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Beyond Introspection

Rethinking Novelistic Space in Isabelle de Charrière's *Lettres de Mistriss Henley*

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The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a profusion of works of fiction in France and in Britain. These works were what we would now call early novels or proto-novels. Their emergence and growing popularity marked the beginning of the golden age of the novel, its evolution towards increasingly mature forms. The most famous, most frequently studied tendency of this early fiction is towards introspection. Many successful proto-novels imitate non-fictional genres of personal writing: the letter, the memoir, the confession. We overhear their narrator-protagonists reflect on their emotions and beliefs. We are seduced by the subjectivity and independence of these voices, the persuasiveness of their idiosyncratic inner worlds.

Yet, at the same time, a radically different tendency was making itself manifest among eighteenth-century writers, especially female ones. Certain proto-novels began to adopt techniques of representation derived from theater. They created mimeses of profound, complex characters by projecting their thoughts and emotions onto the external world. These proto-novels ask us to treat the characters' external world as if it were not just a potential symbol of, but a genuine extended space of their inner lives.[1]

To understand the relation of this technique to theater, it is useful to turn to Nietzsche's definition of tragedy. Nietzsche observes that, in classic theater, we empathize with the principal actors thanks to

the presence of a satiric chorus. This is a group of actors at the margin of the plot of the piece, who regularly comment on and react to it. The chorus combines the roles of spectator and participant. It amplifies and renders more real the protagonists' emotions by confirming that they are echoed in the world beyond them. Nietzsche reminds us that the emotional and aesthetic effect of a play is built not within the protagonist alone, but in the tension established between this actor and his or her spectators. The protagonist's consciousness is represented not within the confines of a single person, but through a more complex interaction spread out across a physical space.[2]

Eighteenth-century writers like Aphra Behn and Isabelle de Charrière become aware of the representative power of such spatial interaction. They adapt the way it functions in theater to suit the format of a novel. Charrière's and Behn's texts breathe life into their protagonists not by allowing these characters directly to speak to us about their inner lives, but by having us watch the way the protagonists affect persons or persons and objects around them. We become aware of them as conscious beings, and begin to intuit their emotional lives, by observing the ways in which their environment responds to them. As a result, we see the protagonists as more significant figures—since they are deserving of intense external reactions. We also attribute to them considerable complexity—seeing that our vision of who they are is built out of not a single allegorical equivalence, but a number of disparate, episodic views not easily reduced to a single, definitive perspective.[3]

I will focus mostly on a close reading which highlights the mechanism I describe at play in the *Lettres de Mistriss Henley*. I hope to show that the formal lens I propose considerably enriches our understanding of the novel. It proves the novel's structure to be much more coherent than its earlier critics have believed, as well as helps us understand Charrière's social critique.

Jens Juel, *Portrait of Isabelle de Charrière*

Lettres de Mistriss Henley is presented as a series of letters written by the eponymous Mistriss Henley to her unnamed friend (whose responses are not given). Mistriss Henley is a young British woman orphaned in her childhood, raised by kind relatives, eventually married off to a wealthy, kind, young widower with a daughter. The marriage degenerates over trifles and miscommunications; the narrator grows increasingly depressed. In the final lines, she suggests that she will either die of misery in a matter of months or entirely lose her personality, becoming her husband's passive, obedient shadow.

Ostensibly, the *Lettres de Mistriss Henley* would seem to be an introspective novel. It is a series of letters—we would expect the narrative voice directly to report to us her feelings and thoughts. However, a closer analysis of the book uncovers some important counter-arguments to this first impression. A great gap exists between the way Mistriss Henley presents herself and the way we respond to her as readers. Mistriss Henley's is by no means a strong or deeply self-knowing narrative voice. She wavers, effaces herself, very rarely dares to name an emotion or desire, still less to stand by it after two or three sentences. Her verbal volatility is melodramatic and chaotic to the point of burlesque. However, as we read the novel, we see her as a far stronger, complex character; we also find it quite easy to name and describe the emotional states she is unable to label. Moreover, we have a good sense of the inner life of her husband—whom she continues to tell us she is completely baffled by. Finally, even though neither she nor her husband ever criticize their society in any overt manner, and even though she is never presented as a blameless victim, we exit the novel with a strong impression that we were reading a feminist text, a strong critique of the gender politics of Charrière's society.[4]

Charrière's work is effectively one of the early proto-novels tending towards externalization and mediated character-drawing. The novel's narration is not organized as a continuum of inner meditations. Rather, it is a series of episodic interactions with physical objects or third parties (people other than the husband and wife). In each of these episodes, this external object or person, rather than one of the protagonists, is made the focus of our attention and emotional reaction.

As readers, we quickly learn to treat these external objects as mediators of the inner lives of the protagonist and her husband. This tendency towards external media-

tion is manifest on all narrative and meta-narrative levels of the piece. At the heart of the plot, these external objects and individuals allow the protagonist and her husband to communicate their emotions to each other without speaking of them directly. The narrator shows her love of M. Henley by taking care of his child:

Je parai l'enfant des parures que j'avais apportées pour elle de Londres, et je la présentai à son père, que je comptais surprendre agréablement.[5]

[I dressed the child in clothes I had brought her from London, and presented her to her father, whom I hoped pleasantly to surprise.[6]]

To please her husband, Mme Henley does not try to speak to him of her love. Instead, she takes the person he cherishes and clothes her as best as she can, as if to make the girl an effigy of her devotion. The language of the fragment focuses on the child's appearance, the visual spectacle of solicitude she is supposed to constitute.

M. Henley responds to this amorous spectacle with a critique. He disapproves of his child's new shoes:

« Votre intention est charmante », me dit-il, « mais c'est un goût que je ne voudrais pas lui inspirer ; je craindrais que ces souliers si jolis ne l'empêchassent de courir à son aise ; des fleurs artificielles contrastent désagréablement avec la simplicité de la campagne. »[7]

["A charming intention," he told me. "but it is a taste I do not want to foster in her; I fear that such pretty shoes would prevent her from running freely; these artificial flowers contrast disagreeably with the simplicity of the countryside.]

M. Henley does not say directly that he disapproves of his wife's cosmopolite upbringing; that he prefers to it his local countryside customs. Instead, he projects these judgments onto the physical appearance of his child, turning them into empirical observations. The new shoes "prevent her from running freely." They are also jarring in their current environment, throwing their potentially harmonious everyday existence out of tune. Like his wife, M. Henley transmits his emotions through a spectacle. We learn his feelings and values through the external details to which he draws our attention.

These mediated exchanges intensify in the course of the novel. Mme Henley rebels against her husband by rearranging furniture in the house:

Il m'avait dit que j'étais la maitresse ; j'ai fait porter les fauteuils dans le salon, le canapé dans un garde-meuble. J'ai ordonné à un laquais de dépendre le portrait de la première Madame Henley, qui était en face de mon lit.[8]

[He'd told me I was the mistress of the house. I had the armchairs brought down into the living room, and removed the sofa into a storage room. I ordered a valet to take down the portrait of the first Madame Henley, which until now had faced my bed.]

He responds by pushing these changes even further:

M. Henley, revenu de la chasse, vit avec surprise le portrait de sa femme dans la salle à manger. Il monta dans ma chambre sans me rien dire, et écrivit à Londres pour qu'on m'envoyât le plus beau papier des Indes, les chaises les plus élégantes et de la mousseline brodée pour les rideaux.[9]

[Back from the hunt, M. Henley was surprised to see his wife's portrait in the dining room. He came up to my bedroom without a word, and sent word to London that I be brought the most beautiful Indian wallpaper, the most elegant chairs, and some embroidered muslin for curtains.]

Ostensibly, the scene describes only two successive rearrangements of furniture. Yet, with hardly any reflection, one sees behind these physical acts a pantomime of strong, conflicting emotions. Taking down the portrait, the narrator shows that she is jealous of her husband's previous mate. She wants to assert herself as more than just a substitute of this dead woman. The husband buys her the furniture he knows she would want. This is to show that her fears and jealousies are ungrounded. At the same time, the excessive, showy quality of his purchase reveals that he found his wife's gesture extreme and hurtful. As before, not a word is exchanged between them about the feelings which prompted these actions. Instead, the space of their house and the trajectories of its objects slowly becomes a map of the couple's mental shifts and conflicts.

Many more instances of this technique could be cited throughout the novel. It is used by the spouses in every single household tension (their conflict before and after a ball, their fight over Mme Henley's pet cat, their plans for the future of the child). It is also present in the narration even before they get married, in the narrator's account of her long search for a husband. Moreover, this technique informs more metatextual levels of the work. When the narrator recounts her life to her friend-correspondent, she underlines that the objects and third persons which surround her and her husband are the best medium for understanding the downturned arc of their relationship:

En lisant seule l'histoire du portrait, les meubles changés, le pauvre Hector, je me suis souvenue douloureusement d'un portrait, d'un meuble, d'un chien.[10]

[Reading about the portrait, the rearranged furniture, the poor Hector, I recalled with sadness another portrait, another piece of furniture, another dog.]

Mme Henley begins her story by giving a list not of feelings, but of objects. She gestures towards these external presences as the gateway towards her own self. In addition, she is asking that her life be seen through the medium of another set of objects—the pieces of paper she continues to send her friend. We are also here being encouraged to read these pieces of paper through the prism of yet another textual object: *The Sentimental Husband*, a novel to which Charrière partially responds and from which the quotation's first "portrait," "furniture," and dog are derived. On all levels of the plot, the narrator gestures away from herself rather than towards herself. She asks us to contemplate not any inner network of sentiments and subjective values, but an external map—eventually an archeology—of objects and third parties moved to and removed from sight, taken up and discarded, rearranged and substituted.

Seen through the lens of this constant, systematically executed externalization, the novel appears considerably more coherent and artistically sophisticated. We also come to understand where its counterintuitive narrative successes come from. Externalization allows us to remain attuned to, and to take seriously, the emotions of Mme Henley, even though she lacks a persuasive confessional voice. That her feelings should call out to us from every corner of the house continually confirms their reality. It also makes her and her husband the unquestionable central figures of the piece, towering over all the other things which seem to be their mere attributes or appendages. Furthermore, each such object isolates a well-defined, distinct feeling; its physical limits help us not to confuse this feeling with others Mme or M. Henley experience in the course of the novel. This lets us see their emotional lives as multifaceted and complex. Even though she is not a strong verbal narrative presence, and we are given no introspective access into his psyche, we see both of them as plausible, interesting characters.

Furthermore, externalization is what allows Charrière to introduce into her work a strong undercurrent of social critique. This is achieved in spite of the fact that the narrator herself never takes an overtly critical stance, and even though she is by no means the moral center of the novel.

On a most general level, the novel's narrative structure questions the possibility of a universal,

rational social order; it shows us that society is nothing more than a negotiation among subjective needs and desires. Charrière never presents the characters' opinions as abstract systems or ideologies. Rather, the differences which separate them are results of past and present attachments to specific objects, persons, and spaces. M. Henley hates his wife's cat because it keeps shedding hair on his first wife's furniture. Mme Henley loves the same animal because it reminds her of her urban, cosmopolite youth. Instead of having the two spouses explain their preferences to us in lofty, abstract moral terms, Charrière shows us the degree to which these preferences depend on the physical trajectories the couple have traversed, the history of the objects with which they have interacted. The couple are not separated by a gap in intelligence or in rationality, but by the different subjective backgrounds of their views.

Les gens qui passent pour raisonnables, font-ils autre chose le plus souvent qu'opposer gravement leurs préjugés et leurs goûts à des préjugés et à des goûts plus vivement exprimés ?[11]

[Those who pass for reasonable people, do they ever do much more than seriously oppose their prejudices and tastes to other, more sharply stated prejudices and tastes?]

For Charrière, the couple's conflict is not one of male rationality versus female irrationality; nor is it a conflict between two rational visions of society. Rather than measure each other's views against logic or reason, both M. and Mme Henley measure them against their materially acquired habits and tastes. Charrière teaches us to discern behind each viewpoint a history of specific sensory experiences. Society is not a hierarchy governed by an abstract moral law; it is the sum total of more or less loudly voiced, gradually acquired, subjective tastes and sentiments. Through its very narrative structure, the novel opens up a space of constant negotiation in which none of the characters' opinions are seen as superior or more valid.

This externalizing movement allows the novel to project not just a critique of universalist visions of society, but also a more directed feminist statement. First, by choosing for her setting a domestic space, one which we get to know in considerable detail, Charrière reclaims this conventionally feminine realm as one of complex, serious emotions. We get to know quite intimately each item of furniture in the house and the arrangement of its rooms. We begin to see in these objects and their repositioning a map, eventually an archeology, of intense, unresolved emotional negotiations and conflicts. The do-

mestic space is represented as deserving of serious narrative attention; one which can hold and persuasively express a wide variety of human attitudes.

Second, the narrative's spatial externalization allows us to see the weakness of the narrator's voice as a sign not of her mental incapacity, but of her oppression by society. Throughout the narrative, the protagonist expresses an anxious desire to be heard and responded to by her husband. She at the same time always seems afraid to communicate her feelings directly, and backtracks on any more vehement manner in which they are manifested. As a result of these conflicting pressures, she continually feels frustrated and dissatisfied; to the extent that, as a substitute for verbal communication, she tries to provoke her husband to hit her, so as finally to obtain from him a direct, unmistakable reaction.

Without any means to access the protagonist's inner life, we would easily dismiss these gestures as melodramatic and hysterical; as signs of an inherently neurotic, and not an outwardly oppressed mind. Externalization allows us to follow quite closely the protagonist's mental processes. We see that she and her husband base their wishes and desires on equally subjective tastes; we also notice that he puts his desires into action far more successfully, and far more definitively, than she does. Her frustration is due not to her mental inferiority to her husband, but to an observable, unwarranted unevenness in the degree to which either of them is allowed to act upon their subjective feelings. Rather than find her weaker, or more irrational in her tastes, we begin to note that her emotions are being systematically smothered, without any justifiable cause.

What specific and general conclusions can we draw from this reading of Charrière? Most basically, this narrative model helps us understand what makes the *Lettres de Mistriss Henley* gripping and mimetically powerful. Most critics studying this work either entirely avoid discussing its narrative structure or broadly classify it as a hybrid offshoot of many preexisting genres. Reading the novel through the lens I propose, we can come to appreciate the full complexity and coherence of its author's artistic and social thought.

On a more general level, this analysis of Charrière's novel hopes to be part of an argument for a significant influence of theater on the early novel. Theater was a deep, structural inspiration for at least one current within the eighteenth-century novel. Research done by Philip Fisher on Theodore Dreiser

and my own study of Thomas Hardy suggest that the tendency towards the use of physical space as an extension of characters' minds continued to be present in the modernist novel.[12] All this calls for a deeper, more systematic investigation of this trend, as a way better to understand the development of the novel as a genre. This is necessary especially as both Charrière and her contemporaries such as Aphra Behn use this model to present characters whose voices their societies often refused to hear directly, women and natives of countries colonized by Europeans.

Even more generally, the success of this mimetic technique forces us to reconsider our preconceptions about the role of narrative space in character-drawing. In Charrière's book, the physical space around the protagonists is not just a symbol or allegory of what they are feeling. It is effectively an extended space of their thought. The ease with which we accept the novel's physical space as a mental one, and use it to obtain cues about characters' states of consciousness, deserves more serious scrutiny. We consistently see Charrière's characters as complex, developed beings. Yet, that we should do so is unaccounted for by literary theories of character-drawing. A great majority of them assume that introspection, and the strength of the introspective voice, are the only systematizable measures of the persuasiveness of a character. While critics such as James Wood acknowledge that some characters appear vivid to us even though we would classify them as flat in introspective terms, these deep non-introspective characters are treated as miracles of artistic skill, exceptions from the norm. The success of novels such as Charrière's alerts us that alternative, more precise means may exist of systematically describing non-introspective character-drawing, and of accounting for its plausibility.

Besides opening up a new path within narrative theory, this model also poses an abstract philosophical question. Conventional literary theory assumes that we intuitively understand consciousness as a Cartesian phenomenon; that we see it as separate from the physical space in which it exists. The success of novels such as Charrière's proves that this is not always the case. We easily empathize with a consciousness presented to us in a non-Cartesian, extended cognitive model. We empathize with this model so easily, in fact, that we are hard pressed to notice its presence—much more attention has been devoted to the study of Cartesian, introspective character-drawing than has been to the

model I describe. The reader's obvious ease in accepting this model invites us to reconsider our preconceptions about our intuitive theories of mind; it suggests that there may exist contexts in which a non-Cartesian view of the mind is more intuitive to us than a Cartesian one.

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[1] Marta Figlerowicz, "'Frightful spectacles of a mangled king': Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and narration through theater," *New Literary History* 39.2 (2008): 321-334.

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor Books, 1956), 52ff.

[3] Figlerowicz, 329-334.

[4] Critics who express this view (without noting the contradiction I describe) include Ives Citton, "L'économie du bon ménage. Chagrins domestiques et soucis éthiques autour d'Isabelle de Charrière," forthcoming in Catherine Mariette and Damien Zanone (eds.), *Romancières des XVIII^e^ et XIX^e^ siècles* (Grenoble, 2009), 5-8.

[5] Isabelle de Charrière, *Lettres de Mistriss Henley, publiées par son amie* (New York: MLA, 1993), 11.

[6] All translations from French are my own.

[7] Charrière, 11.

[8] Charrière, 15.

[9] Charrière, 16.

[10] Charrière, 3-4.

[11] Charrière, 16.

[12] Philip Fisher, "Looking Around to See Who I Am: Dreiser's Territory of the Self," *ELH* 44. 4 (1977): 733–34. Marta Figlerowicz "The Voice in the Snowstorm and the Miming Child: Interiority in the Novels of Thomas Hardy," Harvard University English Department Thesis (Harvard University Archives, 2009).