

Chapter VI - Lettres écrites de Lausanne: Caliste



The Novels of Isabelle de Charrière

by

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On 26 April 1788 Benjamin Constant wrote to Isabelle de Charrière from Brunswick, partly in English:

Have I told you already how satisfied I am with your rehabilitation of poor mistaken and mishandel'd (I do not know whether this is German or English) Caliste? I like it much. Only I do not think it is forcible enough, & the great consideration which induced you to write it is but hinted at. You might have explained a little more explicitly what l'auteur a laissé dans le vague, & proved more fully the importance of that vague, & the lustre it gives, the charm it spreads over the action.¹

Two things emerge from this passage. First it suggests that Isabelle de Charrière was prompted to write the novel by some deeply felt experience of her own. This, as Philippe Godet suggests, may not be unrelated to Madame de Charrière's private grief for an unhappy love affair.² Second, Constant seems to discern an indirect approach to the reader embedded within the text of the story itself which it is the perceptive reader's task to explore. Certainly these two factors and others have produced an extraordinarily rich work of art into which Isabelle de Charrière has distilled certain profound insights into human motivation and behaviour. As we shall see, the range of her inquiry, though limited to a handful of individuals, is characterized by minute detail and psychological depth, and the reader is invigorated by her sense of commitment to her characters and by the results of her craftsmanship.

*Caliste*³ explores in detail the complex web of deception and self-deception involved in a love relationship, into which are drawn elements from the background and previous life of the two central figures. In addition to this the novel is enriched by an underlying sense of mystery that challenges the reader's intelligence and powers of discrimination. But *Caliste* is not simply a single novel, and this is the aspect of it that we must examine first. When we progress from the world of Cécile's private grief to that of Caliste and William we become aware not only of a broadening of the stage but also of a heightening in the dramatic atmosphere. After 'Histoire de Cécile', which is both geographically and affectively limited, the range and scope of *Caliste* indicate that we are to witness the working out of a more exemplary destiny, the experiences of a heroine of much greater stature. However the dramatic lines of force already set up in 'Histoire de Cécile' continue to be felt in *Caliste* in the form of conflicts between sensitive individuals and society, and more particularly in the disproportion between a woman's love for a man and his relative incapacity for feeling. It is William who leads us from one panel of the diptych to the next, for concentrated in him is an awareness of the tensions in the stories of both Cécile and Caliste. He has a growing affection for Cécile's mother and has become absorbed into her concern at Lord Edouard's apparent indifference to Cécile's love. It is William who knits the two parts of *Lettres écrites de Lausanne* together by his preoccupations. He also shares with Cécile's mother a critical

attitude towards the everyday deceptions and hypocrisy of fashionable society. Further - and although this is by no means central to *Caliste* - he is aware like Cécile's mother of how far money places one at an advantage or disadvantage within good society. There is some inconsistency between the two stories, however, in that William seems to be growing in affection for Cécile's mother in 'Histoire de Cécile', and yet in *Caliste* is almost entirely absorbed in his memories - this is undoubtedly an oversight on Isabelle de Charrière's part.

It is not only William's continuing presence that hinges the two 'panels' together. It is also the pause at the country house at Renens that casts the shadow of Cécile's plight and its implications forward onto the story of *Caliste*. In wintry isolation Cécile and her mother confront their moral and social natures. Cécile cares for a dog found wandering in the snow, and then nurses a dying black slave - here, perhaps, the novelist is implying a wider critique of European society. Most important in her mother's eyes is the fact that:

[...] ce que l'amour avait fait acquérir, l'humanité en fit usage.⁴

This applies to all Cécile's actions, though here her mother is referring to her use of English to speak to the slave. Cécile has reached compassionate maturity in almost all respects. She is honest and self-denying in her fellow-feeling, and her mother is anxious to repress any sign of *amour-propre* in her daughter's character. But, as a sombre warning on the frequently distorted values prevailing in society, we also hear of the fate of Cécile's unhappily married cousin. He flees from his wife, an extravagant member of Lausanne society, and his pathetic figure is described as:

éclairé par la lune et la neige.⁵

These, then, are some of the motifs that this bridging section carries on from 'Histoire de Cécile' into *Caliste*: the alienation of struggling goodness in a society that is often unjust, and the anguish caused by marriages based not on love but on wealth and position. But the principal idea that links 'Histoire de Cécile' to *Caliste* is that of a woman who desperately wants from the man she loves something that he is simply not capable of giving. This crucial tension leads to great pathos in Cécile's case and to tragedy in that of Caliste. For in this period before Cécile's departure, which her mother hopes may produce some revelation of strong feelings for her daughter on Edouard's part, nothing positive is forthcoming. He limits himself to polite enquiries about her and does not commit himself in any significant way. William understands the situation, and is asked for his advice by Cécile's mother. It is at this point that he begins his own story.

Caliste is essentially concerned with the interplay between characters whose qualities are incompatible, and which bring about their mutual destruction at the end of the novel. Its concerns are not primarily social but personal and psychological. The central situation which confronts us is that of a woman of infinitely superior and fine feelings, Caliste, who falls desperately in love with a man whose feelings are far weaker than her own. The other chief characteristic of Caliste is her pride. Like Cécile she wants a man who, in the last analysis, is quite unlike the object of her love. For above all she wants spontaneity in William, and she will not give herself to him until he has demonstrated that his feelings are as intense as her own. She can wait for ever until she obtains such a sign, and this is at the root of the tragedy. For William's enigmatic personality is, either guiltily or otherwise, quite incapable of showing the same passionate love as Caliste. He drives her in desperation into a loveless marriage with another man, and to a certain extent he is responsible for her subsequent

decline and death. This, then, is the shape of the novel. I now propose to examine in detail first the characters of Caliste and William, and second the structure and technique used to portray their tragic destinies.

Caliste, in her youth, was the victim of an unscrupulous and grasping mother who 'sold' her to an aristocrat, Lord L. He gave her a convent education in Paris with the intention of later making her his mistress, which indeed she became for about eight years. During this period Caliste was apparently respected in polite society by reason of her status and relationship with Lord L. But her vulnerability became only too clear when she passed to another rich benefactor, Lord L.'s uncle, on her 'guardian's' death. For although she now had an income of four thousand *pièces* a year and a house in Bath, she had not acquired that vital concomitant of money, respectability. This involves conforming to the code incumbent on unmarried women: to be of recognized chastity. This is the first cause of Caliste's anxiety at the time of her meeting with William. A second is left for the reader to deduce from Caliste's solemn report of Lord L.'s reasons for never marrying her.⁶ For beneath the familiar protestations about marriage being an unnecessary and superfluous ceremony, and his stated reluctance to leave her an aristocratic lady with no money, we sense that he may have been being somewhat tongue-in-cheek. For this was surely a pretext for avoiding the *mésalliance* that marriage to Caliste would have constituted. Whether Caliste realized this or not, the net result is the same for her: she is left with something of a trauma because it will become increasingly apparent to her, in view of William's later reactions, that everyone wants her but nobody wants to marry her. In the meantime she must constantly suffer the discomfort of being a subject of gossip and backbiting, as well as the more exquisite fear of what is *not* openly said out of consideration for her feelings. At the time of her first conversations with William it is already not the lack of a dowry that matters: it is the fact that her image in the eyes of the public is tarnished. In an ideal world her fine qualities and talents would outweigh these disadvantages. But as in 'Histoire de Cécile', we are in the real world of late eighteenth-century Europe where upper-class society and its economic power are supported by a protective body of moral taboos. Caliste's one hope, from the point of view of her social standing as well as of her personal self-esteem, is that William will marry her for love. These elements of a critique of society should not be overstressed, but it is perhaps necessary to point them out in view of Professor Starobinski's insistence, in his recent essay, on Isabelle de Charrière's conservatism.⁷ For society is shown in a particularly harsh light firstly in the stress it lays on the economic side of marriage and secondly in its emphasis on respectability. Respectability is a laudable idea, but unfortunately it can be used out of spite and vindictiveness as a weapon against someone like Cécile or Caliste who is in an economically vulnerable position. However, to concentrate on economic or sociological factors exclusively would be to miss the real point of the story. For these, after giving some initial impetus to the novel, fade away. Caliste, either by good fortune or shrewd behaviour, acquires all the money she needs, so that by the end of the story she is economically William's equal. She receives money from Lord L.'s uncle⁸ and, in the middle of story and before it is too late to persuade William and his father, she further inherits a house in Whitehall from her father's uncle.⁹ So this is not the essential focus of interest of the story. That focus is, rather, the complicated excuses and deceptions that people make use of in their personal relationships.

Caliste's entry in the novel comes at exactly the moment of William's greatest weakness, when he seems to have abandoned all hope after his brother's death. It is precisely the point at which an approach to him will find the least emotional spontaneity, although Caliste's company does bring him back to a less morose state of mind. At his most frail, introverted moment she is preparing to offer him her love. But this is exactly when he will be unable to

plead in Caliste's favour with his father or mediate on her behalf with upper-class society in general. His passive, indecisive character begins its interaction with Caliste's vigorous personality in a process that will eventually destroy them both. From the beginning Caliste adopts a firm strategy with William which is absolutely unsuited to his temperament, and which only succeeds in puzzling him and rendering her an enigmatic figure in his eyes. After William's father states his disapproval of their match, she promises not to marry William until such time as he does approve of it. In so doing she puts the onus of persuading his father on William's all too weak shoulders - and the task of course proves too much for him. Furthermore, increasing her own suffering and worsening her plight, Caliste resolves to refuse William's repeated advances, something which in the long run discourages him and even drives him from her. It is Caliste's fate to have an enormous capacity for devotion and self-sacrifice, and these are precisely the gifts that will torture her so much longer while the irresolute William prevaricates and postpones his decisions. Her prophetic remarks scattered through the story bear eloquent testimony to her lucidity of mind - another quality which increases the pain the loss of William causes her. For she foresees that she will lose him long before he begins to drift away from her.

This, then, is Caliste, a total enigma in William's eyes. For she seems, as it were, to be sending out mysterious signals that he is incapable of interpreting. This is nowhere more true than in the series of 'tests' that she sets for him, as we shall see later. What she wants from him is just one sign of spontaneity - the kind of sign he cannot give. She has more pride than even a Marivaux heroine, for she longs to be loved spontaneously on her own terms and in her own way. It would be wrong to interpret this as mere prudence on her part, after her experiences with Lord L. Rather, she is so constructed psychologically and emotionally that she needs from the man she loves evidence of something he perhaps does not experience.

To obtain a more exact estimate of Isabelle de Charrière's originality in her creation of Caliste it is important not to neglect one literary antecedent of her heroine. For Madame de Charrière has very deliberately cast Caliste in the same kind of mould as the less sympathetic heroine of Nicholas Rowe's *Fair Penitent* (1703), that of the 'fallen woman' whom Caliste once played on the London stage.¹⁰ Caliste's name is forever linked with Rowe's heroine, and she must bear this burden patiently. Like Rowe's fiery Calista, she is the victim of an unjust social order that persecutes women in her position.¹¹

It is, however, a matter for discussion whether, despite the novel's title, Caliste is in fact the central figure in the story. One cannot help feeling that it is William who is the more interesting character. He is intriguing, enigmatic, mysterious in his behaviour as well as in the *manner* in which he recounts his actions. With Caliste the area of mystery is somewhat less. Throughout the story the reader cannot help wondering what is wrong with William and why he behaves so very strangely.

The closeness of William's relationship with his brother gives us a glimpse of his greatest moments of happiness at the beginning of the story. The early loss of this companion adds to the tone of the story an ominous sense of the blind injustice of fate and of the waste of premature bereavement. William is left emotionally maimed, as though part of himself is lost, and this is of importance for the role he plays in the tragedy as a whole. He appears to have been cut off from attaining full adulthood, and displays at times an almost wilful disregard for the consequences of his actions, a trait very typical of early adolescence. At one of the climactic points of the narrative his speech becomes childlike:

On m'a promis des glaces

is his reply to Caliste's plea to him to stay with her a little longer.¹² This almost retarded side of William comes out too in his friendship with Sir Harry B., the child baronet. In his relationship with Caliste he consents to being fined for misbehaviour, and Caliste also acts as his tutor in rhetoric. Clearly we are in the presence of a rather unusual individual. William's personality foreshadows that of Goncharov's Oblomov in its extreme passivity; it is as though the shock of bereavement has numbed his sensibility, as though his capacity for experiencing emotions has seeped away into the porous rock of indifference, only to erupt again at the very end of the story. His intellect, on the other hand – 'cette portion de nous qui est, pour ainsi dire, spectatrice de l'autre', as the narrator of *Adolphe* would put it - is sharply conscious of a ceaseless struggle between conflicting emotional alliances, but appears unable to operate in any way on his volition. At the mercy of outside stimuli, William drifts rudderless towards disaster.

It is this reduced threshold of feeling, this diminished level of response that has the most devastating effect on the woman who loves him. For the whole point about Caliste's position as a 'fallen woman' is that she demands pity, understanding and sympathy - all individuals are liable to fall from grace on occasion and to be punished as unreasonably as she is. But she simply cannot obtain such sympathy from him. William does not appear to witness or to be aware of – still less to be ashamed of his part in – Caliste's suffering at the time the story takes place. He seems only to realize Caliste's suffering once he himself begins to suffer, and this curious 'delayed action' response, the fact of his being, as it were, one step behind Caliste, further isolates him from her. Now this brings us to the most tantalizing problem of the whole novel: what credence are we to give to William's story, and how far is he unwittingly revealing himself to the reader as being deceptive, dishonest, forgetful, or genuinely ignorant? For he appears to be different combinations of all these things at different moments in the narrative, and Isabelle de Charrière's manipulation of them adds greatly to the novel's attempts to seize upon the protean and many-sided nature of experience and memory. Professor Starobinski in his richly suggestive essay¹³ tends, in my opinion, rather to simplify William and to neglect the great complexity of his feelings, especially when these are part of a retrospective self-analysis in the first person. He ascribes a certain element of homosexuality to William, and bases this on William's passionate love for his brother, his platonic friendship with Caliste, and his affection for Sir Harry B., as well as the fact of his accompanying Edouard on a Grand Tour. I would suggest rather that William has a diminished sexual response, a factor which Caliste seems to sense obscurely. Beyond this there is insufficient evidence for us to be able, with any certainty, to fix William's position on the broad spectrum between heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Such elements in the story do, however, lend their colouring to my second point, which concerns the wider and more puzzling nature of his behaviour towards Caliste throughout the whole novel. Here is a man of flesh and blood who does not react to an exquisite creature like Caliste. This, surely, is what troubles us more and more as we read his account. He will not marry her - and yet he marries Lady B. without any discussion, consummates his marriage with her, leaves her pregnant and then goes abroad without a word. He could have married Caliste out of generosity even if he did not love her, but he did not do so. His foreshortening of events in his narrative only underlines the peculiarity of his behaviour. We are perpetually frustrated in our attempts to fathom the mystery of his personality. And so we begin to wonder whether a portion of the ultimate truth about himself is being withheld and, more important, we begin to ask whether the whole question of his father's objections to Caliste on

social grounds is not an elaborate alibi. Does he seize on his father's disapproval, the moment he learns of it, in order to justify himself, in true 'confessional novel' manner, in not marrying Caliste? This is an important question, and one which I shall deal with more fully when we come to look at the style and technique of the novel. However, this kind of technique does bring to mind the deceptions of the narrator in *Manon Lescaut*, although of course the personalities of Des Grieux and William are quite different. (Des Grieux is wildly, passionately in love with Manon, whereas William is not in love enough and perhaps builds imaginary hedges around himself.) There is nevertheless one important parallel with the character of William which deserves mention here. This is found in Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, published in 1774 and acknowledged by Madame de Charrière as being one of the novels she admired most.¹⁴ Although her knowledge of German may have allowed her to read the work in its original language, it was doubtless familiar to her through, for example, Deyverdun's French translation of 1776. We know from the journal of Isabelle de Charrière's friend, Pastor Chaillet, that his copy of the novel was probably available to her from October 1777, though whether in German or French is not clear.¹⁵ Now the *Werther* which Isabelle de Charrière would know at the time she wrote *Caliste* was somewhat different from the second version of 1787. There is, nonetheless, a strong element of German 'inwardness' in the first *Werther*, and in its hero there is a characteristic morbid sensitivity and tendency to be drawn along by circumstances. William seems to share these qualities in some measure with him.¹⁶

We have seen in outline the main elements which make up Isabelle de Charrière's protagonists. Let us now examine how these are incorporated into an aesthetically satisfying narrative structure. The 'centre of gravity' of *Caliste*, so to speak, seems to have been deliberately placed towards the beginning of the story in order to allow greater concentration on the indecision of William. His dilemma is established early on, and what follows is an exploration of its consequences. Rather as in a tragedy, the story falls roughly into five sections, with a prologue and, at the close, a section of lamentation. The prologue foretells in ominous terms the main action of the novel. This section, which bears the additional weight of Cécile's (relatively minor) misfortune, prepares us for another victim of society to be sacrificed in a more serious context.

Amid the ruins of Cécile's hopes, William begins his narrative, setting the scene and describing his own part in the events leading up to the catastrophe at which he has hinted. In *Caliste* the sense of 'writing to the moment' is less than in 'Histoire de Cécile' and it is not until the close that the letter form is fully exploited. This introductory section takes us from William's tragic loss of his brother up to his meeting with Caliste. Then we hear Caliste's passionate declaration and the period of rising hopes and elation which culminates with William's father's two letters to his son and one letter to Caliste. This last letter breaks the spell under which William and Caliste have been able to live outside time and social contingency, and during which William could say: "après une longue nuit l'aurore du bonheur se remontre à peine".¹⁷ Once again they are plunged back into the onward rush of real time: "Depuis ce moment, Caliste ne fut plus la même".¹⁸ Caliste's grief and a period of anxious agitation predominate in the second phase, of which the keynote is William's indecision. He leaves for his father's estate, while Caliste is recalled to London by her benefactor. He meets Lady Betty B. and Sir Harry B. who accompany him back to Bath. The reunion with Caliste reveals how far his feelings have changed and it concludes this section of the narrative: "Caliste ne tarda pas à voir que j'étais changé".¹⁹ The next phase heightens the dramatic struggle, underlining William's new reluctance to be alone with Caliste lest his uncertainty about his feelings for her show through. It includes Caliste's desperate ultimatum to William and her departure to marry Charles, and it closes with William's own wedding and the hiatus

caused by his departure for a continental tour with Sir Harry B. In the fourth movement the events are related leading up to William's final climactic break with Caliste; his growing estrangement from his wife, Lady Betty; his search for Caliste; their chance meeting in a London theatre; and their desperate struggle to escape from moral bondage. Significantly this final interview ends indecisively because of the entry of a third party, James, Caliste's servant, and because of a violent thunderstorm: "Je restai seul dans l'obscurité; je ne l'ai jamais revue".²⁰ This closes the period of their mutual suffering. The final extended episode concentrates on the last trials and magnanimous gestures of Caliste. But before the final account of Caliste's death Isabelle de Charrière skilfully interposes three letters that hold the reader in suspense as to the manner of her dying. They give an account of Edouard's indifferent reaction to William's admonitions, and allow the tragic finale its full impact without the necessity of tying up superfluous loose ends. It is fitting that Caliste should assume a lonely eminence after the self-recriminations and weak pathetic epilogue of William:

Ah! malheureux, j'ai toujours attendu qu'il fut trop tard, et mon père a fait comme moi. Que n'a-t-elle aimé un autre homme, et qui eût eu un autre père?²¹

For we are given the full story from another's lips, those of a relative outsider endowed with better judgement, at the very end of the book. William's second letter acts out, as it were, stylistically his indecisive personality through his feeble sequence of impossible conditionals, each beginning with 'j'aurais dû'.²² He is sealed forever in passivity and indecision, the utter antithesis of the moral effort Caliste displays right to the end of the novel. In the context of the two parts of the novel the letters bring a degree of tragic irony to the story, opening out perspectives of tragedy outside the story itself. For Edouard in effect disregards William's advice, and his empty compliment in the last of the three letters, the letter addressed to Cécile's mother (whose daughter he has caused to suffer so much):

ma reconnaissance ne finira qu'avec ma vie²³

ironically counterpoints William's account of Edouard's vague indifference to Cécile. He has said: "de me marier à mon âge, on n'y peut pas penser".²⁴ The final note on which the work ends, Charles's account of Caliste's suffering and death, is thus further emphasized, for we hear it against the background of a more general predicament for women in a male-dominated society.

Whether by design of the narrator or otherwise, the structural mechanisms of the novel recall the inevitable movement of the 'infernal machine' of tragedy which draws its protagonists to destruction in the final cataclysm. There is an underlying myth, too, which is known to the audience in the form of Rowe's heroine Calista, whom Caliste once played in London, and whose plight is constantly recalled. Where one might look for 'unities' there is certainly extreme *concentration* of interest.

When Caliste befriends William - who as the older narrator's of the story depicts himself as having been broken and stunned by his brother's death - he is only half of a complete person: "cette pauvre, inutile moitié d'existence qui me restait".²⁵ In the novel William searches for metaphysical shadows of this lost other half of himself, rather as French Romantic poets would later see themselves as half of a 'Platonic hermaphrodite' with their loved one. Caliste, a fugitive from the injustices of good society, falls in love with him, declares her love and, in full knowledge of his potential weakness and of the debt of gratitude William will inevitably

feel towards her, she describes the wretchedness of her present state.²⁶ The whole episode epitomizes the problem with their relationship, for he operates on a lower level of emotional intensity from her and he can never live up to her expectations of him. We see in it, too, an expression of her pride. Her statement has something of the persuasive art of a legal speech for the defence,²⁷ and it is clear from William's words that Caliste's kindness to him has placed him in an impossible position.²⁸ Her impassioned oratory seems to have an effect on him, and she gives him one day in which to decide whether or not to take her as his own.²⁹ However, as always, she fails to communicate or make contact with William at any deep level. It is part of the drama that William, as well as failing to understand her, cannot understand the 'tests' that she sets him. They make her appear something of an enigma to him. This section of the novel, indeed, offers a finely balanced portrayal of their existence on quite different planes: when she says either he comes to her house the following day or everything is finished between them, his reaction is triviality itself. He makes no effort to see clearly into his heart, but drifts back to her house late the following evening:

Je ne délibérai, ni ne balançai, ni ne combattis, et cependant, comme si quelque chose m'avait retenu, je ne sortis de chez moi que fort tard le lendemain. Le soir fort tard je me retrouvai à la porte de Caliste, sans que je puisse dire que j'eusse pris le parti d'y retourner.³⁰

His action sets them on the path of misfortune; subsequent, less pardonable acts of weakness, only serve to exacerbate the situation. Caliste's tragic error - for in the long term we must consider it an error - stems from her best qualities. For, filled with remorse for her past extra-marital liaison, she aspires to respectability, and wishes to fulfil herself in a proper and acknowledged union. She is guilty of having a sense of pride in her own worth, but it is a pride which, even while it wreaks her own destruction, is remote from anything base. She seems to err in pushing William too hard, and in her estimate of his mind and heart. But she is also to a certain extent responsible for having so much pride that it prevents her from fighting yet harder for William, and lets her hope for the impossible from her 'sign language' which seems merely to baffle William. It could also be argued that Caliste's prophetic statements only underline a tendency to self-deception on her part.³¹ These, then, are the elements of a double tragedy that arises from the quality of feeling in two very different individuals. Their relationship is characterized by anxiety on the one hand and apathy and supineness on the other: pride, a refusal to fight and an unwillingness to face the truth³² are pitted against a curious spinelessness in which passivity and an ability to concentrate on the trivial and insignificant both play a part. William's initial cowardice - if cowardice it is - in going to Caliste's house and deceiving her will eventually be followed by weakness in the face of public opinion.

So Caliste commits an error of judgement, something like the *hamartia* of tragedy, because of her pride. William's is a negative kind of error, the whole problem being that he does not do anything. Caliste appears fully prescient as to the ultimate outcome of the kind of commitment she has managed to extract from the man she loves. However, she may also be making a prophetic statement designed to protect her from what she fears most when she says: "la fin ne sera pas heureuse".³³ But there is too the sense of an impending fate in the story which is confirmed by the narrator's comment on the shrubs which Caliste plants:

Ils croissent, ils prospèrent, c'est tout ce qui reste d'heureux de cette liaison si douce.³⁴

(Perhaps more ominous still is the curiously flat and complacent note which this comment seems to strike.) Caliste's full stature comes out in the one gesture which, with her mastery of

rhetoric, she makes in order to gain the approval of William's father for their marriage. She stakes everything on her letter to him and is clearly distraught when she receives his reply. William provides an almost bathetic contrast to her, remaining far below her level of aspiration. Under Caliste's guidance he sets out to convert his father, but his reserves of will-power do not survive the confrontation: two negative replies seem to exhaust William's resistance to his father's evaluation of Caliste. (We shall examine later how far William is truly sincere in his saying: "Ah ciel! disais-je en moi-même, si je pouvais tout réunir, mon père, mes devoirs, Caliste, mon bonheur et le mien!").³⁵ For a moment he turns into a voluptuary, taking feeble advantage of Caliste's state of disarray and collapse in order to press for the physical consummation of their relationship.³⁶ He aligns himself thereby with society's patently hypocritical estimate of Caliste. By his actions and words he conjures up the spectre of her past, and forces her steadfastly to stand her ground on the question of principles and to reaffirm her desire for moral recovery and renewal. Thus their brief period of happiness, perhaps born of self-deception on both sides, is at a close. During this brief episode Isabelle de Charrière makes effective use of verb tenses and temporal references to convey the sense of a tension between the inexorable forward movement of time and this momentary lull. The pace of the narrative, leisurely up to Caliste's meeting with William, is considerably increased by Caliste's anxiety to assure herself of his love. Her ultimatum to him, that either he leave her or marry her now that the truth is out (and before a refusal can hurt her still more), shifts us to a time-scale of hours. The following day William finds his way back to her house. The hope that William had nurtured the previous day:

Ne prévoyons point de maux [...] Le présent est trop délicieux pour que je puisse me tourmenter de l'avenir.³⁷

had been agreed to by Caliste:

Je ne parlerai donc plus de l'avenir.³⁸

This hope is realized by his visit to her the following day, which she interprets as a desire to marry her. They thereafter enter a safe, as it were extra-temporal zone, a region in which the possibly destructive effects of planning for the future are neutralized. Caliste is free to indulge in self-deception about William's feelings, and William is under no constraint to perform any positive action in any direction whatsoever. This high and idyllic temporal plateau is characterized by the imperfect, for example:

Quelquefois je me plaignais de sa retenue,³⁹

and

Mes jours ne s'écoulaient pourtant pas dans une oisiveté entière,⁴⁰

but the charm, we are reminded by this neutralizing imperfect, cannot last forever:

Heures trop courtes, promenades délicieuses où tout s'embellissait et s'animaient pour deux cœurs à l'unisson.⁴¹

Sooner or later the abrupt onward jolt of the past historic must make itself felt:

Ainsi se passèrent des semaines, des mois, plus d'une année [...] A la fin, je reçus une lettre de mon père.⁴²

Once the period of spiritual equilibrium is over, Caliste and William re-enter the onward march of time that is to drive them on implacably. When his father refuses to accept the idea of Caliste as his daughter-in-law, William attempts to return to this haven, this eternal present with no responsibilities attaching to it:

Changeons, ma Caliste, [...] ce moment si triste en un moment de bonheur.⁴³

The note of doggerel here seems to emphasize the vacuousness of this libertine gesture. Caliste, on the other hand, realizes there can be no happiness for her in such an existence. Her happiness cannot result from escapism, only from struggle with reality. From this moment onwards Caliste and William are pulling in different directions, William longing for the lost point of equilibrium and wishing to live only in the present with his mind closed to the future:

regrettant le passé, déplorant l'avenir, et ne sachant comment disposer du présent;⁴⁴

and with Caliste suffering not only as a result of her wish for a positive gesture from him in terms of their real position in relation to time, but also as a result of his procrastination and small acts of cowardice.

The second stage in the tragedy sees the reinforcement of William's complicity with respectable society in his betrayal of the heroine. Strong evidence is placed before William of the double scale of values operative in society: he notes a certain licentiousness in the behaviour of the society women whom his father respects most. William's reluctance to pursue with his father the comparison between them and Caliste is all the more reprehensible since he knows from Caliste's servants (in an almost juxtaposed passage) of her absolute moral recovery, her almsgiving (which is referred to throughout the novel) and her church attendance. So her holding back from a physical relationship, her scruples have both the appearance and reality of absolute sincerity. The interlude at his father's estate thus gives William the opportunity to rectify his ambivalent position. It also offers evidence of a first slight weakening of his father's hostility: impressed by Caliste's appearance when he first sees her by chance in London, he is put off only by her being referred to as "la Caliste de lord L".⁴⁵ William however fails to press home his advantage. He delays and vapidly complains about his father's interlocutor: "Malheureux, pourquoi le prononçates-vous!"⁴⁶ Delay, procrastination and indecision are established as the tragic register of this second movement, and are to become the imaginative environment of the story as a whole. It is clear by the time of William's return to Bath and to Caliste that a tragic moral impasse has been reached, and our impressions are confirmed by William's persistently missing obvious opportunities for gaining his father's approval of Caliste. The situation becomes all the more urgent when Caliste receives a proposal of marriage from Charles M*** of Norfolk. Pusillanimously William delays on the very brink of being separated from Caliste forever; his final act, when he hesitates before setting out to stop Caliste's ill-matched wedding, brings about their undoing. By now there is perhaps more than a little suspicion in the reader's mind about William's ability to divest himself retrospectively of all responsibility, in particular about such episodes as his allowing Caliste to prepare tasteful decorations for Lady Betty's house in Bath, the "goût" and "élégance" of which are ascribed to William by Lady Betty.

The climax of the third movement of the story is the final evening that Caliste and William spend together as free individuals. He attempts to leave her apartment to return to his father's house and Caliste tries to keep him with her a little longer, almost offering herself to him there and then in desperation. As he leaves on a feeble pretext, Caliste utters the phrase that is to echo ever after in William's and in the reader's memory on account of its ominous content, "C'est fait".⁴⁷ They are - or perhaps the narrator wants us to think they are - entrenched in their fixed positions, in much the same way as the protagonists of Racine's *Bérénice* reach their own tragic 'invitus invitam' attitudes. Having failed to evoke any response from William of the quality and intensity of her own concern for him, and having drawn a blank in her penultimate 'test' (set to galvanize William's jealousy by her friendship with Charles), Caliste leaves to marry Charles M***, hoping that William will make a last-minute effort to prevent their union and to marry her himself. This final step proves irreversible and catastrophic, for William - in a state of nervous collapse we are told - is unable to pursue her and prevent the wedding. A final gulf is set between them by a sacramental union for which, of course, Caliste has all the awe and reverence of the newly converted.

In the fourth part William begins to reap the bitter harvest of his indecision, misplaced filial piety and lack of moral courage. Having drifted somewhat curiously into a loveless marriage with Lady Betty B for no better reason, it seems, than that it was the only thing left to do (and at the bidding of a father whose judgement of what is "avantageux" he knows to be false), he now proceeds to draw others into the disaster with him: not only his wife, but also Charles M*** and, to a certain extent, his own father. The power of melancholy, brought on by his earlier errors of timing, has so possessed William by the beginning of the fourth section of *Caliste* that London society grows to despise him; nor is Lady Betty slow in sharing their disdain. We learn later too that Caliste is estranged from her husband after having had a miscarriage, the result of shock at learning of William's recent marriage. Thus both of the principal protagonists are now spiritually destitute without each other, and their meeting at a London theatre forces them to confront the fact of their inability to live happily either together or apart. It is the tragic moment of *anagnorisis* or recognition, to use Aristotle's term, when the heroine recognizes the truth about her situation, and, fittingly, it comes long before William's own realization, in view of his perpetually belated reactions:

Caliste ne pleura pas après avoir fini son récit; elle semblait considérer sa destinée avec une sorte d'étonnement mêlé d'horreur plutôt qu'avec tristesse.⁴⁸

She perceives the pattern of her life and appears, in Giraudoux's pregnant phrase "résigné[e] à cohabiter avec les monstres de la fatalité".⁴⁹ In St James's Park Caliste makes one last effort to snatch them both from the path of frustration along which they seem destined to walk. Under a menacing sky she considers the prospect of their living together in violation of their marriage vows.⁵⁰ But she withdraws the suggestion: better to be unhappy than involved in an adulterous liaison. The narrator describes in his accustomed 'fatalizing' perspective a thunderstorm raging in the background which coincidentally reaches a climax just at the point where Caliste that they live together. As so often, the reader is perhaps puzzled by such a poetically fitting occurrence: did it really happen this way? However we are told that this their last interview was cut short by James her servant, fearful for her safety in the storm, and that William was left alone beneath a fiery sky. The suggestion of divine interposition or of the workings of fate combines in this climactic passage with that of an almost flattering picture of a destitute William, as he will say later "seul sur la terre" (echoing Rousseau)⁵¹, to increase our sense of confusion about William's responsibility for Caliste's misfortunes. William the older narrator now is free to revert to his refrain of "C'est trop tard" and to allow himself a

limited measure of guilt.⁵² But on the other hand we do sense that from the actual process of recounting his deeds and omissions William is nearer to feeling sympathy for what Caliste went through.

[\[Chapter VI continued\]](#)

¹ B.V.N. Ms 1312-1313, section headed in English '26th' of letter of [25]-28 [April 1788].

² Godet II, 289 n.1.

³ The narrator, William relates how the death of his beloved twin brother in the American War of Independence left him weak and stunned, and how he was helped to recovery by conversations with Caliste, a woman who befriended him in Bath. Caliste's love for him is returned in a curiously uncommitted way by William, who claims that he was still emotionally drained by his recent bereavement. The decisive events of the novel follow on from his father's refusal to give his approval to their marriage on account of Caliste's past history and reputation as a 'fallen woman'. After a long period of delay and vacillation on William's part, Caliste, in sheer desperation at his indifference, decides to marry Charles M*** of Norfolk. William is too weak and dilatory to prevent this unhappy union. On learning of Caliste's wedding he marries Lady Betty B., mother of his young friend Sir Harry B. His marriage proves disastrous, and a final chance meeting in London with Caliste underlines the fact that the only possible escape from their predicament would be the violation of two marriages. Caliste resists this idea, and on his father's advice William accompanies Edouard abroad on a Grand Tour. It is on their travels that they have met Cécile and her mother in Lausanne. Helplessly he awaits news of Caliste, and this arrives in the form of a letter from Charles M*** announcing her recent death.

⁴ *L.L.*, 117.

⁵ *L.L.*, 114.

⁶ *L.L.*, 133.

⁷ See J. Starobinski, 'Les *Lettres écrites de Lausanne* par Mme de Charrière: inhibition psychique et interdit social' in *Roman et Lumières au 18e siècle* (Paris, 1970), 130-151.

⁸ *L.L.*, 131.

⁹ *L.L.*, 164-5.

¹⁰ *L.L.*, 129. It is perhaps a slight flaw in the story that after one performance only Isabelle de Charrière's heroine should retain the name of Calista..

¹¹ It is important to emphasize that this 'fallen woman' tradition in literature should be distinguished from that of the 'flirtatious courtesan' or 'whore with a heart of gold'. (On this matter, see Klaus Sasse, *Die Entdeckung der 'courtisane vertueuse' in der französischen Literatur des 18. Jahrhunderts: Rétif de la Bretonne und seine Vorgänger* (Hamburg, 1967).) For the problem with the fallen woman is essentially her rehabilitation, generally the desire to attain a kind of moral virginity. Caliste's position resembles that of Rousseau's Julie and, perhaps more important, that of Lauretta Pisana in *Les Amours de Milord Edouard Bomston*.

Laure was sold by her parents when young to a cardinal. In later life true love restores to her a sense of shame for her earlier conduct. Bomston says of her: "la pudeur éteinte était revenue avec l'amour" (*Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, ed. René Pomeau (Paris, 1960), 762), but this memory prevents Laure from consummating her love for Bomston. Society and its pressures also affect the man she loves. He hesitates between her and another woman. Rousseau's Laure and Caliste display a strikingly similar sense of pride in their reconquered virtue.

¹² *L.L.*, 176.

¹³ J Starobinski, 'Les *Lettres écrites de Lausanne* par Mme de Charrière: inhibition psychique et interdit social' in *Roman et Lumières au 18e siècle* (Paris, 1970), 130-151.

¹⁴ See Godet II, 232.

¹⁵ Godet I, 229.

¹⁶ It may also be that Isabelle de Charrière's experience of 'the English temperament' during the gloomy winter which she spent outside London coalesced in her mind with the whole eighteenth-century tradition of the melancholy Englishman which ran from Montesquieu's theories of climate and vapours in *De l'Esprit des lois* to the pre-Romantic popularity of Young's *Night Thoughts* and Blair's *The Grave*. She may even have had a reminiscence of *Hamlet* in mind.

¹⁷ *L.L.*, 139.

¹⁸ *L.L.*, 156.

¹⁹ *L.L.*, 168.

²⁰ *L.L.*, 204.

²¹ *L.L.*, 217.

²² *L.L.*, 220-1.

²³ *L.L.*, 223.

²⁴ *L.L.*, 219.

²⁵ *L.L.*, 128.

²⁶ *L.L.*, 136-7.

²⁷ See my later comments on the power of words and rhetoric in the novel.

²⁸ When she states that his health is restored, he replies: "Oui, mais c'est à vous que je la dois" (*L.L.*, 138).

²⁹ *L.L.*, 138.

³⁰ *L.L.*, 138.

³¹ See *L.L.*, 139: "La fin ne sera pas heureuse [...] Peut-être mourrai-je avant de devenir misérable."

³² Her position is that noted by the Chevalier de Méré: "Les femmes veulent tout ce qu'elles veulent et ne sont jamais contentes si elles ne sont absolues." (A Gombauld de Plessac, Chevalier de Méré, *Maximes, Sentences et Reflexions Morales et Politiques* [Paris, 1687], 66-7.)

³³ *L.L.*, 139

³⁴ *L.L.*, 139. One recalls that Rousseau's letters were published in Geneva in 1782 together with the first part of the *Confessions*; this first part of the *Confessions*, of course, refers to Rousseau's famous 'cabinet de verdure' at Montmorency, and Rousseau asks how his plants are being looked after now. This perhaps gave Isabelle de Charrière the idea of these symbolic shrubs.

³⁵ *L.L.*, 167.

³⁶ *L.L.*, 155.

³⁷ *L.L.*, 137.

³⁸ *L.L.*, 137-8.

³⁹ *L.L.*, 140.

⁴⁰ *L.L.*, 140.

⁴¹ *L.L.*, 142.

⁴² *L.L.*, 144-5.

⁴³ *L.L.*, 155.

⁴⁴ *L.L.*, 155.

⁴⁵ *L.L.*, 166.

⁴⁶ *L.L.*, 166.

⁴⁷ *L.L.*, 176. To a certain extent the ritualistic effect of tragedy is achieved by the use of such prophetic verbal leitmotifs as this and "il est trop tard". As well as unifying the story, such recurrent phrases underline William's rather disturbing tendency to take as *prophetic* phrases that Caliste may have meant only to be *persuasive*. There is a somewhat unseemly haste in the way he takes up her refrain to excuse his delayed recognition of his errors. It is almost as though he wishes to place some of the responsibility for his behaviour on her fatalism when he takes up the "trop tard" she uttered no doubt in hope at their first meeting.

⁴⁸ The narrative increases the tragic sense of timeless inevitability – such is the narrator's intention perhaps - by referring us to *Bérénice* and in particular to the celebrated "Dans un mois, dans un an [...]" speech of Bérénice when Caliste says: "Que ferons-nous l'un sans l'autre? Dans une demi-heure je serai comme il y a un an, comme il y a six mois, comme ce matin: que ferai-je, si j'ai encore quelque temps à vivre? [...] Reprenons nos véritables liens." (*L.L.*, 203)

⁴⁹ Jean Giraudoux, *Œuvres littéraires diverses* (Paris, 1958), 602.

⁵⁰ *L.L.*, 203.

⁵¹ *L.L.*, 222.

⁵² *L.L.*, 221-2.