

Annette von Droste-Hülshoff to Matthias Sprickmann in Berlin

Hülshoff, February 8th 1819, Monday

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For one and a half months now I have had your kindly, sincere letter in my hands, my esteemed, dear, dear friend and only today am I answering it, as I had nothing else important to do at the time and, thank goodness, felt myself generally very well. Should that count as a riddle? Oh, Sprickmann mine, asserting my whim with the name-day has turned sour enough, that is to say, asserting it to myself (who cannot see a clear sheet of paper without the most embarrassing impatience and yearning, and no quill without feeling a magnetic twitching in the fingers) rather than to the rest, and to my dear copyist, Jenny, it was especially alright; after all, she also bears responsibility for my not changing my plan ten times over and I have sent you this poem the earlier the better, for there has been so much for her to do that she was not able to complete the copying earlier. I wanted to make the copy for you myself and already had two songs ready, but my Mother did not want to agree to that, as I had been suffering from an inflammation of the eyes from time to time this winter, which had become a tiny bit worse from writing. I assure you it was not worth the trouble and added to that I had been out in the wind the day before, that is really why I would have so gladly copied it for you myself. Now, if only it arrives on the right day, that would be a consolation, but I fear it will come too late. Now I am asking you again, dear Sprickmann, write to me really sincerely about this little work, not just about obvious errors, but what looks uncomfortable to you and seems worth improving. I have, indeed, already heard so much talk about it and each would-be clever person sits in judgement (for my Mother who received the first copy, as you will see from the dedication, is reading it aloud, to my great sorrow, to her acquaintances and often to people of whom I know in advance that they will have nothing sensible to say about it) and has some new praise or some new criticism for it and I often do not know, which annoys me the most. As far as the praise is concerned, I have had to restrain myself from deleting many insignificant and tolerable passages that had become completely distasteful to me through unsuitable praise. Thus, for example, a certain gentleman to whom my poem had not been presented for assessment by me continually claimed, as if he were lost in rapture, that the most beautiful line in the whole poem was (2nd song, 3rd verse, 3rd line) *Es rauscht der Speer, es stampfte wild das Roß* (Swish! went the spear, fiercely stamped the steed) also even quietly stamping his foot as he did so. In the end I had to leave the room. When I was in Münster a week ago, the poor devil meets me on the street, stops me and says in a very friendly way, "Well now, Fräulein Nettchen, how goes it? How fares the Muse? Is it still putting such pretty little things into your head as before, like the recent little poem? Oh yes. I must say that is a dainty thing; what strength

now and then – *Es rauscht der Speer, es stampfte wild das Roß*. I got away as soon as possible and laughed quite immoderately; I could just as well have wept. You see, my friend, that is how it often goes with me. On the other hand, I would make little of hearing my poem criticised, often in the most silly and incorrect manner, if I were not forced to act as if I found their remarks quite right and put on a friendly face and perhaps thank them for their frankness. But when I often hear passages of which I am convinced that they belong among the better parts, being called dark, incomprehensible, etc. and by contrast hear praise for worse and the shallowest, just because everybody is good enough and clever enough to understand and perceive them and am then supposed to put on the grimaces mentioned above, that is too bad and I cannot settle it by keeping silent, or taking a bow, then I am proud. (That the clumsy praisers and fault-finders are the same persons, goes without saying; only very few modest souls are exclusively among the former). Only twice or thrice have I, to my joy, been fobbed off with a plain “Quite nice”. Otherwise, when I send the poem into the drawing room (for I keep it myself, although it belongs to my Mother, and am thus forced to deliver my ‘baby’ into the hands of its enemy myself) it is as good as though I knew beforehand of a dozen criticisms, for scarcely anyone can resist the temptation to play the role of a thinking, refined mind through some improvement or other. My dear beloved friend I know that I can write everything to you without arousing your suspicion that I can stand no criticism. You know how forbearing I otherwise was in this, almost too forbearing, for any and every criticism was welcome even if it came from the silliest of people. I held the principle that a stranger’s eye always and every time saw more clearly than one bribed by self-love and through rethinking and rereading the written word had become more or less numbed to the harshnesses and falsities therein. Not seldom did I sacrifice my better conviction. Even now a reasonable, well-meaning criticism is worth much to me, but what would offend me, for example from my Sprickmann, if he kept his thoughts on my work to himself or cloaked them. Oh, you know not, my friend, how sweet and dear is every word from you. I could and would want to submit myself blindly to your judgement and would take it as the greatest cruelty if you, out of sheer kindness, misled me into retaining something to which you objected and I regretted it afterwards. It is strange that even from those whose judgement I wished and requested myself, none judged the same. I shall give you a few samples here so that you can correct me, if you would be so kind. One said, for example: “the first song is too long”. Another said: “the second song displays similarities to the Templars by Werner”. (That may be, but I am not guilty here, because I do not know the Templars by Werner). Yet another: “the second song is too airy and magical and certainly does not have the soundness of the rest”. (I must also tell you that at the start, in the second song, the old knight poisons himself after he believes that he had not done his duties in providing for his daughter. My Mother found that distasteful and I had to take out two lines and patch in two others in their place. However, I shall copy the two discarded ‘children’ for you and set them above the patched-in lines, then

you write to me whether you like the old or the new better). Another said: "if the old man poisons himself, he cannot be buried with ceremony, at least in those times". Yet another: "the third song concerns itself too much with hunting stories". Again: "the character of the old man (father of Alba) becomes too fanciful in the third song".

Less has been said to me about the three last songs. Criticism includes these, which applies to the whole; for example, the transitions are too sharp, it seems as though I had buried myself too deeply in a picture, could not get free from it and had therefore broken off suddenly, and so on. These are roughly the judgements that I have heard from reasonable people, but is it not strange that each said only one of all this and when I set before him the other criticisms, could not and would not grasp any and all five were thoughtful people of good taste. That, from all these criticisms I regard the one more, the other less correct, is understandable, but I should not like to anticipate your response and am relying upon your instinct much more than my own, since I am still of the opinion that one finally reads oneself silly on one's own works and corrects so much, that one no longer recognises black from white. As far as my tragedy that I started that time is concerned, I continued it up to the third act where it remained lying and now it will continue to stay there. It contains, amongst other things, quite good places, but the material is badly chosen. Had I finished it at the time, when I did not yet realise this, it would probably not have turned out so bad, but this idea was on the contrary appealing and enthralling to me. But it is a frightful thought to work on material for which I no longer have the slightest liking. I am tired of it, I wanted to have completed it then. Also I have nothing significant to show at present apart from a number of poems, of which some are spiritual songs that I wrote for my Grandmother, which are perhaps the best. I enclose a poem that I wrote as a dedication in the style of Walther, that my Mother sent to her four unmarried sisters in Bökendorf, so that you have everything which refers to this work.

I should also like to try my hand at prose, for now just a novella or a short story so that I do not take on too much, but, my goodness, where shall I find material which has not already been dealt with a hundred times (I attach this different sheet because I see that the other paper shows through) and worked to death. "*Denn ihr Name ist Legion*" – for eighteen months to two years I had not read much of these things, thus also did not really know how circulations were standing and had already almost completed some quite pretty material to the stage where not much was lacking, other than writing it out. As the whole idea of the story tended toward the sad and I am no great friend of cases of sudden death, my heroine entered at the start with an inwardly already disturbed and outwardly very delicate and weakly constitution. I thought over the idea with love and warmth and I believe and hope that it will not become a failure. We registered with the reading library and request only the newest publications because, over the years, we have already read them through. To start with, "*3 Novellen*", the heroine in two of them was in the same position as mine, which astonished me. In the following weeks, just the same, I quickly notice that, instead of inventing something new, I have come up against

the favourite material of our times, only with the difference that my heroine is neither magnetised nor became magnetised because I know too little about magnetism to be able to write about it. The heroines in the reading library, by contrast, received their delicacy and weakness in addition to or because of that. This great, incomprehensible subject (incomprehensible to me) is like the lion in the fable, that the ass killed; every young bull has to run off his first horns. It is impossible for me to finish my novella as it already has so many sisters which are completely dissimilar in the main plot but that much more similar in form. Do not scold, my dear friend. If I knew that my fickleness were vexing you, then I would much rather write down my novella. I would not leave off if I had begun to write, but as the whole thing is still only an idea it seems to me that it is better that I go further and seek other material, if only I could find some that is not so completely hackneyed.

But enough, and too much, of that, my esteemed friend. I am constantly entertaining you with reason and yet much comes from my heart, which yearns to reach out to yours. Ah, my Sprickmann, I do not know where to start, in order not to appear ludicrous to you, for what I want to tell you is ludicrous really. I cannot deceive myself about that, I must charge myself before you with a silly and unusual weakness which spoils many an hour for me, but please do not laugh, I ask you, once more. My tormentor has a romantic and foppish name – it is called “hankering after faraway places” – no, no, Sprickmann, it is truly no joke. You know that I am not actually a foolish woman. I did not get my quaint, mad misfortune out of books and cubby-holes as many another would believe, but nobody knows it. You, quite alone, know it and it has not got into me through any outside circumstances; it has always lain within me. When I was still quite small – I was certainly not yet four or five years old – I had a dream in which I thought I was seven and seemed to be a grown up person. In that dream my parents, brother and sister and two acquaintances seemed to be strolling in a garden which was not even beautiful but was only a vegetable garden with an avenue right through the middle, along which we walked up and up. Afterwards it became a forest, but the avenue through the middle remained and we progressed. That was all that there was to the dream, but all next day I was sad and wept because I was not in that avenue and also could never get in there, but I do remember that, one day when my Mother was telling us a lot about her place of birth and the mountains and the grandparents whom we did not yet know, I felt such a yearning thereafter that when, at table, she mentioned her parents incidentally, I broke out sobbing so vehemently that I had to be taken away. This was also before my seventh year, for when I was seven years old I met my grandparents. I am writing all these insignificant things to you only in order to convince you that this unfortunate susceptibility to all places other than where I am at the time, and all things that I do not have, lies quite definitely within me and has not been acquired from outside influences. In this way, my dear forbearing friend, I shall not appear to you to be quite as silly. I think that a foolishness inflicted upon us by the good Lord is never as serious as one that we have brought upon

ourselves. For some years now this state has, however, so increased that I can really count it as a great nuisance. A single word is enough to change my mood for the whole day and my fantasy has, unfortunately, so many hobby-horses that no day actually passes without one of them having been excited in a painful-sweet way. Oh, my dear, dear father, a weight is lifted from my heart when I write to you and think of you. Have patience and let me lay my foolish heart completely bare before you; I shall not feel right until then. Distant lands, great, interesting people of whom I have heard tell, remote works of art and much more of that sort of thing, all have this sad power over me. In my thoughts I am not at home for one moment, where I am so well off and even when conversation touches on none of these subjects for days, I see them, at every moment where I am not forced to direct my attention to something else, passing in parade often with such lively colours and forms bordering on reality that I fear for my poor mind. A newspaper article, a book, however badly written, that deals with these things is able to bring tears to my eyes and if somebody with something to tell from experience has travelled these lands, seen these works of art, known these people, on whom my yearning hangs, and knows how to speak about them in a pleasant manner – oh, my friend, then my peace of mind and equilibrium are disturbed for a long time. I can then think about nothing else for several weeks and when I am alone, specially at night when I am always awake for a few hours, then I can weep like a child, at the same time becoming aglow and frantic in a way that would scarcely suit one in unrequited love. My favourite regions are Spain, Italy, China, America, Africa. Switzerland and Tahiti, these paradises, by contrast, make little impression upon me – why? That I do not know. I have read and heard much about them, but they do not come to life as much in my mind. When I tell you that I often yearn for plays that I have seen performed and often even those where I have been most bored, for books that I read previously and which were often not to my taste (for example, in about my fourteenth year I read a bad novel the title of which I no longer know, but a tower occurs in it over which a river gushes and there was an etching of said romantic tower on the title page. I had long forgotten the book, yet it worked its way out through my memories for a long time, and not the story or the time when I was reading it, but actually and seriously that most shabbily drawn etching wherein nothing is to be seen other than the tower, becomes a strange magical image for me and I often long ardently to see it once more. If that is not a piece of folly, what is. In addition to that, since I cannot stand travelling at all and since I long so impetuously to be back if I am away from home for a week, where all my wishing really is anticipated, tell me, what am I supposed to think of myself and what shall I start, in order to get rid of my nonsense? My dear Sprickmann, I was fearing my own softness as I began to show you my weakness and have, instead, become quite plucky. Methinks, I wanted to beat off my enemy today, even if it should dare an attack. You cannot believe, incidentally, how happy my outer situation is. I have the love of my parents, siblings and relatives to a degree that I do not deserve. I am being treated, especially since I was so ill three and a

half years ago, with tenderness and consideration to the extent that I could very well easily become selfish and spoiled, if I were not to be afraid of that myself and look after myself. Besides, the respect of many estimable people has become my lot, and the friendship of a few dear, dear, harmonious souls among whom, of course, my Sprickmann is close to my heart as the moon is to the stars. Among the rest I should especially like to name the wife of General Thielemann, our Governor. Her rank and the difference in our years (she could easily be my mother) long kept us removed one from another, principally because my Mother avoids any relationship which could lead her into extensive acquaintanceships and connections. We really both have had to struggle with difficult obstacles, in order to come together and I should like to, and could tell you much that is attractive and remarkable about this unusual and lovable woman, but this sheet is nearly finished and I will rather say nothing until the next letter.

I have not seen consistory councillor Möller again, but wish very much to do so and, God willing, I shall surely get to it. We have one of my Mother's sisters staying with us, Ludowine; a good, quiet, sensible girl whose company is worth much to me, especially because of her clear and correct view of things with which, without suspecting it, she brings my poor, confused mind back to reason. Werner Haxthausen lives in Cologne and my brother, Werner, will visit him in a few weeks time.

Farewell and do not forget how eager I am for your answer.

Your Nette