

ALFRED DE MUSSET : THE MAN AND THE ARTIST.

A Thesis submitted to the Committee on Post-
Graduate Studies of the University of
Manitoba in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts.

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Winnipeg, May 14, 1934.

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University of Manitoba,

1933-4.

ALFRED DE MUSSET : THE MAN AND THE ARTIST.

PART I : MUSSET THE MAN.

Alfred de Musset was one of the most pathetic figures in French literature. His brief and uneventful life was a record of a constant struggle for a happiness which always managed to elude him. He was granted magnificent artistic gifts, but only for too short a period of time. He tasted of supreme and god-like ecstasy but for one brief moment, and paid for it most dearly with long years of mental and physical suffering. His life was a disheartening, losing struggle against a Providence which had marked him to a life of sorrow and disillusion.

In this element of pathos, of almost hopeless struggle against Fate, the life of Musset can bear comparison with that of John Keats. Keats--haunted by the spectre of hereditary disease, constantly suffering of poverty, almost maddened by his passionate, hopeless love for Fanny Brawne--he too--but even more bitterly--tasted of the gall of life. Only unlike his Latin brother, he rarely laid bare the sufferings of his soul; he was too modest to give voice to his agony, to flaunt his open wound with almost morbid glee. And unlike his Latin brother, Keats died in all the glory

of his ripened genius, in the midst of his greatest creations,

"A bloom whose petals nipt before they blew,

Died on the promise of the fruit",

while Alfred de Musset was doomed to live on for over fifteen dragging, dreary years, in an attempt to recapture the genius which had so swiftly fled from him.

Let us in these pages, follow the trend of his unhappy, uneventful, life ; let us study the factors which influenced his life and career, the effect of society and environment upon him; and through such a study we will, I hope, derive a true understanding of the character, a composite picture, of the man, Alfred de Musset.

Unlike Keats, Musset was favored with regard to his birth and early environment. His genealogy, of which he and his brother Paul were most proud, boasts, directly or indirectly, of the names of Jeanne d'Arc, Joachim de Bellay, and Cassandre de Peigny, daughter of that famous Cassandre Salviati, whom Ronsard loved; it boasts of a long line of men famed for their military prowess, and of men whose interest in belles-lettres was unquestionably a strong one.

Alfred's most indulgent father, Victor Donatien de Musset-Pathay, gay, witty, eighteenth century in spirit, "avec un peu de légèreté dans les mœurs", had tried his hand at translation, at hack-work, at various literary genres, all with a fair measure of success, and had written a fairly good biography of Rousseau.

The old Marquis de Cogners, head of the family, and Victor's cousin, whom Alfred loved and frequently visited, a dignified member of the ancien régime, lived in his old château in an atmosphere of books and culture. In spite of the fact that in his youth he had written an epistolary novel which clearly showed the influence of Rousseau, he too, like Alfred's father, was firmly opposed to romanticism.

Guyot-Desherbiers, Alfred's maternal grandfather, at one time a distinguished lawyer, charming and witty conversationalist, idealist and classicist, had published a good edition of the Lettres de Ninon de Lenclos au Marquis de Sevigné, and was adept at the writing of the epigram and the madrigal.

His daughter, Alfred's mother, although indicating no especial taste or love for literature, was a kind, devoted mother--modest, refined, charming.

Born amidst such an atmosphere of culture and aristocratic refinement, inheritor of such laudable traditions, Musset had every advantage which John Keats lacked. His native genius could not but flourish under such advantageous conditions.

Musset was born in 1810, in the very heart of Paris, Boulevard St. Germain, near the Hôtel Cluny. He was a strikingly beautiful child; his parents treated him with the utmost delicacy and indulgence. But even, from his childhood, Musset was doomed to suffer. He was exceedingly sensitive, almost neurotic; he was subject to

frequent temperamental fits, which, due to his weak physical constitution, resulted in heart attacks and fainting spells. He could brook no criticism; he was rash, independent, moody.

Alfred received an excellent education. He and Paul began their studies under a most sympathetic tutor. At their grandfather Desherbier's they soon discovered and read avidly The Arabian Nights and the romances of chivalry.

At the age of 9, Alfred was sent to the Collège Henri IV. He was a precocious student and upon graduation in 1827, he won the second prize for a Latin dissertation on "The Origin of Human Feelings."

Then followed a period of disquiet, of indecision with regard to his future career. Already his spirited individuality, his passionate and sensitive nature, was seeking an outlet for expression. "Je m'ennuie et je suis triste", he wrote to Paul Foucher (Sept. 23, 1827), "mais je n'ai pas même le courage de travailler..... Je ne voudrais pas écrire ou je voudrais être Shakespere ou Schiller.... j'ai besoin d'un joli pied et d'une taille fine, j'ai besoin d'aimer.... je voudrais être un homme à bonnes fortunes.....". He dreams of writing poetry; he is even now haunted by that magical figure of the ideal woman, which always eluded his search.

Musset's father, disciple of Rousseau, believed in allowing his son to follow the bent of his own nature, in the matter of a profession, and so, in turn, Musset attempted law, medicine, the study of foreign languages, music, drawing, (for the latter of which he showed a special aptitude). But in none of these did Alfred find suited to his tastes.

In 1828, the family moved to Auteuil, a suburb of Paris; and here, encouraged by the illustrious company which frequented his mother's salon, the elegaic poetry of Chénier, and the already present desire in him to write, he composed his first poem. And immediately he realized that his search was at an end. He would be a poet.

That uneasiness, that yearning and striving for an indefinable something new, which followed upon the ruins of the shattered ancien régime, had caught the younger generation. Literature and art were suffering tremendous changes. Shakespere, Byron, Scott, Schiller and Goethe, read voraciously by the enthusiastic youth, added new ideas to those already advanced by Rousseau and Chateaubriand. Old standards, old models were cast off. Emotionalism was being substituted for cold reason. Freedom in style and language was taking the place of classic regulation and restraint. Alfred de Musset was soon caught in the whirling waters of this literary maelstrom.

Paul Foucher introduced young Alfred to Hugo and the members of the Cénacle--the acknowledged leaders in the movement of literary emancipation. In Hugo's salon, Musset met Vigny, Merimée, Ste, Beuve, Nodier, Lamartine. One can readily imagine with what enthusiasm he received the friendship of these literary giants. They, in turn, immediately took him under wing, and offered him encouragement; they applauded his first poems; Sainte-Beuve, their doyen, acclaimed him a genius.

In 1829, Musset wrote Don Paez, a romantic drama à la Victor Hugo, which received an enthusiastic reception from the Cénacle. A year later he published his first collection of poems--Contes d'Espagne et d'Italie--which was received with both excessive praise and scornful opposition. We shall leave a detailed discussion of its merits and defects to the latter half of our study of Musset. Suffice it here to say that as a result of this first volume, he became firmly established as a man of letters.

But Musset's essentially independent spirit would not allow him to become a slave to any school; and he soon severed his connection with the Romantics. He had given "his adhesion to the Romantic school rather with the light effrontery of youth, than with depth of conviction" (1); he was a romantic, yet he sympathized with the traditions of the eighteenth century. Spectacle dans un Fauteuil (1832), his second volume of poetry, announced to the world that Musset the "romantique" was now entirely "déhugotisé".

And now began the real tragedy in the life of Musset. "La poésie chez moi", he wrote, "est soeur de l'amour". And Love became his main preoccupation, the leading, the guiding power in his life. Henceforth his life was marked by a restless, untiring search for an ideal, a perfect love, which his imagination had created for him--a love both spiritual and sensual, both heavenly and terrestrial. And this search was to bring him sorrow and indescribable pain, and finally lead him to degradation and ruin. He had tasted of that exquisite intoxication of the soul, for a brief moment, at the age of 17, when he had fallen passionately in love with a young

(1) Dowden

Mme. Groisillier (subject for Jacqueline in "Le Chandelier") but he realized bitterly,very shortly afterward,that he had been duped;and although his grief was sincere it was short-lived ,for he soon found solace in another "love-affair". He was to taste of true happiness,of genuine love,once more for a brief period of time,but with much more tragic,much more fatal consequences.

The young dandy,the "Byronic minor of the boulevards", sought his ideal in the cabaret,in the brothel. His mistresses were many,of all types,of all classes. In the gay company of Alton-Shée,of Tattet and Belgiojoso,he lived elegantly, carelessly. But he was far from happy. Neurotic,changeable, a slave to his whims and fancies,at times he was gay,insouciant witty,while at other times,he suffered of morbidity,gloom, and depression. The vision of ideal Love haunted him constantly his many liasons brought him no solace;"le clou" of debauchery soon became firmly planted "sous sa mamelle gauche" (Octave and Rolla are obviously drawn from his own experiences);he seemed to be receding more and more from the attainment of his goal.

Then in 1833,an event occurred which completely changed the course of Musset's life. He met George Sand.

M.Buloz,editor of the Revue des Deux Mondes,attracted by an enthusiastic article of Sainte-Beuve upon Musset,invited the young poet-playwright to contribute to his journal. Musset had at the time already renounced the theatre due to the failure of La Nuit Venitienne;journalism was not to his taste;poetry was unremunerative;and now that this opportunity was offered him,he seized it with enthusiasm. On April 1,1833,André del Sarto was published;and on

May 15, Les Caprices de Marianne.

As a result, he became an author of distinction, discussed in literary circles, popular, recherché. Towards the end of that year, Buloz invited Musset to a dinner to meet the leading contributors of the Revue des Deux Mondes. Here he met George Sand, who was the only woman present. He fell in love with her immediately.

But from the first, the two were unsuited to each other; and the liason which followed could not but end in tragedy.

George Sand was six years older than Musset, and many years his senior in the experience of life. Endowed with a free, independent, fundamentally sensual nature, she had left her coarse and brutal husband, the Baron Dudevant, and came to Paris to seek her literary fortunes. She wrote "Indiana" and became famous. Thenceforth she worked indefatigably and betweentimes she became the mistress in turn of Sèze, a lawyer, Sandeau, a writer, and Merimée. So greatly had she been influenced by romanticism, so closely had she fashioned her life upon romantic conceptions, and so highly did she value her work, that one cannot help but agree with Sedgwick's rather acute deduction that "in her sub-conscious self she was more interested in her novel-writing than in her life; and that she used her own experiences as so many courses of study in which to learn the subtler accomplishments of her métier."

It was shortly after her break with Merimée, when in her loneliness she began to feel the need for sympathy and stimulation, that she met and was attracted to the youthfully sincere Musset. And while with Musset this meeting was the most glorious, the crowning adventure in his life, for Sand

it was but one interlude among many, but one chapter in a life replete with similar experiences.

George Sand was a striking woman. Essentially feminine, love for her was the *prima mobile* of existence. With characteristic vigor she exalted the emotion of love, and demanded the elimination of all the obstacles and conventions of civilization which would prevent its unharrassed fulfillment.

Profoundly moved by the literature and the romantic conceptions of her day, she had forged for herself a type of romantic love based upon a theory of "l'ascension dans l'amour"--"Crois tu donc qu'un amour ou deux suffissent pour épuiser et flétrir une âme forte? Je l'ai cru aussi pendant longtemps, mais je sais à présent que c'est tout le contraire. C'est un feu qui tend toujours à monter et à s'épurer. C'est peut-être l'oeuvre terrible, magnifique, et courageuse de toute une vie. C'est une couronne d'épines qui fleurit et se couvre de roses quand les cheveux commencent à blanchir." (1)

This type of love, Doumic very finely analyses as nothing but pure sensuality. And the maternal instinct which she attempted to incorporate in her idea of love, gave the latter a rather vague and certainly abnormal character of incest.

I believe it would not be very far from the truth to say that Sand's enthusiasm for the attainment of this strange ideal hid a depraved sensuality, a capricious, unsatiable desire for the gratification of her own instincts. She never considered

(1) Doumic

the partner in her experience;when she realized that her companion did not measure up to her exacting requirements, she believed herself free of any moral obligation towards him;and her conscience did not trouble her when she continued her search of the ideal with another.

What a strange match for the young idealistic dreamer who had set up for himself an ideal of love--heavenly,goddess-like,and who found in this strange,beautiful,woman the answer to all his silent questionings,the embodiment of his dreams !

At first the two lovers were happy. George,in her strange combination of sensual passion and almost maternal love for the temperamental youth believed that she had discovered true love at last. And in the little appartement on the quai Malaquais which they occupied,Musset too discovered the meaning of genuine happiness.

But this lasted for a very short while. In the autumn they want to spend several weeks at Fontainebleau. And here began the series of quarrels and reconciliations which marked the remainder of their liason. Musset,the former débauché could not free himself from the pangs of jealousy;he realized that Sand had like himself,had a past,that the "goddess" was in reality nothing more than an ordinary woman. His mind was troubled by hallucinations;he suffered of frightful nightmares. But on recovering from ^{these} ~~thses~~ experiences,he was bitterly sorry for his unkindness,and with pathetic sincerity he attempted to attone for it with exhibitions of tenderness and charming consideration.

When winter came they planned to go to Italy. Mme. Musset refused to give her consent to Alfred's departure;but (if we are to believe Paul in his Biographie),Sand ,after an eloquent

attempt at persuasion, received his mother's reluctant consent; and on December 21, the lovers left Paris.

It is difficult to reconstruct the subsequent drama which took place at the Hotel Danieli in Venice. What happened during those tragic months in Italy is obscured by the many contradictory accounts advanced in the novels--"Elle et Lui" by Sand and "Lui et Elle" by Paul de Musset, and the "Lettres d'un Voyageur" and "La Confession d'un enfant du Siecle" by the actors in the drama themselves. Each of these versions, while undoubtedly containing elements of truth, is nevertheless untrustworthy in its entirety. Sand's account is cruelly unfair to Musset, and her claim of complete innocence is too obviously a lie. Paul's account was born of a life-long hatred of this "femme fatale". Musset's account in the Confession, sacrifices truth to the heroic task of immortalizing their love. And so, in order to know the truth with regard to Musset's relations with Sand, we must rely chiefly upon the letters the two sent each other and those they sent to their families and friends.

From the mass of tangled detail we pick the following facts as being definitely certain.

For the first month Musset was very happy; the letters to his family are filled with a joy and enthusiasm unalloyed. But about the middle of February, his letters stopped, and for six weeks his disquieted family did not hear from him. At last, when Paul and his mother were about to start for Italy to discover the cause of the apparent trouble, they received a pathetic note informing them that he was on his way home.

During this interval much had happened. Sand had been ill; Musset had resumed his periodic fits of quarrelling. Sand

realized that she was mistaken, that Musset was an obstacle to her happiness; and when she told him, "nous ne nous aimons plus, nous ne nous sommes pas aimés" (1), she felt no qualms with regard to her subsequent actions.

Soon after, (Jan. 1834), Musset fell ill with brain-fever. His doctor, Pagello--young, robust, manly--, appealed to George and she gave herself to him. Musset somehow became aware of this relationship; storms and reconciliations followed. Alfred could not support the "lien idéal" between the three--the strange monstrosity which Sand was quite willing to perpetuate; and broken in health of mind and body, he returned to Paris.

And now began "le spirale sans fin de son long suicide" (2) His soul was shaken to its very depths. He suffered the most acute, the most penetrating agony; all his dreams, all his illusions had been shattered; life for him became "weary, stale, flat and unprofitable". "Je fus saisi ", Paul reports him as saying in his Biographie, "d'une souffrance inattendue. Il me semblait que toutes mes pensées tombaient comme des feuilles sèches, tandis que je ne sais quel sentiment inconnu, horriblement triste et tendre, s'élevait dans mon âme. Dès que je vis que je ne pouvais lutter, je m'abandonnai à la douleur, en désespéré. Je rompis avec toutes mes habitudes. Je m'enfermai dans ma chambre; j'y passai quatre mois à pleurer sans cesse, ne voyant personne et n'ayant pour toute distraction qu'une partie d'échecs que je jouais machinalement les soirs."

But he had not given up hope of recapturing that happiness which had fled from him. The correspondence which followed

(1) Ref. to actual conversation from letter by Sand to Musset, 1834-5.

(2) Kuhns.

show us the sincerity of his grief, and his failure to forget Sand; he bears her no hatred; he defends her against the calumnies which have begun to circulate; he plans to write a novel in commemoration of their love (which idea eventually resulted in the Confession). Sand's letters, equally passionate, do not, however, give the same impression of sincerity; it is difficult to dissociate oneself from the idea that she foresaw their value as "literary copy".

In the meantime, as was to be expected, Sand had tired of Pagello. She had welcomed him after the turmoil and nervous excitement that resulted from the clashing of her sensitive temperament with the equally sensitive temperament of Musset; for Pagello brought peace and calm to her troubled soul. But now she craved excitement; her maternal-egoistic instinct desired an outlet for expression, and stolid, "stupide" Pagello could not give her that.

Shortly afterwards, she came to Paris with Pagello. Musset met her. Then began a series of conciliations and quarrels, all short-lived and all ending painfully for both parties. For a time their love was more violent than ever; and in spite of the apparent insincerity manifested in George's previous letters, the entries in her journal dating of this period, show us that she was now suffering as poignantly as Musset; her passion had revived again, now that Musset was beginning to spurn her. Pagello, puzzled by these strange events, left for Italy. Society gossips were working overtime. Parting between Sand and Musset was inevitable.

By the spring of 1835, Sand was "aussi bien guéri de lui que l'empereur Charlemagne du mal de dents" (1), and already Michel de Bourges was occupying her thoughts. Musset gradually

(1) From letter to St. Beuve

regaining interest in life, was plunging into his work. With the calm which followed those months of disillusion and despair, the genius of the poet, aroused by his experience awoke and blossomed forth. "Après avoir consulté la douleur jusqu'au point où elle ne peut plus répondre, après avoir bu et goûté mes larmes, tantôt seul, tantôt avec vous, mes amis, qui croyez en moi, j'ai fini par me sentir plus fort qu'elle, et par me dégager de tout mon passé. Aujourd'hui j'ai cloué de mes propres mains, dans la bière, ma première jeunesse, ma paresse et ma vanité. Je crois sentir enfin que ma pensée, comme une plante qui a été longtemps arrosée, a puisé dans la terre assez de sucs pour croître au soleil. Il me semble que je vais bientôt parler et que j'ai quelque chose dans l'âme qui demande à sortir".

Musset, unlike Sand, had been deeply moved by his unhappy experience. As Dounic points out, George Sand was profoundly feminine; she required domination, but found in Musset only a child. That is why her liason with him left no profound trace upon her memory or her work. It was only one episode in her life, and she continued her work without impairment.

On the other hand, Musset was profoundly moved. His nature was weak; he was incapable of recovering from the ineffacable impression. He tried very hard to forget, but it always remained uppermost in his mind. And as a result of this "grand passion", he entered upon a period of feverish productivity which lasted for three years, during which he wrote his greatest masterpieces -- The Nuits, On ne badine pas avec l'amour, Lettre à Lamartine, Stances à la Malibran, Barberine, Le Chandelier, La Confession d'un enfant du siècle, Il ne faut jurer de rien, Un Caprice.

(1) From Paul Musset's Biographie

The passionate storm he had experienced was succeeded by a quiet calm. He cherished the grief he had endured, he cultivated it, and took a strange delight, a poignant pleasure in "whipping his emotions like recumbent beasts into active fury" (1). He realized that he had suffered greatly, and he found a peculiar sadistic satisfaction in playing the role of a martyr, in tearing off the scar from his but newly-healed wound, and displaying his pain in all its passionate intensity. And these frequent "soul-flagellations", these wilful re-experiencings of a former sorrow, resulted in poetry and drama of tremendous lyrical beauty, of profound human significance--exquisite pain resulted in exquisite poetry.

True, the melancholy which enveloped him after his sad, unhappy experience, never completely left him. It had entered into his very bones, and it grew more pronounced as time went on. Nevertheless, with added vigor he resumed his search of the ideal Love. Love which had brought him so much sorrow, so much agony, still remained the guiding light in his life.

"Après avoir souffert, il faut souffrir encore,

Il faut aimer sans cesse, ~~après~~ après avoir aimé".

But never again did he recapture that fine intoxicating joy that he had experienced so poignantly with Sand. The list of his many mistresses is a long one; each enjoyed his favor for a brief interval; nevertheless in none did he find that fiery emotional stimulus which he associated with true love.

It is interesting to note that several of his mistresses succeeded to some extent in rousing him from the lethargy of indolence which was now gradually growing upon him. Caroline

d'Alton Shée, Mme. Jaubert, whom he jocularly called his "marraine" (and whom later his brother Paul married), during the two years that their liason lasted managed to encourage the development of that quality of sprightly wit, that charming gaiety which are so characteristic of Musset's short-stories and proverbes. Rachel inspired him with a plan to write a classic tragedy. The Princesse Belgiojoso who spurned his love was the subject of that passionately bitter poem "Sur une Mort". Mme. Allan-Despréaux, through whose efforts his plays were introduced to the French public, encouraged him to resume writing for the stage.

And as the years advanced, Musset became more and more depressed. Even at the age of 30, he felt old, tired, weary of life; his liasons brought him only added grief and disappointment; his genius seemed to have left him, and at the rare intervals in which he did write, he lacked the fire and virility which were his before.

In 1852, he was received at the Academy, not without a good deal of opposition. His speech on the occasion of his reception was a distinct failure.

He grew idle and listless; he sought relief for his ennui in drink and in licentiousness; and his health suffered as a consequence--he was addicted to nervous attacks and convulsions, and his heart was a source of constant trouble, and the final cause of his death.

The last years of Musset are the most touching, the most pathetic in his unhappy life. He was but a ghost of his former self, physically, mentally, morally; he had grown prematurely old; his genius was already dead; he cherished no illusions of ever attaining his goal; and his death, on April 26, 1857, did not come too soon.

Alfred de Musset was a romantic "fool". He could never like the "wise" man Spark in "Fantasio", accept life unquestioningly, submit to convention and society, and so be happy. From his early childhood, he was not content to accept tradition; his whole life was spent in working out his own salvation. And so, "il s'est lâché à travers la vie comme un cheval de race cavré dans la campagne, que l'odeur des plantes et la magnifique nouveauté du vaste ciel précipitent à pleine poitrine dans des courses folles qui brisent tout et vont le briser."⁽¹⁾ He grasped avidly at life, but was to find it empty and hopelessly disappointing.

Salvation, Musset early discovered, lay in a religion of love--in an endless search for the ideal bred of his romantic fancy. This conception of the omnipotence of love, as we have already seen, and as we shall see later in more detail, was the centre of his whole philosophy of life; more, it was his whole philosophy of life.

Musset was essentially an individualist. He would not suffer subjection to any literary coterie. He would not trouble himself with social conventions. He was interested only in his own happiness, his own sorrow, his own joy and his own grief. And these he depicted in some of the most impassioned lyrical poems and in some of the most pathetically moving plays in the French language. He found in his own grief something great, something uplifting, something of universal human significance--

"Rien ne nous rend grand que les grands malheurs", he wrote--and his work is one long "gémissement" of sorrow.

This absorption in his own feelings, this constant display

(1). *Taine*

of grief has led many to regard Musset as being fundamentally weak, as lacking in virility, in manly strength of character.

Auguste Vacquerie in a severely critical article on Musset says:--"Ce qui manque à l'artiste est ce qui manque à l'homme-- la virilité. L'homme est égoïste; il ne voit dans ce grand siècle en travail que sa personnalité, ses maîtresses, ses plaisirs ses chagrins, et ne s'occupe du labeur des autres que pour le railler et le décourager: l'artiste est égoïste, et ne peut faire que lui et ne crée personne.... Un adolescent imberbe et gracieux qui aspire à la force et qui n'arrive pas, tel est A. de M. comme homme et comme poète."

James points out Musset's contented smallness of horizon, his lack of energy, his isolation from the general interests and affairs of his time.

Carrère vehemently condemns Musset as a "mauvais maître"-- a harmful, unhealthy, degrading force in literature, lacking in all the essentially virile qualities of greatness. He alleges with most bitter emphasis that the cause of Musset's sorrow did not warrant such a magnitude of treatment:--

"Parler de grande douleur, s'épancher en sanglots désespérés, évoquer les plus tragiques images, faire comparaître en témoignage toutes les forces de la nature et tous les âges de l'humanité, se proclamer victime des dieux, uniquement parce que la gaillarde mère Sand s'est offert un béguin pour le solide Pagello, ah ! vraiment j'ose l'affirmer quand bien même je devrais me laisser à jamais honnir par toutes les fillettes en mal de puberté et tous les adolescents aux rêves érotiques, c'est la dérision de la misère humaine, c'est le sacrilège de la douleur! "

It is difficult to refrain from feeling that this

devastating indictment by Carrère is excessively cruel and too unfair. Nevertheless upon closer examination, we must admit there to be a good deal of truth in the remarks of all three critics. It is true that Musset's sorrow arouses our pity and our interest; the profound human quality, the utter sincerity of his cries touch our very hearts; But never does he inspire us with that grandeur and magnitude of human nature, that strength and fortitude of the truly great man.

Musset may have been too much an egoist, too weak, too unmanly. But no one can deny the sincerity of his emotions, the genuine-ness of his "purs sanglots". "Celui-là au moins n'a jamais menti. Il n'a dit que ce qu'il sentait, et il l'a dit comme il le sentait. Il a pensé tout haut. Il a fait la confession de tout le monde." (1)

No one can deny the sincerity of his friendship. He confided all his secrets to his brother Paul, who in turn revered him almost to a point of worship. Alfred Tattet, whom he met at the College Henri IV, remained his life-long friend and received his deepest devotion. His relations with Mme. Jaubert and his Uncle Desherbiers were of the most pleasant. No more striking evidence of Musset's kindness and powers of friendship can be found than in his devotion to animals; his dog Marzo during his later years was his constant companion and the object of all his love and care.

In spite of his weaknesses, Musset possessed many virtues. He was pleasing, sensible, modest in bearing, generous, a charming conversationalist, endowed with a sense of humour (a quality rare indeed among the Romantics).

(1) The Musset possessing these characteristics was
(1) Taine

These characteristics belonged to the "Caelio" in Musset; for Musset the man, as Musset the artist possessed a peculiarly dual character. There was a constant struggle within him, between two opposing forces---the "Caelio-Musset"--poetic, sensitive, dreamer, artist, and the "Octave-Musset"--weak, vacillating, débauché, who spent away his energies in taverns and houses of shame.

Musset was not a learned man. He had fine sensitive powers of discrimination and good common sense, but he had not the time nor the inclination to become a profound scholar. He read widely and his works abound in references to classical and foreign literature; but his knowledge was not detailed, his references often inaccurate and careless.

Musset was well versed in the history and appreciation of art, especially in that of the Italian Renaissance. He had a special aptitude for painting and his works include frequent references to it--(André del Sarto, Voeux Stériles, Revue Fantastique, Fils du Titien). He was extremely fond of music. He was a frequent visitor at the opera house and the concert-hall; La Malibran inspired him to write one of his most exquisite lyrics.

Neither was he a deep thinker. His ideas on philosophy and religion do not give evidence of great originality or powers of concentration; he realized his weakness and very seldom touched upon the great problems of life.

In Rolla, La Confession and L'Espoir en Dieu, he exhibits an earnest but none too satisfactory attempt to discuss religion. He was born and he lived in unorthodox surroundings, and most of his life he remained a skeptic. But he was never happy in his disbelief.

" Ma raison révoltée

Essaie en vain de croire et mon coeur de douter,

A qui m'adresserai-je et quelle voix amie

Consolera ce coeur que le doute a blessé ? (1)

He cursed his age, "vieil Arouet" for his inability to accept the faith of his forefathers,

"Je ne crois pas ô Christ a ta sainte parole

Je suis venu trop tard dans un monde trop vieux." (2)

But often he found consolation in vague and fleeting but sincere attempts to believe.

Musset loved the Paris in which he was born, and in which he lived for the most part of his life; he loved its restless bustle, its bracing freedom. He also loved his native land. True, he kept himself apart from politics and from public affairs but his stirring song *Le Rhin Allemand*, improvised in reply to a song of Becker's, bears all the anger, all the rancour of a man whose country's interest was near his own heart.

A word in *conclusion*. Musset the man was a strange and rather complex character. We find in him elements of grandeur, mingled with elements of pettiness and mediocrity. Musset was indeed no heroic figure; his chief attraction for us lies in his essential humanity. Musset shall always remain for us the twenty year old lover. Better than any one else did he understand the passionate joys and sorrows of love. He will always be loved and appreciated by youth, for youth finds in him a champion, a friend and a fellow-sufferer.

— (1) *L'Espoir en Dieu*
(2) *Rolla*

PART II : MUSSET THE ARTIST

It is difficult to dissociate Musset the artist from Musset the man, for his work is a direct expression of his own personality. We shall in the following pages attempt to analyse the works of Musset and come to definite conclusions with regard to the qualities and value of his art.

The works of Musset fall easily into three categories :- (1) poems
(2) drama
(3) prose.

We shall discuss each separately, and for purposes of clarity, in the order mentioned above.

A. MUSSET THE POET.

The poetic genius of Musset passed through the usual stages of evolution--gradual development, perfection, gradual degeneration, decadence.

The first stage (1829-33) is marked by a feeling of indecision, a groping in the dark after a medium of expression to suit his own temperament, a youthful exuberance in accepting leadership, in imbibing dogmas and poetic creeds, and just as youthful an abandonment of these dogmas and poetic creeds; resulting finally in the discovery of a medium adapted his own powers and his own sensibilities-- the personal, the lyrical, the self-revealing. This is the period of the *Premières Poésies*. It is the period of his poetic apprenticeship, his short-lived and enthusiastic acceptance of the exaggerated romanticism of the *Cénacle*, and of Don Juanism. It is the period also of his break with the Romantics, when his independent spirit would not suffer subjection to rules and laws, and of his discovery during the interval between the appearance of the *Contes d'Espagne* and the *Spectacle dans un Fauteuil*, that he was a lyric poet, and that he must sing of his own feelings, of his own sorrow, of his own love.

The second stage (1834-7) which marks the crisis of Musset's development, is that which includes the poetry written after the George Sand episode. The tremendous emotional upheaval which the poet experienced, and the poignant pain which resulted therefrom, acted as a

stimulus to the already present impulse to give expression to his personal feelings and emotions. As a result, the poet wrote some of the most glorious, most exquisite lyric poems in the French language, poems which for emotional sincerity, for depth of feeling, and for sheer beauty, are ^{almost} unparalleled.

The third stage (1837-57) which follows the three years of feverish activity after Musset's return from Italy, marks a gradual decline in his powers. Musset the poet — youth had died. There followed a period of lassitude, marked by occasional, short awakenings, when his genius lived again. The great void created after the emotional crisis, weighed heavily upon him, and only when he forced himself to reexperience, mentally and emotionally, those previous, painful incidents, did he write in his former manner. His genius seemed to have gradually ebbed away; and when death came at last, he welcomed it — sadly, bitterly, but with a sense of deep relief.

It ^{would} ~~must~~ be well to examine more carefully each of these three stages or periods in the development of Musset's poetry, to analyse the elements which influenced him at each stage; through a rapid survey of the more important poems, to discover the outstanding characteristics of each period, and to arrive at definite conclusions with regard to the qualities of his poetic genius, and the place he occupies in French poetry.

The Contes d'Espagne et d'Italie, (1829) which marked Musset's ^{début} into the literary world bears very markedly the imprint of the Romantic school. Musset copies its

love of local color, of the bizarre, the picturesque, the moyen[^]ageux. He sings of the charming Andalousienne "au sein bruni"; he captures the exotic glory of Spain, and the rich romantic color of Italy. He admires Byron passionately--the somber, satanic Don Juan who trails through Europe the "pageant of his bleeding^{heart}", the melancholy pessimist who is at war with God and man, appeals to his youthful imagination and he imitates him devotedly, fervently; his heroes--Don Paez, D alti, Raf ael, Mardoche, are all B yronic. He makes use of all the Cénacles literary tricks--the romantic tours de force, the enjambement, sentimentality, prosiness.

Let us examine in some detail the various poems which comprise the volume.

Venise is a simple, not ineffective love-poem, romantic in subject and treatment; Le V ieux Moutier exhibits the romantic love for the moyenageux, and contains at least several descriptive tableaux worthy of note--a sunset streaming through the rosace; the stone saints bent in eternal prayer.

Don Paez, a romantic poem--drama is the most important piece in the volume. In this tale of the tragic and fatal love of Don Paez for the unscrupulous Juana, we have an excellent example of the popular romantic poem in the Victor Hugo manner. It contains all the conventional literary ingredients which were deemed so necessary by the Cenacle--pride, jealousy, duena, rope-ladder, duel, love-philtre; it is written in a rhetorical melodramatic manner; and it has

managed to capture the ardor, the picturesque quality and the colorful beauty of Spain. Although the poem is noticeably lacking in polish and smoothness, and contains some lines of unbelievable mediocrity, as a début it is a powerful piece of work. It contains some descriptive passages of striking vividness. The description of Juana asleep in her richly furnished chamber is endowed with a warm Keatsian beauty--

"Tout était endormi

La lune se levait sa lueur souple et molle,

Glisant aux trèfles qui de l'égive espagnole....."

The duel between Don Paez and Don Etur is depicted with a dramatic vividness and a striking realism--

"Comme on voit dans l'été sur les herbes fauchées

Deux louves remuant dans les feuilles desséchées...."

The poem possesses youthful ardor, a colorfulness and dramatic movement, and exhibits a remarkably mature power of portraying emotions and feelings, and an excellent command of language.

Les Marrons du Feu, a rather complicated tale of a love-episode in the life of a Byronic dandy, is relieved by good characterisation, and some brilliant dialogue in which Musset has captured the finesse and graceful nonchalance of the eighteenth century.

Portia contains all the romantic prerequisites, a fine, boldly drawn portrait of the heroically pathetic Ornorio, some lines of unusual dramatic intensity, and several fine descriptive passages, one of which is particularly good-- that of a scene in the dark church at early dawn.

A Ulric Guttinguer is to my mind the only poem in this collection worthy of Musset at his best, of the Musset of the Nuits. It contains a note of genuine, poignant sincerity,

and one verse of real genius--

"Ulric, nul oeil des mers n'a mesuré l'abîme,
.....ses javelots."

The Ballade à la Lune is the most provoking poem in the volume, and though rather undeservedly, has attracted the most attention. The Romantics believed the poem to be a challenge to the classicists, because it so boldly disregarded the classic rules, and apparently emphasized the romantic theories. In reality, however, it was meant to be a satiric parody on the productions of the romantic school--on its over-sentimentalized descriptions and on its flagrantly audacious rhyme schemes. But apart from its satiric intent, the poem has little to recommend it.

Mardoche is a study of the typical Don Juan, written in a comic-heroic vein, exhibiting a charming wit and irony, hitherto unnoticed, and containing some passages of outstanding brilliance--eg.,

"Heureux un amoureux ! il ne s'enquête pas
Si c'est pluie ou gravier dont s'attarde son pas.
On en rit : c'est hasard s'il n'a heurté personne.
Mais sa folie au front lui met une couronne,
A l'épée une pourpre, et devant son chemin
La flûte et les flambeaux comme un jeune Romain ! "

As I have mentioned previously, the poems in this first volume are distinctly Romantic in tone and quality. It is true, however, that even at this early stage, Musset, whose temperament will not allow him to submerge his own individuality in a literary school, even now, Musset, "romantique né classique", does not follow his models too assiduously, and he manages to give his poems a personal imprint. Already his main

preoccupation lies in the depiction of Love. However, there is yet lacking in his poems the note of genuine-ness and sincerity which we find in his best poems. (As I have already mentioned, "Ulric Guttinguer" is the only exception). The poet cannot write of the consuming passions, of the sorrow and pain of love, for the simple reason that he has not yet experienced them. This difference is very much evident when we compare these early love poems with the poems written after Musset's break with Sand.

Sainte Beuve refers to the poems in this first collection as "a queer mixture of enfantillages de collégien and true genius". This is, I am afraid, only too true. The *Contes d'Espagne et d'Italie* is a very uneven work; it contains lines of surprising genius, and at the same time, passages of an unbelievable mediocrity and dulness. Its saving quality, however, as Nisard points out, lies in its "liberté", in its youthful freshness and abandon, in its "libéرتinage d'esprit" and "verve folle".

A new star had appeared in the firmament of the French literary heavens; and very shortly it was to shine forth with surprising brilliance and intensity.

We are now reaching the latter part of the first stage in the development of Musset's genius. We have already noticed his increasing dissatisfaction with Romanticism and his attempts at independence. This becomes more strikingly apparent, when we examine the poems appearing during the interval between the publication of *Contes d'Espagne* (1830) and the *Spe ctacle dans un Fauteuil* (1832).

Le Saule (1830) still contains many of the objectionable romantic features--overdone imagery, melodrama, artificiality; Tiburce, the melancholy student-lover of Georgina is definitely Byronic. But we are immediately struck by evidence of an amazing progress over anything Musset has previously attempted. There is a melody, a musical quality to the lines, that gives some of them a rare, exquisite beauty--

"Hélas que ce soit la nuit dans les orages,

Un jeune rossignol pleurant au fond des bois. "

The poem exhibits simple beauty, a genuine sincerity, a delicate and tender lyricism--qualities which are almost entirely lacking in the poems contained in Musset's first volume.

In Les Voeux Stériles, Musset makes an eloquent appeal for poetic freedom; the poem is also a vehement thrust against the Romantics, and is an excellent example of the new Musset, noteworthy for its fine satire and vigorous force. It contains some lines of exceptional brilliance:-

"Temps heureux, temps aimés....."; "Grèce, ô mère des arts....".

Musset's break with the Romantics reaches its climax in Les Secrètes Pensées de Raphael (1831). Again, and with even greater vehemence, he declares his independence. He satirizes the critics, the romantics, the classicists. He will be himself; his work will be a genuine expression of his own personality. Musset's satire is especially noteworthy in this poem--it ranges from the charmingly witty to the scathing, almost Swiftian brand.

I must also make mention here of the several love-lyrics written during this intermediary period--à Pepa, à Juana, à Julie, à Laura, Chanson--all of which exhibit, in addition to Musset's habitual simplicity and charm, an element of sincere passion,

and genuine lyricism. Worthy of especial note is the poem beginning--"J'ai dit à mon coeur, à mon faible coeur"--which is imbued with a haunting melancholy, and a pathetic simplicity--qualities which we have come to associate with Musset at his best.

Two years elapsed between the publication of his two first two volumes. The poems which are included in the Spectacle dans un Fauteuil, show us how thoroughly Musset was now emancipated from the influence of the Cénacle. The poems retain the grace and freshness of his earlier poems, but exhibit a sincerity, a freedom and a humanity which are new.

Musset, however, is still undecided with regard to his future poetic course. He attempts various genres--a dramatic poem in five acts, a charming comedy in which he deliberately disregards stage requirements, an Oriental tale which he uses as an excuse for the expression of his ideas--but he has not yet found himself. He is still groping for a medium through which he can give true expression to his genius.

La Coupe et les Lèvres is on the whole a sombre, gloomy poem, relating the tragedy of debauchery. It is disappointingly obscure and unwieldy; but it contains passages of exquisite freshness and lyric beauty--viz; Frank's story to Gunther of his meeting with Deidamia; the graceful idyll of Act V; the passage in the preface beginning with--"Lorsque la jeune fille à la source voisine". Here too, he states his poetical creed; he describes his hatred of artificiality, of Lamartinian "weepers"; he disclaims, (unjustly perhaps) any influence by Byron, and he emphasizes

his independence--

" Mon verre n'est pas grand, mais je bois dans mon verre "

A Quoi Revent les Jeunes Filles is a veritable poetic gem. For simplicity, charm, whimsicality, refreshing, poetic grace it is difficult to surpass. It reminds one at once of a delicate painting of Watteau, a delightfully witty comedy of Marivaux, and for its exquisite aërian quality, of A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Namouna is very uneven both in tone and composition. It is in turn cynical, almost morbid, passionately sincere, whimsical and witty and charmingly lyrical. It contains another indication of Musset's freedom from the influence of both the romantic and the classic schools. But what is most important--it sounds the personal note more strongly than ever; the portrait of Don Juan contains much that is Musset himself.

Musset is gradually beginning to see the clear road before him amidst the surrounding darkness.

We now arrive at the second stage (1833-7) in the evolution of Musset's poetic art. We are on the eve of the great crisis in his life--his unfortunate experience with George Sand.

Rolla (1833) although included in the second volume of his collected works, belongs, strictly speaking to his first period. It is a most uneven work, containing passages of surprising beauty and power and maturity of thought-- (Regrettez-vous le temps...), and others of distinct merit.

inferiority. In spite of the element of declamation and youthful cynicism (which was perhaps inevitable at this stage), in the discussion of such vital problems as religion and social tendencies, the poem contains much that is impressive and sincere. It is perhaps due to this unevenness, that "Rolla" has drawn such widely different opinions--such glowing praise from Taine and such vitriolic condemnation by Hémon and Lemaitre.

Arvède Barine's comment to the effect that "Qu'à tant d'éloquence, à tant d'émotion, dans ce poème de Rolla on eût pu deviner qu'une crise morale était proche et que la passion cherchait l'auteur de l'Andalouse"--is only too true.

He met Sand, and for a period of time he enjoyed (he enjoyed) perfect happiness; but his happiness was short-lived and during the separation that followed, he suffered tremendous agony. And this suffering brought unusually effective poetic fruits. It acted as a stimulus to the already present germ; it was the brilliant light which showed him the way out of his darkness. He had at last discovered ~~(the)~~ his true medium of expression! He would sing of his own emotions, of his own sufferings, of his own love. He would be a personal, a lyric poet. He would be the poet of Love.

As a result, he wrote some of the most intensely moving lyric poems in world literature. The four Nuits form a tetralogy which for the depiction of grief in its most poignant, most personal form, have never been surpassed. They are nothing less than "purs sanglots", escaping from a soul intensely sensitive, and in the throes of vibrant anguish. The Lettre à Lamartine, the Stances à la Malibran and Lucie, are brilliant lyrical gems of the highest order, cries of passion and of grief.

It would be interesting, I believe, to examine each of the Nuits from both a literary and emotional standpoint. Each of the four poems is distinctly different; each is part of an ensemble, a unity. Each Nuit expresses or describes a different state of the poet's soul during this terrific crisis. And from the ensemble, we can reconstruct a composite, living portrait of the Musset of that period.

The Nuit de Mai (May, 1835) is according to Sainte-Beuve "one of the most touching, and most sublime cries of a young heart overflowing". (1) The poet shrinks with apparent horror and indignation from the suggestion of the Muse that he bare his heart pelican-wise and offer it to the world as a "festin divin". But already he realizes that he will and must do so. He firmly believes in his grief; he is proud of it; he cultivates it. The magnificent metaphor of the pelican is endowed with remarkable emotion and dramatic tenseness. There are other lines in the poem of a grandeur and imaginative splendor hitherto unrivalled.

The Nuit de Décembre (Dec. 1835) is much more melancholy in tone than the Nuit de Mai; the latter in contrast, to be sure, exhibits a degree of joy and animated lightness. The poet soliloquizing, grieves over the spectre of solitude which seems to always hover over him; and bitterly he tells of the perfidy of the woman he loved. Although Paul de Musset denies that the woman referred to here is Sand, we are inclined to disbelieve this, since it is inconsistent with the apparent unity of design in the tetralogy, and since Paul may have very conceivably altered the facts to lessen Sand's importance.

(1) Portraits Contemporains.

Nuit d'Août (Aug. 15, 1836), apart from a passage of deep feeling, a "hymn to Eros"--proclaiming the magnificence of love and suffering, is refreshingly calm and restrained.

The Nuit d'Octobre (Oct. 15, 1837), last of the series, is the most beautiful, the most universally significant, if not the most dramatic and most poignant. It contains eloquence and sincerity, a music and movement which varies to suit the different emotions exhibited--a slow movement of calm at the beginning, a climax of impassioned anger, and a diminuendo-like return to calm--truly a work of consummate artistry.

The Lettre à Lamartine (Mar. 1, 1837) which was written in the interval between Nuit d'Août and Nuit d'Octobre, is one of the most pathetic and heart-rending poems Musset ever wrote. He discovers in his beloved Lamartine a sympathetic friend, for he too has suffered from the cruelties of woman, he too has experienced the exquisite pangs and glorious pains of love; and he lays bare his broken heart to him. There are few more powerfully moving, more poignant lines in French literature than those beginning with--

"O mon unique amour ! que vous avais-je fais ! "...

The poem in itself however is very uneven; its beauty is marred by lines which strike one as being melodramatic and rhetorical

Stances à la Malibran (1836) is a beautiful, impassioned elegy upon the death of the famous singer who sacrificed her life to her art. Her love of music, all-consuming, was divine, magnificent, for--

"Rien n'est bon que d'aimer, n'est vrai que de souffrir".

We now arrive at the third stage in the evolution of Musset's poetic genius. The tremendous amount of energy expended during these several years of glorious composition seemed to have wearied the poet. The inspiration he had gained from his grief disappeared when only the scars remained to tell the story of his deep and bloody wound. He had sung long and beautifully of his sorrow; but his sorrow had gradually changed to bitterness, for in his unending search for happiness through brothels and drinking-houses he found no consolation and no forgetfulness.

His friends were few; he belonged to no coterie which could offer encouragement or help. Inspiration came very seldom, and when it did come, (usually during a period of acute discouragement or pain), for too short a period of time. We find that during this period which lasted from 1837 until his death, he wrote few poems of note. These are shining stars in a black and empty wilderness---his several sonnets, *Souvenir* (1841), *Tristesse*.

Musset's sonnets--à Victor Hugo, à Regnier, à Sa Mairaine, --all exhibit a charm, and a modest sincerity, a harmony and melody which make them worthy of comparison with the best of the sixteenth century sonneteers.

Souvenir (1841) is a last or a belated *Nuit*. A visit to Fontainebleau and a meeting with Sand at the theatre soon afterwards, revived the memory of his tragic experience; and he wrote this beautifully serene and quietly impressive poem in which he forgives his unfaithful mistress, and promises to cherish the memory of their deep love .

This poem can readily be compared with Lamartine's

Le Lac and Victor Hugo's Tristesse d'Olympio; all three deal with the same subject--the memories aroused by a visit to a place of previous happiness. Nevertheless each remains distinctively interesting.

Le Lac is an incomparable elegy. Its infinite charm and purity, its perfection of execution, its divine music, make it a poem of tremendous beauty.

Tristesse d'Olympio is superior to the other two in its imaginative splendour, its rich imagery, its universal grandeur, but what it gains in impressiveness, it loses in sincerity.

Souvenir is the most human of the three, the most real, the most poignantly sincere. Here "la passion même parle toute pure".

L'Espoir en Dieu, apart from its apparent sincerity has little to commend it; there is nothing very original or very profound about this, one of Musset's rare attempts to find consolation in religion.

Dupont et Durand (1838) is satiric, witty, and reminiscent of the freshness of the earlier Musset.

Sylvia and Simone, two pretty contes in verse, bear the influence of La Fontaine and Boccaccio.

Tristesse (1840) written under the stress of a period of profound discouragement and mental agony, is a hauntingly beautiful lyric, and contains lines of rare charm--

"J'ai perdu ma force et ma vie,

Le seul bien qui me reste au monde est d'avoir

quelquefois pleuré."....

Sur une Morte (1842) is a bitter poem on a cruel, heartless woman (the Princesse Uranie Belgiojoso).

A M on Frere Revenant d'Italie (1844) exhibits a notable simplicity and melancholy beauty.

Le Souvenir des Alpes (1851) Musset's last poem (apart from the astonishingly beautiful fragment published posthumously in 1857-"L'heure de ma morte...."), exhibits very clearly the decline in the poet's powers. It is marked by carelessness, irregularity, obscurity.

Musset the great poet had died in 1837. These "posthumous" poems, attempts to recapture the genius which had fled from him, are with the exception of a few, unworthy and unfortunate.

And now, after having rather carefully studied the growth and decline of Musset's poetic genius, we shall attempt to analyze that supreme gift of poetic expression which was granted him for so short a period of time, and to discover the salient features of his style.

Musset is primarily a lyric poet. He is at his best when he sings of his own love, his own unhappiness. Rarely has any poet sung with deeper emotion, with deeper sincerity, and with more sweetness and charm, of youth and the sorrows of love. Endowed with an acute sensitiveness, a susceptibility to impressions and emotions, he also possessed the rare art of expressing such sentiments into poignant, musical verse.

Musset is the poet of youth. His poetry exhibits the candour, the freedom, the grace and the spirit of youth. If in his first poems he sings of the gaiety and the frivolity of youth, in his later poems he sings of the sorrows and the sadness of youth.

Musset is sincere. What he has to say comes from his very soul. (We speak here of the mature artist). It is true

that Musset is often rhetorical and declamatory. In this connection the *Lettre à Lamartine* and *Rolla* are poems which immediately come to mind. In the latter poem, the author "invokes" among others, Christ, Faust, Romeo, Voltaire, the nineteenth century, and the negroes of Saint Domingue. But it is wrong to impute this to insincerity. The author, as we shall see later, was attempting to treat of a tremendous subject in a manner which he was incapable of using, a manner which was foreign to his ability as a man and as an artist; his defect must then be imputed to incapability, failure to achieve his end, rather than to conscious insincerity. Neither can one with justice regard him as the constant "attendant dwarf" of Byron. Undoubtedly he was very much influenced by the English poet in his youth, and later he found in him a fellow-sufferer, but Musset's mature poetry is too sincerely personal to allow us to presuppose any idea of deliberate imitation. Musset was undoubtedly sincere.

Musset's poems possess a youthful grace, a limpidity of movement, a refreshing charm, which is altogether admirable. This quality of exquisite freshness and beauty is evident in such fine lines as ,

"Un jeune rossignol pleurant au fond des bois " -.. in *Le Saule* or in the dream-like atmosphere of *A Quoi Révent les Jeunes Filles*.

Musset possesses a degree of esprit, that is strongly reminiscent of the eighteenth century for its buoyant gaiety, its seductive charm. Fine evidence of this strikingly effective type of wit can be found in *Namouna*, *Ballade à la Lune*, *Une Bonne Fortune*, and in parts of *Dupont et Durand*.

As a result of this fine quality, the poet excels in the

in the causerie in verse, which in its mixture of wit and fancy, is a distinctly French genre. *Namouna* and *Après une Lecture* are very fine examples of this type of poetry.

Musset's language is supple, smooth-running, harmonious. Although his rhymes are often feeble and monotonous, his verse is unmistakably in the French tradition. His descriptive images, although not as brilliant as those of Victor Hugo, or as sensuously rich as those of Keats, are nevertheless imbued with a charm and effectiveness all his own.

The poet of youth however, suffered of the faults of youth. He lacked those great powers of thought and imagination which are prerequisite to the writing of great poetry. He lacked that magnitude of mind and imagination which arrives at Universal Truth and Beauty.

Whenever Musset attempts grandeur premeditatively, whenever he treats of problems of universal significance,-- philosophy, religion, sociology--(*Rolla*, *L'Espoir en Dieu*)--, he fails miserably, for he is incapable of profound thought. When he attempts to treat of the elemental, of the impressive, with which Hugo is so successful, he becomes clumsy, uneasy, and is forced to use apostrophes and false rhetoric. "*Son haleine est courte et son art délicat, impuissant aux grandes constructions*" (1). He knew his limitations and so he was content to remain the lyric, the personal poet, and to restrict himself to the depiction of his own self, of his own emotions.

With the carelessness and disregard of youth, Musset allowed his poetry to leave his desk, unrevised and bearing many marks of imperfection. There are frequent evidences of poor composition, incorrect grammar, obscurity, affectation, and obscenity,

that can only be accounted for by carelessness. The work of Musset lacks the chiselled perfection and the fine workmanship of Gautier or Leconte de Lisle. There is somewhat of an affectation in this defect of Musset's. It seems to have been a type of youthful dandyism which was prevalent at the time --the desire to write poetry "en gentilhomme", in a wilfully amateurish manner.

Later we shall discuss the influence and place of Musset in French lyric poetry. Suffice it here to say that for grace, for wit, for charming and refreshing youthfulness, for sincerity and for passion, for beauty of conception and execution, Musset has few rivals.

B. MUSSET THE DRAMATIST

Musset occupies a unique position in the history of the French drama. His plays do not, strictly speaking, belong to the romantic movement; for the most part they were written with no intention of being seen presented on the stage, and so were freed of all the romantic requirements of stage and subject. Neither can one regard them as definitely carrying on the tradition of the classical school. It is true that, being aware of the limitations and defects of the Romantics, he writes (1) in 1838--"Ne serait-il pas curieux de voir aux prises avec le drame moderne, qui se croit souvent terrible quand il n'est que ridicule, cette muse farouche, inexorable, telle qu'elle était aux beaux jours d'Athènes, quand les vases d'airain tremblaient à sa voix ?". But his plays made no attempt to ~~introduce~~ such sweeping changes; indeed, his only attempt at a classic tragedy--La Servante du Roi--remained unfinished, and the fragment which exists is decidedly ordinary.

Musset's plays, as do his poems, exhibit an individuality, a subjectivity, which stamps them as peculiarly his own. For that reason they did not serve as models for his successors. And it is also primarily for that reason that they have remained to most durable, the most lasting of the plays written during the Romantic period.

It is interesting to note that the drama, as did the poetry of Musset, underwent a distinct evolution. Here too, we can notice a period of gradual development, during which Musset tried his hand at various dramatic genres--the

¹ *Blanche, the comedy*
(1) De la Tragedie (1838)

bluette, the comedy, the historical drama, the proverbe--until he discovered the two genres which were particularly suited to his gifts.

The first of these was the comedy-drama of love. Here the poet of love could speak of what was nearest and most important to his heart; for he knew only too well, love with all its tortures, all its ecstasies, all its beauty, all its sordidness. He instilled these plays with a distinctive charm and poetry, a fineness of perception and acute psychological insight, a colorful richness and a youthful, seductive beauty.

The second genre in which he attained great success was the proverbe--the simple, charming comédie familière or comédie de salon. This was particularly suited to his exquisite wit, his fine powers of delicate delineation of character, and enchanting pastel effects. Lenient speaks of Musset as the "Benvenuto Cellini du Proverbe, faisant de la moindre saignette un bijou précieux." Without the shadow of a doubt, he brought this genre which he had inherited from the eighteenth century, to a point of perfection hitherto unrivalled.

But after 1847, when he had already been recognized as a successful dramatist, and he had begun to write plays expressly for the stage, his work, with few exceptions, showed a marked decline. The element of freedom and charming whimsicality, of naturalness and simplicity, which seemed to have been the essential trait of his comedies and proverbes, became strikingly absent. His enforced attention to décor and to stage contingencies was too much of a strain upon Musset the individualist, and his work bore sad evidence of his uneasiness.

We shall now examine the plays of Musset in their chronological order, and attempt to recognize in them this gradual evolution that we have mentioned. We shall also discover the features which unite to constitute his individual dramatic art, and to appraise his value and significance as a dramatist.

Musset's first dramatic attempt was a simple comedy curtain-raiser, a blquette in three tableaux, entitled La Nuit Vénitienne ou Les Noces de Laurette, which appeared in 1830. He wrote it on the encouragement of the director of L'Odéon, who was impressed by the dramatic ability evident in the Contes d'Espagne et d'Italie. The première performance of La Nuit Vénitienne was a distinct failure.

This was probably due, as much to the antipathy of the public towards the Romantics (the play exhibits to a marked degree all the faults of the Romantic school), as to its mediocrity. The play is in itself, melodramatic, puerilely sentimental, inconsistent; it shows unmistakable marks of hastiness and inexperience, and aside from its influence upon Musset's subsequent career, and the inclusion of two well-drawn characters, the play is of little or no importance. Laurette's guardian, the Marquis della Ronda and the prince's secretary Grimm are the first in a series of grotesque figures which we find throughout the plays of Musset. These two characters have as yet not acquired the air of unreality, the lightness and ambiguity of the marionette manipulated upon a string--qualities of Musset's later creations--nevertheless they show, on the part of the author, decidedly promising powers of characterisation and a fine supple wit.

As a result of the unfavorable reception of this, his first play, Musset, astonished and profoundly discouraged, vowed that he would never write again (~~for~~) for the stage; and he kept his word until ten years before his death. This was most ~~un~~fortunate, for in freeing himself from all requirements of the stage and mode, he was able to give free scope to his own imagination and fancy, and to endow his plays with a freshness and spontaneity, a naturalness and charming variety which they would have otherwise lacked.

In 1832, he published the Spectacle dans un Fauteuil which contained *Les Marrons du Feu*, *La Coupe et les Levres*, and *A Quoi Révent les Jeunes Filles*--plays written to be read rather than to be performed.

In the same spirit he composed his *Comédies and Proverbes*, some fifteen in number, and published them singly in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. In 1840 they appeared in a collected edition, and they would have remained so, had it not been for a whim of Mme. Allan-Despréaux who discovered Le Caprice in a Russian translation on the stage in St. Petersburg. She brought it to Paris in 1847, and it became an immediate success. Soon the plays of Musset became the rage. Most of them were adapted for the stage, and the public clamoured for more.

Musset, who had by this time almost ceased to write, attempted to satisfy their demands. But when he set himself to write these plays expressly for the stage, he found that he could not do so at all successfully, for he could not bear to be tied to any restriction; and his art suffered a marked decline.

Three years after his dramatic début, in 1833, there appeared André del Sarto, a historical drama in two acts, which showed an immense progress over his previous work. This tragedy of love and jealousy exhibits an assurance and ease that was hitherto lacking; it exhibits powers of psychological analysis and character depiction that are surprisingly mature, and descriptive and dramatic powers of a decidedly high order. The play is a profound study of love--all-powerful, all fatal love. André has sacrificed his ideals, his art, his very honor, for the love of perfidious Lucrece. Cordiani becomes a traitor and an assassin for the love of the same woman. Yet Lucrece, the central figure of the tragedy, is not fundamentally depraved; nor is Cordiani a roué or a coward. It is love, fatal, overpowering, relentless, which has drawn them together; and they cannot escape it even if they will. André attempts to combat this magnetic attraction, but he fails and he dies in the struggle.

Even at this early stage, Musset has recognized the sphere in which he could best display his talents--in the study of Love; but he has as yet not found a satisfactory vehicle. This historic drama suffers a lack of atmosphere, of local color, as a result of the author's concentration on the drama proper--a fault which could have easily been avoided, had he chosen a genre less ambitious.

In the next play, Les Caprices de Marianne (1833) Musset chose a happier medium in which to treat of his favorite subject. Once again he emphasizes the blind furore of love. But here the originality lies in the poetic, graceful form which he gives to his thought. The influence of Shakespeare is very marked here--in the liberty exercised in the matter of unities of time and place, in the mixture of genres, and in

the enchanting dialogue. The play is a drama in that its subject is the sad love and death of Caelio; it is sombre and melancholy; there is an air of fatalism about it that is reminiscent of ancient tragedy. And yet it contains elements of comedy (the grotesque element in Claudio and Tibia, the clowning of Octave, the gay, impertinent conversation between Octave and Marianne) which give it a lightness and charming liveliness.

This element of duality Musset carries even into his characterisation. In Octave and Caelio Musset has depicted the two sides of his own nature. Octave is his "mauvais moi"--the carefree skeptic who laughs at everything "pour ne pleurer de rien"; Caelio is Musset the idealist, the dreamer, the timid, sensitive, true artist. His life was a constant struggle to suppress the Octave in him, the destroyer of his genius.

Musset, in this play, has undoubtedly shown himself to be a master in the use of words. His dialogue contains all the nuances, the penetration and the shades of character, of the true artist. It ranges from sheer marivaudage to the bitterly sarcastic, from the boisterously humorous to lines of exquisite tenderness and pathos, lines pregnant with sincerity and meaning. Octave's touching elegy at the grave of his friend is endowed with a poignant beauty and lyricism rarely found in drama. If the play lacks magnitude, originality of plot, or too profound characterisation, we are more than compensated by the brilliance of form he has given it, by the beauty and magnificence of his dialogue.

Fantasio (1834) is a "folle, sage et délicieuse comédie". Again in this play, and to a more striking degree than heretofore, we note the influence of Shakespeare upon Musset--in its mixture of reality and fancy, of folly and

wisdom, in its sparkling dialogue, and in its freshness and delicate beauty. Few comedies of Musset are more charming; few are endowed with more grace and spiritualité.

Julleville claims that there is absolutely nothing in the literature of the nineteenth century that can compare with the magnificent conversation between Fantasio and Spark in the second scene of the play. There are very few scenes comparable to that "gentle dialogued dream", of his first meeting in the garden with the princess.

The play boasts of one of the most strikingly vivid characterizations in all of Musset's drama. Fantasio, that enfant du siècle who seeks in vain to escape from the disillusion and ennui, which has eaten into his very soul, whom neither earthly love nor religion can satisfy, who finds relief in acting the chevalier d'amour, in bringing happiness to the helpless little princess, this Fantasio is intensely real, intensely moving, intensely human. For young Fantasio, that "diamant d'esprit" (Elsbeth's remark on the former jester is equally applicable to him), is to some extent the incarnation of Musset himself--Musset the gay, brilliant, young lover of Sand in the midst of their honeymoon, Musset in whose heart the fatal germ of doubt and disillusion was already present.

Lemaître very wisely writes: "Fantasio est un étudiant bohème à qui Musset a prêté son âme: Fantasio s'ennuie--parce qu'il a trop aimé; il se croit désespéré, il voit la laideur et l'inutilité du monde--parce qu'il n'aime plus. Il a comme Musset, "L'amour de l'amour", et après chaque dégoût, l'invincible besoin de recommencer l'expérience, et dans la satiété toujours revenu le désir, toujours renaissant."

Once again Musset returns to the theme he constantly

repeated in his plays--the all-importance of Love. Love, he believed should never be sacrificed to higher duties; it is supreme; it is omnipotent; and "Les combinaisons politiques, les affaires qu'on appelle sérieuses, la guerre et la paix, l'alliance des souverains, les intérêts des peuples qu'est-ce que tout cela au prix d'une larme sur la joue d'une enfant?" (1)

Lorenzaccio (1834) a historical drama in five acts, must be regarded in a class by itself; it exhibits qualities of power and grandeur which we do not associate with Musset ordinarily.

During his stay in Florence, Musset read the tales of Varchi, and there amidst the scenes of which he read, he reconstructed for us with scrupulous exactitude to fact, a fine picture of life in Renaissance Florence. Florence, corrupt and brilliant, atheistic and orthodox; a bustling, scheming, living city where libertinage and humanism went hand in hand, where Republicans intrigued for their city's freedom, while the court revelled in debauchery.

And amidst this vari-colored scene, he introduced a tragedy in the life of one man --the irreparable tragedy of debauchery. (an idea which forms the subject of *La Coupe et les Levres* and which he later introduced in *La Confession*). Lorenzo, prompted through motives fundamentally egoistic, vows to rid Florence of its tyrant (*Il faut que je sois un Brutus*) (2) He becomes the confidant of the king and affects the manner of a débauché; but when his role is ended, when he attempts to unmask himself, he realizes that he cannot throw off his disguise--"Je me suis fait à mon métier. Le vice a été pour moi un vêtement; maintenant il est collé à ma peau." (3) He has

(1) *Julleville* (2) and (3) Act III, Sc iii.

become an object of hatred and ridicule ; he has degenerated physically and spiritually. And what is most tragic, he realizes that his sacrifice has been in vain, for Florence must remain under the yoke of another tyrant. Lemaître's subtitle--"On ne badine pas avec la débauche" seems justified.

This study of Lorenzaccio is remarkably well done; its broadness, its impressiveness, its grandeur are unmistakably the work of a great artist.

Prof. Kuhns writes:- "Lorenzaccio is clumsy, awkward-- a mere sketch beside Shakespere's drama (Hamlet)...If such a man ever did exist, he was abnormal, and the abnormal has no place in the drama (surprisingly narrow and prejudicial view !) which ought to give us a well-proportioned picture of human life. Hamlet, individual as he is, is yet universal; every one of us having his peculiar organisation might have done as he did...."

Lorenzaccio to me, however, is a living and pathetically human character; I find in him as universally significant traits as those in Hamlet. No one can deny the fine sincerity, the heroic grandeur of soul that he exhibits in that magnificent scene in which he explains to Philippe Strozzi the necessity of his useless crime; nor his utterly human and strangely naive love for his mother; nor the helpless sincerity of his sorrow on the realization of how low he had fallen (when he unconsciously attempts to induce Catherine to accept Alexandre's invitation). In his plan to wreke revenge upon the tyrant of Florence he is no more abnormal than Hamlet is in revenging his father's "foul and most unnatural murder".

No, Lorenzo is a thoroughly human, thoroughly real man. Musset understood him well, for Lorenzo was a part of him; he saw in the Florentine what he feared he might himself some

day become.

The play exhibits a fine progress over Musset's previous work in the use of language and powers of analysis and characterisation. It shows a hitherto unnoticed depth and versatility in dramatic powers. There are scenes here ranging from charming poignancy and pathos (the self-revealing scenes of Lorenzaccio), to those of terrifying impressiveness, markedly reminiscent of the great dramas of Shakespeare (the stark, bold realism of the murder scene).

The only striking defect lies in its lack of unity of plot. There are several subsidiary plots in addition to the main "Lorenzo" plot--the one involving the marquise Cibo, and the other involving Louise Strozzi--the result being somewhat of confusion and a distinct retardment of movement.

On the whole we must admit that if Lorenzaccio is not the most impressive and the most important of the works of Musset with regard to subject and treatment, it is at least the greatest of its type of the period in which it was written.

On ne Badine pas avec l'Amour, which appeared in the Revue des Deux Mondes in 1834, very shortly after his return from Italy, is undoubtedly Musset's dramatic chef-d'oeuvre. It is a work less pretentious in scope, less powerfully moving, than Lorenzaccio; but it is the most representative, the most original, the most perfect in itself, of the works of Musset.

The play in its Shakesperian mixture of truth and fancy, of gaiety and sadness, of the comic and the tragic, is real, vivid and life-like. "La gaieté est quelquefois triste et la mélancholie a le sourire sur les lèvres " said Musset. And yet there is about this play a halo of a dream-like quality

a fantastic whimsicality, a charming, graceful quality of the pays de rêve, reminiscent of a painting of Watteau, in which "les vents ont une haleine amoureuse, l'air est traversé de soupirs et ces soupirs s'achevent en sanglots " (1). The grotesque figures (Maitre Blazius, Maitre Bridaine, the Baron, Dame Pluche), and the symbolic chorus of peasants with the only too real characters to emphasize their reality. The dialogue is the most musical, and most poetical in all of Musset's drama. The plot is endowed with all the subtle nuances and charming complications of Marivaux. And altogether these elements blend to form a distinctive world of charm and poetry. "entre ciel et terre", a blend of reality and fancy, of true life and romance, that reminds us very much of the inimitable world of Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream.

Nowhere does Musset penetrate so deeply or analyse so finely the emotion of love. How well he seems to know the fickle misguided Camille; how well he understands the love-sick Perdican ! There is no more admirable scene, none which exhibits more his knowledge of the human heart, than that in which is depicted the meeting of Camille and Perdican at the fountain in the woods (Act III, Sc.v). How excellently he conveys to us the various shades and moods the two characters exhibit during their poignantly sincere conversation! How well he can read the struggle in their young hearts--Camille's love combatting her overweening pride, Perdican blinded with resentment at her indifference.

How true Perdican's lines ring !--One cannot refrain from quoting the whole of this magnificent passage.

"Adieu Camille, retourne à ton couvent, et lorsqu'on te fera de ces récits hideux qui t'ont empoisonnée, reponds ce que je

vais te dire; Tous les hommes sont menteurs, inconstants, faux, bavardes, hypocrites, orgueilleux ou laches, méprisables et sensuels; toutes les femmes sont perfides, artificieuses, vaniteuses, curieuses et dépravées; le monde n'est qu'un égout sans fond où les phoques les plus informes rampent et se tordent sur des montagnes de fange; mais il y a au monde une chose sainte et sublime, c'est l'union de deux de ces êtres si imparfaits et si affreux. On est souvent trompé en amour, souvent blessé et souvent malheureux; mais on aime, et quand on est sur le borde de sa tombe, on se retrouve pour regarder en arrière, et on se dit : J'ai souffert souvent, je me suis trompé quelquefois, mais j'ai aimé. C'est moi qui ai vécu, et non pas un être factice créé par mon orgueil et mon ennui."

These words seem to come from Musset's very heart; they are filled with the anguish and the passionate grief of a man who has loved and suffered, a man for whom Love has become synonymous with Life itself.

The last famous couplet contains Musset's whole philosophy of life--it is the theme which recurs thru all his poetry and drama. Love is all-powerful, all-embracing, all-important. And in this "comédie", he shows us the tragic consequences of treating love lightly. The cruel badinage of Perdican and Camille brings ruin into the lives of three people--to the poor little innocent Rosette who dies a victim of their foolish play; to the proud and haughty Camille who will spend the rest of her life in a convent embittered by remorse and disappointment; and to the sensitive and fundamentally weak Perdican, whose mind will be forever troubled by what he regards as a cruel murder.

La Quenouille de Barberine (1835) (revised as "Barberine" in 1853), marks the beginning of another stage in the evolution of Musset the dramatist. Henceforth his plays exhibit a lightness, a spirit of gay comedy unalloyed. The note of tragedy which underlies On ne Badine pas, Fantasio, Les Caprices de Marianne, becomes conspicuously absent. Musset's deep and tragic wound has all but healed; and his plays bear witness of this fact in the light "spirituel" banter, in the brilliant superficiality with which he now treats of love. He ceases to speak from his heart. No longer (except perhaps in Le Chandelier and later in Carmosine) do we feel in his lines the sincerity and the pathos of his greatest plays. He is now the brilliant mondaine, who is witty at the expense of being sincere, sophisticated at the expense of being universally appealing. Nevertheless this new type of play, which later develops into the "proverbe", is suited to his powers, and he achieves in it a good deal of success.

Barberine (is a charmingly simple comedy ~~relating~~ of the punishment which a witty, faithful wife inflicts upon a scoffing Don Juan. There is nothing profound or complicated about it. As Lenient points out, it is less a comedy than a novelette put into action. The plot is slightly reminiscent of Shakespere's "Cymbeline"; but that is indeed where the comparison must end, for aside from a strikingly original characterisation of that of the little Turkish servant Kalekairi), and a simple and quiet beauty which runs through it, there is nothing approximating greatness in the play.

Le Chandelier which belongs to the same fruitful year (1835), is clearly reminiscent of the society-dramas of the eighteenth century, in its grace, wit, light satire; yet Musset

gives it a thoroughly distinctive personal touch. The play is based upon an adventure of his own youth. At the age of 17, at Auteuil, he had played the disappointing role of Fortunio to a haughty inattentive Jacqueline; and now seven years later, he transcribed this then painful experience with truthful sincerity and charming eloquence. The play is noteworthy chiefly for its fine characterisation. The portraits of the four leading characters are brilliantly drawn---Clavaroche-the boorish, egoistic rascal; Maître André-clumsy old irritable fool of a husband; Jacqueline-worldly, audacious, yet thoroughly sympathetic coquette, possessing several traits which remind us of Sand, who broke the heart of another, older Fortunio; and the most interesting and certainly best drawn-Fortunio-the charming prototype of the adolescent Musset--candid, vivacious, he reminds one of Chérubin, only he is less sophisticated, less artful than Beaumarchais' delightful little rascal, and he possesses a quality of sadness and poignant tenderness which is distinctly mussetiste.

Il ne faut jurer de rien (1836) belongs to the genre of light society proverbes and charming bluettes, which compose the remainder of Musset's dramatic efforts. The plot is simple and swift-moving; it treats of the transformation of a blasé dandy who mocks at woman's virtue, into a romantic lover, through the unconscious efforts of a charming maiden. The dialogue exhibits Musset's broad powers--it is witty (conversation between Uncle and Valentin in Act I), broadly farcical (between the Baronne and the Abbé), charmingly poetic (the scene in which the two young people declare their love for each other, in the woods). The characterisation is good; Cécile is one of the most delightful creatures Musset ever created,

one of the most real and most unaffected ingénues; the Baronne and Van Buck are types; surprisingly enough the Abbé whose name we do not even know, and who speaks very few lines, is a fine, clear-cut and remarkably human creation.

Le Caprice (1837) is notable for its historical significance, since (as I have previously mentioned) ten years later, it served to reintroduce Musset to the public; and this resulted in his resuming to write for the theatre.

It is nothing more than a blquette, a delightful little literary bauble, that has the delicacy and the charm of a pastel. It has practically no plot--it is a psychological study, if one might call it such, of two young married people who are beginning to drift apart as a result of the ennui of seeing too much of each other, and tells of how their little quarrel which might have brought serious consequences, is patched up for them through the good offices of a witty, sensible friend. The beauty of the play lies entirely in the exquisite form the author has given it--in its natural, simple yet brilliant dialogue, in its charming wit and in its thoroughly Parisian flavor. One feels that Théophile Gautier's brilliant éloge in the Feuilleton Dramatique, on the day following its première, is not too much exaggerated: "Depuis Marivaux....il n'est rien produit à la Comédie Française de si fin, de si délicat, de si doucement enjoué que ce chef-d'oeuvre mignon."

Eight years (1837-45) elapsed between the writing of Le Caprice and his next work-- Il faut qu'une porte soit ouverte ou fermée. This charming proverb, which exhibits a fine esprit and excellent powers of reproducing conversation is regarded by many as Musset's most striking play of this

type. Here there is practically no suggestion of a plot; the play consists of nothing more than a simple yet scintillatingly brilliant conversation between two characters.

By this time Musset the artist was practically dead. His best plays as well, as his best poems were already written. His short-lived genius which had burnt with such brightness and intensity, now flickered feebly. He was tired, disillusioned. The years following the dreadful agony of separation from George Sand, during which he indulged in feverish poetic and dramatic activity, brought him little comfort. He sought to forget; he lost himself in drink and debauchery, and during the period which ensued, as a result, he wrote little worthy of note.

In 1845, Le Caprice was presented on the stage. In 1847, he wrote On ne saurait penser à tout, and a little later Louison both expressly for the stage, and to suit the requirements of the actresses Rose Chéri and Augustine Brohan respectively. The first play exhibits a most audacious plagiarism from a proverb by Carpentier; neither work shows any special merit.

In 1850, with the writing of the delightful, poetic comedy, Carmosine, there came a momentary awakening of Musset's dramatic genius. The play breathes of a tender, dream-like atmosphere of love, in which, as in Fantasio and On ne Badine pas truth and fancy meet. This charming tale of the secret love of Carmosine for the king, and its cure through the help of the minstrel Minuccio, boasts of dialogue of outstanding beauty, (Act I, Sc. viii; Act II, Sc. ii), at least one scene of magnificent workmanship (Act III - in which the queen with infinite tact and gentleness, attempts to persuade Carmosine of the folly of her love), elements of Molièresque wit and grotesque comedy

(Dame Paque, Vespasiano), and a sweetness and purity, a fine insight and understanding of the human heart, which is rare even in the best of Musset's works.

Apart from several plays of little importance, Carmosine may be regarded as Musset's last play.

Let us now attempt, through a rapid glance over all his dramatic works, to gather what appear to be the outstanding characteristics of his art, to discover the secret of the charm of his plays and the reason for their durability.

In our discussion we must concentrate upon Musset's "dream plays", his comédie-dramas of love, written for the most part during the interval 1830-7. Lorenzaccio possesses peculiar qualities of its own; and the blquette-proverbes, while exhibiting a perfection and exquisite charm, a légèreté de touche, and fine powers over dialogue, are nevertheless works of lesser importance, and it is not upon them that Musset's fame as a dramatist will rest.

Musset was primarily the artist of love. We have had many an occasion to notice that this was his whole religion, the subject of prime importance to him. His plays exhibit an astounding knowledge of the human heart; his lovers are all so thoroughly human, their problems are so like our own, that they find an echo in each and every one of us; and it is this universal quality that constitutes the prime reason for their appeal and their durability.

Musset was also the artist of youth. He speaks with an assurance and a charming sincerity of the joy and the sadness of youth, of its pleasures and its pains, its ecstasies and its sorrows. He creates for us a world of youth that is real,

and enchantingly alive, because he knows it so intimately.

His young men are prototypes of himself. Like Molière, he put himself into his plays; that is what gives them the individuality they so markedly show. Lemaître says: "Musset en écrivant ses pièces ne veut que s'enchanter lui-même et soulager son coeur. Et voulant s'enchanter lui-même, il nous enchante. Il écrit des pièces pour s'exprimer, pour se communiquer". Musset is Perdican, mad with love; he is Perillo suffering of his love in silence; he is Fantasio cynic and pessimist, and he is Valentin, whose *blase* exterior hides a charming, healthy capacity for love; he is Fortunio at the age of 17; he is the timid Caelio as well as the *débauché* Octave.

Musset's depiction of the young man however, is inferior to that of the young girl. Perhaps his men are too close copies of himself to be entirely real; perhaps his almost feminine sensitiveness allowed him to penetrate more closely into the soul of the *jeune fille*. It is, however, not as paradoxical as it may seem to find that Musset, the skeptic, the dandy-roué-lover should have created this exquisite type of girl; for it was the Caelio in him, that delicate, other self in him, who understood and appreciated her so well. Musset's *jeune fille* is naive, charming, graceful, yet reasonable and utterly human; she is not silly, whimpering, repressed; nor is she a pretty, mechanical doll in the hands of an ambitious artist. Musset endows her with a delicate freshness, with an exquisite poetry, a reality and sincerity that makes her a figure of unforgettable beauty. Ninon and Ninette and Elsbeth who dream of romance; Cécile, so refreshingly naive; Camille, more sophisticated, but none the less human; Carmosine who suffers from her secret love; --this gallery of maidens is unsurpassed in French literature.

Musset was equally successful with his depiction of young women. Barberine is a charming witty creature; Marianne and Jacqueline possess uncomplimentary traits of character, yet Musset looks upon them with indulgence, glosses over their faults, and makes us love them.

Another consistently outstanding quality is the purity and the charm of Musset's style. It is marked by a freshness and youthfulness, an ease and supple grace that is most commendable. It is classic in its simplicity, romantic in its color and vividness, and thoroughly individual in its freedom from conventionalities, from the artifices of the "bien faite" play.

Musset's language possesses a poetical beauty that is rare, "quelque chose de doux comme le vent d'ouest, de pâle comme les rayons de la lune"; there is a musical quality, a swiftness and elan, a charming simplicity to his lines; he is capable of brilliant images, of humour, of Marivaux-like wit, of preciosity, of poignant drama.

Finally we must attribute his success to a particularly effective mixture of fancy and reality--a quality he inherited from Shakespeare. "Toute cette fantaisie à la fois si libre et si pondérée, que nous retrouvons dans le décor et le ton des pièces de Musset, en constitue le caractère dominant. Grâce à elle, ce théâtre est une production unique dans la littérature française." (1) It is this quality of fancy and whimsicality, blended with reality (so expertly), that makes his plays so appealing. This "world" of Musset is situated in no particular country, and during no particular time; this world is one of dreams, and charming make-believe; and yet its principal inhabitants are thoroughly human, thoroughly real. This

(1) Lafocade and realism, with such consummate art.

blend of idealism and realism with such perfect art, is
the true secret of his charm.

C. MUSSET THE PROSE-WRITER.

Musset's prose writings may be classified in the following manner:-

- (a) La Confession d'un enfant du siècle.
- (c) Contes
- (b) Nouvelles
- (d) Miscellanies--which include for the most part, articles on subjects of art and literature, published in the Revue des Deux Mondes.

La Confession d'un enfant du siècle (1835) is Musset's longest and most ambitious prose-work, and his only attempt at a full-length novel. It is designedly an autobiography. In April 1834, Musset, back in Paris after the Venitian fiasco, wrote to Sand:-

"Je m'en vais faire un roman. J'ai bien envie d'écrire notre histoire; il me semble que cela me guérirait et m'élèverait le coeur. Je voudrais te bâtir un autel, fût-ce avec mes os."

Some time later, before his departure for Baden, he wrote: "Mais je ne mourrai pas, moi, sans avoir fait mon livre, sur moi et sur toi; non ma belle, ma sainte fiancée, tu ne coucheras pas dans cette froide terre sans qu'elle sache qui elle a porté. Non, non, j'en jure par ma jeunesse et par mon génie, il ne poussera sur ta tombe que des lis sans tache. J'y poserai de ces mains que voilà ton épitaphe en marbre plus pur que les statues de nos gloires

d'un jour. La posterité répètera nos noms, comme ceux de ces amants immortels qui n'en ont plus qu'un à eux deux, comme Roméo et Juliette, comme Héloïse et Abelard. Ce sera là un mariage plus sacré que ceux que font les prêtres, le mariage impérissable et chaste de l'intelligence."

A prodigious task indeed; and one in spite of the youthful enthusiasm and sincerity with which he attacked it, was not as successful as it might have been. He carried out his vow as best he could; he put his mistress upon a pedestal; Brigitte Pierson is the wronged victim of a débauché, a cruel, jealous, neurasthenic; she is charming, unaffected, self-sacrificing, almost a saint. But although he managed never to sacrifice sincerity, in spite of his declaration- "J'y ai vomé la vérité," he often departed from the truth; and the novel, if one may call it that, is unsatisfactory in that it is not authentic enough to be a document, nor fictitious enough to be a romance.

The book is long, drawn out, lacking in organic structure; the last two books are superfluous; they give the effect of an anti-climax and weaken the general impression of the work considerably. There are passages of melodrama and romantic sentimentality that are distinctly mediocre. Yet the book possesses several passages of great brilliance and impressiveness. There is a magnificent passage at the beginning, (Chapter 2) which describes very forcefully, the mal du siècle, from which his generation suffered- that feeling of emptiness and ennui, that state of morbid introspection which followed the cyclonic era of Napoleon.

There are several passages of a poignant, quiet, beauty, which for limpidity, purity and charm, are difficult to surpass—*29*; the "charme de cimetière de campagne," of the first two chapters in Part 3, the passage describing the awakening of Octave's idyllic love, the moonlit scene in which their love finds its culmination. There are several impressively dramatic passages exhibiting keen powers of analysis and psychology--a notable example is to be found in those in which are described the mental vagaries and tortures of the troubled Octave.

On the whole however, the Confession is an inferior work; it is noteworthy only for the author's sincerity of effort, its autobiographical significance, and the several passages of fine artistry that we have already mentioned.

The Nouvelles were all written during the years 1837 and 1838. After the completion of the Confession, Musset read the tales of Boccaccio and was tremendously influenced by them. Recognizing his failure at the full-length novel, he attempted the nouvelle and finding this more suited to his powers, he wrote no less than five of them within two years.

In all of the nouvelles, Musset shows a distinct aptitude at story telling; all treat of various aspects of love; almost all mix autobiographical truth with imaginary detail; all are written in a style of charming simplicity, which in some cases is of distinctive merit.

Emmeline, his first short story, is a fairly good study of the effect of love upon a proud, spoilt wife. It possesses to a degree both charm and humor, although it shows an

immaturity and uneasiness due no doubt to his inexperience with the new genre.

Les Deux Maîtresses describes the strange love of a man at one and the same time for two women of opposite temperaments. The plot is a good deal more complicated than that in Emmeline; nevertheless it shows a decided improvement in descriptive power and sureness of touch.

Frédéric et Bernerette, a story of student life in the Latin Quarter is one of his best nouvelles. It contains elements of genuine pathos and melancholy, an admirable, sympathetic, study of the true Parisian grisette, and an honest and fairly successful attempt to capture the atmosphere of Montmartre.

Le Fils du Titien is without a doubt Musset's best nouvelle. Its subject and treatment are by far the most ambitious, the most admirable of all his attempts in this genre. It treats of an artist ruined by self-indulgence, whose dormant genius is revived through the sincere love of a woman, and of the sacrifice of his art at the altar of all-powerful Love. Beatrice Donato is clearly Aimée d'Alton, Musset's charming "marraine" through whose kindly efforts, he managed to rouse himself occasionally from his literary lethargy. The work exhibits a fine knowledge of art, some excellent descriptive passages, and a clear poetical style.

Margot, his last nouvelle (1838) is a charmingly simple story of the unrequited love of a naive peasant girl for her mistress' son, a love which almost resulted in her death. It contains a fine picture of rustic life (first-hand details for which he had gotten from a sojourn in the country as a youth--the gigantic Pié de leu family was drawn from reminiscences of actual neighbors at the time). The work boasts of numerous references

to nature--a rare thing in Musset; it exhibits keen penetration, in the study of the childish, sincere love of Margot; its style is marked by simplicity and a pathetic charm.

The Contes, written at intervals between 1839 and 1842 are short, unpretentious stories, also notable for their autobiographic significance but chiefly for their charming wit and fancy--"Ses contes ", writes Roustan, "sont de véritables merveilles, et il (Musset) lutte sans désavantage avec les conteurs du 18e siècle, dont il a su retrouver le badinage nonchalant et la finesse malicieuse."

Croisilles (1839), the story of a youth whose ambitious love brings him to ruin, is told in a simple, unaffected manner; but aside from that it has little to commend it.

Pierre et Camille (1844), on the other hand, possesses an admirable freshness and delicate pathos. The childhood of the poor little deaf-mute Camille, her love for Pierre and her final happiness, is treated with a simplicity and charming delicacy of a rare quality.

Le Secret de Javotte (1844) shows a good deal of esprit and sophistication, a rather good command of dialogue and dramatic power. La Mouche, breathes of the charm and luxuriant beauty of Versailles; In Mimi Pinson (1845) as to a lesser degree in Frédéric et Bernerette, Musset treats of student life in Paris. Here, even more successfully than in his Nouvelle, he has caught the spirit of the Quartier Latin--in all its Bohemianism, its gaiety, its sordidness. Mimi Pinson is a splendidly drawn portrait of the grisette--modest, light-hearted, thoughtless, "amoral".

Histoire d'un Merle Blanc (1842) is accounted by some as the pearl of Musset's contes. Its portrayal of a white blackbird, born in a family of normal blackbirds, and who sings "contre tous les usages et toutes les règles", is distinctly autobiographical--it is Musset the romantic who wars against classic rule and tradition, and who, finally breaking away from all schools, achieves fame for his very individuality. His love for the painted merlette, and his discovery of her falseness clearly refers to George Sand. But aside from these very obvious references, the detailed allegory of the conte is difficult to follow, as a result of obscurity of style and lack of organic unity. It exhibits however, Musset's prose-style at its best--beautifully poetic, clear, simple, harmonious, colorful.

With regard to the rest of the prose-works--his articles on art and criticism--there is little to say.

The Lettres de Dupuis et Cotonet in which the poet pokes fun at the romantics, are excellent examples of Musset's powers ^{of} spiritedly bantering satire.

Un Mot sur l'art moderne, and Salon de 1836, show a good knowledge of art and fine critical powers.

De la Tragedie (1838) written on the debut of Rachel is a little more lenient towards the Romantics. Here Musset goes so far as to admit the importance and possibilities inherent in the work of the new school. Nevertheless he criticizes the new romantic "drame", which is fundamentally "faux, ^àbatard et dangereux pour les jeunes gens qui le

tenteraient", and very eloquently he advances the hope that the classic tragedy may be revived.

A summarizing word about Musset's prose-style.

It is marked by a youthful grace and sincerity, a refreshing spontaneity and ease, charming wit and eloquence, and sometimes attains rare poetic beauty. Its only fault is its unevenness. Musset had little of the true artist's patience and desire for perfection; neither did he have a great constructive imagination; and we note that frequent passages of impressive grandeur or pathetic loveliness, are followed by passages of distinct mediocrity -- slovenly, sentimental, melodramatic.

PART III : MUSSET'S PLACE IN THE WORLD OF LETTERS.

The position of Musset in the literary world has suffered many changes. During his lifetime the "singer of sorrow" never attained great fame. It was only about ten years before his death that he achieved popularity; and this, chiefly through his plays. But he was then too far removed from life, too tired, to find in this recognition, any solace or inspiration for further work.

How strangely his latter years contrast with those of his contemporary, Tennyson in England ! Whilst Musset was dying slowly, amidst dirt and poverty, Tennyson was revered, honored and leading a happy bourgeois life.

Almost immediately after his death, the fame of Musset blazoned forth. During the Second Empire his vogue was great. His influence spread even to England and to Germany. (Previously Heine had called him "le premier poète lyrique de la France.")

With the arrival of the Parnassien and later the Naturalist schools, Musset lost his popularity. Gautier, in 1868, wrote: "...Musset no longer seems to influence greatly the present generation. The young poets find him too incorrect, too lax, too poor in rhymes, --and why not say it--too feeling, too emotional, too human, in a word. Calm is the style of today." But of recent years, interest in Musset has been revived, and his fame now remains firmly established.

As a dramatic author, Musset brought new life into the French theatre. His plays, distinctively his own, exhibit fineness of analysis, sincerity, eloquence, and freedom of fancy. As a prose-writer, he developed a style which is distinctive for clarity, ease, and grace. But it is upon his success as a poet that his fame must ultimately rest. For warm and moving lyricism, for exquisite, thoroughly French charm, for passionate sincerity in the depiction of the sorrows of love, he has few rivals; in his poetry he spoke in accents sublime and unforgettable.

French critics generally accord the first place in French lyric poetry to Victor Hugo, the second to Lamartine, and the third to Alfred de Musset.

Musset lacks the divine elegaic quality of Lamartine, and the grandeur of conception of Hugo, but he possesses ~~what~~ to a more striking degree than his two rivals the quality of humanity. And it is this element of humanity, which constitutes Musset's chief claim to immortality. His poetry, his plays, his contes, will never age, for they contain elements which find an echo in the heart of man; and although literary fads and customs come and go, human nature never changes.

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