BELLE VAN ZUYLEN/ISABELLE DE CHARRIÈRE (1740-1805) TRADITION AND DEFIANCE

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Belle van Zuylen was born on October 20, 1740 in the Netherlands, and she resided in that country until her marriage in 1771. She then lived mostly in Switzerland, until her death on December 27, 1805. She wrote several novels, essays, plays, short stories, and pamphlets, but is best known for her extensive correspondence.

Belle van Zuylen, or more precisely, Isabella Agneta Elisabeth van Tuyll van Serooskerken (1740-1805), belonged to a prominent, aristocratic, Protestant family in the Netherlands, the country where she lived until she moved to Switzerland in 1771. One might say that she was a "black sheep" in her family and in her society, because she was quite independent intellectually and did not hesitate to express her often original ideas on any number of subjects, such as religion, marriage, the relationship between parents and children, and education, to name just a few. These topics were important to her because of the role they each played in her own life, but she discussed them at the same time in a more theoretical or philosophical manner, which makes her insights as meaningful to us, today, as they were to her. She expressed her ideas and opinions in novels, in essays and plays, but above all in her extensive correspondence with men such as David Constant d'Hermenches, his nephew the well known French author Benjamin Constant, and the equally well known James Boswell.

Throughout her life she was tempted to transgress the norms and values of her society, yet she often ended up complying with tradition, not so much because she was a conformist after all, but rather because she considered it ultimately futile to promote sweeping changes. Thus, as this short overview will illustrate, her life and works were full of paradoxes.

In many respects Belle van Zuylen was a representative of what we have come to call the Enlightenment. She put great emphasis on her ability to reason, which accounts to a large extent for her skepticism towards religion, in particular towards revelation. Thus, she wrote to Boswell:

> Everything tells me that there is a God, an eternal, perfect, and all-powerful being . . . . Revelation has qualities of grandeur, goodness, and mercy which are infinitely entitled to our respect; if I understood it better, I should perhaps recognize the marks of divinity in it throughout; but I am held back by much that is obscure, and by what appear to me contradictions. I doubt, and I keep my doubts to myself; I should think it a crime to destroy the belief of others when I can replace it only by an anxious doubt. But I am incapable of forcing my mind to believe what it does not understand, or of compelling my heart to subscribe to a religion which I can never love so long as I find it denies its promised happiness to part of God's creatures. I cannot separate my lot from that of others (June 19, 1764).[1]

As especially the last sentences of this quotation already suggest, Belle van Zuylen, in spite of her privileged position, was well aware of the many hardships afflicting "the masses," and so one might have expected her to be a stronger supporter of the French revolution in 1789 than was actually the case. She was suspicious of the impact of any radical change and feared, correctly so, that many were too easily carried away by their enthusiasm, without seeing the strong possibility of new forms of fanaticism and intolerance. Thus, she warned her readers in her novel *Trois Femmes* (Three Women, 1798):

> The philosophical clergy is just as much a clergy as any other, and it was not really

> necessary to get rid of the priest at Saint-Sulpice, if we are going to have new priests at the Pantheon (*Oeuvres* 9:106, my translation).

Her skepticism with regard to the benefits of the ideas of the "philosophers" and the revolution should not be seen as a desire to maintain the *status quo*. She believed, however, that it was naive, even foolish, to see new ideas and new socio-political systems as a panacea that would eliminate existing inequities, in any aspect of society, on a large scale. She considered it more likely and feasible to bring about change in a few individuals, rather than in entire groups. This emphasis on the individual also manifested itself in her own life, in the way in which she, instead of adhering automatically to the norms of her class, sought to develop a personal ethical system, which was a mixture of teleology and deontology. Numerous examples could be cited, especially from her clandestine correspondence with d'Hermenches (a married man, seventeen years her senior, who had the well deserved reputation of being a Don Juan, but who turned out to be a trustworthy confidant). Particularly amazing is the fact that they maintained this correspondence for some twenty years, confided to each other their most intimate thoughts and feelings, yet actually saw each other only a few times. In several of these letters, Belle expressed her fear of marriage and announced, in an honest and straightforward manner, that she might well become unfaithful to a husband she did not love:

> If I had neither father nor mother, I would be a Ninon [de Lenclos] perhaps, but a more delicate and more constant Ninon; I would not have so many lovers; if the first one were lovable, I think I would not change and, in that case, I don't know if I would be very guilty; at least, I could redeem through virtuous actions the insult that I would do to society by rejecting the yoke of a wisely established rule. I have a father and a mother, I don't want to cause their death nor poison their life, I shall not be a Ninon; I would like to be the wife of an honorable man, a faithful and virtuous wife; but, for that, I must love and must be loved.
> When I ask myself whether I would not love another man, if I did not love my husband, whether the very notion of duty, the memory of my marriage vows would defend me against love, against the opportunity on a summer night . . ., I blush because of my answer. But if we love each other, if my husband does not disdain to please me, if he attaches a great price to my affection, if he says to me: "I shall not kill you if you are unfaithful, but I shall be the more unhappy not to be able to esteem you anymore as I shall perhaps still love you," in that case, I say, I think, I hope, I believe firmly that I would avoid everything that might seduce me, that I would never fail to observe the laws of virtue (July 25, 1764; *Oeuvres* 1:217, my translation).

D'Hermenches knew how to "handle" Belle's observations, questions, and fears, and he understood them, which could not be said of her other correspondent, James Boswell. Boswell was strongly inclined to give her moral lessons, such as:

> Fie, my Zélide [i.e., Belle], what fancies are these? Is a mistress half so agreeable a name as a wife? Is a connection of love merely, equal to a connection strengthened by a variety of circumstances which have a pleasing influence on a sound mind? I beseech you, never indulge in such ideas. Respect mankind. Respect the institutions of society (Pottle 313).

Boswell was constantly both shocked and intrigued by Belle, and that became particularly evident when he finally asked for her hand (which was amazing in itself) in a long letter to her father. He listed many requirements, from which it became obvious that what he was looking for in a wife, that is to say submission to his norms, could never be given to him by Belle. That the marriage never took place was most likely a blessing for both parties.

It is hard to tell whether Belle herself was able to draw the line between her fantasies (as expressed, for example, in the letter to d'Hermenches quoted above) and her "real

life" situation. At any rate, the expression of these "libertine" ideas seems to have helped her to face a life in which there was not much room for non-traditional behavior. When she was already thirty years old, she did marry Charles-Emmanuel de Charrière, a Swiss private tutor of her brothers, and moved to Colombier, a small village near Neuchâtel. She had much esteem for her husband, but was certainly not passionately in love with him. In another long letter to d'Hermenches she explained how she had weighed the pros and cons of this match and why she finally accepted it. She indicated that she saw especially practical advantages in a marriage with de Charrière: she thought that her intellectual freedom had been assured and this would not have been the case in a marriage with Boswell. Scholars customarily refer to Monsieur de Charrière as kind and intelligent, but also as flegmatic and dull. Yet it seems that he was actually much more courageous than he is given credit for, because he did marry Belle van Zuylen, who was in many ways a formidable woman, and moreover he did give her, without any complaints or restrictions, the intellectual freedom that was so dear to her, and enabled her to write and publish. But in spite of that, the marriage was not a particularly happy one, though it must be said that in all likelihood no marriage would have been able to satisfy Belle. D'Hermenches had predicted this to her already many years earlier: "your imagination is too lively and your tastes are too varied and refined for you to be able to marry like any other woman . . ." (November 17, 1763; *Oeuvres* 1:161, my translation). And the portrait which Belle had drawn of herself at the age of twenty-three, under the name of Zélide, is also quite illuminating in this respect:

> Realizing that she is too sensitive to be happy, she has almost ceased to hope for happiness.
> She tries to make every moment of those who approach her happy, for she would like to make their lives happy, and moments make life. Though she is too sensitive to be happy herself, those who associate with her profit by her unhappiness. Her existence ought not to be useless; and the less it appears a good to her, the more she wishes to make it a good for them (Pottle 185-187).

During her marriage, Belle van Zuylen (then of course Madame de Charrière) turned more and more to writing fiction, without giving up her letter-writing. Although these works of fiction undoubtedly have literary merits, it is not through them that their author deserves to be remembered today. Instead, her claim to fame lies primarily in her letters, in which she displayed her outstanding intellectual and artistic qualities much more brilliantly. Despite these reservations about her novels, mention should be made of the *Lettres écrites de Lausanne* (1785-87), composed of two parts, the second of which, *Caliste*, inspired Benjamin Constant and Madame de Staël when they wrote *Adolphe* and *Corinne* respectively, and of the *Lettres Neuchâteloises* (1784). Both works, especially the latter, led to some local indignation because the (fictitious) stories, which contain a certain amount of social and moral criticism, took place against a "real" background of familiar places and customs, which was a technique the author had borrowed from *Sara Burgerhart* (1782), as she indicated in one of her letters. *Mistriss Henley* (1784) is a short story, composed of six letters, written in that same period. It has received less critical attention than the two novels just mentioned, but is, in my opinion, of superior quality. It was written as a reaction to *Le mari sentimental* (*The Sentimental Husband*) by Samuel Constant, brother of David Constant d'Hermenches. In Constant's text the protagonist is a middle-aged man with deeply ingrained habits and a firmly established way of life. He marries a somewhat younger woman, but the "intrusion" of his wife into his daily pattern becomes intolerable to him and finally drives him to suicide. In her response, Madame de Charrière took the point of view of a woman who marries a widower and discovers that there is no room in this man's life for her enthusiasm, impulses, and imagination. Her husband

who, ironically, is in many respects a "nice" man, has one fault which makes his wife totally unhappy: he is flawless, always guided by reason, and fully expects his wife to conform to his rational standards, thus ignoring her spontaneity, her impromptu behavior (Madame de Charrière emphasizes here very much that "reason" is not a panacea and can indeed maintain the *status quo* instead of supporting "progress," in contrast to what was so often thought in the eighteenth century). Mistriss Henley's mistake has been to believe that she would eventually be able to imitate and assimilate her husband's personality, but obviously she does not succeed and the marriage becomes a complete failure.

What makes this short story particularly interesting is that the narrator does not just criticize her husband, but is well aware of her own shortcomings also. It is a well balanced presentation, yet the reader most likely pities the wife and blames the husband because his "reasonable attitude," admirable as it may be, makes him inflexible and insensitive to others.

During the last twenty years of her life, Belle van Zuylen became more and more disillusioned and increasingly emphasized that she could only hope to influence a few individuals. In spite of her progressive, non-traditional ideas and convictions, she remained somewhat aloof and concentrated on influencing only those intelligent enough to understand and appreciate her in her rather secluded environment. One of these people was Benjamin Constant, who acknowledged her impact on him more than once in his *Cahier Rouge* and who wrote at the time of her death in his *Journaux intimes*: "In her I lose a friend who loved me dearly, a refuge if I had needed one, a heart that, although hurt by me, had never abandoned me" (Constant *Oeuvres 560;* my translation). It was through young people such as Constant, approximately twenty-five years her junior, that she tried to transmit her message of non-conformism and her defiance of tradition, even if her expectations of accomplishing anything at all were low.

ENDNOTES

[1] Pottle 306-307. Although Dutch, Belle van Zuylen wrote almost exclusively in the French language. In the present article I am using English translations by others or my own, as indicated.

Works by Belle van Zuylen/Isabelle de Charrière

Oeuvres complètes. 10 vols. Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1979-81.

Translations into English (selected)

see Pottle

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