

Liotard's *L'Écriture* deciphered

NEIL JEFFARES¹



[Jean-Étienne Liotard](#)

L'Écriture: [?] Jacques-Antoine LAVERGNE (1724–1781) [?ou Hugues Lavergne (1732–1768), son frère], neveu du peintre [??Pierre-Joseph Bernard], avec un laquais, ?son neveu Pierre Clarenc (1744–1803)

Pastel on 6 sheets of paper mounted on canvas, 81 x 107 cm

Signed and dated ↗ “peint par J E Liotard/1752”

Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. AC 55013, GG-9851

[J.49.1763](#)

PROVENANCE: Liotard; acqu. Maria Theresia 1762; Maria Theresia, appartements privés, inv. 1772, Zwei große Überzwerstück; *olim* Belvedere, Vienna, 1783; Castello di Miramare

EXHIBITED: Liotard 2015a, no. 76 repr.

LITERATURE: Liotard, autobiographie de 1760, “un de ses principaux ouvrages...ses neveux”; Moücke 1762, iv, p. 276, “due quadri...de suoi nipoti”; lettre à Bessborough 28.VI.1763 (“un jeune homme qui écrit une lettre avec un laquais qui lui apporte une bougie”); Mechel 1784, p. 329, no. 20, as of Bernard, poète français, avec son livre *L'Art d'aimer*; Frimmel 1899, p. 209; I&R 138 repr. clr pl. xxxi; Vienna 1980, fig. 152; KHM Verzeichnis 1991, p. 76, T.673; Perez 1997; Haberstatter 2002, p. 155 repr.; R&L 200, fig. 333; Lyon 2012, p. 257, “tout imprégné de rêverie mélancolique”; [Jeffares 2019i](#); Baker 2023, fig. 28; *Dictionary of pastellists* online, [J.49.1763](#)

GENEALOGIES: [Liotard](#)

¹ This article first appeared as a [post](#) on my blog www.neiljeffares.wordpress.com on 29 July 2019. There were several postscripts, to September 2023; these are included in the present version of record, which may be cited as Neil Jeffares, “Liotard’s *L'Écriture* deciphered”, *Pastels & pastellists*, http://www.pastellists.com/Essays/Liotard_L'Écriture.pdf

THOSE OF YOU WHO SAW THE LIOTARD exhibition at the Royal Academy in 2015 will not have forgotten one of the finest exhibits – the stunning pastel of a young man writing with a boy in attendance holding a candle.² It was sold to Maria Theresia in 1762, ten years after it was painted, and so its permanent home is now Vienna. Its connection with the famous *Déjeuner Lavergne* (J.49.1795: see my [essay](#)) of 1754 is obvious, despite the two-year interval between their execution: the visual evidence is overwhelmingly that the latter was conceived as a pendant, and this is confirmed by the advertisement in the London *Public advertiser* that I reproduced in that essay. There is no doubt either that the *Déjeuner* was executed during a trip to Lyon in 1754 – indeed another Lavergne family portrait was done there in 1746 – as there is other corroborative evidence of Liotard’s visits to his sister and her family: Sara Liotard had married the négociant François Lavergne in Geneva before they settled in Lyon. All this is rehearsed in my previous essay, so I won’t repeat it here.

I might add that the abbé Pernetty, whose portrait by Liotard was also made in 1754, returned the compliment by mentioning the artist as well as “M^{rs} Lavergne, établis ici, & connus par leurs talens” in his *Les Lyonnais digne de mémoire* (1757, p. 255). The MM. Lavergne were of course François, who died in 1752; his eldest son Jean (1715–1776), also described as a *négociant* on his burial certificate (most sources, including R&L, incorrectly thought he had died in 1729); the son [probably] shown in *L’Écriture*, Jacques-Antoine (1724–1781), described as a *banquier* on his (but the professions were not much different: the *Almanach des négocians* for 1762 lists the firm among “banquiers, négocians en soye et commissionnaires” in Lyon); and the youngest son Hugues (1732–1768), overlooked by R&L. For R&L the young man in the pastel must therefore be Jacques-Antoine.

Although that document gives nothing away, Marie-Félicie Perez published a note in *Genava* in 1997 with an entry from the unpublished manuscript diary³ of the abbé Duret in which he reveals that Jacques-Antoine committed suicide by throwing himself out of a window. No one knows why – Perez checked for a declaration of bankruptcy, but could find nothing. The catalogue of an exhibition in Lyon in 2012 consequently found the picture “tout imprégné de rêverie mélancolique”.

Nor frankly does any of the Liotard literature tell us anything of the biography of this young man. Indeed earlier authors spotting the book whose title, *L’Art d’aimer et de plaire*, is so carefully shown in the pastel concluded he must be a poet, and identified the sitter as Pierre-Joseph Bernard who published a book called *L’Art d’aimer* – but failed to notice that it didn’t appear until 1775, and that in 1752 Gentil-Bernard (as he was known) was already 44. (Indeed of Liotard’s three nephews, it is the apparent age of the sitter that identifies him as Jacques-Antoine (28 in 1752) rather than his brother Jean – not dead, but at 36 too old; but can one be confident that it is not the youngest brother Hugues, who would have been 19?) Of course that doesn’t mean that Liotard’s sitter didn’t also have literary aspirations: it’s just that, until now, no one has produced any evidence. Was he then just a boring banker?

And as for the boy, predictably described as the nephew’s nephew in some sources, and therefore named Clarence (as the girl in the *Déjeuner* was previously thought to be), that is far from certain (but it was not impossible that he could be the Pierre Clarenc [sz] who was born in Lyon on 16 January 1744 – his baptismal entry only discovered in 2023 – and married in

² *L’Écriture* is J.49.1763 in the online [Dictionary of pastellists](#), where as usual full details can be found (just put the J number into the search box and follow the link to the pdf).

³ In the municipal library at Lyon, BML, MS 804, f^o 117. Duret’s entry simply says “un neveu de M. Liotard peintre s’est jeté par la fenêtre”, and is undated, but before November 1781. Since Jacques-Antoine’s burial entry is known for that year we can safely infer that he was the nephew mentioned.

Puylaurens in 1771). But I'm inclined in this case to believe Liotard when he calls the boy a "laquais", and I don't think he'd so describe a member of his family.⁴

L'Écriture, as the 1752 pastel is known, is signed and dated with the year – but not the place. And while everyone assumes it was made on a trip to Lyon, that might not necessarily be correct. If Jacques-Antoine went to Paris, which he might well have done, then the boy would almost certainly be unrelated. On the other hand, if you think that he is the same child as in the *L'Enfant à la bougie* (J.49.2441) that I published a few years ago (also reproduced in my *Déjeuner* essay), he probably did come from Lyon, as that pastel was reported (again by the abbé Duret, as spotted by Perez) in 1781 as having previously being bought by Mme de Flesselles for her husband, the intendant de Lyon from 1767 on. Roethlisberger & Loche inferred from the subject matter that it might belong to the period of *L'Écriture*, and with the image I found I concur. So it's possible that it was left with the Lavergne family in Lyon and it was only disposed of between 15 and 30 years later.

So far virtually everything I've repeated here is known – and it's not very much. The diary of Jean-Jacques Juventin which I recently added as a postscript to my *Déjeuner* essay talks only about the Lavergne ladies, and tells us nothing of the men. Nor, despite its usual encyclopaedic coverage, does Lüthy (*La Banque protestante...*) even mention the firm. There's a tiny snippet in a letter⁵ from Louis-Michel Vanloo's sister, Marie-Anne Vanloo Berger, from Paris, 20 April 1757, to his partners Antoine Rey and Barthélemy Magneval, merchants in Lyon, describing how she had missed M. Lavergne who had called that morning, and promising if he returned to receive him as well as she could as he was their friend. At least this proves that Lavergne travelled to Paris occasionally – but that is hardly surprising for a *négociant*.

But I recently noticed a source which as far as I can see has been completely overlooked in the Liotard literature: Voltaire's correspondence.⁶

There is only one Voltaire letter directly addressed to the Laverignes, but several to his other friends give their name (as "Lavergne père et fils" etc. – no first names ever appear) as an accommodation address. But there are three letters with specific information. In one (8 May 1773) to Joseph Vesselier, a poet and writer whose day-job was with the Lyon post office, Voltaire noted that "un de ces Lavergne ... joue parfaitement la comédie". In a letter to Trudaine de Montigny (12 April 1776), then travelling to Nice, he adds more:

J'avais un ami genevois qui s'appelle *Lavergne*, excellent auteur, dit on, dans les comédies de société. Il était malade à Lyon et désespérait de sa vie, il est allé à Nice et y a recouvré la santé. Je ne sais s'il y est encore, et s'il a eu le bonheur de vous faire sa cour.

Tantalisingly Voltaire doesn't identify which of the Lavergne men this amateur actor, writer and invalid might have been. Was it our Jacques-Antoine, or his elder brother Jean? We have another clue in a letter Voltaire wrote, the next day, this time addressed directly to Lavergne Frères:

J'ignore, Monsieur, si Monsieur votre frère est encor à Nice. En ce cas il doit avoir passé des jours fort agréables avec M^r De Trudaine, intendant des finances, Mad^e De Trudaine, et M^r De L'Ille mon confrère, qui sont allés chercher la santé dans le même coin du monde. J'aurais bein dû faire ce voiage; mais je suis trop vieux pour me transplanter.

⁴ I am grateful to Chris Bryant who has pointed out that the boy's coat, with its braided edging, is servant's livery.

⁵ Georges Guigue, *Vanloo négociant*, 1902, p. 24.

⁶ The easiest way to consult this is via the Electronic Enlightenment website, so the dates alone will find the passages I mention. One of Voltaire's correspondents was the pastor Jacques Vernes (also a friend of Rousseau) who married Jacques-Antoine's 18-year-old niece Marie-Françoise Clarenc in 1759; she died later that year. One further reference appears in a letter from Charles Palissot de Montenoy to Jacob Vernes of 15 March 1756; writing to his friend to ask him to intercede with Voltaire on his behalf, he promises to send him a copy of his "histoire", via "M. Lavergne", unidentified in Electronic Enlightenment, but surely Vernes's soon-to-be brother-in-law.

To identify which brother, I found another report – a 1773 account of the health-giving properties of the thermal waters not at Nice, but at Aix, by the celebrated doctor Joseph Daquin (who was best known for his work in psychiatry). Here it is in full (remember Jacques-Antoine would have been 48 or so, near enough 50, while his brother was eight years older):

DES EAUX D'AIX. 127

OBSERVATION NEUVIEME.

D'une Paralyſie à la ſuite d'un rhumatisme univerſel.

MR. *Lavergne*, Négociant de Lyon, âgé d'environ 50 ans, d'un tempérament ſanguin, & d'un caractère vif & enjoué, fut atteint d'un rhumatisme pour lequel il employa différens remèdes, qui, bien loin de l'avoir ſoulagé, lui laiſſerent tout le côté droit dans un état preſque paralytique : la paupière du même côté étoit éraillée, la bouche torſe, le ſentiment de toute la partie droite, ſingulièremment celui de la jambe, diminué à tel point, que le toucher même aſſez fort, n'étoit plus pour lui qu'une ſenſation vague & obtuſe; & le mouvement de l'articulation du pied avec la jambe, ainſi que celui des orteils, s'exécutoit ſi lentement, qu'à peine devenoit-il ſenſible à la vûë. Tel étoit à-peu-près ſon état, lorſque je fus appellé la première fois. Cependant, ayant exigé un examen plus détaillé & plus approfondi de tout ce qui avoit précédé, je promis que les Eaux lui procureroient du ſoulagement; & le succès répondit à mes promeſſes; car après quelques bains & ſeize ou dix-huit douches, la bouche & la paupière ſe remirent très-ſenſiblement; la roideur de l'épine (*u*) diminua, & les muſcles de cette partie ſembloient être plus dociles à ſes différens mouvemens : la ſenſation dans les ex-

(*u*) Cette roideur étoit le ſymptôme dont il ſe plaignoit le plus, car il lui paroifſoit d'être preſque toujours appuyé ſur une planche colée ſur toute la longueur & la largeur de l'épine; car telle étoit ſa façon de ſ'exprimer : *Monsieur, je ſuis ſur mes planches.*

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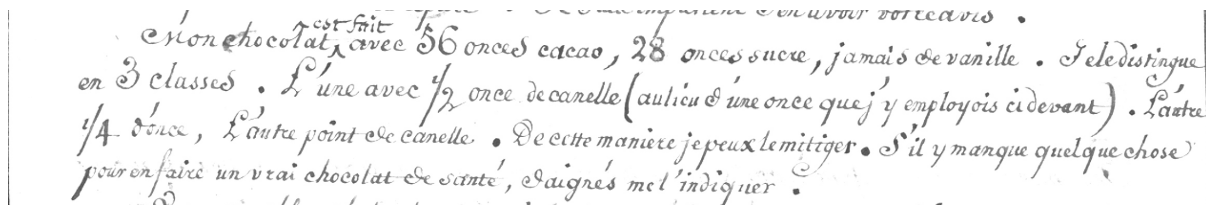
ANALYSE

trémities plus forte; le ſommeil, dont il ne pouvoit jouir auparavant, plus long, quoique ſouvent interrompu; & la tête, qui, ne pouvant guères ſe ſoutenir d'elle-même, allant à droite & à gauche, étoit pour lors ferme & ſolide ſur la colonne vertébrale. En général, je peux dire que Mr. *Lavergne*, à ſon départ pour Lyon, quoiqu'il ne fût venu aux Eaux qu'au mois d'Octobre, tems où elles ont moins de force & de vertu, avoit beaucoup gagné par leur uſage, tant du côté de l'embonpoint, que de celui du ſentiment & du mouvement.

From the age I inferred (in an earlier version of this post) that this was more likely the younger brother Jacques-Antoine. The condition described was severe enough to merit Voltaire's description of a man despairing of life, particularly if after the cure the symptoms returned. That rather than financial failure might well have led to his suicide. But I've since come across new evidence: in the Archives de la Charité de Lyon (*Inventaire sommaire...ville de Lyon*, IV, 1880, p. 156) there is a certificat de vie, delivered in 1774, supporting the purchase of an annuity by "Jean Lavergne, négociant de Lyon, qui se trouvait alors dans la ville de Nice ... jouissant d'une rente annuelle et viagère de 1,225 livres, sur l'hôpital de la Charité." So it now seems clear that the brother who went to Nice and was the comedian was actually the elder, Jean, not Jacques-Antoine.

This is further reinforced by the recent discovery⁷ of a letter from the patient to another celebrated physician, Samuel-Auguste Tissot (1728–1797), written the previous year, 25 October 1772, and signed "Lavergne l'aîné." There are several clues to confirm again that this is Jean (his father and also his uncle Philippe – see addendum below – were already dead); but "Lavergne l'aîné" sends Tissot's "dames" "les obeissances des notres, celles de mon frère, et les miennes", so the writer is unambiguously Jean. This is confirmed by an earlier letter to Tissot, on 9 September 1772, where he describes himself as an "homme de lettres de 57 ans domicilié à Lyon."⁸

One passage stands out as it has resonance with the Liotard pendant: the minute description of the medicinal qualities of both coffee (which Lavergne has to avoid because it causes "des insomnies complettes") and chocolate, whose composition he described in meticulous detail to Tissot:



This undermines the argument in the earlier version of this post, that Voltaire's description proved that the Écrivain in the pastel was indeed a writer, that the sense of intelligence with which he ponders his material is real etc. Nevertheless the information describes the family milieu in which this young man is depicted, and while he may not have himself been a talented actor, there is nothing to disprove an interest in writing more broadly than the commercial tasks of a négociant. We can at least be certain of one thing: Liotard's Écrivain was one of Voltaire's correspondents. If any of his brother's literary work was ever published it was certainly not under his own name, but his interests were plainly in plays. What then can we make of the carefully planted copy of *L'art d'aimer et de plaire*, hitherto assumed to be purely fanciful?

⁷ Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire, Lausanne, Fonds Samuel-Auguste Tissot, 3784/II/144.01.07.24. The letter is reproduced, without the writer being fully identified, in Patrick Singy, "Medicine and the senses: the perception of essences", in Anne C. Vila, ed., *Cultural history of the senses*, IV, 2014, pp. 142f; I only became aware of it in 2023.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3784/II/144.01.07.23. The letter is cited, again without full identification, in Séverine Pilloud, *Les mots du corps*, Lausanne, 2013, p. 94.

74 Représentation	
Du Jeudi 26 ^e Juin 1755	
Manière et la 1 ^{re} Représentation de Zélide.	
119. Billets a 6 ^{ns}	714
72. Billets a 8	216
19. Billets a 2	38
369. Billets a 1	269
	Total
	1237
Les trois Cinquiesmes del'Opéra	200
	1036
Le Dixieme del'Hotel Dieu	80
	1156
frais d'impression	710
	1866
frais de pain et feux	29
	1895
Art de la Représentation - d'après l'Auteur	28
	1923

I had previously identified it as the subtitle of a play called *Zélide*, but that was only published in 1755 and the dates still don't quite work. It was written by one Jean-Julien-Constant Rénout, who was secrétaire du duc de Gesvres (the duc had commissioned Pierre Mérelle to copy Liotard's portraits of the royal princesses in 1751). But although not premiered until 1755,⁹ there was apparently an earlier performance of *Zélide* at the comte de Clermont's château de Berny, probably by an amateur cast. (Liotard's pastel of the comte de Clermont was recorded in the artist's posthumous inventory.) It is of course sheer speculation, but might Jean, who played "parfaitement la comédie", have had an advance manuscript copy for amateur use – and shared it with his younger brother?

Addendum 1

Although not immediately relevant to the Liotard pastels, there is a curious incident in the family background which is worth noting, if only to exclude the figure from the "Lavergne l'aîné" description. As we know, Liotard's sister Sara married François Lavergne (1678–1752) in 1713. The family name was in fact Mialhe, and he was the son of Daniel Mialhe La Vergne, from Vabre near Castres. His brother Philippe Mialhe de Lavergne (Vabre 1687 – Lyon 1761) was in Paris on 13.ix.1720 when he contracted to marry a 46-year-old heiress, Marie Goussard de

⁹ To a mixed reception: in a letter from Claude-Pierre Patu to David Garrick written from Passy, 23 August 1755, he notes that it had "Assez d'esprit, peu de justesse, style haché, mauvais tour de vers." The extract from the Comédie-Française's register show the receipts for the double bill on 26 June 1755.

Ménard (1674–1757), daughter of a huissier audiencier aux finances de Tours, bringing a dowry of 28,000 livres. But for reasons that remain obscure, the marriage never took place, and Marie went back to the notaries two years later to report this. She bought an annuity instead, and died in a convent in Paris 25 years later. Liotard seems to have had no contact with Philippe in Paris at this time. Philippe subsequently lived with his brother in Lyon, and his inventaire does not indicate any great wealth.

Addendum 2

One further note which is relevant to Liotard was added to my essay on the pendant in September 2023: it cites an advertisement in the *Affiches de Lyon* on 4 January 1764 advertising retail space to be let “dans la maison de M. Berger, dont l’allée conduit de la rue de l’Arbre-sec, à la rue Pizay, & où demeurent MM. Lavergne & Delessert.” This not only locates the Lavergne house but evidences the close relationship between the Lavergne and Delessert families from among whom Liotard drew so many of his subjects.

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