

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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10. Marie Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun

16 April 1755–30 March 1842



Fig. 10. Marie Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, self portrait. Photo by Cybershot 800i (2012). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c9/Lebrun%2C_Self-portrait.jpg, CC BY 4.0.

Mémoires d'une portraitiste

Je ne puis vous dire ce que j'éprouvai en passant sur le pont Beauvoisin. Là seulement je commençais à respirer ; j'étais hors de France, et cette France qui pourtant était ma patrie, et que je me reprochais de quitter avec joie. L'aspect des monts parvint à me distraire de toutes mes tristes pensées, je n'avais jamais vu de hautes montagnes ; celles de la Savoie me parurent toucher au ciel avec lequel un épais brouillard les confondait. Mon premier sentiment fut celui de la peur, mais je m'accoutumai insensiblement à ce spectacle, et je finis par l'admirer.

Je montai le mont Cenis, comme plusieurs étrangers le montaient aussi ; un postillon s'approcha de moi : « Madame devrait prendre un mulet, me dit-il, car monter à pied, c'est trop fatigant pour une dame comme elle. » Je lui répondis que j'étais une ouvrière, bien accoutumée à marcher. « Ah ! reprit-il en riant, Madame n'est pas une ouvrière, on sait qui elle est. — Eh bien, qui suis-je donc ? demandai-je. — Vous êtes madame Le Brun, qui peint dans la perfection, et nous sommes tous très contents de vous savoir loin des méchants. »

Je n'ai jamais pu deviner comment cet homme avait pu savoir mon nom ; mais cela m'a prouvé combien les jacobins avaient d'émissaires. Heureusement je ne les craignais plus ; j'étais hors de leur exécration puissance. À défaut de patrie, j'allais habiter des lieux où fleurissaient les arts, où régnait l'urbanité ; j'allais visiter Rome, Naples, Berlin, Vienne, Pétersbourg, et surtout, ce que j'ignorais alors, chère amie, j'allais vous trouver, vous connaître et vous aimer.

Toute à vous.¹

Marie Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun was born and died in Paris. An ardent royalist, she was in turn painter to the French court, to the Kingdom of Naples, to the court of the Austrian Emperor, to the Tsar, and to the Restoration. Her father and mother, a pastelist and a hairdresser, married in 1750. A younger brother, a successful dramatist, was born in

1 Marie Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Mémoires d'une portraitiste* (Paris: Scala, 2003), pp. 80–81.

Translation: I cannot tell you what I felt in crossing the Beauvoisin bridge. There only did I begin to breathe; I was out of France, and that France which nevertheless was my fatherland, and which I reproached myself on leaving with joy. The aspect of the mountains succeeded in distracting me from all my sad thoughts, I had never seen high mountains; those of Savoy seemed to me to touch the sky with which a thick fog confounded them. My first sentiment was one of fear, but I insensibly accustomed myself to this spectacle, and I ended by admiring it.

I climbed Mount Cenis, as many strangers were also climbing it; a coachman approached me: "Madame should take a mule, he told me, since to climb on foot is too tiring for a lady such as her." I replied to him that I was a worker well accustomed to walking. "Ah! he continued, laughing, Madame is not a worker, we know who she is. — Well then, who am I? I asked. — You are Madame Le Brun, who paints to perfection, and we are all very happy to know you are far from the wicked."

I was never able to guess how this man could have known my name; but that proved to me how many emissaries the Jacobins had. Luckily, I no longer feared them; I was out of their execrable power. Lacking a fatherland, I was going to live in places where the arts flourished, where urbanity reigned; I was going to visit Rome, Naples, Berlin, Vienna, Petersburg and especially, what I did not then know, dear friend, I was going to find you, know you and love you.

Entirely yours.

1757. The infant Élisabeth was given to a wet nurse, her father fetching her back to Paris six years later, where she entered a convent until 1766. Her father died the following year; her mother remarried, to a jeweler who later pocketed Élisabeth's earnings. In 1769, she introduced herself to Gabriel Briard, member of the Académie royale de peinture. At the Louvre, she met Horace Vernet and later Jean Baptiste Greuze, but as she later wrote, she never had a proper teacher. She kept a list of her paintings: twenty-seven in 1773. In 1776, she married Jean Baptiste Pierre Lebrun, a merchant and restorer of paintings, against advice; that same year, she was admitted to paint for the court of Louis XVI, then in 1778 for Marie-Antoinette. Her portraits sold for 12,000 francs, of which she saw just six, the rest pocketed by her husband. In 1785, a portrait of Calonne, her alleged lover, earned her 800,000 francs. Vigée Le Brun painted mainly portraits, though necessarily she entered the Académie as a history painter; in summer 1789, a *sans-culotte* crowd sacked her home and tried to set fire to it. On the night of 5 October 1789, as the royal family was brought back to Paris, Vigée le Brun fled the capital with her daughter and twenty francs, leaving a million to her husband who encouraged her departure. Added to the list of émigrés in 1792, Vigée Le Brun was unable to return from Italy to Paris. She instead left for Vienna. Her husband obtained a divorce in 1794, as his wife crossed Europe in triumph, reaching Saint Petersburg in 1795 and staying five years. In 1799, her husband petitioned for her removal from the list of émigrés, with 255 signatures, largely of artists. She returned in 1800, after her mother's death and her daughter's marriage, of which she disapproved. She found post-revolutionary France unpleasant and went to England for three years, meeting Byron, Benjamin West, and Lady Hamilton and staying with the court of Louis XVIII, whose return in 1814 she welcomed. Her daughter died in 1819, her brother in 1820. About two-thirds of her 900 paintings are portraits; that and her ties to Marie-Antoinette did not much help her posthumous reputation.

Vigée le Brun the artist is not our topic, though she has been enjoying rediscovery in recent years; our concern is with the memoirist. Here we are then at the outset of the Revolution, in 1789, and Vigée Le Brun is emigrating. Students of the Revolution will note that there were various emigrations: Staël, for instance, left Paris just after the storming of the Tuileries, late in 1792. The Comte d'Artois, future Charles X, left on 17

July 1789; Vigée Le Brun emigrated in October 1789, as seen here, amid the early royalist emigration, not the later monarchist one. This may be no surprise, given that a mob had attempted to burn down her Paris home that summer; but it is also worth noting her years spent painting absolutist royals from Marie-Antoinette to the King of Naples to the Habsburgs to the Tsar, not to mention her alleged affair with Calonne, among the most intransigent, if not incompetent, of Louis XVI's ministers. Vigée Le Brun then seems ready to condemn the Revolution lock, stock, and barrel: she describes the Jacobins as being in power in October 1789 (they were not), and notes, "j'étais hors de leur exécration puissance." This is very much an émigré text.

It is interesting to see Vigée Le Brun twice use the word *patrie* in this short passage: the word was charged with revolutionary affect, as the opening of 1792's *Marseillaise* reminds us, but the author is unprepared to cede patriotism entirely to the Left. She tells us, first, not that it hurt to leave her *patrie*, but that she reproached herself for leaving with joy; later, she says she had no *patrie*. There is some conflict in her feelings here, in this age of emergent nationalism, but Vigée Le Brun, who spent years abroad, appears relatively at ease abandoning France, as other contemporaries were not. That is hardly unique in émigré literature, which includes memoirists who were prepared to make active war on the French Republic. It seems uncommon, though, among the women writers in this book: Vigée Le Brun, for instance, returned to France under Bonaparte and disliked it, departing for exile or at least emigration once again.

Works

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