

Conclusion



The Novels of Isabelle de Charrière

by

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Isabelle de Charrière in her novels displays to a surprising degree what used to be called a 'unified sensibility', a particularly coherent attitude to life which embraces both her aesthetic position and her moral views. It is an attitude of notable seriousness. This does not exclude from her stories the humour of irony, but does involve the kind of minute investigation of human relationships later pursued by her friend Benjamin Constant and by other European novelists of the nineteenth century. The kinds of experience she explores in no way compare with the demonic range of her contemporary Laclos, nor on the other hand do they extend to the mawkish excesses of, for example, Loaisel de Tréogate or Dorat. Her concern is with moral choice ('moral' meaning "whatever bears upon the question, 'how to live'", as Wordsworth said) and moral choice in circumstances not beyond the lot of average human beings. Her aesthetic position seeks to avoid excess, first in style, and then as a corollary of this, either in "sentiment in excess of the facts" or in creating characters of total virtue or villainy.

In this study I have tried to show the nature and quality of Isabelle de Charrière's fiction, first in her concerns as a novelist, and second in her command of particular techniques - her handling of the epistolary form, her often oblique view of her characters, her use of irony and of narrative point of view. It will be apparent that when we actually read Isabelle de Charrière's novels 'concerns' and 'techniques' are in fact inseparable - tone, point of view, and structure *support* the kinds of psychological and moral investigation which Isabelle de Charrière undertakes. In the context of the eighteenth-century French novel she has something in common with novelists like Madame Riccoboni when she examines the position - and the sufferings - of women in society, especially when this is linked to a first-person narrative. In a more general way, Madame de Charrière's longer works like *Caliste* are related to the tradition of the *roman sentimental*. But the *differences* are perhaps more significant than any superficial similarities. As I suggested in my chapter on Isabelle de Charrière's life and literary career, the supreme quality of her personality is seldom hidden in her work - her intelligence allied to her insight into human nature. Her refusal to accept ready-made answers and her ability in her novels to probe commonplace responses and modes of thought stemmed from her other great quality, her scepticism, which throughout her life she applied to all sects and schools with a peculiarly passionate impartiality. Where for example characters in Madame Riccoboni's stories are on the whole two-dimensional and conventional, Isabelle de Charrière's - especially some of her heroines - are anything but conventional. A girl like Marianne in *Lettres neuchâtelaises* is no *ingénue* - she is remarkably clear-sighted, broadminded, even sophisticated in that same way which delighted or terrified those who met her real-life creator. If the reader expects the high-flown sentimentality associated with the usual run of practitioners of the *roman sentimental* or followers of Rousseau, he or she will find none of it. As for Isabelle de Charrière's style, it is for the most part characterized by clarity and control. The language of her novels, which is worthy of a complete study on its own¹, has something of the Voltairean understatement about it in *Le Noble* and in those stories which have the Abbé de la Tour as their narrator, particularly *Sainte-Anne*. Elsewhere, as well as the tone of good company Isabelle de Charrière can also produce thoroughly

convincing naturalistic dialogue such as we see in *Lettres neuchâtelaises* or *Trois femmes*. By comparison with the increasingly gaudy and rhetorical colours which other writers towards the end of the century were allowing themselves, there is a laudable single-mindedness in her pursuit of simplicity and naturalness of expression.²

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

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

When we turn to Isabelle de Charrière's more ambitious works, we find a similar variety of techniques adopted to achieve a kind of impersonality and moral objectivity. *Lettres neuchâtelaises* uses a carefully arranged series of letters, each written in a particular linguistic register: those of Meyer and Marianne in educated middle-class speech, those of Julianne in a working-class and regional *patois*. The novel deals skilfully with such a delicate confrontation by not concealing any awkward detail. Although all the characters owe some theoretical allegiance to Christian morality, the uncouth and undiscerning Julianne is outmanoeuvred by her betters who quite ruthlessly bundle her off to Germany, almost as if she belonged to an inferior order of being. We are left to judge for ourselves the degrees of responsibility

incumbent on each character - how far characters can assert their own interests, and how far these may interfere with the integrity of others. We witness the crucial moment in Meyer's life when he passes from cold self-seeking (conveyed in the detached tone of his early letters) to a more adult, sensitive awareness of his relationship with other people. We also observe Marianne's assumption of responsibility for Julianne, and here the novelist seems to question the rather incomplete nature of what Meyer and Marianne have actually learnt. There is still no place in their world for Julianne who is, as it were, handled with tweezers and clinically isolated. This is the question raised by the presence of Julianne's letters, for all their coarseness, at the beginning of the book and their absence at its close. Isabelle de Charrière's emphasis is not on class warfare or on strictly social criticism so much as on a moral dilemma which is realized concretely in a specific human situation. The novel, by its use of letters, expounds the problem and leaves the complex whole to the reader's judgement.

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

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

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

Readers are seldom sure whether they too are being lulled into accepting William's explanations of his actions and omissions rather **than** being given convincing proof of the necessity or unavoidability of these past actions and omissions. In some respects William resembles later 'unreliable narrators' of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, perhaps the narrator of Camus's *La Chute*. William's story, with its strange omissions and apparent distortions, reveals the recesses of a weak and evasive personality who is faced with emotional demands to which he cannot or will not make an adequate response. If it were also to be shown to be the case that the narrator in Constant's *Adolphe* similarly attempts to attenuate his responsibility (to put it no more strongly than that), the affinities between *Caliste* and *Adolphe* would be still deeper than has hitherto been suspected. (As I indicated in my Introduction and in my chapter on *Caliste*, much work remains to be done in this field.) But to

return to my main concern, the use of this technique in *Caliste*, there does lurk behind it a fascinating meta-aesthetic question which adds to the story's moral and technical richness. The novel seems to be based on Isabelle de Charrière's own unfortunate infatuation with an unknown man. It portrays a woman in love with a man whose affection for her is less than hers for him. Now in such a situation it is difficult to invent explanations for the behaviour of the other person in terms which one is willing to accept oneself. So William's narrative omissions and his peculiar flatness of tone might reflect Madame de Charrière's own incomprehension at critical times and her failure to understand the behaviour of the man she passionately loved. This may account for the peculiar inability or unwillingness of William - even after the final break with Caliste - to understand why he behaved as he did.

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

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

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

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

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