

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-Beuve¹ and E.-H. Gaullieur² 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 Charrière³ 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 essay⁴, 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 neuchâtelaises*, 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 it⁵. Anticipating the present revival of interest in Isabelle de Charrière, there appeared in 1938 a German work by Dr Charlotte Kimstedt⁶ 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 correspondence⁷.

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 neuchâtelaises* 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 Riccioli⁹, 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 Winiker¹⁰ 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 1970¹². 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 form¹⁴, Dr Braunrot's descriptions of the technical qualities of the novels are indeed valuable¹⁵. 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 writing¹⁶. 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*, XXXV (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.