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How to Be Sociable: Charrière's Dialogue with Rousseau in *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés*

Giulia Pacini
College of William and Mary

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Abstract
C'est avec la raison et les arts que l'on pourrait quelquefois oublier ses souffrances [...] . Vivons ensemble, chère Germaine; doutons, croyons, raisonnons, déraisonnons ensemble et ne nous quittons pas même à la mort": Alphonse, the hero of Isabelle de Charrière's Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés (1793), thus extols the value of the arts, as well as the importance of being sociable. Similar statements echo throughout this epistolary novel, its plot consisting of efforts to maintain ongoing conversations and attempts to establish useful international relations among friends and strangers across Europe. Geographically and ideologically separated by the outbreak of the French Revolution and consequent civil war, Charrière's protagonists develop a support network that is crucial not only to their understanding of current events but also to their survival and future happiness. As the narrative insists upon the value of discursive practices both public and private (two dimensions that are clearly intertwined in this text), it illustrates Charrière's ideal form of sociability. More important, this novel offers one of Charrière's most eloquent reactions to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's political theory. Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés dialogues, in fact, with the Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes; and, in unison with another of Charrière's texts, Éloge de J.-J. Rousseau (1790), this novel rewrites the philosophe's "chimerical" descriptions of an ideal social contract (OC, 10:204). In the process, Charrière tackles moral and political problems posed by the French civil war, and ponders the conditions of possibility of a more peaceful and equitable society.

Keywords
Isabelle de Charrière, dialogue, Rousseau, sociability, the arts, conversation

Cover page footnote
Contributor's note: Giulia Pacini, assistant professor of French at the College of William and Mary, studies discourses of women's rights in the early modern epistolary novel.

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"C'est avec la raison et les arts que l'on pourrait quelquefois oublier ses souffrances [...] . Vivons ensemble, chère Germaine; doutons, croyons, raisonnons, déraisonnons ensemble et ne nous quittons pas même à la mort": Alphonse, the hero of Isabelle de Charrière's *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* (1793), thus extols the value of the arts, as well as the importance of being sociable.[1] Similar statements echo throughout this epistolary novel, its plot consisting of efforts to maintain ongoing conversations and attempts to establish useful international relations among friends and strangers across Europe. Geographically and ideologically separated by the outbreak of the French Revolution and consequent civil war, Charrière's protagonists develop a support network that is crucial not only to their understanding of current events but also to their survival and future happiness. As the narrative insists upon the value of discursive practices both public and private (two dimensions that are clearly intertwined in this text), it illustrates Charrière's ideal form of sociability. More important, this novel offers one of Charrière's most eloquent reactions to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's political theory. *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* dialogues, in fact, with the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*; and, in unison

1 Isabelle de Charrière, *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* in *Œuvres Complètes* (*OC*), ed. Jean-Daniel Candaux et al., 10 vols. (Amsterdam: van Oorschot, 1979–84), 8:460–61. References are to this edition. I have modernized Charrière's spelling.

with another of Charrière's texts, *Éloge de J.-J. Rousseau* (1790), this novel rewrites the *philosophe*'s "chimerical" descriptions of an ideal social contract (*OC*, 10:204). In the process, Charrière tackles moral and political problems posed by the French civil war, and ponders the conditions of possibility of a more peaceful and equitable society.

By the end of 1792, Revolutionary ideology had spread from France across Europe. Among other places, it had reached the Principality of Neuchâtel, where for years the Swiss bourgeois had ill tolerated the yoke of Prussian authority. Inspired by recent news reports from Paris and swayed by Jacobin propaganda, in 1792 the citizens of Neuchâtel had shown their first signs of unrest. Similarly to their Parisian counterparts, they erected freedom trees, danced the *carmagnole*, and donned revolutionary red bonnets; they called for a war against Prussia and attacked fellow countrymen suspected of entertaining monarchist persuasions. In response, the State Council sent a delegation of five men to meet with the Swiss Jacobins. When these negotiations failed, the Chancellor of Neuchâtel, Charles-Godefroy Tribolet, decided to change tack: hoping that public opinion might be assuaged by a forceful piece of literature, he commissioned Isabelle de Charrière to write a series of political pamphlets.[2] Pleased at the invitation to participate in Neuchâtel's public affairs, Charrière composed an epistolary dialogue meant to pass as an authentic correspondence between a Swiss and a Frenchman. Along with its three sequels, this text was eventually credited with playing a role in the reestablishment of peace in the area.[3]

Immediately after completing this project (now known as *Lettres trouvées dans la neige*), Charrière began composing *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés*, an epistolary novel whose title, plot, and dates are in perfect continuity with those used in the earlier pamphlets written for Tribolet. Both works address the problems caused by the French civil war, and the last epistle of *Lettres trouvées dans la neige* is dated only two days before the first letter of the novel. As a result, these twin texts show how senseless—if not impossible—it is to posit

2 In a letter to Charrière, Tribolet outlined the stakes of this project: "Il s'agit, Madame, de reconcilier des pères, des enfants, des frères, des sœurs, des maris, des femmes, des amis" (10 February 1793; *OC*, 3:498).

3 Charrière's friend, critic, and collaborator Alexandre-Pierre Du Peyrou remarked: "En tout je crois vos lettres utiles, autant qu'agréables à lire" (Du Peyrou to Charrière, 3 May 1793; *OC*, 4:49).

a binary distinction between Charrière's literary achievements and her journalistic writing of history: setting up such an opposition would elide the relevance and significance of her fiction.[4] Stressing the continuities between *Lettres trouvées dans la neige* and *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* may mean, however, ignoring the specificity and respective strengths of these two different texts. While the publicly commissioned pamphlets formulate a positive political message regarding the merits of an enlightened monarchy, the polyphonic novel is more abstractly intent on dramatizing the workings of a complicated process of negotiation. It is more interested in showing the "sympathie, de vrais rapports" between an aristocrat and a Jacobin than in proving the superiority of a predetermined type of regime (8:438). Given the impossibility of distinguishing right from wrong in a situation of civil war—and therefore the difficulties involved in defending a strictly partisan position—the text ultimately stresses "n'importe de la République ou de la Monarchie, il faut accepter l'ordre et la paix, sous quelque dénomination qu'on les présente" (8:439).[5] Rather than simply reflect an historic impasse or a rigid ideological program, *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* promotes a more flexible politics of discussion and compromise.[6]

The plot of *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* can be read

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4 Isabelle Vissière, *Isabelle de Charrière: Une aristocrate révolutionnaire: Écrits 1788–1794* (Paris: des femmes, 1988), 355–56.

5 Another aristocrat, the vicomte Des-Fossés, similarly speaks about how he and Alphonse could contribute to either "l'Empire ou la République" (8:450).

6 The originality of Charrière's thesis becomes evident as soon as one compares *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* to the best-known contemporary collection of émigré letters. In 1793, the National Convention's *Comité de Sûreté générale* published *Correspondance originale des émigrés, ou les émigrés peints par eux-mêmes* (Paris, Lyon, Marseille, and London: Buisson, Bruyset frères, Mossy and de Boffe, 1793). As in Charrière's novel, this text presents a fiction of "found" authentic letters: the *Correspondance originale* is said to have been "prise par l'avant-garde du Général Kellermann à Longwi et à Verdun, dans le porte-feuille de *Monsieur*, et dans celui de M. Ostonne, Secrétaire de M. de Chalonne." Unlike Charrière's ambivalent novel, however, these letters are presented in an anthology that analyses and classifies them in terms of their moral and political value: although the correspondence allegedly "n'a pas besoin de préambule, puisqu'il parle de lui-même," the editor stresses the treacherousness of the émigrés and then orders their letters in frequently disparaging categories. Having read this correspondence, Charrière realized the value and specificity of her ideologically diverse novel: in a letter to Chambrier d'Oleyres, she criticized the *Correspondance originale* for its blatantly partisan attitudes (1 February 1794; *OC*, 4:323). The dialogic character of Charrière's novel was certainly appreciated by the critics of the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*, who, as they highlighted the importance of the Jacobin character's letters, effectively expressed an interest in hearing his voice alongside those of convinced royalists. *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* 372 (Jena: 25 November 1794), 419.

as a reflection on the pragmatics of interpersonal communication and negotiation. Instead of nostalgically representing an already established idyllic culture-in-exile—as did contemporary authors such as Sénac de Meilhan in his epistolary novel *L'Émigré* (1797)—Charrière took pains to sketch the process by which the problems posed by the French emigration and civil war might be resolved. Set in 1793, the novel describes the dispersion of the de *** family: Germaine is said to be a refugee in London; her sister Pauline and her mother, the Marquise de ***, have remained in the Vendée, where "tout est en feu" because of counter-revolutionary movements (8:418). Their father and husband, the Marquis, has left the country to join Condé's anti-revolutionary army. Germaine's fiancé, the aristocrat Alphonse, is in Switzerland with his friend, the refractory abbot des ***, who has refused to swear allegiance to the Civil Constitution of the clergy. To the Marquis's chagrin, Alphonse has taken leave from the royal European armies, for he no longer wants to fight alongside "ennemis de sa patrie" (8:433). As a result, the Marquis has revoked his prior agreement to Germaine's engagement with the young man, and has prohibited any correspondence between the two lovers. To complicate the novel's sentimental plot even further, aristocratic Pauline eventually falls in love with Alphonse's best friend, Laurent Fonbrune, a young Jacobin in charge of repressing the "white," counter-revolutionary insurrection in the Vendée and, worse still, brother of the current Convention president.

These characters write each other to express their divergent ideas, to attempt a formal and ideological reconciliation, and to organize, together, Pauline's escape from France. Fully exploiting the kaleidoscopic potential of the polyphonic epistolary novel, Charrière presents their opposing perspectives on politically charged issues, such as the justice of violence, the value of the Civil Constitution of the clergy, the newly instituted divorce law, and the appropriateness of serving in a foreign army against one's own country. In addition, in this novel Charrière sets up a discursive space where all her characters are given an occasion to voice their opinions, regardless of their gender or social class.[7] Far from serving as a mere backdrop for

7 Pauline alone does not write: her words are quoted in direct discourse by others. This lack of a voice may be seen as an illustration of the originality of her character: Pauline cannot find a place of her own within the structures of the eighteenth century's social and cultural imaginary. In this regard, see Jenene Allison, *Revealing Difference: The Fiction of Isabelle de Charrière* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995), 34. Regarding Charrière's use of direct discourse within the letters of an epistolary novel, see Monique Moser-Verrey, "Isabelle de Charrière en quête d'une meilleure entente," *Stanford French*

another story, the French civil war defines the novel's plot and establishes a tension that the narrative must then try to resolve; since the safety and happiness of Charrière's characters depend on the success of their communication, they are personally invested in maintaining their dialogue. Contrary to so many other mute, distant, or personally uninvolved confidants of the early modern French epistolary tradition, they respond to each other's letters critically and with passion. Furthermore, their debates are driven by a desperate desire for closure: these discussions must lead to action if Charrière's characters expect to save lives and stop the civil war. The stakes of a fictional correspondence could not be any higher.

As it represents the workings of an idealized sociable network, the novel underscores the psychological and practical value of political and personal contacts. Charrière's characters circulate each other's letters and quote each other's words, a typical practice in most late eighteenth-century epistolary novels. In addition, the protagonists of *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* use their private and public relations for numerous purposes. For example, Pauline (a "white" aristocrat) convinces Laurent (a Jacobin) to mail her letters, despite his knowing that he should destroy any document destined for his class's political enemies. The noblewoman even manages to entrust the Jacobin's brother—the National Convention president!—with a letter for her sister Germaine in England (8:422, 441). With its dramatization of other such extraordinary manoeuvres, the novel illustrates the concrete difficulties involved in mailing a letter during a time of civil war (some epistles are lost: 8:433, 452).

More significantly, the text highlights the importance of having appropriate contacts in all ideological camps. The value of political connections is reiterated at two crucial moments: at the novel's conclusion and at the end of its sequel. The first edition of *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* closes with a letter in which the Marquis asks Alphonse and the abbot des *** to help his family escape from the Vendée: "*Vous avez tous deux des amis dans tous les partis et toutes les classes*, tâchez par leur moyen de faire savoir à ma femme et à mes filles, qu'étant tous les jours plus inquiet pour elles, je voudrais qu'elles s'embarquassent avec un homme sûr à La Rochelle ou à Rochefort, et qu'elles se rendissent en Hollande" (8:471; emphasis added). The sequel's conclusion echoes these lines,

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Review 11 (Spring 1987), 67–68. Moser-Verrey argues that, in her early novels, Charrière used direct discourse to convey politically subversive messages. This seems to be the case in *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* as well, where the fact that Pauline does not write is compensated by this alternative—yet nevertheless direct—form of voicing.

as the Marquise asks Alphonse whether he would mind conveying important information to her husband:

> *Je sais, Monsieur, que vous conservez toutes vos relations*, et que même les gens dont vous avez actuellement le moins à vous louer vous sont encore chers. Ils reviendront à vous soyez-en bien persuadé et en attendant que cela arrive continuez à leur prouver que vous êtes digne de tout leur attachement. Les instruire de ce qu'il leur importe de savoir est un service que vous ne refuserez sûrement pas de leur rendre. (8:479; emphasis added)

The following two letters (the last of the sequel) prove the success of this manoeuvre, for Alphonse passes the Marquise's epistle on to the abbot, who copies it within his own missive to the Marquis. The conclusion of the novel then demonstrates the effectiveness of this social and political epistolary network, as the final letter tells the story of Pauline's successful escape from the Vendée. She is welcomed by a stranger in Holland because "elle nous a nommé un excellent homme de nos amis établi à Smyrne comme étant l'ami de ses amis" (8:482).

Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés further develops this point about the value of sociability through an intertextual dialogue with the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Literary critics have traditionally remarked upon the ways in which Charrière's works respond to the *philosophe*'s ideas.[8] To begin with, Charrière's familiarity with the latter's oeuvre is well attested: her correspondence with her Swiss governess, Jean-Louise Prevost, indicates that she was first introduced to Rousseau's works at the age of fifteen: Prevost's letters of 1755 mention *Devin du village*, *Lettre à d'Alembert*, and *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*. From 1762 onward, Charrière's correspondence with Constant d'Hermenches was interspersed with references—both admiring and critical—to *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Émile*. This interest in the *philosophe*'s work developed even further when Germaine de Staël published *Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.J. Rousseau* (1788): Charrière responded with a critical

8 Among others, see Raymond Trousson, *Défenseurs et adversaires de J.-J. Rousseau: D'Isabelle de Charrière à Charles Maurras* (Paris: Champion, 1995), 29–75; and Jacqueline Letzter, "Isabelle de Charrière versus Germaine de Staël: Textual Tactics in the Debate about Rousseau," *SVEC: Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 362 (1998), 27–40. Charrière's criticism of the philosopher is generally considered original and exceptionally well balanced (Trousson, 72; Letzter, 29).

piece (unfinished) entitled *De Rousseau* (1788–89) and *Plainte et Défense de Thérèse Lavasseur* (1789). Charrière continued to engage Rousseau's ideas in her *Lettres d'un évêque français à la nation* (1789), *Courte réplique à l'auteur d'une longue réponse* (1789), and, above all, her *Éloge de J.-J. Rousseau* (1790). Furthermore, she collaborated with Pierre-Alexandre Du Peyrou, one of the editors of the second part of Rousseau's *Confessions* (1790). In 1791, Charrière drafted a letter, *À Monsieur Burke*, which defended the idealistic French philosopher before one of his fiercest opponents. In her personal correspondence throughout the Revolutionary period, she expressed annoyance at the extreme ways in which Rousseau's memory was being either vilified or venerated by opposite political parties.

Charrière admired Rousseau's musical talents, but she took issue with many of his philosophical ideas. Above all, she disagreed with his gender ideology: she refused his binary distinction between male and female roles, and she questioned the existence of an essentially feminine nature. In addition, she critiqued Rousseau's excessive idealism, his opposition between a state of nature and one of culture, and his faith in the intrinsic goodness of human nature. Charrière's negative response to Sophie's education in *Émile* is most evident in her fictional works, whereas her other points of contention are perhaps best represented in *Éloge*, a short piece that pays tribute to the lyrical sensibility of *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, while also articulating a moderate critique of Rousseau's moral and political ideas. In particular, *Éloge* dismisses Rousseau's theory of the social contract as a fundamentally unrealistic notion—a pact "qu'aucune société n'a fait ni ne peut faire" (*OC*, 10:204). Later on in the same text, she reiterates this need for "des plans plus praticables, plus aisés à réaliser" (*OC*, 10:206). A similar interest in methodological issues and political processes emerges at the end of *Lettres d'un évêque français* when Charrière refers to Rousseau's description of a social contract and ponders the origin and authority of society's laws. As she emphasizes the importance of each individual's voluntary and explicit adherence to the social contract, Charrière reflects upon the specific ways such a bond can be established and maintained legitimately (*OC*, 10:155–56).

While displaying this overarching interest in practical matters, *Éloge* still acknowledges the inspirational value of Rousseau's "dreams."[9] Charrière explains:

9 The *Éloge* epigraph reads: "His words were Musick / his thoughts celestial dreams" (*OC*, 10:197; original English).

> Nous sommes si las de nous-mêmes et de toutes nos réalités, que *nous avons besoin de choses idéales pour rajeunir nos imaginations affaissées et nos cœurs affadis.* Oui, l'on nous fait un extrême plaisir de nous dire quelquefois que l'homme est naturellement bon; que l'homme de la nature est tout différent de celui que nous voyons partout. Alors nous nous persuadons que l'état de société n'est qu'une circonstance où l'homme pouvoit se trouver ou ne se trouver pas; et nous nous consolons mieux de cette dégradation accidentelle que d'une abjection naturelle, éternelle, inhérente. (*OC*, 10:205; emphasis added)

As it recognizes the function of "chimerical" stories, such as Rousseau's descriptions of an innocent state of nature, *Éloge* virtually upholds the value of utopian literature, suggesting that works such as the *Contrat social* could fulfil a purpose if they offered readers a glimpse of a better *and a possible* society. It is to this effect, most probably, that Charrière's own fiction (*Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés*, in particular) wavers between idealized images and more level-headed attempts at addressing concrete political and procedural questions.

The direction in which Charrière develops these ideas on society and the social contract ultimately separates her from Rousseau. Not only does she end up defending the value of the arts and sciences, but she also concludes that distinguishing between an original, innocent state of nature and a degraded one of social culture makes no sense: "J'avoue que je ne sais ce que c'est que cette nature, qu'on n'a jamais vue dans son intégrité, qui n'est en aucun lieu, et dont on ne sait pas qu'elle ait été en aucun temps [...] tout ce que fait l'homme est de sa nature" (*OC*, 10:205). *Éloge* thus articulates Charrière's belief in the natural character of human sociability, along with her understanding of civilization as a positive force. The same passage also demonstrates that, even before witnessing the Terror, Charrière was convinced of the existence of a darker side to human nature.[10] In a letter to her friend Chambrier d'Oleyres, minister of Prussia at the court of Piedmont, she reiterated:

> Vous ne voulez pas savoir pourquoi les hommes me paraissent si foncièrement méchants et sots. À la bonne heure je ne vous le dirai pas, mais c'est une chose bien fixée dans ma tête. *La religion, l'étude, une vie douce exempte de rongeants besoins, et d'enivrante prosperité ont apprivoisé quelques uns de ces farouches et stupides*

10 This conviction is frequently reiterated in the rest of her work: "On sépare mal-à-propos la société d'avec la nature," Charrière writes in *Trois Femmes*, "est-il quelque chose hors de la nature où nous ayons puisé nos institutions sociales, nos vices et nos erreurs?" (*OC*, 9:121).

> *animaux* mais la race n'en [*sic*] pas meilleure, et si les anges ont une ménagerie je doute que nous y soyons. (12 April 1792; *OC*, 3:354; emphasis added)

Contrary to Rousseau, therefore, Charrière attributed positive, quasi-remedial powers to the civilizing process. She credited religious and intellectual exercises with having a calming and inspirational effect on human nature. She also believed that the arts and sciences could play a consoling role amid the horrors of war: "C'est avec la raison et les arts que l'on pourrait quelquefois oublier ses souffrances" (8:460), says the protagonist of *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés*.

Charrière's position vis-à-vis Rousseau's philosophy and more generally her views on human sociability become even clearer when one reads the *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* intertextually. The following anecdote from Alphonse's last letter to his fiancée is particularly interesting:

> Un démocrate dînait ces jours passés chez une femme bizarre et contredisante. Il soutenait ses principes, et elle défendait la cause de l'aristocratie dont pourtant elle ne se soucie point du tout. Quoi, Madame! vous approuvez qu'il y ait des supérieurs et des inférieurs, et selon vous il est permis au fort d'opprimer le faible! J'ignore, Monsieur, dit-elle, ce qui est permis ou défendu; je ne sais pas, par exemple, s'il m'était permis de faire tuer le poulet dont j'ai l'honneur de vous servir, et si je n'ai pas grand tort de mettre un de mes chevaux à la charrette, tandis que l'autre ne traîne qu'un léger cabriolet.—Mais, Madame, quelle comparaison y a-t-il entre l'homme et la brute, entre une créature raisonnable et un vil animal?—Monsieur, ce n'est pas, ce me semble, en qualité de créature raisonnable, mais de créature sensible que tout être vivant demande à être bien traité. (8:461)

According to Isabelle Vissière, contemporary readers of *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* took this "femme bizarre et contredisante" to be Charrière's fictional alter-ego, and indeed the two women resembled each other strongly in character, political beliefs, and place of residence.[11] The existence of this self-portrait is obviously interesting in and of itself, but it also, more importantly, highlights an otherwise marginal anecdote, spotlighting and endors-

11 Vissière, 366. This identification was compelling enough to be preserved untouched for over a century: in his intellectual history of the French emigration, Fernand Baldensperger (unwittingly?) refers to Charrière's "humeur bizarre et contredisante qui n'était pas son moindre charme," while also mentioning—within the same sentence—her "sentiment profond de l'égalité de tous les individus." Baldensperger, *Le Mouvement des idées dans l'émigration française: 1789–1815* (Paris: Plon, 1924), 135.

ing the ideas featured within it. Insofar as this character can be read as a caricature of Charrière herself, her words might be said to carry an authority superior to that of any other figure in the novel.

This "bizarre" character becomes even more intriguing when one realizes that, as she mulls over the possible inequality of human beings, she echoes the content and language of Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755). This was a work that Charrière seems to have known well, either because she had read it herself, or because the *philosophe*'s ideas and writings were the object of discussion among her close acquaintances.[12] *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* certainly resonates with many of the *Discours*'s main keywords. In particular, as she articulates her doubts about the foundation of human justice, Alphonse's "femme bizarre et contredisante" calls to mind the passage in which Rousseau takes contemporary natural-law theorists to task for having granted the notion of natural law a *rational* moral status. In a critical dialogue with Hugo Grotius, Rousseau proposes that human behaviour is driven by two forces whose functioning pre-empts that of human reason: these, he believes, are an instinct of self-preservation and an innate pity for all who suffer. He continues: "C'est du concours et de la combinaison que notre esprit est en état de faire de ces deux principes, *sans qu'il soit nécessaire d'y faire entrer celui de sociabilité,* que me paraissent découler toutes les règles du droit naturel."[13] Rousseau develops this point further, positing (still in the name of sensibility) that animals and human beings share the same nature and therefore the same natural rights:

> Il est clair que, dépourvus de lumières et de liberté, ils [les animaux] ne peuvent reconnaître cette loi [naturelle]; mais tenant en quelque chose à notre nature par la sensibilité dont ils sont doués, on jugera qu'ils doivent aussi participer au droit naturel, et que l'homme est assujetti envers eux à quelques espèces de devoirs. Il semble, en effet, que si je suis obligé de ne faire aucun mal à mon semblable, *c'est moins parce qu'il est un être raisonnable que parce qu'il est un être sensible; qualité qui, étant commune à la bête et à l'homme, doit au moins donner à l'une le droit de n'être point maltraitée inutilement par l'autre.*[14]

12 Charrière may have first read Rousseau's second Discourse in 1755 when she sent a copy of this text to Prevost, who had since returned to Switzerland (*OC*, 1:84). Charrière discusses ideas probably taken from this text in a letter to Hermenches (29 December 1762; *OC*, 1:148) and then in *Lettres d'un évêque français à la nation* (1789). Her dialogue *De l'Esprit et des rois* (1797) was later presented as a direct response to one of the *Discours*'s main theses: "l'homme qui médite est un animal dépravé."

13 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes,* vol. 3, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 126; emphasis added.

14 Rousseau, 126; emphasis added.

Rousseau thus opposes Grotius's claim that human beings are united by a naturally sociable and rational character. He argues that it is not man's conscious understanding of his desire and need for company that founds human morality, but rather an instinctive feeling of pity; one must therefore disengage the notions of sociability and rationality from that of natural law. The *Discours* goes on to develop Rousseau's basic hypothesis that in a perfectly natural environment men would treat each other well, despite the fact that they—like all sentient creatures—were born to live alone.

Charrière's *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* evokes this text not only as it studies the reasons for social inequality, but also as it ponders, in very similar terms, the potentially common rights of humans and animals ("Mais, Madame, quelle comparaison y a-t-il entre l'homme et la brute, entre une créature raisonnable et un vil animal?—Monsieur, ce n'est pas, ce me semble, en qualité de créature raisonnable, mais de créature sensible que tout être vivant demande à être bien traité"). Similarly to Rousseau, Charrière raises questions about the foundations of human morality as she examines the justice of accepted social practices. She too seems to believe in the priority of sensibility over rationality when addressing moral problems. One of the most important letters of the novel is, in fact, dedicated to this very issue: dissatisfied with the quantitative logic by which his fellow Jacobins justify their violence, Charrière's character Laurent wonders about the accountability of human suffering. He asks his friend the abbot: "ai-je l'obligation et le droit de soulager les maux d'un certain nombre d'hommes aux dépens d'un moins grand nombre d'hommes?" (8:470). Charrière was clearly troubled by this question, which Benjamin Constant had first raised in a letter to her and which she then incorporated, almost verbatim, within her novel.[15] As Constant did before them, Laurent and the fictional abbot ultimately concur that human suffering cannot be gauged in rational terms and that the pain of a single person is as shocking and unacceptable as that of a multitude. Like Rousseau, Charrière thus offered a critique of those moral philosophies whose hyper-rational discourse failed to consider individuals' sensations and emotions.

This intertextual dialogue with Rousseau also provides an interpretative key to *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* as a whole. Recognizing these references allows an appreciation of how

15 See letter from Constant, spring or summer 1791; *OC*, 3:289–91; also the novel's rough drafts *OC*, 8:773–79.

Charrière chose *not* to repeat Rousseau's remarks about the unnatural character of sociability. Far from being a mere oversight, this omission becomes particularly eloquent when read alongside Alphonse's immediate response to the anecdote in question (these are his last words in the novel, sequel included). As if in reaction to Rousseau's second Discourse, Charrière's hero ends his correspondence, concluding: "vivons ensemble, chère Germaine; doutons, croyons, raisonnons, déraisonnons ensemble et ne nous quittons pas même à la mort" (8:461). In his final statement, he upholds the value of company and conversation: regardless of whether or not one's talk is consistently rational, and despite the fact that inequality might be inevitable, Alphonse affirms a civilized ideal of sociable living. In the light of the uncertainty of so many moral, social, and political dilemmas, he seems to indicate that human fellowship and the cultivation of the arts and sciences may be the only hope for a better future. At the very least, he suggests, they will provide solace for the many evils in life.[16]

Along with maintaining contacts and transcending social or political differences, in Charrière's novel epistolary sociability implies a commitment to thoughtful discussion. Despite the war, within this fictional network information circulates quickly: in a letter to Laurent, dated 11 May, for example, Alphonse criticizes statements that the Marquis had

16 One is thus reminded of how, in her *Éloge*, Charrière stressed the paradoxes inherent in Rousseau's thought: if he claimed to be happy and virtuous only in solitude, he nonetheless felt the need to share his feelings with someone else (*OC*, 10:210). In addition, regarding instead the function of the arts within the novel, one might note that letter writing is here represented as a soothing and inspirational activity: it allows Alphonse—as it did Charrière—to maintain friendships, to clarify thoughts, to participate in the revolutionary debates, and to help save an émigrée's life (the support Charrière offered the French émigrés passing through Neuchâtel is well documented in her personal correspondence). Finally, it is interesting to remember that *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* was created, published, and read in a sociable context. The novel was conceived in Colombier "à l'incitation de [l'émigré] Camille de Roussillon" (letter to d'Oleyres, 15–16 January 1794; *OC*, 4:315). It includes a letter initially written to Charrière by Constant, who also helped correct the first drafts. The manuscript was eventually published thanks to the combined efforts of Constant and Julie Rieu, who supervised the printing and corrected proof errors in Lausanne. In Neuchâtel, the novel was translated into German by Ludwig Ferdinand Huber, whose wife Thérèse composed a second sequel. Charrière sent copies of this novel to Switzerland, France, Italy, Holland, and Prussia, where friends and relatives read and commented upon it in groups. Letter to Benjamin Constant, 7 August 1973; *OC*, 4:139. For a description of a public reading of—and reaction to—the text, see letter from Du Peyrou, 18 October 1793; *OC*, 4:231.

made to yet another party—the abbot—on the fifth of the same month (8:438). Furthermore, discussions continue over the course of many letters: provoked by the declarations of his Jacobin friend, Alphonse responds with his own opinions on recent events; Laurent then picks up on these ideas in his next letter (8:439, 461). More important, within the epistolary fiction of these letters, characters write to discover their common ground rather than to assert their own theories and representations of the world. Laurent, who repeatedly acknowledges the "chaos de ma tête" (8:465), tells Alphonse:

> L'endroit où je t'écris est exactement celui d'où tu m'écrivais, quand il n'y avait encore ni émigrés ni jacobins. Tu t'es mis au nombre des uns, moi je me suis joint aux autres; cependant nous sommes encore amis. Oui, *soyons amis, Cinna, c'est moi qui t'en conjure.* Qui de nous deux est le Cinna? Qui des deux l'Auguste? Lequel des deux est le conspirateur? Lequel sera le maître et pourra faire grâce à l'autre? En vérité je n'en sais plus rien; la tête m'a tourné, je ne sais plus ce que je suis ni ce que je veux. (8:421)

Caught within a binary system that only allows for political enemies or allies, the Jacobin finds it difficult to acknowledge his friendship with a member of the French nobility; he is well aware of the conflict between his feelings and his convictions. As he quotes Corneille, moreover, he recognizes the instability of the republic's new power structure and wonders about the long-term consequences of the counter-revolutionary movements in the Vendée and on France's borders.

Thus Charrière's correspondents do not try to convince each other of a pre-existent, objective, and universal form of Truth. They realize that they do not have a satisfactory answer to the problems posed by the ongoing civil war. Even as they strive to build a consensus, they never produce a unitary voice in which individual differences are transcended. Rather, through rational *and* impassioned discussion, they work to reach an intersubjective and necessarily compromised understanding with essentially pragmatic ultimate goals; their actions speak to what we would now call a temporary coalition rather than an identity politics. Alphonse's satisfaction is evident when he realizes that his conservative friend, the refractory abbot, shares many of Laurent the Jacobin's ideas:

> J'ai près de moi un Prêtre déporté qui fait *comme toi* des plans de gouvernement. Il veut un Roi à la tête de ta République; *voilà toute la différence entre ton plan et le sien*; *encore ne veut-il un roi que pour faire mieux cheminer la République*; et si tu lui prouvais qu'elle peut se passer de Roi, il n'en voudrait plus; car ce n'est pas au nom de Royaume ou de Monarchie, ce n'est pas non plus au soi-disants petit-fils

> d'Henri quatre, qu'il est attaché [...]. [I]l pense qu'un Roi est nécessaire pour donner de l'ensemble à une aussi grande machine que la République française, ainsi que pour inspirer aux étrangers quelque confiance et quelque crainte. (8:438; emphasis added)

Alphonse subscribes to these ideas, adding that if he were presented with "un autre ressort [moteur] suffisamment actif," he too could respect and love it "autant qu'un roi" (8:439–40).

Despite their many political differences, Alphonse, Laurent, the abbot, and the Marquis ultimately agree on the importance of maintaining a stable organ of power. This conclusion is interesting because it calls to mind Charrière's frequently forgotten comments about the value of a strong executive force during times of revolution and civil war. As early as 10 September 1789, she had remarked, "Un dictateur serait bien nécessaire à cette France" (letter to Dudley Rider; *OC*, 3:151). Five years later, she still entertained these thoughts as she explained to Constant:

> Si le ciel a decreté la république je crois qu'il faudra cette succession pour y arriver.

Ja[co]bins

Convention

guerre

civile

Roi Dictateur

république

> *Qui y a-t-il à présent qui puisse l'établir ou l'affermir?* Les armées vont encore comme des boules vont roulant sur un billard après que le bras qui les a poussées s'est retiré. Robespierre agit encore quoiqu'il ne soit plus. *Mais pensez-vous que cela puisse durer longtemps? Plusieurs hommes peuvent-ils ce que peut un homme?* Si vous ne le croyez pas pensez-vous qu'un autre unique se montre? *Je le voudrais et qu'il fût lui le dictateur avec qui la paix se pût faire et qui pût arranger tout de suite la république ou une monarchie* tellement mitigée que vous même en fussiez passablement content. Cela n'est pas, j'espère, trop aristocratique [...] *je me suis tourmentée l'esprit pour imaginer la possibilité d'une république française une et indivisible.* (29 September 1794; *OC*, 4:588; lines formatted as in the original; emphasis added)

Given that critics tend to neglect such remarks because they focus on Charrière's numerous calls for moral and political flexibility, it seems important here to acknowledge her ongoing and equally significant preoccupation with the feasibility of different projects.[17] As far as *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* is concerned, one must recognize that the novel wavers between idealized representations of an exemplary form of sociability and more practical reflections on the means by which the revolutionaries might reach an acceptable political compromise. Charrière's text clearly indicates that tangible results, such as the re-establishment of peace in France, matter more than the (ultimately impossible) achievement of an abstract ideological ideal.

Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés thus describes the problems of consensus-building, at the same time that it raises questions about the possibility of ever discovering a universal Truth. The novel emphasizes the importance of testing the value of abstract philosophical principles against specific concrete problems. Laurent the Jacobin fantasizes about being able to freeze the course of history and thereby oblige the French to stop and reflect upon their current situation: "je voudrais que [...] tout Français conservant pour faculté unique celle de penser, fut forcé d'en faire long-temps usage, sans autre objet de ses pensées que ces deux seules questions: *Que puis-je? et que veux-je?*" (8:430–31). These same ideas are reiterated later in the text, when Laurent sets up a distinction between a fable, which can afford to be "ce qu'elle veut," and history, which is only "ce qu'elle peut" (8:462). The Jacobin finds fault with voluntarist political philosophies that fail to concern themselves sufficiently with the applicability of their visions. When he witnesses the chaos and violence of the Terror, Laurent looses faith in the abstract principles of "l'indivisible République, et l'invisible liberté et l'impossible égalité," and starts defending a more contingent politics of social connections and coalition-building (8:462). Instead of continuing to dream of an impossibly ideal world, he and the other characters in this ideologically ambiguous novel learn to recognize the pragmatic value of working hypotheses, temporary alliances, and imperfect compromises.[18]

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17 In addition to *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés*, Charrière celebrates a politics of flexibility in *Aiglonette et Insinuante, ou la Souplesse* (1791), for example.

18 Regarding Charrière's celebration of social and ideological ambiguities, see Michel Delon, "Lettres trouvées dans des porte-feuilles d'émigrés ou l'éloge de l'amphibie," in *Une Européenne: Isabelle de Charrière en son siècle. Actes du colloque de Neuchâtel,* ed. Doris Jakubec and Jean-Daniel Candaux (Hauterive-Neuchâtel: Gilles Attinger, 1994),

Horrified by the violence that accompanied the French Revolution, Charrière showed little faith in the idea that society might ever produce a perfectly just, rational, and unanimous voice capable of superseding individual interests. Instead she took pains to render a more realistic cacophony of uncertain interests, limiting her hopeful statements to representations of the positive effects of civilized dialogue. In particular, by making both the plot and the form of *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* point to the importance of networking, Charrière emphasized the difficulty of different processes of political discussion, representation, and decision-making, while also—very importantly—illustrating these operations' ideal forms.

Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés thus illustrates the workings of an epistolary sociability committed to respecting individual differences and to maintaining a civil and therefore productive communicative climate. The novel counters the argument of Rousseau's second Discourse by upholding the beauty and necessity of a sociable existence. It also furthers the project of Charrière's *Éloge* as it addresses the difficulties involved in those processes of consensus-building and decision-making that found and maintain every social contract. Echoing Charrière's earlier text as it defends both the value of hope and the need for "des plans plus praticables, plus aisés à réaliser," *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* oscillates between a utopian inclination and a more realistic interest in addressing the concrete problems posed by the French Revolution and civil war.

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