

# The life of a 19th century drop-out

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## THE LIFE OF A 19th CENTURY DROP-OUT

This autumn will mark the bi-centenary of the birth of Etienne de Senancour, the French author. It is as well that one is able to pay tribute at last to the *precursor of the Romantic Movement*, such as was revealed in his novel of self-disclosure, "*Obermann*" (1804).

Senancour was born in 1770 and, having passed his priesthood years in the seminary of St. Sulpice, broke away from his training and country to live for some time in Switzerland where he married, returning to France in middle life and following thenceforward the career of a man of letters, but with hardly any fame or success. He died an old man in 1846, desiring that on his grave should be inscribed only the words: "Eternité deviens mon asile"—Eternity be thou my refuge!

### The "mal du siècle"

In comparison with Chateaubriand, Senancour is a lesser man, his life obscure and depressing, with traits of apathy, disenchantment, and thwarted imagination surrounding it. Nonetheless, as Maurice Barrès expressed it: "No figure is more often connected with French Romanticism than the melancholic solitary". Although recent studies have identified not one kind of "héros romantique" but several, yet the most typically Romantic character for most readers remains the passion-tossed individualist afflicted with the "mal du siècle". Senancour's inward-turning temperament together with his melancholy view of the world makes him a typical "mal du siècle" figure. His biography is a story of frustration in its various forms: he grew up an aristocrat in a revolutionary age; the Revolution reduced him to relative poverty; he made a very unhappy marriage and his literary ambitions remained totally unrealised. While growing up in a strictly religious home, he read the 18th century "philosophes" in secret and dreamt of high adventure, in exotic lands.

Senancour's "*Obermann*" is truly in a class by itself, but hardly noticed until Sainte Beuve discovered it, although it had already appeared in an earlier form as "*Aldomen, ou le bonheur dans l'obscurité*" (1795). It thus antedates all the other studies of the romantic mind. It is not a novel, but a confession in the form of letters (in the same vein as "*La Nouvelle Héloïse*" and "*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*") some short, others long, written to a fictitious correspondent whose answers are occasionally implied, but never given. The whole constitutes a spiritual diary of unique sincerity. The life described is one of brooding and meditation with very few external incidents, in which *Obermann* is a prey to incurable melancholy. In fact, doubt, self-diffidence and the loss of vitality have eaten into his superabundant energy long before he could feel the full taste of experience. This is the main aspect of the "mal du siècle", made fashionable by Chateaubriand's "*René*".

Senancour was undoubtedly the first exponent of this romantic malady but his name did not remain attached to it: his style was too argumentative and analytical. Nurtured on the philosophy of the 18th century and sharing its religious scepticism, he found that his thoughts were wrapped in a veil of curiously blurred abstraction and that his vocabulary was somewhat vague. Certainly, "*Obermann*" lacks firmness of texture. Its development is desultory to an excess, with frequent repetitions. But in spite of such faults, that the book should have gradually won the warm esteem of an elite comprising George Sand, Sainte-Beuve, and Matthew Arnold is due to its outstanding merits. Candid beyond anything written before or immediately afterwards, it strikes a note of desolation which is strangely searching and moving. It has none of the particular rhetoric of romanticism. When emotions are aroused, the style is transfigured and acquires a rigour and a terse power of suggestion investing it

with genuine poetical force. This is especially true of the scenes and descriptions in which nature is the central theme; most of all the episodes that deal with the sublimity, the untouched charm and magnetic mystery of the mountains. As a good example of the French literature of the Alps, there are pages here that go far beyond Rousseau. They are possessed with a restrained evocative force that surpasses the sensuous, romantic appreciation of nature, and belongs to the symbolist art of the future.

### A rootless background

Steeped in the spirit of the age, *Obermann* has no faith and yet, dissatisfied without one, seeks solace in mysticism but finds disenchantment. Therein doubtless lies the secret of Sainte-Beuve's faithful admiration for him. With the inertia to be expected from someone who has locked himself away from other men in the sanctuary of his own soul, *Obermann* was at first overshadowed by the equally egotistical but more vigorous *René*.

A Frenchman, coming immediately after the French Revolution, too clear-headed and austere for any Catholic sentimentalities such as Chateaubriand's and yet from the very profoundness and meditateness of his nature, religious, Senancour felt to the utmost the bare and bleak spiritual atmosphere into which he was born. He was of a character to be aware of his spiritual position, to feel it without dream or illusion, and to experience, also, that in the absence of any real inward basis, life was weariness and vanity. "People keep talking", he said, "of doing with energy that which ought to be done, but amidst all this parade of firmness, tell me then, what it is that ought to be done? For my part I do not know, and I venture to suspect that a good many others are in the same state of ignorance . . ."

His convictions for Christianity are at times illuminating. He owns that religion has done much, but, "si la reli-

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gion a fait des grandes choses, c'est avec des moyens immenses." Disposing of such means it should have done much more. That religion should be of use as some restraint to the ignorant and brutal masses of mankind, shows, he thinks, not so much the beneficence of religion as the state of utter confusion and misery into which mankind has, in spite of religion, drifted.

The concern for the state and the prospect of what are called the masses perpetually recur with Senancour. "There are men", he says, and he was one of them, "who cannot be happy except amongst men who are contented; who feel in their own persons all the enjoyment and suffering they witness, and who cannot be satisfied with themselves except by contributing to the order of the world and to man's welfare. Arrange one's life how one will, who can answer for its being any happier so long as it is and must be? Inequality is in the nature of things; but you have increased it out of measure when you ought, on the contrary, to have studied the ways of reducing it. The mass of mankind is brutal, foolish, given over to its passions; all their ills come from this cause. Either do not bring me into existence, or, if you do, give this mass an existence which is human".

### The quest for happiness

This pessimism was accompanied with the feeling that he had no power to set it right: "Your miseries have worn out my soul", he says, they are intolerable, because they are objectless. Your pleasures are illusory, fugitive; a day suffices for knowing them and abandoning them. I enquired of myself for happiness, but with my eyes open, I saw that it was not made for the man who was isolated: I proposed it to those who stood round me; they had not leisure to concern themselves

with it. We are wretched today, but we shall enjoy ourselves tomorrow. For my part, I know that the day which is coming will only tread in the footsteps of the day which has gone before". However, a sense of failure, powerlessness and ennui certainly pervaded Senancour's own natural constitution so that, unfavourable as may have been his time, we should err in attributing to any outward circumstances the whole of the discouragement by which he is affected. He himself knew this well, and he never seeks to hide it from us. "Il y a dans moi un dérangement", says he, "c'est le désordre des ennuis".

"I was born not to be happy. You know those dark days, bordering on the frosts of winter, when mists hang heavily about the very dawn, and day breaks only with threatening lines of a lurid light upon the masses of cloud . . . you see in them the morning of life; at noon, cooler storms and more steadily persistent; at evening, thicker darkness still and the day of man is brought to an end". No representation of Senancour can, however, be complete without some of the brightness which relieved this discouragement: besides the inwardness, besides the sincerity, besides the renouncement, there was the poetic emotion and the deep feeling for nature.

### Ecstasy on the lakeside

"And I, too, I have my moments of forgetfulness, of strength, of grandeur; I have desires and yearnings that know no limit. But I behold the monuments of effaced generations; I renounce the care for that which passes away, and the thought of a present which is already gone".

The following extract, taken from Letter IV, describes the north end of Lake Neuchâtel.

"My window had remained open all night, as is my habit. Towards four o'clock in the morning I was awakened by the dawn and by the scent of the hay which they had been cutting in the cool early hours under the light of the moon. I expected an ordinary view, but I had a moment of perfect astonishment. The midsummer rains had kept up the waters which the melting snow in the Jura had previously swollen . . . He dines at a toll-house by the river bank and after passing the afternoon there leaves off again late in the evening— . . . The moon had not yet risen; my path lay beside the green waters of the Thiele. I had taken the key of my lodging so that I might come in when I liked without being tied to a particular hour. But feeling inclined to muse, and finding the night so warm that there was no hardship in being all night out of doors, I took the road to Saint Blaise. I left it at a little village called Marin, which has the lake to the south of it. I descended a steep bank and arrived upon the shores

of the lake, where it ripples gently against the gleaming rocks. The air was calm; not a sil was to be seen on the lake. Everyone was at rest; some in the forgetfulness of their toils, others in the forgetfulness of their sorrows. The moon rose, I remained there for hours. Towards morning the moon shed over earth and waters the ineffable melancholy of her last gleam. Nature seems unspeakably grand, when, plunged in a long reverie, one hears the wash of the waves upon a solitary strand, in the calm of a night still enkindled and luminous with the setting moon.

Sensibility which no words can express, charm and torment of our vain years; vast consciousness of a nature everywhere greater than we are, and everywhere impenetrable! All-embracing passion, ripened wisdom, delicious self-abandonment — everything that a mortal heart can contain of life-weariness and yearning, I felt it all, I experienced it all, in this memorable night. I have made an ominous step towards the age of decline; I have swallowed up ten years of life at once. Happy the simple, whose heart is always young!"

There, in one of the hours which were at once the inspiration and the driving force of Senancour's life, we leave him. It is possible that an age breaking with the past, and inclined to tell it the most naked truths, may take more pleasure than its predecessors in Obermann's bleak frankness, and may even give him a kind of celebrity. Nevertheless, it may be predicted with certainty that his very celebrity, if he gets it, will have, like his life, something maimed, something incomplete and unsuccessful about it; and that his intimate firends will still be but a few, as they have hitherto been. Those few will never fail him.

G. H. Buchler

### Epitaph by Mathew Arnold

O thou who ere thy flying span  
Was past of cheerful youth,  
Didst find the solitary man  
And love his cheerful truth—  
Despair not thou as I despaired  
Nor be cold gloom thy prison,  
Forward the gracious hours have  
fared,  
And see; the sun is risen!  
He breaks the winter of the past;  
A green, new earth appears.  
Millions whose life in ice lay fast  
Have thoughts and smiles and tears.  
What still of strength is left, employ  
That end to help attain:  
One common wave of thought and  
joy  
Lifting mankind again!

Mathew Arnold "Obermann once more"