

## Nostalgia in the letters of Elisabeth Charlotte, the second Madame

by  
William Brooks

When in 1671 the nineteen-year-old Elisabeth Charlotte arrived in France to marry Monsieur, the King's widowed brother, she began to write copiously to her German relatives.<sup>1</sup> Her fifty-one years at court was the longest time spent there by any adult member of the French royal family excepting only Catherine de' Medici and Louis XIV; and a reliable estimate of her output counts 40,000 letters in German, many of twenty or thirty pages. She wrote some 20,000 in French as well.<sup>2</sup> (Mme de Sévigné wrote less than one twentieth of Elisabeth Charlotte's total, and hers are shorter.) Unless I specify, the present article relates to her German letters to German correspondents, and I use my translations or published translations, several of which are drawn from an important article by Philip Yarrow in which he discusses her sense of being an alien in France.

Yarrow (117) is unequivocal: "She did not like the French. [...] She found them self-interested, greedy, grasping, and treacherous. [...] She constantly criticizes the debauchery, adultery, and homosexuality of the French nobility, men and women alike [...] and (she says) they despise everything un-French [and] are dirty, making water all over Versailles." She herself wrote that the upper nobility are "utterly worthless, have neither Christian values nor a sense of honour, are ungrateful, and have no other god but Mammon" (Holland VI, 33). She complains about long-winded church services in which the congregation cannot sing but has to listen. "To hear a e i o u screeched in Latin the whole time is very boring [...] [as is] to hear *ora pro nobis* a hundred times in a row" (Bodemann, *Sophie*, I, 350, and II, 210). And not just on Sundays: as the wife of Monsieur she had to hear Mass and attend evening prayers every day; long hours had to be spent in church at Christmas, in Easter week, on Ascension Day, and so on (Forster 144). (She was brought up a Protestant but converted to

Catholicism on her marriage.) Towards the end of her life she says, “I have not been able to get used to French food in fifty years [...] What they eat one day, they eat the whole year round [but] I must have [...] variety” (Holland VI, 99 and 251). French milk and butter is second rate, the soil infertile, the cabbages flavourless, and French wine, except champagne, tastes like vinegar (Yarrow 115).

She disliked court life. “I cannot say what I do not think, and so shall never prosper at this court” (Bodemann, *Sophie*, I, 229). She was depressed by what she saw as spite, malice, and envy (Yarrow 116), and loathed Mme de Maintenon, *die alte Zott*, “the old trollop”, the personification of those negative qualities, who wielded enormous influence (or Elisabeth Charlotte thought she did), and kept her away from the King, for fear (Elisabeth Charlotte thought) that her plain-speaking would open his eyes to the falseness and hypocrisy surrounding him. Her hatred for Mme de Maintenon became intense as France lay on the brink of Louis XIV’s momentously crass decision to revoke the Edict of Nantes, and never abated. Madame says some years later that if she had known what was to happen, she would never have renounced her own Protestantism (Forster 108)—a rhetorical flourish rather than a realistic statement, since in fact she had no choice, but no less indicative of the strength of her feelings in the matter.

She distrusted French doctors, whose only cures were bleedings, emetics, and enemas. Once, she was given eighteen enemas in two days and “I’m never off the pot and I’m exhausted”. She disliked flattering portraits by French painters—in Germany they paint what they see. She disliked many French amusements: “I hate balls and French dancing and if I hear a minuet, I at once start to yawn” (Yarrow 117; Holland VI, 270). She deplored the sale of offices and *service par quartier* because it gave rise to inefficiency and dishonesty. As to Paris, which she described in the middle of a heatwave in the summer of 1718, “[it] is a horrible, hot and smelly place at the moment. The intolerable stench in the streets comes from the butchers, because the meat goes bad in the heat, and from the fish; there is a lot of fish. What with the people who urinate in the alleys, there is such a frightful stink that it

makes you quite sick” (Holland III, 356-57). She disliked French morals. Louis’s affair with Mme de Montespan, a double adultery, disgusted her, and her dislike of the children of that relationship would have been severe even if her own son (the future Regent) had not been obliged by the King to marry one of them, over her distraught objections. The old trollop, the former governess of the said child, certainly had a hand in that. Elisabeth Charlotte never liked Mlle de Blois,<sup>3</sup> duchesse de Chartres and later duchesse d’Orléans, and missed no opportunity to revile her. “Dogs are the best people I have found in France” (Forster 84).

Now, I could extend that list a hundred times over. Do her criticisms sustain the accusations of Francophobia levelled at her implicitly and sometimes explicitly from time to time? The answer lies in the way her letters have come down to us.

Over 4,000 German letters have been published. They are still appearing: fifty-two previously unpublished letters (295 manuscript pages) to Johanna-Sophie von Schaumburg-Lippe, Lady-in-Waiting to Princess Caroline of Wales, came out in 2003 (ed. Voss). In French translation, parts of about 600 have appeared, almost all incomplete, the same bits over and again. French commentators ignore the rest. It is disingenuous to claim, as does Christiane Lalloué (xi), in an otherwise sensible introduction to a well organized and approachable (albeit typically abridged) translation, that “il fallait débarrasser des lettres de Madame des formules de politesse, des protestations de dévouement qui les encombre, ainsi que des répétitions” – as if such were the only passages that had been omitted. Nearly a century ago, Arvède Barine, one of only two Francophone biographers before 1988 who read German, complained that “nous n’en connaissons en France que des miettes” (cited Van der Cruyse, *Madame Palatine* 11), and the situation is unchanged. It is almost no exaggeration to say that every French translation published during the twentieth century selects from the anthology by Ernest Jaeglé that appeared in 1890, containing 600 pages of extracts, supplemented by a handful of letters to her aunt Sophia in Rolland’s translation of 1863. Of the German letters published since 1890, the French knew nothing and they know nothing still.<sup>4</sup>

As Van der Cruysse points out (*Madame Palatine* 9), German commentators see her life as “une lutte pour la préservation de sa droiture germanique originelle au milieu d’une Cour plus décadente que brillante”. As if to bear this out, the blurb on the popular *Goldmanns Gelbe Taschenbücher* anthology declares that “[this] brave and resolute individual [...] courageously [bore] all the hardships of her destiny”. One might espy Francophobia in *German opinion*, therefore, and that is part of the problem. When her letters began to appear in France, they were not merely discovered, they were *pièces à conviction*. The first major widely available anthology, sweepingly called *Correspondance complète de Madame* (it was not), appeared in the 1850s (ed. Brunet), when anything that criticised the greatest Bourbon of all chimed neatly with Napoleon III’s imperatives. It is a short step from discovering criticism of Louis XIV’s court to the more tendentious assertion that she criticises France, and sure enough, in the poisonous Franco-German atmosphere of the 1890s – that is, *after* Jaeglé – the German Eduard Bodemann issued two anthologies, one of letters to her aunt, Sophia containing – without admitting it – only 8% of the 34,000 surviving manuscript pages;<sup>5</sup> the other an abridged set of letters to her former governess. Bodemann, publishing in German, selected, truncated, and spliced artificially to highlight criticism of France, a priority of numerous German editors for the next quarter of a century, and in 1910, her German biographer Michael Strich declared that “most of what remains unpublished now should be thrown overboard as unwanted ballast” (cited Van der Cruysse, “Du constat de carence”, 1).

The French fought back, but did so on territory the Germans had chosen. Instead of placing Madame’s comments in context – because they did not know the context because it was German – they sought to belittle her. In 1916, in *Une Allemande à la cour de France*, Augustin Cabanès (*passim*) mocked the ignorance of “[cette] grosse Allemande”. In 1922, in his major study of the Regency period, Leclerc (I, 215–16) observed that her letters contain disgusting and immoral lies that the French language has no words to convey. In a 1934 biography, *Une Rude Gaillarde* (“a strapping wench”, “a country bumpkin”), Paul Reboux (viii) condemns the vocabulary and by implication the contents of her

letters (“Je prendrai soin de ne parler que par allusions déceimment voilées des culs, des pets et de la merde dont Mme la duchesse d’Orléans avait coutume d’entretenir tant de personnes dignes du plus profond respect”) and promises to use “des circonlocutions afin de désigner ce que Madame n’hésitait pas à nommer”.<sup>6</sup> In other words, she criticizes France because she is stupid, uncouth, and German—not a difficult line to peddle during the Great War and the 1930’s. The estimable Frantz Funck-Brentano partly redressed the balance in his *Liselotte, duchesse d’Orléans*, but that appeared in 1937 when the French were once again becoming negative about Germans, and so, when, half a century later Van der Cruysse (“Du constat de carence”, 2) says she is regarded as “a rough-and-ready German born of a Sauerkraut-stuffing family who tarnished the refined image of Versailles and Saint-Cloud” (my translation), he certainly does not exaggerate, and it is true that she loved scatological vocabulary and had a prurient interest in other people’s sex lives that sits ill with “droiture germanique”. Her letters brim with anecdotes, ghost stories, and other credulous tales such as that of the Dunkirk fisherman whose boat was caught in a storm and swept to India (she admits that geography was not among her strong points); what happens in the convent, in the theatre, at the opera, at the hunt, in the street, at court. Along with Saint-Simon, she is *the* authority on procedure, etiquette, and precedence. She writes about her appearance and that of other people, hairstyles, clothes, fashion—she unwittingly started one fashion, the *palatine*—and wishes she were not “Madame”: “Being Madame”, she writes, “is a miserable job, and if I could sell it as they sell offices in this country, I would have put it up for sale long ago” (Forster 123).

Yet this woman also read extensively among the great French classical writers of imaginative literature and piety, attended performances of plays and operas five times a week, took a robust view in defence of the French theatre when its very existence was threatened by religious forces in the 1690’s, corresponded with the philosophers Huet, Spanheim, Leibniz, and the abbé de Saint-Pierre, discussed their teachings with other correspondents, kept up an almost daily intellectual interchange with her former tutor, Polier de Bottens, and gave useful practical and moral advice when

asked (and when not asked). It might be thought that in 1988 Van der Cruyssen's magisterial biography *Madame Palatine: princesse européenne* swept away prejudice born of French ignorance of these activities, but four years ago a new book by Claude Pasteur repeated the usual claptrap.

At various times she criticises Lorraine (still a foreign country), Spain, Italy ("in Italy, the life of a princess is full of constraint; anyone accustomed to the free life in Germany will have a hard time putting up with it"), England and the English, Austria, Russia, and Poland ("a wild and dirty country");<sup>7</sup> but I have *never* found her expressing hatred of France. She criticises and condemns, but her observations are selective and reasoned, and, to generalize, she reserves her condemnation for things she believes to be examples of bad faith, insincerity, hypocrisy, cynicism, or ingratitude. Moreover, I could give another list of what she liked and approved of. She was friendly with French Huguenots who fled abroad, such as her former lady-in-waiting, Mlle de Malauze (Brooks & Yarrow, "Three Huguenots", *passim*); she warmed to a Huguenot painter who managed for a time to remain in post-Revocation France (Yarrow 123, Forster 251); she loved the *people* of Paris; she leapt to the defence of French Catholicism, agreeing with the opinion that the Pope is not infallible; adding for good measure that French Catholics are not as silly as German Catholics. Some of her opinions are corroborated. With regard to food, the Dauphin, a noted epicure, observed: "Quand vous me disiez que vos lièvres et vos truites étaient meilleurs au Palatinat [...], je croyais que l'amour de la patrie vous faisait parler ainsi, mais depuis que j'ai été au Palatinat, je ne puis manger ici ni truites, ni lièvres, et je vois que vous aviez raison" (Holland IV, 281).

"L'amour de la patrie." It is a pleasure to endorse the words of the maligned and misunderstood Grand Dauphin. Saint-Simon (VIII, 553) called Elisabeth Charlotte "allemande au dernier point", and she herself said, in 1721: "I am still altogether a German" (Forster 264). She never missed an opportunity of speaking German. As Sean Ward shows, she cultivated a plain-speaking image that was considered Germanic, and as far as she could, she protected the young, sickly and overwhelmed German-

speaking Dauphine and befriended the German wife of the diarist Dangeau (Yarrow 122). She always welcomed German visitors to court, and a list of the positive things she says about Germany would be at least as long as a list of her criticisms of France. Reacting to news about Heidelberg, she says: “on aime, ce me semble, à savoir ce qui se passe dans les lieux qu’on connaît tant, et où on a passé sa jeunesse, car on les aime toujours, au moins moi” (Van der Cruysse, *Lettres* 215). When her half-sister Louise returned from England to Germany, she wrote: “That you still find Germany preferable to other countries [...] is quite natural. What one is familiar with is always better than anything strange, and the fatherland always appears best to us Germans” (Holland I, 90). Let us readily acknowledge that anyone arriving abroad might well be homesick and write copious letters to relatives back home, but Elisabeth Charlotte never stopped.

The word *nostalgia*, coined in 1678 from the Greek words *nostos* (“return”) and *algos* (“suffering”) by the Swiss physician, J.-J. Harder, practising in Mulhouse, denoted morbid or excessive love of one’s country of origin and desperate but impossible desire to return.<sup>8</sup> And Elisabeth Charlotte could never go home again. The fact that the word was invented for use in medical Latin entitles me to infer that she did not know it. There are no examples in seventeenth-century French dictionaries; nor any synonyms, and, as Robert notes (II, 1434), *nostalgie* first appears, with its medical meaning alone, in 1759; not until the onset of French Romantic fiction in the nineteenth-century did readers come across the expression *mal du pays*, which surfaced in 1827.

When she was seven, Elisabeth Charlotte went to live with her aunt in Osnabrück and Hanover in north Germany, staying four years before returning to her native Heidelberg. North Germany was even more different from south Germany in those days than today, yet Elisabeth Charlotte’s morbid or excessive love extends to both, so her feelings are not coterminous with simple homesickness. As a matter of fact, she was actually extraordinarily well travelled for a princess – how many others saw so many places? In her case, Hanover, Osnabrück, Celle, Iburg, and the Hague, in addition to her own Palatinate, Mannheim and

Heidelberg, and also Strasbourg. Her connections were Europe-wide as she kept up her massive correspondence with people in Spain, Italy, England, Lorraine, and various parts of France and Germany, including Saxony. She was the only person in France who got on well with Peter the Great.<sup>9</sup>

For these reasons, I suggest, “l’amour de la patrie” is a *necessary ingredient* in her outlook, but not a *sufficient explanation*. For that, we must look to her childhood, yet from Sainte-Beuve forward, with the exception of Barine and Funck-Brentano (and latterly Van der Cruysse), it is as though she does not exist until suddenly, she arrives in Metz on her way to Saint-Germain, marriage, and adulthood. (I discount biographies which dispose of her childhood in half a dozen reluctant pages and make no serious attempt to explain its importance in what came later. Not that brevity itself is a fault, for a small number of deft references in the first few pages of Jacqueline Duchêne’s recent novel *Madame l’étrangère* show how to alert readers to the importance of her childhood without sacrificing succinctness.)<sup>10</sup> She was not the only princess sent to live forever in another country, but she may have been the only one to combine pre-existing travel experience, a happy childhood (her parents’ woes notwithstanding), the capacity and enthusiasm to write about it, a host of correspondents, and the blessing, or curse, of a long life.

In ninety-nine per cent of her surviving letters, German *and* French, France is the here-and-now.<sup>11</sup> Her childhood memories and her German memories are coeval, identical. As Brooks & Goodbody point out, typical is the word *Rauschenplattenknecht*, a pet name meaning (roughly) “tom-girl”, which she acquired in North Germany and used for the rest of her life to refer to herself, its last appearance only one month before her death. She never lost her love of cats, parrots, ponies, tortoises, birds, farm animals and of course, dogs, and she befriended a similar menagerie of boys and girls of her own age at both her father’s and her aunt and uncle’s courts and in the countryside around. She made butter in the castle kitchen at Celle, and, at Hanover, was taught to play the guitar; fished in the stream at Heidelberg, watched a potter and a knifemaker at work; walked beside the Rhine at Mannheim and



between there and Heidelberg and Schwetzingen; climbed mountains, roamed in the woods, picked wild strawberries, stole grapes in the vineyards, and her only recourse in a country where princesses did not do such things was memory.

She was happiest in later life among elderly female German friends who visited. One in particular was Frau von Ratshamshausen, whom she refers to by her given name, Lenor. In the whole of her correspondence no other friend is referred to in the third person by a given name alone. Lenor was none other than the former Eleonore von Venningen, a childhood friend. As time went by, however, an increasing proportion of Elisabeth Charlotte's past lay in France. She never forgot her childhood, but began also to recall good things about her adoptive country. Her principal weakness was that she was rarely tactful in expressing herself. French courtiers and the royal family, amongst whom she lived, resented her outspokenness and reacted badly to her unwillingness to accept that everything French was automatically superior. She praises what she considers to be genuine and heartfelt, whether French or not. Her favourable references in later letters to things French, albeit things French in the past, show this to be so. During the Regency, she compares the bourgeois court life with the aristocratic court of Louis XIV. She affectionately remembers the good simple Queen, Maria Teresa. "Everything has changed for the worse since [her] death (she laments), and it has become an altogether different world" (Holland I, 106). She recalls warmly many aspects of pre-Revocation, pre-Maintenon France. By 1702, she is complaining how impolite the court has become by comparison with how it was when she was first there (Forster 147). Even though she fondly remembers Versailles, she claims to have preferred Fontainebleau (Forster 196). She *says* it was because its architecture is Germanic (she was wrong: it was merely old-fashioned), but I suspect she helplessly associated Versailles, which had been regularly occupied only from 1682, with *die alte Zott*, the old trollop, whose rise to favour began at about the same time. When she first came to France, she confesses in 1721, she loved playing with her stepdaughters. "There was an old lady called Mme de Fienne [...] who did not like the sound of shooting. We used to toss firecrackers into her skirts. This drove her wild,

and she would run after us and try to hit us. It was such fun.” (Holland VI, 289.) She did not want to grow up, and even in the last year of her life played a childish trick on the pompous maréchal-duc de Villeroy, governor to the young Louis XV, by slipping into the king’s hand a letter full of earthy advice about how to relieve his stomach pains, knowing that the elderly maréchal would see it and take offence (Forster 272–73).

In the last twenty years of her life, as Brooks & Yarrow show (*Dramatic Criticism* 1, 4, and 6), she frequently recalls the French theatre when she arrived in France, on one occasion giving a long list of actors and playwrights whom, she says, have no equal nowadays; she recalls the Spanish actors who were in France in the late Queen’s time; and in an uncharacteristic expression of preference, she says that French theatre is better than German. Opera, too, which had not existed in Germany and which she experienced only as a French art form, she came to enjoy. Elsewhere, praising a book in German, she says how unusual it is to find one better than books in French, for she has found no other in twenty-five years (Forster 93). There is no irrational Francophobia there even if, in 1721, she could write to her half-sister: “I have been fifty years away from home against my will” (Yarrow 114).

Her constant allusions to memories constitute a rhetorical strategy, albeit an unconscious one, that aided her to sublimate her unhappiness. Most of her memories were accurate, but she muddles the French actors and actresses, for her examples are drawn from fifteen years after her arrival. As to the Spanish company, its thirteen-year stay in France ended months after she came, so she is transmitting as a personal memory something she has probably heard much more about at second hand through Maria Teresa. Although she says plays and operas were better in the old days, she also often complains about having to watch things she has seen before (Brooks & Yarrow, *Dramatic Criticism* 261). Several years after her husband’s death, she sometimes states and frequently implies that they were on good terms in the last three years of his life. We can convict her of false memory on her own

evidence, because letters from that period show that they were certainly not (Yarrow 124).

Four points in rapid conclusion. First, any analysis of her nostalgia requires an examination of her childhood. More could be said than I have said, and further analysis needs to be done of the formative influences at work upon her in North Germany. Second, no doubt unconsciously, she used writing as “a way of recapturing her past” (Yarrow 119), that is, as an attempt to preserve a past she could not inhabit. Such an explanation may be fancily academic with a whiff of Proust, but it seems valid. Third, allusions to her past form a defence against an unhappy present and help her to make the best of it. Finally, her nostalgia breaks the bounds of the 1678 and 1759 definitions of the word, and fits more readily the modern idea of “un état de regret mélancolique du passé ou d’une chose idéale que l’on n’a pas eue” which Robert tells us is traceable to Balzac,<sup>12</sup> and which, to use the neatest English-language formulation (from Webster’s) is “a longing, usually sentimental, to experience again some real or imagined former pleasure”. If Elisabeth Charlotte, whose nostalgia accords with *that* definition, seems at the very least, post-Romantic, then in this aspect of her writing as in others we find her expressing a personal outlook which shows her to have been more modern than many of her contemporaries.<sup>13</sup>

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Charlotte was born in Heidelberg in May, 1652, and died at Saint-Cloud in December, 1722. French writers, as is their wont, gallicize her name, but “Élisabeth-Charlotte” sits ill with the thrust of my argument. Heidelberg was the capital of the Palatinate, her father was the Elector Palatine, and she was of the Protestant, Palatine branch of the Wittelsbach family, not the Bavarian, Catholic branch, but the solecism “Élisabeth-Charlotte de Bavière” has its origins in her own day. Neither is it correct to call her “la Princesse Palatine”, a title which identified her aunt, Anna Gonzaga. The French tendency to abbreviate to “la Palatine”

is somewhat patronizing, especially towards someone so doggedly determined to demand all the honours to which her rank entitled her. Her official title, as the wife of Monsieur, was of course simply “Madame”. Dirk Van der Cruysse (*Madame Palatine* 15) goes into further detail about her name.

<sup>2</sup> The accuracy of these calculations is discussed by Van der Cruysse in two places, viz, *Madame Palatine* (10) and “Du constat de carence” (6-7).

<sup>3</sup> That is, the second Mlle de Blois, viz, Françoise-Marie de Bourbon (1677-1749), youngest daughter of Louis XIV and Mme de Montespan.

<sup>4</sup> Modern French translations, such as those edited by Juin and Amiel, are in themselves unexceptionable; but the English translations by Stevenson, Kroll, and Forster provide between them a more extensive anthology of her work for readers who do not wish to read her in German. Moreover, because the English language is lexically and grammatically Germanic in so many respects, it seems to me that it is often more faithful to her mode of expression. That, of course, is a personal view.

<sup>5</sup> See Van der Cruysse, “Du constat de carence” (19–20), where he corrects an earlier and commonly accepted overestimate of the proportion published by Bodemann.

<sup>6</sup> The books by Cabanès and Reboux are comprehensively condemned by Van der Cruysse, “Du constat de carence” (12). Van der Cruysse’s commentary on these and other texts largely accords with my own assessment. I would add that some of them—Reboux’s, for example—are so dreadful as to be unintentionally comical.

<sup>7</sup> Forster 104, 126, 138–39, 183, 264, and 266.

<sup>8</sup> *Grand Larousse de la Langue française*, IV, 3364. Dr Harder, practising in Mulhouse, was treating soldiers who had fought abroad as mercenaries in the recent wars and could no longer return home.

<sup>9</sup> There is nothing rational about nostalgia and France was a peculiarly rational country, Cartesian at least on the surface, at any rate until Rousseau and his ilk began their work, but I note that three different ways of articulating the concept existed in the German language in the seventeenth century (the words *Sehnsucht*, *Wehmut*, and *Heimweh*). In Volume 14 of Grimm's *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, there are no fewer than eight seventeenth-century examples of *Wehmut*, emanating in the main from North Germany, especially Westphalia – not so far from Osnabrück and Hanover. Am I stretching a point to suggest that Elisabeth Charlotte imbibed the concept in North Germany? More work needs to be done by German-speaking specialists, but if proven, it would be yet another example of the formative influence of her early years.

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Francis Assaf for drawing my attention to this readable if only partially accurate historical novel. It may whet the appetite for the fuller and more detailed non-fictional account by Van der Cruysse. I exclude from my general criticism of French biographies the recent example by Christian Bouyer that appeared after this paper was accepted for publication. Bouyer gives a fair account of her childhood and redresses a number of other criticisms I make here of French attitudes.

<sup>11</sup> Ninety-nine per cent is a literally accurate figure, not a linguistic stratagem to provide emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> Specifically, his novel *La Recherche de l'absolu* (1834). See Robert (II, 1434). Balzac's sense cannot have imposed itself very rapidly on the common language because Littré does not recognise *nostalgie* in that sense: "*Nostalgie*: terme de médecine. Mal du pays, dépérissement causé par un désir violent de retourner dans sa patrie" (Littré III, 748–49).

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