

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Paul et Virginie (1788) Bernardin de Saint Pierre (1737-1814)

OVERVIEW

Background The Enlightenment was a period of human discovery, unlike the discovery of the classics and antiquity, during the Renaissance, which seemed a freeing from the adages of religion, and to be a discovery of the potent luck of mankind, to be born into the first blossoms of cultural creativity. The Enlightenment expressed in many ways the thrill of rediscovering nature or the new in the creator's inventory of wonders. It was in this wide sense that the Enlightenment became a period of invention and even revolution, of freedom from strict forms in the arts, in literature, liberation in styles of life and governance. It is true that the 18th century Enlightenment gave us forms of stricture; for example Alexander Pope, and the strict verse forms of *The Rape of the Lock*, but it is also true that the 18th century brought us virtually the thirst for the mythical and natural in ourselves. That natural is the national nerve that Bernardin de Saint Pierre touched in the present novel.

Author The text we spring these thoughts loose from is *Paul et Virginie*, a novel composed in 1788, at the peak of what was becoming its author's prolific writing career. The author was a middle class intellectual who had opened his own world eyes with the reading of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and his discovery of nature unfiltered, and was never after to forget the Jean Jacques Rousseau thrill of loneliness, isolation. (Nothing else can have been the substance of the author's subsequent intimate friendship with the real Jean Jacques Rousseau, with whom Bernardin later wandered blissfully, gathering plants around the suburbs of Paris. That encounter with isolation and solitude, to which he owed Defoe's Crusoe imagination, can only have enriched Bernardin's access to his own personal, and youthful, encounter with the South Seas. Thanks to a merchantman uncle the young Bernardin had in his teens profited from a teen age trip to Mauritius, a French colony thousands of miles east of the southern coast of Africa; precisely the thrill of that voyage helped to keep in his mind the text of *Paul et Virginie*. When we open our eyes into the frame of the novel *Paul et Virginie*, we find ourselves inside a frame text to which we are introduced by a young man remembering.

SYNOPSIS

Wandering through Port Louis, the young man has noticed a couple of huts which have captured his curiosity. He approaches an old tim, and asks whose huts those were. In response he receives a lengthy narration. The old man had known the couple who lived in the huts, and remembered those people as models of peace and virtue. From there the old man launched into the tale of *Paul et Virginie*.

Paul et Virginie were raised as siblings by two single mothers, and lived a childhood of innocence and joyfulness, living peacefully off of the tropical land. Nothing was necessary for them but what nature provided them— unlike the lives of the worldly Parisians who would later have been reading this text, and who would have read this text in their private boudoirs.

The innocence of the two youngsters is only occasionally broken. One day they are walking through the brush when they see a slave running toward them, scarred and beaten. They take the slave to his master, and beg for mercy on behalf of the poor man. The slave is pardoned. The master grudgingly concedes, but all is not well. When the two teenagers return home they learn that the slave has been seen hanged on a pole. He has been lynched. This experience lingers in the minds of these two children of paradise, and shadows a complexity over the innocents, who will carry the present memory far into their later life. We may say that the first part of the present book is a memoir concerning a growing up into the harsh realities of life. Meanwhile, though, a further breach in harmony impends, a separation from Paradise itself.

It seems time for Paul and Virginia, who are old enough to be falling for one another, to be temporarily separated for a period before an expected future marriage, the agreed on goal of the two single mothers who have raised these children. And at just this time Virginia's mother decides that it is time for her daughter to visit France, collect the considerable dowry awaiting her there, and familiarize herself with the ways of society. Though this would inevitably lead to a separation from Paul, quite unthinkable to the young people, the path of separation begins to seem like the only way forward, and indeed it is the only way to advance the natural energies of the plot. We cannot but appreciate the skill with which the author brings us to the inevitability of the present conclusion.

The new life that awaits Virginia in Europe wreaks the expectable havoc on her innocence and closeness to nature. After the two sweethearts complete their final celebratory ceremonies, leaving behind their vows for a prompt reunion, and dulling as far as possible Paul's pain and isolation, it is impossible to stave off an impending doom. Unfortunately it is impossible to convert this story of love and innocence into a success story, for a significant tragedy awaits Paul and Virginia. (The classic aura of the doomed love story—from *Romeo and Juliet* to

Eric Segal's *Love Story*-- surrounds the fortunes of the young couple who had in the end no chance to develop their adult lives together.) After two years in France, during which she has been assailed by every kind of pretentious and artificial behavior, been scammed, had her letters to Paul hijacked, and begun to lose some of her innate innocence, Virginia books passage on a ship carrying her back to Mauritius. As the ship approaches land, off the coast of Mauritius, it strikes a reef and capsizes, close enough to shore that Virginia can see Paul stripping and jumping into the tide to rescue her. But at this point her Europeanized instincts betray her. Instead of stripping and plunging, a fish in water as she had always been, her newly acculturated modesty—de rigueur in continental France—impeded her—she could not strip and swim. She died within sight of her lover.

CHARACTER

Paul et Virginie is not a study of character so much as of place, atmosphere and situation. Nature, innocence, and love may be considered the dominant personality of the story, whereas individuals are little more than functionalities, but as such illustrative of conditions, exotic or urban, which circumscribe what is distinctive about them.

Parallel As something once called 'the modern world' found itself created, out of the bumpy and unshaped globe, the literary texts that record our development began to include more examples of what we might call a literature of adventure, distance and wonder—one might think of the magic and wonder of books like *Tom Sawyer* or *Huck Finn* or *Treasure Island*, all of which, like our *Paul et Virginie*, take us to a realm of peace and innocence—oh yes, of loss and death as well. Does the Romantic Movement, at the doorstep of which Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's work lies, seem to you an enriched and powerful development from the books and attitudes sketched above?

THEMES

Innocence The childhoods of Paul and Virginia were as untouched by the Fall as we can imagine. The tropical atmosphere of Mauritius promoted an easy going lifestyle; the ease of feeding and healthfulness of nutrition supported active health. There was little competition, no crime, in short nothing but the conditions for wholesome togetherness, and ease of spirit.

Love Love as *eros* makes its appearance in *Paul and Virginie*, in the early teen years, and brings with it the usual precautions against unwanted pregnancy. Love in the wider sense pervades the whole benign prelapsarian mood of Mauritius. There are no prompts to think of discord.

Civilization The increasingly urbanized culture of France, in the late 18th century, introduced those urban ills—pollution, crime, pretense, false sophistication, jealousy—of which the European fiction of the time amply informs us. This was the world into which Virginia was plunged as a young woman, and from which she could not escape alive.

Nature Nature is the pristine world that precedes mankind's advent, or, in another sense, is that quality of primacy which marks a personality in its freshness and inception. Paul and Virginie live in nature.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is the significance of Virginie's refusal simply to strip down and swim through the waves to the waiting arms of Paul? Is she too modest to strip? If so, is this modesty a trait she will have picked up in Europe? Were her clothes the symbol of her new life? Of a life which literally dragged her down to her death? Was she happily naked as a child?

Why do you suppose the present novel was so extremely popular in Europe? What would be the nerve that Saint-Pierre touched in the European reading public?