

LETTER

Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800) to Benjamin Stillingfleet (1702–1811)

Spa, 9 August 1763

I should have thanked my dear Mr. Stillingfleet for his letter before this time if the water-drinking regimen and the Spa mode of life had allowed me leisure to write him a long letter, for I could not prevail on myself to write him a short one. My health is now so well fortified with the waters I can venture to transgress rules, so I am set down to chat with you for an hour or two. I do not intend to be witty or wise, I think a bon mot should not be sent further than one can shoot a squib, nor a sage sentence beyond cannon shot. When friends are at a great distance, the proper subject is where they have been, where they are, how they are, and what they are doing. You see the three heads of my sermon, but I expect to be indulged beyond the twenty minutes.

Our journey was very agreeable in all respects, and as every object was new to me, every object was pleasing to a certain degree. We staid a whole day at Lisle, the first fortified town I had ever seen; it is certainly very beautiful, but it gives ideas of war and despotism. We staid two days at Brussels; I was glad to see so famous a city, but it has the air of a town of shopkeepers, and the park, of which I had heard so much is but a very ordinary thing. We went from thence to Liege; the town on the first approach has a very singular and beautiful appearance; within it, appears the most sordid and wretched poverty, one is everywhere surrounded by beggars. There is hardly any government, and men associated in cities without laws are the most terrible and wretched of all animals. We passed a day there while our machines were repaired for the rough roads to Spa. The country between Liege and Spa is mountainous and rocky, but the valleys are green, and there is a great deal of wood, though the soil is so poor one wonders from whence vegetation has its supply. The prospects are noble and sublime, and we saw them to advantage, for on the top of a mountain we were in a violent hurricane accompanied by the deepest thunder I ever heard; this circumstance, which would have spoiled the amenity of a little scene, added dignity to this solemn and majestic character.

The town of Spa is situated in a little valley surrounded every way by mountains, and is therefore ill-placed in regard to exercise in a voiture, and would be so far walking, if a generous-spirited Englishman had not cut walks round the mountains, by which you are carried to the summit by an easy ascent; from thence you look down on the town of Spa which is so rudely and irregularly built one might imagine it had been raised in the first beginnings of architecture; all the country round is wild, and the eye in a wide circuit perceives no vestiges of society; no plows are going, no windmills turning, no cottage chimney smokes, nor is there church or village in sight. The imagination suggests from various appearances that the family of Noah are just settled at Spa after the flood, while the rest of the world is desolate and in ruins; by striking into other paths you are led round another mountain, and descend into the *promenade de sept heures*; there you find ages have passed since the deluge, for it was surely many ages e're heralds rose and titles were invented, and you find yourself walking with *son altesse Royal, son altesse Serenissime, son Excellence Mr. le Comte, and Monsieur le Marquis*. Here you meet all the various orders and professions in which mankind are classed; the friar is walking with the soldier, the nun with the matron, the financier with a chanoinesse, the long robe with the staff officer. All professions and all nations are assembled at Spa in the summer; in a few months we all disappear and the wolves and bears reassume their dominions from the mountains. We have been very unfortunate in our weather, and I lament it the more as the country is so much suited to my taste and contrasts so well with the company and manner of life here....

I know our friend Torri¹ thinks I have been poring my eyes out for many years for very little purpose, and is afraid I should teach my godson more than the needful love of the *pater noster* and the ten commandments, but he does not know how much amusement I can make to myself in my lonely walks from memory and imagination. I have sometimes fancied a lean blacksmith at his forge was the miserable personage Care painted by Spencer. Thanks to Mr. Mason, I have heard the druids sing their mystic songs upon these mountains. One morning as Mrs. Carter and I were looking down from them upon the town of Spa, the Cordeliers carried the host in procession, their solemn step, lugubre habit, and the base voice of their chanting deepened the murmur of the falling floods, and shed a browner horror on the woods. The dreary dessert, the woods, the rocks, the cascades, and all the objects we looked upon borrowed from and lent solemnity to this religious ceremony, and it is the only instance in which I have found any of that kind of awe from the rites of the Romish Church; though I have been at the high Mass, the Vespers, and all their ceremonies, I have not seen anything that could raise even superstition in the mind. The long-sounding aisles and intermingled graves in our cathedrals strike one with awe, while the gaudy tricked-up altars here give such

¹ Samuel Torriano

gaiety to the churches one should rather think they were adorned for a ball or feast than prepared for religious worship. The nuns too disappointed me, for instead of the

Pensive nun devout and pure,
Sober, steadfast, and demure

I found a parcel of cloistered boarding-school girls who affected a gaiety that suited neither their years nor condition. Though I had heard so much of the absurdity of worship in the Roman Catholic countries, it surpassed my expectation.

I have now said so much of the inanimate objects you will hardly have patience to hear an account of the living world here. We are made up of princes and princesses; in the first place as a sovereign I must mention the Bishop of Augsburg of the house of Hesse-Darmstadt, a very good-natured and petite man. We have dined with him five or six times. The Hereditary Prince of Brunswick did not keep a table here, but he dined with my Lord Bath, and so I had an opportunity of seeing him without constraint. Our princess need not envy any in Europe, as he seems to promise to make a greater figure by his personal qualities than anyone of his rank, and I think she will be more happy, and ought to be more proud than if she was allied to one of greater extent of dominion and inferior talents. Our general Duke Ferdinand and his Princess were here some weeks, the prince seems a sensible good kind of man. We had also for a few days Prince Clement, youngest son of the King of Poland, who was a candidate for the Bishopric of Liege, but it is doubtful whether he will be confirmed, for which we are all sorry as he is a very petite, agreeable young man. We have a distinguished lady, the Princess Esterhasi, a French woman by birth, the widow of an Hungarian prince. I am much charmed with her as the most polite and accomplished person I have seen amongst the foreigners. We have a great many of the English nobility here, but all the princes have greatly distinguished my Lord Bath by their regards and attentions. The Bishop of Augsburg and Princess Esterhasi are to dine with him tomorrow. If my Lord Bath was not very well able to maintain himself, it would be worthwhile to send him abroad at the public expense, for it is prodigious to see the regard all the people of all ranks and nations have for him; there is a native dignity that strikes them immediately. In the list of our princes I forgot Count Blanquenham Manderchilde and the Princess of Salm, his wife, and Prince Pulhowsski of Poland. Princess Emilie, the King of Prussia's sister, is to come here on Wednesday.

We shall leave this place on the 17th; then we go to Aix-la-Chapelle, where we are to pass one day, then we go to Bonn and Cologne and to see the Elector of Cologne's palace, and we are to go to Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and the Hague, then to Antwerp, and so return to Calais; we intend being in England the middle of September. If it pleases God to continue to us our health we shall have passed our time very agreeably. My Lord Bath is in very good spirits, as lively and as healthy as at 25. His temper is perpetual sunshine and he is in all little amiabilities, as well as great qualities, the most perfect character I ever saw. Mr. Montagu has been always cheerful and well-amused. I have recovered my health entirely. Mrs. Carter has still her headache, which grieves me much, as I had flattered myself she would find benefit from the waters. I send this letter by an English gentleman who is returning home....

Reginald Blunt, ed. *Mrs. Montagu, "Queen Of The Blues:" Her Letters and Friendships from 1762 to 1800* (1923), I:53-56.