

FRENCH REALISM: THE CRITICAL  
REACTION, 1830-1870

BY  
BERNARD WEINBERG

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## FOREWORD

THE subject of this study was suggested to me by Professor Algonon Coleman and Professor E. Preston Dargan of the University of Chicago. The work was written under the direction of Professor Coleman; to him I wish to express my gratitude for his unfailing interest and for countless valuable suggestions. To Professor Dargan, who assisted me on the Balzac chapter and who kindly read and corrected the entire work, I am also grateful. Likewise, I am indebted to Professor W. Scott Hastings of Princeton University and to Professor Thomas R. Palfrey of Northwestern University for their kindness in reading the manuscript. To Mr. W. H. Royce, for his help on Balzac bibliography, thanks are also due. Without the aid, finally, of the trustees of the American Field Service Fellowships for France, who enabled me to pursue a year of reading at the Bibliothèque nationale, the project would have been impossible of achievement. To them, and to the Institute of International Education, I should like to express my sincere appreciation.

B. W.

Chicago, August, 1937

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## INTRODUCTION

OF THE literary controversies that arose in France in the last century, those relevant to Romanticism and to Realism were by far the most considerable. Romanticism, in recent years, has been studied carefully by literary historians, whose interest has centered both about the development of the movement and about its reception by the public. Although Realism came but shortly after Romanticism, from which it sprang, and although its advocates made equally positive assertions, it has provoked less debate on the part of contemporaries and of later critics. This we may explain by several facts. On the one hand, many of the liberties demanded by Realism had already been solicited, if not won, by the earlier school, and public opinion was naturally less aroused by the reiteration of these demands. In a word, the cleavage between Realism and Romanticism was less considerable, in many respects, than that between Romanticism and the antecedent tradition. On the other hand, there existed for Realism no body of theory comparable in unity of purpose and in scope to the credos and manifestoes of the romantics. Hence we find that while scholars have made many studies of individual realists, they have given less attention to the general movement, to its gradual development of an artistic method and to the reception accorded the method by contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> In the present study, I shall examine the second of these problems—the critical reaction to French Realism from 1830 to 1870.

Each of the terms in this formulation of the problem—the critical reaction to French Realism from 1830 to 1870—demands elucidation.

In the first place, *whose* critical reaction? I have already indicated that my interest focused on “the reception accorded the method by contemporaries,” on the reaction of contemporaries to the realistic movement. But practical considerations necessitated a restriction of the term *contemporary*: restriction to the contemporary who lived in France, and who wrote and published his opinions in Parisian journals or in books. For the study of memoirs and letters as a means of ascertaining “public” opinion yielded, in most cases, meager results indeed; when literary comments did appear in these sources, they were usually of an anecdotal nature. Hence the mass of opinions consulted were “professional,” the writings of literary critics proper.

In order that these opinions might approximate the general attitude of the period, I have included a very large number of critical articles.

These I discovered by examining nearly all the Parisian reviews and journals which contained literary materials and which appeared within the time limits adopted.<sup>2</sup> Materials found there were supplemented by articles in two daily newspapers, *Le Constitutionnel* and *Le Journal des débats*, both of which I studied for the whole period; by items in *Figaro* up to the time it became a daily newspaper (1866); by other newspaper articles to which I had specific references; and by non-periodical works such as biographies, collections of essays, histories of literature, and prefaces. It is to be noted that the study is based only on this limited group of representative materials, and that the conclusions are valid only for these materials. I hope, however, that they will be found typical of the entire mass of journalistic writing in this period.

From these various sources, I gathered more than a thousand pertinent items. Many of these had not previously been mentioned in historical studies, and therefore constitute a contribution to the bibliography of the subject.<sup>3</sup>

In the second place, critical reaction to what? To French Realism, to the movement in nineteenth-century literature known by that name. For critics, however, this "movement" would take the form of specific works and specific statements of theory. Any work, then, which was regarded by a contemporary as an example of the realistic tendency should be considered a realistic work, and any such criticism should be eligible for inclusion in the materials of this study. But, again, limitations of time and of space made a selection necessary. Thus I have omitted all critical discussion of the realistic dramatists, and have included only those novelists who were consistently related to the movement, for reasons adequately stated by the critics. And here another problem presented itself. For while affiliations of works and authors with Realism were clear enough after 1850, when the term *réalisme* had become current, how was one to determine what works before that date belonged to the new tendency? Once more, the materials were allowed to speak for themselves. For in the writings which deal with the realists proper, the critics named the principal forerunners of the school and described the traits which merited that designation. On the basis of contemporary opinion, therefore, I have studied the reaction to Stendhal, Mérimée, and Balzac as precursors of the school: Stendhal and Mérimée as isolated figures with partly realistic tendencies; Balzac as the earliest complete expression of a realistic system in the novel and as the fountain-head of the subsequent literary movement. The chapter on criticism of Balzac is, indeed, the longest in the study; for over one-third of the total number of articles consulted dealt with the author of the *Comédie humaine*. In a second group came Champfleury and

Murger, who prepared the way for the realistic group proper—Flaubert, Feydeau, and the Goncourts. Several minor authors, Monnier, Charles de Bernard, About, Dumas *fils* as author of *Affaire Clémenceau*, have been studied in their appropriate groups.

There are good reasons for including so large a number of writers. It is possible to discover the contemporary reaction to Realism as such only by examining the reaction to all the important writers participating in the movement. Thus, by eliminating individual differences, one may determine how realistic practices in general were received by the critics. Moreover, the critical judgments of authors who are as different from one another as those enumerated will indicate fully the critical standards and attitudes of the period.

In addition to the works, the statements of theory; in addition to the judgments of given novels, the remarks on the body of realistic doctrine and on the general tendencies of the school. A large number of special articles, and many passages in other articles, contained statements of the critical attitude towards Realism, taken as a general term designating a complex of literary practices. These statements, and the formulations of literary theory which they upheld or controverted, I have included in a chapter called "Theory and Opposition." It became manifest, however, that such statements were usually relevant not only to literature, but also to painting; that in the estimation of the critics, the two arts were closely connected during the realistic period. Hence I have included a chapter on the criticism of realistic painting (from 1840 to 1860 especially). If the chapter on painting precedes that on theory, it is because realistic theory and the reaction to it first crystallized about the work of the painters, and the same attitudes were later transferred to literary discussion.

In the third place, critical reaction *at what time?* The realistic movement had obscure beginnings before the nineteenth century, and still continues. Within this span of time, it was necessary to select a limited period for study; the selection was again made on the basis of the materials themselves. Critics pointed to Balzac and Stendhal as the chief precursors of the school. Now Balzac's earliest work as a realistic novelist came in 1830, which was also the date of Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* and of Monnier's *Scènes populaires*. Thus the famous date of the triumph of Romanticism would seem to mark the beginning of a second, realistic phase of that movement, and I have taken it as the *terminus a quo* for this study. Similarly, certain facts pointed to 1870 as the *terminus ad quem*: the publication of Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale* and the beginnings of Zola's ambitious naturalistic sequence (both in 1869), and, in 1870, the death of Jules de Goncourt, which

marked the close of the joint authorship of the Goncourts. Both termini, furthermore, were dates of political significance, and critics frequently spoke of them as influencing literary trends; Realism proper may be said to extend from the Revolution of July to the fall of the Second Empire.

The principle of organization of the materials has already been suggested: I have classified the critical opinions according to the works (or authors) criticized, or with respect to statements of realistic theory. Each chapter (or part of a chapter) presents the criticism of a single author from the beginning of his career as a realist until 1870; the arrangement is chronological within each chapter. In some cases, I have been able to treat separately the reaction to each of the successive novels of a writer; in others, it has been necessary to group the criticisms within larger periods, on the basis of the points discussed in the critical remarks. Again, the chronological principle directs the ordering of the various chapters: the realists are taken up in approximately the sequence in which they presented themselves to contemporaries, the chapters on painting and theory also occupy an approximate chronological place. Throughout, I have tried to quote the most representative pronouncements, and to give references to all other passages offering similar opinions. The references, for the sake of brevity, give only the index-number of the item as it appears in the Bibliography, the author's name, and the page. Each chapter has been prefaced by a chronology of those works of the author which were published during the period, and which aroused critical comment of a pertinent character; these chronologies are thus partial rather than complete.

Through the examination and classification of the materials, I have tried to answer a number of questions inherent in the problem. What did contemporaries think of the realistic movement? Were they essentially sympathetic or antagonistic towards it? What aspects of realistic writing attracted them, what repelled them? What did they mean by *réalisme*, by *réaliste*? Was there any change, any evolution in their attitudes? Is it possible to determine the general criteria of the period as applicable to the literature of any school?

In answering these questions, I have been led to what I might call a statistical approach. I have tended to subordinate the critic's personality, to consider his contribution as merely another manifestation of the general spirit. So too I have been very democratic: the dictum of an anonymous writer may have just as much weight in my analysis as the expert statement of a Sainte-Beuve or a Taine. In a word, I am concerned with the general attitude towards Realism, and with the successive phases of that attitude.



I make no attempt at writing a history of Realism. Such a history would study sources, the advances made by individual writers, the development of the technique, the formulation of theory, personal relationships. With these I am occupied only in so far as they explain new or different responses from the critics. I treat rather the converse of the problem, the critical judgments elicited by the constituent elements of Realism as these were embodied in the work of one realist after another.

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<sup>1</sup>The most prominent general studies are Bouvier's *La Bataille réaliste* (Paris: Fontemoing, 1913) and Martino's *Le Roman réaliste sous le Second Empire* (Paris: Hachette, 1913).

<sup>2</sup>See Appendix A for a list of the periodicals examined.

<sup>3</sup>A complete bibliography of the materials used, arranged chronologically according to the authors criticized, will be found in Appendix B.



## THE PRECURSORS



CHAPTER I  
STENDHAL AND MÉRIMÉE

*Chronologies*

[Stendhal]

- 1830: *Le Rouge et le Noir*  
1838: *Mémoires d'un Touriste*  
1839: *La Chartreuse de Parme*  
1842: Stendhal's death  
1853-1855: *Œuvres complètes*

[Mérimée]

- 1829: *Chronique du règne de Charles IX*  
1830: *Théâtre de Clara Gazul* (2nd ed.)  
1833: *Mosaïque*  
*La Double Méprise*  
1835: *Notes d'un voyageur dans le midi de la France*  
1840: *Colomba*  
1844: *Arsène Guillot*  
1845: *Carmen*  
*Reception at the Académie française*  
1850: *Les Deux Héritages*  
1852: *Nouvelles*

DURING the romantic period, in the decade of the 1820's, Stendhal and Mérimée distinguished themselves from their associates by qualities which were one day to be recognized as realistic. They were, even at that early date, isolated figures whose work evidenced varied and sometimes conflicting impulses: the "classical," the "romantic," the "realistic." As they progressed in their literary careers, it was perhaps the realistic aspect that gained the ascendancy in their writings; at any rate, it was this aspect which, in the eyes of the succeeding generations, identified them as predecessors of a new literary manner. Because of these traits, readily described as realistic, and because they were both linked, in the later years, with the realistic movement, I have chosen to study their literary fortune between 1830 and 1870 as a prologue to the study of the critical reaction to the realists themselves.

When, in 1840, Henri Beyle announced to Honoré de Balzac that he "had not expected to be read before 1880," he was expressing a conviction that appears frequently in his writings.<sup>1</sup> This conviction had a

double source: it sprang first from Stendhal's sense of his maladjustment to the tastes of contemporary readers, and secondly from his experiences with the critics. With judgments on his work prior to 1830 I am not here concerned; but it is significant to note that from that date to the time of his death, there appeared (or at least I have been able to discover) but thirty critical discussions of his novels. The years from 1842 to 1870 added scarcely fifty more. The total is indeed small. It is especially small when we realize that the same periodicals examined for Stendhal yielded, in the case of Balzac, some four hundred items. Beyle's statement was at once a recognition of fact and a presentiment.

For our purposes, criticism of Stendhal began with the appearance of *Le Rouge et le Noir* in 1830. That year and the following saw a relatively large number of critical articles. A second peak came between 1838 and 1840, with the appreciations of *Mémoires d'un Touriste* and of *La Chartreuse de Parme*; a third between 1842 and 1847, comprising the notices following Stendhal's death; and a fourth between 1853 and 1855, when the publication of his complete works was stimulating critical comment. From that time to 1866 (the date of my last item) discussions were scattered and sporadic.

#### 1830 to 1831

*Le Rouge et le Noir* appeared during the week of November 13, 1830; for about four months it received a certain amount of attention from the critics. Then came a complete silence. Short as this space was, however, and limited in number as were the items, they were still numerous enough to record a fairly unified body of attitudes; disapproval by the critics was the principal unifying element. The various reactions find their most typical and perhaps their most complete expression in an article by Jules Janin in the *Journal des débats* of December 26, 1830.<sup>2</sup>

Janin gives a long summary of the novel, with intercalated critical remarks. He defines Stendhal's purpose to "peindre la société telle que l'avait faite le jésuitisme de la Restauration." Passing on to the character of the hero, he says:

Dans ce personnage, si cruellement exact, il n'y a pas un mouvement de jeune homme, pas un mot naïf, pas un transport naturel. . . . Si c'est là de la vérité, c'est une vérité bien triste; si c'est là de la nature, c'est une horrible nature. On ne saurait imaginer combien souvent je me sens déchaîné contre ces esprits méthodiques et inflexibles, qui considèrent le moral avec une loupe, qui se posent là comme sur un cadavre, disséquant scalpel en main les recoins les plus hideux de cette nature sans vie.

Follow attacks on Stendhal's blackened portrayal of provincial life, and on his anti-bourgeois and anti-Jesuit prejudices. Then:

Sous sa plume, tout se flétrit sans retour, le plus beau jour, le plus beau sol, les plus heureux sentiments. Il promène avec un admirable sang-froid son héros, son monstre, à travers mille turpitudes, à travers mille niaiseries qui sont pirés que des turpitudes. Singulier plaisir que s'est donné cet écrivain de réunir en bloc toutes les criailleries, toutes les misères, toutes les dissimulations, tous les mensonges, toutes les superstitions, toutes les cruautés de notre état social. . . .

Arriving at the end of his résumé, Janin condemns the dénouement as artificial, and then proceeds to a summary statement :

Si le dernier roman de M. de Stendhal est, avec de si graves invraisemblances et si peu morales, un ouvrage remarquable, vif, colère, plein d'intérêt et d'émotions, s'il mérite d'être lu, même dans le grand oubli de la littérature contemporaine, M. de Stendhal est autrement digne d'être étudié. M. de Stendhal est un de ces écrivains à plusieurs noms, à triple visage, toujours sérieux, dont on ne saurait trop se méfier. C'est un observateur à froid, un railleur cruel, un sceptique méchant, qui est heureux de ne croire à rien, parce qu'en ne croyant pas, il a le droit de ne rien respecter et de flétrir tout ce qu'il touche. Un auteur ainsi fait, corps et âme, s'en va sans inquiétude et sans remords, jetant son venin sur tout ce qu'il rencontre ; jeunesse, beauté, grâces, illusions de la vie ; les champs même, les forêts, les fleurs, il les dépare, il les brise. . . . jamais on n'aimera l'auteur qui vous aura gâté toutes vos illusions, qui vous aura montré le monde trop laid, pour que vous osiez désormais l'habiter sans pâlir.

And he closes with an objection to Beyle's excessive use of the paradox, which constitutes, with "cet invincible besoin de tout peindre en laid," the principal element of his literary approach.

I may summarize thus Janin's objections: Stendhal gives a false portrait of society, and his hero and situations are exceptional ; his departure from truth is always in the direction of the ugly ; the general effect of his book, since he has the cynical outlook of a scientist, is to sadden and disillusion the reader. These objections, I hardly need insist, are essentially non-literary in character ; they are concerned with the philosophy and, still more definitely, with the moral attitude of the author. This tendency to raise a moral objection to *Le Rouge et le Noir* is prevalent in criticisms of these years. An anonymous writer of *La Revue de Paris* calls the book "une dénonciation en forme contre l'âme humaine, une sorte d'amphithéâtre où on le voit occupé à la disséquer pièce à pièce, pour mieux mettre en relief la lèpre morale dont il la croit rongée" ; it is a "satire des mœurs contemporaines," in which the desire for vivid portrayal, leading to exaggeration and caricature, deprives the work of naturalness.<sup>3</sup> Again, *L'Artiste* characterizes it as "de l'algèbre sur le cœur humain,"<sup>4</sup> and *La Gazette de France* as an "honteuse production."<sup>5</sup> Even for Mérimée, Beyle's intimate friend,

Julien is true, but horrible—art must not treat this side of human nature<sup>6</sup>—and for Balzac the novel is the “conception d’une sinistre et froide philosophie.” *La Gazette littéraire*, in an ironic review, mocks at the “manie . . . de faire des mœurs et des passions” and at Stendhal’s attempt to make common life “distinguished” by multiplying minute details.<sup>8</sup> Even a satirical song, entitled *Le Rouge et le Noir*, calls Stendhal “un sceptique désenchanté,” and continues:

Il hait l’honneur pusillanime  
Et, dans son sot égarement,  
N’accorde un cœur un peu sublime  
Qu’à l’homme qui tue et qui ment.<sup>9</sup>

By contrast with these adverse opinions, Amédée Pichot finds in the work a penetrating and faithful depiction of society; he considers the events (whose historical source he indicates) and the hero true, and he sees in Julien a representative of the youth of his time.<sup>10</sup> Alexis de Saint-Priest exclaims: “Voilà de la vérité! voilà de l’exactitude!”<sup>11</sup>

For expressions on the formal, literary aspects of the work we must turn to other passages. A tribute to the plot and its interest is paid by *La Revue de Paris*,<sup>12</sup> but its opinion is contradicted by *La Gazette littéraire*, which finds the narrative capricious and without logical sequence:<sup>13</sup> everywhere, except in the laudable treatment of the love of Julien and Madame de Renal, the author strains for originality, and as a result his style, his characterizations, his descriptions, are uneven. The most favorable review of all appears in *Figaro*: its author finds that certain of the figures are without individuality; but Julien and Mathilde are original creations, and the handling is generally superior; especially is the style “jeune, frais et plein de couleur.”<sup>14</sup> However, this is not the opinion of *L’Artiste*, which notes an abuse of the unexpected (“l’imprévu”) and a monotony of plot; only the “esprit” and the “choses vues et décrites à la loupe” are praiseworthy.<sup>15</sup>

In general, then, the novel was rejected by the critics, chiefly because they disapproved on moral and philosophical grounds of the subject-matter and the author’s cynicism, and also because they found structural deficiencies. None of the writers, indeed, was sufficiently impressed by the literary qualities of the work to comment upon them extensively.

#### 1838 to 1840

After seven years of an almost absolute silence—I find only a passing compliment to the description in *Le Rouge*<sup>16</sup> and an allusion to its immorality<sup>17</sup>—we come to the *Mémoires d’un Touriste* in 1838 and to *La Chartreuse de Parme* in 1839. The former is only incidentally of



interest to us, since it is not a novel; but certain remarks on Stendhal's general method are worthy of note. Such, for example, is Francis Wey's mockery of "la feinte banalité des observations, les niaiseries simulées," of "ces détails si vrais, si naturels; le *vrai seul est aimable*," of the "ineffable simplicité," and of the "profonde connaissance de la classe la plus nombreuse des lecteurs." He speaks lightly of Stendhal's "profondes pensées politico-théo-philosophiques."<sup>18</sup> More significant is the judgment of Frémy in *La Revue de Paris*:

... l'auteur a compris que la première qualité du voyageur comme de l'historien était d'être vrai; il n'a donc voulu rien déguiser, rien farder, il a tenu avant tout à raconter les choses telles qu'elles se sont passées, telles qu'elles existent.

He finds a certain charm in the conscious simplicity and naïveté; but the lack of transitions is fatiguing. Beyle's style, although sometimes affected in rhythm, has real originality, and he avoids the abuse of description. He sees things in a true, albeit a sad light; above all, he is absolutely sincere.<sup>19</sup> Chaudes-Aigues, who speaks of *Le Rouge* as one of the finest contemporary novels, lauds the naturalness of the new book and the presence of "ces qualités étouffées par l'emphase de certains écrivains modernes"—obviously an allusion to romantic excesses, of which he believes Stendhal to be free.<sup>20</sup> Eugène Guinot, in a review of the *Mémoires*, also praises *Le Rouge* since it "paints well the world and the heart."<sup>21</sup> Finally, Forgues—like many later critics—compares Stendhal to Diderot and comments, incidentally, on his excessive use of detail.<sup>22</sup>

Early in 1839, before the appearance of *La Chartreuse*, Amédée Duquesnel gave a belated appreciation of *Le Rouge et le Noir*, which he termed "singulièrement remarquable par la profondeur des observations et la texture nerveuse de l'ensemble." Like his predecessors he blamed the dénouement and the disenchanting moral conclusion. But he was obliged to declare: "mais quelle science de la vie! quelles peintures de la haute société parisienne et de cet égoïsme brillant qui la ronge!"<sup>23</sup>

The reception of *La Chartreuse de Parme*, although extremely limited in scope, was on the whole favorable: not that the criticisms were all laudatory, nor that its enthusiasts found nothing deprecatory to say; but in general the balance swung towards praise rather than towards blame. We may again consult Frémy for such a statement of mingled praise and blame; he begins his article by scoring Stendhal's narrative technique:

On peut faire plus d'un reproche à la *Chartreuse de Parme*: la manière de raconter de l'auteur est étrange, elliptique, et il est même douteux qu'il soit avantageux de l'imiter. Il fait entrer ses personnages