The Novels of Isabelle de Charriere (1740-1805)

by Dennis Wood

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Abbreviations used

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A.J.F.S.	*Australian Journal of French Studies*
Simone Balayé	*Les carnets de voyage de Madame de Staël. Contribution à la genèse de ses œuvres* (Geneva, 1971)
Dorette Berthoud	*Madame de Charrière et Isabelle de Gélieu*. Extrait des Actes de la Société jurassienne d'Emulation, Année 1971 (Imprimerie Roger Pfeuti, La Neuveville [1971])
B.V.N	Bibliothèque publique de la Ville de Neuchâtel (of manuscript material) [since 1983 Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Neuchâtel]
Constant	Benjamin Constant, *Œuvres*, ed. Alfred Roulin [and Charles Roth] (Paris, 1957)
Essai	*Frau von Staëls Essai sur les fictions (1795) mit Gœthes*

	Übersetzung (1796) herausgegeben von J. Imelmann (Berlin, 1896)
Godet	*Madame de Charrière et ses amis d'après de nombreux documents inédits (1740-1805)* (Geneva, 1906), 2 vols.
Honorine	*Honorine d'Userche, nouvelle de l'abbé de la Tour, suivie de trois dialogues* (Leipzig, 1798)
Le Noble	*Le Noble, conte moral* (Amsterdam, 1763)
Lettres à d'Hermenches	*Lettres de Belle de Zuylen (Madame de Charrière) à Constant d'Hermenches 1760-1775*, ed. Philippe Godet (Paris and Geneva, 1909)
L.L.	*Lettres écrites de Lausanne: Histoire de Cécile. Caliste*, avec une préface de Philippe Godet (Geneva, 1907)
L.N.	*Lettres neuchâteloises, Mistriss Henley, Le Noble*, avec une préface de Philippe Godet (Geneva, 1907)
M.L.R.	*Modern Language Review*
P.M.L.A.	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
Sainte-Anne	*Sainte-Anne et les Ruines de Yedburg* in *L'Abbé de la Tour ou Recueil de nouvelles et autres écrits divers*, tome III (Leipzig, 1799)
Suite	*Suite des Trois femmes* (B.V.N. Ms 1363)
T.F.	*Lettres neuchâteloises* suivi de *Trois femmes*, postface de Charly Guyot (Lausanne, 1971)

THE NOVELS OF ISABELLE DE CHARRIERE

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RETROSPECT (1998)

Over the years I have frequently been asked by *charriéristes* why I never published my 1975 Cambridge doctoral thesis, the original title of which was *The Novels of Madame de Charrière (1740-1805)*. My honest reply has always been 'because I've been too busy'. While I was still writing the thesis, I was invited to join the international team planning the *Œuvres complètes de Belle de Zuylen/ Isabelle de Charrière*[i], and my time was entirely taken up with that project between 1975 and 1982. Then, in 1983, I was invited to join another team preparing the *Œuvres* and *Correspondance générale* of Isabelle de Charrière's friend Benjamin Constant, a project to which I am fully committed for the foreseeable future[ii]. It has long been clear to me that I am unlikely to have the leisure needed to update my thesis this side of retirement!

It may be an opportune moment to recall the circumstances in which the dissertation was written. I began work in autumn 1969 at the suggestion of the great Rousseau scholar Dr (later Professor) R. A. Leigh of Trinity College, Cambridge, whose enthusiasm for Isabelle de Charrière's novels had ensured that a plaque was put up on the wall of her house, Le Pontet at Colombier, near Neuchâtel in Switzerland commemorating her life there. Ralph Leigh's incomparable wit and erudition sustained me during my years of research. In Neuchâtel Professor Charly Guyot generously made available to me his transcriptions of hitherto unpublished letters by Isabelle de Charrière which I refer to in the text. The thesis was examined by two more formidable scholars, Vivienne Mylne and Alison Fairlie, and awarded a doctorate in 1975. It is particularly poignant that not one of these colleagues and friends is alive today.

The thesis reflected reasonably accurately, I think, the state of scholarship and opinion in the mid-1970s. Already a fair amount of valuable new work had been done on Isabelle the Charrière during the preceding decade – I am thinking in particular of the research of Simone and Pierre Dubois and of a remarkable essay by Jean Starobinski. But what was still lacking was a reliable edition of all her work. Thanks to the unstinting support of Geert van Oorschot, a distinguished academic publisher in Amsterdam, and to the generosity of the Dutch and Swiss governments, our team of editors was able to produce ten scholarly volumes between 1979 and 1983, fortunately in time for Geert van Oorschot to see the project completed before his death. I recall several agreeable summers during the 1970s spent in the Bibliothèque publique de la Ville de Neuchâtel (since 1983 the Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Neuchâtel) working on Isabelle de Charrière's manuscripts and early editions of her works (aided by the erudite *dix-huitiémiste* librarian Jacques Rychner and his colleagues), and staying at Miremont, a château near Bevaix belonging to the late Thérèse de Chambrier, a descendent of Isabelle de Charrière's friend Chambrier d'Oleyres.

Since the completion of the *Œuvres complètes* there has been an enormous increase in the amount of research into Isabelle de Charrière's life and work, as will be immediately apparent from a glance at René Rancœur's or Otto Klapp's annual cumulative bibliographies. Not only is there a lively annual bulletin, the *Lettre de Zuylen et du Pontet* (1976-), there are also associations devoted to the study of *la Dame du Pontet* in France, Switzerland and Holland, and a major international conference on her work took place at the University of

Neuchâtel in 1993, the Proceedings of which appeared in 1994.[iii] She has recently had biographies devoted to her in three languages, by Simone and Pierre H. Dubois in Dutch (1993), by Raymond Trousson in French (1993) and by my fellow Constant editor Cecil Courtney in English (1994).[iv] Cecil Courtney has also produced two essential bibliographies of primary and secondary Charrière material.[v] American feminist critics have worked on her fiction in recent years, notably Kathleen M. Jaeger and Jenene J. Allison,[vi] and Isabelle de Charrière has that most modern of accolades, a Website[vii] devoted exclusively to her at http://www.etcl.nl/charriere/

Opmerking [GPU1]:

Looking back over nearly a quarter of a century, what would I now change in my thesis? Most obviously, all references would henceforward be to our edition of the *Œuvres complètes*, the text of which is reliable[viii]. (Nevertheless Philippe Godet's and Charly Guyot's editions of the novels still contain useful things in their introductions.) I would now lay emphasis on Isabelle de Charrière's literary collaboration with the young Benjamin Constant, a fact which emerged I was editing Volumes VIII and IX of the edition, the *Romans, contes et nouvelles*. Not only is it clear to me that the two writers worked together on the *Lettres de d'Arsillé fils*, but also on a *Suite* to the *Lettres trouvées dans des porte-feuilles d'émigrés*[ix]. Although I do not see Isabelle de Charrière as anything like a feminist writer in the modern connotation of the word, especially as understood in Britain or America, I would acknowledge the value of insights contained in the several books and articles to have been published recently on her from a feminist viewpoint.[x]

This said - and of course making due allowance for what others and I myself have published subsequently in the field[xi] – I remain broadly in agreement with what I wrote twenty-three years ago, though I would undoubtedly express myself differently today. I am publishing the dissertation now electronically, and in a revised form, as a book in the hope that it may be of use to present-day scholars and critics. The revisions I have made are stylistic and (very occasionally) factual: I have not attempted a fundamental updating of the 1975 text, and I would urge those wishing to explore particular areas further to consult the more recent books and articles listed in my endnotes here. My thesis has already been referred in the recent past to by Charrière commentators, some of whom have been able to consult a photocopy which I allowed the BPU in Neuchâtel to make years ago. It seems only fair therefore that those who are unable to visit Cambridge University Library or the Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Neuchâtel should henceforth be able to consult it as a book on the Internet. All I ask is that acknowledgement be made of anything in the book that is used in future publications. The copyright rests with me.

[1] Isabelle de Charrière/Belle de Zuylen, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Jean-Daniel Candaux, C.P. Courtney, Pierre H. Dubois, Simone Dubois-De Bruyn, Patrice Thompson, Jeroom Vercruysse et Dennis Wood, Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1979-1984, 10 volumes. There are still plans for a final *Supplément*. Jean-Daniel Candaux has published a convenient one-volume edition of the Isabelle de Charrière-Benjamin Constant correspondence in modernized spelling, *Correspondance (1787-1805)*, Paris: Desjonquères (coll. 'XVIIIe siècle'), 1996. There are now several studies of the correspondence corpus, most recently Paul Pelckmans, *Isabelle de Charrière: une correspondance au seuil du monde moderne*, Amsterdam: Rodopi (coll. 'Faux Titre', 95), 1995.

[1] At the initiative of the late Pierre Cordey an Editorial Board was set up in 1980, and under the chairmanship of Professor Paul Delbouille that Board signed a contract with Max Niemeyer Verlag of Tübingen in 1988. By

March 1998 six volumes had appeared, four of the *Œuvres* series and two of the *Correspondance*. The *Correspondance* volumes complement and in some areas supercede the edition of the Isabelle de Charrière-Benjamin Constant letters in the Van Oorschot Charrière *Œuvres* (see note 1 above). These are Benjamin Constant, *Correspondance générale I (1774-1792)* ed. C.P. Courtney and Dennis Wood (with the collaboration of Peter Rickard for the linguistic notes), 1993 and *Correspondance générale II (1793-1794)*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1997.

[1] *Une Européenne: Isabelle de Charrière en son siècle*, ed. Doris Jakubec and Jean-Daniel Candaux, Neuchâtel: Attinger, 1994. Isabelle de Charrière's place in the history of the French novel now seems reasonably secure. Her work is discussed, for example, in Michel Delon and Pierre Malandain's *Littérature française du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris: PUF (coll. 'Premier cycle'), 1996, and by Raymond Trousson in his important anthology *Romans de femmes du XVIIIe siècl*e, Paris: Laffont, 1996, which includes the complete texts of *Lettres neuchâteloises*, *Lettres de Mistriss Henley* and *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*.

[1] P.H. and S. Dubois, *Zonder vaandel. Belle de Zuylen. Een biografie*, Amsterdam, Van Oorschot, 1993; Raymond Trousson, *Isabelle de Charrière. Un destin de femme au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris: Hachette, 1994; C.P. Courtney, *Isabelle de Charrière (Belle de Zuylen). A Biography*, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1993. Among studies of Isabelle de Charrière's contemporaries there is now Sabine Dorothea Jordan, *Ludwig Ferdinand Huber (1764-1804): his life and works*, Stuttgart: Akademische Verlag H.-D. Heinz (Stuttgarter Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 57), 1978.

[1] C.P. Courtney, *A Preliminary Bibliography of Isabelle de Charrière (Belle de Zuylen)*, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, (*Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century*, 186), 1980; *Isabelle de Charrière (Belle de Zuylen): A Secondary Bibliography*, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation; Paris: Jean Touzot, 1982.

[1] Kathleen M. Jaeger, *Male and Female Roles in the Eighteenth Century: the Challenge to Replacement and Displacement in the Novels of Isabelle de Charrière*, New York: Peter Lang, 1994, and Jenene J. Allison, *Revealing Difference. The Fiction of Isabelle de Charrière*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995.

[1] A useful list of books and articles relating to Isabelle de Charrière can be found at this site.

[1] See note 1 above.

[1] See Dennis Wood, 'Isabelle de Charrière et Benjamin Constant: à propos d'une découverte récente', *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation), Vol. 215, 1982, pp. 273-279; 'Isabelle de Charrière et Benjamin Constant: problématique d'une collaboration', *Annales Benjamin Constant 4*, 1984, pp. 17-30; and *Benjamin Constant. A Biography*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993. My edition of *Ma vie* (*Le Cahier rouge*) in Benjamin Constant, *Œuvres III. Ecrits littéraires (1800-1813)*, ed. Paul Delbouille and Martine de Rougemont, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1995, contains a good deal of information about the early period of Constant's friendship with Isabelle de Charrière. C.P. Courtney's edition of the same Constant text (Cambridge: Dæmon, 1991) looks again at the question of Isabelle de Charrière's alleged affair with a M. de Saussure and concludes that the most likely candidate as lover is in fact one Charles Dapples (1758-1842). He also discusses the matter in his biography (see above, note 4, pp. 484-486), and is agreement with the Dubois' conclusion on the matter in their Dutch biography (p. 806, n. 33).

[1] I am thinking in particular of Béatrice Didier's chapter on Isabelle de Charrière in *L'Ecriture-femme*, Paris: PUF (coll. 'Ecriture'), 1981, pp. 93-110, and of Mona Ozouf's perceptive essay in *Les Mots des femmes. Essai sur la singularité française*, Paris: Fayard (coll. 'L'Esprit de la cité'), 1995, pp. 53-83.

[1] Particularly worthy of note are Alix Deguise's *Trois femmes. Le monde de Madame de Charrière*, Paris and Geneva: Slatkine, 1981, and Sigyn Minier's *Madame de Charrière. Les premiers romans*, Paris and Geneva: Slatkine, 1987. *Isabelle de Charrière (Belle de Zuylen): De la correspondance au roman épistolaire.* Etudes réunies par Yvette Went-Daoust (*CRIN*, 29), Amsterdam-Atlanta, Ga: Rodopi, 1995 maintains a high standard standard of critical comment and erudition. Two recent articles of my own, 'Isabelle de Charrière,ou la difficulté de conclure' and 'La Ville dans l'œuvre d'Isabelle de Charrière' will be published by the Université de Franche-Comté, Besançon during 1999.

Chapter I

Introduction

Habent sua fata libelli: it is one of the vicissitudes of literary history that the work of Isabelle de Charrière should have been virtually forgotten by both the reading public and literary critics for long periods of the past two hundred years. It could not be said that in her own day Isabelle de Charrière's novels and stories went without acclaim. On the contrary, Benjamin Constant and Germaine de Staël greatly admired her fiction and were influenced by it. However, by that period of the nineteenth century when Sainte-Beuve[1] and E.-H. Gaullieur[2] were beginning their research into her life, Madame de Charrière's name was all but forgotten, so much so that Sainte-Beuve could actually include her in a series of studies of women writers who, he thought, had captured the atmosphere of a now distant age. For Philippe Godet, too, writing his magisterial biography of Isabelle de Charrière[3] half a century after Sainte-Beuve, she was a figure in Swiss cultural history whom he hoped to restore to her proper place after a hundred years of neglect.

Godet's efforts, like those of Sainte-Beuve in his useful essay[4], have largely been in vain, though from time to time individual works by Isabelle de Charrière have been reprinted during our own century. At the opening of this study, therefore, some serious questions must be raised: what is the nature of Madame de Charrière's distinction, and why has her work been neglected for so long?

To the first question one answer would be that Isabelle de Charrière's strength lies in detailed psychological analysis and in a sensitive and sympathetic understanding of human behaviour. This analysis is limited in both range and social context. None of Isabelle de Charrière's novels is longer than what is generally considered the length of a *nouvelle*, yet within this small compass her psychological observation is acute and penetrating. Within the limited material used, there is a patient working-out of detail and, in *Histoire de Cécile* and in *Lettres neuchâteloises*, a clearly defined local community is taken as the framework for her exploration. While Isabelle de Charrière's writing is of a somewhat different character from Constant's style in *Adolphe* - it perhaps lacks something in *intensity* of thought and expression - it does succeed, nonetheless, in combining conciseness and seriousness of observation with a notable lightness of touch.

Now this consideration brings us to at least a partial answer to our second question, the reason why Isabelle de Charrière's achievement should have fallen into near-oblivion. From our standpoint in the twentieth century (in 1975 that is), she has been overshadowed. In her

most famous work, *Caliste*, she appears to stand at the beginning of a genre which came of age in the nineteenth century. Constant, Fromentin and others lie between us and Isabelle de Charrière's novel, even though we may know that a form of "confessional novel" had been developed and taken quite far by such eighteenth-century novelists as Prévost and Madame Riccoboni. Madame de Charrière has been viewed as a minor precursor and her place in the tradition of the eighteenth century has not been considered. More important, the particular qualities of her work have not been sufficiently investigated.

I suggested earlier that during much of this century Godet's labours have appeared largely in vain. Happily, recent encouraging signs seem to indicate that this may soon be changed. Several writers have lately focussed attention on Isabelle de Charrière as a novelist in her own right, and although not all critical commentary has been of equal quality, it would appear that the reading public may once again be in a position to enjoy Madame de Charrière's work and to make a more informed judgement of it[5]. Anticipating the present revival of interest in Isabelle de Charrière, there appeared in 1938 a German work by Dr Charlotte Kimstedt[6] which surveyed the writer's attitudes to education, politics, philosophy and aesthetics. However, this study, which was based to a very large extent on Godet's biography, often adopted the somewhat perilous procedure of quoting the words of the novelist's characters and taking them, without further qualification, as Isabelle de Charrière's own view on a given subject. This is the gravest defect in Dr Kimstedt's work, for her book is largely made up of quotations from novels and stories when, of course, she would have been on surer ground with Isabelle de Charrière's literary essays, pamphlets, and corpus of correspondence[7].

More recently a briefer but perhaps more useful study of Isabelle de Charrière's mind has been written by Professor S. Dresden. The article draws an interesting parallel between the self-awareness of Belle de Zuylen (as Madame de Charrière then was) as demonstrated in her correspondence with Constant d'Hermenches, and Benjamin Constant's so-called *dédoublement*:

Ce qu'ils ont vraiment en commun, c'est, je crois, cette nécessité intérieure de se détacher de la vie et même de leur vie. Chez tous les deux il existe ou il avait existé cette conscience, ce regard, qui reflète la totalité de leur vie et qui ne sait ni ne veut intervenir. C'est une conscience-miroir qui les rend admirablement lucides mais ne saurait les guider. C'est pourquoi d'ailleurs les deux sont si sensibles à ce qu'il y a d'absurde dans la vie.[8]

This self-scrutinizing lucidity is seen not only in Belle de Zuylen's letters to Constant d'Hermenches and later to James Boswell, but also in several characters in the novels she was later to write. Professor Dresden does not pursue the parallel, although he could have mentioned Henri Meyer in *Lettres neuchâteloises* or Cécile and her mother in *Lettres écrites de Lausanne* as fictional characters similarly able to analyse themselves but unwilling or unable on occasion to act in a positive way. Nevertheless, Professor Dresden was the first modern critic to have written an original piece on Isabelle de Charrière's mode of thought without being over-reliant on Godet's biography.

If one can judge by the number of books and articles that appeared between 1961 and 1975, interest in Madame de Charrière seems to have increased noticeably in the academic world. Two full-length biographical and psychological studies have been published, both of which, however, while offering occasional useful insights, do little to enlarge our understanding of Isabelle de Charrière the writer. Neither offers the reader original scholarship or convincing literary criticism in any appreciable measure. The first, a chronological study of Madame de

Charrière's career by Professor Giovanni Riccioli[9], has a disconcertingly diffuse style and a general tendency towards the use of blanket terms like *femminismo* and *spregiudicatezza* which are unhelpful. Excessive amounts of quotation and paraphrase take the place of real literary analysis. Nevertheless Professor Riccioli does have some valuable points to make on *Le Noble*, Isabelle de Charrière's early satirical tale, on the ironic social critique it embodies, and on its anticipation of the social obstacles which were later to be seen in *Caliste*. The second of these studies of Isabelle de Charrière was a thesis entitled *Madame de Charrière. Essai d'un itinéraire spirituel* by Dr Rolf Winiker[10] which adopts an altogether different approach from that of Professor Riccioli. Dr Winiker deliberately sets out, in the manner of Georges Poulet, to trace Madame de Charrière's spiritual development, and believes that:

La deuxième époque de sa vie apparaît de loin comme la moins intéressante et la moins importante.[11.]

Now although Isabelle de Charrière's formative years in Holland are vitally important for our understanding of her mind and personality, I believe that there are dangers in neglecting, as Dr Winiker does, the valuable evidence contained in the unpublished correspondence of her mature years. Dr Winiker as a spiritual biographer, like Dr Kimstedt before him, does not draw upon this evidence, but rather tends to confuse characters from Isabelle de Charrière's stories and details from the author's life so as to produce a schematic and perhaps untrustworthy portrait of Madame de Charrière. He goes no further than Godet towards examining her interests or skill as a novelist.

Before coming to the most important piece of academic research yet to appear on Isabelle de Charrière, that of Dr Christabel Braunrot, I should like to mention a most penetrating critical essay on *Lettres écrites de Lausanne* written by Professor Jean Starobinski and published in 1970[12]. It is a work of close analysis, and although Professor Starobinski in my opinion exaggerates some points - the degree of "dépendance" in Cécile's mother or William's possible homosexuality - his critical approach is refreshingly new and invigorating in a field which has seen too little critical intelligence.

Dr Christabel Braunrot's doctoral thesis, *Madame de Charrière and the Eighteenth-Century Novel: Experiments in Epistolary Techniques*[13] which in terms of scale is the most significant work yet to appear on Madame de Charrière's art, sets out to examine the technical details of the novelist's use of the letter form. Although the dissertation is clearly not intended to be a full critical study of the novels, Dr Braunrot does make several useful observations in passing, particularly on the "Swissness" of Isabelle de Charrière's work which may not have appealed to Parisian readers, and on underlying themes of misunderstanding and incompatibility between men and women. While she perhaps overstates the innovatory side of Madame de Charrière's handling of the epistolary form[14], Dr Braunrot's descriptions of the technical qualities of the novels are indeed valuable[15]. Where I would take issue with Dr Braunrot is in her dismissive attitude towards biographers and in her underestimation of the emotional life of Isabelle de Charrière as a possible stimulus to creative literary writing[16]. This second tendency leads Dr Braunrot to search for literary sources, particularly foreign ones - a reading of *Clarissa* or a performance of Rowe's *The Fair Penitent* - and to build fragile hypotheses on these, where the evidence we already have, both of Madame de Charrière's life and of the influence of French literature on her, is more convincing. Finally, I believe that it can be fairly said that Dr Braunrot's study leaves virtually untouched the essential task facing the reader of Isabelle de Charrière's novels, as of any novel. This is, of course, the task of discovering *to what end* techniques are being employed, although Dr

Braunrot clearly realizes that techniques are not simply ends in themselves and that Madame de Charrière is no mere formalist.

I hope it will be apparent from this brief survey of recent research that relatively little literary criticism has been written on Isabelle de Charrière's fiction. In the present thesis I hope to make some contribution towards a critical consideration of her work. Criticism which leaves out of account biographical or historical material relevant to a writer's creativity is liable to err seriously in its judgements. I therefore intend in this study to keep such material constantly in view. But I also believe that there is much to be gained from a careful analysis of individual novels and stories, an analysis in which the text remains the centre of attention. As a good deal of Madame de Charrière's work has not yet been published, my investigation must be limited to material which appears the richest and the most representative of her concerns and of her technique at its best. It will be apparent that my own critical approach is broadly that of English criticism since I. A. Richards: I intend to impose no *a priori* patterns on the texts, but to offer a commentary on the various aesthetic experiences which they offer. Lack of space will necessarily exclude many matters of interest from this thesis. Isabelle de Charrière's biography, her essays and pamphlets, her relationships with various literary figures, notably Benjamin Constant and Germaine de Staël, questions such as these will be touched upon only where they directly concern my area of investigation. Although I shall try, for example, to suggest certain parallels between *Caliste* and *Adolphe*, I shall generally confine myself to the elucidation of Isabelle de Charrière's own fiction. In these other related fields there remains a vast amount of ground to be explored at a later date.

The problem of value-judgements is a difficult one. Writing on Madame de Charrière, Professor Alison Fairlie has spoken of the "quicksilver quality of an exceptional character" and of "the wit and experimentation in techniques which give penetration and subtlety to her writings"[17]. Underlying my own study is a belief that Isabelle de Charrière is a minor but genuine artist whose fiction has an intrinsic interest as well as an interest as being typical or untypical of a particular tradition or period. Though her range of expression is limited, her fiction often shows a fineness of perception fully worthy of investigation and recognition.

In the pages which follow I shall attempt to suggest what characterizes Isabelle de Charrière's concerns and her approach to the novel, and to indicate her position with regard to other minor novelists writing before and in the same period as herself.

[1] Sainte-Beuve, *Portraits de Femmes* (Paris, [1869]), 411-457.

[2] E.-H. Gaullieur, *Etudes sur l'histoire littéraire de la Suisse française particulièrement dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1856).

[3] Philippe Godet, *Madame de Charrière et ses amis d'après de nombreux documents inédits (1740-1805)* (Geneva, 1906), 2 vols, hereafter referred to as 'Godet', followed by volume and page number. Frequent reference will, of course, be made to this work. Many of the documents on which it is based are no longer accessible or have disappeared, which renders the study especially valuable. However, although Godet's book is generally reliable on the Swiss period of the author's life, it is in some respects now defective with regard to

Madame de Charrière's years in Holland and continuing Dutch connections, as Simone Dubois's recent discoveries have shown.

[4] See note 1.

[5] An edition of the *Œuvres complètes d'Isabelle de Charrière/Belle de Zuylen* is being planned with the collaboration of Madame Simone Dubois, Monsieur Jean-Daniel Candaux, Prof. Jeroom Vercruysse, Dr. C. P. Courtney and myself.

[6] *Frau von Charrière: ihre Gedankenwelt und ihre Beziehungen zur französischen und deutschen Literatur, Romanische Studien*, Heft 48 (Berlin, 1938). In limiting myself here to more substantial or professedly scholarly works, I do not wish thereby to minimize the value of such a readable and highly graphic biography as, for example, Geoffrey Scott's *The Portrait of Zélide* (London, 1925).

[7] Similar faults of method are to be found in an earlier and, to my mind, inferior piece of work, characterized by a certain superficiality, Robert Reinhäckel's *Madame de Charrière und ihre Stellung zur Frage der sozialen Lage der Frau*, Leipzig thesis, 1906.

[8] S. Dresden, 'Madame de Charrière et le goût du témoin', *Neophilologus*, XXXXV (1961), 274-5.

[9] *'L'Esprit' di Madame de Charrière,* Bari, 1967.

[10] Lausanne, 1971

[11] Winiker, op. cit., 14.

[12] '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. This is a modified version of an introductory essay to the Rencontre edition (Lausanne, 1970) of the novel. The most recent article to appear on *Caliste*, Janine Rossard, 'Le Désir de mort romantique dans *Caliste*", *PMLA*, 87 (1972), 492-498, is to my mind an unsatisfactory interpretation. One has the impression that Madame Rossard has found a label sometimes used in literary history and is anxious at all costs to attach it to a book. As I hope to suggest in my chapter on *Caliste*, that novel is too complex to admit of ready-made classifications. Further, Madame Rossard begs the whole question of whether Madame de Charrière is related to Romanticism, to an older tradition or whether she may stand apart from such categories.

[13] Yale, 1973, unpublished dissertation (University Microfilms).

[14] It is surely excessive to see Isabelle de Charrière by virtue of her techniques as 'une des toutes premières en date des modernes' (op. cit., 156) and to suggest that in *Mistriss Henley* Isabelle de Charrière anticipates the *Nouveau Roman* and has 'come astonishingly close to one of the more sophisticated of twentieth-century stream-of-consciousness techniques' (op. cit., 86).

[15] She is, however, unaware of the work of Dr Vivienne Mylne and others in this field, and relies on an article by François Jost.

[16] Dr Braunrot is, for example, unaware of the work of Madame Simone Dubois.

[17] Alison Fairlie, review of Dr Winiker's book in *French Studies*, 28 (1974), 203.

Chapter II - Isabelle de Charrière: Her career and preoccupations as a novelist

The Novels of Isabelle de Charriere

by

Dennis Wood

Isabella Agneta Elisabeth van Tuyll van Serooskerken, generally known to literary historians as Belle de Zuylen or Belle van Zuylen, was born on 20 October 1740 and received a private education at the family seat, Slot Zuylen, near Utrecht[1]. From her earliest years she spoke and wrote French with great facility and was familiar with the works of the best French authors. She was an impulsive girl with a mind of her own, and was critical of the humdrum world of the Dutch provincial aristocracy which was epitomized in the personality of her father, Baron van Tuyll van Serooskerken, a thoroughly respectable man, but dour and rather stern. In later years Belle de Zuylen inevitably came into conflict with the rigid system of beliefs of this formidable figure. We are fortunate in possessing a written self-portrait by Belle which dates from her formative years and which gives us an impression of the unusual and highly intelligent personality that was imprisoned in such spiritually deadening surroundings:

Compatissante par tempérament, libérale et généreuse par penchant, Zélide n'est bonne que par principe; quand elle est douce et facile, sachez-lui en gré, c'est un effort. Quand elle est longtemps civile et polie avec des gens dont elle ne se soucie pas, redoublez d'estime, c'est un martyre. Naturellement vaine, sa vanité est sans bornes: la connaissance et le mépris des hommes lui en eurent bientôt donné [...]

Tendre à l'excès, et non moins délicate, elle ne peut être heureuse ni par l'amour, ni sans amour. L'amitié n'eut jamais un Temple plus saint, plus digne d'elle, que Zélide. Se voyant trop sensible pour être heureuse, elle a presque cessé de prétendre au bonheur, elle s'attache à la vertu, elle fuit le repentir, et cherche les amusements. Les plaisirs sont rares pour elle, mais ils sont vifs, elle les saisit et les goûte avec ardeur. Connaissant la vanité des projets et l'incertitude de l'avenir, elle veut surtout rendre heureux le moment qui s'écoule.

Ne le devinez-vous pas? Zélide est un peu voluptueuse; son imagination sait être riante même quand son cœur est affligé. Des sensations trop vives et trop fortes pour sa machine, une activité excessive qui manque d'objet satisfaisant, voilà la source de tous ses maux. Avec des organes moins sensibles, Zélide eût eu l'âme d'un grand homme; avec moins d'esprit et de raison, elle n'eût été qu'une femme très faible[2].

We can already glimpse at this stage the compulsive talker and arguer, the woman of penetrating intelligence, the reckless, unconventional and rebellious daughter. We can also perhaps sense that when Belle turned to fiction later in life, her novels would reveal a similar civilized inquisitiveness about motives and behaviour to that seen above.

It is easy to imagine the degree of frustration which led Belle de Zuylen to write her first published work, *Le Noble, conte moral*[3], a lively satirical tale. She had a spontaneity and unpredictability of temperament which was stifled by the *bienséances* of aristocratic society.

She was sceptical about the importance one should attach to pride of birth, and yet her father never tired of recalling his illustrious forbears. Belle ceaselessly questioned all received ideas, all abstract systems that might limit human happiness or prevent people from being considerate in their dealings with one another. Her father, on the other hand, was the embodiment of an established order or religious, political and social belief that was seldom openly questioned. The Baron also represented, in a more immediate way, the perpetual domination of the female by the male. As head of the family his word was final, and a girl like Belle could not but resent this at times. Of course, there were more fine shades to the situation than such a brief sketch can indicate - the Baron was generally disposed to be tolerant towards his daughter's whims, he could be thoughtul and understanding, and for her part Belle loved and respected him. Nevertheless, *Le Noble* delights in underlining the absurdity of such a rigid outlook on life as that of Baron van Tuyll van Serooskerken. The tale is spiced with a wit very akin to that of Marivaux, particularly in its portrayal of the feelings of the young heroine, a wit sometimes of a knowing, tongue-in-cheek quality.

There are four main figures in the *conte*: Baron d'Arnonville, the personification of genealogical pride and dull inflexibility; his daughter Julie, witty, intelligent and headstrong; her proud conventional brother; and Valaincourt, Julie's suitor, a nobleman but one of relatively recent date. The plot is simple. Valaincourt wants Julie's hand in marriage, and Julie lies to her father about Valaincourt's ancestry. When the Baron learns of her deception and of Valaincourt's lack of quarterings, he confines Julie to her room. Julie, however, contrives to escape, and elopes with Valaincourt. In the meantime, her brother announces his intention of making an advantageous match with a deformed noblewoman. So delighted is Julie's father at this news that during the celebrations he forgives Valaincourt and his daughter, who have returned to throw themselves at his feet at such an opportune moment.

It is possible to approach the *conte* from several different points of view. First, we could consider it as a therapeutic *déversoir à passion*, a release for those tensions in Belle's life which I mentioned earlier. The parallels with her own situation are striking. Second, as Professor Riccioli has suggested[4], we could consider how the story outlines the theme of the social obstacles barring the way to love, a theme which re-appears *in* the *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*. The story seems representative of the impatience of a progressive mind with social prejudice between *noblesse de robe* and *noblesse d'épée* in France, and doubtless Belle had found comparable prejudice in her native Holland. Various aspects of the story might allow it to be read as a social document of the period: the Baron's stupidity in preferring his daughter to play with a dull, ugly aristocratic girl rather than with one who is lively and attractive but from the middle class; Julie's awareness that she has not the freedom of her maid to be happy; and her brother's pleasure at beating a *parvenu* at gambling. There is, too, along with the narrator's ridicule of such attitudes as those of Baron d'Arnonville and his son, an obvious appreciation of the worth of an ennobled bourgeois family as represented by Valaincourt and his mother. In 1762, however, such a social critique was chiefly remarkable for the fact that it was the daughter of a very old Dutch noble house who had thus caricatured her class. The reaction of Belle's family was unequivocal. Steps were taken to withdraw the story from circulation.

However, beyond the biographical and historical interest of *Le Noble*, the story has an intrinsic literary merit. It reveals not only the author's intelligence but also a quality of humour which almost entirely disappeared from Isabelle de Charrière's later fiction, although it continued to flow in her letters. The style of *Le Noble* is easy, conversational, but also pithy, and indeed style and technique together constitute the source of the reader's pleasure.

We sense how the story will turn out, from its mock fairy-tale beginning to its parody of a fairy-tale ending, but it is the narrator's tone and expression which matter most. An understanding is quickly established between reader and narrator which allows for irony even at moments of seriousness, and which, of course, is close to that of Voltaire. In a sentence like this:

Le Baron d'Arnonville étoit très-sensible au mérite de cette ancienneté, & il avoit raison, car il n'avoit pas beaucoup d'autres mérites [...][5]

we recognize the effect of shock and surprise, the sudden release of laughter as not altogether remote from the philosophe. There is too, in Belle's handling of sentences, an effect of balance which can produce a wry smile:

Content du nom d'Arnonville, & de la connoissance de l'arbre généalogique de sa maison il se passoit de talens, & de science.[6]

comme sa figure n'avoit besoin ni de beaucoup d'art, ni de beaucoup de magnificence, on la trouvoit toujours bien parée.[7]

Julie ne vouloit point avoir trop d'esprit, & voilà pourquoi ce qu'elle en avoit plaisoit davantage.[8]

The other tones which the narrator employs to sustain a mood of comedy range from the mock-heroic:

L'Amant désespéré s'éloigna en maudissant son sort, & la noblesse.[9]

to the coyly suggestive:

Je ne sais ce qu'elle sentit, & pensa encore; mais par bonheur le Jeune homme pensoit aux mêmes choses de son côté.[10]

References too to the decrepitude and dilapidation of the Baron's château underline the incongruity between the aristocrat's feudal pretensions and his diminished fortune. This central incongruity is sustained by the manipulation of dialogue in the conte, dialogue in which Valaincourt is subjected to the recurrent deafness of the Baron to all that is not pride of ancestry or related subjects:

J'ai pris, Monsieur, la liberté de venir voir Mademoiselle votre Fille avec qui mon bonheur m'a fait faire connoissance – N'aviés-vous jamais vu mon Château? - Non, Monsieur, je n'avois jamais eu de prétexte pour oser venir vous rendre mes devoirs. Il mérite bien qu'on le voie, dit le vieux Seigneur [...][11]

The Baron is as much of a puppet as Pangloss, and his reactions are of the same order as Monsieur Orgon's "Et Tartuffe?". Dialogue - and a large proportion of the conte consists of dialogue - is used with a dramatist's liveliness of touch.

However, besides technical features like these, the narrator shows particular delicacy and perception in her portrayal of the relationship developing between Julie and Valaincourt, and the intelligence and wit displayed by the narrator remind the reader of Marivaux's comedies.

This is seen particularly in her picture of the gradual consolidation of a mutual affection which includes in it an interplay of self-interest on the part of the two lovers:

ils se plurent dès qu'ils se virent, & ils ne songerent d'abord ni à se le cacher. Peu à peu ils se le firent entendre, & ils se trouverent encore plus aimables quand ils surent qu'ils se plaisoient.[12]

The narrator, though amused and sympathetic, keeps at a distance from her characters as she offers insights into their behaviour:

si Valaincourt eût demandé un consentement, comme doutant de l'obtenir, peut-être Julie n'eût osé se rendre: mais Valaincourt éxigea, & Julie ne crut pas pouvoir désobeir.[13]

The same smile of complicity with the reader shows through in the description of the couple's growing physical attraction, though the narrator humorously draws back at the brink of more serious developments.[14]

The sustained understanding on which the *conte* rests - between a knowing, teasing narrator and the reader - is, then, the story's chief literary accomplishment. It raises *Le Noble, conte moral* from satire or the gently comic account of the trials of two star-crossed lovers[15] to the level of a minor *tour de force*. Later, in *Mistriss Henley*, Isabelle de Charrière was to sustain a kind of wit in a more serious context, one of potential pathos, and rather more obliquely. What carries over into her more mature work from this *conte* as far as its substance is concerned is its lifelike observation and moments of psychological insight into love relationships. We note also, to a limited degree, a characteristic interest in moral responsibility, in the consequences of moral decisions: grave results ensue from Julie's lies to her father.

Belle de Zuylen published *Le Noble* in 1762. Two years earlier had begun one of the most remarkable aspects of her life at Slot Zuylen, her friendship and clandestine correspondence[16] with a married man, Constant d'Hermenches, the Swiss aristocrat, friend of Voltaire, uncle of Benjamin Constant, and a well-known libertine. Characteristically, Belle de Zuylen had introduced herself to him at a ball in The Hague. Their correspondence is more extraordinary still for Belle's lucid self-awareness, daring to undertake almost a Clarissa-Lovelace relationship and to maintain it at the level of an intellectual friendship. Her frequent self-analysis offers us glimpses of her disconcerting honesty and astonishingly mature intelligence:

Vous avez donc vu combien je respecte la vertu et la raison, et vous n'avez pu voir à quel point je pourais les oublier; peut-être le soupçonnez-vous; ma physionomie parle, l'expérience éclaire votre pénétration. Mais cela ne suffit pas aujourd'hui, je veux être sûre que vous me connaissez. Je vous dois [...] cet abandon, cette sincérité sans réserve; peut-être mon langage ne sera pas celui de la décence, mais qu'est-ce que la décence au prix de la probité?

Eh bien donc, si j'aimais, si j'étais libre, il me serait bien difficile d'être sage. Mes sens sont comme mon cœur et mon esprit, avides de plaisirs, susceptibles des impressions les plus vives et les plus délicates. Pas un des objets qui se présentent à ma vue, pas un son ne passe sans m'apporter une sensation de plaisir ou de peine; la plus imperceptible odeur me flatte ou m'incommode; l'air que je respire, un peu plus doux, un peu plus fin, influe sur moi, avec

toutes les différences qu'il éprouve lui-même. Jugez du reste à présent, jugez de mes désirs et de mes dégoûts. Si je n'avais ni père ni mère, je serais Ninon peut-être, mais délicate et plus constante; je n'aurais pas tant d'amants; si le premier eût été aimable, je crois que je n'aurais point changé, et, en ce cas-là, je ne sais si j'aurai été fort coupable; j'aurais du moins pu racheter par des vertus l'offense que j'aurais faite à la société en secouant le joug d'une règle sagement établie. J'ai un père et une mère, je ne veux pas leur donner la mort ni empoisonner leur vie, je ne serais pas Ninon; je voudrais être la femme d'un honnête homme, femme fidèle et vertueuse; mais pour cela il faut que j'aime et que je sois aimée.[17]

There are many other striking examples in this correspondence of Belle's ceaseless efforts to reconcile the different emotional and moral demands on her. Such problems were to be explored in her later fiction.

At this same period of her life Belle de Zuylen became the friend and correspondent of James Boswell. Boswell was in Utrecht in 1763 and stayed until June 1764. Their letters reveal once again Belle's sharp, unorthodox mind which is set in relief by Boswell's concern at her unconventionality, which she expresses in such comments as this:

If I am much in love with my husband, and he with me, it is at least possible that I shall not fall in love with another; if we were but little in love, I would certainly love some one else. My spirit is formed to have strong feelings and will assuredly not escape its destiny.[18]

To this Boswell replied with a characteristically reproving letter. Indeed their relationship was curious, for they had utterly different outlooks and temperaments. Her pertness and frankness clearly fascinated Boswell, and his pomposity and stiffness greatly amused Belle. However, although they corresponded sporadically for several years, their friendship seems never to have been of the same intensity as Belle's friendship with Constant d'Hermenches, in spite of a proposal of marriage on Boswell's part which Belle rejected.

It will be evident, therefore, that Belle de Zuylen had an independent and, when the need arose, a courageous temperament. She was sceptical of all that smacked of cant or humbug, and this scepticism extended to the dogma of Calvinistic Christianity. All her life Belle was to remain an 'honest doubter', while retaining a certain respect for what is commonly called the Christian ethic. These many qualities made Belle irresistible as a friend and totally undesirable as a respectable, conventional wife. Indeed the strength of social convention was further impressed on Belle by the number of suitors for her hand who, for various reasons, were unsuccessful and gave up. Count Anhalt, the Marquis de Bellegarde (whose Catholicism proved unacceptable to Baron van Tuyll), Lord Wemyss, all were potential husbands who never obtained her hand. Her visit to England and her residence in London in 1767 also failed to produce a suitor ready to risk such a match. Years went by, and Belle de Zuylen's affection grew for her brothers' tutor, the quiet, reliable, methodical Charles-Emmanuel de Charrière, a member of the Swiss gentry. Monsieur de Charrière had a gaucheness and a simple honesty that attracted her sympathy. It was yet another example of her unusual and unpredictable character that she accepted such a husband and went with him to live in a quiet corner of Switzerland with his senile father and old-maid sisters.

Belle de Zuylen married on 17 February 1771 and settled at Monsieur de Charrière's *manoir* of Le Pontet at Colombier near Neuchâtel. On the first ten years of her marriage there was, until recently, little information available, but recent discoveries by Madame Simone Dubois have extended our knowledge of this period.[19] For Isabelle de Charrière maintained a

correspondence with her brother Vincent and his family, and this contains an account of her brief and inconclusive meeting with Voltaire at Ferney in the early summer of 1777. The most important feature of this first decade of her marriage was the consolidation of her relationship with Monsieur de Charrière as a working partnership rather than as a love-match. However, the great differences in temperament between them frequently caused tensions and misunderstanding. Monsieur de Charrière's sober, phlegmatic, conventional character would inflame her highly sceptical, critical, sometimes extravagant personality, rather as happens in *Mistriss Henley*. As a consequence, writing became a refuge and perhaps a kind of release for her, a way of expressing inner conflicts and the fluctuations in her emotional and intellectual life. Since ill-health confined her to Colombier for most of the time, Isabelle de Charrière read extensively in French and other European literatures, and through the journals kept herself informed of current events,[20] Then, probably in 1780 or 1781 during one of her visits to Geneva with her husband,[21] it appears that Madame de Charrière went through an emotional crisis that affected both her life and work for the next decade. She fell in love with a man who was unable to return her affection, a man whose identity is still uncertain.[22] The disillusionment and bitterness which she seems to have felt as a result were still with her when she wrote some of her finest stories, *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*, *Mistriss HenleyandLettres neuchâteloises*, although *Lettres neuchâteloises* seems less marked by her recent emotional sufferings than the other two works.

During the unsettled period after 1781, Isabelle de Charrière travelled more frequently, visiting Strasbourg to consult Cagliostro about her health, and taking up residence in Paris in 1787 with her husband.[23] It was during the few months she spent in Paris that Madame de Charrière met perhaps the most important person in her life, Benjamin Constant. In his *Cahier rouge* (*Ma vie*) Constant describes their subsequent friendship in these terms:

Elle était occupée à faire imprimer ce livre [*Caliste*] quand je fis connaissance avec elle. Son esprit m'enchanta. Nous passâmes des jours et des nuits à causer ensemble. Elle était très sévère dans ses jugements sur tous ceux qu'elle voyait. J'étais très moqueur de ma nature. Nous nous convînmes parfaitement. Mais nous nous trouvâmes bientôt l'un avec l'autre des rapports plus intimes et plus essentiels. Mme de Charrière avait une manière si originale et si animée de considérer la vie, un tel mépris pour les préjugés, tant de force dans ses pensées, et une supériorité si vigoureuse et si dédaigneuse sur le commun des hommes, que dans ma disposition, à vingt ans, bizarre et dédaigneux que j'étais aussi, sa conversation m'était une jouissance jusqu'alors inconnue. Je m'y livrai avec transport.[24]

Opinion remains divided on whether Benjamin Constant was at any point Isabelle de Charrière's lover. At the level of friendship, however, we know that Constant had an extraordinarily volatile and unstable personality and Madame de Charrière was a sympathetic listener who offered him the affection he had never received from his father. Constant, for his part, was able to offer Isabelle de Charrière the intelligence, wit and vitality which she had missed since Constant's uncle, Constant d'Hermenches had gone out of her life.[25] At last Madame de Charrière had a mind as keen as her own against which to try herself, and a friend with whom she could engage in endless discussion. And indeed on Constant's subsequent visits to Colombier and in their letters they would argue and debate, and Isabelle de Charrière herself would take pleasure in observing the quirks of Constant's behaviour. In fact the description of Madame de Charrière I quoted above from Constant's *Cahier rouge* could in many respects as well apply to Constant himself; a highly original and independent character whose experiences in England and Germany are related in his brilliant letters to Colombier.[26] Isabelle de Charrière may have unwittingly provoked Constant to be

extravagant in attitudes and behaviour, and in later years he perhaps realized this and resented it. Nonetheless, the impact of the two figures on each other was, at the time, immense. As far as Constant's influence on Madame de Charrière's work is concerned, its exact measure is difficult to gauge except in one important instance, Constant's interest in the ethics of Kant.[27] He also, of course, revived her intellectual sharpness. I shall examine Isabelle de Charrière's own influence on the author of *Adolphe* in my chapter on *Caliste*. However, Isabelle de Charrière and Constant shared a contempt for slack thinking and complacency, and their novels are enriched by their questioning, exploratory approach to human relationships.

Until 1794 Constant and Isabelle de Charrière remained close. Constant read and criticized Madame de Charrière's work, and they had an important friend in common, Ludwig Ferdinand Huber, Isabelle de Charrière's German translator who lived at Bôle near Colombier. However, at the end of 1794 Constant's admiration, affection and attachment to her were considerably lessened by his new relationship with Madame de Staël. Although Isabelle de Charrière and Constant corresponded until her death in 1805, albeit often on Constant's political activities, the intellectual and emotional bonds between them were practically severed, and a residue of resentment was left in Madame de Charrière's heart. It was towards the end of 1794 that Constant began to feel drawn towards the passionate, energetic personality of Germaine de Staël, and on 21 October 1794 he wrote the following rather tactless lines to Isabelle de Charrière:

depuis que je la connais mieux [Madame de Staël], je trouve une grande difficulté à ne pas me répandre sans cesse en éloges, & à ne pas me donner à tous ceux à qui je parle le spectacle de mon intérêt & de mon admiration.[28]

Germaine de Staël certainly had some of the same qualities as had first attracted Constant to Isabelle de Charrière - originality, independence and strength of mind - but over and above these a fire and a vital enthusiasm that completely enthralled him. She was roughly the same age as Constant, and by the side of Madame de Charrière's caution and reserved judgements she could offer refreshingly new possibilities of emotional, intellectual and cultural experience.

To fill the vacuum left by Constant's change of allegiance, Isabelle de Charrière cultivated new and less perilous friendships and, of course, had her books and her writing. She was fortunate in the return to Colombier of her young friend, Henriette L'Hardy, with whom she had corresponded since September 1791. At the end of 1795, Henriette returned from Prussia where she had been lady-in-waiting and companion to the Countess Dönhoff. During her absence she had regularly exchanged letters with Madame de Charrière on a wide range of subjects.[29] As well as Henriette L'Hardy, Isabelle de Charrière also had a growing friendship with another young woman, Isabelle de Gélieu. With Isabelle de Gélieu she could discuss her current reading, and her declining years were not without some small consolation for the loss of Constant's company.

It was during this later period of creativity that Isabelle de Charrière composed three stories that were to be included with *Trois femmes* in a collection first published in French at Leipzig in 1798-99. These were *Honorine d'Userche*, *Sainte-Anne* and *Les Ruines de Yedburg*. I shall be devoting a later chapter to *Trois Femmes*, and propose now to examine these minor stories, for they share with Isabelle de Charrière's more important works a characteristic concern with the responsibility of the individual towards others. In this they serve as an introduction to the world of her novels.

Honorine d'Userche is a somewhat melodramatic story based on the commonplace of the 'cri du sang', according to which people related to each other are drawn together even when ignorant of their kinship.[30] Its chief weakness, apart from its exploitation of the theme of near-incest between brother and sister (which is dwelt on at the close of the story), is that the quality of its thought is rather flimsy. For in Isabelle de Charrière's presentation of Monsieur de la Touche, a man who studiously eradicates all deistic belief on the part of the two children in his charge, the reader is uncertain whether she is seriously trying to say that atheists are immoral, or whether this is a frivolous atheist she is bringing before us. But, if we leave aside these weaknesses and uncertainties of direction, we can see a more important focus for the story in the character of Honorine herself.

Honorine and Florentin are the children of Madame d'Userche and her lover, the Marquis de la Touche, though only Honorine has the privilege of supposedly legitimate parentage. Ignorant of their blood relationship, the children are irresistibly drawn together and grow in affection for each other. By the age of seven, Honorine is an extremely precocious girl and intelligent enough to discern and exploit weaknesses in those around her in order to further her friendship with Florentin. She uses her knowledge of her maidservant's love affairs as a means of holding Thérèse to absolute secrecy about her own feelings for Florentin. Fear of losing her post makes Thérèse ready to assist Honorine in all her plans and to suffer Honorine's haughty and domineering attitude towards her:

Mademoiselle Thérèse, et le jeune, et même le vieux jardinier se voyaient forcés en esclaves de porter les lettres et de faire pour Florentin toutes les autres choses qu'Honorine exigeait.[31]

Such a disposition in Honorine is not simply the result of childish egotism. Her legal father, Monsieur d'Userche, in his desire not to shield his daughter from the harsher aspects of life or from human corruptibility, went too far and released the potentially anti-social elements in Honorine's character. Honorine by means of flattery induces her tutors to undertake Florentin's education, she deceives everyone, and conceals her long-term designs from Florentin himself, a far less perceptive individual. She deceives the Abbé-Narrator himself into thinking that she does not love Florentin, in order that she can be together with Florentin in the country. She extends her web of constraint by securing for Gaspard, Thérèse's lover, a position as Florentin's manservant. Gaspard is also secretly intended to ensure that his master does not become friendly with other women. Florentin remains ignorant of the extent to which his life is being run for him. He only realises much later. Honorine's mother is of such feeble intelligence that she never realises that her mental processes have been precisely catalogued by her daughter so that Honorine can guide her with a hidden hand as well.[32] The tragic irony of the story is that all Honorine's ruses isolate her psychologically from everyone but the man she loves, and this will make her bitterness yet greater at the close. For all this, Honorine's qualities of genuine warmth and vitality are not altogether obscured by her ruthlessness:

Je l'aime à tel point que tout ce que j'ai lu d'amour dans les poëtes et dans quelques romans, me parait froid en comparaison de ce que j'éprouve.[33]

Worries begin to build up on her horizon. The Marquis de la Touche unwittingly welcomes his own son into his house and destroys all religious belief in Florentin. In its place he leaves a doctrine of self-interest. Honorine begins to fear that Florentin will attempt to seduce her and then abandon her if he follows such principles. She becomes watchful and cautious, and even threatens suicide in order to exert additional pressure on Florentin. When at length they

learn that they are brother and sister, Honorine has become an atheist, addicted to a reasoned policy of self-interest which, ironically, she has pursued more or less unconsciously throughout the *nouvelle*. The deaths of Florentin and the Marquis leave her alone in the world, desperate and embittered. Her loss of religious belief adds poignancy to the story. The death of the loved one makes her ask whether Florentin has disappeared without trace forever, and her suffering, one feels, coincides convincingly with a form of human experience. It is a moving story, underlining the potentially self-defeating nature of blinkered self-assertion. Viewed technically, *Honorine d'Userche* can be classed with *Trois femmes*. It uses to great effect, however, an additional technique, that of combining short letters written by different characters with a linking narrative. By this Isabelle de Charrière succeeds in bringing to life the distinctly individualized voices of the naïve Florentin and of passionate Honorine with her deep-laid schemes. Like *Trois femmes*, too, the *nouvelle* examines the problems raised when people are used by others, for whatever motives. The other *nouvelles* in the Leipzig collection, *Sainte-Anne* and *Les Ruines de Yedburg* are also concerned with this problem, though with considerably less success.

Sainte-Anne deals with the question of putting principles before people, but is particularly concerned with that process of enriched awareness which ensues from the conflict between untested ideals and the demands of social convention. In its exploration the story is allowed wide scope for drawing on the conflicting and irreconcilable elements of reality. The particular set of theoretical principles in this story are held by a young aristocrat of intensely Rousseauistic leanings, Sainte-Anne, and social convention is represented by his formidable widowed mothers. Sainte-Anne, filled with bookish assumptions, falls in love with an illiterate peasant girl. Isabelle de Charrière takes care to allow the maximum possible light to fall from different angles on the characters in *Sainte-Anne*. Such light comes from her Abbé-Narrator, whose *discours indirect libre* insinuates itself into the characters' thinking; from a range of spectators at the scene of the events; and in particular from Mademoiselle Kerber, a *caustique* of the kind we meet in *Lettres neuchâteloises*, an impartial but benevolent witness. The events of the story teach Sainte-Anne a lesson in objective judgements, in particular when unsuspected depths are revealed in four women he at first thought naturally hostile to him because of their prudery. Early in the story he is given the title of "Monsieur le Puriste" for his ill-considered attacks on the women for their manner of speech. He praises illiteracy, as much out of love for the peasant girl Babet as from previously held conviction, but by the end of the *nouvelle* Babet is asking to be taught to read, like Rousseau's Emile, because her inability to read an important letter has put her happiness in danger. Sainte-Anne admires rustic ways, and yet finds himself trying to reason Babet out of troublesome and irrational superstitions. He writes a letter to Mademoiselle Kerber in which he praises the simple life, but his imagination runs away with him and he tumbles into bathos:

Labourons nos champs; que nos femmes filent; et que le tisserand change en vêtements notre lin, notre chanvre, ainsi que la toison de nos brebis.[34]

He behaves in a peculiar way, sleeps fully clothed, and this is noticed by his vigilant mother who suspects his love for Babet and sets her mind on outmanoeuvring him. She is intelligent enough to see how far her son's nature-nostalgia and admiration for Babet's illiteracy are linked, and uses all the ruses at her disposal to marry Babet to Sainte-Anne's friend, Tonquedec. After an embarrassed interplay of self-interest and selflessness between Tonquedec and Sainte-Anne on the latter's return home, Madame de Sainte-Anne concedes defeat. Sainte-Anne, however, has now arrived at a clearer understanding of motives in people. He has perceived that his mother was anxious to repair the family fortunes and to see

her son well established. This was why she, his greatest defender, should have appeared his greatest enemy. Of course, she is ambitious too, self-assertive and concerned with her own standing. But Sainte-Anne can move beyond the kind of premature judgement he had earlier indulged in, and, in direct opposition to the Rousseauism he had earlier cherished, assents to a clause in his marriage-contract forbidding Babet's peasant mother to remarry:

Une pareille clause ne se seroit jamais présentée à l'esprit de Ste. Anne; mais il falloit donner satisfaction à une mère trompée par son fils dans ses plus cheres espérances.[35]

There is a subtle hint to the alert reader that Sainte-Anne, for all his declared principles, is capable of letting his own self-interest coincide with that of another to the disadvantage of a third party; it is a position that has the same effect as slavish attachment to principle. Isabelle de Charrière trusts the evaluative response of her reader, but the tone of the story is lighter and nearer to wit than pathos. The rather pert and Voltairean opening of the story, reminiscent of *L'Ingénu* in its suggestion that Babet is not much of a savage at all, is well sustained, and on this occasion Madame de Charrière is content not to explore her characters in any real depth.

Les Ruines de Yedburg is a relatively minor achievement. It too concerns principles and how they fare in the world, but the result is not an enlarging of awareness for the central figure but something closer to the general catastrophe which occurs in *Honorine d'Userche*. Charles Stair, a pallid idealist, must choose between abandoning a principle and allowing a family to disintegrate, or maintaining it and seeing the family stay together in happy poverty. He is given money for the upbringing of relatives in Scotland. Should he reveal this to them or not? In the event, he puts his rather watery Rousseauism on one side and, acting out of love for a young relative, reveals the truth. Again the deciding factor is the consideration: how far can anyone impose his principles on others? His action opens the floodgates of the world on the Stair family, and disaster ensues. In a logical progression from the revelation by Charles Stair, Lord Thirlestaine insists that James Stair should be sent to University or cease to see his daughter Anne; Charles, James's brother, falls in love with Anne while he is away; and James, on his return, marries Anne. Thus the two brothers are permanently divided by Charles's unavowed love. In essence the story is sound. But in *Les Ruines de Yedburg*, unlike *Honorine d'Userche* or *Trois femmes*, the characters have no complexity and remain two-dimensional, as though Isabelle de Charrière has withheld her sympathy from them. As a consequence we miss that firm grasp of experience that the other published novels and *nouvelles* maintain.

A similar weakness is felt in *Sir Walter Finch et son filsWilliam*, a novel on which Isabelle de Charrière worked throughout 1799 and which was published posthumously in 1806. It is not that she cannot portray weak characters in a convincing and immediate fashion. *Caliste* shows that she can. The problem in *Les Finch* (as it is usually known) is that a welter of aesthetically insignificant detail and character-sketching swamps the central interest of the book. As a result this re-emerges only spasmodically. Sir Walter is writing a diary about the upbringing of his son, composed as the events took place. When his son reaches maturity he will give him the diary. The novel concerns two things: the personality of Sir Walter, for it is as much his *Bildungsroman* as that of his son, and the peculiar education that Sir Walter gives his son. In both matters there is an unceasing conflict between ideals and realities, and from the interaction of society, hard experience and circumstance, Sir Walter arrives at a quite different position from that which might have been anticipated at the outset. Sir Walter's initial misogyny, for example, is transformed into ardent idealism in his adolescence

by an almost beatific vision of the perfect woman, whom he glimpses in a carriage one day on the outskirts of Cambridge. The vision is representative of Sir Walter's latent idealism. He takes it to heart and envelops the ideal in layers of imaginative encrustation. Sir Walter continues to maintain this kind of unsatisfactory relationship with other people and everyday life, and it poisons his relationship with his wife. He meets his ideal woman again in later life, but, like Flaubert's Frédéric Moreau in *L'Education sentimentale*, he prefers to hold on to the image he once had of her. In a similarly idealistic way, Sir Walter plans his son William's education along the lines of a Rousseauistic grand design, and has William suckled on goat's milk in a crofter's cottage in Scotland, as William's mother has recently died. The Rousseauistic project is challenged by Lady C., a representative of London society, who advocates a normal aristocratic upbringing. She is proved to be both right and wrong; wrong in as much as William is not ruined - though he does have an attack of smallpox - and right, in that Sir Walter in the long run performs a volte-face of which he does not seem fully aware. For by the time William reaches adolescence his father is actually discouraging him from taking up a craft like carpentry because it would not fit him for his future "métier d'homme opulent".[36] Sir Walter is something of an 'unreliable narrator', and there is a measure of humour in this, but once again Isabelle de Charrière's real focus of concern is the examination of how far one can put one's beliefs before what is best for others. Is Sir Walter right to give in, like Charles Stair in *Les Ruines de Yedburg*, and to lay his principles aside? As in her more important works, it is an imaginative *exploration* of a situation that we are offered, not the solution of a problem: Isabelle de Charrière's desire is to illustrate in a *concrete* way the complexity and interdependence of human relationships, as these are the only possible basis for any serious ethical position.

Isabelle de Charrière worked on *Les Finch* in 1799. The period up to her death was a quiet one, though she kept up several correspondences. Her protégés married, and she found herself cut off from any real intellectual stimulation. Her health was poor and kept her in Colombier, often housebound. Monsieur de Charrière's mind became increasingly feeble and eventually unbalanced. Ludwig Huber, her German friend and translator, left Switzerland to settle at Ulm, where he died on 24 December 1804. Isabelle de Charrière outlived Huber by a year, and died on 27 December 1805 after a month's illness.

Biographers more competent than myself in retrospective psychology have spoken at length about Madame de Charrière's constant search for a companion, man or woman, who could match the qualities of mind, the independence of thought, the warmth she herself possessed. There was no lasting solution to this need, only passing remedies. Her relationships with social groups were even less successful. In Neuchâtel Isabelle de Charrière aroused the same fierce distrust as Belle de Zuylen had provoked in Holland, and for similar reasons - her scorn for convention, and her pride. Art was a form of communication which could exist outside a living human relationship. It offered some form of compensation, we can presume, and Madame de Charrière's intense spells of creativity, in music as well as fiction, may to some extent have offset the emotional and intellectual frustration from which she continually suffered.

[1] Despite the work of Philippe Godet, much of the history of Belle's years in Holland remains to be written. On this period, see Dr Titia Geest, *Madame de Charrière (Belle van Zuylen). Een leven uit de achttiende eeuw* (Assen, 1955) and especially Simone Dubois, *Belle van Zuylen. Leven op afstand* (Zaltbommel, 1969). Madame Simone Dubois's labours have brought to light many letters from the period, and these will be published in the edition of Isabelle de Charrière's *Œuvres complètes* now in preparation

[2] Godet 1, 59.

[3] The *conte* was published in the *Journal étranger combiné avec l'année littéraire* (a journal published in Amsterdam by E van Harrevelt) in August 1762, and reprinted as a separate work, with stylistic corrections by the author, in 1763. Only two copies are known of this 1763 text (which Godet could not trace for use in his 1908 edition), one at the Royal Library in The Hague and one at Halle. It was published in an altered form by F H Jacobi in 1771, and once again in 1787, when the 1762 text was re-used. On this, see the two complementary studies by J Th de Booy and Roland Mortier, 'Les Années de formation de F H Jacobi, d'après ses lettres inédites à M M Rey (1763-1771) avec *Le Noble*, de Madame de Charrière', *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century*, vol. xlv (Geneva, 1966), and J-D Candaux, 'La première œuvre de Belle de Zuylen et son édition par F H Jacobi', *Musée neuchâtelois* (1968), 49-61.

[4] Giovanni Riccioli, *'L'Esprit' di Madame de Charrière* (Bari, 1967), 30-31.

[5] *Le Noble, conte moral* (Amsterdam, 1763), 1. (Hereafter referred to as '*Le Noble*' followed by page number.)

[6] *Le Noble*, 3-4.

[7] *Le Noble*, 5.

[8] *Le Noble*, 8.

[9] *Le Noble*, 42-3.

[10] *Le Noble*, 15.

[11] *Le Noble*, 19.

[12] *Le Noble*, 10.

[13] *Le Noble*, 55. See also 14-18.

[14] *Le Noble*, 14.

[15] In this the *conte* resembles *Aucassin et Nicolette*. The maiden in the tower and the domineering father (though in the case of the *chantefable* it is the suitor's father who disapproves of the match), and the resourcefulness of Julie and Nicolette alike in escaping from their towers makes one wonder whether Belle knew the artfully simple tale from the very popular translation by La Curne de Sainte-Palaye published in 1752. (See Lionel Gossman, *Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment: The World and Work of La Curne de Sainte-Palaye* (Baltimore, 1968), 260).

[16] The text of their exchange has been preserved and in part published. See *Lettres de Belle de Zuylen (Madame de Charrière) à Constant d'Hermenches 1760-1775*, ed. Ph. Godet (Paris and Geneva, 1909) and Baroness Constant de Rebecque with Dorette Berthoud, *Les Mariages manqués de Belle de Tuyll (Madame de Charrière). Lettres de Constant d'Hermenches* (Lausanne, 1940).

[17] *Lettres à d'Hermenches*, 76-77.

[18] *Boswell in Holland 1763-1764 including his Correspondence with Belle de Zuylen (Zélide)*, edited by Frederick A. Pottle (London, 1952), 291. (Letter of 14-17 June 1764, translated from the French by the Editor.)

[19] Simone Dubois, 'Visite à Voltaire et lettres inédites de Madame de Charrière'*, Musée neuchâtelois* (1972), 213-224.

[20] It was long thought that an item of news prompted her to write a satirical poem against Voltaire, *L'Aigle et le Rossignol*. This was the failure of the Emperor Joseph II to visit the *philosophe* at Ferney in July 1777, and the poem pokes fun at Voltaire's wounded pride. (Unpublished manuscript, not in Madame de Charrière's hand, bearing on the cover: 'Thuyl de Serooskerken dédié à Mr de Zuylen/Marié [sic] à Mr de Charrières demeurant en Suisse', in the Gemeentearchieven, Breda under Collectie Varia (Afd. V-I), Nr. 279, acquired about 1930.) It now generally thought not to have been composed by her.

[21] See Godet 1, 236-255 and *Constant*, 135.

[22] Godet's conjecture was that this man was a Monsieur de Saussure, a friend of Monsieur de Charrière

[23] 'Son mari, qui était un très honnête homme, et qui avait de l'affection et de la reconnaissance pour elle, ne l'avait menée à Paris que pour la distraire de la tristesse où l'avait jetée l'abandon de l'homme qu'elle avait aimé.' (*Constant*, 136).

[24] *Constant*, 135-6.

[25] Although many biographers have dealt with the relationship, the standard work on this period of Constant's life remains the most useful, Gustave Rudler'*s La Jeunesse de Benjamin Constant (1767-1794)* (Paris, 1908), esp. 187-516. (Rudler'*s thèse complémentaire*, *Bibliographie critique des Œuvres de Benjamin Constant avec documents inédits* (Paris, 1908) is of great value with regard to the correspondence between Isabelle de Charrière and Benjamin Constant.) Of interest concerning Constant's mind is Charles Du Bos*, Grandeur et misère de Benjamin Constant* (Paris, 1946).

[26] BVN Ms 1312-1313, 78 letters covering the years 1787-1796. Of Isabelle de Charrière's own letters Neuchâtel has three. More will doubtless come to light in future years.

[27] During his stay in Brunswick Constant studied Kantian ethics and appears to have transmitted his interest to Isabelle de Charrière. I shall have more to say on this in my chapter on *Trois femmes*. For a very full discussion of Kant's possible influence on the two writers and others at this period, see B. Munteano, 'Episodes kantiens en Suisse et en France sous le directoire', *Revue de littérature comparée*, 15 (1935), 387-454.

[28] BVN Ms 1312-1313, letter headed 'Lausanne ce 21 8bre 1794'. On this period, see Pierre Kohler, *Madame de Staël et la Suisse. Etude biographique et littéraire avec de nombreux documents inédits* (Lausanne and Paris, 1916), Esp. 184-218.

[29] I shall return to this rich and illuminating correspondence in my next chapter.

[30] One thinks of Destouches's *Le Glorieux*, where the Comte de Tufière turns out to be the brother of Lisette. 'La voix du sang' is seen in her indulgent behaviour towards him. Diderot's *Le Fils naturel* also uses the theme. By the end of the century it was a well-worn literary cliché.

[31] *Honorine*, 15

[32] *Honorine*, 51.

[33] *Honorine*, 60

[34] *Sainte-Anne*, 57.

[35] *Sainte-Anne*, 191-2.

[36] *Sir Walter Finch et son fils William*. Par Madame de Charrière, Auteur des *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*, et de plusieurs autres ouvrages (Geneva, 1806), 103.

Chapter III - Isabelle de Charrière and the Eighteenth-Century Novel

The Novels of Isabelle de Charriere

by

Dennis Wood

Having surveyed the important friendships and experiences of Isabelle de Charrière's life and their relationship to her work, and having examined the more significant of her minor works, we are now to consider her fiction in a broader context. I propose in this chapter to ask where Isabelle de Charrière stands in relation to earlier and contemporary writers of fiction. However, before attempting to consider her work in the broader framework of literary history, it is important to note briefly what writers Isabelle de Charrière herself read and prized highly or returned to with most pleasure, and in this task we are fortunate enough to have the evidence of her correspondence, both published and unpublished, to aid us.

In a letter addressed to her protégée in Prussia, Henriette L'Hardy, Isabelle de Charrière makes this comment on those achievements in the novel which she admires most:

Werther est a mon gré un chef d'œuvre. Je ne dis pas qu'il n'y ait point d'imperfection mais c'est l'ouvrage du genie & d'une sensibilité exquise. La Pr. de Cleves, Manon L'Escaut, Werther, voila a mon avis en fait de roman la gloire de la france & de l'allemagne.[1]

From her early years in Holland she knew Richardson's *Clarissa*,[2] Marivaux's *La Vie de Marianne*,[3] Hamilton,[4] and Voltaire,[5] and we can be sure that she sampled many more. For Isabelle de Charrière's taste in her later years was catholic, as we see from her letters to Henriette L'Hardy,[6] L F Huber,[7] and from those written to Isabelle de Gélieu which cover the years from 1790 to her death.[8] In English literature it is well known that she admired Mrs

Inchbald.[9] But she also read and recommended Johnson's *Rasselas*[10] and Mrs Charlotte Lennox's *Female Don Quixote* (1752),[11] and preferred Robert Bage's *Man as He is* (1792) to Fanny Burney's *Camilla* (1796).[12] Godwin's *Caleb Williams* prompted Isabelle de Charrière to write to its author in praise of his novel.[13] In German literature hitherto unpublished letters to Henriette L'Hardy reveal a predilection for Wieland's *Geschichte des Agathon* (1766-67),[14] and for a novel by Johann Karl Wezel, *Wilhelmina Arend* (1782).[15] But though she dearly loved *Werther*, Madame de Charrière disliked later volumes of *Wilhelm Meister*.[16] As to her reading of contemporary French novelists, we learn that she particularly approved of *Adèle de Sénange* (1794) by Madame de Souza,[17] knew the work of Benjamin Constant's uncle, Samuel de Constant[18] and probably of Madame de Montolieu,[19] and, in the *genre troubadour*, read Madame de Genlis's *Les Chevaliers du cygne ou la cour de Charlemagne* (1795).[20] She also had access to Restif's *Les Contemporaines* in Monsieur de Charrière's library.[21]

When we have entered the necessary caveats regarding this evidence - books being on occasion specifically recommended for Henriette L'Hardy's education, for example - it is reasonably clear that Isabelle de Charrière had a general preference for novels of sentiment, novels that explore the complex workings of the human heart in a love-relationship.[22] However, it would be unwise to rely solely on such fragmentary information, which in any case applies for the most part to the period after 1790. We must turn now to considering the facts of literary history, and consider the work of Madame de Charrière in the light of these.

In a recent survey of eighteenth-century French fiction, Professor Henri Coulet has remarked:

De toute l'histoire du roman sous l'Ancien Régime, la période dont il est le plus difficile de donner une description satisfaisante est la fin du XVIIIe siècle.[23]

While we await a thorough and systematic listing of French novels published in this period,[24] we have to help us a number of partial surveys of the fictional production of the second half of the eighteenth century. From the work of Etienne,[25] Mornet,[26] Martin,[27] Godenne,[28] and others[29] it is possible to gain a general picture of the state of French fiction during most of Isabelle de Charrière's life and then to isolate those strands which are most closely related to her work.

It will be evident from earlier discussion of Isabelle de Charrière's fiction that she was associated with a particular line of development, that of the *roman sentimental*,[30] a line which we can trace back to the seventeenth century, to Madame de Lafayette, to *Le Grand Cyrus*, and to *L'Astrée*. In her own century it was *La Nouvelle Héloïse* which of course gave additional popularity to the *roman sentimental*, but there were many other practitioners, notably Marivaux (*La Vie de Marianne*, 1731-41), Prévost (*Mémoires d'un homme de qualité*, 1728-31), and Richardson, certain of whose novels were taken into the French tradition in Prévost's adapted translations. However, it is among the lesser practitioners of the form that we must look for parallels to Isabelle de Charrière's own kind of fiction, to Madame de Tencin, Madame de Grafigny, and above all, perhaps, Madame Riccoboni. We might also look to Duclos (*Histoire de Madame de Luz*, 1741), to Crébillon fils (*Lettres de la Marquise de M*** au Comte de R****, 1732) and particular works of Baculard d'Arnaud, for example *Les Epoux malheureux...* (1745) and *Clary* (1767). I shall be returning to such novelists presently. After 1761 the tradition of the *roman sentimental* was joined by imitators and disciples of Rousseau, such as Dorat (*Les Sacrifices de l'amour*, 1771, and *Les Malheurs de l'inconstance*, 1772) and Loaisel de Tréogate (*Ainsi finissent les grandes passions*, 1778, and

Dolbreuse..., 1783), and later Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, as well as other *minores*.[31] By the period when Isabelle de Charrière was writing, translations and imitations of Goethe's *Werther* had added further new elements to the tradition[32] The years 1780-1800 represent largely a continuation of earlier forms of the novel rather than its renewal. Madame Riccoboni's fiction was still appearing (*Histoire de Christine, reine de Suabe* and *Histoire d'Enguerrand*, 1783), Restif continued to publish his *Contemporaines* (and also *La Paysanne pervertie* (1784)) and Baculard d'Arnaud his stories. Two of the more significant works of the period were, of course, Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) and Rousseau's *Les Amours de Milord Edouard Bomston* (1780), to the latter of which *Caliste* bears some resemblance.[33] But more directly important as regards Isabelle de Charrière's work was Samuel de Constant's *Le Mari sentimental...* (1783), to which *Mistriss Henley* was a kind of pendant. Other species of the novel in this period 1780-1800, the gothic, erotic (Nerciat and Louvet, for example), sombre, oriental and historical need not detain us, but it is of interest that Madame de Charrière did utilize the common Emigration situation as a background in *Trois femmes*, a situation found in several other novels of the period.

Looking back on the preceding brief survey, we can observe that Isabelle de Charrière belongs to a tradition of the *roman sentimental* which was still alive in her creative years, and would be continued by Madame de Genlis, Madame Cottin (*Claire d'Albe*, 1799), Madame de Krüdener (*Valérie*, 1803), and, of course, by Madame de Staël (*Corinne*, 1807). There is, however, in the restrained, sober tone of Madame de Charrière something that is remote from the Romantic effusiveness of Germaine de Staël, and which looks back to earlier writers.

A further important element in placing Isabelle de Charrière in the general context of the eighteenth-century novel is her preoccupation with 'la condition féminine', with the social and emotional lives of women. The view of human relationships that Isabelle de Charrière offers is, however, too comprehensive for propaganda. Nevertheless, if we add together this evidence - sobriety of manner and a concern with the affective lives of women - there can be little doubt of her further affiliation with that particular form of the *roman sentimental* known as the *roman féminin*.[34]

Professor Jacques Vier noted recently:

Ce que l'ancienne poétique appelait "les grands intérêts" n'intervient guère dans le roman féminin; quant aux "grandes passions" elles y sont rares. En revanche, le prisme sentimental s'y enrichit de mille nuances.[35]

This observation could equally well be applied to some of Madame de Charrière's finest writing as to Madame Riccoboni and other practitioners of the *roman féminin* who preceded her, Madame de Fontaines (*La Comtesse de Savoie*, 1722), Madame de Tencin (*Mémoires du Comte de Comminge*, 1735, and *Le Siège de Calais*, 1739), and, in some measure, Madame de Grafigny (*Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, 1747). But the parallels are perhaps strongest with Madame Riccoboni's work, which is not concerned with dramatic moments in the historic past and has few exotic affinities, but rather records fine shades of feeling in women who suffer through love, often through the faithlessness of the object of their passion, and who frequently reveal great generosity of character. The scale of some of Madame Riccoboni's brief stories, such as the *Histoire du Marquis de Cressy* (1758) or the *Histoire d'Ernestine* (1765), her sense of the often unjust burden of responsibility laid on women and of the quiet strength required of them, and the generally domestic setting of her novels, all these characteristics bring us close to the concerns of Isabelle de Charrière. The similarities are

such that I believe they require some brief consideration here. The discussion will further serve to distinguish Isabelle de Charrière's work from more distantly-related novelists whom limitations of space preclude my discussing other than cursorily.

In *Lettres de Milady Juliette Catesby* (1759), Lady Catesby loves Milord d'Ossery. her letters to her friend record the monotonous rhythm of her lonely days at a country house, the dullness of those around her, and the aching memory of Milord d'Ossery's perfidy. Madame Riccoboni's heroine is intelligent, sensitive and affectionate and draws us into growing sympathy with her plight. She finds herself in a perpetual state of nervous expectation, wanting news of d'Ossery but also wishing to forget him now he has married Jenny Monford. There is humour of a kind, too, in the contradictory positions the heroine adopts from moment to moment, and this helps to make Lady Catesby's character plausible. Later in the story comes a moment of pathos in the briefly reported scene between Milord d'Ossery and his dying wife, since he is unable to love Jenny even though he feels great pity for her. Lady Catesby, like the heroines of *Le Noble*, *Mistriss Henley* and *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*, is at a permanent disadvantage. She is obliged to conform to *l'usage du monde*, the social pattern of respectability, and at the same time is constantly vulnerable to the wiles of men.[36] In Madame Riccoboni's *Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd...* (1757), there is a more girlish heroine whose tone matures through grief and suffering until she finally approaches the situation of Madame de Tourvel in Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Again the reader's involvement is built up by the genuineness of Fanni's love and the cruelty of her betrayal, as well as by our following in detail her day-to-day feelings. As Fanni says:

Mon style est toujours assujetti aux impressions que mon ame reçoit.[37]

and further,

mon style est tendre quelquefois; il est tantôt badin, tantôt grave, triste même, souvent ennuyeux, toujours vrai.[38]

It is the kind of confessional style of letter-novel that we find in these two novels by Madame Riccoboni that Madame de Charrière later used in *Lettres écrites de Lausanneand Mistriss Henley*. We also find, for example in Madame Riccoboni's Fanni Butlerd, the kind of woman whose high principles must make up for her social inferiority:

La rigidité des principes ausquel[s] je tiens le plus, n'est peut-être estimable que dans ma sphère; elle est peut-être le partage de ceux qui, négligés de la fortune, peu connus par leurs dehors, ont continuellement besoin de descendre en eux-mêmes, pour ne pas rougir de leur position. Le témoignage de leur cœur leur donne en partie, ou du moins leur tient lieu de ce que le sort leur a refusé.[39]

In a somewhat different form we shall find a comparable disjunction between character and status in *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*. Indeed there is to some extent a parallel to Caliste in Fanni's description of herself addressed to her faithless lover:

trop délicate pour vous partager, trop fiére pour remplir vos momens perdus, & trop équitable pour vouloir garder un bien sur lequel un autre acquiert de justes droits [...][40]

Similarities of tone and interest are, then, discernible between Madame Riccoboni's work and that of Isabelle de Charrière. But there are also considerable differences. The fact is that Madame Riccoboni's feminism is overt and leads to passages of preaching:

Les hommes nous regardent comme des êtres placés dans l'Univers pour l'amusement de leur esprit, pour servir de jouet à cette espece d'enfance où les assujettit la fougue de leurs passions, l'impétuosité de leurs desirs, & l'impudente liberté qu'ils se sont réservée de les montrer avec hardiesse & de les satisfaire sans honte. L'art difficile de résister, de vaincre ses penchants, de maîtriser la nature même, fut laissé par eux au sexe qu'ils traitent de foible, qu'ils osent mépriser comme foible.[41]

However much Isabelle de Charrière might sympathize with such sentiments, her novels generally eschew propaganda and simple, unqualified didacticism. Only the utopian dreaming of the heroine's mother in *Histoire de Cécile* comes anywhere near feminist apologetics. Madame de Charrière disliked tugging at the reader's sleeve.[42]

A further difference between Madame Riccoboni and Madame de Charrière which distinguishes the latter's individual position within her tradition is the use of local references. Madame Riccoboni's settings tend to be colourless by comparison with those of Isabelle de Charrière. Now I do not mean to imply by this that there is massive use of concrete detail in Madame de Charrière's Swiss settings. There is not. But there are a considerable number of references to places and streets, and discreet allusions to the social hierarchy of Lausanne, to the freedom of association between young men and women in Protestant Lausanne and Neuchâtel, the total effect of which, I believe, is to lend *Lettres neuchâteloises* and *Histoire de Cécile* a convincingly localized flavour.

In the use which they make of the letter form, the two novelists are perhaps closer. Their epistolary novels, like Madame de Grafigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, exploit the one-sided correspondence form, a literary device better suited to self-analysis and self-revelation rather than to imparting a sense of movement or action to a narrative. However, in *Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd...* and *Lettres de Milady Juliette Catesby...* the form suffers from rather creaky machinery. Parts of the latter novel rival the worst passages of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*:

quelle surprise! sous une enveloppe dont la main m'est inconnue, une lettre de Milord d'Ossery... oui, de lui, en verité... voilà son caractere... elle est de lui... Mon Dieu, elle est bien de lui!... D'où vient-elle?... qui l'a apportée?... comment?... pourquoi?... Il m'écrit encore!... à moi!... que me veut il?... Ma main tremble... ma plume s'échappe de mes doigts... Il faut que je prenne l'air.[43]

There is nothing in Isabelle de Charrière as absurd as this.[44] There is, rather, a general level of competence, and indeed in *Lettres neuchâteloises* each speaker has a convincingly personalized voice and tone, and the order of letters is often telling.

The final all-important distinction between Isabelle de Charrière and her predecessor in the *roman féminin* is that, though their tone may be similar at times, Madame de Charrière has an incisiveness of which Madame Riccoboni was perhaps incapable. Her manner is far more 'natural', as is her handling of dialogue. She does not adopt the flaccid prose of the 'style noble'. On the contrary, her writing at its best displays a distinctive pertness, a tone of Voltairean understatement, and a wit which fully engages the reader's intelligence. For all her

insights into human nature, Madame Riccoboni's central characters are frequently two-dimension and conventional. Isabelle de Charrière's are most often the very opposite.

If we look a little further afield in the tradition of the *roman sentimental*, we might perhaps see the sufferings of Caliste as in some measure anticipated in those of the Marquise de M*** in *Lettres de la Marquise de M*** au Comte de R****** of Crébillon fils or in the misfortunes of Baculard d'Arnaud's *Clary*. Indeed the scale of such a *récit court* by Baculard d'Arnaud is not unlike that of some of Isabelle de Charrière's work. The morbid and sentimental tone, on the other hand, particularly in longer works like *Les Epoux malheureux*..., is utterly alien to Madame de Charrière. The same can be said of another near-contemporary, Dorat. Once more it is Isabelle de Charrière's restraint, sobriety of tone, and conciseness that distinguishes her from the author of *Les Sacrifices de l'amour*... (1771) and *Les Malheurs de l'inconstance* ... (1772), as well as from the high-flown sentimentality of followers of Rousseau, imitators of *Werther*, or members of the *école sensible* writing in the last third of the century.

In another respect Isabelle de Charrière appears more indebted to her predecessors and contemporaries. The distinctly *regional* flavour of *Lettres neuchâteloises* and of *Histoire de Cécile* probably owes something to *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, but also perhaps to Restif de la Bretonne's portrayals of provincial life. Samuel de Constant is also close to Madame de Charrière in offering an authentically *Swiss* setting in his fiction. Although it must be emphasized that Isabelle de Charrière does not share Samuel de Constant's rather facile Rousseauistic dislike of town life, his domestic psychological study, *Le Mari sentimental*... (1783), to which *Mistriss Henley* (1784) is Madame de Charrière's companion-piece, and *Laure, ou Lettres de quelques femmes de Suisse* (1786) both have a localized setting and a certain similarity of tone.

We are now in a position to see Isabelle de Charrière's relationship to the tradition of the novel in her century. Her work combines some features of the *roman sentimental*, in particular of the so-called *roman féminin*, with, on occasion, a particular regional setting, probably suggested both by her own experience of life in Switzerland and by the example of writers such as Samuel de Constant. Further, it is my belief that although her novels can undoubtedly be read from quite different points of view, Madame de Charrière's principal preoccupations are psychological and moral ones. My purpose in subsequent chapters will be to offer an analysis of her works that will reveal how the exploration of a moral theme is supported by the structure of a given novel or story. As Professor Jean Starobinski has said, in any critical approach to Madame de Charrière "il faut écouter de légers bruissements",[45] those minute shifts and transitions in the emotional lives of men and women in her novels. In tracing out her patterns of cause and consequence, Isabelle de Charrière is able to suggest some of the contradictoriness and complexity of human experience. This she does with what is perhaps best described as a naturalness of style which avoids the grosser pitfalls of her age - didacticism, propaganda, sentimentality - and, for a minor artist, succeeds in maintaining a considerable degree of interest and involvement in her reader.

[1] B.V.N. Ms 1303, no.105, 4 April 1795.

[2] *Lettres à d'Hermenches*, 133.

[3] Godet I, 29.

[4] Godet, I, 64.

[5] *Lettres à d'Hermenches*, 321.

[6] B.V.N. Ms 1302-1304, 161 letters covering the years 1791-1803.

[7] In the private collection of Madame Paul Chaponnière of Geneva, copies communicated to me by Professor Charly Guyot.

[8] Dorette Berthoud, *Madame de Charrière et Isabelle de Gélieu*. Extrait des *Actes de la Société jurassienne d'Emulation*, Année 1971 (Imprimerie Roger Pfeuti, La Neuveville [1971]).

[9] With Isabelle de Gélieu she published a translation of her *Nature and Art* in 1797.

[10] B.V.N. Ms 1302, no. 5, 27 Sept. 1791, to H L'Hardy.

[11] B.V.N. Ms 1304, no. 141, 9-13 Dec. 1794, to H. L'Hardy.

[12] Letter to L F Huber, 20 July 1798.

[13] Godet II, 350.

[14] B.V.N. Ms 1304, no. 137 [Nov. 1794]. (See also Godet II, 274.)

[15] B.V.N. Ms 1302, no.10, 2 February 1792.

[16] Letter to L F Huber, 29 December 1800

[17] Godet II, 350

[18] *Camille* (see Godet II, 178) as well as *Le Mari Sentimental*

[19] See Godet I, 305

[20] Letter to L F Huber, 16 December 1795

[21] Godet I, 360.

[22] This interest in motive and feeling perhaps explains her lifelong attachment to Classical historians like Tacitus and Plutarch.

[23].Henri Coulet, *Le Roman jusqu'à la Révolution* (Paris, 1967), t.1, 418.

[24] In preparation, A Martin, V G Mylne, R L Frautschi, *Bibliographie du genre romanesque français, 1751-1800* (London and Chicago), continuing the work of Silas P. Jones, *A List of French Prose Fiction from 1700 to 1750* (New York, 1939).

[25] S Etienne, *Le Genre romanesque en France depuis l'apparition de la Nouvelle Héloïse jusqu'aux approches de la Révolution* (Brussels, 1922).

[26] J-J Rousseau*, Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, ed. D Mornet (Paris, 1925), t.1.

[27] A Martin, 'A First Listing of New French Prose Fiction 1780-1783', *A.J.F.S.,* III (1966), 356-369; 'A First Listing of New French Prose Fiction 1784-1788', *A.J.F.S.*, IV (1967), 109-131; 'A First Listing of New French Prose Fiction 1780-1788: Addenda and Corrigenda', *A.J.F.S.*, VI (1969), 131-137; 'Le Roman en France sous la Révolution: Thèmes et Tendances: 1789-1799', *Studi francesi*, XVI (1972), 281-294.

[28] *Histoire de la nouvelle française aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Geneva, 1970).

[29] Laurent Versini, *Laclos et la Tradition* (Paris, 1968), esp. 654-664, and Anna Mary Attridge, *The Reception of Rousseau's La Nouvelle Héloïse in France and its influence on the French novel from 1761 to 1786*, unpublished Cambridge PhD thesis, 1972.

[30] On this genre in the eighteenth century, see Henri Coulet, op. cit., t.1, esp. 378-386.

[31] See Rousseau, *Julie ouLa Nouvelle Héloïse*, ed. D Mornet (Paris, 1925), t.1, 367-369, and Anna Mary Attridge, *The Reception of Rousseau's La Nouvelle Héloïse in France and its influence on the French novel from 1761 to 1786*, unpublished Cambridge PhD thesis, 1972.

[32] See Louis Morel, 'Les principales traductions de *Werther* et les jugements de la critique (1776-1872)', *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 119 (1907), 139-159, and Henry Stavan, 'Les premiers romans werthériens français: imitations ou parodies?', *Neophilologus*, LII (1968), 362-365.

[33] Madame de Souza's *Adèle de Sénange* (1794) may have given Isabelle de Charrière the idea for Constance's coach accident in *Trois femmes*. It was doubtless fresh in her mind at the time of writing *Trois femmes*, as we learn from Godet II, 216.

[34] See Jacques Vier, *Histoire de la littérature française: XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1970), t.II, 580-605, and Pierre Fauchery's monumental study, *La Destinée féminine dans le roman européen du XVIIIe siècle. Essai de gynécomythie romanesque* (Paris, 1972), 2 vols.

[35] Jacques Vier, op. cit., 599-600.

[36] Such pressures also govern the behaviour and limit the freedom of action of Ernestine in her love for the Marquis de Clémengis in the *Histoire d'Ernestine*.

[37] [Madame Riccoboni], *Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd, à Milord Charles Alfred de Caitombridge...* (Paris, 1759), 93.

[38] [Madame Riccoboni], op. cit., 120.

[39] [Madame Riccoboni], op. cit., 172.

[40] [Madame Riccoboni], op. cit., 173

[41] [Madame Riccoboni], *Lettres de Milady Juliette Catesby à Milady Henriette Campley, son amie* (Amsterdam, 1759).

[42] This was the principal reason for her dislike of the work of Madame de Genlis. Of one of her works Isabelle de Charrière wrote to a friend that it was "si moral, si endoctrinant, d'un style si sec!" (Godet II, 257 n.1.).

[43] [Madame Riccoboni], *Lettres de Milady Juliette Catesby à Milady Henriette Campley, son ami* (Amsterdam, 1759), 124.

[44] It may readily be conceded, however, that there is sometimes too much giving of information which the correspondent might reasonably be expected to know already. I am thinking particularly of the beginning of *Mistriss Henley* and of *Histoire de Cécile.*

[45] *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse, Lettres écrites de Lausanne*. Présentation de Jean Starobinski (Lausanne, 1970), 45.

Chapter IV - Lettres de Mistriss Henley and Lettres neuchâteloises

The Novels of Isabelle de Charriere

by

Dennis Wood

Mais vous ne savez pas combien il est difficile de se conduire avec ceux dont on dépend, quand ils sont faits tout autrement que nous, et que cependant on les aime et les respecte, quand enfin ils opposent une prudence toujours la même à notre vivacité.

(Letter to Constant d'Hermenches, [August 1764])

Vaut-il la peine de se rendre heureux aux dépens des autres dans cette courte vie? Est-on heureux, d'ailleurs, quand on a voulu l'être aux dépens des autres?

(Letter to Constant d'Hermenches, 12 January 1772)

The years between 1762 and the early 1780s were rich in experiences for Isabelle de Charrière. Certainly the most important of these was the sometimes painful process of adjustment to living with her husband Charles-Emmanuel de Charrière. She doubtless drew upon this material when writing *Lettres deMistriss Henley, publiées par son amie* (1784). Then there was the very different social setting in which she found herself, the small world of Neuchâtel which was to be at times severely critical of her, and about which she too had certain things to say in *Lettres neuchâteloises*. There the town is seen, significantly, through the eyes of a foreigner, the German, Henri Meyer. Finally came the alleged mysterious infatuation with a shadowy figure on whose identity one can only speculate, and which may have prompted Isabelle de Charrière to write *Caliste*.

In 1783 Samuel de Constant (uncle of her future friend Benjamin Constant) published his *Le Mari sentimental ou le mariage comme il y en a quelques-uns*. The story concerned a sensitive husband, Monsieur Bompré, who is driven to suicide by a selfish, domineering wife.

Perhaps as a result of her own recent experiences, Isabelle de Charrière felt compelled to write a short pendant to Constant's story, and this was *Lettres deMistriss Henley*. In Samuel de Constant's novel, Bompré's wife disrupts his hitherto established habits as an ageing bachelor, dismisses his old servant, forces Bompré to sell his horse and has his dog killed. Finally, when wrongly accused of seducing a peasant girl, he locks himself in his room and shoots himself. *Lettres deMistriss Henley* is a less dramatic epistolary novel set in England and tells in the words of a wife how she has been driven to despair by her inability to find happiness with a quiet, apparently reasonable husband. It is a study of Mrs Henley's isolation and its causes. The story has a tone that varies between a kind of playful wit that often verges on dark comedy, and pathos which excites sympathy in the reader for Mrs Henley. In fact, although it has generally been read as a feminist reply to *Le Mari sentimental, Mistriss Henley* is, I believe, remote from propaganda, and displays a subtlety of mind that makes considerable demands on the reader's intelligence and judgement.

Mrs Henley was a highly sensitive young woman, full of banal illusions about what kind of husband she would eventually have. After an early disappointment in love, she chose a calm, responsible suitor who offered her the tranquil existence of his country estate, and she turned down a wealthy man who could have given her a life of ease in London. Since her marriage Mrs Henley has seen her life reduced to utter tedium, she has become alienated from her step-daughter, and she finds her husband's behaviour towards her insufferable. Her letters provide an account of these latter events and are crowded with the minor incidents of everyday life, skilfully and succinctly reproduced. Mr Henley is a steady, reliable man of rather fixed views, but he is constant if undemonstrative in his affection for his wife. But these are precisely the elements in his character that will cause his wife so much misery. His views on the upbringing of children, which he seems to have derived from Rousseau, are not initially shared by his wife. And his feelings for Mrs Henley are seldom revealed other than in conventional tokens, "ma chère femme" etc. In seeking to impose his beliefs on his wife, Henley behaves at times as a prig and a boor, a man to whom reproof and sermonizing come all too readily. In his emotional response to his wife he appears too cool, and his coolness can be felt by her to be indifference. Worse still, he ignores her increasingly desperate demands for some reaction to her. But Henley is not an evil man. Indeed the wit of the story derives from the very fact that he is so often undeniably in the right, in the reader's eyes at least if not in those of the narrator. For he has a young and inexperienced wife whose judgement is frequently faulty, whose foresight is limited, and who makes impetuous and on occasion extreme decisions at the prompting of her emotions. Mrs Henley is a woman who must acquire habits of self-control and reflection, and the story, which is at times a sorry catalogue of her errors, allows these lessons to be taught most painfully. Chance and the consequences of her impetuousness rapidly tangle her tighter and tighter in their web. All this is one side of the story, and its dark humour is to be found in the rapid crescendo of misfortunes that assails the young wife. However the deeper the problem which *Lettres deMistriss Henley* explores is that of a fundamental incompatibility of character and temperament that leads to Mrs Henley's frustration and hints of possible suicide. Her husband is so often right in his judgements, yes - but it is his *manner* of being right that is the heart of the problem. In the story a tension evolves between notions of 'right' and 'wrong' seen purely as matters of accurate assessments of situations or possibilities, and the emotional consequences of sharing these perceptions with someone else. 'Raison', 'raisonnable' and 'tort' are terms frequently on the heroine's lips when she admits her lack of good judgement and her blunders and when she admits that her husband's judgement was better. But the insufferably smug and domineering way in which Henley is seen to 'avoir raison' and to be the impregnable bastion of 'good sense', of complacent, unshakeable 'reasonableness' constantly swings our

sympathy back towards his immature but well-intentioned wife. Furthermore, Mr Henley clearly knows the kind of woman his wife is, passionate, sensitive, and as yet unused to his austere beliefs and way of life, and yet he makes few real allowances for her. Such concessions as he does make sound almost like reproaches on his lips. He casts a blight on Mrs Henley's relationship with her step-daughter by the clumsy behaviour we see illustrated in the following passage:

Elle [Mr Henley's daughter] récita un jour à son père le Chêne et le Roseau, avec une grâce charmante. Je disais tout bas les mots avant elle; le coeur me battait, j'étais rouge de plaisir.

- Elle récite à merveille, dit M. Henley; mais comprend-elle ce qu'elle dit? Il vaudrait mieux peut-être mettre dans sa tête des vérités avant d'y mettre des fictions: l'histoire, la géographie...

- Vous avez raison, Monsieur, lui dis-je; mais sa bonne pourra lui apprendre, tout aussi bien que moi, que Paris est sur la Seine et Lisbonne sur le Tage.

- Pourquoi cette impatience, reprit doucement M. Henley; apprenez-lui les fables de La Fontaine, si cela vous amuse; au fond il n'y aura pas grand mal.

- Non, dis-je vivement; ce n'est pas mon enfant, c'est le vôtre.

- Mais, ma très chère, j'espérais...

Je ne repondis rien, et m'en allai en pleurant.

J'avais tort, je le sais bien; c'était moi qui avais tort. Je revins quelque temps après, et M. Henley eut l'air de ne pas même se souvenir de mon impatience.[1]

Mrs Henley's well-meaning spontaneity and warm-heartedness are crushed by her husband's insensitive and finally pointless sententiousness. With care Henley could have swayed his wife towards his own beliefs, no doubt, but he lacks tact. In his unbending demands he exasperates her, but he irritates her still further by his almost total lack of open emotional display. But there is more to the exchange than this. We see Mrs Henley stung into pique by her husband's words; she bridles and thereby reveals her immaturity, which is the other side of the coin that Isabelle de Charrière is anxious to show us. Gradually Mrs Henley's sweetness of nature sours as more and more circumstances prove her husband right, in particular the unfortunate occasion when she allows her own self-interest to take priority over the welfare of her servant, Fanny. Henley takes his wife to task on this issue and appears pleased at his own wisdom after the event. However, the reader has little difficulty in realizing that he lacks a more elusive and more vital wisdom, that of *discretion*.

In *Lettres deMistriss Henley* neither husband nor wife significantly advances towards greater communication with the other partner or towards mutual consideration. Henley's clumsy self-righteousness is undented, and his wife's impetuousness is at length mellowed by weariness and despair. The last pages of the story reveal a still impenetrable Henley giving a final turn to the screw. Out of puritanism and asceticism he commits the ultimate offence against his wife's feelings when he refuses a seat in Parliament. Moreover he does not consult Mrs Henley until after he has made his irrevocable decision, he does not sympathize with her feelings of disappointment, and he will now force her to live with him in rural isolation in the

knowledge of this. Indeed we have already learnt from the prologue to *Mistriss Henley* that now Mr Henley has read Constant's *Le Mari sentimental* he has the additional pleasure of being able to consider himself a martyr to his wife's conduct, a thought that had not hitherto occurred to him. This final touch admirably sums up the subtle humour in Isabelle de Charrière's story, arising from the kind of friction which is likely to occur between two incompatible people and their intractable situation. Mr Henley and Mrs Henley as individuals are perfectly all right in their own way, but they were simply never meant to live together.

With *Lettres neuchâteloises* we come to Madame de Charrière's first major novel. It appears to have been composed during the same period of literary activity as *Lettres deMistriss Henley*, and both works were published, probably simultaneously, in the first quarter of 1784.

In *Lettres neuchâteloises*[2] Madame de Charrière's attitude towards society is characterized by the finely calculated ambivalence that we find in her other novels. The difference with *Lettres neuchâteloises*, however, is that the scales seem to be tipped slightly in favour of the organizing and ordering forces within the community, which are set against the potentially destructive force of a wayward ego. The community can at times be hypocritical and unfair, and its censure has the power to prevent the strong from exploiting the weak. Nevertheless there is another side to the picture, and Isabelle de Charrière does not hesitate to place this before us as well. This is the image of a tightly knit, highly elitist group within society which ensures, when the need arises, that any victim of its members' misconduct is conveniently sent into exile. We are offered the disquieting image of a nominally Christian community acting in disregard of its principles when this is expedient. Thus we gain an evenly balanced and comprehensive view of the forces and tensions at work within a community. These are revealed as the central figure of the novel, Henri Meyer, attempts to come to terms with them. Further, Meyer's growth into a fully socialized individual entails the loss of one form of morality and the acquisition of a new code of conduct. In the process that Meyer undergoes he is helped by particular members of the community who act, as it were, as a leaven, ensuring that society's civilizing activity is carried through.

In writing a novel such as I have just described, Isabelle de Charrière draws on two separate traditions that would be familiar to her audience, those of Richardson and Fielding. But in setting its actions within the recognizable framework of Neuchâtel she is nearer to the topographical realism of the first half of Prévost's *Manon Lescaut*. There is, however, one source which Madame de Charrière openly acknowledges in a letter addressed to Taets van Amerongen:

Je venais de voir dans *Sara Burgerhart* [...] qu'en peignant des lieux et des mœurs que l'on connaît bien, l'on donne à des personnages fictifs une réalité précieuse.[3]

This novel clearly gave Isabelle de Charrière her initial inspiration from which her novel was to germinate, and as a starting point for our examination of *Lettres neuchâteloises* it will be well worthwhile looking more closely at this important source.

The *Historie van Mejuffrouw Sara Burgerhart* (1782) is, in the view of many critics, one of the finest Dutch novels of the eighteenth century. Written by two women, Betje Wolff and Aagje Deken, it is significant not so much for the basically Richardsonian mould in which it is cast as for its efforts to capture the particular flavour of middle-class life in the Netherlands. In a culture for so long dominated by French civilization, especially in the field of literature, the importance of *Sara Burgerhart* lay in the new sense of national

consciousness which it displayed. The range of social types examined constitutes a cross-section of eighteenth-century Dutch society; Zuzanna Hofland, the fanatical Protestant *dévote* is set against Abraham Blankaart, representing the liberal and human Dutch bourgeoisie; Heer R-, the ruthless Lovelace against Sara, the educated middle-class girl so vulnerable to his advances. Like *Lettres neuchâteloises*, the novel traces a young person's growth to maturity, that of Sara. But for us the central consideration is that, like Isabelle de Charrière's novel, *Sara Burgerhart* is firmly grounded in geographical and historical reality, giving, for example, verifiable details of contemporary Amsterdam and elsewhere.[4] Street and place-names are plentiful and must have helped to reinforce the fictional illusion for the eighteenth-century Dutch reader, as in *Lettres neuchâteloises* for the Neuchâtel reader. The *pension* on the Keizersgracht where Sara is said to live, Abraham Blankaart's lawyer on the Keizersgracht (where in real life a certain Jeronimus Nolthenius had his chambers),[5] the filth at Schiedam caused by a distillery, all these details would be sure to impress Madame de Charrière as being aesthetically enriching within the framework of a realistic story.[6]

As well as the deft use of a particular local atmosphere, Isabelle de Charrière also seems to have learnt (or to have learnt once more) how the skilful use of letters can shed light on personalities and situations from several sides. A necessary result of this technique is that although there are a few cardboard villains in *Sara Burgerhart*, most of its characters are rounded, and indeed they defy hasty definition by breaking out of the persona initially ascribed to them. Similarly in *Lettres neuchâteloises* Meyer's own accounts of his actions are balanced by those of Julianne, and often within each letter an opportunity is given for yet further characters to voice their opinions. This enriches the novel as a whole by allowing unresolved ironies to hover in the reader's mind.

Other less significant parallels with the Dutch novel are the exploitation of Richardson's technique of 'writing to the moment' to mirror thought and feeling in flux, and a common concern for the moral education of young people. But there can be little regret that Isabelle de Charrière chose to depart from her source in one major respect; she does not bring before us characters all of one piece, whose natures can be deduced immediately from their names, like Widow Spilgoed (generosity) of Buigzaam (amenable) or Styntje Doorzicht (perspicacity). As was noted earlier, Madame de Charrière's characters possess or lack certain qualities in various degrees and are endowed with a measure of fluidity.

We are, therefore, to consider a novel that consciously sets out to grasp the nature and quality of the life of a particular community. The town which Isabelle de Charrière chooses is, in the 1780s, a small face-to-face community of three to four thousand people. Everyone in Neuchâtel goes to church and takes communion, and everyone must attend the *prône* on Sundays. It is representative of the Protestant culture of a small corner of what was later to become Switzerland, and it can boast one feature of social life that would impress the outsider. This is the freedom of association between the sexes. It is the direct consequence of orthodox Protestant theology which counts among its central doctrines the primacy of the individual conscience, and every man and woman's personal responsibility to God for their actions. This is the burden of responsibility that Henri Meyer is forced to shoulder by the end of the novel. The same sense of freedom fraught with potential danger is found in *Sara Burgerhart* which similarly explores the question of responsibility against a Protestant background. But in Madame de Charrière's story the central figure does not draw back at the brink of disaster, unlike Sara. Henri Meyer does in fact act irresponsibly, but he is forgiven by the woman he loves, and through her he is brought back into the fold of society.

Let us for a moment leave the background of the novel and now turn our attention to the themes which *Lettres neuchâteloises* illuminates by skilful exploitation of this background. The central concern of the story itself is the kind of development that Marivaux described in *La Vie de Marianne*, one of growth towards maturity and self-understanding. This is achieved through coming to terms with others, and, in the broadest sense, learning the correct balance of self-assertion and self-denial necessary for society's well-being. If the hero or heroine is slow to learn the rules that the community has laid down, society administers a sharp lesson. Now such a novel is fraught with hidden pitfalls, not least that of a total collapse into over-simplification. Or the novelist may underestimate other factors in the fullness of human life, such as an individual's feelings towards received moral systems, or the clash of such a received moral code with the empiricism that governs most social transactions. As we are about to see, Isabelle de Charrière does not neglect these other concerns, but constantly enlarges the angle of vision; different facets of the socializing of the individual, and his profit and loss by the process, are brought out through Meyer's encounters with other characters. The result can only be an enrichment of the perceptions offered to the reader, for no questions are begged and all are left only partly answered. This, then, is way Isabelle de Charrière chooses to approach her subject. Let us now see how this is worked out in detail in *Lettres neuchâteloises*.

Henri Meyers first steps in ethics are consciously arranged to coincide with a growing awareness of himself and of the social role he intends to play. Like Marivaux's Marianne and Jacob, he is seen at a crossroads in his life and he must set himself on the right path while he still can. The development of his love for Marianne de la Prise parallels his acquisition of the values of the *haute bourgeoisie* from the potential bourgeois that we see in him at the outset. The process is threefold, passing from revolt through confusion to compliance at the close. Along Meyer's path occur a series of 'recognitions' of the truth about his situation, in which he attempts to win a difficult victory over the very obverse of upper middle-class values. And Marianne is for him "le prix d'une longue persévérance".[7] At the beginning of the story there is little suggestion of Meyer's previous social class other than that it had allowed him a good education. He is more literary-minded than his fellow clerks, but has to learn a middle-class skill to live by:

Je quittais des études [...] pour venir au milieu de gens inconnus me vouer à une occupation toute nouvelle pour moi, pour laquelle j'aurai peut-être un talent fort médiocre.[8]

We later learn that he is the son of a lower middle-class *marchand* from Augsburg.[9] He begins in Neuchâtel in voluntary isolation from others, and this withdrawal into himself to a degree anticipates his loss of respect for the rights of social inferiors. There is a general arrogance and sourness of tone in his commentary on the town in the second letter of the novel. He finds himself placed low on any social scale, although still above the working class of which he is disdainful. Nonetheless his outlook is that of a *petit-bourgeois* intent on rising. Meyer's fondness for music (he plays in a chamber ensemble), his determination not to let slip the fruits of his studies in Latin ("On a beau dire que cela est fort inutile pour un négociant"),[10] and his indifference towards money match his unconcealed scorn for the mercantile outlook:

Pour moi, si je fais mon métier de gagner de l'argent, je tâcherai de n'entretenir personne du vif désir que j'aurai d'y réussir; car c'est un dégoûtant entretien.[11]

He does not worry about money as long as it flows in in moderate sums from his uncle Charles D. He feels he is one of the 'gens du monde' in his behaviour, this is clear. His sensitive mind and his gift for social intuition cause him to suffer acutely when a well-meaning woman at the ball suggests he is better placed socially than in fact he is:

J'ai répondu que j'étais le fils d'un marchand d'Augsbourg.

- D'un négociant, m'a-t-elle dit.

- Non, Madame, ai-je repris (et j'ai senti que je rougissais), d'un marchand. Je sais bien la différence.[12]

Each stage in Henri Meyer's social development underlines the rigidness of social barriers: even though we sense that he is destined to rise socially, Isabelle de Charrière is at pains not to conceal the difficulty of his task, and by implication the lengths to which fashionable middle-class society goes to ensure its exclusive superiority. Meyer's temporary desertion of the ostensible standards of the caste to which he aspires deprives him of the model on which he was trying to shape himself. His casual liaison with a seamstress leaves him uneasy and totally disorientated, and he fears that he is slipping imperceptibly away from his ideal:

Si une fois l'on commence à manquer de sincérité, et cela sans une grande nécessité, on ne sait plus, à ce qu'il me semble, où l'on s'arrêtera; car il faut qu'il en ait peu coûté pour mentir, et chaque jour l'habitude rendra cela plus facile. Et alors que deviendra l'honneur, la confiance que l'on veut inspirer, en un mot tout ce que nous estimons?[13]

Perhaps I may be permitted a short digression on the important question of the moral assumptions that are clearly shaping Madame de Charrière's portrayal of Meyer's growth. Sympathetic communication and association, and the awareness of the response of society are central elements in the thought of Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), a book with which Isabelle de Charrière was thoroughly familiar.[14] Smith was anxious to establish the existence of an inner monitor or conscience within every man, formed by the opinions of our fellow men on our actions. Through this mirror-like faculty we judge our own behaviour in a versatile form of imaginative projection. The checks on self-love thus lie both within and outside ourselves. Virtue is to be found in stoical *striving* for self-control; but the weakness of Smith's system is its reliance on the relative standards of society to the detriment of individual initiative. Henri Meyer closely follows the pattern traced by Adam Smith. From initial detachment and scorn for his colleagues, and from the absolute failure of sympathy in his treatment of the seamstress Julianne, Meyer has come to a crossroads. As we have seen, he voices his perplexity in Letter Nine; from this moment on he will follow the guidelines laid down by polite society. Thus we apparently see a triumph of high morality in Meyer's new resolution, in which he is helped by Marianne. However, this is only part of the picture; it is worthwhile asking whether Madame de Charrière goes a stage beyond Smith and shows how polite society thinks nothing of bundling Julianne off to Germany and of taking her child away from her. For the modern reader expediency reinforced by a rigid social hierarchy seems here to come before everything. We are left with a nagging doubt in our minds: if this is the kind of moral code and practice that Henri Meyer has been modelling his new morality on, how much is it worth? And when middle-class society dictates conduct, what happens to individual moral intuitions? Although one cannot be *certain* of Isabelle de Charrière's own attitude, questions such as these seem to be hinted at quite strongly here.

But let us return to Meyer's moment of choice, remembering the Smithian undertones present in his moral development. His misdemeanour with Julianne has brought the strongest sense of guilt, casting a shadow over his promising new relationship with Marianne. Isabelle de Charrière underlines the dangers of permanent loss of reputation in Letter Nine, where Meyer's ignorance in the face of social ostracism is a sign to the reader of the risks he is taking.[15] On the other hand, however, his basic honesty does succeed in winning him approval at the Ball. There his manifest loyalty to his friend outweighs the lack of social foresight which Meyer has shown in giving his friend, M. Monin, a ticket not intended for him. Similarly his offer to surrender Marianne as dancing-partner to Count Max earns him the respect he needs. But still he is unable to enter fully into the concerns of the class he aspires to. When class friction between bourgeois and patrician in Geneva is discussed, he is forced to admit:

Comment parler d'une chose où l'on n'entend rien?[16]

Gradually, it becomes clear that the more Meyer despises the *arrivisme* and the scramble for positions of the counting-house, and the more he shuns its base materialism, the higher he rises in the esteem and approval of the 'gens du monde'. It was the generous instincts that Meyer displayed on the occasion when he helped Julianne when she had dropped a dress in the mud which first impressed and attracted Marianne:

L'histoire m'en fut faite le lendemain; elle me plut: j'y voyais de la bonté et une sorte de courage; car la petite fille, jolie à la vérité, est si mal mise et a si mauvaise façon, qu'un élégant un peu vain ne se serait pas soucié d'être vu avec elle dans les rues.[17]

Through contact with polite society Meyer's tone matures. He confesses that both in social and moral concerns he is adapting himself:

Qu'on le veuille ou non, on change; on s'instruit; on devient responsable de ses actions.[18]

He is absorbed into the culture of educated society, for through Count Max he learns correct literary German, and through Marianne's social skill (we learn she belongs to an ancient noble family) he is saved from social disgrace and set on the path towards social fulfilment. Germaine de Staël's complaint that the novel is incomplete is superficial, for the whole point of the story is to illustrate the widening consciousness of both Meyer and Marianne.[19] *Lettres neuchâteloises* is a novel of development in which issues are seldom resolved but where the lines of suggestion are at the close deliberately prolonged indefinitely. This is likewise true of the finest example of the genre, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-6). There are no final answers in life; we can only assume that since everything in the novel tends in that direction, Henri Meyer and Marianne de la Prise will be united in marriage and in the world of polite Neuchâtel society as they are already united emotionally. All is by no means certain, for Marianne's fortune is not great and Henri Meyer is still a counting-house apprentice, but the novel loses nothing through this uncertainty.

To the modern reader a wealth of assumptions, both expressed and left unexpressed, are felt at times to link Isabelle de Charrière and her intended audience. There is a framework that is fully operative at the aesthetic level which needs closer examination, for it is inherited from the novels of Marivaux and Crébillon and is a peculiarly French achievement. (Perhaps the closest English equivalent is Jane Austen's unspoken frame of reference.) In terms of character and action it is made manifest in the peculiar importance for individuals of visual

perceptiveness as a means of self-protection. Through gauging other people's intentions from their appearance and behaviour one gains the advantage of foreknowledge of their actions. Roland Barthes was one of the first modern critics to examine this phenomenon in relation to La Bruyère, and to suggest the value for the critic of an awareness of its presence in literature.[20] Although with the tiny microcosm of Neuchâtel we are not faced with the sophisticated social rules of Versailles or of the Parisian salon, there are nonetheless styles of behaviour and there is an emphasis on tact and perceptiveness that are in some measure comparable. Meyer is attempting to win admission to the kind of 'clôture' of which Barthes speaks, and believes that he can fulfil himself only in such a cultivated circle. When we take leave of him at the end of the story, he has almost reached the point of being accepted into fashionable society thanks to his own qualities and to Marianne's perseverance in his cause. It is perhaps her delicate handling of the crucial interview with Meyer concerning Julianne at the Assemblée that best exemplifies both her own knowledge and understanding of the social code and the (potentially ruthless) pragmatism enshrined in it. She has undertaken to settle the problem of Julianne and must discuss the matter with Meyer. To the embarrassment of the subject-matter itself is added the need to preserve her own reputation from any suggestion that she may be carrying on a sexual liaison with him. She therefore enlists the aid of Count Max, who is to preserve her from all malicious gossip by his presence at the interview, for she can only speak to Henri Meyer in a public place. She says to the Count:

Voulez-vous bien renoncer, comme moi, à la danse pour ce soir? Dans quelques moments nous nous asseyerons tous trois sur ce banc; vous vous mettrez entre M. Meyer et moi; de cette façon, j'aurai l'air de parler à tous deux. Nous serons souvent interrompus: il ne faudra pas avoir l'air d'en être fâchés; il faudra nous quitter quelquefois, quitter la conversation, et puis la reprendre [...][21]

She is acutely aware of the eyes of Neuchâtel society evaluating her conduct from her face and her looks, as well as judging her behaviour in male company, but she undertakes to ward off the public gaze and to risk her reputation in the cause she has taken up. She shows too, when Meyer has made it clear that he is no longer interested in Julianne as his mistress, that she will ensure that he will not have to see Julianne again:

Il ne sera donc pas nécessaire qu'il la revoie? a dit le comte.

- Point nécessaire du tout, a-t-elle dit avec quelque précipitation.[22]

The rest is taken care of by Meyer's rich uncle, Charles D, in Frankfurt. He mixes generosity and severe middle-class empiricism in his dealings with Julianne, whose voice is never again heard in the story. Charles D stipulates that everything will be done for Meyer's illegitimate child to ensure that it will be brought up as a credit to its father; but it is to be deprived of its mother from its earliest days. She must leave it in Charles D's care. Thus Julianne pays a higher price for her indiscretion than Henri Meyer, and this thought perhaps troubles the modern reader for being nowhere voiced by any of the middle-class characters in the novel. Isabelle de Charrière's realism is double-edged, dealing as fairly with the empty and amoral Julianne as with the closed and oligarchic world that uses her as it sees fit.

We are, then, given both the framework of a civilizing social code and the limitations of such an élite world. Meyer recognized very early in the story that *le monde* is by nature and function exclusive, and he was ready to acquiesce in this even to his own personal exclusion:

[...] on ne reçoit pas les commis et les apprentis de comptoir dans les sociétés: en quoi on a bien raison, à ce qu'il me semble; car ce serait une cohue de polissons. S'il y a quelques exceptions, cela n'empêche pas que la règle soit bonne.[23]

Along with his generous qualities Meyer already has a hint of rather priggish exclusiveness in his attitudes that make his growth into a fully-fledged *mondain* all the more credible. Marianne de la Prise, already inside fashionable society, is the instrument that erases his momentary moral lapse from history, as social convention demands that it must be. For his part, he too renders a service. She had been bored with good society:

le monde [...] me promettait des compensations, et il ne me les a pas données; je croyais entrevoir en lui des charmes qui se sont évanouis dès que j'en ai fait partie moi-même.[24]

This again is the other side of society that Isabelle de Charrière does not conceal, with its routine, its idleness and the ever-present threat of boredom. But Marianne de la Prise's love for Henri Meyer and the responsibilities it imposes make Marianne rediscover her role and its use as a power for good. There is a sense of balance which must be found between arrogance about one's social rank and underestimating oneself, and which Meyer and Marianne are near to finding at the end of the story. Both avoid the kind of false modesty of Meyer's employer, who pretends to set no store by the recently acquired 'de' in his name.[25]

Love is of course the theme which balances and complements that of Meyer's social education, and it offers Madame de Charrière a further opportunity to display the tact, intelligence and self-awareness of her young protagonists. As in the world of Marivaux's plays, a woman must discover truths essential to her happiness without disclosing her own feelings. She must delve beneath appearances with words and glances, while in no way outraging propriety. This is a difficult task and in itself constitutes a test of character. For Marianne in Isabelle de Charrière's novel must gauge Meyer's feelings towards her through close observation, and in so doing she discovers the circumstantial detail of his apparent promiscuity which might be expected to work against a favourable conclusion. Furthermore, she has made it plain that when she commits herself to a man it will be for life.[26] All this has the essence of a rather cold approach to love, but Isabelle de Charrière's psychological realism comes in here, showing how in fact she is a warm and fragile creature who, for some of the time at least, is barely in control of her thoughts and reactions. At the Concert Meyer notices her first blush, prompted by his stare,[27] and observes the flush of jealousy on their walk together when Julianne is mentioned.[28] Meyer has a fairly good idea of her feelings from such things, but at times she is uncertain herself of her emotions. The Richardsonian 'writing to the moment' allowed by the epistolary form affords scope for the realistic exploration of such emotional limbos. Marianne tries to focus her attention on the minutiae of her sentiments, but fears either myopic distortion or over-diminution of them. This sense of her unstable and unreliable judgement attempting to deal with feelings that are themselves in perpetual flux is admirably captured in the ebb and flow of her symmetrical sentences:

Il me semble que j'ai quelque chose à te dire; et quand je veux commencer, je ne vois plus rien qui vaille la peine d'être dit [...] tous les faits sont si petits, que le récit m'en serait ennuyeux à moi-même; et l'impression est quelquefois si forte que je ne saurais la rendre.[29]

The 'frozen time' of the letter and her need to speak when nothing is yet clear, in this letter to her friend, convey Marianne's fleeting moments of expectation that hover between definable mental attitudes. She must give expression to an intuition that has not yet reached

expressibility and exists in a temporal no man's land. "Davantage" occurs three times in two consecutive sentences, in which the flustered unawareness of style reflects her confusion:

Permets, ma chère Eugénie, que je n'en dise pas davantage jusqu'à ce que [le chaos] se soit un peu débrouillé et que je sois rentrée dans mon état ordinaire, supposé que j'y puisse rentrer. Ne te rien dire eût été trop pénible; t'en dire davantage, quand moi-même je n'en sais pas davantage, ne serait pas possible [...][30]

Isabelle de Charrière seems here to be seeking a form of notation for indeterminate psychological states. Marivaux too is often concerned with such feelings that defy verbal formulation, as we see in this passage on the writer's task from *Réflexions sur la clarté du discours* (1719):

C'est comme si l'âme, dans l'impuissance d'exprimer une modification qui n'a point de nom, en fixait une de la même espèce que la sienne; mais inférieure à la sienne en vivacité, et l'exprimait de façon que l'image de cette moindre modification pût exciter, dans les autres, une idée plus ou moins fidèle de la véritable modification qu'elle ne peut produire.[31]

But as well as this intuitive exploration of the human mind Isabelle de Charrière also shows, through her portrayal of Marianne de la Prise, how a shrewd young woman using the skill of close observation can come to a correct decision on her prospective partner's character. She could deduce from the status and dress of both Meyer and Julianne that it took some courage for him to help Julianne when she had dropped a dress in the mud. He had nothing to gain in the transaction, and this is not vitiated by his later treatment of Julianne. Secondly Marianne noted his flustered appearance when she appeared at the Concert in the dress Julianne dropped:

Je vis qu'il reconnaissait ma robe. Moi, je reconnus la physionomie que devait avoir celui qui l'avait relevée; et nous nous perdîmes si bien dans cette contemplation l'un de l'autre, que je laissai tomber ma musique et qu'il oublia son violon, ne sachant plus, ni lui ni moi, de quoi il était question, ni ce que nous avions à faire. Il rougit, je rougis aussi.[32]

The next stage, once their interest in each other is confirmed, is Marianne's "curiosité assez naturelle de savoir si M. Meyer est aussi bon, aussi honnête qu'il en a l'air".[33] The incident in which, in spite of the presence of Marianne, Meyer saves Julianne from children pelting her with snowballs clearly gives a positive answer to this question. It is when Marianne undertakes to ease Meyer's difficult situation with Julianne that she gleans the information that allows her to say triumphantly:

Je ne me trompais pas: il m'aime; cela est bien sûr, il m'aime. Il ne me l'a pas dit; mais il me l'aurait dit mille fois que je ne le saurais pas mieux.[34]

By Meyer's distress and bewilderment when told of Julianne's pregnancy, by his embarrassed gratitude for a social connection with Marianne even in these circumstances, and by his tears, as well as by his kissing of her dress (all these facts are recounted by Meyer) Marianne's intuitions about his character are confirmed. She knows that he did not seduce Julianne, that Julianne was a willing partner in a youthful aberration Meyer now regrets, and that Meyer is grateful for some kind of link with herself, at whatever cost in terms of embarrassment: all these things she gauges from Meyer's interview with her at the Assemblée, which he recounts in Letter Twenty-One.

All social transactions in the world of fashionable society in Neuchâtel must be guided by careful observation. The attentiveness of the two young principal characters shows this. But there is another aspect of behaviour within the circumscribed ambit of *le monde* which illustrates Isabelle de Charrière's impartial realism particularly well. This is the figure of 'Le Caustique' whose quasi-symbolic form hovers in the background throughout the novel. He exasperates Meyer by the accuracy of his account of society's changing attitudes to Meyer's behaviour. In fact the urbane M. Z*** is a personification of the all-seeing but unseen entity, Society. He knows Neuchâtel from the inside and tries to steer Meyer away from anything that would threaten his social and emotional life. But he is at the same time a representative of society's hard cutting-edge by reason of his abrasive wit. Thus he admirably exemplifies Madame de Charrière's own bifocal view of society in *Lettres neuchâteloises*. It is with experience that Meyer gains the mature discrimination and broadness of sympathy that allow him to value the pragmatic commentaries of a social daemon who is neither good nor evil, like society itself. 'Le Caustique' warns Henri Meyer, after Meyer's long talk with Marianne at the Assemblée, that despite their elaborate precautions there is doubt about the propriety of their friendship:

C'est si peu votre intention de faire soupçonner une intrigue entre vous et la plus aimable fille de Neuchâtel, que je vous prie de ne pas m'en assurer...[35]

Meyer's final appreciation of 'Le Caustique' denotes his hard-won grasp of the complexity of human behaviour, acquired through the chastening consciousness of his own potential for good and evil:

Les gens caustiques ne sont donc pas nécessairement méchants, ou du moins ils ne sont pas méchants en tout. Mais qui pourrait être méchant en tout si ce n'est le diable? Et encore le diable?...[36]

We have now seen some of the central themes of *Lettres neuchâteloises* which make it a novel of self-discovery and of social education. It remains for us to examine how Meyer's discovery and experience of Neuchâtel society are translated into the structure and style of the novel.

The story of Henri Meyer's development describes, one might say, a curve of rapid fall and gradual recovery. The first eight letters of *Lettres neuchâteloises* trace Meyer's encounter with Julianne, his first sight of Marianne, his furtive intimacy with Julianne and the end of their liaison. This brings us to the centre of the novel, the point at which Meyer takes stock of himself. Letters Nine to Thirty place before us Meyer's recovery of self-respect, his growth in social responsiveness and his increasing love for Marianne, a love which she returns. Of course, this kind of shape in a story is not unusual, although generally an 'introduction to society' describes a more linear pattern in a character's acquisition of experience and wisdom. But clearly a rapid 'fall' followed by a slow recovery does leave scope for enriching insights into the many-sidedness of individuals; like 'Le Caustique', Meyer is a young man whose occasionally cruel behaviour is not allowed to obscure the fact of his fundamentally altruistic nature. But we also see a man who willing to see his sense of what is right modified by the demands of polite society.

The kind of shape Isabelle de Charrière gives to her plot brings out the complexity of character that lurks beneath the surface of all human beings. In a sense the *felix culpa* story acts as a metaphor for such complexity. For it captures perfectly the ambivalence of growing

out of innocence into maturity, and balances out the profit and loss of such experience. Before his fall from grace Henri Meyer was a man of a morally neutral disposition. He indulged in desiccated wit at the expense of Neuchâtel and its inhabitants, and flaunted his superiority over his fellow clerks. On the other hand he could sympathize with the lot of women grape-harvesters, and was willing to assist Julianne when she dropped in the mud the dress she had been working on. (However we are not sure how far sexual motives enter into his sympathy, and therefore how far his behaviour is disinterested.) Meyer's affair with Julianne has repercussions for his self-esteem: he is intelligent and lucid enough to feel dissatisfied with his conduct. His realization is, however, as complex as all his feelings; it reveals on the one hand a knowledge that such a liaison can only do him harm socially -

Je crains qu'on ne vous ait vue sortir de chez moi, et j'en suis très fâché pour l'amour de vous, et aussi pour l'amour de moi-même.[37]

- and on the other hand a vague residue of guilt in view of society's moral and social injunctions against sexual promiscuity. On every count he finds that he has fallen short of his own ideal of himself, and resolves to begin the new year differently:

Ce jour-ci a pour moi une solennité lugubre. Je me suis demandé ce que j'avais fait de l'année qui finit; je me suis comparé à ce que j'étais il y a un an, et il s'en faut bien que mes réflexions m'aient égayé. Je pleure; je suis inquiet: une nouvelle époque de ma vie a commencé; je ne sais comment je m'en tirerai, ni comment elle finira...[38]

His honesty re-emerges to win him consideration at the Ball, and the thought of Marianne assists him in overcoming socially undesirable instincts:

je souhaite surtout que son idée ne me quitte plus et me préserve de rechute.[39]

He has lost what may have been either innocence or ignorance, and has gained a new maturity:

je ne suis plus un enfant; cela est vrai, j'ai presque dit: cela n'est que trop vrai; mais au bout du compte, puisque la vie s'avance, il faut bien avancer avec elle! Qu'on le veuille ou non, on change; on s'instruit; on devient responsable de ses actions.[40]

The fullness of life in society, with all its obligations, finds a new response in Meyer, and is expressed in words which could stand as an epigraph for the whole novel:

je sens bien qu'il faut que je paie moi-même l'expérience que j'acquiers; mais je voudrais que d'autres ne la payassent pas.[41]

He moves on to a more positive and optimistic attitude towards other members of Neuchâtel society; our last glimpse of him is on his departure for Strasbourg where he goes to help a sick friend. (But, as was noted earlier, this too is balanced by the rather cynical disregard of Julianne's feelings by all the main characters, whose charity stops short of consulting a mother about the fate of her child.) Helping Meyer to grow into a more responsible and sensitive member of society is Marianne, an almost redemptive figure who is witness to his generous and gentlemanly conduct in rescuing Julianne from a second 'fall'. This is the snowballing scene, where Julianne is in even greater and more real danger from a kind of

symbolic stoning than from the scorn and contempt of society. In helping Meyer, Marianne herself learns to tolerate and forgive human weakness.

As well as discovering himself, Meyer also comes to terms with both the mental concept and the physical reality of Neuchâtel. I spoke earlier of the particular flavour of Protestant Neuchâtel that Isabelle de Charrière conveys. Let us now examine how she makes the atmosphere and speech of Neuchâtel support the theme with which she is dealing.

In *Lettres neuchâteloises* Isabelle de Charrière presents us with a standard form of speech, together with the social assumptions which underlie it. The speech of Julianne constitutes a striking deviation from this linguistic norm.[42] The order in which the letters in the novel are arranged is also related to this question of a normative style, and we will examine it first of all. We are introduced into the world of the novel and into the atmosphere of Neuchâtel by Julianne. Julianne's first letters contain several provincial terms that firmly establish the Swiss setting in the reader's mind. She is favourably impressed by the act of kindness of a stranger, Henri Meyer. Next we have two letters by Meyer himself, relating the circumstances of his arrival in Neuchâtel, and mentioning Julianne only incidentally in his second letter. The fourth letter of the novel is devoted entirely to Meyer's first encounter with Marianne. Then, after these three letters by Meyer, we have a letter by Julianne describing her dismissal from the shop, and then a letter addressed by her to Meyer appealing for help. This is followed by Meyer's intimacy with her and his desire to break off their relationship. This is the pattern of the first movement of the novel, a more or less equal distribution of the two principal voices, each offering a sample of the speech of their class and locality. The second movement of the novel allows us to hear only Meyer's voice and the voice of Marianne, heard previously only in dialogue. Julianne's voice is heard only once, and then it follows several of Marianne's letters, making the contrast very conspicuous.

It is clear that the letters are carefully arranged by Isabelle de Charrière to differentiate Julianne's view of the world from that of Henri Meyer. The voices alternate, and on second hearing that of Julianne clashes ominously with the gentler if somewhat more detached tone of Meyer. It is the reader who must see both sides of the picture as no individual character can. For Julianne's style reveals not only uncouthness and a certain cunning, but also a kind of innocence, for all her sensuality, when compared with the dry detached manner of Meyer:

Ce n'est pas que je demande rien à Monsieur, car je ne suis pas dans la misère; mais le bois est bien cher, et l'hiver sera encore bien long, et les fenêtres de ma chambre sont si mauvaises que je ne puis presque pas travailler du froid que j'ai aux mains. Le cordonnier chez qui je suis demeure tout au bas de la rue des Chavannes.[43]

In the second movement of the novel, after Meyer ends his liaison with Julianne, Julianne's sole intervention is, now that the norm of polite speech has been established, a strange, graceless and discordant element, but also one of rustic innocence. Her artless revelations of past sexual promiscuity do not diminish the fact of her defenceless ignorance in a community that has the power to exploit her. Indeed there is a certain honest realism and sociological truth in making Julianne a seamstress. Seamstresses and those similarly employed were invariably badly paid, exploited and overworked, and in this letter Julianne complains of all these things to her aunt.[44] It has been noted that the contrast between a seamstress's poverty and the riches she beheld every day, and the number of contacts that people in the dress-making profession maintained with different social classes, combined to produce a loose moral outlook. For seamstresses were traditionally used as go-betweens in liaisons and often

fell into prostitution themselves.[45] In the case of Julianne, Madame de Charrière takes a universally acknowledged social situation and places it in a particular Swiss setting, showing the effect on an ignorant peasant girl of exploitation and ostentatious wealth. What characterizes Julianne's speech, apart from a greater preoccupation with the concrete and the everyday? Firstly, of course, the use of provincialisms, "bouëbe", "jaubler", "gringe", "engringer". Then there is the recurrent popular use of "la" in "la Marie Besson", which is not geographically limited to the Neuchâtel region. But for a wider sample of her speech and what it conveys to the reader let us look at the following passage:

Vous allez être un peu surprise, mais je vous assure que ce n'est pas ma faute, et je suis sûre que sans la Marie Besson, qui a méchante langue, quoiqu'elle pût bien se taire, car sa sœur et elle ont toujours eu une petite conduite, tout cela ne serait pas arrivé. Vous savez bien ce que je vous ai écrit de la robe de Mlle Marianne de la Prise, qui tomba dans la boue, et comment un Monsieur m'aida à la ramasser et voulut venir avec moi vers mes maîtresses; et je vous ai dit aussi qu'il m'avait donné un petit écu, dont la Marie Besson a bien tant à dire! Et je vous ai aussi dit que le lendemain il vint demander si on avait bien pu nettoyer la robe, et on avait fort bien pu la nettoyer, et mêmement mes maîtresses avaient fait un pli où çà avait été sali, que Mlle de la Prise avait trouvé qui allait fort bien: car je lui avais raconté toute l'histoire, et elle n'avait fait qu'en rire, et m'avait demandé le nom du Monsieur; mais je ne le savais pas. Et quand j'eus tout cela raconté au Monsieur, et comment Mlle de la Prise était une bien bonne demoiselle, il me demanda d'où j'étais, et combien je gagnais, et si j'aimais ma profession. Et quand ensuite il voulut s'en aller, je sortis pour lui ouvrir la porte, et en passant il mit un gros écu dans ma main; et je crois bien qu'il me serra la main, ou qu'il m'embrassa.[46]

It is precisely through Julianne's style that Isabelle de Charrière casts the maximum of light on her liaison with Meyer. The style – completely unlike the style of Meyer - is that of a gossiping shopgirl who is incapable of mature self-awareness, of informed judgement or of even the broadest discrimination between the trivial and the important in what goes on around her. We note the sinuous shape of her sentences, winding through subordinate clauses and switching tenses at bewildering speed. The breathless hurrying stream of 'and's exemplifies not only popular volubility but also the total absence of any reasoned analysis in her thought. All these factors which clearly reflect Julianne's character are placed before the reader in an effort on Isabelle de Charrière's part to be totally objective and realistic: Julianne is a rather empty-headed and frivolous young girl, but she is also in a position of great social weakness vis-à-vis Meyer. She would be unable to control her emotions in an encounter with him, just as here she cannot resist a biting aside against her enemies.

The first letter by Meyer, from the same early stage of the novel as Julianne's letter, quoted above, contrasts strongly with her gushing prattle. Meyer is concerned to see behind the physical peculiarities of Neuchâtel, to interpret and to impose a pattern on it, as we see here:

On est fort content de mon écriture et de ma facilité à chiffrer. Il me semble qu'on est fort disposé à tenir parole à mon oncle pour le soin de me faire avancer, autant que possible, dans la connaissance du métier que j'apprends. Il y a une grande différence entre moi et les autres apprentis quant aux choses auxquelles on nous emploie: sans être bien vain, j'ose dire aussi qu'il y en a assez quant à la manière dont on nous a élevés eux et moi. Il n'y en a qu'un dont il me paraisse que c'est dommage de le voir occupé de choses pour lesquelles il ne faut aucune intelligence et qui n'apprennent rien, il serait fort naturel qu'il devînt jaloux de moi;

mais je tâcherai de faire en sorte, par toutes sortes de prévenances, qu'il soit bien aise de m'avoir ici: cela me sera bien aisé. Les autres ne sont que des polissons.[47]

Meyer's style reveals a man who evaluates and categorizes the world around him and then measures himself against it. But, as so often in Isabelle de Charrière's work, this has both a positive and a negative side. On the positive side clearly Henri Meyer is a man of sensitive discrimination; on the negative side he is something of a prig, and harbours a destructive arrogance that will be chastened by his experiences in Neuchâtel. Above all he has the intelligence to act sensibly and responsibly, and fails in that task when he uses Julianne for his own pleasure. Before we move on to other more specific aspects of Meyer's experience of Neuchâtel life, it is interesting to speculate on the use of juxtaposed styles to bring out the contrasts between Meyer and Julianne. For Laclos in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, published in 1782, also began his novel with the 'babil' of the naïve Cécile de Volanges and then made it alternate with the polished epistolary style of the Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont. It is reasonable to suppose that Isabelle de Charrière may have been impressed by the technique and may have adopted it for use in her own novel.

In *Lettres neuchâteloises* Henri Meyer comes to terms with a realistically portrayed member of the working class of Neuchâtel. But there is more to his awareness of the town than this. Local references are worked into the fabric of the story from time to time; Julianne's aunt lives at Boudevilliers near Neuchâtel;[48] there are references to the Rue du Neubourg,[49] to the Armourins,[50] to a cobbler's shop in the Rue des Chavannes where Julianne lodges,[51] to Marianne's father's estate in the Val-de-Travers and his vineyards at Auvernier,[52] and to Le Crêt and Le Mail, two hills behind Neuchâtel.[53] This kind of topographical realism was to be found in both *Manon Lescaut* and *Sara Burgerhart*. But there is also a more obsessive presence of Neuchâtel in the story as an almost allegorical social stage for Meyer's actions. It is the interplay between the streets and landscapes of Neuchâtel and Meyer's thoughts and feelings that enriches the reader's experience of the novel.

One of the best examples of this use of background detail to throw light on Meyer's character is his account of his journey into the town itself. He has come to learn his profession in the counting-house of Monsieur M, and has consciously left behind all family restraints in Germany; his first reactions reveal his eagerness to obtain as much pleasure, both intellectual and physical, as he can. His first encounter with what constitutes the economic lifeblood of Neuchâtel, its vineyards, fills him with disdain. Ideas of fixity, regularity and of a whole community involved in hard work according to the cycle of the seasons are not pleasing to Meyer in his present frame of mind. The working women in particular, the *vendangeuses*, arouse both his repugnance and pity in a rather ominous way that foreshadows his attitude towards Julianne. He feels that disciplined effort in carrying out a socially useful task is not for them, and the suggestion is that they are too young and pretty for such tasks. Nor does the wine-pressing please Meyer: it too smacks of order and regularity, and challenges his individualistic and egotistical inclinations. For Meyer the town of Neuchâtel is a place of decision, although he at first thinks of it as a place of escape. He walks around it admiring the women of the town, and at the bottom of one of its many narrow and sloping streets he sees Julianne slip and fall in the mud. Their intimacy eventually takes place in the meanness of her room above a cobbler's shop at the bottom of the Rue des Chavannes. By contrast Meyer's love for Marianne is characterized by a sense of height and spaciousness, also related to the topography of Neuchâtel; they meet above the town and walk on the Mail together, and at the close of the novel there is the promise of Meyer's graduation to the polite world of the salon.

In *Lettres neuchâteloises* Isabelle de Charrière exploits, for the first time on this scale, the kind of undidactic psychological analysis that she was to develop further in *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*. And the novel shares with *Lettres deMistriss Henley* a characteristic trait of her work (although lacking the dark ironic wit of *Mistriss Henley*): it offers a deliberate challenge to the reader's readiness to conclude. The grounds for all judgement are shown to be infinitely complex. She avoids stereotyped characters and situations, preferring to create each character anew and in very specific circumstances. Stock responses, then, are not encouraged, and the security of our preconceptions is constantly threatened. This frankness and impartiality of mind extends also to her range of interests - Sainte-Beuve in particular admired Isabelle de Charrière's courage in her handling of the Julianne episode. As we shall see in a later chapter, she was to employ in *Caliste* a further technique to offer an even greater number of perspectives on character and motive.

Lettres neuchâteloises, Mistriss Henley, Le Noble par Madame de Charrière avec une préface de Philippe Godet (Geneva, 1908), 121-1. (Hereafter referred to as *L.N.*, followed by the page number.)

[2] The story traces the initiation of a young German from Augsburg, Henri Meyer, into the obligations of social life. Soon after his arrival in Neuchâtel, where he takes up employment as an *apprenti de comptoir*, he engages in a liaison with a seamstress, Julianne C., which results in her pregnancy. Soon after breaking off his relationship with Julianne, Meyer finds a fuller and more lasting love in Marianne de la Prise. Marianne learns of Julianne's plight, and with Meyer's cooperation arranges for her to go to Frankfurt, where the child will be adopted by Meyer's uncle, Charles D.

[3] Quoted by Godet in the preface to his edition of *Lettres neuchâteloises* (Geneva, 1908), p.x. Sainte-Beuve was the first critic to mention this letter in his *Portraits de Femmes* (Paris, [1869]).

[4] For details of this meticulous realism of setting in *Sara Burgerhart*, see P. J. Buijnsters' article, 'Tijd en plaats in de roman *Sara Burgerhart*', *Studia Neerlandica*, 3 (1970), 20-32.

[5] Buijnsters, art. cit., 27-8 and 32.

[6] There was for long a popular assumption, perpetuated by the exhibition catalogue *Belle de Zuylen et son époque* (Institut Néerlandais, Paris; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1961), that Isabelle de Charrière translated *Sara Burgerhartinto French. In fact the tr*anslation, *Histoirede Mademoiselle Sara Burgerhart* (Lausanne, 1787) is very probably the work of Henri Rieu. (See 'De Franse vertaling van Sara Burgerhart. Voorlopige mededelingen' door H. A. Höweler. Overdruk (met enige wijzigingen) uit *Documentatieblad van de Werkgroep 18e Ee*uw, Nr 9, November 1970.)

[7] *L.N.*, 102.

[8] *L.N.*, 7.

[9] *L.N.*, 39.

[10] *L.N.*, 8.

[11] *L.N.*, 30.

[12] *L.N.*, 39.

[13] *L.N.*, 16-17.

[14] On Isabelle de Charrière's detailed knowledge of Adam Smith's book, see Godet I, 110.

[15] *L.N.*, 29: 'quelque chose qui s'était dit auparavant, et dont je n'avais pas la clef'.

[16] *L.N.*, 39.

[17] *L.N.*, 53

[18] *L.N.*, 61.

[19] See Godet II, 138.

[20] Roland Barthes, *Essais critiques* (Paris, 1964), 221-237.

[21] *L.N.*, 81.

[22] *L.N.*, 86.

[23] *L.N.*, 12.

[24] *L.N.*, 41.

[25] *L.N.*, 14.

[26] *L.N.*, 54-5 and 73.

[27] *L.N.*, 18.

[28] *L.N.*, 66.

[29] *L.N.*, 46. The same kind of oscillation and uncertainty between 'rien n'a changé pour moi' and 'une immense histoire à te faire', 'le monde a changé' etc. is present throughout Letter Thirteen (46-7 passim).

[30] *L.N.*, 47.

[31] Quoted by Frédéric Deloffre in *Stylistique et poétique françaises* (Paris; 1970); 115.

[32] *L.N.*, 53.

[33] *L.N.*, 56.

[34] *L.N.*, 100

[35] *L.N.*, 87.

[36] *L.N.*, 99.

[37] *L.N.*, 28.

[38] *L.N.*, 31.

[39] *L.N.*, 37.

[40] *L.N.*, 61.

[41] *L.N.*, 62.

[42] On this notion of a linguistic and social norm, see the richly suggestive essay by Graham Hough, 'Narrative and Dialogue in Jane Austen', *Critical Quarterly*, 12 (1970), 201-229.

[43] *L.N.*, 25-6.

[44] *L.N.*, 59.

[45] On this see W W Sanger, *The History of Prostitution* (New York, 1913), pp. 524, 568 and 572.

[46] *L.N.*, 20-1.

[47] *L.N.*, 8-9.

[48] *L.N.*, 3.

[49] *L.N.*, 4.

[50] *L.N.*, 15.

[51] *L.N.*, 26.

[52] *L.N.*, 42.

[53] *L.N.*, 69.

Chapter V - Lettres écrites de Lausanne: 'Histoire de Cécile'

The Novels of Isabelle de Charriere

by

Dennis Wood

In the Introduction to his edition of *Lettres écrites de Lausanne* Philippe Godet gives an extract from a letter unknown to him when he published his biography of Isabelle de Charrière. The letter, written in about 1800 to a Dutch correspondent, reveals that the first section of *Lettres écrites de Lausanne* was composed in 1785:

Un an après que l'on eut imprimé les *Lettres neuchâteloises*, un proposant du Pays-de-Vaud publia dans un prospectus trois volumes des *Lettres lausannoises*. Il annonçait les plus belles choses du monde, mais il voulait une souscription. "Quoi! dis-je, on me vole mon titre! Mais je préviendrai ce pédant audacieux." - Aussitôt je montai dans ma chambre et me dépêchai d'écrire. Huit ou dix jours après, les *Lettres écrites de Lausanne* étaient faites. *Caliste* ne fut écrite qu'assez longtemps après, c'est-à-dire un an peut-être. Entre deux, j'avais écrit *Mistriss Henley*.[1]

It cannot be said that contemporary critics ignored 'Histoire de Cécile', the first part of the novel. French journals reproached the author for its looseness of style, and the critic of the *Journal de Par*is found not altogether to his taste "un certain goût de terroir", citing the use of the verb 'se dégonfler' to convey the colloquial sense of 'to get something off one's chest'.[2] In Switzerland two hostile pamphlets appeared. *Lettres écrites de Colombier, près de Neuchâtel. Pour servir de Supplément aux Lettres neuchâteloises*, in fact directed against the first part of *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*, found the novelist's critical tone too great and objected in particular to the portrayal of those somewhat outside fashionable society, "cette classe inférieure à la bonne compagnie".[3] The pamphlet was written in the first person, as if Isabelle de Charrière stood condemned out of her own mouth. Beneath the personal abuse and accusations of cynicism there is clearly a deeper recurring grievance: that Madame de Charrière should ever "prendre [ses] héroïnes dans une classe subalterne".[4] The other hostile pamphlet, *Lettre écrite de la Cheneau-de-Bourg sur les Lettres de Lausanne et de Colombier* was slanted more against a woman writer daring to apply her intelligence to novel-writing. However there was one pamphlet*, Lettre d'un étranger à une dame de Lausanne, sur quelques nouveautés littéraires du pays*, which defended Isabelle de Charrière's novel for its relevance to the problems and character of the Swiss cantons. The pamphleteer praised it as a vindication of the "mœurs de la patrie" and also as "le miroir de nos faiblesses", and commended the novel's portrayal of those outside good society.

Contemporary readers of 'Histoire de Cécile' seem to have been concerned with social elements in the story, and a recent critic has also turned his attention to some of these aspects of the story.[5] Professor Jean Starobinski, in an introductory essay to a new edition of *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*, has emphasized the particular social situation of Cécile and her mother and the state of their finances, and has linked this to a generalized narrative, affective, and material *dépendance*. The mother in the story is powerless to alter the events related, her narrative position is passive; an emotional dependence is inherent in the mother-daughter relationship and in Cécile's love for Edouard, and material *dépendance* results from the family's financial situation. Certainly, as in *Lettres neuchâteloises*, Isabelle de Charrière has taken much trouble to create a convincing background, full of realistic detail, and this detail does indeed affect the main course of the story. 'Histoire de Cécile' reveals something of an understanding of the economic structure of Swiss society. As in *Lettres neuchâteloises* Isabelle de Charrière draws no conclusions, makes no dogmatic pronouncements, but throughout 'Histoire de Cécile' one senses the presence of Rousseau's thought when the novelist calls into question the values of upper-class and aristocratic society. (One is reminded of the well-known critique of luxury found in Rousseau's letters to the Maréchal de Luxembourg concerning the inhabitants of the Val-de-Travers, and published as recently as

1782.) The *moraliste* in Isabelle de Charrière is ready to examine the pressures on the virtuous in a society based, as she shows, on privilege and class prejudice and where money openly and covertly supports both of these. Whatever our final estimate of Isabelle de Charrière's position as a social critic, fashionable society appears in a relatively more sombre light than in *Lettres neuchâteloises*. Personal heroism, honesty and integrity are clearly contrasted with a general vein of duplicity to be found in fashionable society.

This brings us to the central question about 'Histoire de Cécile': what kind of novel is it? Is it a novel of social realism, and if it is not, what purpose does the proliferation of background information serve? To answer this we must first of all understand that the background detail which Isabelle de Charrière provides is more than mere local colour. In Lausanne certain historical and social factors have been brought together in a unique combination at the end of the eighteenth century, and these are, directly or indirectly, the cause of many of Cécile's problems.[6] Since the annexation of Lausanne and the Pays de Vaud by Berne in 1536 the region had gradually lost any autonomy in government that had been left to it. One major attempt at insurrection had been crushed and ended with the execution of Davel in 1723. The effective governing power in the Pays de Vaud was the Bernese Council of Two Hundred, a patrician group which ruled firmly but efficiently, and which had assured peace and stability for the region throughout the eighteenth century.

Although in the Pays de Vaud some of the bailiffs (representatives of Bernese authority) were Vaudois or of Vaudois extraction, a number of factors had conspired to produce what was almost an enforced indolence among the Vaudois aristocracy. Commerce was closed to the nobility, being considered socially degrading. The one honourable pursuit that could appeal to a young aristocrat was service in a foreign regiment. Failing this, there was only the path of scholarship, training to become a pastor. (There were no splendid bishoprics or abbeys to aspire to, as there were in France.) In consequence Lausanne became a seat of *désœuvrement* and parasitism as noblemen, discontented with the emptiness of life on their country estates, sold their property to rich foreign merchants and took up residence among the fahsionable society of the city. Unable to earn money, the families of several aristocratic lines saw their fortunes decline from generation to generation. Largely excluded by the absolutism of Berne from any really constructive role in relation to Vaudois society as a whole, the aristocracy evolved a sophisticated and artificial way of life cut off from the more active sections of society.

In the society of Lausanne there existed three principal groups, each subdivided into coteries and exclusive cliques: that which was centred on the Rue de Bourg, for the aristocratic class; the Quartier de la Cité, for the educated upper middle-class élite of Protestant clergymen and professors at the Académie; and the Quartier du Pont for the commercial bourgeoisie. This strict stratification, however, sometimes allowed a certain rather uneasy intermingling of the clergy with the aristocracy. Actual power over this city of seven thousand inhabitants lay in the hands of the Bailiff, who resided in the Castle. In spite of its lack of industry and the weak state of its commerce, Lausanne enjoyed a particularly elegant and cosmopolitan style of life on account of an influx of foreign visitors and capital. The price it paid was complete political docility.

Isabelle de Charrière's novel includes some of these factors in the network of constraints and pressures that act on Cécile and her mother. Cécile's mother is a widow in her late thirties, and her daughter is approaching marriageable age, being now seventeen. Cécile's mother is of Protestant *noblesse d'épée* lineage on her father's side and she had a mother who was a

member of the bourgeoisie. She married a Vaudois aristocrat whose inheritance was small but sufficient. He has died, but her financial position for the moment remains secure. Cécile's mother, the narrator, relates (perhaps with some implausibility) all the events leading up to her present position. Her father had revived the failing family fortunes by taking a middle-class wife and earning himself a dowry, but had himself lost much of his own family's wealth to his four brothers in the division of his father's property. All this detail is clearly designed to show how important marriage and the dowry system have become as a means for the transmission of wealth. In the eyes of Cécile's mother it is essential for her daughter to marry well, and to marry within her caste if at all possible. She is the means by which a penurious Vaudois aristocrat might hope to repair his fortunes - and she has no real fortune. A man will therefore marry her not through acquisitiveness but through love. This economic detail brings out a duality of values in Cécile and her mother: both position *and* personal feelings must be safeguarded. The tensions in the novel grow as it becomes increasingly clear that Cécile will not succeed in reconciling these two factors. Various suitors with different qualities and prospects come forward, but it is Cécile's misfortune to fall in love, like Caliste, with the man who is socially ideal for her, but whose affection may not amount to love. The pathos is increased by her nearness to attaining this ideal for, as we later learn, Edouard's parents would be only too pleased to consent to their marriage.[7] (There is perhaps an autobiographical echo in the many and varied suitors that appear as potential husbands for Cécile. In her youth Belle de Zuylen herself had been confronted by suitors she could not love and had been unable to marry those she could have loved.) Cécile has possible partners in the rather shadowy nobleman who reads only the Bible and the Gazette, in Lord Edouard, in the Bernese aristocrat nephew of the Bailiff, all of the noble class of Lausanne society. She has potential suitors from the 'educated' élite, Jeannot her second cousin and his robust friend from the Lac de Joux. And there are two members of the commercial bourgeoisie who might also quality as possible suitors, one a gifted but idle drunkard, the other a colourless *négociant* unwilling to leave the Pays de Vaud to advance in his work. But Cécile's sufferings are only increased by having around her such a variety of suitors and potential suitors when she becomes increasingly aware that she can love only Edouard.

The social background of Lausanne also has a considerable bearing on the beliefs and aspirations of Cécile's mother, in particular her views on the nobility, which she views as embodying an ideal of public service. In Letter III we are given her design for a utopia under the traditional heading "Si j'étais roi". Her three-tier system would give pride of place to an hereditary aristocracy. This would be followed by a group of ennobled public servants who had served meritoriously in various fields, and then by life peers chosen by the people as their representatives. From these three groups would be drawn the King's advisers who would begin a new hereditary nobility. The class of all men would be that of their wives, as would the social class of their children, and this would ensure family stability and also greater respect for marriageable young women. The next letter contrasts sharply with such an ideal state of affairs in its description of the present state of Lausanne society. In the opinion of Cécile's mother it has degenerated because of the introduction of foreign manners and behaviour, and because of a surplus of foreign money:

En vérité, pour ce monde, l'argent est bon à tout. Il achète jusqu'à la facilité de conserver des vertus dans le désordre, d'être vicieux avec le moins d'inconvénients possibles.[8]

Her utopian constitution of Letter III casts its shadow over Letter V, which focusses our attention on such problems as libertines seducing young girls,[9] the need to rectify the inferior social position of women in marriage,[10] the need to reinvigorate the nobility with men of

energy,[11] and, to counter the possibility of a nobleman's *déclassement* by a bourgeois marriage, the desirability of rewarding service to the state with a peerage.

This is how things should be. But Cécile's mother knows the very great difficulties that face her daughter in the real world where no such utopian solutions are likely to prevail. Women are at a permanent disadvantage and are likely to be exploited in every way. Cécile in the eyes of society represents money as well as an agreeable personality. On the marriage market she is a commodity with a price and will probably pass to the highest bidder. It is this permanent disadvantage, this generalized *dépendance*, to use Professor Jean Starobinski's term, that functions as a besetting obstacle to Cécile's happiness. But as I said earlier the question remains whether the social circumstances of 'Histoire de Cécile' are, as seems generally to have been believed, its real centre of interest. I would suggest rather that Isabelle de Charrière's real achievement lies in her delicate realism, but a realism that is not so much social as psychological. Moods, tones and changes of register in relationships between highly sensitive and perceptive individuals are the areas in which Madame de Charrière is most successful. Her subtle colours are used to illustrate a central theme: how a fine and noble character gradually emerges onto the social scene from being a protected adolescent, and how she is liable to have her feelings bruised by the selfishness and self-seeking of society. Closely linked with this main theme is the developing relationship between Cécile and her mother, for the latter displays throughout the story varying degrees of protectiveness and clear-sightedness concerning her daughter's feelings. She knows that her daughter will no longer be sheltered from the wind, and that it can blow very sharply indeed. This is the twofold interest of the story: the delicacy of Isabelle de Charrière's style in evoking the shifts and nuances in complex human situations, and the exploration of a particularly close relationship between a mother and her daughter.

It would indeed be interesting to know whether Isabelle de Charrière was acquainted with Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1777) when she wrote the first part of *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*, for its subtitle, 'The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World' and the kinds of experience it relates run parallel to Cécile's development in her novel.[12] Isabelle de Charrière lays before us the various stages in a young woman's discovery of herself in contact with fashionable society, and her growing awareness of the demands of prudence, patience and decorum. There is a significant difference, however, between the general tenor of 'Histoire de Cécile' and the experiences of Meyer in *Lettres neuchâteloises*. For the moral positives of Cécile's story are centred more on the responsibility of the individual and less on conformity with the demands of a particular society. There is also a deeper tension within the central characters: they realize that society can be little more than a jungle of predatory egos, but also that it is the only place where Cécile is likely to find any fulfilment. Thus as regards society Isabelle de Charrière is as comprehensive in her view as ever. She understands the financial pressures and pressures for conformity that hold fashionable society together, and more or less impartially shows us their effects on a maturing and sensitive individual.

As the story opens Cécile is emerging to face the trials of life in the public eye. Like Henri Meyer she is observed and judged by society. She cannot, however, be allowed any shortcomings or failings that would spoil her prospects of winning a suitable husband. Cécile's mother must make marriageability her daughter's chief concern. Yet pulling against this right from the beginning of the story is the need to be true to one's own sense of values, a factor which will increasingly force Cécile to turn her back on all mercenary considerations. From the beginning, Cécile's mother gives us certain clues as to the ideas involved in the conflict. She values character and principle as much as social presentability, and there is more

than a hint of Rousseau in the way her pedagogical theory comes down so heavily on the side of experience and avoids pedantic knowledge.[13] Nonetheless Cécile is taught reading and writing at a very young age, so that such necessary skills can easily become automatic to her. She is also taught other subjects and accomplishments which for various reasons her mother considers useful. Other education is left to Cécile's own leanings. Patience and resilience in suffering are learnt from example and experience, as when Cécile is impressed by her uncle's attitude during his final illness.[14] Her mother considers it important too that Cécile should spend a short time in a village with a domestic servant of the family. The essential feature of her upbringing is her mother's desire to protect her from the excessive demands of contemporary education with its burden of learning and accomplishments, and, while developing her judgement, to fit her to be pleasing in good society. It is something of a compromise, and as such is symptomatic of an uneasiness about the social world of Lausanne. Cécile's mother wants above all naturalness for her daughter:

en vérité, elle est si jolie, si bonne, si naturelle, que je ne pense pas que personne voulût y rien changer.[15]

She wants something beyond social virtues like respectability or a sense of honour. She would seek to remedy society's artificiality and dislocation from a more natural way of life. Cécile's mother therefore undertakes to complete her daughter's education by guiding her through the reefs and shoals of adolescent meetings, aware that her daughter's urges must be held in abeyance, her innocence protected and her judgement developed. She recognizes above all the urgent need to wrest from Cécile an acknowledgement of the right course of action to pursue in all her dilemmas. The narrator would like to see her daughter's 'naturalness' unspoilt, but knows that for the present Cécile needs to acquire a mask of impassiveness, since people will take advantage of clues about her feelings presented by any emotional display. Her simple recipe for married happiness proves, in the event, impossible for her daughter, despite its apparent simplicity:

On se marie parce qu'on est un homme et une femme, et qu'on se plaît.[16]

The subtle delineation of a mother and daughter relationship is a rare thing in French fiction. In Isabelle de Charrière's story we enter into the heart of one particularly close relationship. Cécile and her mother often appear isolated, from correspondents, from unsympathetic relatives and on occasion (through the disparity between maturity and youth) from each other. By the end of the story we will have watched them moving into a deeper and richer relationship with each other.

From the beginning Cécile's mother displays an awareness of the variety of often contradictory qualities that an individual must have in order to be fully human. She sets herself firmly against all fashionable distinctions that pronounce certain qualities to be mutually exclusive. This early statement by the narrator suggesting that ethical textbooks do not take account of the complexity of real people prepares us for the exploration of her own complex personality and that of her daughter:

A l'occasion de ce mariage on parlera de vous, et l'on sentira ce qu'il y aurait à gagner pour la princesse qui attacherait à son service une femme de votre mérite, sage sans pruderie, modeste quoique remplie de talents. Mais voyons si cela est bien vrai. J'ai toujours trouvé que cette sorte de mérite n'existe que sur le papier, où les mots ne se battent jamais, quelque contradiction qu'il y ait entr'eux. Sage et point prude! Il est sûr que vous n'êtes point prude:

je vous ai toujours vue fort sage; mais vous ai-je toujours vue? M'avez-vous fait l'histoire de tous les instants de votre vie? Une femme parfaitement sage serait prude; je le crois du moins. Mais passons là-dessus. Sincère et polie! Vous n'êtes pas aussi sincère qu'il serait possible de l'être, parce que vous êtes polie ; ni parfaitement polie, parce que vous êtes sincère; et vous n'êtes l'un et l'autre à la fois, que parce que vous êtes médiocrement l'un et l'autre…[17]

She later returns to this problem to express her own comprehensive and compassionate realism about human complexity:

Revenons à vous, qui êtes aussi sincère et aussi polie qu'il est besoin de l'être; à vous, qui êtes charmante; à vous, que j'aime tendrement.[18]

It is the same objective but compassionate tone that Cécile's mother adopts when speaking of her growing daughter. Her directness seems to have shocked some contemporary readers, detailing Cécile's nosebleed, her hot flushes, her large eyes, her thick red lips and her enlarged neck. Gradually we come to understand the narrator's very personal sense of values, also epitomized in her use of forceful colloquial phrases like 'se dégonfler', 'où diantre', and a realistic bluntness:

Penser à elle! Quelle ridicule expression dans cette occasion-ci! (...) Vous voyez bien que, si on l'épouse, ce ne sera pas pour avoir pensé, mais pour l'avoir vue.[19]

Cécile's mother reveals herself to us as a character with as much individuality as her daughter. We glimpse an affectionate, enthusiastic woman, energetic and shrewd - in fact a personality not so far removed from Isabelle de Charrière herself. Perhaps at times she hovers on the brink of vulgarity, as when, for example, she refers to the son of the Bailiff of Lausanne:

C'est le fils de notre baillif, un beau jeune Bernois, couleur de rose et blanc, et le meilleur enfant du monde.[20]

Such near-lapses from the perfectly urbane could be viewed as a further extension of Isabelle de Charrière's realism, for Cécile's mother may have inherited such rough-and-ready phrases - as well as her good sense - from her bourgeois mother. Such expressions are also something of a breath of oxygen in an otherwise suffocating atmosphere of masquerade and imposture. In her third letter Cécile's mother shows considerable penetration and foresight in outlining a social order that would eliminate many of the disadvantages which her daughter is to experience in the course of the story. Events will also lend pathos to her hopes:

Cécile n'est pas oubliée. Je suis partie d'elle; je reviens à elle. Je la suppose appartenant à la première classe; belle, bien élevée et bonne comme elle est, je vois à ses pieds tous les jeunes hommes de sa propre classe, qui ne voudraient pas déchoir, et ceux d'une classe inférieure, qui auraient l'ambition de s'élever.[21]

She has evaluated the whole range of suitors available for Cécile and has found no one outstandingly qualified. It is in the fourth letter that her problems really begin and her relationship with her daughter develops. Lord Edouard and his tutor William ask to be taken in as lodgers at Cécile's mother's house. Now earlier we learnt that Cécile's mother herself had underlined the superiority of the robust young Englishman to Cécile's cousin, a weak and spoilt young pastor. As her cousin is wrapping himself up warmly:

le jeune Anglais monte l'escalier quatre à quatre, revient comme un trait avec son chapeau, et offre la main à Cécile. Je ne pus m'empêcher de rire, et je dis au cousin qu'il pouvait se désemmaillotter. Si auparavant son sort auprès de Cécile eût été douteux, ce moment le décidait.[22]

By her words Cécile's mother has been to a certain extent responsible for attracting her daughter's admiration towards Edouard, and ironically she must now do her best to guide her daughter through the dangerous period of infatuation she has begun. When Edouard makes his request for lodgings she foresees her daughter's excitement, and acts swiftly to protect her from her own feelings:

Je refusai bien nettement, sans attendre que Cécile eût pu avoir une idée ou former un souhait.[23]

Edouard has of late been particularly attentive and eager to please Cécile, and the narrator recognizes the advantages of this as well as its potential dangers. But she must hurt Cécile in the short term in the hope both of keeping Edouard's interest *and* of preserving Cécile's reputation in the long term. For the long term is the only scale on which Cécile ought to consider anything, though her feelings may be demanding more immediate satisfaction. A short-term affair would ruin her. This tension between their two attitudes to experience brings about a moment of deep mutual understanding and sympathy:

Je regardai Cécile; elle availt les yeux fixés sur moi. Je vis bien qu'il fallait refuser; mais en vérité je souffris presque autant que je faisais souffrir [...] Cécile est venue m'embrasser. Vous me remerciez, lui ai-je dit. Elle a rougi: je l'ai tendrement embrassée. Des larmes ont coulés de mes yeux. Elle les a vues, et je suis sûre qu'elle y a lu une exhortation à être sage et prudente, plus persuasive que n'aurait été le plus éloquent discours.[24]

Each hurts the other by her attitude, the mother by the overarching range of her concern for her daughter's future, Cécile by an urgent but myopic concern with the present. But their love for each other adds an extra dimension of suffering, each being hurt by causing the other distress. This second and more selfless dimension of feeling will develop into a new emotional bond between them by the end of the story. Already in the same letter, Letter IV, Cécile comes to her mother's defence against the short-sighted mercenary outlook of her uncle. She can defend an action she almost certainly regrets her mother taking, and shows considerable will and moral strength in so doing. It is interesting to note, after this crucial first dilemma, that Cécile's mother very typically ranges wider into the general social situation in Lausanne and, almost without seeming to, situates Cécile's predicament more exactly. Cécile's mother reveals that she is not naïve enough to disregard money as a factor in marriage, but in her hierarchy of values such pragmatism comes well below love.

Here we have the situation summed up in the narrator's words:

Je l'aime uniquement: cela rend bien clairvoyante et bien attentive.[25]

But all the protectiveness and lucidity of Cécile's mother are now called upon to deal with the central problem of the story, one which makes it something of a parallel to *Caliste*. Edouard comes into increasing prominence, and will pose the same kind of problems for her as William sets the reader of *Caliste*. For it is extremely difficult for her to know what Edouard is thinking and to penetrate the mystery surrounding his feelings. She obviously hopes that he

loves Cécile, and she must watch while her daughter builds castles in the air. But the body of evidence is slim indeed. It would not be true to say that Edouard is *indifferent* to Cécile, for he certainly pays her plenty of attention. The question is *whether Edouard harbours matrimonial intentions*, and it is *this* that Cécile's mother desperately tries to find out. As a personality the reader rapidly comes to see Edouard as little more than a stock figure, coloured in with stock details. With his horse, riding crop, smart clothes and boots he belongs to the second wave of *anglomanie* that struck France at about this time. (The first wave of *anglomanie* had concerned ideas; the second wave, as Parisian journals of the time eloquently attest, concerned English fashions and English novels.) Edouard represents superficiality in every respect, as we come to realize in the end, but for Cécile and her mother the marriage question is of the utmost gravity since Cécile is unable to control her infatuation with him.

What is to be done, since it is Cécile's happiness that hangs in the balance? Her mother can only love and advise her. Although she does on occasion take decisive action, the narrator's role is generally confined to observation and post-mortems on Cécile's encounters:

Elle ne me dit rien; mais je la vois contente ou rêveuse, selon qu'elle le voit ou ne le voit pas, selon que ses préférences sont plus ou moins marquées.[26]

But her observations are *felt* ones and draw us into close sympathy with the indulgent mother who smiles at her daughter's grammatical errors and with her lapse into pragmatism on the matter of William's visits:

Faut-il le renvoyer? Ne m'est-il pas permis, en lui laissant voir ce que sont du matin au soir la fille et la mère, de l'engager à favoriser un établissement agréable et brillant pour ma fille, de l'obliger à dire du bien de nous au père et à la mère du jeune homme? Faut-il que j'écarte ce qui pourrait donner à Cécile l'homme qui lui plaît? Je ne veux pas dire encore l'homme qu'elle aime. Elle aura bientôt dix-huit ans. La nature peut-être plus que le cœur...[27]

As an shrewd and mature observer she can see not only further than Cécile but also than Edouard However such foresight and such an aphoristic understanding of human nature as this can only increase her suffering:

Il ne voit pas combien il est peu à craindre qu'elle s'ennuie [avec lui]. On parle tant des illusions de l'amour-propre; cependant il est bien rare, quand on est véritablement aimée, qu'on croie l'être autant qu'on l'est. Un enfant ne vois pas combien il occupe continuellement sa mère. Un amant ne voit pas que sa maîtresse ne voit et n'entend partout que lui.[28]

Soon she is to witness the rebuffs that Cécile receives at the hands of society, and to be made more anxious and fearful than Cécile yet realizes. For when Cécile returns home silent and withdrawn after what her mother later sees as a relatively minor incident (Edouard's flirtation with another woman), her mother immediately fears the worst:

Il arriva l'autre jour une chose qui me donna beaucoup d'émotion et d'alarme [...] Cécile est revenue d'une visite qu'elle avait faite, pâle comme la mort. J'ai été très effrayée. Je lui ai demandé ce qu'elle avait, ce qui lui était arrivé [...Elle] s'est mise à pleurer, à sangloter, pour mieux dire. Je l'ai embrassée, je l'ai caressée, nous lui avons donné à boire: ses larmes coulaient toujours.[29]

It is this kind of intense emotional atmosphere that Isabelle de Charrière is so successful in producing, through short sentences, pauses and eloquent gestures, and this technique focusses our feelings upon the narrator as much as on Cécile herself. In the event the incident, though unimportant in its causes, takes us to the heart of the mother-daughter relationship. Cécile's magnification of what to the mature mind are trivia unwittingly causes their two attitudes to life, the immediate and short-term, and the long-term, to come distressingly into friction. As Cécile's situation becomes more serious, her mother's love and concern for her daughter leads her to risk embarrassment and ridicule. When society places Cécile in a difficult position, or when she is in danger of losing control of her emotions with Edouard, her mother steps in to defend her or to ward off the danger. Cécile is naïve enough to state that a visiting Frenchwoman is wearing a false hair-piece. This is taken by the men in the company as an amusing instance of feminine spite, and she is teased for it. Amid the salon witticisms her mother breaks in to clear Cécile of the charge:

Si ma fille avait quelques années de plus, elle se serait tue; à son âge, et quand on a sur sa tête une véritable forêt, il est assez naturel de parler.[30]

The change of tone to a stern respect for the truth gives the reader the same prickly embarrassment as Cécile:

Cécile, embarrassée, souriait et pleurait en même temps.[31]

Once again we are drawn into sympathy with the two characters. Is her mother being more protective than befits Cécile's years? Should she allow her to suffer and learn by fighting her own battles? This is the kind of question that is actually dramatized before us. For Cécile love and understanding increasingly take the place of any resentment that she might have felt as regards her mother's behaviour. Afterwards she can say to her:

Bonsoir, ma mère et ma protectrice (...) bonsoir, mon Don Quichotte.[32]

Cécile not only understands but can also feel with her mother enough to smile at her. Her mother enters into the complicity:

J'ai ri. Cécile se forme et devient tous les jours plus aimable.[33]

Whatever the results of her mother's intervention, Cécile cannot be protected from herself or others all the time. To her mother's dismay, she lets slip an opportunity to inflict a salutary humiliation on Edouard. As an onlooker her mother is powerless to tip the balance in her favour:

au lieu de se moquer de lui, comme il l'aurait mérité, elle m'en parut bien aise. Heureuse de faire une impression favorable sur son amant, elle en aimait la cause quelle qu'elle fût.[34]

Cécile lives in Protestant Lausanne, an additional difficulty for her mother, though one she would not willingly change. Her daughter is free within reason to associate with young men, and cannot be kept under strict surveillance. But the important occasion when Cécile does begin to lose her composure is fortuitously witnessed by her mother, and provides her with an opportunity to deepen her relationship with Cécile. Her daughter falls into an infatuated trance while playing chess with Edouard, and is interrupted by her before anything truly irreparable can be said or done. This minor crisis provides Cécile's mother with an

opportunity of taking her afterwards through what is almost a catechism class in womanly and wifely morality. She attempts, in reply to Cécile's surprised questions, to reconcile her daughter with patience and chastity. She restates the dangers of self-indulgence:

Les filles peu sages plaisent encore plus que les autres; mais il est rare que le délire aille jusqu'à les épouser: encore plus rare qu'après les avoir épousées, un repentir humiliant ne les punisse pas d'avoir été trop séduisantes.[35]

Cécile would surely give in to her feelings if her mother were not prepared to guide her. As it is, her mother uses their growing trust and mutual understanding to instil in her daughter some of her own immense will-power. She builds on their love in order to elicit an act of faith from her daughter. The danger is laid before her:

L'habitude de la faiblesse sera prise, le devoir et la pudeur sont déjà accoutumés à céder.[36]

Cécile must accept her role as a respectable woman, however hard the task. Through love for her mother she does so:

Je n'ai pas tout compris, mais les paroles sont gravées dans ma tête.[37]

It is this love for her mother which will eventually extend her sympathies and strengthen her principles, and will in part compensate her for the bitterness of not winning Edouard's love. But before this final loss there comes the crisis with M de ***'s dangerous deception, and the triumph of her mother's advice in Cécile. For Cécile surpasses her mother in prudence as well as in feeling and compassion. On what is now her own initiative she, like Caliste, sets a test for Edouard by arranging to go out more and mix with the fashionable society of Lausanne. Her test, like that of Caliste, produces little evidence of deep feelings on Edouard's part, and yet even in defeat she keeps hoping. She has achieved mature judgement in all other matters, and stands firm on the high ground of principle in this, largely through her mother's influence:

Je me trouve (...) de la fermeté, et j'ai une envie si grande de ne pas vous donner des chagrins![38]

Her mother entirely approves of her daughter's behaviour, but is not unaware of the cost:

Ma fille perd sa gaieté dans la contrainte qu'elle s'impose.[3]

Their conversations have taken on an increasingly intimate tone, so that in the closing stages of the story they are rendered almost equal in maturity, sensitivity and suffering. Now the mother asks her daughter questions, about her feelings for an agreeable Bernese gentleman, and gradually the discussion grows in emotional closeness. On this delicate marriage question even the conventional barriers of speech are broken when her mother slips into uncharacteristic *tutoiement*. Although Cécile recognizes the total superiority of the gentleman from Berne, she will never be able to love him with anything like the intensity of her love for Edouard. It is as if she is bereaved and alone - just like her widowed mother. Adversity has so strengthened their love for each other that Cécile contemplates the idea of a spinster's life with less revulsion:

si vous trouviez bon que nous allassions en Hollande ou en Angleterre tenir une boutique ou établir une pension, je crois qu'étant toujours avec vous et occupée, et n'ayant pas le temps d'aller dans le monde ni de lire des romans, je ne convoiterais et ne regretterais rien, et que ma vie pourrait être très douce.[40]

However her mother's experienced voice realistically reminds her that death will separate them sooner than Cécile thinks. There is a world of suggestiveness in the narrator's comment on their long silence:

Nos paroles ont fini là, mais non pas nos pensées.[41]

Their tenderness and sadness are both increased by this realization. But Cécile has the courage to hold to her love for her mother even at the very moment of defeat, when they announce their departure from Lausanne:

que j'en aie tout le plaisir ou tout le chagrin. A vos côtés, appuyée contre votre chaise, touchant votre bras, ou seulement votre robe, je me sentirai forte de la plus puissante comme de la plus aimable protection. Vous savez bien, maman, combien vous m'aimez, mais non pas combien je vous aime, et que vous ayant, vous, je pourrais supporter de tout perdre, et renoncer à tout. Allons, maman, vous êtes trop poltronne, et vous me croyez bien plus faible que je ne suis.[42]

In the section of the story which overlaps into *Caliste*, the situation becomes so poignant for her mother that quite unexpectedly she weeps when informing William and M. de *** of her intention of leaving Lausanne.[43] But she finds consolation in Cécile's fine and compassionate character which opens itself to the afflicted, in the shape of a dying black man and an abandoned and starving dog. Her comment on this epitomizes her own relationship with Cécile:

Au lieu de raisonner, au lieu de moraliser, donnez à aimer à quelqu'un qui aime; si aimer fait son danger, aimer sera sa sauvegarde; si aimer fait son malheur, aimer sera sa consolation: pour qui sait aimer, c'est la seule occupation, la seule distraction, le seul plaisir de la vie.[44]

Let us now turn to the novel's second focus of concern, the development of Cécile as she moves out from the calm and unruffled anchorage of her protected adolescence into the troubled waters of womanhood. She has, as we know, been brought up in such a way that moral principles and judgement will take root in her heart as a result of her own experience. We remember the influence of Rousseau in her mother's strictures against 'se laisser moraliser'.[45] Now one of the central problems facing Cécile, in whom everything tends towards 'le naturel' in the broadest sense, is the essential gulf between what people appear to say and do and their real feelings. All social life demands a degree of insincerity, as her mother is well aware; we recall her observation on her correspondent:

Sincère et polie! Vous n'êtes pas aussi sincère qu'il serait possible de l'être, parce que vous êtes polie; ni parfaitement polie, parce que vous êtes sincère; et vous n'êtes l'un et l'autre à la fois, que parce que vous êtes médiocrement l'un et l'autre.[46]

But the distance between appearance and reality is infinitely variable depending on social circumstances. It also depends on degrees of self-seeking and wilful deception, of vanity and empty show in individuals. Cécile must learn to hide her stronger emotions for several very

good reasons. First, society demands a measure of decorum in her behaviour. Second, although she has no first-hand experience of it, there are men and women in fashionable society who will take advantage of such feelings. The third reason is linked to the second and first: no husband would want an obviously hyper-sensitive wife for fear of losing her to another man, and, human nature being what it is, a man would be reluctant to marry a woman who made courtship too easy. But hiding one's feelings is an art that has to be learned. Cécile can momentarily regain Edouard's interest by a show of complete indifference after he has hovered around a Parisian lady,[47] but she fails to realize that any criticism of the woman in mixed company will draw knowing smiles and sarcasm.[48] Also the object of her criticism, the question of the woman's false hair-piece, is in a way symbolic of the necessary deceptions which society practises and which are best left without comment. One could class with the hair-piece another symbol of the artificiality and theatricality of society with which Cécile must arrive at some *modus vivendi*, namely Madame de ***. Of her Cécile's mother says:

Madame voudrait être de tout, briller, plaire, jouer un rôle.[49]

This pattern of alternating success and failure in dissimulation occurs once again in Letter X. Cécile can see that William loves her mother, by reason of her special relationship with her and her increasing powers of discernment. However, she is unable to see M. de ***'s love for herself, and continues to be dangerously blind to it. Nor can Cécile cover her embarrassment when Edouard suggests during a party game that she is in love:

Cécile rougit comme jamais elle n'avait rougi.[50]

She needs and receives from her perceptive and sympathetic mother the kind of verbal diversion that can protect her from damaging gossip. Indeed Cécile must come to learn that good society lives in and through its words and conversations, and to understand that in the salon's verbal skirmishes she needs to be able to parry awkward and probing questions. Such a military frame of reference also seems to fit the almost emblematic confrontations between Edouard and Cécile across a chess or draughts board. Like the games themselves there are the regulated moves, the face-to-face contest, the manoeuvres which must be concealed under the very eyes of one's opponent. Her mother'is uneasy from the first about such meetings:

On commençait à les faire jouer ensemble partout où ils se rencontraient.[51]

for Edouard has the opportunity of scoring a decisive emotional victory over the impressionable Cécile. The game progresses in seriousness in the eyes of all, as do Cécile's feelings for Edouard. Cécile's restraint cannot hold out. At one point, while being taught chess moves, Cécile becomes overwrought and quarrels with Edouard. This leads to one trance-like and ecstatic moment of silence between them as, significantly, Cécile tries to re-set a toppled pawn. She is only saved by her mother's intervention. Of course her mother, as we have seen, is in an unenviable position. She cannot forbid such a superficially harmless pastime; all the pressure of society would probably be turned against her if she did, as well as its suspicions. She has little room for manoeuvre, but takes the one effective course she can with her daughter, that of building a defence out of their mutual trust. She urges Cécile to uphold the Christian principles she has reared her in, and to cultivate in society the appearance of indifference and impassiveness. Again the pattern of success and failure sets in. Cécile can deceive Edouard into believing the chess-board incident is forgotten, albeit with some reluctance as she confides to her mother:

Je l'ai trompé, cela n'est pourtant pas bien agréable à faire.[52]

Edouard's confidence received a jolt. But Cécile fails disastrously to foresee the behaviour of M. de ***, who cuts his finger with a penknife, pretends to faint, then kisses Cécile when she leans over him.[53] What can a mother do when her own relative, a married man, can stoop to such deceitful behaviour? Although Cécile recovers her poise, can we now be sure that all will finally be well? A further degree of verisimilitude lies in the very real love that M. de *** feels for Cécile. He is no Lovelace. As her mother has said earlier:

les vicieux déterminés, les véritables méchants sont aussi rares que les hommes parfaits et les femmes parfaites. On ne voir guère tout cela que dans des fictions mal imaginées.[54]

(In fact M. de *** becomes an object of pity by the end of the story.) Cécile, growing in wisdom and moral stature, now takes the initiative of resuming social visiting in order to assess Edouard's feelings for her. She has conquered her tendency to display her feelings. But society can offer no reward. Where the story breaks off, Cécile has no proof of Edouard's loving her. Her only reward is in being fully herself, in having lived out the highest ideal of herself before her mother's eyes. It is the kind of conclusion which, I believe, wins our assent. Indeed one might argue that Isabelle de Charrière is at her most successful as a novelist when dealing with this kind of quiet domestic tragedy.

[1] *Lettres écrites de Lausanne: Histoire de Cécile. Caliste* par Mme de Charrière avec une préface de Philippe Godet (Geneva, 1907), vi-vii. (Hereafter referred to as *L.L.*, followed by page number.)

[2] Godet I, 312.

[3] Godet I, 314.

[4] Godet I, 315.

[5] *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse. Lettres écrites de Lausanne*. Présentation de Jean Starobinski (Lausanne, 1970), 43-66, reproduced with some modifications in *Roman et Lumières au 18e siècle* (Paris, 1970) as 'Les *Lettres écrites de Lausanne* par Mme de Charrière: inhibition psychique et interdit social'.

[6] On the social circumstances that inform 'Histoire de Cécile', see Charles Burnier, *La Vie vaudoise et la Révolution. De la servitude à la liberté* (Lausanne, 1902).

[7] *L.L.*, 122.

[8] *L.L.*, 23.

[9] *L.L.*, 25.

[10] *L.L.*, 26.

[11] *L.L.*, 26.

[12] Such an acquaintance would seem quite possible. We know that she read *Camilla* (though she did not approve of it) from an unpublished letter to Madame Huber of 20 July 1798. (In the collection of Madame Chaponnière of Geneva, copy communicated to my by Professor Charly Guyot.)

[13] *L.L.*, 29.

[14] *L.L.*, 30

[15] *L.L.*, 29. The attitude of Cécile's mother towards botany, 'Je considère la nature en amant; ils [les chimistes] l'étudient en anatomistes' (*L.L.*, 39), is a further echo of Rousseau in her thinking. One recalls the *Rêveries* where Rousseau contrasts his own approach to nature with that of botanists who collect flowers only to distil them into drugs and medicines (*Rêveries*, ed. Roddier (Paris, 1960), 91-4.) Similarly her mystical sense of the presence of God in the midst of natural beauty (*L.L.*, 100) is strongly reminiscent of Rousseau.

[16] *L.L.*, 8.

[17] *L.L.*, 2.

[18] *L.L.*, 3.

[19] *L.L.*, 4-5.

[20] *L.L.*, 33. Such homely artlessness is felt in her comment on her daughter, 'C'est une belle et bonne fille que ma fille' (*L.L.*, 6).

[21] *L.L.*, 16.

[22] *L.L.*, II.

[23] *L.L.*, 19.

[24] *L.L.*, 19-20.

[25] *L.L.*, 28.

[26] *L.L.*, 36-7.

[27] *L.L.*, 39.

[28] *L.L.*, 37.

[29] *L.L.*, 40.

[30] *L.L.*, 46.

[31] *L.L.*, 46.

[32] *L.L.*, 47.

[33] *L.L.*, 47.

[34] *L.L.*, 53.

[35] *L.L.*, 62.

[36] *L.L.*, 64

[37] *L.L.*, 70.

[38] *L.L.*, 83.

[39] *L.L.*, 101.

[40] *L.L.*, 98.

[41] *L.L.*, 99.

[42] *L.L.*, 108-9.

[43] *L.L.*, 110

[44] *L.L.*, 116

[45] *L.L.*, 3.

[46] *L.L.*, 2.

[47] *L.L.*, 45.

[48] *L.L.*, 45.

[49] *L.L.*, 49.

[50] *L.L.*, 51.

[51] *L.L.*, 37.

[52] *L.L.*, 69.

[53] *L.L.*, 75-6.

[54] *L.L.*, 60.

Chapter VI - Lettres écrites de Lausanne: Caliste

The Novels of Isabelle de Charriere

by

Dennis Wood

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 uncle[8] 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 thel 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 essay[13] 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 to 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 vie[23]

ironically counterpoints William's account of Edouard's vague indifference to Cécile. He has said: "de me marier à mon age, 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 truth[32] 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'animait 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 plutot 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" (*Julieou 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 1, 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.

Chapter VII - Trois femmes and Suite des Trois femmes

The Novels of Isabelle de Charriere

by

Dennis Wood

Plato's Dialogues are queer little novels. It seems to me it was the greatest pity in the world, when philosophy and fiction got split. They used to be one, right from the days of myth. Then they went and parted, like a nagging married couple, with Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and that beastly Kant. So the novel went sloppy, and philosophy went abstract-dry. The two should come together again - in the novel.

(D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix*)

Trois femmes, which first appeared in a German translation by Ludwig Ferdinand Huber in 1795,[1] was published in the original French for the first time in London in 1796 in a somewhat bowdlerized form,[2] having been censored and in parts rewritten by a French émigré Count, M. de Lally, against Isabelle de Charrière's wishes.[3] It appeared in its complete form in an edition published at Lausanne in 1797, but unfortunately one which was full of printing errors.[4] Modern editions of the novel - those of Lonchamp (1942) and of Professor Charly Guyot (1971)[5] - follow the text of 1798, printed by Orell Füssli in Zurich and published in Leipzig 'chez Pierre-Philippe Wolf'.[6] I shall base my study on the most recent and readily available of the two modern editions, which also happens to have the fewest misprints.

Trois femmes is not a particularly easy work to grasp immediately, but it is one that richly repays careful reading. Like for example *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, the central problem which it poses for the reader is whether it requires to be read in terms of conflicts between certain abstract moral and philosophical positions or whether it is concerned with the real problems of everyday living. I intend to deal with this question before moving on to any other, in the hope that it will lead us nearer to what Isabelle de Charrière is doing - and doing with considerable success - in *Trois femmes*.

The novelist has left us a few important clues that may help in solving the problem. She described the novel on one occasion as:

un petit traité du devoir, mis en action [...] On n'a pas prétendu donner des modèles à suivre, mais montrer des vices et des faiblesses à excuser comme non incompatibles avec une idée ou un sentiment de devoir et une moralité dans la personne coupable ou accusable.[7]

In a letter to Constant written closer to its period of composition Isabelle de Charrière also said:

Par idée de devoir j'entends l'idée que quelque chose est dû, n'importe quoi, et indépendamment de tout calcul. Le roman ne prétend point prouver l'existence de cette idée, que Kant dit exister.[8]

The first quotation is a clear echo of the well-known preface by the Abbé Prévost to his *Manon Lescaut*:

L'ouvrage entier est un traité de morale réduit agréablement en exercice.[9]

This obviously suggests that Isabelle de Charrière is anxious to avoid any kind of direct preaching, but also that every incident in her story will be significant and will illustrate some moral concept. The second quotation clearly sets out to question a new vogue in ethical thinking which has recently been preoccupying her.

On the actual extent of Isabelle de Charrière's acquaintance with Kant a considerable amount of work has been done by Munteano, whose long article[10] places the influence of Kant in Switzerland in its context. The facts briefly are these. Benjamin Constant, who was in correspondence with Isabelle de Charrière from 1787 to the end of her life, spent the period from 1788 to 1794 largely at the court of the Duke of Brunswick. He could read German, and in December 1794, while staying in Lausanne, seems to have been particularly excited by his reading of Kant's philosophy and to have shared his discoveries with Isabelle de Charrière. It is clear that through conversations and letters she became acquainted with the broad lines of Kant's ethical thinking as expressed up till then. This knowledge would soon be supplemented by her friend and translator Ludwig Ferdinand Huber who was engaged in translating Kant's *Theorie und Praxis* (1793) over the period November 1974 - January 1795, a translation of which Isabelle de Charrière probably corrected the proofs. (Huber's translation was sent in manuscript to Paris and was in the hands of Grégoire by the end of January 1795, but nothing is known of its fate after that date). Isabelle de Charrière was not exaggerating when she wrote to Henriette L'Hardy on 16 December 1794:

Dans cet instant il est fort question ici de Kant. On le traduit, on l'analyse, on s'efforce de le comprendre.[11]

But probably her clearest statement concerning her understanding of Kant at that moment comes in her letter to L. F. Huber of 25 December 1794:

J'ai reçu hier une lettre de M. Constant. Il y a un mot ou deux que je n'ai pu déchiffrer. Comme il ne s'agit que de métaphysique, cela est peu important. M. Constant est ainsi que moi de l'avis de Kant qu'on ne saurait mêler à l'idée de devoir l'idée d'aucun avantage attaché à remplir un devoir qu'on ne détruise son essence. Pour le reste il ne m'a pas entendue et je ne l'entends pas. Peut-être croira-t-il que c'est parce que je ne l'entends pas que je crois qu'il ne m'a pas entendue. Mais ce n'est pas cela. Avec le temps nous pourrons mieux nous expliquer, si le sujet nous intéresse encore.[12]

She is obviously concerned with the field of disinterested actions as against actions directed towards achieving some utilitarian end, and this is the focus of concern in part of *Trois femmes*. But what is most noteworthy is her shunning of abstractions, a feature which brings life to a novel where abstractions and ratiocination might have proved artistically disastrous.

We ought now perhaps to examine exactly what elements of Kantian ethics Isabelle de Charrière is trying to question in *Trois femmes*. Principally it is the *deontological* conception of the value attaching to actions, which Kant adopts as the *sole* criterion of goodness in behaviour. In Kant's view a person could only be called good whose will was determined by an *a priori* law of reason. *Willed action alone* counted towards goodness. Action which originated in the inclinations or desires did not fall within the purview of reason, and though it could be evaluated in other terms, it could not according to Kant have any *moral* value. The only strictly *moral* motivation is compliance with the *a priori* command of reason as expressed in Kant's moral law. Such an *a priori* command or categorical imperative is *apodeictic*, or immediate in its authority, whereas all prudential, that is end-directed - or in Kant's term 'hypothetical' - injunctions are non-rational, and therefore not immediately binding on the individual. Kant's position in the perennial debate between deontological and teleological moral systems is an extreme one. His anti-empirical standpoint is in total opposition to the varieties of systematized utilitarianism favoured by Helvétius and other French Enlightenment thinkers influenced by Locke. Actions have value not because of the feelings that go into them, nor because of the favourable results they produce. They have value because of the *principles* on which they are undertaken. At the close of the eighteenth century Kant sent unexpectedly massive reinforcements to beleaguered absolutist thinkers marooned by the high tide of empirical utilitarian thought. And for a while at least Isabelle de Charrière, Germaine de Staël and Benjamin Constant were all interested in his so-called 'Copernican revolution' in philosophy and ethics.

In *Trois femmes* part of the essence of Kant's position reappears. Characters with strong moral scruples find themselves suddenly confronted by a human situation that cries out for some action which their principles will not allow. Isabelle de Charrière is far too subtle to oversimplify the issues: there are discriminations both for and against to be made by the attentive reader. What she does admirably well is to lay before us objectively her explorations of these issues. Of course the whole novel is set against a background of revolutionary violence and inhumanity, the result on occasion of either too many principles or of no principles at all. Isabelle de Charrière's ethical sense was clearly disturbed by the prevailing absence of any profound notion of moral responsibility on the part of those in authority in France:

Savez vous ce qui me consterne surtout dans le jugement rendu & exécuté ce n'est pas la sceleratesse ni la dureté de ceux qui ont provoqué le décret mais la lâcheté de ceux qui l'ont voté contre leur vœu intime & l'apathie de ceux qui ont assisté en silence à un supplice qu'ils ne désiroient pas ou se sont cachés dans leurs maisons. Il est affreux de voir que les gens soi-disans honnêtes ne soyent que des machines sans âmes ou de vils trembleurs.[13]

Shortly after writing this passage at the height of the Terror in a letter to her young friend Henriette L'Hardy, *Trois femmes* was already in existence, at least in rough draft - that is by April 1793. Indeed it was probably already in the form in which we know it, except for topical commentaries that may have been written later:

M. Berthoud & M. de Charriere ont eu la bonté de copier les 3 femmes & je les donnai hier à M. Huber qui les traduira. Elles vous amuseront plus qu'une autre à cause de la france dont vous tenez & de l'allemagne que vous connoissez. Je continue a ecrire les lettres qui feront suite au roman ou plutot je corrige & copie les dernieres, les premieres sont deja au nez.[14]

It seems that the additions on Marat, Rousseau and Voltaire were made later, and certainly around December 1794 the novel was reshaped to accommodate Isabelle de Charrière's thoughts on Kantian problems. Another letter to Henriette L'Hardy illustrates Isabelle de Charrière's attitude to the troubled times that form the backcloth to *Trois femmes*:

Mon scepticisme va toujours croissant & je pourois en venir à n'être pas très democrate, même au sein d'une monarchie tyrannique ni très aristocrate au milieu du republicanisme le plus desordonné. Rien n'est si mauvais que son contraire ne puisse paroitre encore pire. Je pense a ces grandes inresolvables questions le moins que je puis, & me borne a de petites indignations & pitiés individuelles, partielles, privées.[15]

This also demonstrates the concern for individuals that is so apparent in her novel. She is, for all intents and purposes, agnostic in religion and political matters, being concerned primarily with individual dilemmas rather than with broader issues:

Entre l'ignorance qui croit & l'ignorance qui rejette, je choisirois la premiere excepté chez un souverain dont la superstition peut devenir persécutante. Encore ne sai-je! Neron en fait de cruauté valoit bien Philippe II. Robespierre valoit bien le Duc d'Albe. Les Jacobins valent bien les Jesuites. Carybde & Scylla ne sont-ils pas d'aussi épouvantables écueils l'un que l'autre?[16]

This is confirmed by an undated fragment intended for publication and found in a journal which is also contained in the dossier of letters addressed to Henriette L'Hardy:

Aujourd'hui que le bouleversement d'une grande nation ebranle toutes les autres & que l'autorité des loix nous est devenu precaire & foible de fait mais dans beaucoup d'endroits douteuse de droit, la société me semble ne reposer plus que sur la vertu individuelle. Qu'elle redouble donc de force d'activité de pureté, qu'elle soit excessive s'il le faut chez ceux chez qui elle regne et qu'elle supplée ainsi a toutes les autres loix. Il en etoient qui m'auroient contrainte il y a quelque tems & que je ne reconnois plus auxquelles je n'obeis plus. Je les remplace par d'autres que je m'impose à moi même et auxquelles je veux obeïr strictement. Où en seroit-on dans certains païs & Dieu sait combien de païs sont à la veille de ressembler à celui là si l'on y faisoit tout ce que l'on croiroit pouvoir fair[e] impunément. Il est vrai que les factions y punissent tour à tour les crimes des factions, mais elles punissent aussi les vertus qui s'opposent à elle[s]. Le seul tribunal toujours responsable est celui de notre propre cœur.[17]

We see, then, Isabelle de Charrière's approach to the problem raised by Kant and by the events of the Terror. She wishes to examine, like Rousseau in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, how far it is permissible to place one's own principles and integrity before the interests of others. *Trois femmes* in fact asks whether it is necessary on occasion to sacrifice one's own integrity in order to save others from suffering, and whether one has the right to punish others, as it were, for one's own principles. This is also linked to an inquiry undertaken in the second part of the novel about ill-considered benevolence at the expense of others. At certain moments the focus of concern in *Trois femmes* is very similar to that of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, a play which indeed Isabelle de Charrière may have read. One recalls the central scene between Claudio and Isabella where the choice open to the condemned man's sister is either to give herself physically to Angelo and save Claudio's life, or to preserve her integrity and see her brother die. The scene begins idealistically - Isabella will refuse and Claudio will

die - but then moves towards a tragic conclusion as Claudio comes round to begging Isabella to save him. Isabella refuses, holding to the resolution expressed at the close of Act II, Sc. iv:

Then, Isabel, live chaste, and, brother, die:

More than our brother is our chastity.

Emilie is placed in a situation that also demands compassion and a relaxation of principle, and like Isabella, whatever she does may possibly be wrong in the long run. It is perhaps on account of her initially unbending character that she, like Théobald, is in the overall story a slighter figure than Constance or Joséphine, both of whom hold our interest and concern throughout as fully human individuals. But this is not to say that what Constance and Joséphine do is always morally right.

The introductory dialogue before the beginning of *Trois femmes*[18] presents several different points of view concerning morality. In it the Abbé de la Tour's voice is one among many. His own view, as a result of the experiences of the three women whose story he is to relate, is quite clear:

Je me suis convaincu auprès d'elles qu'il suffit, pour n'être pas une personne dépravée, immorale, et totalement méprisable ou odieuse, d'avoir une idée quelconque du devoir et quelque soin de remplir ce qu'on appelle son devoir. N'importe, que cette idée soit confuse ou débrouillée, qu'elle naisse d'une source ou d'une autre, qu'elle se porte sur tel ou tel objet, qu'on s'y soumette plus ou moins imparfaitement, j'oserai vivre avec tout homme ou toute femme qui aura une idée quelconque du devoir.[19]

A Kantian, believing in the strength and autonomy of the will when carrying out the maxims formulated by pure practical reason, maintains the universality of moral obligation *in everyone*. A theologian and a Quietist uphold the heteronomous origin of obligation: that is, it lies in conformity with God's will, and it may be reinforced by God's rewards and punishments. Another defends enlightened self-interest, and yet another questions the derivation of 'ought' from such profit-and-loss calculations. The longest interpretation is cogently and powerfully argued by 'l'homme de la société', and, very significantly, comes last and just before the story itself, as if it represents the strongest challenge to all other moral systems. The 'homme de la société' traces the growth of ethical awareness in the child through reward and punishment. By self-observation, somewhat in the manner described by Adam Smith (see my earlier comments on *Lettres neuchâteloises*), our moral consciousness is shaped:

nous sommes dans le monde tout à la fois spectacle et spectateurs, jugés et juges.[20]

By the time we reach maturity we have been fully moulded by our upbringing, and our notion of a rewarding and punishing God is an extension of this. This of course is the orthodox 'sociological' and empirical view expounded by, for example, Helvétius, and one which foreshadows much later empirical psychology. Isabelle de Charrière appears to have subscribed to this kind of attitude at least up to the composition of *Lettres neuchâteloises*. But although it is satisfactory as far as it goes in explaining some aspects of obligation, it is not alone in winning her sympathy. She also admires the kind of individual, autonomous ethical response described by Rousseau. Further, although the Abbé purports to be producing a non-political story, it is clear on close reading that its implications are highly relevant to political

actions in France. These, then, are the different possible ethical positions Isabelle de Charrière wishes to lay before an audience well aware of the courage which new situations have demanded of people since 1789. Of course the presence of humour in the prologue alerts us to the huge proliferation of systems and dogmas, and prepares us to see reproduced in the novel something closer to the real experience of men. (And of course the Abbé is no more Isabelle de Charrière than, say, Diderot is *simply* his Narrator, Reader, Jacques or Master in *Jacques le Fataliste*.)

At the outset *Trois femmes* seems to lie somewhere in the line of the *conte philosophique* because of a note of detached amusement in the narrator's voice. Gradually, however, this slips away as the characters grow in stature, and, one assumes, also grew in Isabelle de Charrière's sympathy. She succeeds in building up wholly credible characters, not least in Emilie and Joséphine. The early part of the *Première Partie* places us in the ironic realm of the Voltairean superlative:

[…] la plus jolie maison du plus joli village de la Westphalie.[21]

We have our critical faculties alerted by the lightness of treatment given to a potentially tragic situation. This is the absurd death of Emilie's parents, who are the victims of the pretentious poses they strike, each claiming to die on account of the misfortunes suffered by the other. The welfare of their daughter is therefore sacrificed for their principles, such as they are, namely not to live on in dishonour when their property has been confiscated by the revolutionaries. Into Altendorf comes Emilie, at first glance a figure in the mould of Candide, whose education is to be acquired not through the school of experience alone but also through the tensions between the demands of urgent human situations and her received conceptions of right conduct. The lives of Emilie and her servant, the faithful and generous Joséphine, are bound together by adversity. The first crisis in their quiet pastoral existence brings to light the deep gulf between their respective ethical positions: Emilie is thoughtful, hesitant, endowed with principles acquired from her parents and her convent education; Joséphine is relatively uneducated and acts on instinct. This contrast is expressed succinctly in Emilie's 'comment se peut-il:?', alive to causes and consequences, and Joséphine's opportunistic "Jouez, jouez".[22] Joséphine presents Emilie's choice of whether to accept the harp or not as the result of a chain of events at the end of which she places Emilie. Some unknown person has been generous to Emilie and Joséphine; with Emilie's best interests (in her view) at heart, she insists that it would be churlish to refuse the gift. Her second line of attack is to hint that the gift may be for herself. This should appear a more flimsy suggestion to Emilie's rational mind, but when supported by Joséphine's cunning rhetoric, it proves convincing:

pitié pour une jeune fille éloignée de tous ses parents, et obligée par son attachement pour ses maîtres à vivre dans une terre étrangère [...][23]

In her possibly short-sighted wish to secure at least the short-term advantage of her mistress, Joséphine finally triumphs, and the harp is taken into the house. This first confrontation between them reveals the strengths and weaknesses of each character. Emilie is cautious and perhaps a little too anxious not to compromise her integrity. Joséphine is loving but rather foolhardy. The central point is that neither can foresee the consequences of either course of action, and each must bring her wisdom, experience and humanity to bear on the problem in the hope that the decision taken will be the right one. Emilie has given in largely out of pity for Joséphine, and has ceased for a moment to act in accordance with her ideal rule against "accepter le don d'un inconnu", "une harpe qui ne m'appartient pas"[24] and concerning which

she has no information. A tightly knit series of consequences flows from Emilie's first acquiescence in a transaction that goes against her received code of conduct. Emilie, lying awake at night and thinking of the harp - a retrospective clue to her not altogether unselfish motives the previous day[25] - hears Henri enter Joséphine's room. In failing to prevent Joséphine and Henri from pursuing their liaison - out of "la crainte de me compromettre" we later learn - Emilie reveals a little more of the complexity beneath her high moral tone. For she is in fact something of well-meaning prig whose principles are clearly untested by any experience of life. When she persists in her pursuit of absolutes at the expense of others she becomes pharisaical. The most important of this first series of exchanges shows this most clearly. Joséphine excuses her liaison with Henri on the grounds that his help with the cultivation of their land has been keeping them alive. It must somehow be paid for. Again she places Emilie at the end of a chain of consequences and urges her to accept the situation and to forget moral codes that do not further their material well-being. Up to now Emilie has acquiesced in Joséphine's increasingly utilitarian manoeuvres and has been the beneficiary of their profitable consequences. Now she is forced either to make a stand or to make a really major which goes against the principles she has been brought up in.[26] She knows of her maidservant's willingness to commit fornication, and may sense that Joséphine's consequentialist morality could be damaging to them both. At this early point in the novel the situation is already extremely complex. Emilie's selfish side sees the advantages of the situation, but also the appalling risks even from a utilitarian viewpoint. That part of her which adheres to principles which she has never put to the test is already weak and uncertain. Emilie gives in because of this combination of feelings, and practises that compassion that Joséphine has been demanding. Joséphine has not been entirely honest, for she clearly enjoys her relationship with Henri [27], and so in part she is responsible for her own corruption. She is quick to lay the burden of responsibility rather unfairly on Emilie's shoulders. Emilie, inexperienced and as yet incapable of making her own moral judgements, allows her very reasonable and principled position to be undermined by a misplaced sense of responsibility. She allows her brief moral stand to be demolished. Emilie allows pity and guilt to triumph in her in a situation in which the reader feels that they may not be altogether appropriate, especially considering the risks Joséphine is taking. She tells her servant:

Je n'ai plus rien à répondre à un docteur tel que toi. [28]

Is Emilie relieved that there is someone to relieve her of all material worries, and who does not harbour moral scruples ? With such thoughts in our minds we move on to the next stage of the story, also remembering the narrator's curiously suggestive words on Emilie's tears and Joséphine's possible incomprehension:

Au moment où elle vit revenir Joséphine, elle essuya des larmes dont il eût été difficile et pénible de lui expliquer les différentes causes. [29]

It is not that all dogma, superstitious rule-worship or legalism has been proved wrong - Isabelle de Charrière is far too subtle to be saying that. It is rather that certain people, rather like Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, knowingly or unknowingly use principles to the detriment of others, and even as a cloak for their own failings. Nor are blind utilitarianism and self-interest given a plus-value; Joséphine's subsequent fate eloquently shows this. Rather Isabelle de Charrière is exploring certain moral options and it is our task to respond to her explorations as fully and as sympathetically as possible.

Teased, provoked and persuaded by Joséphine's exuberant wit and vivacity, Emilie has conceded much ground. She sends a note of thanks to the château enclosing a *fichu* for the Baroness. The observant reader now recalls that Joséphine quite knowingly planted an additional selfish reason in Emilie's mind for accepting the harp, the interest of the squire's son in Emilie:

vous êtes la moitié mieux coiffée que lorsque le Junker vous rencontra dans le chemin, et s'éprit si bien de vous qu'il dit que c'est pour la vie. [30]

When Joséphine had said this, Emilie made no reply, but we must add her servant's words to the sum total of motives prompting Emilie to write to the château. (Why did Joséphine say this? To give Emilie a chance of happiness with Théobald and to ensure that she would rise in the world? Because Henri wanted to see his master's love requited? Once again the suggestiveness of one remark is in fact profound.)

Emilie with her education and principles should have been able to maintain a commanding position vis-à-vis Joséphine, but Joséphine has been perceptive and has played on Emilie's weaknesses. Emilie has occasionally jettisoned her scruples, and now this process is partly helped by the first signs of interest in Emilie for Théobald, signs which later grow into love. Her letter to the Baroness flatters both its recipients and herself, and plays no small part in crystallizing Théobald's admiration for Emilie. Joséphine can rightly feel "glorieuse" when she delivers it, for she has successfully browbeaten her mistress, and cajoled her into submission. The style up to this first 'palier' has gradually developed away from the *conte philosophique*; the tone has ceased to be ironic, and the story is now more overtly serious in its concerns.

The shift of focus from cottage to château is matched by the increasing presence of the Abbé-Narrator who is eye-witness and judge of behaviour in polite society. We are presented with a range of ethical attitudes running from the ogre-father, a ludicrous monster of honour and self-interest in the lineage of Baron Thunder-ten-tronckh or the father in Isabelle de Charrière's own *conte*, *Le Noble*, through the more discreet self-interest of Baroness d'Altendorf and the Countess Sophie, to Théobald's adherence to a principle of universal altruism. Théobald - and Isabelle de Charrière said of him, perhaps tongue-in-cheek:

C'est le plus beau caractère du roman [31]

takes this duty of doing good to others with absolute seriousness, come what may. His mother controls her husband who, in his comic automatism, resembles a clockwork Mr. Punch. However on this particular occasion, when the jealous Sophie tries to use him to nip Théobald's infatuation with Emilie in the bud, the Baroness, for all her reluctance to see her son marry a person not of her choosing, shows herself a mother. She ensures that Sophie's comment on the harp rebounds on her. Already, in a very few words the Baroness has taken on a more three-dimensional character. Sophie shows understandable pique at Théobald's new attachment, and this resentment smoulders on until the end of the story; and it must be said that he is partly responsible for everything he receives at her hands. The real point of this introductory tableau is to cast another sidelight on the central concern of the novel. The Baron, like the father in *Le Noble,* places his honour and integrity before everything else, so that it excludes any kind of imaginative sympathy or compassion for others, even for his own son.

There now follows a period of acquaintance and of growing affection between Théobald and Emilie. Although rather superficially portrayed, their friendship adds a further dimension to the main theme of the novel, for it concentrates on national differences. Emilie is stereotypically French, Théobald typically German: each has what are considered 'national qualities'. It becomes apparent as the novel develops that Emilie has a tendency towards arrogance and pride, and an ability to ridicule others quite hurtfully.[32] Théobald lacks such quick-wittedness, but has a fundamental if rather plodding honesty. Both learn as individuals to control what they had previously prided themselves in. They learn that such habits of mind may bring with them a lack of sympathy for the feelings of others. In their own relationship each tests the resilience of the other's characteristic attitudes. Emilie's coquetry plunges Théobald into turmoil, for he is exasperated by her desire to live in Paris, a place he considers a centre of barbarism and cruelty on account of the atrocities of the Revolution. Théobald declares his intention of staying in Altendorf and caring for his villagers.

At this crucial moment a new figure comes onto the stage, Constance de Vaucourt, an émigré widow from Paris. We have noted the tightness of the development of the moral dilemmas facing Emilie; no lull has been allowed. Now there is a new challenger - more powerful than Joséphine because more intelligent – to Emilie's fund of moral certainties. Constance is an engaging and perceptive woman of considerable intellectual power, but represents a further pressure on Emilie to reconsider her inherited golden rule of "réfléchis, conserve tes bonnes habitudes". Constance is shrewd and near in outlook to the balance of personal and general interest advocated by "l'homme de la société" in the *Avant-Propos*. Her first concern, as a solitary widow in exile, is to win Emilie's friendship. This task presents no difficulty, for Constance soon imposes her strong personality on her. She moves in next door to Emilie, whose mixture of excitement and uneasiness is laconically hinted at:

Au bout d'une quinzaine de jours, sa demeure fut prête à la recevoir. Emilie trouva qu'on s'était trop pressé. [33]

Capitalizing on her greater experience of life and greater perceptiveness, Constance acts with a convincing blend of rather brutal rhetoric, genuine warmth and self-interest in her treatment of Emilie. In order to insinuate herself into Emilie's confidence - her ultimate long-term aim - she gives an account of her background of misfortune, coloured by an apparent sense of wronged innocence. In this account the very real guilt of her husband and of her father (brought out in the *Suite* to the novel) is considerably underplayed. In a superb piece of casuistry she gradually whittles away before Emilie's eyes all the reasons why she should repay her family's creditors, alleging that:

(a) Many other people embezzle and escape punishment;

(b) her creditors are spread too widely across the world; and

(c) one should not restore money to such corporate bodies as countries or governments because they are all as bad as each other.

Then, with a mixture of pique and confidence born of perceptiveness, Constance changes from a slightly hesitant and cautiously self-justifying tone to one of well-directed personal slight. She clearly senses that Emilie's principles are really only verbal:

Votre éducation vous a donné des idées spéculatives extrêmement délicates sur quantité d'objets, que vous envisageriez un peu différemment si vous aviez plus vu le monde. [34]

Finally she demands Emilie's *discrétion* and *estime*. A stammering Emilie offers the former and before she can continue Constance seizes the latter:

Votre estime m'est due, et je l'aurai [35]

She continues to construct her edifice of deception (and possibly of self-deception), precariously balancing a new layer of propositions upon the last, and reaches a point where she can maintain that *l'intérêt* is not her kind of moral ideal. She catches Emilie unawares in a complacent moment and self-righteously cuts her to the quick for having bent her principles when it suited her on the subject of Théobald. Mote and beam have been cunningly exchanged:

Ne voyez-vous pas qu'au château vous séduisez Théobald, inquiétez sa mère et désolez sa cousine? [36]

Emilie at once retreats into an automatic guilt-response:

comment pouvez-vous me montrer quelque.estime et vous confier à moi, si vous croyez… [37]

This is the kind of half-admission Constance has been seeking, an admission that for all Emilie's principles (clearly a deep source of annoyance to Constance for more than one reason) Emilie can put her own interests before those of Sophie. She can now relax the pressure on Emilie, and concedes to her what she has just taken away, that her love is basically innocent and even praiseworthy. She can even allow herself the additional triumph of quite superfluously *encouraging* Emilie in her love. Emilie is overwrought and breaks down in tears, her self-esteem shot to ribbons. The encounter has the flavour of real life, with the underlying irony that for all Constance's accusations of selfishness against Emilie, her behaviour is itself partly motivated by self-interest. And yet Constance is to show that she is a generous-hearted woman and a true friend to Emilie when Emilie really needs a friend; it is also these second and third levels of significance that win our assent to the novelist's fictional world.

Now, hard on the heels of Constance's verbal assaults, a new problem comes to trouble Emilie. Joséphine is perhaps right in saying of Emilie:

Votre âme s'ouvre […] aux intérêts, aux fautes, aux faiblesses des autres: oh! combien vous en devenez plus aimable. [38]

(But we must also remember how faulty Joséphine's judgement can be on occasion, if not necessarily on *this* occasion.) The sudden discovery that Joséphine is pregnant precipitates the climax of the novel, precisely at a moment when Emilie is at her most insecure. Joséphine indeed presents a pitiful picture carrying Henri's child, but she does not fail to touch up that picture at points where she might be considered blameworthy, making light of her friendship with Lacroix, and uttering threats of suicide if she cannot be married to someone to spare her shame. Constance offers to bribe Henri to marry Joséphine, but Joséphine rejects this as both impractical and beneath her dignity. She would rather Emilie exercise some form of moral

blackmail on Henri. Emilie's sense of reason and logic cries out in the face of Joséphine's known promiscuity and deceptiveness:

Mais après tout ce que tu m'as dit, comment nier...? [39]

and when forced to admit her liaison with Lacroix, Joséphine reluctantly does so. Yet she insists that it is vital that Henri should be deceived on this point and imposes this as an obligation on Emilie. So Emilie is to blackmail and deceive Henri for the sake of a woman who may not suit him and who might one day be unfaithful to him. Again Emilie is outraged and tempted to put principles before people:

Mais, ma chère Joséphine, trahirai-je la vérité, moi qui n'ai jamais affirmé que ce dont j'étais ou me croyais assurée? Abandonnerai-je en un instant des principes et des habitudes sur lesquelles je fonde tout ce que je puis avoir d'estime pour moi-même...? [40]

(As so often with Emilie's pronouncements, it is difficult to separate her principles from a certain egotistical *pride in having principles*.) She is at once set upon by Joséphine who with the utmost virulence attacks her "estime pour moi-même" as basically selfishness. She puts Emilie's fine words to the test by walking to the door and hinting that she will kill herself:

C'est fort bien, Madernoiselle, abandonnez et trahissez Joséphine plutôt que des mots, de grands mots, la vérité, vos principes, vos habitudes, et quand je serai morte, estimez-vous encore si vous pouvez... [41]

If Emilie held firmly to her principles, she would probably remain impassive. But they prove to be merely theoretical. She gives in to Joséphine, and promises to speak to Henri. (We as readers know the kind of action we expect from Emilie, action based on concern and fellow-feeling. But Isabelle de Charrière is objective enough not to leave room for any complacency, for, as we presently see, Emilie's break with hard-and-fast principles is to lead to the near catastrophic climax of the book.) While they are waiting for Henri's arrival, there is a subtly delineated exchange between Emilie and Joséphine on the subject of Joséphine's threatened suicide, in which Emilie rather ponderously rehearses the traditional argument:

Sans oser condamner le malheureux qui s'ôte la vie […] j'estime plus celui qui le supporte; il montre plus de respect et de soumission pour son Créateur. [42]

Joséphine deliberately adopts a more light-hearted approach to the subject altogether:

Oh! bien, […] je ne me tuerai pas: je ne voudrais pas contrarier vos idées. Rendez-moi un peu de bonheur et je ne me tuerai pas. [43]

She clearly has no time for such "idées" and admits:

j'étais au désespoir quand je vous voyais tout occupée de vous et d'un certain mérite que vous voulez avoir, et avec lequel vous laisseriez tranquillement souffrir tout le monde. [44]

But in her eagerness to prick the bubble of Emilie's rectitude Joséphine has left the reader in no doubt as to her own capacity to deceive on the matter of suicide. Can we *really* believe that, speaking this way now, she would have killed herself? And Emilie herself is anxious about Joséphine's ability to deceive Henri, and perhaps to be unfaithful to him. Nonetheless

Emilie does give in, and she regains the reader's sympathy (in the light of Joséphine's unreliability) by stating with dignity:

Etre sage, être vraie, ne posséder que ce qui est bien à soi, voilà ce qu'on m'avait recommandé depuis que je suis au monde. Est-il bien étonnant que j'aie quelque peine à prendre sur tous les objets des idées plus relâchées?

Cependant, je cède, Joséphine; mes répugnances cèdent les unes après les autres à l'amitié, à la reconnaissance. [45]

With characteristic realism, however, Isabelle de Charrière allows Emilie to carry her apologia further than is necessary, thus leaving an aftertaste of priggishness. (It is the kind of technique Jane Austen uses in *Emma* to allow the reader to measure how far her heroine has yet to develop.):

Cette condescendance m'ôtera, peut-être, peu à peu, toute l'estime que j'avais pour moi: n'importe! [46]

In the meantime Constance has been out on a mysterious errand, which we later learn was to bribe Lacroix to marry another village girl. Emilie's next move is to speak to Henri's father and then to Henri. Henri, however, offers stout resistance from the outset and proves largely impervious to Emilie's emotional rhetoric. He throws back at Emilie her use of the verb "aimer", and is as cutting in his language as Constance. He is indeed a powerful adversary and the more so because Emilie knows he has right on his side in some measure:

Heureux, Mademoiselle! Et si je suis jaloux, serai-je heureux? Et Si M. Lacroix... Comment dirai-je cela honnêtement...? Serai-je heureux? [47]

He does not want to be tied to a woman for whom he has no love. But there is another side to the situation. Is this simply a convenient pretext for Henri to neglect Joséphine? This is something we have to bear in mind later when his marriage proves a failure: it does not necessarily mean that a man is right because we can see how he has been wronged. Henri has definite responsibilities towards a woman he has slept with and who is now going to give birth to a child. But it is debatable whether he should be *made* to marry her. At this point Constance announces that Lacroix is to marry a village girl, but of course reveals nothing of her own part in the arrangements. Henri remains adamant in his refusal, and even Joséphine is beginning to wonder whether it is worthwhile pursuing the matter:

Mais, Monsieur Henri, c'est assez vous presser; vous êtes le maître. Grand Dieu! [48]

Emilie now jettisons all her scruples in one last desperate effort to ensure that Joséphine has a husband. She declares that she will leave Altendorf with Joséphine and not return. This strikes at Henri's Achilles' heel, his love for his master Théobald, whom he knows to be in love with Emilie. He capitulates immediately. To a large extent Emilie thus assumes responsibility for the marriage. This is a concrete example of Isabelle de Charrière's awareness of the complexity and interdependence of moral situations, for here the characters are shown to be affecting third parties by their actions.

We have a brief glimpse of the consequences of such conduct as Emilie's emotional blackmail of Henri in an ensuing dialogue between Constance and Lacroix. In both characters

enlightened self-interest has replaced moral principles. Lacroix chooses his wife Mathilde in a casual and random fashion, heedless of any broader or more long-term considerations regarding her happiness or his own. Once again the question of 'national qualities' comes to the surface, since for Lacroix and Constance "l'esprit" is the only value of real use in society, and implies that ability to manipulate others so familiar from the novels of Crébillon fils and Laclos. Constance ensures that all her *ficelles* function correctly, even seeing to it that another temptation for Joséphine is kept out of her way, a certain Hans. By now the reader certainly begins to feel some unease at witnessing such rough-and-ready trading in human destinies, especially when Lacroix remarks:

Madame Constance est bien bonne; si j'osais, je dirais que c'est elle qui a bien de l'esprit; elle connaît ses gens; c'est tout autre chose que ces dames allemandes; elles n'auraient pas imaginé en vingt ans ce que Madame a arrangé en un quart d'heure. [49]

All this must give us pause when considering Emilie's abandonment of principles, something which will have consequences beyond any she could have foreseen. Indeed the first fruits of Emilie's deception are not long in showing themselves. For Théobald becomes greatly anxious whether Emilie really cares so little for him that she could have left Altendorf there and then. And Emilie, weakened by her interview with Henri, cannot prevent Théobald from stumbling into the trammels of her deceit. Théobald would by no means agree with Constance's opinion of Emilie:

L'esprit d'Emilie se forme, se perfectionne extrêmement. [50]

He would not consider attachment to principle as being merely a childish aberration, the result of too little experience of life.

Quickly preparations are made for the wedding. Joséphine tries to console Emilie, assuring her that she is determined to hold to her promise of fidelity to Henri for Emilie's sake:

Chacun a sa vertu à sa manière: la mienne est de tout faire pour vous. Je me suis vouée à vous. [51]

Indeed her words are moving, and she expresses the central concern of the book when she says:

Aller tout droit son chemin dans ses actions et dans ses paroles sans s'embarrasser de ce qui en peut arriver, a je ne sais quoi que je respecte, et je crois que c'est la vertu des gens de qualité. Toutefois ils ne doivent pas la pousser trop loin. [52]

(We the readers understand, of course, that such a morality is not necessarily linked to any particular social class, nor is its abuse.) However she also reveals a disturbing readiness to be too exclusive in her concern with Emilie:

Je ferais un faux serment pour vous épargner le moindre mal […] [53]

Joséphine's wedding ceremony takes place, marked symbolically by a brief and magnificent firework display which lasts no more than a quarter of an hour. In the case of Joséphine it clearly suggests a shortlived triumph which is soon to be followed by the hard reality of everyday living.

We briefly now return to another of the novel's concerns in the next scene. For we are not allowed to forget that Altendorf is a haven of peace in a world full of barbarism, and that this peace is fragile. The Abbé-Narrator's disgust with a France existing in the shadow of the guillotine is a sombre warning to his compatriots, Emilie and Constance, as to the consequences of an excess of zeal at the expense of others. It is also an excuse to poke fun at those who believe a nation can be *wholly* anything, whether good or evil, much as *Trois femmes* itself aims at being objective about human complexity. The Abbé says of Germany:

Croyez, Madame,[…] que ce n'est pas chez vous qu'on peut penser que l'esprit, le goût, la générosité, que rien, enfin, de ce qui est agréable et beau, manque aux Allemands ni à l'Allemagne.

Chacun me remercia par un coup d'œil ou un sourire.' [54]

The story has demonstrated so far that society is composed neither of villains nor plaster saints.

After Joséphine's wedding Théobald, deeply in love with Emilie, now broods on her deception of Henri and dislikes what he has discovered. This is the first unforeseen result of Emilie's successful blackmailing of Henri, and it is to have long and serious repercussions. Théobald muses:

N'avait-elle point trop pressé Henri, sachant quelle fille était Joséphine?[55]

and he registers instinctive distrust of Emilies "fleur de rhétorique", as Constance had called it.[56] (Rhetoric is a weapon Emilie has borrowed from the hitherto alien armoury of Constance and Joséphine.) Very characteristically Isabelle de Charrière is presenting the same situation as viewed through different eyes, and hence suggesting the protean character of moral problems.

Now we see the beginning of a period of serious misunderstandings and misinterpreted gestures that leads on to the climax of the *Première Partie*. Emilie, concerned at Théobald's appearance, is unable to guess its cause, and it is only the intervention of the Abbé to allay Théobald's fears about Emilie that cuts short this period of estrangement between them. Now indeed the focus is on Théobald and on how far removed he is from the attitudes of Constance. Constance continues meanwhile to represent the forces of self-interest in her conversations with Emilie:

Supposé que Théobald fût capable de se laisser donner pour femme cette petite envieuse [Sophie], il faudrait vous remontrer tous les jours à eux, jusqu'à ce que la tête eût tourné à l'un de regret et à l'autre de jalousie; mais j'attends tout autre chose de sa part. [57]

Théobald for his part theoretically holds to:

une vertu plus sévère, plus inflexible. [58]

But, like Emilie's ideas at the beginning of the story, Théobald's are untested and unshaped by experience. Constance, having schooled Emilie, now turns her attention to Théobald, questions his attachment to "la règle", and looks for lapses from this rule of conduct. Théobald, however, is a quite different personality from Emilie. He can foresee that lapses

may occur on his part, especially as a result of the working of his emotions, but maintains that they are only lapses. His rule does not change with every circumstance, nor is it invalidated by his failure to obey it. (The nuances are important here: Emilie has her 'principles' tested by an urgent human problem, and shows compassion in resolving it, however unwise her solution. Théobald really *believes in* and practises his ideal of disinterested *bienfaisance*, and although he fails badly, his kind of idealism retains a large measure of our approval. In a way it could be said that both characters attain the kind of virtue that befits their background and character.) A determined Constance makes Théobald feel embarrassed at his admission of occasional failure, and in so doing increases our sympathy for Théobald's position.[59] By now, too, there is a further stimulus to the reader's faculty of moral judgement in the Abbé-Narrator's unconcealed infatuation with Constance and with all her views, a factor which renders him less clear-sighted as to her failings. The occasion of Théobald's momentary embarrassment at the hands of Constance also forces Emilie to admit to Théobald that she truly would have left Altendorf when she had said she intended to. She plunges him into despair, then unmistakably reassures him of her affection. By doing this she further increases Théobald's passion, as his excited words to the Abbé confirm. [60] Another circumstance, directly attributable to Constance's influence on Emilie, precipitates a sudden and dangerous crisis. Emilie reads *Adèle de Sénange* by Madame de Flahaut, and Théobald is so inflamed by its story of a coquette who teases a patient lover that he contrives to be left alone with Emilie while the Countess Sophie is called elsewhere in the château. Although this is not stated, Théobald's uncertainties are, we presume, exacerbated by the memory of Emilie's deception of Henri, and also by the unresolved statement that she would have left Altendorf because she 'had talked herself into doing so'.[61] He impetuously declares his love to Emilie and proposes marriage, unaware that Sophie, whom he has tried to deceive, is listening at the door. The scene of the love-declaration is thoroughly conventional, and clearly Isabelle de Charrière's main concern is with the development of the moral interest of the story. We are not to be disappointed on this second point, for the pieces are fitting inexorably into place. A noise is heard in the adjoining room and the lovers are at once fearful that they have been spied on. With this ominous cloud hanging over them, Emilie and Théobald separate for the night. The following day Théobald, delirious with happiness, is already beginning to forget the necessities of everyday life. He sleeps till eleven in the morning and omits to see Sophie off on her mysterious errand to Osnabruck. His actions are shortly to rebound on him: an irate Sophie returns with her mother, and Théobald in his blindness is incautious enough to greet them lightheartedly. Baron d'Altendorf when informed of Théobald's infatuation insists that an undertaking once entered into must be honoured. Now it is implied throughout the story that Théobald's parents and Sophie's mother have an understanding about their respective children eventually marrying. Théobald is now wilfully shirking his responsibility even though he was not a party to the undertaking, he who has maintained the sacrosanct nature of all obligations. To a certain extent, of course, his actions are understandable: first, he loves Emilie, and in the second place he is simply reacting to the widening shock-waves generated by Emilie's deception of Henri. But now he is clearly seen to be holding one very real and important duty, however repellent or unjust, in contempt:[62]

Depuis quelques moments, Théobald n'écoutait plus et, nonchalamment assis, caressait son chien dans un coin de la chambre.[63]

He makes a deceptive statement to his mother implying that he will leave Altendorf as she wishes but secretly meaning that he will elope with Emilie. Emilie later that evening receives a mysterious invitation to join "un malheureux" who she can little doubt is Théobald. We are

reminded at this crucial moment of Emilie's moral blackmailing of Henri, for it is he who has the task of persuading Emilie to leave with the unknown gentleman. He pleads as the servant

qui me suis marié pour que vous ne vous séparassiez pas de mon maître[64]

And his rough words and harsh treatment of Joséphine further underline the results of Emilie's earlier manipulation of Henri. As so often, however, the picture is not touched up: Henri's boorishness might suggest that a woman like Joséphine is really neither better nor worse than he deserves:

Ne dis mot et ne remue pas [...], ou tu t'en repentiras le reste de tes jours. [65]

Henri is no martyr. Emilie herself, partly of her own volition and partly out of force of circumstance, now joins Théobald and Henri in their flouting of conventional morality and of family honour.

At this moment Constance, the shrewd utilitarian and advocate of enlightened self-interest comes into her own. Weakness on Emilie's part and passion on the part of Théobald have almost brought about their undoing. Constance not only has an interest in Emilie's successful future but also very clearly has affection both for her and the man she loves. She is a real and complex individual in our eyes, and the *Suite* will confirm our sympathy for her. Her contribution is to extract, through the good offices of the Abbé her admirer, a conditional full pardon for the aberrant couple from Théobald's parents. This is obtained without difficulty by playing on their self-interest. Constance then pursues the fleeing lovers and overtakes them before Emilie's good name is lost forever. It is a piece of astute planning which comes off; the risk is worth taking, for by this stage nothing can be lost and everything can still be gained. Théobald and Emilie return to the fold, and even the Baron comes to life as a character by his amusement at Constance's wiles. The only mournful note amid the universal rejoicing is the disappointment of Henri at returning to the wife he does not love. Our feelings for him must be mixed, for hard though his situation now is, should we feel a great deal of sympathy for a man who refuses to marry the woman he slept with? Do we not also feel at times that in his case also 'moral principle' (in this matter of Joséphine's fidelity) is a cloak for egotism? Closing this section of the novel we are again reminded of the inseparability in real life of self-interest, altruism and love. Constance buys a ruby for Emilie, engraved with an intertwined 'C' and an 'E', a further hint that Constance intends to keep her advantageous friendship with Emilie in good repair after her marriage to the squire's son.

The marriage of Théobald and Emilie is not lingered over but dismissed in a single sentence. It is clearly only accessory to the novel's main theme. Instead we are returned to the outer narrative frame for a discussion of events between the Baroness de Berghen and the Abbé-Narrator. It is a more or less objective account of the findings of the novel so far, or rather of its *explorations*, since the dialogue ensures that no one view of the events is necessarily adequate to understand them. The Abbé defends his three women in much the same vein as his admired Constance, taking particular pains to emphasize the view that Emilie's change from "inflexible vertu" to "une moralité quelconque" is a great advance on her former position. He is challenged on the vagueness of this "moralité quelconque" by the Baroness de Berghen who also impugns the non-universalizable nature of the three women's conduct, saying that it is not of a type conducive to the maintenance of "le bon ordre". To this the Abbé rightly replies that Joséphine and Constance suffer. He does not pass on to more general moral considerations but confines himself to his chosen examples.

[Chapter VII continued]

[1] Godet II, 410.

[2] See Denise Hermann, 'La première édition des *Trois Femmes* de Mme de Charrière', *Etudes de Lettres*, 33 (1938), 76-89, and J.-D. Candaux, 'Note sur deux éditions mutilées de Madame de Charrière'*, Revue des Sciences humaines*, 137 (janvier-mars, 1970), 87-92.

[3] Denise Hermann, art. cit.

[4] Godet II, 217.

[5] Respectively, *Trois Femmes* (Lausanne, 1942) *and Lettres neuchâteloises suivi de Trois Femmes*, postface de Charly Guyot (Lausanne, 1971). Although nowhere stated, the Guyot edition reproduces Lonchamp's text, with necessary corrections to printing errors.

[6] Godet II, 412.

[7] Godet II, 218-19.

[8] Godet II, 219.

[9] Abbé Prévost, *Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*, ed. Clifford King (London, 1963), 4.

[10] B. Munteano, 'Episodes kantiens en Suisse et en France sous le directoire', *Revue de littérature comparée*, 15 (1935), 387-454.

[11] Godet II, 219.

[12] Charly Guyot, 'Lettres inédites de Madame de Charrière', *Musée neuchâtelois* (1970), 6.

[13] Letter to Henriette L'Hardy, B.V.N. Ms 1303, No. 72, undated [Feb. 1793].

[14] Letter to Henriette L'Hardy, B.V.N. Ms 1303, No. 105, dated 4 April 1793.

[15] B.V.N. Ms 1304, No. 133, dated 26 September 1794.

[16] Letter to Henriette L'Hardy, B.V.N. Ms 1304, No. 139, dated 20 November 1794.

[17] B.V.N. Ms 1304, No. 159 in the dossier of letters to Henriette L'Hardy.

[18] The story is prefaced by a discussion between the ostensible author, the Abbé de la Tour, and the Baroness de Berghen and several other characters. The Abbé proposes to tell a story which will show that in order not to be immoral or depraved it is sufficient to have an idea of what one's duty is and to act upon it. The other characters dispute the origins of this sense of obligation - a Kantian, a Christian theologian, a Quietist, and an Enlightenment empiricist, 'l'homme de la societé'. The question is thus thrown open, and the Abbé begins his story. Emilie, a French girl whose parents have lately died, comes to Altendorf in Westphalia with her maid Joséphine. She is offered a harp by a stranger, which after some hesitation she

accepts. That evening her maid receives a man, Henri, the groom of Théobald, son of the local squire, into her bedroom. Emilie hears this but, through cowardice, does not interfere. In both cases Emilie's actions run counter to her inner convictions about right conduct. Joséphine's moral code, far less absolute than Emilie's and more pliable to circumstance, shocks Emilie, but at length she is persuaded of its occasional expediency. Emilie is loved by Théobald, son of the squire, Baron d'Altendorf, even though he is expected to marry his cousin Sophie. It is obvious to that Emilie loves Théobald. At this point, as a result of a coaching accident, Constance, a widow from Paris, comes to the village, becomes Emilie's friend and settles in Altendorf. Joséphine becomes the friend of Lacroix, Constance's manservant. After some time, Emilie discovers that Joséphine is expecting a child. Joséphine in distress threatens suicide if Emilie does not help her. While Constance bribes Lacroix to marry another village girl, Emilie urges Henri to marry Joséphine. He is reluctant and has doubts about her fidelity, but Emilie uses moral blackmail. Théobald in despair declares his love to Emilie and is overheard by his cousin Sophie. She with her mother brings down Baron d'Altendorf's wrath on his son: the squire refuses to approve of his marriage to Emilie. Théobald impetuously leaves in the night for Bremen with Emilie, but Constance has the foresight to overtake their coach and to bring them back, having ensured a favourable reception from Théobald's parents. The Second Part of the novel, after the marriage of Théobald and Emilie, begins with a debate in the outer 'frame' of the novel between the Baroness de Berghen and the Abbé. The Abbé defends the behaviour of all the characters, but the Baroness is uneasy about such thoroughgoing relativism. This dialogue is followed by eleven letters from Constance and one from Emilie addressed to the Abbé, in which the pace of the narrative is slowed down and in which Constance describes Théobald's plans for the education of the villagers' children, his hostility to the behaviour of fashionable society, his hiring of an atheist geometry teacher, and Constance's own difficulties with the Countess de Horst and her husband whom she has taken under her roof. These details are interspersed with reflections on current political questions and remarks on Rousseau and Voltaire. The narrative climax of this section is the confusion of the baby sons of Joséphine and the Countess de Horst. The Countess abandons her own child to Joséphine who henceforth nurses both children. Both will be brought up as if they were of the same social class. Constance also plans to bring up a village boy and girl as if each were of the other sex, to find out whether upbringing or innate propensities make for the differences between the sexes. The section concludes with a *Dictionnaire politique, moral et rural* composed by Théobald, filled with observations on metaphysical, political and social questions raised by the revolutionary period in France. In Letter XII we learn of the approach of the English and émigré army, and of the flight of Emilie, Constance and the Baron to avoid a possible meeting with them, Théobald and Joséphine remaining at the château. Constance ends on a serious and thoughtful note, speaking of her regrets that her fortune was wrongfully amassed and of Henri's unhappiness at being married to Joséphine.

Isabelle de Charrière wrote a *Suite* to *Trois femmes* which has not yet (1975) been published, B.V.N. Ms 1363, in the handwriting of Charles-Emmanuel de Charrière with corrections by Isabelle de Charrière. Although Godet dismisses it out of hand (Godet II, 228), it does belong to the same period of composition as the published novel and, as I intend to show, is well worth consideration as a valuable part of Isabelle de Charrière's total project. It develops the issues raised by the published novel, and is not simply a superfluous addition to an already self-sufficient edifice. (It is unfortunate that no modern edition has yet included it). The narrative frame is again that of the Abbé recounting the actions of his three women characters. Constance and Emilie on the coach leaving Altendorf discuss contemporary fiction at some length, and their comments and those of the Abbé clearly have some bearing

on *Trois femmes*. They arrive at Celle in Hanover and settle there. The Abbé tells of Théobald's sheltering two of Emilie's émigré relatives, a gouty old marquis and his son, the Vicomte de Chamdray. He also tells of the Marquis' boorishness, his insistence that Emilie should marry his son, and his attempts to win Joséphine into his service. Joséphine, knowing of his licentiousness, refuses. Unaware of this development, a wounded Englishman, Sir James *** gives her money so that she can leave Henri, with whom he knows her to be unhappy, and cross to England to join his household. Henri discovers the money, and although Joséphine allays his suspicions, he remains sceptical about her character. Théobald suggests that the Vicomte should go and see Emilie, his relative. On arrival he recognizes Constance, and Constance begins the story of her background and of her early acquaintance with the Vicomte. She was brought up in Bordeaux by her Creole mother, her father having left France for the West Indies. All was well until her mother's brother Victor returned from the West Indies with his daughter Biondina. His wife, a slave, had been exasperated by his infidelity and had tried to kill him. She had been executed for attempted murder. Now exceedingly melancholy, he encourages Constance's mother in her indolence and both die, leaving the two girls orphans. A representative comes from Constance's father to urge her to marry, saying her father will make the fortune of any future son-in-law if she and her husband join him in the Caribbean. A husband, M. Le Muret, is found, but soon it appears that he only wants Constance's money. Advised by relatives not to suffer such treatment without offering any resistance, she decides to flirt with a ship's officer, M. de Merival (the Vicomte) on the voyage, and arouses her husband's jealousy. At this point the Vicomte takes over the narration, telling how Le Muret challenged him to a duel while the other passengers were at prayer, and how in a final speech of bitter anger he poured forth a story of repeated disappointments in which his wife had been his last hope. Very reluctantly the Vicomte had fought and killed Le Muret. Although the Vicomte on his arrival in the West Indies had been acquitted of murder, the incident is still a source of anguished self-reproach to him. Constance reflects on the similar failing in French émigrés who should have stood up for their beliefs in France while they could still have been effective. Here the *Suite* ends, apart from a few interesting fragments which I shall mention in the commentary.

[Chapter VII continued]

[19] *T.F.*, 94.

[20] *T.F.*, 95.

[21] *T.F.*, 99. Cf. "le plus beau et le plus agréable des châteaux possibles" in *Candide*, ed. J.H. Brumfitt (London, 1968), 57. Of course, the château in question is also in Westphalia.

[22] *T.F.*, 99.

[23] *T.F.*, 101.

[24] *T.F.*, 100-101.

[25] Joséphine's emotonal rhetoric may be powerful, but such is Isabelle de Charrière's realism that when we ponder on such details we have the convincing impression of the complexity of life itself: Joséphine could never have won her 'victory' if Emilie had not sensed that her rectitude hid a desire to know who had given her the harp and why. And to persist in her efforts at persuasion Joséphine must have felt intuitively that this was the case.

[26] We are told later that Emilie's unthinking and attitudinizing mother had said: "Je te laisse à la Providence … prie Dieu, mon enfant; réfléchis, conserve tes bonnes habitudes; je n'ai point d'autre mentor à te donner que toi-même" (*T.F.*, 103).

[27] Note her laconic "Henri est fort joli" (*T.F.*, 103).

[28] *T.F.*, 108.

[29] *T.F.*, 109.

[30] *T.F.*, 108.

[31] Godet II, 217.

[32] We shall later look at the dinner scene after their marriage when this conflict comes to a head (*T.F.*, 183-188).

[33] *T.F.,* 128.

[34] *T.F.,* 131-2.

[35] *T.F.*, 131.

[36] *T.F.*, 132.

[37] *T.F.*, 132.

[38] *T.F.*, 134.

[39] *T.F.,* 138.

[40] *T.F.*, 138.

[41] *T.F.*, 138.

[42] *T.F.,* 140.

[43] *T.F.,* 140.

[44] *T.F.*, 140.

[45] *T.F.,* 140.

[46] *T.F.,* 140.

[47] *T.F.*, 142.

[48] *T.F.*, 143.

[49] *T.F.*, 146.

[50] *T.F.*, 147.

[51] *T.F.*, 147.

[52] *T.F.,* 148.

[53] *T.F.,* 147.

[54] *T.F.,* 151.

[55] *T.F.*, 151.

[56] *T.F.*, 147.

[57] *T.F.*, 152.

[58] *T.F.,* 153.

[59] *T.F.*, 154.

[60] *T.F.,* 155.

[61] We must remember that Emilie never denied that she would leave Altendorf: she merely said she would be sad if Théobald found her departure agreeable. Thus the link in the chain of cause and effect from the deception of Henri is carefully kept in place.

[62] This is not to say, of course, that his parents are not responsible for unwisely organizing their son's future life for him. They appear not to have consulted him on his choice of a wife, and throughout the story Théobald's father puts his own self-interest before that of his son.

[63] *T.F.,* 164.

[64] *T.F.*, 166.

[65] *T.F.*, 167.

Conclusion

The Novels of Isabelle de Charriere

by

Dennis Wood

Isabelle de Charrière in her novels displays to a surprising degree what used to be called a 'unified sensibility', a particularly coherent attitude to life which embraces both her aesthetic position and her moral views. It is an attitude of notable seriousness. This does not exclude from her stories the humour of irony, but does involve the kind of minute investigation of human relationships

later pursued by her friend Benjamin Constant and by other European novelists of the nineteenth century. The kinds of experience she explores in no way compare with the demonic range of her contemporary Laclos, nor on the other hand do they extend to the mawkish excesses of, for example, Loaisel de Tréogate or Dorat. Her concern is with moral choice ('moral' meaning "whatever bears upon the question, 'how to live'", as Wordsworth said) and moral choice in circumstances not beyond the lot of average human beings. Her aesthetic position seeks to avoid excess, first in style, and then as a corollary of this, either in "sentiment in excess of the facts" or in creating characters of total virtue or villainy.

In this study I have tried to show the nature and quality of Isabelle de Charrière's fiction, first in her concerns as a novelist, and second in her command of particular techniques - her handling of the epistolary form, her often oblique view of her characters, her use of irony and of narrative point of view. It will be apparent that when we actually read Isabelle de Charrière's novels 'concerns' and 'techniques' are in fact inseparable - tone, point of view, and structure *support* the kinds of psychological and moral investigation which Isabelle de Charrière undertakes. In the context of the eighteenth-century French novel she has something in common with novelists like Madame Riccoboni when she examines the position - and the sufferings - of women in society, especially when this is linked to a first-person narrative. In a more general way, Madame de Charrière's longer works like *Caliste* are related to the tradition of the *roman sentimental*. But the *differences* are perhaps more significant than any superficial similarities. As I suggested in my chapter on Isabelle de Charrière's life and literary career, the supreme quality of her personality is seldom hidden in her work - her intelligence allied to her insight into human nature. Her refusal to accept ready-made answers and her ability in her novels to probe commonplace responses and modes of thought stemmed from her other great quality, her scepticism, which throughout her life she applied to all sects and schools with a peculiarly passionate impartiality. Where for example characters in Madame Riccoboni's stories are on the whole two-dimensional and conventional, Isabelle de Charrière's - especially some of her heroines - are anything but conventional. A girl like Marianne in *Lettres neuchâteloises* is no *ingénue* - she is remarkably clear-sighted, broadminded, even sophisticated in that same way which delighted or terrified those who met her real-life creator. If the reader expects the high-flown sentimentality associated with the usual run of practitioners of the *roman sentimental* or followers of Rousseau, he or she will find none of it. As for Isabelle de Charrière's style, it is for the most part characterized by clarity and control. The language of her novels, which is worthy of a complete study on its own[1], has something of the Voltairean understatement about it in *Le Noble* and in those stories which have the Abbé de la Tour as their narrator, particularly *Sainte-Anne*. Elsewhere, as well as the tone of good company Isabelle de Charrière can also produce thoroughly convincing naturalistic dialogue such as we see in *Lettres neuchâteloises* or *Trois femmes*. By comparison with the increasingly gaudy and rhetorical colours which other writers towards the end of the century were allowing themselves, there is a laudable single-mindedness in her pursuit of simplicity and naturalness of expression.[2]

In the main body of this book I have attempted to demonstrate how Isabelle de Charrière's preoccupations as an artist and her craftsmanship both tend to focus themselves around a vigilant, scrupulous and wholly undogmatic examination of questions of moral responsibility. In her fiction she avoids putting forward any single definite moral standard and does not propose particular solutions to human problems. This does not mean that a form of moral positive is never obliquely implied. A life which opens itself to others and respects their interests, we soon understand, may for many reasons be preferable to that ruled over by the

enthroned ego. But *exploration* is the key word: Madame de Charrière is concerned with exploring concretely the moral situations in which human beings find themselves.

In *Le Noble* flippant humour and a careless word at the expense of another person almost bring Julie to the edge of calamity. In *Mistriss Henley* we see a particularly moving example of the varying degrees to which two people are unable to move beyond themselves and extend their sympathy to each other. *Honorine d'Userche* takes a tragically ironic form, recounting the story of a young woman who uses others in order to marry a man who turns out to be her own brother. Her misfortune, though not *directly* her own fault, indirectly raises the question whether the exploitation and manipulation of other people can lead to psychological isolation and despair. In these three short works Isabelle de Charrière employs various techniques which enable her to avoid speaking in her own voice. In *Le Noble* she assumes the ironic attitude of Voltaire and in parts, takes on a Flaubertian *impassibilité*; she is enabled by its *conte moral* flavour to offer the happy ending the overall course of events would otherwise most certainly have denied. For *Lettres deMistriss Henley*, the more personal form of the epistolary novel is brought into use, but adapted so as to produce the effect of a diary or internal monologue. This creates a particular tension between reader and narrator, the reader perceiving before long that the narrator is anything but omniscient - or indeed on every occasion wise. The reader is prompted into making judgements about the situations described, into building up in his or her mind a more considered picture of Mrs Henley's character and behaviour than the narrator herself is capable of. The art of eliciting the reader's sympathies for a variety of characters and attitudes is achieved in *Honorine d'Userche* by the use of a mixture of narrative (given by a more or less 'reliable' narrator) and letters from various characters which are quoted in full and differentiated in style; the scheming, energetic, attractive Honorine at one extreme, the naive Florentin, unaware of her guile and her designs on him, at the other. Several perspectives are thus offered, but what is gained in comprehensiveness of view when the story is compared with *Mistriss Henley* for example, is lost through the absence of tension between narrator and reader.

When we turn to Isabelle de Charrière's more ambitious works, we find a similar variety of techniques adopted to achieve a kind of impersonality and moral objectivity. *Lettres neuchâteloises* uses a carefully arranged series of letters, each written in a particular linguistic register: those of Meyer and Marianne in educated middle-class speech, those of Julianne in a working-class and regional *patois*. The novel deals skilfully with such a delicate confrontation by not concealing any awkward detail. Although all the characters owe some theoretical allegiance to Christian morality, the uncouth and undiscerning Julianne is outmanoeuvred by her betters who quite ruthlessly bundle her off to Germany, almost as if she belonged to an inferior order of being. We are left to judge for ourselves the degrees of responsibility incumbent on each character - how far characters can assert their own interests, and how far these may interfere with the integrity of others. We witness the crucial moment in Meyer's life when he passes from cold self-seeking (conveyed in the detached tone of his early letters) to a more adult, sensitive awareness of his relationship with other people. We also observe Marianne's assumption of responsibility for Julianne, and here the novelist seems to question the rather incomplete nature of what Meyer and Marianne have actually learnt. There is still no place in their world for Julianne who is, as it were, handled with tweezers and clinically isolated. This is the question raised by the presence of Julianne's letters, for all their coarseness, at the beginning of the book and their absence at its close. Isabelle de Charrière's emphasis is not on class warfare or on strictly social criticism so much as on a moral dilemma which is realized concretely in a specific human situation. The novel,

by its use of letters, expounds the problem and leaves the complex whole to the reader's judgement.

In 'Histoire de Cécile', in order to convey the sense of both a social and a deeply personal dilemma at the point where the two intersect, Isabelle de Charrière uses the type of monologue by letter we saw in *Mistriss Henley*. The story is a 'confessional' *roman sentimental* in the eighteenth-century tradition. Like *Mistriss Henley*, it reveals a peculiarly intense family relationship (between mother and daughter on this occasion), described by the articulate, lucid and sensitive mother. This technique has the advantage of Richardson's "writing to the moment", but ensures there is no dissipation of emotional intensity through any change of narrator. 'Histoire de Cécile' depicts a particularly warm and open relationship, and also the kinds of rebuff which an indolent and self-seeking social group can administer to a young woman. But at the same time it does not deny the necessity of a social group for Cécile's ultimate fulfilment. The mother's affectionate voice is a delicate instrument for recording changes of feeling and particular atmospheres between herself and Cécile, and also allows us a measure of insight into her own character by its occasional bluffness.

In *Caliste* this technique of first-person narration is brought into fullest co-ordination with a comprehensive analysis of a human situation - and indeed readers learn to be on their guard against making premature judgements. For gradually we find ourselves asking whether there is perhaps a truer picture of the past events described by the narrator than he is able or willing to give us. An air of mystery and enigma surrounds the character of William and we remain uncertain throughout the story whether his account is a disguised defence and justification of his own conduct or not. At one point William says:

Je définissais l'éloquence le pouvoir d'entraîner quand on ne peut pas convaincre, et ce pouvoir me paraissait nécessaire avec tant de gens, et dans tant d'occasions, que je crus ne pouvoir pas me donner trop de peine pour l'acquérir.' [3]

Readers are seldom sure whether they too are being lulled into accepting William's explanations of his actions and omissions rather **than** being given convincing proof of the necessity or unavoidability of these past actions and omissions. In some respects William resembles later 'unreliable narrators' of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, perhaps the narrator of Camus's *La Chute*. William's story, with its strange omissions and apparent distortions, reveals the recesses of a weak and evasive personality who is faced with emotional demands to which he cannot or will not make an adequate response. If it were also to be shown to be the case that the narrator in Constant's *Adolphe* similarly attempts to attenuate his responsibility (to put it no more strongly than that), the affinities between *Caliste* and *Adolphe* would be still deeper than has hitherto been suspected. (As I indicated in my Introduction and in my chapter on *Caliste*, much work remains to be done in this field.) But to return to my main concern, the use of this technique in *Caliste*, there does lurk behind it a fascinating meta-aesthetic question which adds to the story's moral and technical richness. The novel seems to be based on Isabelle de Charrière's own unfortunate infatuation with an unknown man. It portrays a woman in love with a man whose affection for her is less than hers for him. Now in such a situation it is difficult to invent explanations for the behaviour of the other person in terms which one is willing to accept oneself. So William's narrative omissions and his peculiar flatness of tone might reflect Madame de Charrière's own incomprehension at critical times and her failure to understand the behaviour of the man

she passionately loved. This may account for the peculiar inability or unwillingness of William - even after the final break with Caliste - to understand why he behaved as he did.

In *Trois femmes* we are similarly furnished with something of the contradictoriness and disturbing complexity of experience. In this investigation of human motivation and of individual moral responsibility, the techniques employed are, in the first part, a narrative of a sporadically 'reliable' kind given by the Abbé de la Tour; and in the second part, letters written by various characters laying before us the results of the events of the first part. Although the novel lacks something of the unity of finish we see elsewhere - the important and unpublished *Suite* is tacked on to the second part of the novel but in fact continues the story of the first part - nevertheless through the exposition of the many component forces at play in a human situation Isabelle de Charrière investigates in a quite profound way the consequences of Emilie's abandonment of firm principle. Is Emilie acting wisely in adopting a more flexible mode of judgement based on foreseeable results, on altruism or on sympathy? Can sympathy to one person mean suffering for another? The effects of her choice stretch far into the future, and it is clear that even the unfinished *Suite* may not have exhausted all of those Isabelle de Charrière had in mind. The conception, if not the digressive form, is perhaps of nineteenth-century proportions.

At the beginning of this study I suggested that Isabelle de Charrière's art had attracted relatively few literary critics since her death. Perhaps Philippe Godet came closer than most to understanding her fiction and, in his prefaces to her novels, to bringing out its true qualities and strengths. I hope that I have added something to Godet's critical commentaries. Much remains to be done, and the rewards for scholars and critics will be considerable. The honesty and integrity of Isabelle de Charrière's thought makes her the enemy of all dogmatism or simplification. Her novels are alive with the ambiguous and protean nature of moral issues, and raise questions that lead back to our understanding of ourselves and of life.

[1] A starting-point for the study of her prose might be her polemical Lettre à Monsieur Burke (unpublished letter of two sheets in Isabelle de Charrière's hand, B.V.N. Ms 1368), a masterpiece of argument which demonstrates the balance and clarity of her style. I hope I have suggested within the necessarily limited space of this book how keen Isabelle de Charrière's ear also is for *tone*, how she can convey the dignity of Cécile's mother in her anxious concern for her daughter with as much ease as she can the endless disordered volubility of the empty-headed seamstress Julianne.

[2] In her correspondence Isabelle de Charrière's stylistic observations on the writings of others increased in asperity with her years. She found Germaine de Staël's prose mere "amphigouri", she found Constant's style to be worsening during his stay in Brunswick through exposure to German syntax, and she criticized the neologisms creeping into the letters of her young protégée, Henriette L'Hardy.

[3] On the narrative situation and the narrator's moral position in Adolphe, see Marian Hobson, 'Theme and structure in Adolphe', *M.L.R.*, 66 (1971), 306-314. Professor Hobson rejects this theory of 'bad faith' put forward by Francis Jeanson and Alfred Fabre-Luce.

Select bibliography of works consulted

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by

Dennis Wood

This bibliography lists those works mentioned in the text, and also those manuscripts, books, and articles which, while not mentioned in the body of the thesis, have been valuable in its preparation. For printed works, the dates given are those of the editions which I have consulted.

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[i] Isabelle de Charrière/Belle de Zuylen, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Jean-Daniel Candaux, C.P. Courtney, Pierre H. Dubois, Simone Dubois-De Bruyn, Patrice Thompson, Jeroom Vercruysse et Dennis Wood, Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1979-1984, 10 volumes. There are still plans for a final *Supplément*. Jean-Daniel Candaux has published a convenient one-volume edition of the Isabelle de Charrière-Benjamin Constant correspondence in modernized spelling, *Correspondance (1787-1805*), Paris: Desjonquères (coll. 'XVIIIe siècle'), 1996. There are now several studies of the correspondence corpus, most recently Paul Pelckmans, *Isabelle de Charrière: une correspondance au seuil du monde moderne*, Amsterdam: Rodopi (coll. 'Faux Titre', 95), 1995.

[ii] At the initiative of the late Pierre Cordey an Editorial Board was set up in 1980, and under the chairmanship of Professor Paul Delbouille that Board signed a contract with Max Niemeyer Verlag of Tübingen in 1988. By March 1998 six volumes had appeared, four of the *Œuvres* series and two of the *Correspondance*. The *Correspondance* volumes complement and in some areas supercede the edition of the Isabelle de Charrière-Benjamin Constant letters in the Van Oorschot Charrière *Œuvres* (see note 1 above). These are Benjamin Constant, *Correspondance générale I (1774-1792)* ed. C.P. Courtney and Dennis Wood (with the collaboration of Peter Rickard for the linguistic notes), 1993 and *Correspondance générale II (1793-1794)*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1997.

[iii] *Une Européenne: Isabelle de Charrière en son siècle*, ed. Doris Jakubec and Jean-Daniel Candaux, Neuchâtel: Attinger, 1994. Isabelle de Charrière's place in the history of the French novel now seems reasonably secure. Her work is discussed, for example, in Michel Delon and Pierre Malandain's *Littérature française du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris: PUF (coll. 'Premier cycle'), 1996, and by Raymond Trousson in his important anthology *Romans de femmes du XVIIIe siècl*e, Paris: Laffont, 1996, which includes the complete texts of *Lettres neuchâteloises*, *Lettres de Mistriss Henley* and *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*.

[iv] P.H. and S. Dubois, *Zonder vaandel. Belle de Zuylen. Een biografie*, Amsterdam, Van Oorschot, 1993; Raymond Trousson, *Isabelle de Charrière. Un destin de femme au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris: Hachette, 1994; C.P. Courtney, *Isabelle de Charrière (Belle de Zuylen). A Biography*, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1993. Among studies of Isabelle de Charrière's contemporaries there is now Sabine Dorothea Jordan, *Ludwig Ferdinand Huber (1764-1804): his life and works*, Stuttgart: Akademische Verlag H.-D. Heinz (Stuttgarter Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 57), 1978.

[v] C.P. Courtney, *A Preliminary Bibliography of Isabelle de Charrière (Belle de Zuylen)*, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, (*Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century*, 186), 1980; *Isabelle de Charrière (Belle de Zuylen): A Secondary Bibliography*, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation; Paris: Jean Touzot, 1982.

[vi] Kathleen M. Jaeger, *Male and Female Roles in the Eighteenth Century: the Challenge to Replacement and Displacement in the Novels of Isabelle de Charrière*, New York: Peter Lang, 1994, and Jenene J. Allison, *Revealing Difference. The Fiction of Isabelle de Charrière*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995.

[vii] A useful list of books and articles relating to Isabelle de Charrière can be found at this site.

[viii] See note 1 above.

[ix] See Dennis Wood, 'Isabelle de Charrière et Benjamin Constant: à propos d'une découverte récente', *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation), Vol. 215, 1982, pp. 273-279; 'Isabelle de Charrière et Benjamin Constant: problématique d'une collaboration', *Annales Benjamin Constant 4*, 1984, pp. 17-30; and *Benjamin Constant. A Biography*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993. My edition of *Ma vie* (*Le Cahier rouge*) in Benjamin Constant, *Œuvres III. Ecrits littéraires (1800-1813)*, ed. Paul Delbouille and Martine de Rougemont, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1995, contains a good deal of information about the early period of Constant's friendship with Isabelle de Charrière. C.P. Courtney's edition of the same Constant text (Cambridge: Dæmon, 1991) looks again at the question of Isabelle de Charrière's alleged affair with a M. de Saussure and concludes that the most likely candidate as lover is in fact one Charles Dapples (1758-1842). He also discusses the matter in his biography (see above, note 4, pp. 484-486), and is agreement with the Dubois' conclusion on the matter in their Dutch biography (p. 806, n. 33).

[x] I am thinking in particular of Béatrice Didier's chapter on Isabelle de Charrière in *L'Ecriture-femme*, Paris: PUF (coll. 'Ecriture'), 1981, pp. 93-110, and of Mona Ozouf's perceptive essay in *Les Mots des femmes. Essai sur la singularité française*, Paris: Fayard (coll. 'L'Esprit de la cité'), 1995, pp. 53-83.

[xi] Particularly worthy of note are Alix Deguise's *Trois femmes. Le monde de Madame de Charrière*, Paris and Geneva: Slatkine, 1981, and Sigyn Minier's *Madame de Charrière. Les premiers romans*, Paris and Geneva: Slatkine, 1987. *Isabelle de Charrière (Belle de Zuylen): De la correspondance au roman épistolaire.* Etudes réunies par Yvette Went-Daoust (*CRIN*, 29), Amsterdam-Atlanta, Ga: Rodopi, 1995 maintains a high standard standard of critical comment and erudition. Two recent articles of my own, 'Isabelle de Charrière,ou la difficulté de conclure' and 'La Ville dans l'œuvre d'Isabelle de Charrière' will be published by the Université de

Franche-Comté, Besançon during 1999.