

I

MME DE SÉVIGNÉ & THE NEWS

On 4 February 1671, Mme de Sévigné was parted from her daughter for the first time in their lives. It was for her a cruel separation, but we owe to it the correspondence which reveals her as the greatest letter-writer of France, perhaps of the world. For it cannot be too clearly recognised that her letters to Mme de Grignan greatly exceed in importance all the rest. In the first place she could write to her daughter, as she could to hardly anyone else, without the fear of her letters being shewn to the wrong people, and this gives them their greatest charm—their absolute spontaneity. Secondly, seeing that her daughter was never absent from her heart or her thoughts and that in fact her whole existence was bound up in her, she could be her true self, she could lay bare her inmost soul.

She herself fully realises the difference between her letters to her daughter and to others:

*Je n'aime point m'enivrer d'écriture. J'aime à vous écrire, je parle à vous, je cause avec vous: il me seroit impossible de m'en passer; mais je ne multiple point ce goût: le reste va, parce qu'il le faut.*¹

and a little later she writes:

Je donne avec plaisir le dessus de tous les paniers, c'est-à-dire, la fleur de mon esprit, de ma tête, de mes yeux, de ma plume, de mon écriture; et puis le reste

¹ 9 October 1675.

MME DE SÉVIGNÉ & THE NEWS

va comme il peut. Je me divertis autant à causer avec vous, que je laboure avec les autres.¹

There is some exaggeration in the last sentence. For she evidently took real pleasure in writing to her two cousins, Coulanges and Bussy-Rabutin, both of whom she had known from childhood.² But her letters to them do not reveal the whole woman. Rather they bring out certain aspects of her character, since, like all good letter-writers, she unconsciously adopted a tone that suited the character of her correspondent. With Coulanges, to whom three or four of her most brilliant letters are addressed, she is all gaiety and light-heartedness. To Bussy, with whom she was in strong sympathy, a sympathy rather of the head than of the heart—“Autrefois nous avions le don de nous entendre avant que d’avoir parlé”—she writes in a tone of friendly understanding. But her letters to him sometimes give us the feeling that his reputation as a letter-writer and literary critic puts some constraint upon her freedom, or at any rate keeps her from the grammatical escapades which are so delightful in her letters to her daughter. As the years go on, her letters to Bussy become more serious, and in those of the last ten years of her life there are often passages of grave moral reflection. Even in one of her letters to Coulanges, when he was at Rome in 1691 with the Duc de Chaulnes, she writes in a serious vein, beginning with a reflection on the sudden death of Louvois, and then, after dwelling

¹ 1 December 1675.

² We have twenty-seven letters to Coulanges and about one hundred and forty to Bussy.

MME DE SÉVIGNÉ & THE NEWS

on the great part that the Popes and the Christian religion had played in the great city, recommending her cousin to read St Augustine on the *Truth of Religion* and reminding him that, whatever intrigues went on in the Conclave, it was always the Holy Spirit who made the Pope: “Voilà sur quoi je vous laisse, mon cher cousin.”¹

We can parallel this difference between Mme de Sévigné’s letters to her daughter and those that she wrote to others from our own great letter-writers. Gray’s letters to his old schoolfellow, Tom Wharton, give us a deeper insight into his character than those to any other of his friends. Horace Walpole is most natural when he is writing to George Montagu. We know Dorothy Osborne’s charming personality so well, because all her letters are addressed to her lover and future husband, with whom she was in perfect sympathy.

Another reason for Mme de Sévigné’s delightful spontaneity is that she is so little conscious of her matchless skill: “Est-il possible, ma très-chère,” she writes, when she was past sixty, “que j’écrive bien? cela va si vite; mais puisque vous êtes contente, je ne demande pas davantage.” And twenty years earlier she wrote to her cousin, Bussy, “Il seroit à souhaiter que ma pauvre plume, galoppant comme elle fait, galoppât au moins sur le bon pied.” But she was, as she says, quite content with the pleasure that her letters gave her daughter. “Je suis ravie, ma chère bonne,” she writes on her forty-sixth birthday (5 February 1672), “que vous aimez mes lettres. Je ne crois pas pourtant

¹ 26 July 1691—a remarkable letter.

MME DE SÉVIGNÉ & THE NEWS

qu'elles sont aussi agréables que vous dites; mais il est vrai que pour figées, elles ne le sont pas." Certainly nothing could be less "congealed" than Mme de Sévigné's letters. They flow from one topic to another like conversation. "Voilà bien de la conversation," she says in another letter, "car c'est ainsi qu'il faut appeler mes lettres; car si celle-ci vous ennuye, j'en suis fâchée, car je l'ai écrite de bon cœur, et *currente calamo*."¹

This is no mock-modesty, in spite of the fact that Mme de Sévigné knew that her letters were talked about and that her friends passed them on from one to another. For instance Mme de Coulanges writes to her that Mme de Thianges (a sister of Mme de Montespan) has sent a lackey to borrow the "Letter about the horse" and the "Letter about the meadow", and she adds: "Vos lettres font tout le bruit qu'elles méritent, comme vous voyez; il est certain qu'elles sont délicieuses et vous êtes comme vos lettres."²

Mme de Sévigné must of course have realised that she had a happy knack—as she would modestly have put it—of describing scenes and occurrences in a graphic and amusing fashion, and that this gave much pleasure to her friends. But it certainly did not occur to her that she was a great writer, much less that after her death her letters would be collected and published,

¹ 3 November 1688.

² III, 198. The *Lettre de la Prairie* (II, 291) contains the famous description of how Mme de Sévigné sent all her household at Les Rochers to turn hay. The *Lettre du Cheval* is lost. The account of the fire at M. Guitaut's (II, 72 ff.) was known as the *Lettre de l'Incendie*.

MME DE SÉVIGNÉ & THE NEWS

like those of Voltaire, of which new editions were continually appearing. She would have been amazed if she had known that by virtue of these letters, written *de bon cœur et corrente calamo*, she would one day be recognised as one of the greatest of French classics, and that as such she would inaugurate alike the *Grands Écrivains Français* and the *Grands Écrivains de la France*.

In contrast with Mme de Sévigné's humble opinion of her own letters is the high praise that she gives to her daughter's. This she does constantly. I will quote one passage as a sample of the rest. It is taken from a letter, which from the variety of its topics and from the light that it throws on Mme de Sévigné's thoughts, reading, and friends is one of the first interest:

Ma bonne, ne me parlez plus de mes lettres. Je viens d'en recevoir une de vous, qui enlève, tout aimable, toute brillante, toute pleine de tendresse: un style juste et court, qui chemine et qui plaît au souverain degré je dis même sans vous aimer comme je fais... Il y a un petit air de dimanche gras répandu sur votre dernière lettre, qui la rend d'un goût nonpareil.¹

We must allow for the partiality of a fond mother, but, as a matter of fact, the few letters of Mme de Grignan that have come down to us are well written and shew decided ability and intelligence. As for the air of Carnival Sunday and the gaiety that Mme de Sévigné detects in them—"Vous êtes plus gaie dans vos lettres que vous ne l'êtes ailleurs"—one associates it more with the mother than with the daughter.

Two days later Mme de Sévigné tells her daughter

¹ 9 March 1672.

MME DE SÉVIGNÉ & THE NEWS

what her practice was with regard to answering her letters.¹ The post from Provence arrived in Paris on Monday and Wednesday, and the post for Provence left on Wednesday and Friday. It took a week either way. On Monday Mme de Sévigné began her answer to her daughter's letter as soon as she got it—*à la chaude*—finished it on Tuesday, and posted it on Wednesday. On Friday morning she began to answer the letter she had received on the previous Wednesday and finished it that evening in time for the post. Thus her Wednesday letter, as she explains, was generally much longer than her Friday letter, which contained the news of only two or at most three days, and was written on the same day as it was posted. The part that she added in the evening generally contained something of interest, for every Friday she dined *en Bavardin*, that is to say, with the Bishop of Le Mans, M. Lavardin de Beaumanoir—he died in July 1671—and his widowed sister-in-law, Mme de Lavardin. Other habitual guests were La Rochefoucauld, Benserade, the poet and writer of ballets, “qui fait la joie de la compagnie”, and Mme de Brissac, the half-sister of Saint-Simon, and thirty years his senior.² The *bavardage* was doubtless of a high order, but what is to be noted here is that Mme de Lavardin had a passion for learning and retailing the latest news.

Delays in the post, or other reasons, sometimes caused Mme de Sévigné to modify her practice either by posting on Monday instead of waiting till Wednes-

¹ 11 March 1672.

² She died in 1684.

MME DE SÉVIGNÉ & THE NEWS

day, or by answering and posting on Thursday the letter she had received on Wednesday. On one occasion indeed she took four days to make up her “packet”. Thus, on Friday morning (24 April 1671) she begins, as usual, an answer to the Wednesday letter. Then, in the evening, after dining *en Bavardin*, she continues it *au faubourg*, that is to say, at La Rochefoucauld’s hôtel at the corner of the Rue de Seine and the Rue des Beaux Arts. The latest news is that Vatel, Condé’s *maître d’hôtel*, had killed himself because the fish for the grand dinner to the King at Chantilly had not arrived in time. On Sunday she is able to give details, and we have the brilliantly written account that everybody knows. On Monday she adds a page or two on general topics. Finally, on Tuesday, after dining at Pomponne on the Marne, about eighteen miles from Paris, with her old friends Arnauld d’Andilly—his son, Pomponne, was absent in Sweden as ambassador—and conversing with him for six hours, she finishes her “packet” at Livry¹ to the accompaniment of the nightingales, and posts it at Paris. “Que dites-vous”, she asks, “de l’infinité de cette lettre?”² We have not Mme de Grignan’s answer, but we know what posterity says.

At a time when the *Gazette*, founded by Théophraste Renaudot in 1631, was the only news-sheet in France, dwellers in the provinces were naturally eager to hear the news from Paris. Mme de Sévigné, therefore, was

¹ Livry is about ten miles from Pomponne and about the same from Paris.

² II, 183–196.

MME DE SÉVIGNÉ & THE NEWS

always anxious to send her daughter the latest information, and her friends knowing this did their best to help her. Some of them, indeed, like Mme de Lavardin, as we have seen, and Mme d'Huxelles, were themselves eager collectors of news. Indeed, Mme d'Huxelles made a regular business of it and kept up a large correspondence for the purpose. Equally indefatigable was d'Hacqueville, who often sent his *gazette* direct to Mme de Grignan, and, when he died in 1678, he was succeeded as a *gazetier* by the Abbé Bigorre, who lodged at one time with Mme de Sévigné in the Hôtel de Carnavalet.

Mme de Sévigné was far from taking all she heard on trust. For instance, in one of her early letters to her daughter (17 April 1671) she laughs at d'Hacqueville for his credulity and gives an instance of a false report that he had sent: "Tout cela est faux et ridicule et ne se dit point dans les bons lieux... Je vous déclare, ma fille, que je ne vous manderai rien que de vrai."¹ And in a later letter she says:

Quand je vous mande des nouvelles, comptez que je les tiens de gens bien informés; mais ils ne veulent jamais être cités pour les moindres bagatelles. Il y en a d'autres dont je ne prends jamais des nouvelles.

She had a reliable source of information in Mme de Coulanges, who not only frequented the Court and saw much society, but who as niece to Le Tellier, the Minister of War, and first cousin to his son and successor Louvois, had special sources of information. Writing to Mme de Sévigné at the end of 1672,² when

¹ 17 April 1671.

² III, 175.

MME DE SÉVIGNÉ & THE NEWS

the war against Holland was going on, she says, that spending her days at M. Le Tellier's she hears the news as soon as the couriers arrive.

I will give two striking examples of Mme de Sévigné's accuracy in reporting the news. Let us first take her account of Turenne's death in her letter of 9 August 1675,¹ the letter which begins: "Parlons un peu de M. de Turenne." If we compare it with that given by Saint-Hilaire,² who was an eyewitness of the catastrophe and whose father's arm was carried off by the same cannon-ball which killed Turenne, we find that there is no essential difference between the two accounts. That of Mme de Sévigné came from a gentleman in Turenne's service.

The second example is equally striking, for Lord Macaulay, who was very careful about the sources of his information, quotes her as if she were an eyewitness, bracketing her with Dangeau, who was almost certainly one, for he was always at the Court, and who kept a matter-of-fact diary, which is extremely reliable. The event for which Macaulay cites them was the reception of James II by Louis XIV at Saint-Germain. This is Mme de Sévigné's account, written on 10 January 1689:

Le lendemain il fut question de l'arrivée du Roi d'Angleterre à Saint-Germain, où le Roi l'attendoit: il arriva tard: Sa Majesté alla au bout de la salle des gardes au devant de lui: le Roi d'Angleterre se baissa fort comme s'il eût voulu embrasser ses genoux: le Roi

¹ This letter has the fullest account. See also those of 31 July and 2 August.

² *Mémoires*, ed. L. Lecestre, 6 vols. (in progress), 1903–1916.

MME DE SÉVIGNÉ & THE NEWS

l'empêcha, et l'embrassa à trois ou quatre reprises, fort cordialement.

Macaulay's version is that James "bowed so low that it seemed as if he was about to embrace his protector's knees. Lewis raised him, and embraced him with brotherly tenderness."¹ This, it will be noticed, is, at any rate as regards the first sentence, almost a literal translation of Mme de Sévigné. She agrees in the main with Dangeau, but the picturesque touch that James seemed as if he was about to embrace Louis's knees is an addition to his dry statement of fact.² Again, the exquisitely phrased remarks which Louis made to James, when, on his departure for Ireland, he came to Versailles to say farewell, are translated by Macaulay³ with some slight amplifications from Mme de Sévigné, who gives them as follows:

Monsieur, je vous vois partir avec douleur: cependant je souhaite de ne vous revoir jamais: mais si vous revenez, soyez persuadé que vous me retrouverez tel que vous me laissez.⁴

As Mme de Sévigné says, "Peut-on dire mieux." Her brief account of James's departure from Whitehall, for which her authority was her friend, the Abbé Bigorre's *Gazette*, is, except for the spelling, fairly correct. The King of England, she writes on 3 January

¹ *Works*, II, 347.

² "Le roi d'Angleterre se baissa jusqu'à ses genoux." *Mémoires*, II, 292.

³ *Works*, II, 528.

⁴ 2 March 1689. The words "Je vous void partir avec douleur" are not in Dangeau's account (*Mémoires*, II, 339).