

## THE AUTHOR OF OBERMANN.

IN November, 1849, Matthew Arnold, then a young man of twenty-seven, almost at the beginning of his literary career, wrote some Stanzas in Memory of the Author of *Obermann*, an obscure French poet, whose name and writings had, until then, been scarcely known outside of France, and who had died, almost unnoticed, three years before. These were followed, many years after, by other stanzas, *Obermann Once More*. It is through these two poems by Matthew Arnold that the author of *Obermann*, Étienne Pivert de Senancour, has been chiefly known to the reading public of England and America. But while his name has in this way become familiar to many, his writings have never attained celebrity; and even in his own country he is not famous. The prose poem *Obermann* has been read by a few, who have been attracted by its rare poetic quality and interpretative power, but it has not received general recognition, nor been awarded by the public its just rank as a work of marked talent.

There are good reasons why the author of *Obermann* should have remained without fame beyond a narrow circle of admirers, as we shall see by a study of his character. His own description of this isolation, which oppressed him, even though he sought it, is filled with a sense of pain. On the 12th of October, in Letter XXII., he writes from Fontainebleau:

"I am alone. . . . I am here in the world, a wanderer, solitary in the midst of a people for whom I care nothing; like a man deaf for many years, whose eager eyes gaze upon the crowd of silent beings who move and pass before him. He sees everything, but everything is withheld from him; he suffers the silence of all things in the midst of the noise of the world; . . . he is apart from the entirety of beings; . . . in vain do all

things exist around him; he lives alone, he is severed from the living world."

Although the author of *Obermann* separated himself by choice from the life of his times, and, while the turmoil of events swept past him, stood apart as a solitary figure, deaf to their noise and seemingly unconscious of their object, yet he must take his place as a member — the most isolated, it is true — of the sentimental democratic movement which had its rise in the second half of the eighteenth century. By right of talent, through affinity of sentiment and feeling, he belonged to that romantic school of France which was the successor of classicism and intellectual atheism, and numbered in its ranks a Rousseau, a Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, a Chateaubriand, a Madame de Staël, whose names sounded like clarion notes through the end of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth. But even the gentler lights among the pantheists of literature, Vigny, Maurice de Guérin, Lamartine, Musset, Amiel, received wider recognition than the solitary dreamer who has, nevertheless, written pages more beautiful, perhaps, in their simplicity, charm, grandeur even, than have many of his better known contemporaries or successors.

These pages, which formed the repository of the intimate personal reveries of a nature delicately responsive to every impression and emotion, and which contained a depth of feeling and experience not appreciated by the many, were, however, we are told by Sainte-Beuve, cherished by a small band of admirers, — Sautetet, Bastide, Ampère, Stapfer, Nodier, — young and ardent spirits, who looked up to their author with reverence as to a master, and by a group of men of letters which counted such names as Rabbe, Ballanche, Pierre Leroux, and Boisjolin, the editor of the second edition

of Obermann. More than this, Sainte-Beuve himself, George Sand, and in recent years Jules Levallois, attracted by his rare gifts and his singular charm, have done for him in France what Matthew Arnold has done in England, and Alvar Tornudd in Finland: they have made him a name to the many, and more than a name to the few who appreciate beauty of style and the poet's power to interpret nature.

Several of the writers of the romantic school possessed to a remarkable degree this gift of rendering nature. Chateaubriand possessed it, though often in a studied form; Maurice de Guérin had it in all its naturalness and grace; Senancour had it with a simplicity, grandeur, and eloquence which have seldom been surpassed. He has given us pictures of singular beauty, both as a landscapist and as a poet; for he not only paints nature in her outward semblance, but he leads us into close companionship with what is hidden and intimate in her life. This is why Obermann has outlived obscurity. Although Senancour made no use of metrical form, he held more of the poetic gift of understanding and appreciating nature, and of interpreting her with subtle sympathy, than did many poets who wrote in verse. And in this feeling for nature he was perhaps less akin to Lamartine, the chief singer of French romanticism, than to Wordsworth and others among the English poets.

It may appear singular that the only countries where the works of Senancour have been widely appreciated are the lands of the far north, Finland, Sweden, and Norway. But his strong sympathy with all that was primitively sublime and titanic in nature and in man, which inspired him to write in Obermann, "It is to the lands of the north that belong the heroism born of enthusiasm, and the titanic dreams bred of sublime melancholy," must have formed a powerful attraction to a people whose early literature

represented types of primeval man and nature.

Obermann, written during 1801 to 1803, and first published in 1804, is a book of disconnected impressions and meditations, in the form of letters to a friend, containing the reveries of a recluse on life and nature. But although Obermann is an internal autobiography of Senancour, we must guard against taking too literally its external details, for the author purposely altered facts and dates in order to mislead the reader.

Étienne Pivert de Senancour was born in Paris in 1770, the year of the birth of Wordsworth. His father, who belonged to a noble and a comparatively rich family of Lorraine, and who held the office of comptroller of the revenues under Louis XVI., was a man of inflexible will, and of small sympathy with youth or with what goes to make youth gay. Young Senancour's childhood was not happy; he had little companionship, and no pleasures. A profoundly melancholy temperament, given him by nature, developed by all the conditions of his home life, made him prematurely sombre and discontented; ill health and his father's sternness increased a self-repression, apathy, and awkwardness which were the result partly of physical immaturity, and partly of mental precocity. Romantic from childhood, thirsting for joy with an intensity rarely seen in one so young, receiving back from life only disillusion and unsatisfied longings, he soon became acquainted with suffering, and could say with reason that he had never been young. Born without the power, but with the fierce desire, for happiness, his "joy in everything" was withered before it bloomed. The few allusions in Obermann to those early years show how greatly they influenced his after life. But among these memories of his youth one ray of content pierces now and then the general gloom,—his love for his mother, and her sympathy with him. Later, after death had separated him from her,

he pictures, with unwonted tenderness, the walks they took together in the woods of Fontainebleau, when he was a school-boy spending his vacations with his parents in the country. He was only fifteen at that time, but showed even then his love for all things beautiful in nature, his longing for solitude, his premature seriousness, his changeful moods, his ardent, sensitive, restless temperament which gave him no peace. At Paris, on the 27th of June, in Letter XI., this recollection comes to him as an inspiration: —

“The first time I went to the forest I was not alone. . . . I plunged into the densest part of the woods, and when I reached a clearing, shut in on all sides, where nothing could be seen but stretches of sand and of juniper trees, there came to me a sense of peace, of liberty, of savage joy, the sway of nature first felt in careless youth. Yet I was not gay. . . . Enjoyment grew wearisome, and a feeling of sadness crept over me as I turned my steps homeward. . . . Often I was in the forest before the rising of the sun. I climbed the hills, still deep in shadow; I was all wet from the dew-covered underbrush; and when the sun shone out I still longed for that mystic light, precursor of the dawn. I loved the deep gullies, the dark valleys, the dense woods; I loved the hills covered with heather; I loved the fallen boulders and the rugged rocks; and still better I loved the moving sands, their barren wastes untrodden by the foot of man, but furrowed here and there by the restless tracks of the roe or the fleeing hare. . . . It was then that I noticed the birch, a lonely tree, which even in those days filled me with sadness, and which since that time I have never seen without a sense of pleasure. I love the birch; I love that smooth, white, curling bark, that wild trunk, those drooping branches, the flutter of the leaves, and all that abandonment, simplicity of nature, attitude of the deserts.”

Here, then, at Fontainebleau, came

the first awakening of his feeling for nature, — a feeling which had perhaps already been unconsciously stirred at Ermenonville, a small village in the Valois, where Rousseau had died a few years before, in 1778. Young Senancour, who had early shown his love of study, and when only seven years old had devoured with feverish ardor every book of travel that fell into his hands, had been sent to school at Ermenonville, and lived with the curé of the parish. There, as an impressionable boy, he must have stood by the tomb of Rousseau; must have wandered in the castle grounds where Rousseau had spent his later years; have listened to the “rustling leaves of the birches;” have seen “the quiet waters, the cascade among the rocks, . . . and the green that stretches beyond like a prairie, above which rise wooded slopes,” as Gérard de Nerval, in *Sylvie*, pictures it to us in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

At fifteen Senancour entered the Collège de la Marche, at Paris, where he followed the four years’ course diligently, not brilliantly, but successfully, and graduated with honor. In those four years, his mind, already open to philosophic doubt, was definitely led into channels which destroyed whatever religious belief may have been feebly lodged there by his mother’s teaching. He left college an atheist. It had been the intention of the elder Senancour that his son should enter the priesthood, and, being a man of imperious will, unaccustomed to remonstrance or opposition, he immediately made arrangements for Étienne to take a two years’ preparatory course at the seminary of Saint-Sulpice.

By nature without depth of Christian religious feeling, by temperament fiercely opposed to rules and institutions, by education steeped in the philosophic thought of the day, the young student of Malebranche and Helvétius rose in revolt against a step which “essentially shocked his nature.” In August, 1789,

with the help of his mother, he left Paris, and buried himself in the solitudes of the Swiss Alps: there, in the region of perpetual ice, the primitive man in him strove to wrest from primitive nature the key to life.

At this period, when we see in him so much to "essentially shock" our natures, — his atheism, his antagonism to Christianity, his bitterness against institutions, — he has at least the merit of austere sincerity and of scrupulous morality. With a nature so sincere and so strongly opposed to a religious vocation, he could not bring himself to enter the priesthood solely for the sake of earning a living, or to play the hypocrite in order to satisfy an exacting parent.

"I could not sacrifice my manhood," he protests, "in order to become a man of affairs."

And in another place, in the same letter, he says: —

"It is not enough to look upon a profession as honest for the simple reason that one can earn an income of thirty or forty thousand francs without theft."

Sincerity he regarded as one of the natural, simple virtues. The grander virtues he had also known; he writes: —

"I have known the enthusiasm of the great virtues. . . . My stoical strength braved misfortunes as well as passions; and I felt sure that I should be the happiest of men if I were the most virtuous."

This stoicism was merely a phase; it went hand in hand with an atheism and a fatalism which were also nothing more than phases. They were not destined to endure long, but they produced his first work, *Rêveries sur la Nature Primitive de l'Homme*, written during the early years of his exile in Switzerland, and published in 1799, when he had returned secretly to Paris. During those ten years France had passed through her great crisis; but the distant rumblings of the Revolution which had shaken his country to her foundations, and had reëchoed throughout Europe, seem to have left

Senancour unmoved. Buried in his mountain solitudes, surrounded by the silence of the snows, absorbed in the contemplation of natural forces, he remained apparently unconscious of the movement of the gigantic social forces around him. He represents passivity in an age of intense moral and social activity, the sage among soldiers, the dreamer of ideas for which the rest of the world were fighting, the believer in a new system which was even then overturning society, and which fifty years later was to produce men of his stamp.

But the Revolution which he ignored did not pass him by unnoticed, as he might have wished. His noble ancestry, and his abrupt departure from Paris immediately before the outbreak of the Revolution, were sufficient reasons to lay him open to suspicion, and for him to be classed as an *émigré*: thus his voluntary retirement was turned into a forced exile. Obligated, for political reasons, to make Switzerland his home, we find him, not long after his arrival, living in the house of a patrician family in the canton of Fribourg. A daughter of the house, unhappy in her home, and in her engagement to a man for whom she had no attachment, became interested in Senancour; they saw each other constantly, even began to write a romance together; she confided her troubles to him, and at last broke her engagement. Young Senancour, sensitive, scrupulous, believing himself to be morally, though unintentionally, bound to the young girl, married her in 1790, at the age of twenty. The marriage was not a happy one, but he remained a devoted husband until his wife's early death. He had been in love once, some years before, — a transient fancy, as he then thought, but one that had for a moment opened before him visions of happiness which might have been his, and that returned to him, in later years, with almost overwhelming force in the hour of his great moral crisis.

In Letter XI., from Paris, he writes: —

"It was in March; I was at L——. There were violets at the foot of the thickets, and lilacs in a little meadow, springlike and peaceful, open to the southern sun. The house stood high above. A terraced garden hid the windows from sight. Below the meadow, steep and rugged rocks formed wall upon wall; at the foot, a wide torrent; and beyond, other ledges, covered with fields, with hedges, and with firs! Across all this stretched the ancient walls of the city; an owl had made his home among the ruined towers. In the evening, the moon shone, distant horns gave answering calls; and the voice that I shall never hear again . . . !"

These dreams had passed, and in their place had come misfortunes in a long and overwhelming train. The loss of his fortune through the French Revolution, and of his wife's inheritance through the Swiss Revolution, a painful nervous trouble which deprived him throughout his life of the natural use of his arms, the long and mortal illness of his wife, the death of his father and of his much-loved mother, separation from his son and from his friends, — all these formed the setting of a grief, stifling and sombre, that found frequent expression in the book which was the *Journal Intime* of Senancour's inward experience.

In a life so grave, so full of disillusion, Senancour turned for support to nature, — to a nature calm, broad, majestic, that brought him moments of content, almost of happiness. His sensitive organization responded like an echo to every impression from the natural world, yet his enjoyment of nature had in it as much of an intellectual as of an emotional quality. His style attracts us, not so much from the sound of the words as from the musical flow of the phrase and the exquisitely harmonious turn of the sentence, the falling cadence at the close, with here and there a sudden break in the rhythm. No one who reads *Obermann* can fail to find rare

delight in the charm of its cadences, in the remarkable power of language which it shows, and in the magic faculty of the artist to see the elements that constitute a picture.

On the 19th of July, in Letter iv., Senancour writes from Thiel of a night spent on the shores of Lake Neuchâtel:

"In the evening, before the rising of the moon, I walked beside the green waters of the Thièle. Feeling inclined to dream, and finding the air so soft that I could pass the whole night in the open, I followed the road to Saint-Blaise. At the small village of Marin I turned aside to the lake at the south, and descended a steep bank to the shore, where the waves came to die on the sands. The air was calm; not a sail could be seen on the lake. All were at rest, — some in the forgetfulness of toil, others in the oblivion of sorrow. The moon rose: I lingered long. Toward morning she spread over the earth and the waters the ineffable melancholy of her last rays. Nature appears immeasurably grand when, lost in reverie, one hears the rippling of the waves upon the solitary shore, in the calm of a night still resplendent and illumined by the setting moon.

"Ineffable sensibility, charm and torment of our fruitless years, profound realization of a nature everywhere overwhelming and everywhere inscrutable, all-absorbing passion, deepened wisdom, rapturous self-abandonment, — all that a human soul can experience of deep desire and world-weariness, — I felt it all, I lived it all, on that memorable night. I have taken a fatal step toward the age of decay; I have consumed ten years of my life. Happy the simple man whose heart is always young!"

This passage has been quoted before; it cannot be quoted too often. There is a sentence in one of Emerson's Letters to a Friend that reminds one of it. He has been reading the Vedas "in the sleep of the great heats," and writes: —

"If I trust myself in the woods or in a boat upon the pond, nature makes a Brahmin of me presently. Eternal necessity, eternal compensation, unfathomable power, unbroken silence, — this is her creed. Peace, she saith to me, and purity and absolute abandonment."

Less lyrical than Maurice de Guérin, Senancour was more of a Titan in power and daring; he was the epic poet of landscape. Nature in her bolder moods appealed to him most strongly: it was not her smiles, her graceful fancies, her waywardness, her exuberance, that moved him, as they did the more "elusive," changeful temperament of Maurice de Guérin; it was the rugged in her, the mysterious, the vast; he loved to grapple with the strength, the difficulties, of a wild and savage region. And in this he showed an intellectual rather than a sensuous quality, a quality which it is interesting to trace even in the words used to express the elements in nature that aroused his sympathy. Maurice de Guérin was attracted by the evanescence and grace of nature; Senancour by her "permanence" and "austerity." This austerity and permanence are especially insisted upon in one of the most striking of the Obermann letters, — the letter in which he tells of a day spent on the Dent du Midi.

On the 3d of September, in Letter VII., he writes from Saint-Maurice: —

"I have been to the region of perpetual ice, on the Dent du Midi. Before the sun shone upon the valley I had already reached the bluff overlooking the town, and was crossing the partly cultivated stretch of ground which covers it. I went on by a steep ascent, through dense forests of fir trees, leveled in many places by winters long since passed away: fruitful decay, vast and confused mass of a vegetation that had died, and had regerminated from the wrecks of its former life. At eight o'clock I had reached the bare summit which crowns the ascent, and which forms the first sali-

ent step in that wondrous pile whose highest peak still rose so far beyond me. Then I dismissed my guide, and put my own powers to the test. I wanted that no hireling should intrude upon this Alpine liberty, that no man of the plains should come to weaken the austerity of these savage regions. . . . I stood fixed and exultant as I watched the rapid disappearance of the only man whom I was likely to see among these mighty precipices. . . .

"I cannot give you a true impression of this new world, or express the permanence of the mountains in the language of the plains."

The whole of that day he spent among the chasms, the granite rocks, and the snows of the Alps, taken possession of by the inexpressible permanence of life in those silent regions, which seemed to have in them less of change than of immutability.

We can see the landscapes which Senancour paints: they are bold, vivid, and full of atmosphere. And we can feel the mysterious hidden life which he feels so profoundly, which becomes a passion with him, subdues him, absorbs him, until he has grown to be a part of it. The great Pan claims him. We must not, however, mistake Senancour. He loves nature, but to him man is the highest part of nature; only, man troubles him by departing from primitive standards, and nature does not. "It is true I love only nature," he writes, "but men are still the part of nature that I love the best."

It is not social man, as he existed at the close of the eighteenth century, that fills this high place in Senancour's affections. He pictures to himself a primitive life, simple, austere, uniform; a state of human relationships in which friendship such as the ancients knew it — the friendship of Cicero and Atticus, of Lælius and Africanus — holds a conspicuous place. By nature strong in the affections, this bond of two minds and souls, united in



thought, feeling, and belief, the "absolute running of two souls into one," as Emerson expresses it, has for him a deep attraction. He realizes what Emerson emphasizes with greater force when he writes that "the sweet sincerity of joy and peace, which I draw from this alliance with my brother's soul, is the nut itself whereof all nature and all thought is but the husk and shell." And so Senancour writes: "Peace itself is a sad blessing when there is no hope of sharing it."

Believing firmly in the inborn goodness of humanity, he feels that the dictates of one's own nature are safe guides to be followed in life, "convinced," he declares, "that nothing that is natural to me is either dangerous or to be condemned." Yet these impulses which he acknowledges as wise leaders are never to be other than moderate, for, he says, "dejection follows every immoderate impulse." And the goodness which he broadly ascribes to all human nature is far from being of a commonplace order, to judge from his own definition: "True goodness requires wide conceptions, a great soul, and restrained passions." Himself a man of restrained passions, he willingly believes that all men are originally made virtuous, and he insists upon the melancholy degeneration of man as he has been made by the "caprices of this ephemeral world."

This forms the keynote of his aversion for the world, and the reason for his appeal to nature, when overwhelmed with despair at "the hopeless tangle of our age;" and with a full sense of his own impotence, he seeks solace in the strength of the stars and the peace of the solitary hills. For nature "holds less of what we seek, but . . . we are surer of finding the things that she contains." And thus, he believes, the tie is often stronger between man and the "friend of man" than between man and man; for "passion goes in quest of man, but reason is sometimes obliged to

forsake him for things that are less good and less fatal." Alone, battling with the "obstacles and the dangers of rugged nature, far from the artificial trammels and the ingenious oppression of men," he feels his whole being broaden. I cannot refrain from quoting in this connection a vivid description of one of his first communings with the "friend of man," after he had fled from a world which oppressed him, and against which he had neither the courage nor the power to struggle. In Letter VII., on the 3d of September, he writes from Saint-Maurice: —

"On those desert peaks, where the sky is measureless, and the air is more stable, and time less fleeting, and life more permanent, — there all nature gives eloquent expression to a vaster order, a more visible harmony, an eternal whole. There man is reinstated in his changeful but indestructible form; he breathes a free air far from social emanations; . . . he lives a life of reality in the midst of sublime unity."

In this very year Wordsworth was writing: —

"To her fair works did Nature link  
The human soul that through me ran;  
And much it grieved my heart to think  
What man has made of man."

We can now, I think, understand in a measure why Senancour has remained obscure. He shunned the world, and the world neglected him; he could not make his way with a public whom he ignored and disliked. Shrinking from contact with men, craving neither applause nor popularity, despising every means of obtaining celebrity that savored of intrigue or expedient, he marked out for himself a rigid line of sincerity and truth. "If it is not sufficient," he writes, "to say things that are true, and to strive to express them in persuasive language, I shall not have success." And in harmony with this ideal of literary simplicity and directness was the feeling he had that an author should not strive to re-

ceive "approbation during his lifetime." The only success he honored and desired was the austere success of the future which assigns a work "to its right place." Surely this was not the temperament from which springs the desire to court notoriety or the power to win it.

Another reason for Senancour's failure to reach general appreciation is perhaps his unevenness. Like Wordsworth, he falls, at times, far below his level; not that he is ever weak, but in his tendency to repetition he becomes tiresome. Although in his later work he shows more unity and a clearer sense of proportion, in *Obermann* he is wanting in what is necessary to the creation of a complete work of art, — the power to distinguish between the essential and the non-essential. It is this power which makes Chateaubriand's *René* a finished painting, and the lack of this power which makes *Obermann* a portfolio of sketches as exquisite as Turner's water colors, intermingled with minute studies of unimportant details.

*Obermann* has been compared to *René*. Both books describe the same order of psychologic experience; they are both the expression of thwarted lives, of unsatisfied cravings. But there exists this difference between them: *René* represents passionate struggle, and, later, victory; *Obermann*, despairing acceptance, and, later, resignation. With *René*, nature is secondary to moral power; his expression is strong, brilliant, vigorous. With *Obermann*, nature is the spring of all beauty and perfection, — she is mystic, vast, inscrutable; his expression has something of the sensitive, the hidden charm which he has caught from the inner life of nature.

We know that Senancour became familiar with the works of his great contemporary, Chateaubriand; and that in 1816 he published a critical study of the *Génie du Christianisme*, in which he exposed with merciless candor and logic the insincerity of Chateaubriand's religious

position. But at the time that Senancour wrote *Obermann*, while he had read *Atala*, as he himself tells us, *René* and the *Génie du Christianisme* were still unknown to him. Whatever similarity existed between *Obermann* and *René* was therefore due to the spirit that animated the whole literary movement of the time, to the romantic tendency of which they were the simultaneous expression.

Another parallel that suggests itself is with *Amiel*; but here, too, there is a marked difference. Senancour's rendering of nature, which makes him worthy of being classed among the poets, is on a far higher plane of beauty than *Amiel's*, while he is greatly *Amiel's* inferior in strength of intellect, culture, and mental training. It is *Amiel's* keenness and justness as a critic of life and things, of men and books, that give him his claim to distinction. Senancour is a poet and moralist, *Amiel* a critic and speculative philosopher. The difference in their style is equally marked: *Amiel* is at his best where he is incisive, critical, epigrammatic, full of verve, cutting to the root of his subject like fine steel; Senancour, where he is poetical and meditative. The philosophy of *Amiel* is on a far more intricate scale, and takes a more prominent place in his *Journal* than does that of Senancour in *Obermann*; but the idea of the indefinite, miscalled the infinite, appeals equally to both, though in different ways. *Amiel* is fascinated by it, — his individual life is absorbed, evaporated, lost, in the universal nothing; while Senancour, alone, as an individual, stands face to face with an immutable and inscrutable eternity, which terrifies and overwhelms him, but which he desires to comprehend through an etherealized intelligence. The common ground on which they meet is their desire to be in unison with the life of nature, their mystical pantheism, and their morbid melancholia which leads them into pessimism, — all of these traits being an in-



heritance from their great progenitor, Rousseau. It was the malady of the century, — “melancholy, languor, lassitude, discouragement,” as we find in Amiel’s *Journal*, — lack of will power, the capacity to suffer, a minute psychologic analysis, the turning of life into a dream without production, that furnished the basis of their affinity.

We must, in fact, go back to the ideas which formed the spring of the Revolutionary movement and changed the conditions of modern society, to find the common meeting ground of all the romanticists. Unswerving belief in human nature, desire for the simplification of life and dislike of the complicated social conditions of the old order, passionate love of the natural world, full return to nature as the ideal of life, glorification of savage man, — these ideas, formulated by Rousseau, were the inspiration of Chateaubriand, Senancour, and Amiel. Rousseau, as the father of the movement, became the chief influence in the work of his successors: he set the type for their beliefs; he opened the path through which all were to walk, — some as leaders, like Chateaubriand, others as recluses, like Senancour; his spirit pervaded not only France, but Europe; from him proceeded Childe Harold, Werther, and René, as well as Obermann.

The poet with whom Senancour has most of kinship in mood, in feeling, in charm of expression, is Matthew Arnold. That Obermann exerted a strong influence over Matthew Arnold’s early years is clear from several references in both of the Obermann poems. “We feel thy spell!” the English poet cries; and that spell draws him to solitude, to sad reverie, to companionship with the eremite, the “master of my wandering youth,” the name he gives, many years later, to Obermann. But stronger still than this inclination is the opposite impulsion, the necessity which is upon him to go out into the strife of men, — an

unseen driving power which he calls fate, but which we might call conscience. And so he cries: —

“I go, fate drives me; but I leave  
Half of my life with you.”

Yet with him he carries into the world that thing which

“has been lent

To youth and age in common discontent,”  
and the

“infinite desire  
For all that might have been,”

and

“The eternal note of sadness.”

It is the poet in Matthew Arnold that claims “fellowship of mood” and sympathy with the poet in Senancour. This may explain why Matthew Arnold has not given of him one of his delightful critical portraits. The affinity is too close, the influence too subtle, to be brought within the limits of analysis. But beyond this personal affinity of mood, Matthew Arnold reveres Obermann as a sage and seer. Every one will recall those verses, in the first Obermann poem, beginning:

“Yet, of the spirits who have reigned  
In this our troubled day,  
I know but two who have attained,  
Save thee, to see their way.”

These two spirits are Wordsworth and Goethe.

Twenty years later he returns to “Obermann once more,” and in a vision is charged by the ancient sage to carry to the world the message of that hope for which Senancour had so passionately longed. Obermann, addressing the younger poet, urges him to bear

“‘Hope to a world new-made!  
Help it to fill that deep desire,  
The want which crazed our brain,  
Consumed our soul with thirst like fire,  
Inmedicable pain.’”

Matthew Arnold here constitutes himself the disciple and exponent of Obermann, the interpreter of his aspirations, and the complement, as it were, of his unfulfilled and disappointed life.

The fellowship of Matthew Arnold

with Obermann is seen in several of his poems, — in *The Grande Chartreuse*, *The Youth of Nature*, *The Youth of Man*, and markedly in *Self-Dependence*.

Indirectly, it is also apparent in many modes of thought and feeling. In both poets there is a ground tone of melancholy underlying the passionate craving for tranquillity and joy, which leaves them forever reaching out toward a goal that can never be attained. Together with this is the sense of the futility of human effort, and a blind reliance on fate. Both are stoical in their austerity, and both are transcendental in their tendencies. In both we find a deep discontent with “the thousand discords” and the “vain turmoil” of the world; a desire to be in sympathy and union with the inner life of the universe, — to

“Yearn to the greatness of Nature;”

and the final appeal to nature, whose glory and greatness and calm are alone enduring, while all else is subject to change, — a nature who can say of men in Matthew Arnold’s words, —

“‘They are dust, they are changed, they are gone!  
I remain.’”

And how like Senancour is the spirit of these lines! —

“For the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.”

But this resemblance, strong as it is in many ways, belongs more to their moods, their ethical attitude toward life, the peculiar temper of their minds, than to character, or intellect, or creative power. As a result of this affinity of sentiment is a certain similarity in rhythm, the outward but elusive expression of the inner feeling. In both writers we find the same note of sadness in the cadence, the same grace and charm of diction, the same dying fall at the end of the sentence, like the ebb and flow of the

waves on the shore. Especially is this evident in *The Youth of Man*, *The Youth of Nature*, parts of *Tristram and Iseult*, and *Dover Beach*. There exists this difference between them: in Senancour the expression is spontaneous and natural; in Matthew Arnold it is finished, and the result of art and study.

Senancour’s inward changes during the twenty-five years that followed the appearance of his first work, the *Rêveries*, were great; they formed a gradual and continuous growth, from despair to resignation, from restlessness to calm, from doubt to belief, from materialism through pantheism to theism. Throughout Obermann we see traces of a passionate longing for more than nature could give him, something higher than nature. On the 17th of August, in Letter XVIII., he writes from Fontainebleau: —

“I am filled with an unrest that will never leave me; it is a craving I do not comprehend, which overrules me, absorbs me, lifts me above the things that perish. . . . You are mistaken, and I too was once mistaken; it is not the desire for love. A great distance lies between the void that fills my heart and the love that I have so deeply desired; but the infinite stretches between what I am and what I crave to be. Love is vast, but it is not the infinite. I do not desire enjoyment; I long for hope, I crave knowledge! . . . I desire a good, a dream, a hope, that shall be ever before me, beyond me, — greater even than my expectation, greater than what passes away.”

At the time he wrote these words, he had no belief in the immortality of the soul, no hope beyond this world. Later, this belief and this hope were to come to him; but even then he had glimpses of the future peace, as when he writes, in Letter XIX., on the 18th of August: —

“There are moments when I am filled with hope and liberty; time and things pass before me with majestic harmony, and I feel happy. . . . I have surprised myself returning to my early years; once

more I have found in the rose the beauty of delight and its celestial eloquence. Happy! I? And yet I am; and happy to overflowing, like one who reawakens from the terrors of a dream to a life of peace and liberty, — like one who emerges from the filth of a dungeon, and, after ten years, looks once again upon the serenity of the sky; happy like the man who loves the woman he has saved from death! But the moment passes; a cloud drifts across the sun and shuts out its inspiring light; the birds are hushed; the growing darkness drives away both my dream and my joy."

The time was to come when this life of "peace and liberty" would no longer be seen by snatches, between the drifting clouds, but would fill him with the serenity he so ardently craved. Perhaps he little dreamed that his prayer, framed as a question, was to be answered in his life with the same beauty that he pictured it in words. In Letter XXIII., dated on the 18th of October from Fontainebleau, we find this passage: —

"Will it also be given to man to know the long peace of autumn after the unrest of the strength of his years, — even as the fire, after its haste to be consumed, lingers before it is quenched?"

"Long before the equinox the leaves had fallen in quantities, yet the forest still holds much of its verdure and all of its beauty. More than forty days ago everything looked as though it would end before its time. and now everything is enduring beyond its allotted days; receiving, at the very door of destruction, a lengthened life, which lingers on the threshold of its decay with abundant grace or security, and seems to borrow, as it weakens with gentle loitering, both from the repose of approaching death and from the charm of departing life."

This we may take as a picture of his own old age. Not that his material surroundings had in any way improved; the change was internal, and was the fulfillment of his own words: "The true

life of man is within himself; what he absorbs from the outside world is merely accidental and subordinate." The fruit of this change came to maturity in his last important work, *Libres Méditations*, written fifteen years after *Obermann*. In the writer of the *Méditations* we see a man who has profoundly suffered, and whose spirit has been softened, chastened, harmonized. His last word to the world is the calm, majestic expression of one who has realized the existence of a distant truth, and has succeeded in lessening the space which separated him from it. It is the answer to the restless questionings, the doubt, of *Obermann*. Even in *Obermann* he had begun to feel that nature was not the beginning and the end of all things. On a day in August, in Letter XVI., he wrote from Fontainebleau: —

"What noble sentiments! What memories! What quiet majesty in a night, soft, calm, luminous! What grandeur! But the soul is overwhelmed with doubt. It sees that the feelings aroused by sentient things lead it into error; that truth exists, but in the far distance."

In the *Méditations* the pursuit of this distant truth has led him to belief in a God, in a future life, in a governing power in the universe; nature is the proof of divine wisdom; the world we live in, and the world to which we are pressing forward, are the results of divine justice. The *Méditations* is a work of distinct ethical value; its writer, a moralist of the type of Marcus Aurelius. The classic dignity and repose of its style, its full and measured numbers, like the solemn harmonies of church music, are the perfect outward expression of elevation of thought, a poised nature, a spirit of peace and consolation. We are lifted above the strife of the world to a region of moral grandeur. The poet is lost in the philosopher.

This change, although so fundamental, is not a mark of inconsistency. The youth of nineteen, who ran away from

home to avoid acting a part, is still the man of maturity, who wrote the *Méditations*; genuineness, simplicity, and the love of truth form the basis of his nature.

Senancour lived for twenty-seven years after writing the *Méditations*, and the spirit of calm continued to grow upon him; yet his external life can scarcely have held more of happiness in his old age than it had in his youth. He had left Switzerland many years before, soon after the completion of *Obermann*, and had returned to Paris, where, poor and almost in want, he lived a secluded life, with his daughter as his only companion,

in a house near the Place de la Bastille, on the Rue de la Cerisaie, a street of interesting historic memories connected with Charles VI. and Francis I. There, a recluse in the midst of the world, he composed his *Méditations*, and there, obliged to live by his pen, the only way open to him, he wrote for the periodicals and journals of Paris, edited encyclopædias, prepared historical summaries, and spent years in the drudgery of the literary profession. In 1846, four years before the death of Wordsworth, at the age of seventy-six, he died at Saint-Cloud, a lonely old man.

*Jessie Peabody Frothingham.*

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## SMALL VOICES OF THE TOWN.

WHEN this roaring, stony, aching city dies; when its harbor is choked, and commerce goes elsewhere; when corruption and oppression, or a hope of exercising them, have driven the last of its cave dwellers to the tenements of rival towns, the grass will sprout in its streets, its Babel towers will soften into ruin, the birds will return, and within a twelve-month Nature will have declared herself in the place that had forgotten her. The bird's voice, then, is not its racial memory alone: it utters prophecy. How futile this hiding from the universal will! Law finds us in every habitation. Perch we never so high, we cannot cheat gravity; delve we never so low, the moral also seeks us. At its worst the town is open to some beauty, and has lately, in alarm for its own state, widened its gates to more. Public parks, gardens, playgrounds, recreation piers, and boulevards are creations almost of our day, and have been forced into being by the huddling of mankind into a throng, with faces turned inward. That meant the denial and desertion of every benefit the town stands for. A city of a million without

a breathing spot, — conceive it! A barbarism! A monstrosity! It is astonishing and pathetic that multitudes come and go along the avenues and years without knowledge of the silence, the music, the grace, hue, light, substance, and resource of the world. They are not so to pass forever. Voices have begun to call from the fields, and they listen. They are learning the need of touch with the soil. They have discovered air. They have seen water, and have timidly put their hands into it. Their children have been haled away to the farms, and have come back brown and strong; and their sons have gone away as soldiers, discovering, as they marched with their regiments, that parts of the earth had no buildings, and yielded only grateful smells and colors. When these town folk are stubborn, and keep out even of the parks, the darkness, the miasm, and the uproar do their work, and in the third generation their line runs to its end.

But not only are the masses learning to use their parks: they are beginning to watch for those estrays who come in from that region round about the city, — that