

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



The Novels of Isabelle de Charrière

by

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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 Utrecht¹. 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 faible².

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 thoughtful 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 suggested⁴, 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 exigea, & 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 lovers¹⁵ 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 correspondence¹⁶ 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 pourrais 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'incomode; 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'Herminches, 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 Henley* and *Lettres neuchâtelaises*, although *Lettres neuchâtelaises* 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'enchantait. 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 poètes et dans quelques romans, me paraît 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 neuchâtelaises*, 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 fils William*, 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 *chante-fable* 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: 'Thuyt 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 is 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 kantien 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.