

“Sentimental Education”

By KENNETH REXROTH

AS WE TURN OVER the pages of nineteenth-century literature, we are constantly confronted with the question of alienation. Baudelaire, Marx, Kierkegaard, Chateaubriand, Cardinal Newman—it does not matter whether the voice comes from the Left or the Right, all are agreed in their rejection of the values of the prevailing ethic. Yet we never get a clear definition of alienation. What is man alienated from, and why? Perhaps it is precisely the democratic society, the growing affluence and education, which have revealed the natural state of man, much as the development of medicine has enabled greater accuracy of diagnosis with the resultant tremendous increase in the record of certain diseases. Perhaps the discovery of human self-alienation was simply a statistical refinement made possible by the spread of the privileges of culture to the middle class.

Flaubert, of all the century's major novelists, most emphatically did not believe this. *Madame Bovary*, *Sentimental Education*, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, were conceived as head-on attacks on middle-class life in all its aspects—its ideals as well as its realities. *The Temptation of St. Anthony* and *Salammbô* are sensation-drugged reveries for an anti-bourgeois elite. Yet what happens? Flaubert was a tireless craftsman, and as he reworked his sentences, seeking always the ultimate precision of a surgical instrument, the simplicity of his approach yielded before an irony of which he never became fully conscious. Flaubert had a vision, a model, of how words should function, and he ground down each phrase until it fitted that model, a kind of abstract template which shaped, not just rhythm and image, but which revealed a fundamental quality of the sensibility.

Sentimental Education is a step forward in time from Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, and a step downward in the decline of human nobility. Julien Sorel, Stendhal's hero, is the hero of a tragic farce, a village Bonaparte who never got a chance. But even though his life, and its end, are acted out with mock heroics, the vestiges of nobility still cling to him and to his two foolish women. There is nothing heroic about Frederick, the hero of *Sentimental Education*. He is a man of the Forties, of the reign of Louis-Philippe, the bourgeois parody of

a king who fell before a bourgeois parody of an Emperor. Julien Sorel was motivated by an unfulfillable lust for power; Frederick is motivated by greed. Julien forces his life to its tragic denouement, a Romantic re-enactment of a classic end. A generation later, Frederick lives in a world in which Romantic solutions are no longer available. He simply runs down.

The plot of *The Red and the Black* still preserves something of the self-sufficiency of Racine or Sophocles. The people live in a world determined by their own inter-relationships. *Sentimental Education* is a social and historical panorama—Frederick is the narrative focus of a people and a time. He is mass man, nearer the top of the mass than the bottom. Julien is, or at least wishes to be, man against the mass.

If in any sense *The Red and the Black* is a *roman à clef*, its deciphering adds nothing to the fiction. *Sentimental Education* is full of deadly caricatures, and many of the characters are in fact Flaubert's contemporaries at the period of writing, moved back ten or twelve years. The book is a mirror image of the first volumes of the *Goncourt Journal*.

“Enrich yourselves!” was the slogan of Louis-Philippe's rule, and in *Sentimental Education* we can watch an elite, a clerkly class, abdicate finally all claim to being the “responsibles” and get down and scramble at the trough of the *nouveaux riches*. Julien, in a time of transition, strove to hammer content into his poor life. Frederick's life, says Flaubert, had no content, and when content offers itself he avoids it or, if necessary, destroys it. It was in these years that Proudhon said, “Property is theft,” and reading this novel we can see why he did. It is the story of a den of thieves, busy stealing counterfeit coin from each other.

This is the salient characteristic of Flaubert's portrayal of covetousness and distinguishes it sharply from the simple greed that motivates so many of Balzac's

characters. There are greedy men like those of Balzac in Greek and Latin comedy, and all through medieval literature. The covetousness of Flaubert's people is the special nineteenth-century, capitalist hypertrophy of covetousness.

Flaubert's change of focus is accompanied by a change in style, a change in the very meaning of style. Balzac, and in a more profound way, Stendhal, adopted for literary purposes the language of the documents and dispatches of Napoleon. They made a subtle literary instrument out of an anti-literary direct communication, which was new to spoken as well as written French. Flaubert worked in a completely opposite way. He is artistic. He persuades himself that style is an end in itself and that communication is to be shaped by a rhetoric that may be the antithesis of the rhetoric of either Cicero or Chateaubriand, but which is rhetoric nonetheless.

All this is a kind of occupational delusion. If there is a hero of the *Goncourt Journals* it is Flaubert. He enters, a young Viking in a berserk rage of literary creation. He leaves, an old man, mad about writing. Café conversations and little dinners of gossip, petty politics, and grave discussions of the merits of sundry tarts he turns into pursuits of the just word—conversational fox-hunts that end in essays of the sound of sensibility.

FOR sheer brilliance of direct vision, Flaubert's prose surpasses any of them, and has yet to be equalled by any of his disciples. All the manifold details of life, of nature, of still life, glow with an internal fire, the fire of burning prose which has a perfect transparency. Flaubert wants us to be excruciatingly conscious of the craftiness of his art.

If this were all, he would be only another Huysmans, only the founder of Art for Art's Sake. But behind the irony is a terrible pity. Frederick with his sentimental covetousness, the crooked revolutionaries, the literary imposters and whores, the women exhausted with bad dreams, the treacherous friends—all the cast of *Sentimental Education*, as immense as a Russian novel, are finally brought to judgment and let go. The novel is not, as Flaubert thought it was, a pure work of art devoid of any moral. Pity and terror, said Aristotle, were the essence of tragic response. At the end we look back over the generation that enriched itself and share with Flaubert a sad, calm terror at the pity of the human condition. This is all it ever came to. The Last Judgment is not the melodrama of the flames of hell mounting toward heaven, but only two emotionally ruined old men, all lust and covetousness, used up, like prisoners paroled in old age after serving thirty years of a life sentence.



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—Vytas Valaitis (From "Casals").

Pablo Casals—at home in Puerto Rico.

THE BIG WORLD OF DON PABLO

By IRVING KOLODIN

MOST FIGURES of legend become so when there are no longer witnesses to contest the accuracy of the evaluation or, more likely, when so much time has elapsed that the evidence to the contrary has eroded or been forgotten. So much could be said of the legendary cellist born in Vendrell Tarragona in 1876, who was an international celebrity at twenty-five, revived the world's interest in the Bach literature for his instrument at thirty-five, made a reputation as a conductor of his own orchestra at forty-five, contributed to a new esteem for the trios of Beethoven and Schubert at fifty-five, and, as befitted the trials and tribulations that accompany advancing years, lapsed into silence at sixty-five.

This was the famous career that ordained him a giant in a generation of giants—the generation of Manuel de

Falla and Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari, who were born in the same year; of Ernst von Dohnanyi, Ottorino Respighi, and Cyril Scott, who came later in the decade; and of Godowski, Paderewski, and Ysaye, who were young when he was. Such a roster of bygone, in some instances once revered but now forgotten, names is an index to the atmosphere and the musical climate into which he was born, this legendary musician who acquainted our fathers—or grandfathers, depending on the age of the reader—with a new concept of the qualities inherent in his chosen instrument.

Were any of these bygone celebrities—plus such other collaborators of his youth, maturity, and middle age as Artur Nikisch, Ossip Gabrilowitsch, Bronislaw Huberman, Artur Schnabel, Alfred Cortot, or Jacques Thibaud—to be advised by celestial grapevine that a Festival Casals prevails each year in Puerto Rico, they might reasonably conclude that a

group of friends of the long-since legendary figure had banded together to preserve his fame, and that this was a good thing they had done, for one of their kind and time to be remembered so long afterwards.

One who might especially approve was the great French violinist Thibaud, with whom, from the earliest years of the century, Casals frequently combined in a trio whose pianist was Cortot. When Thibaud returned to resume his American career in the fall of 1946, I took advantage of an interview for journalistic purposes to ask him about his old associates, news of them being hard to come by in those immediate postwar days. "I have not been very lucky with my fellows," he replied. "They have become politicians. Cortot bad, Casals a little mad." The reference was, of course, to Cortot's chosen role as a collaborator with the Germans during the occupation of France (accompanied by Thi-