

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

Dominique (1862) Eugene Fromentin (1820-1876)

OVERVIEW

Background Nineteenth century French literature abounds in a mastery of finely etched and emotionally twisting short novels. From *Delphine* (1802) to Andre Gide's *La Porte etroite* (1909); the French literary tradition smacks of the crispness and insight of the Roman tradition from which it derived. (In *De l'Allemagne* Mme de Stael bemoans the excess 'of the French literary tradition,' too much art, too little feeling. She argues for the Christian feeling-full culture of Germany. She puts the anti-Romanitas case.) This rich pot pourri of French texts will for sure enjoy many interactions with what was coming to be called Romanticism, and rightly so if we take that term to connote a literature open not only to feelings, but to the ironic meanings that play through feelings, that sprudel from the historical texture of being here in time. *Dominique* is a masterpiece of the intricate Roman tradition.

Text Fromentin's text of *Dominique* flows out of its historical frame with a hard to pause fluidity. Before you know it has happened, you are repeating the voice that has come across at you. You have, without knowing it, been consumed both by the framing speaker, and by the tale he tells you, of another man he allows you to know through that man's narration. With this text we reach to a level of narratorial intricacy that throws us forward into the thought complexities of another century, the French *nouveau roman* of the past century, or, in another vein, toward the mindset of Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man without Qualities*; (1930-43), a landmark of modern complexity.

The stealth with which Fromentin slithers into his duplex narratorial position is exemplary. The first sentence of his novel may do. ('*Certainly I have nothing to complain about*'—I heard those words from the man whose simple and down to earth confessions I will share with you shortly, ordinary though they may be.) On the far side of the phrasing here we come up with what seems the master query of the sentence—'Why should it be relevant to know whether the man speaking has anything to complain about?' A question posed so peremptorily cannot fail to drive us forward into a chortled response, and we are effectively launched on our journey of curiosity. We have been wheedled onto the main lines of the novel, and forced to wonder whose life recital would require the listener to wonder why the narrator would have a complaint about his life. May we say that by this time, in anatomizing the procedures of the present novel, we are truly engaged with understanding the kind of main character we are going to be dealing with. The mystique of the main character has already been put under the lens of language. The character is both a user and a creator of language.

SYNOPSIS

An unnamed narrator visits with a prosperous country gentleman in a provincial French village, not far from the Atlantic Ocean and in verdant vineyard country. The country gentleman appears happily embedded in the life of his wife and children, although an air of melancholy and loss hangs in the atmosphere around them. The narrator falls into deep conversation with his host, who increasingly discloses to him some details of loss in his early life, and especially of a tragic early love affair, which ended badly, and which tainted the remainder of host Dominique's life.

As Dominique recounts the peripheries of this passionate and finally doomed love we deepen our sense of Dominique's fundamental melancholy. We also come to realize that throughout this unfulfilled romance the beloved Madeleine is unaware of the love Dominique feels for her. In the end, in fact, Madeleine marries another man. And it is years later that Madeleine confesses to Dominique the love she has felt for him, though by this time the pain of loss has too deeply infiltrated the melancholy gentleman. It is too late.

Prior to the taking place of this final disclosure, Dominique has made a last effort to realize his full ambitions for himself. He has moved to Paris, where he has thrown himself into the life of literary creativity, high culture, but been forced to recognize his lack of ability, and has decided to return to his country estate, where we meet him at the start of the novel, in a position to debrief his life history to the 'unnamed narrator' of this text.

Dominique's life as village mayor, and in a quiet, child resonant marriage, is a compromise with romantic and literary unfulfillment.

CHARACTERS

The main character, Dominique, is known to us through the unnamed personage who introduces us to his host, who with his introducer are creations of language, helping us to discover the multi evocative landscapes around Les Trembles, Dominique's chateau. Dominique is the 'main character,' of course, but the introducer is almost a twin to Dominique. In an unusual sense it might be said that both Dominique and his twin are creations of language. As an individual Dominique is familiar to us as the original frame's narrator's host, who ultimately tells his life story to his friend.

Madeleine, Dominique's childhood love, whose mutual love for him can never be brought to fruition, and has in fact never been confessed until the end of the story, by which time it is too late to do anything about it. Hence the great sadness in Dominique's life.

Agustin, Dominique's reasonable guide and tutor.

Madame Ceyssac, Dominique's aunt.

Julie, Madeleine's sister.

Olivier, Dominique's closest friend, whose death provokes a cascade of reminiscences from the narrator's host.

THEMES

Love Dominique has been beset by incompleteness, from the time of his passionate but ultimately doomed love for Madeleine. In the end he has settled for life with his small family and attentive kind wife, in love quietly but resigned to a very shrunken version of the life he had dreamed of. Fromentin is a subtle and sympathetic analyst of loss and depression, as they grow through an individual's life choices. While we track, here, the longing for passion, we also track the protagonist's desire to quell passion, with its dangers of rejection.

Ambition Was Dominique ultimately a loser, or was he simply an ambitious man who hoped to be a great writer, or a great lover, and finally settled for a bourgeois quietude? Was he truly happy, perhaps, being mayor of a small village, putting in his quality time shooting partridge in his fields, and reading? Did he settle for second best, or did he make second best into the putty for a new creation? What contribution, to the development of his spirit, did his family make? Do we ever see him alone with them? Why are we given no view of Dominique 'at work'?

Withdrawal Dominique was an ambitious man, but had great difficulty coping with setbacks to his ambition. His loss in the battle for Madeleine's love, already in childhood, was a harbinger of his strategy of resignation, which he would adopt as a life strategy, ultimately convincing himself that his retreat into bourgeois mediocrity was his saving recourse.

Nature Nature plays a prominent role in *Dominique*. The landscape around Les Trembles, Dominique's chateau, is verdant and hilly, and slopes off toward the Atlantic coast in gradual declines; the juncture of sand and moisture generating a moist foggy biosphere which translates into foggy mood. The perfect atmosphere for retrospective conversations.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Season and mood: From the outset of Dominique's first narration, he equates the melancholy of the season—it is autumn—with his own melancholic turn; at once adding, though, '*j'ai fait l'impossible pour n'être point un mélancolique,*' 'I've done everything I could to avoid being the melancholy type...' This self-reflective commentary will upend us into the thinking of many an author of his time in France—Gerard de Nerval or Gustave Flaubert. Does this sensitivity of negative heroes seem distinctive to any particular historical period? Is the literature of our own moment keenly sensitive when it comes to mood and place? Examples?

The negative hero: Can you bring to mind negative heroes—negative main characters—in the history of literature? If we wanted to make a list of such types would we include such as Quixote, Falstaff, Thersites, Philoktetes? Or would the notion of 'negative hero' need much more fine tuning before it could fit into a sequence like the above? What would you think of the butler, Stevens, in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989)? Is he a Hamlet or Dominique for our time? (By contrast can you identify 'positive heroes' in literature? Would you be happy with a list of 'positive heroes' which included *Robinson Crusoe*, *Huck Finn*, *Tess of the d'Urburville*, or *Aeneas*? What issues would you have with the list making projects we are airing? What is involved in the generation of character from an 'author?' Is the author's created *character* a 'magnified trait of the author himself?' Or could the character have no roots in the author, but simply be an authorial fancy, like Puck