

Dominique

A painting of a town in Dominique, featuring a prominent church with two towers and a tall obelisk in the foreground. The scene is set on a hillside with a view of the town and distant mountains. The style is impressionistic with visible brushstrokes.

A Tale in Verse by C J Holcombe

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Dominique

Colin John Holcombe

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Dominique: A Tale in Verse

by Colin John Holcombe

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Dominique

A tale in verse, modelled on Eugène Fromentin's *Dominique* published in the *Revue des deux mondes* of 1862, and on Sir Edward Marsh's translation of 1948.

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INTRODUCTION

Eugène Fromentin was that most unusual of creatures: a successful genre painter exhibiting regularly at the Salon, and a prose stylist of the first order. He wrote only four books: *Un Été dans le Sahara* (1857), *Une Année dans le Sahel* (1859), *Dominique* (1863) and *Les Maîtres d'Autrefois* (1876) but all were accomplished, *Dominique* being warmly praised by the likes of Flaubert, George Sands, Gautier and Sainte-Beuve. Yet the novel seems not wholly successful. Its power of evoking the moods of nature, its depiction of youth's painful infatuations and its exquisite sensibility of style have never been seriously questioned, but over the plot there hangs a large uncertainty. Why don't Dominique and Madeleine, having exhausted themselves in their long struggle with propriety, finally consummate their love? Is it cowardice, prudence, high-mindedness or a penance for Fromentin's own transgressions in a youthful affair on which the novel was loosely based?

In fact, the novel leaves several matters unexplained. The narrator in Chapter One simply says: 'If there is any difference between him and the many who might choose to recognize their own likeness in him, it is in the rather rare persistence of his self-examination, and the still rarer severity with which he set himself down as a mediocrity; and no one, I think, will envy him that.' Why then devote a whole novel to someone who, if not a complete nonentity, is nonetheless far from being the swashbuckling rebel expected of French Romantic literature?

And then there is M. de Nièvre. We can understand Dominique's antipathy towards the rival who has stolen his childhood sweetheart, but the man remains well bred, accommodating and even kind to Dominique in the early days, when the d'Orsels and de Nièvres visit 'Les Trembles'. Why do Madeleine and de Nièvre drift apart: on what grounds or differences in needs and sensibilities? Again we're not told, and this perplexity, which is echoed in Oliver's unconvincing attempt to end his pointless existence, is one that Fromentin echoed in his own life. His marriage to Marie Cavallet de Beaumont in 1852 was apparently happy, but he seems never to have escaped recriminations over the earlier affair, a romance he recreated in

Dominique as a collage of rural and Parisian impressions. He spent some of his most fruitful years in north Africa depicting exotic scenes which he was prepared to study but not settle into. Perhaps later work or revision would have made amends, but Fromentin died prematurely, of an anthrax infection, in 1876.

So the novel remains, the equal of Turgenev in its sensitive depiction of the human heart in love, its follies, raptures and despair. In the verse translation that recreates the novel I have simply supposed that *Dominique* represents the artist's vocation, of creating imaginary worlds but living largely elsewhere, in what passes for our mundane reality. It may help to read the verse tale with that view in mind.

DOMINIQUE

1. *There's Monsieur Dominique, the doctor said,
whose beat, I'd hazard, is not far from ours.*

I looked, and by a puff of smoke was led
to see his neighbour two fields off. For hours
we closed or circled round, and each could hear
the other calling dogs to fetch or heel,
but every time our varying paths drew near
the prescient fates held off, refused to deal.
My dogs then raised a bird, which flew his way.
Your shot! I called out, lest, on waiting, both
would miss. He fired, and after some delay
emerged from vines and tangled undergrowth.
*I hope my deputizing here is cause
to make this fine cock partridge rightly yours.*

2. I saw a well-made man, suntanned and tall,
of forty odd, but with a youthful air.

Some pleasantries were said, and I recall
my thinking something in the manners there
did not accord with rustic, southern earth
of vineyards, farms and sun-warmed heath,
although the gun-crest spoke of local birth:
a sort of consciousness that stayed beneath
the pleasing memories that clothe the past.
*He's not the simple countryman he poses
as,* the doctor offered me at last,
and that the least enquiry soon discloses.
*But what he sometime was I doubt he'll say,
and much prefers it being kept that way.*

3. I paid my duty call that very night,
and found him much at home, by happy chance
beneath the splendour of the moon's full light
that blessed his vineyard's end-of-harvest dance.
We spoke of shooting, vintage, crops. The biniou wailed
and underlined the narrative, except
that Paris with a wistful note prevailed
like childhood promises we haven't kept.
Later came an invitation, where I met
the happy household of 'Les Trembles'. She,
Madame de Bray, was charming, would have let
the conversation amble naturally
but Dominique, while still our well-bred host,
remained apart from us, a smiling ghost.

4. The shooting season ended. Back I went
to Paris with our friendship not advanced
by one iota. Yet the distance lent
an air of mystery that the months enhanced.
A whole year passed. *You're missed*, the doctor wrote,
so please do come. My neighbour adds his name.
I started out at once, and as by rote
was rambling over, finding just the same
with house and kindly occupants. So in
I walked as one who'd hardly been away.
Perhaps I hadn't even, when within
us both the past resumed its earlier sway,
or something like that, and the trusting air,
which children have, was once more featured there.

5. To them I was their father's quiet friend
who came continually as weather will —
unmasked, a backdrop that our thoughts attend
to rarely, though it colours all. But still,
as I have said, a happy house, and one well run
with gardens from the seashore winds withdrawn,
stone terraces that faced towards the sun,
tall pines and ornamental lake and lawn.
A fine and ancient property, where one André,
of sorts the bailiff there, and I suspect
a scion of an earlier de Bray,
was guardian recognized or in effect:
a throwback to the old regime, a place
of stern traditions with a homely face,

6. at least in part. We dropped the 'vous', until
we both were comfortable, and I could roam
the old stone house and turrets as at will,
the place indeed become a second home.
But if Madame de Bray so found it, I
don't know. She had her duties mapped out hour
by hour, and places where she didn't try
to go: her husband's childhood's south-west tower
where walls with capitals inscribed would stare
defiantly as though still intertwined
were reason for his sometimes distant air.
It spoke of memories that stayed behind
to take on absences within this room
of muffled eloquence in damp and gloom.

7. There were the usual guests: the doctor, me,
the curate and one Oliver d'Orsel
who was a foreigner, an oddity
of childhood days, I thought, or one known well.
Fair-haired, distinguished-looking, always dressed
in latest Paris fashion, and a blasé air:
a raconteur and gracious dinner guest
but like our host not wholly present there.
A fund of anecdotes — in easy speech
he ranged from Germany to spa towns south,
but kept the circumstances out of reach
as though reproach restrained that smiling mouth.
Of local gentry, rich, but lived alone:
perversities Madame would not condone.

8. She often teased him, called it scandalous
in one so eligible but unattached.
*Marriage, he'd say, for selfish souls like us
would be a self-made madness soon as hatched.
I am not faithful, kind, considerate,
and if there's wherewithal that women heed
in charm and nonchalance, at any rate
it's nothing, I assure you, that they need.*
One night she pressed him over-much. Bereft
of stratagem he rose as on a whim,
bowed to company and promptly left,
his servant taking bags and riding after him.
Returned, the latter handed Dominique
a note, who read it, stared and couldn't speak.

9. He left immediately, the doctor too was off post-haste and put a doubtful cast on explanations. After much ado of back and forth, it seemed the worst had passed. *He'll live, said Dominique, though only just. Perhaps it's time to have you understand the basis of a lifetime's wayward trust.* He stopped, and put the letter in my hand. *It is a dead man who is writing this,* I read. *Your Oliver is gone, or good as gone. And though it was a clumsy miss I am disfigured, badly, and no doubt should retire to some far place and learn to live in what good providence is pleased to give.*

10. I didn't ask for confidences. When I gave the letter back he led me through to that small haunted turret room again in which the signatures were still on view. We sat, and shifted, settled, then: *Please tell me what you think of these.* The offered book held verse: conventional but turned quite well, or so I told him, from the first quick look. He handed me a second volume. *This? About the same. Good music in the choice of words, and nothing we could take amiss but not the careless magic of enraptured voice.* *Correct, he said. They both are mine, and dwelt on thoughts imagined but not truly felt.*

EARLY YEARS

11. *Well then, he said at last, I'll have to start
with suffocating matters that involve
the pain that drives the all too simple heart.
And what we do about it: our resolve
to reason or to hold it in — which brings
acknowledgement that life can never be
that carnival of ever new-blessed things
our yesterdays would seem to guarantee.
How vast those prospects seemed short years ago
when we could surely match our hopes with strength.
We all spend recklessly, who would not know
how arduous can be that journey's length.
Perhaps, with too much autumn in the heart,
the lives repented of are slow to start.*

12. *Mine is one of those habitual tales:
the countryman who leaves his native hearth
to make his name in letters: strives and fails,
returning thence to tread a humbler path.
In that you have it all. This life of mine,
which now amounts to very little, had,
or so I'm told, a rather forward shine.
There's nothing untoward in that, or sad,
indeed it's normal, and tranquillity
must come from duties aptly borne. You can
attest to this: in home and family,
you've seen a fortunate and happy man.
So comes this local, homely tree, portrayed
as stunted, but providing broader shade.*

13. *I was the countryman, from first was brought
to sense the bats about the darkening eves,
the fox or leveret the snare has caught,
the hesitant, shy rustling in the leaves,
and moths that fluttered through the scented air
that long, long afterwards would bring to mind
the outline of some lingering presence there.
A lost Elysium we human kind
who drudge in this hard portal know awaits
our hopes with certainty — beyond the hill
we see at evening in its mythic states
of flame-clad majesty — refulgent still
in warm sufficiency of breathy sighs
that speaks of depths beneath the smiling eyes.*

14. *But that's anticipating. Childhood sees
my two good parents in declining health
— I don't remember them — which by degrees
will leave me orphaned into modest wealth:
a feudal name, this country place, and all
the untamed countryside, the woods and fields
and bare salt marshes at my beck and call,
as though to mischief only boyhood yields.
I was entirely rural, knew no books
or studies till an aunt of mine arrived,
dear Madame Ceyssac, purged these ill-bred looks
if not the rootedness that still survived.
She had me tutored, and a young man came
you'll hear of more: plain Augustin by name.*

15. *Whatever good I've done is owed to him.
Beneath his patient and untiring rule
what sentiment I had or boyhood whim
was brought to consciousness, which manners school.
So many things I did not know, nor felt
the need to know, but like the local lads,
I knew the tracks and bird-calls, what they spelt,
and mark of forester and honest adze,
but naught of Hannibal or Gallic Wars,
the liberal arts to which I now lay claim,
of commerce, industry, our country's laws:
indeed I couldn't even write my name.
Astonishing, of course, and Augustin
at once contrived an all-too-needful plan.*

ORMESSON

16. *With roughness polished off, and rustic grace
severely disciplined, or dressed at least,
I left for nearby Ormesson, a place
where all tranquillity then promptly ceased.
Imagine streets beneath high abbey towers,
and quaint respectability, old ways
where still the watchman told the passing hours
that ebbed out cautiously to gloves and stays.
But there was Oliver, his cousins, name
so irreproachable that even my dear aunt
approved of them, and in that laid the claim
that others afterwards would not supplant.
Friends, no more than that, but from these grown
are all the heights and depths of life I've known.*

17. *Oliver I met my first day there:
a town-bred, delicate and fair-haired boy,
quite individual, and as self-aware
as Paris makes of all in its employ.
'At least with you', he said, 'I'll have a friend
who's not a tradesman's son with grubby nails,
beyond my cousins, that is. Condescend
to visit us, supposing all else fails.'
And so we met: the girls about my age,
convivial and natural, convent-bred
to play some purpose on life's larger stage,
or so their father wanted, good as said,
but there was Madeleine in youth's shy blaze,
and Julie, stuck in her hard, stubborn ways.*

18. *In time we were inseparable, and met
at their large rambling country house or at
my aunt's, where I was lodged. In this was set
the onward pattern of our lives. We'd chat
and laugh, and share some silly joke or fret —
which even now I think is not revised —
and Julie's large and sombre eyes were set
on one cool Oliver she idolized,
and gradually, what once applied to one
applied to everyone, and so, however
innocent must seem that childhood won
from drab surroundings, it is one we sever
from all that is ourselves — although we should,
like children lost within a haunted wood.*

19. *So went my life. I came to seventeen,
a youth that promised much, though still a boy
in thoughts and attitude — or would have been
had not my comrade wanted to annoy
continually with his confounded wit.
Against whose barbs a saint could hardly win.
But you will smile of course when opposite
there sat the softly flowering Madeleine:
so ingénue and sweetly innocent
that I could hardly meet her candid looks
but grew half awkward, turned away, or went
on solo walks, or lost myself in books —
when Oliver's cursed teasing only grew
the more revealing when it would be true.*

20. *Was this my dawning love? I didn't know,
but played the ignorant and blameless still.
I'd watch her distantly as though she'd show
by indication what might be her will.
What will was that? the puzzled eyes would say
and draw back pained and doubting, half afraid
that something indiscreet formed this display
of maudlin silliness, which I had laid
at poetry's door, on fitful verses' whim —
for such the reasons given Oliver
who only smiled the more, as though to him
it was mere happenstance what might occur:
one blushing idiot when he the while
grew more to practising his blasé style.*

21. *An end prefigured was that fatal day,
with sisters not at home, and Oliver
from school and evening stroll had stayed away,
You'd think the merest schoolboy would infer
the facts. A servant kindly asked me wait.
I didn't, but crept on to the garden giving view
to that large drawing room where as of late
the family had grouped. I noticed too
a someone new, young-looking still, who stood
articulating what was meant for Madeleine,
submissive as in waiting maidenhood,
the hair across her shadowed face. And then
a darkness fell around me, one that spelt
the loss of all I hitherto had felt.*

22. *De Nièvres was his name, I learned,
but stayed a background figure best I could
while still the suitor's wise discretion earned
him warm opinions, as full well it should.
I had few options as to age and caste,
and future happiness of Madeleine
must put coincidences in the past,
or so I firmly told myself, again.
Perhaps I half believed it: introduced
to him as Madeleine's best friend had brought
a certain pause, as if the fact produced
a backward, hesitating, guarded thought
that here was someone whom he had to win,
or where some future troubles might begin.*

23. *Events thereafter followed in a daze:
betrothal, church and then the wedding feast,
with Julie sobbing, and that sombre blaze
in eyes that took in all but spoke the least.
But this she did say: 'Madeleine is still
our care, and you and I must do our part
to keep her safe.' I stared and felt the chill
of some unlooked-for warning touch the heart.
'Of course', I promptly said, but all the while;
when I must follow custom, kiss the bride,
there was, eviscerating, her soft smile
against the depths of hurt I felt inside.
I wanted just to rush away, but in that state
still vowed, if silently, that I would wait.*

24. *A few more weeks and we were Paris bound,
where Augustin had gone some years before,
but still my school had spite enough to hound
me ignominiously with one last chore.
The end of schooldays meant the annual prize
when all would come, the neighbourhood, to see
before their patronizing, knowing eyes
half men, half boys in borrowed dignity
accept the accolades and, with some tawdry wreath,
accentuate their harmless, lofty thoughts
on this and everything, while underneath
they squirmed in uniform and tight-cut shorts.
I gave whatever words I had to say,
and glanced at Madeleine, who looked away.*

PARIS

25. *Our brand new life was soon established. Each, both Oliver and I, had facing rooms, distinct apartments but in easy reach, a neat arrangement, though that much assumes we mixed. We didn't. Each had different ways, for Oliver was always out, and I, then going through some righteous, priggish phase, much kept to lecture rooms, so almost shy of all that Paris offers more courageous men. My life was literature, or thought, perhaps, or something anyway that Madeleine, whatever years of effort might elapse, would see was worthy of her, comprehend how much had altered in her childhood friend.*

26. *So picture then the newborn musketeers, myself and Oliver and Augustin, with fortune offering her late arrears, or promises that never build to plan. I was the most impressed, indeed bewitched, by modish elegance and outward charm, and Oliver was Oliver, and switched the local has-been for some beauty's arm. Impeccable, a well-bred negligence in choice of necktie or of buttonhole: a man about who, in the best of sense, was made Parisian, both heart and soul, which leaves the third, poor Augustin, still trudging on from where we first began.*

27. *To get her out of mind I also worked,
continually, and every evening saw
me late returning, hauling papers soaked
in sweat and disappointment, adding more
to that great pile of manuscripts we call
our contribution to the world of thought.
In truth it was but sorry matter, trawl
of observations that the world has sought
from better minds. And yet I'd add afresh
to mediocrity what hours begot.
What fine intentions mortified the flesh
until and sensibly I burned the lot.
Augustin would often ask me where it led,
and Oliver but sadly shake his head.*

28. *His haunts were opulence, where he'd to thank
his looks, good breeding and indifferent air
that much commends itself to those of rank
who have no other thoughts to place or care.
I know because occasionally I'd find
him promenading some becoming thing:
high-stepping, beautiful and unconfined
by any small-town mores I might bring.
Sometimes he passed them on: for several weeks
I joined that world of pleasure, louche and fast,
enjoyable, of course, where money speaks,
but thought of Madeleine, and all that passed.
No doubt it was to finally efface
my hopes I brought them out to this small place.*

29. *Those two whole months with Madeleine were full of danger though the entourage was there attending, simple and adorable.*

My inbred mind was even more aware that she was on her mettle too. I tried to show the many moods that made up me were in 'Les Trembles' grounds and countryside, the local atmosphere. Each oddity originated in this rural place of old traditions, towers and lichen walls, immemorial woods and pastures where the pace that Paris fosters here but barely crawls. And still her husband went along with it: smiling, courteous, with a rueful wit.

30. *He understood the matter, like as not, assuming kindness we all observe. Of me he made a tolerably good shot and gave as well, he smiled, this strange reserve. Those two whole months were magical, and shed a lingering afterglow, both bright and sad: Paris, Nièvres – all events that led to things mishandled, or we never had. Most notably with Oliver, for Julie, ever watching with those dark-blue eyes, remained unspoken to, and this was surely one more deathblow to her enterprise. Oliver was never one to yield to anything but social heights afield.*

31. *The de Nièvres soon regained their social set,
indeed within a month of getting there
Madeleine had Tuesdays, and that bloom was let
abroad to blossom in the Paris air
as was expected of her rank and place.*

*'To you of course I'm always home', she said
and smiled enchantingly, with such sweet grace
that now the thought still pains the battered head.
Far worse was her becoming ballroom dress,
which fittingly displayed a woman's charms.
The whole world darkened for me. I confess
to hardly seeing how she dropped her arms
and went back casually to drape a shawl
about the features where my gaze might fall.*

32. *So always Madeleine, and in my sleep,
awake or walking through each park or street,
I saw the semblance, had my manners leap
to upright conduct if we chanced to meet.
Her look or manner in a thousand forms
each step she made or any tilt of head
throughout the snowy weather, sun or storms:
she haunted everything my hopes still bred.
Some shape half-recognised, some silhouette,
or woman's finery — I'd hurry on,
when each new disappointment only set
up expectations that were soon as gone.
The eye grows sensitive, and at a glance
can tell intent in every look and stance.*

33. *Indeed in time the features Paris wore
were simply Madeleine and always her,
the streets and sounds originating more
and more made consciousness, and I'd infer
the time or what the rainy day would bring
from clouds, the grey of stonework, or the burst
of sparkling sunshine, when the light would sing
of coming happiness. I knew the first
soft breath of morning with its subtle scents
of unaired rooms and horses, pungent earth.
My aimless hours and strange existence lent
itself to vague imaginings and dearth
of plain reality or any plan:
just dreams, of course, as wayward boyhood can.*

34. *The feelings drawn by her went unexpressed,
and kept so purposely lest she be cursed
with all the otherness that I'd suppressed.
But then one day she stopped, and grasped the worst.
At once she turned quite pale and hung her head,
and, generously, her eyes grew large with tears.
'What I have done, I will undo', she said,
no matter what it takes, how many years.
And so she did. Like someone weaned from drugs,
our meetings widened into not that close,
but as a noose that tightens as one tugs
so heart still hungered for its last full dose.
'Madeleine, I'm cured!' I lied at last.
She stared as one for whom all hope is past.*

35. *Then Madeleine, from something safe,
became as watchful as the lidless snake,
some troubled, hurtful and elusive waif
that dwells at depth beneath the tranquil lake,
and like a creature horribly deformed
grew venomous, embittered and adept
at staying put however much I stormed,
or finding pitfalls in each course we stepped
to new deliverance. I never stayed
a moment longer than required to, all
perfunctory visits only, never paid
a compliment beyond the duty call.
Yet Madeleine had changed, and all I'd done,
or would do, in this illness had begun.*

36. *At last I stayed away, even went
into a sort of exile, creating space
on invitation cards, and in no wise lent
an impropriety to name or place.
Except that, distantly, I studied her,
and sent on thoughts about my coming book.
But nothing came of that, and sillier
to think she followed every step I took.
So was I happier? Not much, though less
exposed to hopelessness, and each new stab
of pain and jealousy, and I confess
my life grew steadier but also drab,
like one who teeters at some waterfall
that takes him safely onward, past it all.*

37. *How painfully will Opera nights bewitch
our senses with their warmth and scent. There, notch
by notch, the tensions reach their fever pitch
when Madeleine and all were forced to watch
the antics of the demi-monde arrive.
Immediately their glasses picked me out,
regardless, that is, how I might contrive
to feign an ignorance: there seemed no doubt
that I was well acquainted with their class.
Madeline swung round and stared at me.
I felt that blazing accusation pass
into the depths of my identity,
when every scrap of self-possession fled.
'Why must you torture me?' the fierce eyes said.*

38. *It was her first and only declaration.
And yet whole months and years had come to this
intoxicating, sheer exhilaration
that shattered finally all promised bliss.
How long I wandered round I do not know
but found myself at length beside the Seine:
white domes and palaces that seemed to glow
against the dark, torn sky, foretelling rain.
How silent was that world, all commerce stilled
and vexed inhabitants quite lost in sleep,
as though that consciousness were willed
to confidences now I had to keep.
Next day I found our correspondence cut:
her doors were closed to me, forever shut.*

39. *I did the obvious, and went abroad,
to Greece and Italy, the Holy Land,
and from my patrimony could well afford
the best of everything, go four in hand.
How rewarding should have been those sights,
the pulse of history in the sun-bleached stones,
the starry splendour of those warm blue nights.
I travelled singly but was not alone
when every vista also showed a face
both sorrowing and wearing out its care.
Each night-time courtesan assumed a grace
that vanished with the morning's sunlit air.
How recklessly I spent, but had to face
a Paris out of its beguiling lace.*

40. *At last I gave up worthier pursuits
and took each day of rapture as it came:
no more would idleness be outlawed fruits
but more as carelessness now loosed to play.
But like poor Augustin, still on I worked
by fits and starts, prodigiously, both day
and night. Consumed by that, I even lurked
to have presentiments incline my way.
The change in morning's odour, light and shade,
the street-cries, clothes, the clouds, all passing things
were such to leave me worried or afraid
to lose the certitude that writing brings.
In short a hackneyed distillate, the core
of old sensations better put before.*

41. *But still I went to press; the volume sold,
the public happy with a nom de plume
that promised true emotions known of old.
It gave me confidence, however, room
to bathe a little in reflected light,
have long meanderings be pondered on
in small societies, assert the right
to issue one more volume. That's all gone
now. Little – I speak to you quite candidly –
is irreplaceable, or worth the cost,
or, donning more the mask of honesty,
of recompensing us for long years lost.
But still, all said and done, I tried
and from that small success drew modest pride.*

42. *And then a revelation. Going round
a picture gallery from room to room
one dark and rain-swept afternoon I found
there Madeleine's clean lines conveyed in gloom.
It was a half-length portrait, hands and face
and dress, although the last was nondescript.
Each feature modelled with a master's grace:
severe and candid, as in acid dipped,
but hurt the looking, brought a troubled soul
alive in every sharp and haunted shape.
A trembling, breathing creature imaged whole
in looks, in chair and every casual drape:
how bitterly the shadowed eyes conveyed
a life diminished and the more betrayed.*

43. *I went each day until the gallery
was closed at last, and with it Madeleine
then slowly faded from my mind. I'd see
no more of her, I thought, and need not feign
an interest in what was surely past.*

*We grow up, change, and lead a different life:
Whatever else was clear, the die were cast:
my friend of childhood was another's wife.*

*And so I put it by, of course I did,
and even Oliver's half awkward air
scarce urged me happily to do as bid.*

*'Things', I hear, 'are not too good out there.
But you could go and find out what is what,
and be the emissary that I cannot.'*

44. *I knew immediately just what was meant,
how intervention could be falsely read,
indeed would be, for Julie ever spent
long days on turning round the least words said.*

*It was the hope that made her being whole,
the slightest kindness turned to destiny.*

Events he hated with his well-bred soul.

'I'll not be loved by her. Why should I be?'

fumed Oliver, for once now vexed.

'But what of Madeleine? You think she's well?'

*I asked, when common childhoods had annexed
what name and family had still to tell.*

He stopped, his features seeming clenched in stone,

'I think you know, and why they're on their own.'

NIÈVRE

45. *I reached Nièvre late that afternoon,
and found the chateau grounds deserted, more:
the gate and inner court unlit. Thence, soon,
if unannounced, I crossed the entrance floor.
'Madame?' I asked of some approaching maid,
or so I thought it was in that dim light.
The figure started back as one dismayed,
and there was Madeleine: a fearful sight.
'Dominique!' she cried. I looked aghast
at someone barely human, pale and thin.
'Ah well, the miscreant's returned at last
to see what desperate straits we're in.
Come, I'll take you to my father: he
will want to show you some civility.'*

46. *'My dear, dear boy, yes, do come in', he said —
d'Orsell himself seemed aged and bent,
his wispy hair quite white about the head —
'You've worked so hard. We've read the books you've sent,
for we are invalids sequestered here.
Madeleine you've met, she's greatly changed,
and Julie's ill again, though one could fear
she makes herself like this, and half deranged.'
I think she was, and hard to recognize
a former beauty in the one unkempt
where passion burned so fiercely in the eyes,
and more so for their object's veiled contempt.
Impossible, I knew, for Oliver,
suppose he ever married, would not her.*

47. *'She speaks of him?' I ventured of her nurse. 'Never', said Madeleine, 'but thinks of him continually, and therefore, what is worse, will not relinquish it to childish whim.'*
'But can't you wean her from such mulishness, to set her hopes elsewhere?' I said. 'That's rich', said Madeleine. 'I think you might address what notions serve to banish or bewitch the lives of our two souls together. You should know that this, de Nièvre's house, is not appropriate, nor can we do what hurts the reputation of my spouse, who's honourable at least, if not so wise to leave uncared for what you recognise.'

48. *We rode and rode all day. She drove her horse, up hill, through briar and stream and tangled wood and if I caught her up, then on she'd force the poor, scared animal as best she could. A hundred times I nearly cracked my head on low-hung branch or was long-ways thrown. She laughed and, turning in the saddle, sped on wildly past me in a tempest blown all ways and this. At last I snatched the rein and brought the animal back down in foam, when, crop in teeth, she glared at me, a pain I could not answer as we headed home. Once there she flung the traces at the groom and went in, quickly: daylong kept her room.*

49. *All night I ventured up and down along
the corridor that led to her small room
towards that deafening, sweet and sensual song.
Her light was on and left a reddish bloom
upon the maples opposite and shed
a beckoning radiance beneath the door.
I was a man possessed and in my head
there rose the fumes of all those looks before,
and, though the fall would hurt us, still the flight
from frank reality portrayed a fevered look
of sad acceptances that none could fight.
I stopped. No fundament of being shook
but, like that pillared thing that first was Lot,
I grasped the handle firmly, then could not.*

50. *Such are our natures when we lack the strength
to take the least misstep and pay the cost.
I wavered, wandered, and indeed at length
walked round the parkland, inward tossed
by wild imprudences that entertained
a life made practical with Madeleine.
How pointless that was when it only feigned
the joys my nature would demounce again.
For we are social creatures that require
a modicum of grace to get us through
the days' perplexities. No frank desire
would cauterise the hungering body's due.
In the morning I was shown a face
now punctured with a pained and rueful grace.*

51. *How hard that meeting was. She took my hands
as one consoles an ever-erring friend,
where steadied firmness holding them withstands
the thought their childishness will never end.
And so it was, with passion flooded out,
and still in riding clothes, a deathly cast
about her straitened features, one devout,
and like the kindly nun when all is past,
she said, 'There is no future now. No, none,
but only heartache and at length disgrace
to family and then whatever son
must come to bear that handsome, forthright face.
We'd have dependents, both, who'll have to wait
in vain for what is theirs: a fine estate.'*

52. *'My dear, impossible, poor Dominique',
she said. 'So many hopes of which the heart
until this moment could not even speak
have you undone. And will again. We part
today, and finally, though you know all
my thoughts thereafter in the paths you choose,
impelled by sense and instincts I recall
as some inheritance I'll never lose.
Perhaps some part of me will go with you
to help us both towards that guarantee
of lives succeeding nonetheless, so true
to those fond memories we'll one day be.
Think well of me, be happy, take a wife
who will, as I cannot, make good your life.'*

53. *I left at once, avoided Paris, came to that small house of Augustin's. One glance at me was quite enough to give the name to life's interminable and painful dance. 'She's dead, Madame de Nièvre, then?' he said. 'In ways that matter, yes. At least to me.'* He heard me out and then the questions led to sadness and a quiet propriety. Afterwards I went to Ormesson where Madam Ceysac took me in. Again there was no need for words. She prattled on, then looked up quickly, sighed and said, 'Amen'. So it was over, and, distressed and sore at life, I came to my old house once more.

EPILOGUE

54. At last, the gloom of evening gathering shade
by shade about the room, the letter too
with all its melancholy contents laid
so plainly out to introspection's view,
a silence settled on us both. I thought
of many things to ask but could not speak,
and Dominique himself seemed also fraught
with reservations not that far to seek,
the hard looks coiling into earnest thought.
Madame de Bray was on the gravelled walk —
I heard her calling to the boys at play —
and there were also sounds of work and talk
that mark the ending of a country day.
The past was done with, and a softer tone
appeared in clouds and in the shadowed stone.

55. We spoke no more. And three days later there
appeared a stranger at 'Les Trembles', one
whose style of dress and bearing, close-cropped hair
betokened some distinction, station won
of eminence in life or court affairs.
Augustin, of course. I could have guessed
from such impregnable and fearless airs
but heard him welcomed, warmly, so addressed
when I was introduced. He bowed and shook
my hand with that grave courtesy reserved
for those we take in with a candid look.
That night, when too much wine had served
to loosen tongues a little, at long last,
we each of us looked through that tortured past.

56. I was plain narrator here, the man
of words and strange imaginings: no past
to speak of, playing honest artisan
with lives presented in this story's cast.
*And I, said Dominique, am reconciled
to temperate blessings from a temperate life.
Past storms, so perilous, have domiciled
themselves to care for children and a wife.
But Augustin's the one you ought to ask:
he's grown quite famous for his iron will.
To all a good example, there's no task
he hasn't undertaken, would do still.
Perhaps, said Augustin, but many things
are simply as our purblind fortune brings.*

57. *For you have lived, dear Dominique: your heart
can celebrate the heights I've never known,
those painful joys and sorrows that impart
their strange infractions to our lives. My own
careers, if I may call them that — which give
to book-lined sanctuaries their evening light,
illuminating all the timid ways we live,
forever fearful and much hid from sight —
are like some butterfly that beats in vain,
in gaudy helplessness, its tattered wings
repeatedly against the window pane,
and wanting — who knows what? Those far-off things
by which, and fervently, as with a child,
the day is suddenly unloosed and wild.*

58. *Of course at times we've been ourselves: a glow
of true conviviality with friends
that animates this world of outward show.
It spreads before us as the suppers end
in warm contentment and benevolence
to all around us as we walk on home.
Perhaps in new companionship we sense
an earlier world, and one in which we roam
long distances but knowing all too well
that happiness eludes our outstretched hands.
We are but instances, by which we tell
the tracks of others in those sunrise lands.
In this plain world we live, while unconfessed
go all the varied hopes we once possessed.*

59. *We age, said Dominique. Eventually
we lose the earnestness, and let regress
the fading distances that make us see
the past blocked out in warm forgetfulness.
At least I think so. Hope so. Madeleine
and Julie: unknown to me where either lives.
I think of them, and constantly, but then
with not that urgency, which yearning gives
to our perplexed and wounding paths. It's true
that something still can walk upon my grave
and echo what I'd onetime hoped to do,
but these are old exactions that I wave
aside, lest penitence and unforced fasts
become the staple of our smiling pasts.*