her *Letters* –written during her travels from 1716 to 1718– a «highly self-conscious ethos of sentiment» (Brissenden 108). This *ethos*, articulated around the hospitality towards warm individuality and the rejection of cold abstractions, endowed Montagu's *Letters* with a daring 'idiolect' that anticipated later sentimental writings of the period. Considered by many a subversive counterdiscourse, sentimentalism «provoked much anxiety amongst critics» (Ellis 35) and was severely attacked from its beginnings by some «reactionary figure[s] haunted with premonitory dreams of cultural Armageddon» (McGann 3). Taking into account that at the end of the century sentimentalism was still perceived as

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6. According to Brissenden, «'sentimental' seems to have first appeared in the English language in the 1740s. The adverb 'sentimentally' occurs in one of Walpole's letters written in 1746; and Lady Bradshaigh, in a letter dated 1749, uses the word 'sentimental' itself. This is the first firmly established appearance of the word. It also occurs in a letter supposedly written by Sterne in 1739 or 1740» (98).

7. Markman Ellis has traced the antecedents of literary sentimentalism back to some philosophical writings of the first decades of the century, such as Shaftesbury's *Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit* (1711), where he argued that «virtue [...] lies in following the natural affections» (10). Ellis also highlights the significance of Francis Hutcheson's *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), articulated around the belief that human beings are «not led by self-interested desires» (11), which is linked to the socially activist dimension of sentimental literature.

«a disturbing force» (Ellis 192)<sup>8</sup>, Montagu's *Letters*, which «began circulating almost as soon as they were sent» (O'Loughlin 34), might have been considered meaningfully oppositional at the time.

The chronological continuum of negative evaluations of sentimentalism, which endowed it with connotations of superficiality, *sensiblerie* and «epistemological insincerity» (Ellis 35), had to face the intense dissemination of some theories that presented it as movement guided by an *ethos* of depth<sup>9</sup> that was articulated around the ideals of hospitality towards human completeness, self-fulfillment and happiness. Sentimental writers, who opposed the reductive accounts of human complexity and the normalisation of a notion of virtue associated with the cultivation of impermeable rationality and self-restraint, sought «to restore out of [themselves] that unity [...] disrupted by abstraction» and «to give complete expression to the humanity within [themselves]» (Schiller 154-155). In many important documents of the period –such as Francis Hutcheson's *On the Nature and Conduct of the Passions with Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (1728), David Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751) or Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759)– the notion of virtue came to be significantly redefined and associated with the willingness «to pursue personal happiness, a universal, divinely ordained quest» (Vereker 43). As David Hume declared in his *Enquiry* (1751):

What philosophical truths can be more advantageous to society than those [...] which represent virtue in all her genuine and most engaging charms, and make us approach her with ease, familiarity, and affection? The dismal dress falls off, with which many divines, and some philosophers, have covered her; and nothing appears but gentleness, humanity, beneficence, affability; nay, even at proper intervals, play, frolic, and gaiety. She talks not of useless austerities and rigours, suffering and self-denial. She declares, that her sole purpose is, to make her votaries and all mankind, during every instant of their existence, if possible, cheerful and happy. (153)

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8. As late as 1787, in *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, John Hawkins, for example, described sentimental writers as «men of loose principles [...] living without foresight», who were «a law to themselves» (218).

9. In a letter addressed to Sir William Stanhope in 1767, Laurence Sterne argued that the sensibility that had inspired the composition of *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768) contained a valuable intellectual component that went beyond the mere expression of «the pleasures [of a] grossest sensualist» (*Letters* 396).

Some of the aforementioned writings, which were aimed at legitimising the intellectual depth of sentimentalism, were published after the composition and dissemination of the *Letters*. Yet, their ideas are wonderfully contained in Montagu's narrative, the most important thematic articulator of which is, in our view, the pursuit of happiness.

The sentimental *ethos* encouraged a literary aesthetics guided by a clear principle: the highly personalised expression of unrestrained feelings and emotions. Sentimental writers believed that the literaturisation of their sensations should be kept, in Francis Hutcheson's words, «pure and unmixed with any foreign ideas» (58), *i.e.* free from the interference of abstract generalist rules. This self-conscious rejection of abstractions is part of the rhetorical apparatus that permeates the composition of Montagu's *Letters*. The physicalisation of important philosophical issues, with pervasive references to the body «to substantiate beliefs, fictions, and ideologies» (Kelly and Von Mücke 8-9) –a procedure also latent in the *Letters*– emerged as a reaction against the customary literaturisation of useless abstractions. As Barbara M. Benedict has argued, «the body, rather than the word, conveys meaning in novels of sensibility» (326), which tried to «imitate feeling rather than intellect and to embody direct experience rather than artistic premeditation» (Braudy 5).

The sentimental ideal of human completeness was also closely linked to the cult of limitlessness. Many sentimental writers saw the world as animated by a «great SENSORIUM» (Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey* 117) and frequently literaturised the processes by means of which they «turn[ed] the world into a thousand Shapes to enjoy it» (Sterne, *Journal to Eliza* 145) without any restrictions. Travel writing, a literary genre which was especially hospitable to the cult of limitlessness, became one of the most natural literary *loci* to immortalise the writers' desire to escape from the tyranny of epistemological confinement and to textualise their personal experiences of the world. In the eighteenth century this genre underwent an interesting evolution that is also reflected in Montagu's *Letters*. As Charles L. Batten has argued, travel writing had been traditionally subjugated to the tyranny of fixed rules, with «generic convention, not personal taste» determining «to a great extent what

a traveller says» (15)<sup>10</sup>. Many travel narratives favoured depersonalised, emotionally detached or even statistically exhaustive accounts of the places visited, following narrative patterns that overpowered the 'interference' of the personal voice of the travel writer. However, sentimentalism introduced a significant change in the aims and function of travel writing, as it endowed this genre with an «openness to alternative manners and customs [that] constituted a reaction against the insular character of much contemporary discourse» (Regan 267). This openness destabilised Anglocentric impermeability and favoured cultural symbiosis and cosmopolitanism. Sentimentalism also turned travel writing into a powerful vehicle for exercising unrestrained individuality in the process of apprehending and narrating the world beyond the authority of any limitations, «privileging the 'thick' experience of everyday feelings, habits and loyalties before a pure universal 'reason'» (Hallemeier 3). The emotional pleasure derived from this therapeutically individualising function of travel writing at a time of constraints was an essential ingredient of Montagu's *Letters*.

### 3. THE SENTIMENTAL ETHOS OF THE TURKISH EMBASSY LETTERS: FROM THE DARK BACKGROUND TO THE VALIDATION OF A VITALIST EPISTEME

The sentimental *ethos* of Montagu's *Letters* is thematically articulated around her obsession with women's happiness and self-fulfillment. In order to understand its depth, it is necessary to move beyond the nuclearity of the Turkish episodes, which have been frequently presented as the core of Montagu's epistolary narrative<sup>11</sup>. Their importance cannot be denied, though: as we have previously argued, the ideas of patriarchal Orientalism, with its artificial construction of Great Britain as an unparalleled *locus* of freedom for women,

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10. As worthy examples of these narratives, some of them almost coetaneous with the publication of Montagu's *Letters*, Batten mentions Samuel Sharp's *Letters from Italy, Describing the Customs and Manners of that Country in the Years 1765 and 1766* (1766), Samuel Paterson's *Another Traveller* (1767) and Henry Swiburne's *Travels to Spain* (1779).

11. As O'Loughlin argues, «despite their wealth of European content, the *Letters* became most famous in the eighteenth century, as they are now, for Montagu's representations of her experiences in the Muslim world of the Ottoman Court» (34).

were aimed at discouraging the feminist desire to explore other possibilities for self-realisation. With Meyda Yeğenoğlu we agree on the fact that Montagu's depiction of Turkish women «is not in any simple sense outside the traditional discursive strategies of Orientalism» (83). The representation of the veil as a symbol of women's freedom or her «voyeuristic» exploration of «the concealed space of the harem» (90) mimic the rhetoric of some male Orientalist narratives. However, as Yeğenoğlu equally argues, it is «in the Orient, in the space of its women» that Montagu «finds the life-enhancing origin, which has been denied to her (in the West) within the phallogentric economy» (93). Montagu's central reflections about women's happiness are both significantly and repeatedly contextualised within the confines of the Ottoman Empire. In our view, these reflections contribute to destabilising the monochromatic representation of Oriental settings as *loci* of unhappiness for women. In Letters XXXVI and XL Montagu challenges Anglocentric «vulgar notion[s]» by asserting that in Mohammed's paradise «there is a place of happiness [...] where all good women are to be in eternal bliss» (100), highlighting that «'tis certainly false, though commonly believed in our parts of the world, that Mohammed excludes women from any share in a future happy state» (109). Likewise, one of the most powerful symbolic moments in the narrative—where Montagu's desire to break free from her status as a constrained subject is sentimentally physicalised and communicated through a concrete bodily action—appears unexpectedly contextualised in the hot baths in Sofia, where one of the Turkish women invites her to participate in their ritual:

The lady that seemed the most considerable amongst them entreated me to sit by her and would fain have undressed me for the bath. I excused myself with some difficulty, they being however all so earnest in persuading me, I was at last to open my shirt, and show them my stays, which satisfied them very well, for I saw they believed I was so locked up in that machine, that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband. (59-60)

By opening her shirt—a powerfully defamiliarising moment, as it associates Oriental settings with the possibility of women's freedom—Montagu metaphorically breaks with her constraints. She assumes an unrestrained defying voice that overpowers a narrative where the Turkish episodes certainly enrich

the sentimental anatomy of the *Letters* but do not account for the wholeness of her journey, which had as its point of arrival the validation of an alternative *episteme* configuring women both as legitimate depositaries of happiness and potential explorers of limitless opportunities for self-fulfillment. In the first letter, addressed to her sister, Lady Mar, and written from Rotterdam (3 August 1716), Montagu declared: «if I continue to like travelling as well as I do at present, I shall not repent my project» (4). In a narrative within which words seem to have been carefully chosen so as to prompt her audience's emotional engagement and activism against closure, the words «my project» comprise Montagu's invitation to see her epistolary narrative as guided by a humanistic finality that transcends the mere account of her personal cosmopolitan experiences.

The steps of Montagu's epistemological journey revolve around the representation and the denunciation of the manifestations of a transnational patriarchal order. She provides her addressees with meaningful evidence for the universalisation of patterns of female oppression, which are both Eastern and Western: «the manners of mankind do not differ so widely as our voyage writers would make us believe» (72), she told her sister. The foregrounded presence of this dark patriarchal background and the subsequent evolution of her journey towards the superimposition of a vitalist *episteme*, which overpowers darkness and is intensified by a pleasure-creating sentimental rhetoric, generates a unique tensional structure that, in its oscillation between the confinement to the known and the desire to embrace the unknown, fuels the dynamics of the *Letters*. In Yuri M. Lotman's terms, Montagu created her narrative of empowerment in the extremely fruitful and permeable «boundary» of her «semiosphere» (142, 125)<sup>12</sup>. From this intellectual frontier she contemplated both the unhappiness generated by the restrictive patriarchal *récits* of her home country and the immense possibilities afforded by the happiness of abandoning comfort zones. She chose to explore what Lotman

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12. Lotman defined the «semiosphere» as «the whole semiotic space» of a given culture (125). The «boundary» of the semiosphere is «a place of incessant dialogue» (142), a «mechanism for translating texts of an alien semiotics into 'our' language» (136). It is intellectually inhabited by those who see themselves as mediators between aseptically separated cultures and worldviews and encourage cultural symbiosis as a way to enrich their *episteme*.

has described as the «forest (the anti-home)», which, opposing imperialist discourses, she did not see as an «anti-space» speaking an «anti-language» (140-141), but as an opportunity for enriching her worldview. The initial image of Montagu in Rotterdam, walking «almost all over the town [...] incognito, in [her] slippers» (3) symbolises her permeable status as a *lotmanian* mediator who has decided to transcend impermeable aseptic distances to experience the world by herself. Her rejection of sophisticated theories of cultural separation is metaphorically represented by the simplicity of her slippers. Montagu's admiration for the Arnounts, «the best militia in the Turkish empire», also symbolises her love of inbetweenness: «these people living between Christians and Mohammedans, and not being skilled in controversy, declare that they are utterly unable to judge which religion is best» (63-64), she asserted.

The geographical steps of Montagu's journey become highly instrumental settings enabling her to textualise the (im)possibilities of women's happiness and self-fulfillment. Using Borbély's words, she shows no interest in «cartographically representable space» (par. 9). Contrary to officialist eighteenth-century travel narratives, what defines every place visited is not its artistic manifestations or its ethnographic singularities: physical places become metaphorical *loci* to reflect upon women's welfare, which articulates the feminist cosmivision of the *Letters*. In Letter X Montagu writes to Lady Rich to openly denounce «the barbarous customs of [their] country» (21). This destabilising assertion inserts in her narrative a catalogue of situations in which the imperialist superiority of Britain as a unique *locus* hospitable to women's freedom is overtly deconstructed. Vienna, for example, prompts some valuable reflections about women, age and beauty, a central source of transnational female constraints:

A woman till five and thirty is only looked upon as a raw girl, and can possible make no noise in the world till about forty. [...] 'tis a considerable comfort to me to know there is upon earth such a paradise for old women. [...] I cannot help lamenting on this occasion, the pitiful case of so many good English ladies, long since retired to prudery and ratafia who, if their stars had luckily conducted them hither, would shine in the first rank of beauties. (21)

Montagu equally asserts that the impoverishing British categorisation of women either as «coquettes» or «prudes» (22) does not have any validity in this city, where women also have the possibility of being «much richer than their husbands» (25), a privilege also unexpectedly shared by some Turkish women, such as the Grand Signor's eldest daughter (65). By contrast, as Susan Kingsley Kent has argued, the law of coverture, according to which «married women had no legal existence apart from their husbands: they had no legal rights to property, to earnings, to freedom of movement, to conscience, to their bodies, or to their children» was at the time «unique to England» (6). Vienna also allows Montagu to reflect upon its women's expanded sexual freedom, as engaging for pleasure «in [...] little affair[s] of the heart» (23), without any moralising restrictions, was socially acceptable: «gallantry and good breeding are as different in different climates as morality and religion. Who have the rightest notions of both we shall never know till the day of judgment» (23), she declared.

The darkest steps of Montagu's journey are articulated around the incorporation of situations that universalise female oppression and confinement, which are not only located in the Eastern world, but also in 'civilised' Europe. In the *Letters*, it is possible to find a nun «buried alive» (28) in Vienna, a countess in Leipzig «kept prisoner in a melancholy castle» (32-33), or a Spanish woman choosing to marry a Turk instead of going back to her native country, where her relatives «would certainly confine her to a nunnery for the rest of her days» (136). In Constantinople, she asserts that

in this country it is more despicable to be married and not fruitful than it is with us to be fruitful before marriage. [...] Without any exaggeration, all the women of my acquaintance that have been married ten year have twelve or thirteen children, and the old ones boast of having had five-and-twenty or thirty a-piece, and are respected according to the number they have produced. (107)

However, within a narrative that incorporates significant equalising scenarios concerning the situation of women in different countries, Eastern women are not presented as the exclusive victims of this social pressure. Montagu inserts an interesting reference to the French Ambassadress in Turkey (Madeleine Françoise d'Usson Bonnac), who «is forced to comply with this fashion as well as myself. She has not been here much above a year and has lain in once and is

big again» (107). Likewise, in Letter XLVII, addressed to Madame de Bonnac, Montagu describes herself as equally alienated by this patriarchal constraint:

I have produced a daughter. [...] In this country it is just [...] necessary to show proofs of youth to be recognised among beauties. [...] I was very angry at this necessity, but, noticing that people looked at me with a great air of contempt I finally complied with the fashion and I lay in like the others. (132)

Yet, in Montagu's narrative transnational female constraints and the dark background that they generate paradoxically serve to illuminate the significance of her achievement as a *lotmanian* frontier writer: her capability to explore and embrace other possibilities for self-fulfillment and to generate a highly functional alternative *episteme*. The vitality of her amplified worldview compensated her for the many deficiencies of the reductive British microcosm within which she had spent most of her life. This superior *episteme*, which pulverised intellectual confinement and emotional limitations, is wonderfully epitomised in Letter XXXVII, addressed to Alexander Pope:

I endeavor to persuade myself that I live in a more agreeable variety than you do, and that Monday setting of partridges, Tuesday reading English, Wednesday studying the Turkish language (in which, by the way, I am already very learned), Thursday classical authors, Friday spent in writing, Saturday at my needle and Sunday admitting of visits and hearing music, is a better way of disposing the week than Monday at the Drawing Room, Tuesday Lady Mohun's, Wednesday the opera, Thursday the play, Friday Mrs Chetwynd's, etc.: a perpetual round of hearing the same scandal and seeing the same follies acted over and over, which here affect me no more than they do other dead people. I can now hear of displeasing things with pity and without indignation. The reflection on the great gulf between you and me cools all news that comes hither. (103)

«The great gulf» between Alexander Pope and herself symbolises her distancing from her old constrained life and the empowering enjoyment of her widened cosmivision, based on the pleasurable contact with «agreeable variety» and on «the study of [...] pleasure» (142) as a way of self-assertion and self-fulfillment. Montagu, who had discovered that «we are not formed to enjoy» the «ambitious thirst after knowledge» (165), rejected this limitation and delineated a journey within which geographical *loci* only become memorable when they enable happiness. The rhetorical anatomy of the *Letters*,

purely sentimental, was used to intensify the emotional value of her renewed *episteme*.

#### 4. THE RHETORICAL ANATOMY OF *THE TURKISH EMBASSY LETTERS*: TEXTURES OF INTENSITY AND OF ACTIVIST PLEASURE

Montagu's *Letters* contain a 'texture of intensity' due to the meaningful confluence of some elements. From a thematic point of view, the desire to attain happiness acts as a powerful articulator of her narrative, and its sentimental rhetoric –the anatomy of which will be described in this section– mimics this desire of a woman who, as a frontier writer, repeatedly asserts that she is moved by «a passion so powerful with [her] as curiosity» (127), which «supplied [her] with strength» (144). The rhetorical anatomy of the *Letters* is articulated around five elements inspired by some of the principles of composition characterising sentimental literature: the interpolation of meaningful paragraphs where Montagu self-consciously highlights the highly personalised dimension of her epistolary narrative beyond the authority of generalist norms; the narrative centrality of moments foregrounding symbiosis with foreign Otherness; the inclusion of sensorial paragraphs paying homage to the charming boundlessness of her desire; the textualisation of the world as a vitalist dynamic space –the greatness of which cannot be subsumed under cold categorisations– and the incorporation of semantic structures of activist pleasure.

The pervasive presence of self-conscious paragraphs in which Montagu separates herself from the official expectations concerning the form and the aims of travel writing intersects with the hospitality towards individualised creative expression typical of sentimental rhetoric. These paragraphs prepare readers to absorb a unique *Montaguian* textuality, which embodies a valuable «strand of life writing» (Borbély par. 2). Montagu explicitly declared that she would not «imitate the common style of travellers» (8) because she did not want to «degenerate into a downright story teller» (120). She rather expected her travels «to furnish [her] with [...] a useful piece of learning» (106). Referring to popular authoritative travel writers such as Richard Knolles and Paul Rycout, in letter XLVIII she tells the Countess of Bristol that she is «in no humour to copy what has been writ so often over», and that she is not going

«to give [her] a list of Turkish emperors» (133). She distances herself from those travel writers keen on providing their readership with exhaustive lists of materialist data concerning the places visited. As she wrote to Lady Mar, «if I made you the most exact description of all the ravelins and bastions I see in my travels, I dare swear you would ask me, ‘what is a ravelin?’ and ‘what is a bastion?’» (34). Years later, in *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), Laurence Sterne verbalised the sentimental neglect of these compilations of cold data to favour the literaturisation of more emotional aspects, an attitude that appears immortalised in delicious paragraphs such as the one quoted below:

I have not seen the Palais royal –nor the Luxembourg– nor the Façade of the Louvre –nor have attempted to swell the catalogues we have of pictures, statues and churches– [...] ’Tis a quiet journey of the heart in pursuit of NATURE, and those affections which rise out of her, which make us love each other –and the world, better than we do. (84-85)

The *Letters* anticipated Sterne’s negative criticism of emotionally detached travel writers, whom Montagu described as mostly «merchants, who mind little but their own affairs, or travellers who make too short a stay to be able to report anything exactly of their own knowledge» (60). She became, by contrast, a permeable sentimental traveller who enriched her narrative with the presence of moments of symbiosis with foreign Otherness. In the *Letters* the textual saliency of these moments highlights her belief that the contacts with ‘demonised’ Otherness provide opportunities for intellectual improvement, self-realisation and pleasure. Montagu’s defying voice also empowers foreign characters, namely Turkish, and amplifies their signification beyond stereotypical reductions: they are no longer confined to the aseptic containers where Anglocentrism ‘safely’ kept them. Rather, they become dynamic instruments of possibilisation that rendered feasible some interesting connections –both emotional and intellectual– that the Age of Reason had relegated to the cultural periphery. In the *Letters*, symbiotic moments are framed in semiotic defamiliarisations that contribute to destabilising the validity of those dark constructs which presented an impoverished vision of Eastern Otherness. In this respect, Montagu declares, on more than one occasion, that Turkish women «have more liberty than we have» (71) or that they are «the only free people in the Empire» (72). Female empowerment is also foreignised, as in the case of the Sultana Hafise, who, contrary to the customs of her country,

kept «the vow [...] of never suffering a second husband to approach her bed» (114).

One of the most important symbiotic moments articulating the sentimental rhetoric of the *Letters* takes place in Belgrade, where the *effendi* Achmed Bey creates Montagu's first genuine moment of happiness, derived from bringing together what 'should' be separated: «an extraordinary scribe», «perfectly skilled in the Arabic and Persian languages» (53), and a British woman engaged in mutually enriching intellectual disquisitions:

You cannot imagine how much he is delighted with the liberty of conversing with me. [...] I pass for a great scholar with him. [...] He has wit, and is more polite than many Christian men of quality. I am very much entertained with him. (54)

The repetitive references to this symbiotic encounter with Achmed Bey endow Montagu's *Letters* with emotional cohesion and configure her narrative as a *locus* of rest, hospitable to her desire for unbounded communication with Otherness beyond impermeable boundaries. Another relevant symbiotic moment, with Montagu dressed «in [her] Turkish habit» (69), visually embodies the potential of her independent voice, which defied the validity of Anglocentric separatist constructs. When Fatima, a young woman whom she met at the Grand Vizier's house, calls her «güzel Sultanum, or the beautiful Sultana» (91), Montagu is not inserting in her narrative an insignificant compliment: rather, she is acknowledging that her contact with Otherness has allowed her to go beyond her constrained status and be recognised as a valuable human being by those who were supposed to be 'inferior' cultural antagonists. As Katrina O'Loughlin argues, the *Letters* reflect a «cosmopolitan sociability» (31) that transcends the imperialist «macropolitics of orientalism or 'colonial' relations» (25) and has «conversability as a central value» (39). With O'Loughlin, we agree on the fact that Montagu's symbiotic dialogue with Eastern Otherness becomes «a source of intellectual engagement and pleasure» and a «conduit for bridging difference: between men and women, Briton and Turk, scholar and courtier» (39-40).

The significance of symbiotic moments is intensified by bodily contact. A third relevant element articulating Montagu's sentimental rhetoric is the incorporation of sensorial paragraphs where the references to the body are

central. The ideal of boundlessness articulating her *episteme* is expressed in highly physicalised terms. This physicalisation symbolises that, like our bodies, the immensity of the world can be touched and embraced without any restrictions. As Lia Guerra has argued, the importance of the body has traditionally been «annihilated by the superstructure of the social rule and role» (53). Sentimental writers believed, by contrast, that the body spoke «a sincerity before which devious language resigns» (Benedict 326). In the *Letters*, the references to the body and, very especially, to the characters' physiognomic traits, interweave an unalienable code of communication with Otherness that is totally opposed to generalising abstractions, as it legitimates individual perceptions and pulverises distances. Montagu moves from Vienna to Adrianople immortalising «lively look[s] full of sweetness» or mouths with «charms that touch the souls» (18), whilst lyrically describing the intensity of «eyes full and black» (67). The encounter with Fatima epitomises the use of references to the body to highlight the need to humanise transnational communicative codes at a time in which nationalist discourses discouraged the literaturisation of true emotional bonds and encounters:

She stood up to receive me, saluting me after their fashion putting her hand upon her heart with a sweetness full of majesty that no court breeding could ever give. [...] I was so struck with admiration that I could not for some time speak to her, being wholly taken up in gazing. That surprising harmony of features! That charming result of the whole! That exact proportion of body! That lovely bloom of complexion, unsullied by art! The unutterable enchantment of her smile! But her eyes! Large and black, with all the soft languishment of the blue! Every turn of her face discovering some new charm. [...] And to that a behaviour so full of grace and sweetness, such easy motions, with an air so majestic, yet free from stiffness or affectation that I am persuaded, could she be suddenly transported upon the most polite throne of Europe nobody would think of her other than born and bred to be a queen, though educated in a country we call barbarous. (89)

The rhetorical physicalisation of ideology is intimately linked to another pervasive presence defining Montagu's mind style: the construction of life as a worldly *sensorium* (in the *Sternean* sense) that is alien to useless abstractions. Montagu hints at the possibility of widening the *episteme* and reaching

happiness by exercising a process known as «sentimental translation»<sup>13</sup>, which consists in incorporating into her worldview the moments, sensations, encounters, ideas and people that vibrate within the world without the disturbing mediating presence of any stereotyped ideas or external theories. Montagu pays homage to the inexhaustible potential of the world as a space of «agreeable variety» (103), the vastness of which cannot be either scientifically controlled or objectively represented. She intends to «write with vivacity» (24) and dignify the ephemeral aspects that officialist travel writers, keen on adhering to exact mathematical descriptions of important buildings or monuments<sup>14</sup>, usually left aside. The very first letter of her narrative, addressed to her sister, represents Rotterdam as «full of people [...] all in motion» (3). In Nijmegen she derives pleasure from contemplating the Belvedere, «where people go to drink coffee, tea, etc., and enjoy one of the finest prospects in the world» (6). In Vienna she declares that «'tis really a pleasure to pass through the markets and see the abundance of [...] rarities of fowls and venisons» (41). In Constantinople she expresses her desire to fly away from intellectualist disquisitions and «leap from religion to tulips» (111). Rejecting static constructs, she even shows admiration for the fact that «human grandeur» is there «more unstable than anywhere else» (140). Within her vitalist cosmovision—as when she declares that «[she] might easily pick up wonders in every town [she] pass[es] through» (41)—she claims the superiority of life over artifice, telling her addressees that, although she contemplates many things «pleasant to the sight», they «would be very unintelligible in a letter» (141).

The zenith of Montagu's sentimental rhetoric is the incorporation of a cumulative semantics of pleasure that inserts within the *Letters* the voice of a self-fulfilled persona, the centrality of which diminishes the importance of the intellectual dimension of her journey to highlight the relevance of emotionally individualising factors. The main achievement of Montagu's sentimental rhetoric is the materialisation of a text hospitable to her zest to enjoy life.

13. The significance of this process, to which Laurence Sterne devoted a chapter in his *Sentimental Journey*, has been illuminated by critics such as David Fairer (1999).

14. In his *Travels through France and Italy* (1766) Tobias Smollett appears measuring the arena of an amphitheatre in Nice to conclude that «it is an oval figure; the longest diameter extending to about one hundred and thirteen feet, and the shortest to eighty-eight» (140).

The undomesticated worldly *sensorium* immortalised in the *Letters* provides her with opportunities to experience «infinite pleasure» (28). In every stage of her journey she depicts herself as «surrounded with objects of pleasure» (152) that offer «delightful scenes to [her] imagination» (106). The atypical descriptive dimension of her journey to the Ottoman Empire is articulated around «the pleasure of [contemplating] a vast variety of prospects» (12), which are invariably presented as «fine prospects» (97), when not as «the most beautiful prospect[s] in the world» (99) or, using her own words to describe the Turkish climate, as «delightful in the extremist degree» (108). In the *Letters* the word «prospect», one of the most recurrent *Montaguian* terms, did not only mean an extensive visual scenario: it acquired ideological connotations of limitlessness and emerged as a physicalised metaphor codifying Montagu's widened *episteme*. The confluence of this semantics of pleasure with her status as a sentimental observer who deprecates abstractions and pays homage to the 'unpolluted' «sights [she] see[s] everyday» (21)<sup>15</sup> configures her inalienable status as a happy woman.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS: THE ARRIVAL. MONTAGU'S POLITICISED SENTIMENTAL *ETHOS* AND THE TRANSITION FROM INDIVIDUALITY TO COMMUNALITY

The *Montaguian* semantics of pleasure might have been associated by some anti-sentimentalist ideologists with useless *sensiblerie*. However, the insertion of a powerfully destabilising paragraph in a letter addressed to the Abbé Conti demonstrates that the centrality of pleasure in the *Letters* was self-consciously activist. Montagu's rhetorical structures of pleasure were designed to be easily

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15. The references to sight are an important part of the sentimental rhetoric of the *Letters*. In Meyda Yeğenoğlu's view, they materialise «the Western voyeuristic pleasure» through which Montagu «constitutes herself as the gazing Eye/I» (90). Yeğenoğlu sees vision as framed in «a desire for [...] colonial governing» and concludes that «Western woman's relation to her Oriental counterpart was conditioned and nourished by the occulocentrism of the whole rationalist and epistemological tradition of Enlightenment» (111-112). We believe, by contrast, that Montagu's references to sight, and to the senses in general, are inspired by «the sensationist view of happiness» (Norton 6): they embody her emotional agency and her pleasurable engagement with Otherness beyond epistemological closure.

translatable from the realm of her individuality to the space of communality. This is the real progressive movement animating her journey: «I have often wished for the opportunity that I might impart some of the pleasure I have found in this voyage through the most agreeable part of the world, where every scene presents me some poetical idea» (142-143), she wrote to Antonio Conti. Montagu's willingness to «impart pleasure» establishes a valuable link between the *ethos* of the *Letters* and «the politicisation of sensibility» (Ellis 198), which emphasised the ideological centrality of what, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Adam Smith described as the «social passions», or «the interest» that, as human beings, we are «obliged to take in the happiness» of others (52). Montagu wished to instil her enthusiasm and disseminate her symbiotic *episteme* in a society still alienated by the ideal of impermeability. Her feelings of sorority encouraged women to leave comfort zones and embrace new horizons of possibility for their self-fulfillment.

There have always been, and will continue to be, some conflicting views about the ideological component of Montagu's *Letters*. In Anna Secor's opinion, for example, Montagu would have chosen to «postpone the manuscript's publication until after her death», something which

reflects not only the constraints of her aristocratic station but also gendered norms, since many eighteenth-century women writers kept their work private during their lives, recording their experiences in journals and diaries, and many also did assume that their writing would be published after their deaths. (380)

By contrast, and as has been previously argued, other critics consider Montagu's desire to disseminate her correspondence a vital element guiding the composition of the *Letters*. As Katrina O'Loughlin notes, some of them «were published (anonymously) during Montagu's lifetime», and were directed to a wide variety of addressees, mostly female<sup>16</sup>, including «influential social, political, and literary figures at the Hanoverian court» (34-35). However, Montagu may have aspired to take the message of her *Letters* beyond socially important circles in order to share the liberating joy of her experiences with other people that probably had an intensely emotional significance for her. In this respect, as Malcolm Jack notes, her addressees also included

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16. For a detailed account of these addressees see O'Loughlin (34-35).

childhood friends like Jane Smith or Sarah Chiswell, «whom Lady Mary failed to persuade to accompany her to Constantinople [and] died of smallpox» (168). Montagu's project to spread her knowledge, feelings and experiences was deeply embedded in the sociability of sentimentalism<sup>17</sup>, which her activist nature embraced.

With Meyda Yeğenoğlu we agree on the fact that the *Letters* do not contain explicit «moments of resistance [...] against Orientalism» (79), and that «we cannot merely posit the depiction of positive images of the Orient and its women as a means of shattering [its] power» (87). Yet, as Yeğenoğlu also argues, we should not «comfortably assume feminism and Orientalism as necessarily contradictory modalities» (86). Moving beyond the discussion of Montagu's Orientalist or anti-Orientalist ideology –on which an important part of the critical debate about her epistolary narrative has been focused– the *Letters* communicate her feminist rebelliousness against the patriarchal constraints that resulted in women leading dull lives. They are composed by a sentimental explorer who defied the authority of paralysing cosmovisions and encouraged others to go beyond their limitations to enjoy life. As she wrote to her sister from Adrianople, «all that seems very stale with you would be fresh and sweet here» (69). Montagu wished that her female addressees could explore those fruitful spaces that reconciled what others had unnaturally separated. It could be argued that the epistolary textualisation of her abandonment of epistemological confinement was aimed at exciting others' desire to break constraints. In a true sentimental spirit, she enacted in her *Letters* «a symbiotic process, with all [...] creative faculties –mind, feelings, intellect and passion– participating, intertwined and not separated» (Talvet 124). In the face of contemporary mutilations –materialised in the rebirth of supremacist theories– Montagu's sentimental *ethos* timelessly appeals to the brains and to the senses of those readers who, using her own words, do not want their lives to be «destined to so much tranquillity» (155). As a sentimental explorer and as a frontier writer, Montagu refused to stay in hegemonic comfort zones, and the translation of this refusal into a uniquely personalised *Montaguan* narrative is the main achievement of her *Letters*.

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17. Mullan (1988) offers meaningful insight into the importance of the ideal of sociability within the literature of sensibility.

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