

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Oberman*** 1804

Etienne Pivert de Senancour 1770-1846

### OVERVIEW

*Historical Background* The author of the present text, *Oberman*, offers us a series of *Letters* in which a young man gives expression to his complex longing, which is close to the central existential openness of Romantic sensibility, a world view and world-writing which stormed over the creative expression of western European cultures after the beginning of the nineteenth century. However in the present case Senancour's creation, *Oberman*, represents the romantic hero with a twist, not as the free adventurer, like Atala, in Chateaubriand, who travels dangerously to the new America, not to discover new paths of life, but to grow in experience, but rather as one who remains within himself, fretting at the limits of the human condition. Rather than anguishing at the absurdity of the universe itself, Obermann worries at his own inability to realize himself as a solitary longer for what he could be. This slant on the romantic narrator will generate distinctive progeny of its own, and lead to fads and attitudinizing widespread in Senancour's time.

The putative author of the text before us, is a solitary resident of a lonely valley in the Jura Mountains. He questions his ability to become the realized person he believes he should be. There is more than a touch of Hamlet in this character, for whom imagined fears turn him regularly in the direction of inaction. Or should one refer to a far more likely thought mate than Shakespeare, to Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose *Reveries d'un promeneur solitaire* was but one of the achievements through which that author had made himself a directing cultural force for Europe's romantic explosion. So great was the public acclaim for *Oberman* that two of the leading politico-intellectuals of the day in France, Messrs. Thiers and Villemain, helped to obtain, for Senancour, sizeable pensions from the monarch Louis Philippe—guarantees of a comfortable retirement.

*Author* Etienne de Senancour--the successful author, of the Romantic text of *Oberman*, was a sickly child who was in poor health as a youth, and was raised by a local cure during his childhood. Senancour's father was intent on sending the young man to Seminary for studies, and eventually the priesthood, but the young man felt no attraction to this profession and, with the help of his mother, fled to Switzerland. The next year he married; his wife giving birth to two children, one of whom, a daughter Eulalie, became a significant writer. Seemingly Senancour's marriage was an unhappy one. Senancour's wife refused to accompany him to an Alpine retreat which drew him fervently, and the couple settled for residence in Fribourg, Switzerland.

The couple's continued residence in Switzerland, after the outbreak of the French Revolution, was taken as disagreement with the new society; Senancour was listed as an 'émigré.' He was able to visit France, but only on the sly, and in the process of political change lost most of the considerable fortune he had inherited. In the meantime Senancour had begun to involve himself with the Parisian literary scene, making influential connections like those of another figure of Romantic fiction, Fromentin's *Dominique*, and exercising much of the preparatory thought work he would be unfolding in *Oberman*, to be published in 1804. (His *Reveries sur la nature primitive de l'homme*, published in 1799, is easy to view as a basic introduction to the Romantic Movement, and should be read in conjunction with *Oberman*.)

Senancour earned a considerable recognition for *Oberman*, but the moment that would truly enlarge his readership had not yet come. To understand the following quirk of literary fate requires appreciating the cultural situation of the time, in which literary destinies were being created. A public prosecutor went after Senancour on the charge of 'slandering religion,' in a text describing Jesus as a 'youthful sage.' This term was evidently too much even for an age vacillating between free thought and religious orthodoxy, and many cried horror at the casual language addressed to their savior. Senancour was sentenced to nine months in prison. Public interest in Senancour soared, the penalties against him were dropped, and various of his earlier texts were republished. So much for slander.

Senancour revised and expanded *Oberman* in 1833. The peculiar attraction of this text continued to lie in the distinctive 'hang' of the main character's mindset. Were we to approach this distinctiveness thoroughly—once more to take a close look at other contemporary 'romantic' fictional characters-- Adolfe, Atala, Dominique, Rene, Virginie of *Paul et Virginie*--we would see the sense in which Romanticism took its earliest developmental flights out of the nest of philosophy. (We are, after all, in a cultural working period, in which the vast astro calculative cosmological breakthroughs of the seventeenth century— Kepler, Newton, Tycho Brahe having renamed our world setting— speculative investigations of thought and value, as we see them in Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel were opening continent wide minds to fresh fields of intelligibility. Senancour took the character of *Oberman* with him, in his investigation of new fields of thought and feeling.

Text

### Letter 3.

We follow *Oberman* on a trip into Switzerland, reading his often barefoot walk, as he puts words down before him like a flight pattern, He gives us things to see and attitudes to adopt toward. We track the visual lines of the Alps, which establish a noble commentary on the villages below the road, on the long slopes downward to the mountain lakes at the bottom of the valley. Senancour walks us quietly through both walking and thought processes, texting us regularly the formulations his steps elicit: to wit, in the midst of strides, *'in this moment, in which nothing was missing except another person to share my feelings, I had the sense of how an hour of life can be worth a year of existence, how deeply everything in us is relative—both within us and in the surrounding world—and the extent to which our miseries derive from our maladjustment in the scheme of things, (notre deplacement dans l'ordre des choses).*

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The interlacing of physical event with reflection is fluid, and carries its decoder with it seamlessly. The inspiration for this literary genre was the *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (1776) by Jean Jacques Rousseau, a prototype for early Romanticism's fascination with the harvestable richness of walking in nature. Rousseau's text lay behind a rash of philosophical promenades in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

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*'I write to you as I would speak with you, as one speaks to himself. Sometimes one has nothing to say to another person, but has a great need to talk about. to himself. That's when we talk to ourselves most comfortably. The most beautiful walks are when we have no goal, when we walk for the walking's sake without wanting anything ... How the soul (l'ame ) soars when it encounters true beauty, especially unexpected beauty. Wonder that relates to the soul should not be prearranged and organized. Let the mind search for order, and make a symmetrical unit out of its findings. But as for the soul (l'ame), it generates no findings...When friends talk to one another, it is proper for them to say everything that comes to their minds.*

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I decided to remain for the *night at Iverdun. The landscape is woody and picturesque. In this setting I hoped to make contact again with what I love most, well-being blended with sadness.*

### Letter 4.

*There, in the peace of the night, I inspected my uncertain future, my fretful heart, and this incredible indifference to the thing called nature, which seems to contain everything, but in the end does not contain the object my universal sensibility desires. Who am I then, I asked myself? What a pitiful mixture, global and sensitive, yet indifferent to the textures of daily life. My romantic imagination, (imagination romanesque), drives my fascination to address a crazy patchwork of objects notable for their singular strangeness and offbeat beauty. I see imaginary relationships among objects but I am forever looking for what I will never find...stranger among the realities of nature, a fool to my fellow men, my feelings are pure vanity; I'm doomed to a life of repression and misery.*

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At the present point, as though to illustrate the fluctuations peculiar to his nature, Senancour turns on himself and asks what he has in common with the essentially deranged *persona* as which he has been portraying himself? WHAT, ME? He might seem to be saying, throughout the remainder of the letter. By converting himself, before our eyes, into Mr. organized, nice, and put together, this craftsman of languages plays himself as an existential escape artist. We will need to watch him closely.