Modern Critical Views

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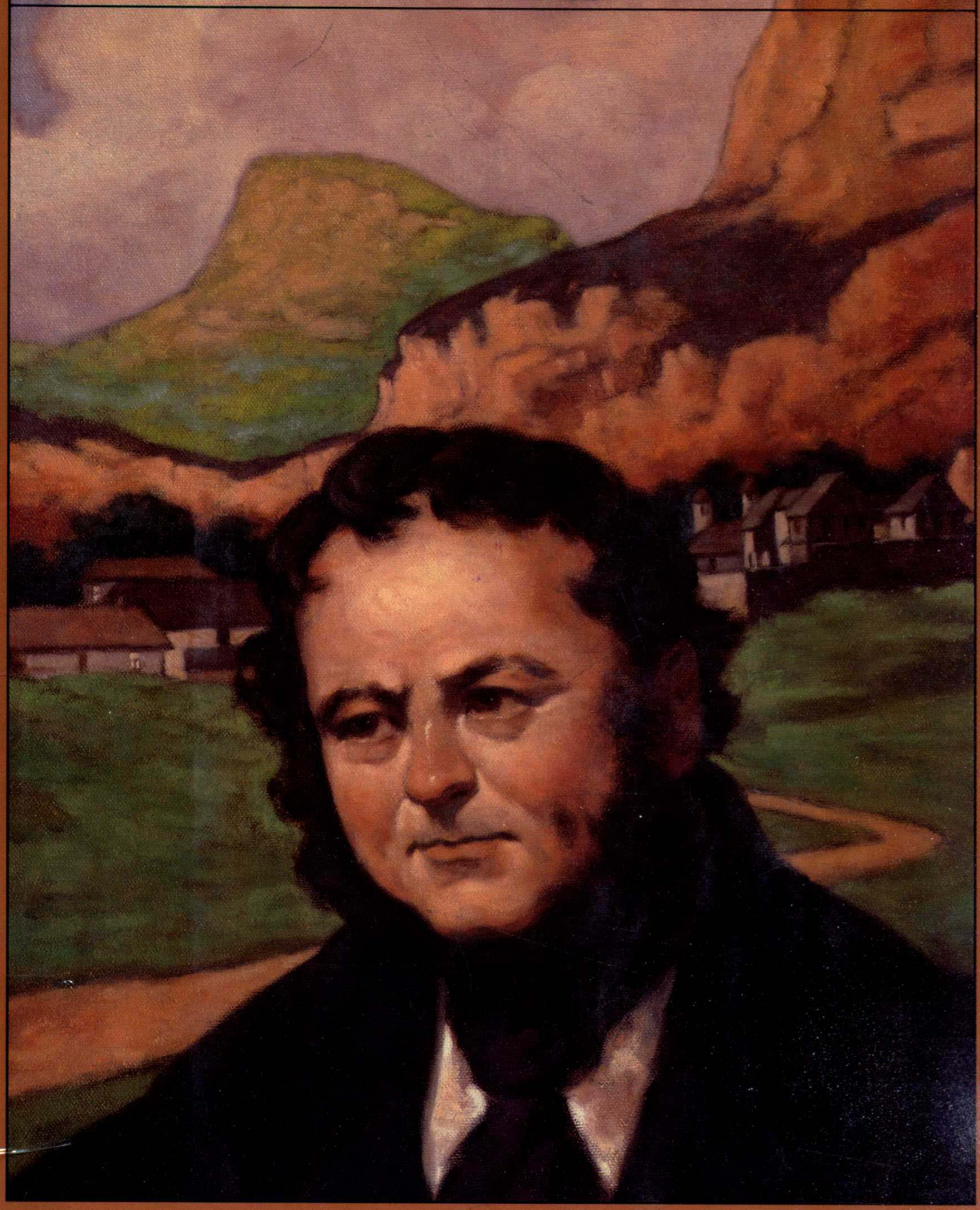
Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best modern criticism available in English on the writings of Stendhal. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their publication. I am grateful to Suzanne Roos for her assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction centers upon *The Red and the Black,* with particular emphasis upon the last days of Julien Sorel. Paul Valéry, the greatest French poet of our century, begins the chronological sequence of criticism with an overview of Stendhal, whom he sees as "much more a type of mind than a man of letters."

A comparison of Balzac and Stendhal, by the eminent Marxist critic Georg Lukács, finds them both to be supreme social realists, with the difference emerging from Stendhal's residual Romanticism. Simone de Beauvoir, novelist and feminist critic, expresses her relief at encountering Stendhal's realistic representation of women in love. René Girard, chronicler of the catastrophes of mimetic desire in the novel, reads *The Red and the Black* as an early vision of a pattern of human deceit that since has become intolerable.

The Charterhouse of Parma is interpreted by Stephen Gilman as a vision of human isolation, conveyed with particular force through the novel's emblematic tower. Alexander Gelley, in a very different reading of the *Charterhouse,* emphasizes the novelist's perspectivizing of his own sensual mythology through its medium of his landscapes.

Stendhal's "autobiography," *The Life of Henry Brulard,* is judged by Louis Marin to be an art of interruption, a mode of rewriting the text of life. *Lucien Leuwen,* neglected because of the extraordinary strength of *The Red and the Black* and *The Charterhouse of Parma,* is analyzed by D. A. Miller as an instance of the dependence of Stendhalian eros "on love plots engendered from misjudgments and blind spots."

Peter Brooks, like D. A. Miller deeply versed in Freud, reads *The Red and the Black* as an anticipation of Freud's boldest speculations on patterns of recurrence and revenge in the relations of fathers and sons. Stendhal's letters are interpreted by Martine Reid as ambivalent meditations upon the fictive nature of language. In this book's final essay, Juliet Flower MacCannell employs current advanced modes of criticism to show how Stendhal equated consciousness with woman, while indicating that male vanity, calling itself "freedom," was what kept man from achieving a parallel degree of consciousness.

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Introduction

Nietzsche saluted Stendhal as "this strange Epicurean and man of interrogation, the last great psychologist of France." Yet Stendhal is both less and more than a psychologist, even in the sense of moral psychologist intended by Nietzsche. If we are unhappy because we are vain, which seems true enough, then the insight seems related to the conviction that our sorrows come to us because we are restless, and cannot sit at our desks. To assimilate Stendhal to Pascal would be tasteless, yet to determine the pragmatic difference between them is a complex labor. Pascal, to me, is the authentic nihilist; Stendhal is something else. Call that Julien Sorel, who attracts us without compelling our liking. Or do we like him? Robert M. Adams coolly concludes that:

> Whether you like Julien Sorel, and for what parts of his behavior, depends, then, in some measure, on who you think you are and what conspiracies or complicities your imagination allows you to join, in the course of reading the book.

That may be giving Stendhal the best of it, since the reader's fundamental right, as critic, is to ask the writer "who do you think you are, anyway?" The reversal is shrewd, whether Stendhal's or Adams's, since we do not expect the author to be quite as aggressive as ourselves. Stendhal brazenly excels us, and Julien is more his surrogate than many have allowed. We admire Julien for the range of his imagination and are a little estranged by his extraordinary (if intermittent) ability to switch his affections by acts of will. He is, of course, designedly a little Napoleon, and if one is not Hazlitt or Stendhal that may not move one to affection. But the Napoleonic is only one wave or movement in him, and Stendhal is one of that myriad of nineteenth-century writers of genius who fracture the self. A more crucial movement is the Byronic, and here Adams is very perceptive, indeed marvelously so:

> Most of what we think about Julien depends, of course, on our judgment of his behavior with the two ladies; and here we come up against the central paradox of the novel, that (like the ladies) we don't really think more highly of our hero the better he behaves. Quite the contrary. The worse he behaves, the more painful the sacrifices he requires of them, the more we are impressed by their determination to love him. Impervious to jealousy, untouched by his effort to murder her, Mme. de Rênal defies public scandal, leaves her husband and children, and comes to be with Julien in the hour of his anguish. Mathilde is in despair that he no longer loves her though she has sacrificed even more prodigally to her love of him. The revelation of Julien is not to be made directly, in the glare of open daylight, but only through the glow reflected on the faces of these devoted acolytes. As with Christ and Dionysus, the mystery of Julien is performed in the darkness of a prison-tomb, and his resurrection is celebrated in the presence of women. The cenacle of Julien allures its converts by withdrawing its mystery, etherealizing its cult: that is the work of the book's last important section.

One could argue that Julien, like Lord Byron, has that cool passivity that provokes his women into a return to themselves, so that his function is to spur these remarkable (and very dissimilar) ladies on to the epiphanies of their own modes of heroism. This could account for what I myself find most unsatisfactory about *The Red and the Black,* which is the obscurity (perhaps even obscurantism?) of Julien's final state of the soul:

> The bad air of the prison cell was becoming insupportable to Julien. Fortunately on the day set for his execution a bright sun was shining upon the earth, and Julien was in the vein of courage. To walk in the open air was for him a delicious experience, as treading the solid ground is for a sailor who has been long at sea. There now, things are going very well, he told himself, I shall have no lack of courage.
>
> Never had that head been so poetic as at the moment when it was about to fall. The sweetest moments he had ever known in the woods at Vergy came crowding back into his mind, and with immense vividness.
>
> Everything proceeded simply, decently, and without the slightest affectation on his part.

> Two days before he had told Fouqué:
>
> —As for emotion, I can't quite answer; this dungeon is so ugly and damp it gives me feverish moments in which I don't recognize myself; but fear is another matter, I shall never be seen to grow pale.
>
> He had made arrangements in advance that on the last day Fouqué should take away Mathilde and Mme. de Rênal.
>
> —Put them in the same coach, he told him. Keep the post horses at a steady gallop. Either they will fall in one another's arms or they will fall into mortal hatred. In either case, the poor women will be somewhat distracted from their terrible grief.
>
> Julien had forced from Mme. de Rênal an oath that she would live to look after Mathilde's son.
>
> —Who knows? Perhaps we retain some consciousness after death, he said one day to Fouqué. I should like to rest, since rest is the word, in that little cave atop the big mountain that overlooks Verrières. I've told how several times when I spent the night in that cave and looked out over the richest provinces of France, my heart was afire with ambition: that was my passion in those days. . . . Well, that cave is precious to me, and nobody can deny that it's located in a spot that a philosopher's heart might envy. . . . You know these good congregationists in Besançon can coin money out of anything; go about it the right way, and they'll sell you my mortal remains.

Julien's superb sense of humor, at the end, enchants us, but what precisely is Stendhal's final attitude towards his hero? I take this sentence as not being ironic: "Never had that head been so poetic as at the moment when it was about to fall." Julien is madly in love with Mme de Rênal; the sincerity of this madness cannot be doubted, but then the suicidal intensity or sustained drive beyond the pleasure principle of Julien's last days cannot be doubted either. Several critics have remarked upon the supposed similarity between Julien and Don Quixote, but I cannot see it. The Don lives in the order of play until he is battered out of it; then he dies. What others call madness is simply the Don's greatness. But Julien falls into pathology; it is an attractive craziness, because it makes him more likeable than before, yet it remains a kind of madness. Stendhal is poor at endings; the conclusion to *The Charterhouse of Parma* is also weak and abrupt. But I feel a certain hesitancy in myself at these judgments. Perhaps I simply like both novels so much that I resent Stendhal's own apparent loss of interest when he nears an end. The best defense of Julien's demise was made by

Stendhal's subtle disciple, the Prince of Lampedusa, author of *The Leopard:* "The author hastens to kill the character in order to be free of him. It is a dramatic and evocative conclusion unlike any other." One wants to protest to the Prince that it isn't dramatic enough, but he forestalls the complaint: "The impulsive, energetic handsome Julien spends his last words to tell his friend how he must go about buying back his body." Evidently, this is dramatic in the mode of *The Leopard,* where death takes place in the soul, and the body alone remains living. A Stendhalian pathos, the Prince implies, belongs only to the happy few; it is a pathos more of sensibility than of emotion.

Mathilde and Julien, on the occasion of their first night together, are comic triumphs of sensibility over emotion. "Their transports," Stendhal observes, "were a bit *conscious,*" which is a delicious understatement:

> Mlle. de La Mole supposed she was fulfilling a duty to herself and to her lover. The poor boy, she thought to herself, he's shown perfect bravery, he ought to be happy or else the fault lies in my want of character. But she would have been glad to ransom herself, at the cost of eternal misery, from the cruel necessity imposed upon her.
>
> In spite of the frightful violence with which she repressed her feelings, she was in perfect command of her speech.
>
> No regret, no reproach came from her lips to spoil this night, which seemed strange to Julien, rather than happy. What a difference, good God! from his last stay of twenty-four hours at Verrières! These fancy Paris fashions have found a way to spoil everything, even love, he said to himself, in an excess of injustice.
>
> He was indulging in these reflections as he stood in one of the great mahogany wardrobes into which he had slipped at the first sounds coming from the next room, which was that of Mme. de La Mole. Mathilde went off with her mother to mass; the maids quickly left the room, and Julien easily escaped before they came back to finish their tasks.
>
> He took a horse and sought out the loneliest parts of the forest of Meudon near Paris. He was far more surprised than happy. The happiness that came from time to time like a gleam of light in his soul was like that of a young second lieutenant who after some astounding action has just been promoted full colonel by the commanding general; he felt himself raised to an immense height. Everything that had been far above him yester-

> day was now at his level or even beneath him. Gradually Julien's happiness increased as it became more remote.
>
> If there was nothing tender in his soul, the reason, however strange it may seem, was that Mathilde in all her dealings with him had been doing nothing but her duty. There was nothing unexpected for her in all the events of the night, except the misery and shame she had discovered instead of those divine raptures that novels talk about.
>
> Was I mistaken, don't I love him at all? she asked herself.

This hilarity of mutual coldness is the prelude to the novel's most delightful pages, as Stendhal surpasses himself in depicting the agon that springs up between these two titanic vanities. What Hobbes was to the principles of civil society, Stendhal was to the principles of eros. Neither man should be called a cynic. Each is more than a psychologist, because both saw the truth of the state of nature. Hobbes is to Stendhal what Schopenhauer was to the Tolstoy of *Anna Karenina,* the philosopher who confirms the insights so central to the novelist that they scarcely require confirmation. I would prefer to put it more starkly; if you repeatedly read *The Red and the Black,* then *Leviathan* becomes a fascinating redundancy, just as a deep knowledge of *Anna Karenina* renders *The World as Will and Representation* almost superfluous. Stendhal and Tolstoy are in their antithetical ways the true philosophers of love between the sexes, the dark metaphysicians of the unconscious verities of desire.

PAUL VALÉRY

Stendhal

I have just reread *Lucien Leuwen.* It is not quite the same book I was so fond of thirty years ago. I have changed and it has changed. I hasten to add that the second *Leuwen,* which is a revised, enlarged, and improved version of the first, both brings back and heightens the delicious memories of that first reading. But I do not disown my pleasure of long ago.

Jean de Mitty, who first published *Leuwen* about 1894, has sometimes been harshly judged. I agree that for the future the text he gave us at that time will appear unfortunate—abridged and perhaps seriously tampered with; and I am not unaware that Mitty himself may have given cause for certain severe judgments not confined to this particular publication, but aimed at the man himself. I feel, however, that I am still in his debt, and I am going to risk putting in a good word for him here. We had met at Stéphane Mallarmé's, where he used to come quite frequently on Tuesdays. At the end of those delightful evenings we happened more than once to walk together the whole length of the Rue de Rome, which was half in darkness, chatting about Napoleon or Stendhal until we reached the brilliantly lighted center of the city.

At that time I was reading the *Vie de Henri Brulard* and the *Souvenirs d'égotisme* with passionate interest and preferred them to the famous novels, to the *Rouge* and even to the *Chartreuse.* I cared little about plot or action. I was only interested in the living system to which every event is related, I mean the disposition and reactions of a particular man; so far as

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From *Masters and Friends,* translated by Martin Turnell, with an introduction by Joseph Frank. © 1968 by Bollingen Foundation. Princeton University Press, 1968.

plot was concerned, only his inner plot. In those days Mitty was working on—putting together, if you like—his little edition of *Lucien Leuwen,* which he sent me almost as soon as it was published by Dentu. The book gave me immense pleasure; I was among the first to read it and I went round singing its praises.

Up till then I had read nothing about love which I had not found excessively boring, or which had not appeared silly or pointless. When I was young, I set love so high and so low that I found nothing in the most famous works either powerful enough or true enough, either tough enough or tender enough to satisfy me. But in *Leuwen* the extraordinary delicacy of the portrait of Madame de Chasteller, the nobility and profundity of the hero's feelings, the progress of an attachment which in a sort of silence becomes overwhelming; the consummate art displayed by Stendhal in containing and maintaining it in a state of uncertainty about its own nature—all this appealed to me and had to be read again. I may have had my own reasons for being so deeply moved by these indefinable qualities; and what is more, I was amazed to be so, because I could not and still can scarcely abide being deluded by a literary work to the point where I can no longer distinguish clearly between my own feelings and those suggested by the author's artifice. I see the pen and the person who is holding it. I do not care for, I have no need of, his emotions. I only ask him to let me into the secret of how it's done. But *Lucien Leuwen* brought about in me this miracle of a confusion which I detest. . . .

As for the picture of provincial, Parisian, military, political, and parliamentary or electoral life, a charming caricature of the first years of the reign of Louis Philippe, a vivid and brilliant piece of comedy verging at times on vaudeville—just as the *Chartreuse de Parme* at times suggests operetta—I found in that an entertainment glowing with wit and ideas.

My impressions of the first *Leuwen* were tender and vivid. So why not show a little gratitude to the shade of poor Mitty, to whom I owed some enchanting hours? I was charmed and moved by that primitive and imperfect version of *Leuwen* which he had given me; I shall never reread it in the faulty text that he provided. That is my reason for saying a few well-meant words of farewell to that early version and to the man who published it.

I had hardly written down the words "vaudeville" and "operetta" (a little earlier on) when I had a feeling that the reader would be shocked. He probably does not care for this mixing of the literary castes; he is astonished to find Stendhal, who was praised by Taine and Nietzsche, and who was almost a philosopher, placed so close to mere men of wit. But truth

and life add up to disorder; connections and relationships which are not surprising are not real. . . .

Am I wrong in thinking that I can discern a path leading from Stendhal by way of Mérimée and the Musset of *Fantasio* to the little theaters of the Second Empire, to the princes and conspirators of the Meilhacs and Halévys? And this capricious track may have started quite a long way back. (But on the intellectual globe everything comes from everything and leads everywhere.)

Stendhal with his taste for *opera buffa* must have delighted in Voltaire's little novels, which will always remain marvels of racy vigor and terrifying fantasy. May not a lively mind see in those nimble, cruel works, where satire, opera, ballet, pamphlet, and ideology are welded into a diabolical whole, in those fables which gave scandalous pleasure at the end of the reign of Louis XV, the elegant ancestors of the operettas that provided a pitiless entertainment during the last days of the reign of Napoleon III? I cannot reread the *Princess of Babylon, Zadig, Babouc,* and *Candide* without imagining that I am listening to a kind of music a thousand times wittier, more satirical, and more diabolical than the music of Offenbach and his like. . . .

In short, I am bold enough to think that *Ranuce-Ernest* might have had a success at the Variétés, and *Dr. Du Poirier* have practiced at the Palais-Royal.

Fortunately, Beyle inherited from the century into which he was born the inestimable gift of liveliness. The heavy-handed pundits and the bores never had an adversary quicker on the draw. Classics and romantics alike, in whose midst he moved and glittered, provoked his ready wit. He would have been amused (but decidedly flattered) if someone had shown him in a magic bowl his future swamped with doctoral theses. In the enchanted water he would have seen his sallies transformed into dogmas, his fancies turned into precepts, his quips developed into theories, doctrines extracted from his works, his brief maxims expanded into interminable homilies. His favorite subjects, *Napoleon, love, energy, happiness,* have produced volumes of exegesis. Philosophers have joined in the game. Scholarship has turned its magnifying glass on the least events of his life, on his scribbled notes, on his tradesmen's bills. The iconoclast's name and relics are venerated with a sort of naïve and mysterious idolatry. In accordance with custom his eccentricities have encouraged imitators. All that is most contrary to the man, to his freedom, his whims, and his love of opposition has come out of him. There is a good deal that is unexpected in the growth of a reputation. A *mystique* attaches to fame, even the fame of atheists.

"To hell with this Stendhal!" the spirit of Stendhal must sometimes cry out in some nonconformist reader.

He had to put up with a great deal from his father and from the worthy, serious-minded people who kept him under their thumb, or who bored him; he was the slave—in whom there was so little of the slave—of those pompous individuals who worked in the Council of State, pillars of the Empire, counselors and consultants who were compelled unendingly to provide the hotheaded master of France, a France vastly expanded and in a continual state of crisis, with the required answers, the correct details, the figures, the decisions and specifications needed; he had seen at close quarters, noted, penetrated, and mocked the follies and virtues of people in official positions; had observed their occasional corruption, their invariable thirst for promotion, their profound and puerile schemes, their meticulous pettiness, their love of high-sounding language, their self-importance; the trouble they made for themselves and others; their incredible courage when confronted with mountains of files, columns of figures which crush the spirit without enriching the mind, the unending memoranda which give those in power the illusion of being alive, of knowing, foreseeing, and taking action. . . . Beyle always pits a pure young man, or a man of wit, against such gluttons for work, those monsters of silliness, greed, aridity, hypocrisy, or envy whose features, characters, and actions he portrayed on so many occasions. He learned from his own disgust, and knew in himself that true value may be divorced from vanity, from mountains of paper, lies, solemnity, and automatism. He had observed that those self-important personages so inevitably associated with the smooth working of the State are speechless nonentities the moment they are faced with the unexpected. A State that fails to keep a few improvisers on hand is a State without sinews. Anything that moves quickly becomes a threat. Anything out of the blue annihilates it.

It is easy to see from his writings that Beyle would have loved to handle great affairs as though they were a game. He creates with loving care men of clear, quick judgment, whose reactions are *as sudden as events,* as brisk and breath-taking as a surprise—ministers or bankers who direct, settle, or cut their way through circumstances, who combine charm and profundity, finesse and good sense, in whose skins we are aware of the presence of Beyle himself; we feel that he is plotting or impertinently ruling under their masks, and besides, that by creating them he is taking his revenge for not being the sort of person they are. Every writer compensates himself as best he can for the injustices of fate.

What is valuable in many men of value depends on the variety of roles