

ALFRED DE MUSSET : THE MAN AND THE ARTIST.

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### 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 liaisons 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, unsatiated 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 went 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 <sup>these</sup> these experiences, he was bitterly sorry for his unkindness, and with pathetic sincerity he attempted to atone 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