

## Chapter IV - Lettres de Mistriss Henley and Lettres neuchâtelaises



The Novels of Isabelle de Charrière

by

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*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 de Mistriss 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 neuchâtelaises*. 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 de Mistriss 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 de Mistriss 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 impetuosity 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 de Mistriss 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 répondis 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 bristles 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 de Mistriss 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 impetuosity 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 neuchâtelaises* 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 de Mistriss Henley*, and both works were published, probably simultaneously, in the first quarter of 1784.

In *Lettres neuchâtelaises*<sup>2</sup> 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*

*neuchâtelaises*, 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.<sup>3</sup>

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 neuchâtelaises* 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 neuchâtelaises*, 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.<sup>4</sup> Street and place-names are plentiful and must have helped to reinforce the fictional illusion for the eighteenth-century Dutch reader, as in *Lettres neuchâtelaises* 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),<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 neuchâtelaises* 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 neuchâtelaises* 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 oversimplification. 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 neuchâtelaises*.

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".<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

We later learn that he is the son of a lower middle-class *marchand* from Augsburg.<sup>9</sup> 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"),<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

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?<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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?<sup>16</sup>

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

risers 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup> *Lettres neuchâtelaises* 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.<sup>20</sup> 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 [...] <sup>21</sup>

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. <sup>22</sup>

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. <sup>23</sup>

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. <sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup> 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,<sup>27</sup> and observes the flush of jealousy on their walk together when Julianne is mentioned.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

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:

Permetts, 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 [...]<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup>

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 avons à faire. Il rougit, je rougis aussi.<sup>32</sup>

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".<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>

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...<sup>35</sup>

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?...<sup>36</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup>

- 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...<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup>

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.<sup>41</sup>

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 neuchâtelaises* 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.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup>

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.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> 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 même mes maîtresses avaient fait un pli où ça 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.<sup>46</sup>

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.<sup>47</sup>

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 'babel' 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;<sup>48</sup> there are references to the Rue du Neubourg,<sup>49</sup> to the Armourins,<sup>50</sup> to a cobbler's shop in the Rue des Chavannes where Julianne lodges,<sup>51</sup> to Marianne's father's estate in the Val-de-Travers and his vineyards at Auvernier,<sup>52</sup> and to Le Crêt and Le Mail, two hills behind Neuchâtel.<sup>53</sup> 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 de Mistriss 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.)

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Buijnsters, art. cit., 27-8 and 32.

<sup>6</sup> 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 Burgerhart* into French. In fact the translation, *Histoire de 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 Eeuw*, Nr 9, November 1970.)

<sup>7</sup> *L.N.*, 102.

<sup>8</sup> *L.N.*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> *L.N.*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> *L.N.*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> *L.N.*, 30.

<sup>12</sup> *L.N.*, 39.

<sup>13</sup> *L.N.*, 16-17.

<sup>14</sup> On Isabelle de Charrière's detailed knowledge of Adam Smith's book, see Godet I, 110.

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

<sup>16</sup> *L.N.*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> *L.N.*, 53

<sup>18</sup> *L.N.*, 61.

<sup>19</sup> See Godet II, 138.

<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes, *Essais critiques* (Paris, 1964), 221-237.

<sup>21</sup> *L.N.*, 81.

<sup>22</sup> *L.N.*, 86.

<sup>23</sup> *L.N.*, 12.

<sup>24</sup> *L.N.*, 41.

<sup>25</sup> *L.N.*, 14.

<sup>26</sup> *L.N.*, 54-5 and 73.

<sup>27</sup> *L.N.*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> *L.N.*, 66.

<sup>29</sup> *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).

<sup>30</sup> *L.N.*, 47.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted by Frédéric Deloffre in *Stylistique et poétique françaises* (Paris; 1970); 115.

<sup>32</sup> *L.N.*, 53.

<sup>33</sup> *L.N.*, 56.

<sup>34</sup> *L.N.*, 100

<sup>35</sup> *L.N.*, 87.

<sup>36</sup> *L.N.*, 99.

<sup>37</sup> *L.N.*, 28.

<sup>38</sup> *L.N.*, 31.

<sup>39</sup> *L.N.*, 37.

<sup>40</sup> *L.N.*, 61.

<sup>41</sup> *L.N.*, 62.

<sup>42</sup> 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.

<sup>43</sup> *L.N.*, 25-6.

<sup>44</sup> *L.N.*, 59.

<sup>45</sup> On this see W W Sanger, *The History of Prostitution* (New York, 1913), pp. 524, 568 and 572.

<sup>46</sup> *L.N.*, 20-1.

<sup>47</sup> *L.N.*, 8-9.

<sup>48</sup> *L.N.*, 3.

<sup>49</sup> *L.N.*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> *L.N.*, 15.

<sup>51</sup> *L.N.*, 26.

<sup>52</sup> *L.N.*, 42.

<sup>53</sup> *L.N.*, 69.