

THE RED AND THE BLACK

STENDHAL



TRANSLATED BY ROBERT M. ADAMS
EDITED BY SUSANNA LEE

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION
SECOND EDITION

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SECOND EDITION

AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
CONTEXT AND BACKGROUNDS
CRITICISM

Translated by

ROBERT M. ADAMS

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Edited by

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Introduction to the Second Edition

In *Vie de Henry Brulard*, Stendhal pondered the staying power of his writing:

The rhythmical, pretentious phrases of MM Chateaubriand and de Salvandy made me write *Le Rouge et le noir* in too jerky a style. It was a great folly, for in twenty years who will think of the hypocritical rigmaroles of these gentlemen? As for me, I am taking a ticket in a lottery in which the first prize amounts to this: to be read in 1935.¹

Were Stendhal to see the reception that *The Red and the Black* has enjoyed through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, he might be quite surprised at how much the modern audience has found to love in his “jerky style.” Indeed, while Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* often gets top billing as the masterpiece of French nineteenth-century literature, *The Red and the Black* has become code for a reader’s novel, and Stendhal a reader’s author. The novel is an incomparably galloping, multilayered, labyrinthine adventure chronicling the inscrutable substance of character, the caprices of politics, the comforts and insincerities of religion, the ambiguities of the law, and the all-consuming, exhausting, and sometimes crazy-making vicissitudes of love. The pace and agility of the novel demand that the reader be sitting up, listening for the constant shifts in perspective, changes of mind, the minute details of action, reaction, and internal monologue. Indeed, as more than one student has remarked, first in fatigue and later in admiration, the demands of *The Red and the Black* are many, but the reward is an unforgettable journey into a society, a historical moment, a heart, a mind, a life.

Stendhal’s original intention was to call his novel *Julien*, and indeed, more than anything, this is the story of an individual character. We follow Julien Sorel on his trajectory from Verrières to Besançon to Paris and through his numerous and contradictory in-

1. Stendhal, *The Life of Henri Brulard*, trans. Catherine Alison Phillips (New York: Knopf, 1925), p. 163.

carnations: Julien the son, the reader, the weakling, the hypocrite, the seducer, the student, the criminal, the philosopher, the egotist. He is remarkable for the simultaneity of his emotions, sensations, and actions, for this character does not just evolve, he divides, a sort of multicelled organism whose personality and fortunes split and shoot off in various directions. He is calculating but vulnerable, rational but mad, childish but perspicacious, innovative but imitative, grandiose but uncertain, red but black: The layers of his personality, the multitude of outside influence on that personality, all contribute to the richness of Julien as well as to the oft-repeated critical statement that Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* is the first psychological novel. But what does it mean to be a psychological novel, much less the first one? Other novels have certainly given us portraits of minds and souls in action. But this is perhaps the first novel in which the drama of self-invention is so utterly essential to the plot. Julien (and Mathilde) are to an unprecedented degree concerned with succeeding as characters—with *existing* with enough vigor and originality to merit a story. The obsession with existence and originality has much to do with the labile nature of circumstances social and political, the fragility of which forces characters to build and rebuild their own criteria. Unlike the social climbers of eighteenth-century novels, in other words, the characters in this novel are for the first time assailed with a double concern: not just how to function within the social and political and moral parameters of their world, but also how to determine what those parameters mean. Julien is steeped in these concerns, and to a large extent they drive his actions and define his personality. In this sense, he is the first existential hero: the first to encounter the specter of meaninglessness, both within himself and without. This is another way of saying that he is the first psychological hero, the first for whom questions of who he is are so fundamental, and so tormenting.

And yet, the question of who someone is was not as common in 1830 as it would become in the following century. French society might have been hypocritical and precarious, but it was nonetheless the playing field of the day. To disconnect from it would have been unthinkable, and identity was not something to conjure out of thin air. Rather than modern existential crises à la Jean-Paul Sartre, then, Julien's problems of self-definition were first and foremost problems of role-playing. He worries after a particularly noteworthy romantic encounter: "Did I play my role well?" (although the narrator is quick to add, "And what role was that?"²). For Julien as for

2. Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, trans. Robert M. Adams, ed. Susanna Lee (New York: Norton, 2008). Abbreviated hereafter as *RB*.

Mathilde, questions of role have much to do with living in a society that is constantly changing and whose rules and norms can be endlessly manipulated. The main characters are concerned with fashioning themselves in the context of their surroundings even as they try to fashion those surroundings to serve as context. Whatever environment he finds himself in, be it mayoral home, seminary, or Paris mansion, Julien is intensely concerned with looking like what he believes he is supposed to be—the lover, the seminarian, the innocent, the scribe, and so on. At the same time, he is intensely worried about what others might think he looks like: a servant, a fool, Martin Luther, a pathetically out-of-his-league suitor. Dealing as it does with the voyage of self-discovery, then, the novel speaks not just to a volatility specific to its historical period, but also to a universal process of learning and shaping who one is.

The paradox of self-definition is that the only way to be original is to write one's own script, as it were. And yet, the most reliable way to know what makes a good story is to read one: thus Julien's obsession with Napoleon and other textual models. He constantly copies, from Rousseau and Molière, among others. So too with Mathilde, who, in a telling moment, braces herself against self-doubt with the phrase: "No matter! I can say like Medea: *Amid so many perils, still I have MYSELF.*"³ The fact that the fictional Medea did not in fact say this underscores the precariousness of modeling oneself after literature. But nonetheless, it reminds us that a high consciousness of prescribed worlds is the foundation of the characters' imaginations. To fail to succeed is for them to fade into a story already written for their "type": a boring marriage for Mathilde, or a dinner at the servants' table for Julien. In many ways, then, this is a psychological novel in that it is about characters intensely aware of their existence *as* characters on the world stage, or on their own stage (which is starting to amount to the same thing), as we see in Julien's famous—and famously erroneous—line: "My novel is finished, and all the credit is mine."

With his posturings, his back-and-forths between imitation and originality, Julien is on a number of levels a rich hybrid of character types, combining shades of the epic hero with elements of the twentieth-century existentialist. His family tree, so to speak, begins with Homer, passes through Don Quixote, and continues on to include such troubled souls as Meursault, the dissociated center of Albert Camus' 1942 novel *The Stranger*. He also belongs (since this is a chronicle of 1830, after all) to that group of early nineteenth-century fictional *arrivistes* such as Balzac's Eugène Rastignac and Lucien de Rubempré, determined to find success in the big city.

3. *RB*, p. 267.

With his pale face and dark hair, there is also something of a Caspar Friedrich painting of a Byronic poet about him. His love of reading and his tendency to model his own life after those he sees in books also place him in a similar camp with that later, much more deluded and passive reader, Emma Bovary. Madame de Rênal, a sort of beautiful soul, also has something of the romantic heroine, but without the idealization that usually makes such characters boring or unreal. Mathilde de la Mole is in her turn one of the more unusual female characters of the French nineteenth century, containing ironized elements both of haughty eighteenth-century French aristocrats and virtuous heroines of English novels. And while adolescence as we understand it today was not really invented until the mid-twentieth century, Mathilde is very much a prototeenager, volatile, passionate, self-obsessed, rebellious. College students reading this novel often remark that they know someone like her, though they often don't like that someone. Actually, the same remark is often made about Julien, with his constantly changing affections, his looking out for number one, his occasional touching sincerity, his combination of willpower, perspicacity, and cluelessness.

Crossroads in Literary History

It is sometimes said that Stendhal's novel stands at the cusp of the epic and the novel; it also stands at other generic crossroads: those of the pastoral and the Bildungsroman, the religious and the secular, the romantic and the realist. With all these transitions, particularly the last, the novel marks an important moment in literary history—not just because it marks a historical transition, but also because it reveals an essential pretense in both romanticism and realism. To the contemporary reader, the romantic literary period seems a time of pure and unambivalent emotion. It is not an age or a style that seems to be aware of either neurosis or calculating self-involvement; to the contrary, the lilting cadences, bucolic scenes, and sentimental ruminations of, say, Chateaubriand and Lamartine suggest a starry-eyed generosity of spirit. *The Red and the Black*, written toward the end of but still well within the romantic period, keeps the reveries, the landscaped grounds of country estates, the scaling of stone walls for romantic assignations, the cutting-off a lock of hair as a sign of devotion. But in these pages, the ladder that scales the wall crushes the flowers beneath; the lock of hair becomes an entire clump hacked off with scissors, leaving the amorous woman half bald. And once the wall is scaled and the lovers meet, we see all the halting steps, the posing, the sometimes

disingenuous movements that go into those meetings. Romance was work in 1830, we learn, and so was romanticism. *The Red and the Black* shows young people scrambling to keep up with the Joneses that their times, their books, or even just their own grasping imaginations have invented.

There is too much consciousness of romanticism in his novel—too much edge, too much trying too hard—for Stendhal to be entirely considered a romantic novelist, though the very trying, in a sense, becomes romantic through its pathos. Seeing the traces of irony that run through the novel, students, alerted that French novelistic style of the nineteenth century evolves from romanticism to realism, want to know, Is Stendhal then a realist? And the related, though rather impossible question, Is this novel realistic? On the one hand, the question is misplaced, as realism and romanticism are not really opposites. But talking about realism is important here, because it allows us to look at the historical importance of this novel, as well as the ways in which the narrator plays with history, with his characters, and with his readers.

Many of the events that take place in the novel, as well as the basic outline of Julien's adventures and misadventures, are in fact "ripped from the headlines!" The real-life escapades of one Antoine Berthet, combined with those of a woodworker named Lafargue, provided the foundation for the plot (an account of Berthet's trial is to be found in the "Backgrounds and Sources" section of this volume). More important, the political goings-on are in a broad sense real. And for this reason, the novel stands as a significant historical document. *The Red and the Black* gives us a close and ironic portrait of the French Restoration era, with its constant ideological upheaval and almost surreal public hypocrisy. Perhaps the second-best-known line in the novel is the narrator's aside: "Politics in the midst of imaginative activity is like a pistol shot in the middle of a concert. The noise is shattering without being forceful."⁴ If the concert in question means an untroubled representation of life in a vacuum, life out of context, if there is such a thing, then Stendhal has fired his own shot, disrupting his own performance. But far from being the cacophonous pistol shot, of course, politics in this imaginative activity, as Sandy Petrey so wonderfully describes in his essay, is an imaginative activity of its own. Peter Brooks writes that Stendhal's novels "offer the first decisive representation of individuals plotting their lives in response to the sociopolitical dynamics of modern times." And just as no individual moment in this novel is immune to the intrusion of politics, so here, no political moment or event is immune to the intrusion of individual psychologies, de-

4. *RB*, p. 304.

sires, and egos. Society, family, government—these are monoliths, large-scale backdrops against which individuals define and position themselves. But as we are shown these monoliths, we are also constantly shown the component parts into which they are broken and the extent to which political systems depend on individuals playing their parts. Each part makes sense only relative to another part, and individuals are holding these roles up even as they fill them. In the end, while the showcasing of sociopolitical dynamics is new, so is the contingency and fragility, the very dynamism as it were, of those dynamics. For example, this is a society in which Julien's boss, wanting a man of his own social stature to converse with and knowing it would be out of the question to chat with a servant, arranges for Julien to dress up as an aristocrat. "Allow me, my dear Sorel, to make you a present of a blue suit: when you feel disposed to put it on and pay me a call, you will be, in my eyes, the younger brother of the Comte de Retz, that is to say the son of my friend the old duke."⁵ It's an exhausting world for Stendhal's characters, not to mention for the readers who try to follow it all. The political background, the sociopolitical ground on which the characters stand, never really manages to *be* a ground, because it is itself shifting, and never settles into a reliable fixedness. Instead, it constantly and subtly slips into the foreground so that we may see the intricacies and fallibilities of its operation.

As a side note, we can remark that the political posturing in the novel is itself of particular interest to a contemporary English-reading audience. The portrait of politics driven by ego and caprice resonates mightily, as worsening cynicism greets the news of political dealings in twenty-first-century America. And just as no one in Stendhal's clever, jaded, and hypocritical 1830 expected politics to operate in some pure and unadulterated sphere, so increasingly, if sadly, few in our world expect politicians to rise above self-interest. The same sort of egocentric nervousness that pushes young Julien in love also drives M. de Rênal and Valenod in the political sphere. And so it is, many students remark, with the politicians of our time; the disingenuousness that permeated France in 1830 is more and more familiar—disturbingly, but also often, strangely, comfortingly so—to students of this early twenty-first American century.

Also of real social and historical interest is the complexity of treatment that the novel affords to religion. Religion is critically presented in all its permutations: as a profession, a spectacle, a consumable product, a social institution, and a political instrument, as well as a personal feeling and a spiritual force. All these depictions of religion are fraught with contradiction. On the one

5. *RB*, p. 219.

hand, an ironic doubt pervades the spiritual pursuit: We have Julien's cool musings on career and salary: "Nowadays, there are forty-year-old priests who draw salaries of a hundred thousand francs, three times as much as the famous division commanders of Napoleon The thing is to be a priest."⁶ We also have the memorable scene of the young bishop of Agde practicing his benedictions in front of the mirror and experimenting with the best placement of his miter, among other scenes of posturing (the same theme appears in *The Charterhouse of Parma*, where handsome Fabrice becomes a sort of rock star of a preacher). And yet, on the other hand, men of religion are perhaps the most sincere characters in the novel; Abbé Pirard, that stern Jansenist, is in fact a kind and giving figure. We also see characters coming to surprising moments of spiritual clarity.

Some readers, finding the Abbé Pirard in charge of the Besançon seminary, wonder what the Jansenists, a religious group associated with the seventeenth century and excommunicated in 1719, are doing in the pages of this Chronicle of 1830. For one thing, the Jansenists serve as contrast to the Jesuits—selflessness to their materialism, severity to their flashiness. More than this, though, because Jansenism emphasizes salvation through divine grace, rather than through human will or action, the Jansenist/Jesuit conflict is a metaphor for the conflict within Julien's own experience. Julien wants to be master not only of his actions but of his entire destiny. But this mastery is largely an illusion, for even as he is writing his own script (deciding what he wants to do, whom he wants to seduce, where he wants to go), he is also following the script of others (studying Napoleon, parroting Tartuffe, copying Korosov's letters, and so on) and riding the tide of circumstance. Jesuits emphasized the idea of action and Jansenists emphasized the idea of grace. Similarly, Julien values the idea of action and the narrator values the idea not of grace, perhaps, but of chance, coincidence, good luck, good looks, the whims of other people—forces, that is, outside oneself. Julien, in other words, would like to take the world in hand, but has he? Can anyone? We are constantly confronted with the question of what precisely is driving this boat—a boat that contains the Jansenists, the Jesuits, religious institutions, Restoration politics, and Julien himself.

The issue of what (or who) makes the action happen in this story is an important one, because raising this question is one way Stendhal plays with the reader—one way he turns the reading of this novel into a highly entertaining game. Another way he does this is with a varied, nimbly shifting narrative point of view. Narra-

6. *RB*, p. 19–20.

tive point of view in this novel is a shape-shifting target, which in turn brings us back to the question of realism. Who is telling this story? The answer, of course, is our narrator. But while this narrator provides many points of access to his tale, many angles from which to approach it, he is also a rather tricky gatekeeper. A fictitious Stendhal fan in one modern novel says: "I love how Stendhal gets, you know, like, inside and outside Julien at the same time, so you can imagine doing what Julien's doing, and meanwhile you're thinking you would never do something like that."⁷ That very dichotomy comes from an unparalleled narrative personality that simultaneously embraces Julien and detaches from him, embraces society and detaches from it, embraces reality and detaches from it—and expects the reader to do the same. At times, this narrator even invites us to wonder who he is and what he has to do with the entire business, and these moments are a monkey wrench thrown into the entire idea of the real.

Early on in the novel, the narrator muses: "How many times, my mind still dwelling on the balls of Paris which I left the night before, have I leaned on these great blocks of bluish-gray granite, gazing deep into the valley of the Doubs!" He seems at this point a resident of Verrières (though a frequent flier on the Paris party circuit), well placed to witness the goings on he describes. As if to support this role, he pauses in the middle of the action to insert the famous and often-quoted parenthetical aside: "A novel is a mirror moving along a highway. One minute you see it reflect the azure skies, next minute the mud and puddles of the road. And the man who carries the mirror in his pack will be accused by you of immorality! His mirror shows the mud and you accuse the mirror!"⁸ Realism, indeed. But this same narrator, so insistent when defending the truth of his chronicle, continues: "Now that it's fully understood that a character like Mathilde's is impossible in our age, no less prudent than virtuous, I am less afraid of distressing the reader by describing further the follies of this attractive girl."⁹ This sharp contradiction (my story is real/no it isn't) undermines the claim of realism. Or at least, it reminds us that realism is not primarily about being the real thing, but rather about not being reminded too harshly that we are not being shown the real thing—that we are in the land of fiction, of an author's creation.

Curiously, when the narrator concedes to us that a character like Mathilde's is impossible, she has done nothing terribly impossible or incredible: His comment serves mainly as an ironic reminder

7. Francine Prose, *Blue Angel* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), p. 38.

8. *RB*, p. 289.

9. *RB*, p. 290.

that "our age" is neither prudent nor virtuous. And as the narrator abruptly abandons his aside and continues the story, we the readers are as caught up in Mathilde as ever, her "impossibility" never intended as an obstacle to our enjoyment of her (or annoyance with her). On the other hand, those acts in the novel that do seem the most outlandish and improbable are, ironically, the very ones cribbed from the real adventures of Lafargue and Antoine Berthet as reported in the *Gazette des Tribunaux*. Just as a novel that sets its characters at a remove from romanticism cannot be entirely romantic, so a narrator who stops his story to insist on (and then deny) his own realism cannot entirely be considered a realist. Or perhaps this is the highest form of realism—a real acknowledgment of the writing process. What one finds in this cryptic authorial aside, and what readers have always loved in Stendhal, is an author who thoroughly enjoys a vigorous give-and-take with the reader. His "jerky" narrative style, his occasional winking at the reader, his assumption of a common taste for rapid-fire shifts in perspective, for ironic historical and political asides, is Stendhal's signature, and an essential element of the novel's appeal. Many features of the novel show creative construction, a sense that writing is something of a game. Most of Stendhal's epigraphs, for instance, are misattributed. And this from the very beginning—from Danton's "Truth, bitter truth" (words not found among Danton's writing) to Hobbes's nonsensical "Put thousands together, less bad, but the cage less gay," in English, to the comically out-of-character: "The glance of a woman was enough to intimidate me. The harder I tried to please, the more awkward I became . . ." attributed to the philosopher, Immanuel Kant.¹ This is a narrator as well versed in ironic commentary as he is in compassion, in identification as in mockery, often in the same paragraph.

Forty-eight years old at the time of the novel's writing, in love with his mother whom he had lost at the age of seven, a veteran of Napoleon's army who had retired to Milan upon the general's exile, a short and squat man who lacked Julien's delicate features but had plenty of his impatience and infatuation, Stendhal had kept the soul of an adolescent enough to combine the wry perspective of the older man with a teenage sense of urgency. He was a romantic who disliked Romanticism, a French fan of Italian passion who described himself as Milanese in his self-authored epitaph, a Bonapartiste who nonetheless had considerable contempt for the bourgeoisie. He wrote an autobiography (*Vie de Henry Brulard*, excerpted in this volume) under a pseudonym, which demonstrates, at the least, a slightly fantastical relationship with the self. Sten-

1. *RB*, p. 192.

dhal (yet another pseudonym) is best known for his novels, starting with *Armance* (1827), then *The Red and the Black* in the summer of 1830, then *The Charterhouse of Parma* in 1839, as well as the posthumously published (and unfinished) novels *Lamiel* and *Lucien Leuwen*. Stendhal also wrote the *Chroniques italiennes*, short stories inspired by Italian Renaissance passion and violence, a biography of Rossini, biographies of Mozart, Haydn, and Métastase, two travelogues (*Promenades in Rome* and *Rome, Naples and Florence in 1817*), and a two-volume history of Italian painting—this last originally dedicated to Napoleon. In addition, though, distinguishing Stendhal from other great nineteenth-century novelists, is a rich and moving autobiographical corpus. This contains *Vie de Henry Brulard* and his treatise, “On Love” (1822), as well as *Memoirs of Egotism*, *The Private Diaries of Stendhal*, and the travelogues. His autobiographical creations have inspired much public fondness for the author, and even a subsequent of Stendhal fans called Beylistes (for Stendhal’s real name, Henri Beyle)—readers deeply taken with the autobiographical writings and by extension with Stendhal the person. The travelogues have even given us a psychiatric diagnosis: Stendhal Syndrome, a psychosomatic illness that causes confusion and hallucinations when the sufferer is exposed to art. This is not the only psychiatric syndrome that nineteenth-century novels have given us—we have *bovarysme*, from Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, an inability to see oneself for who and what one is—but Stendhal Syndrome is the only condition named after the author himself. Flaubert might have claimed, “Madame Bovary, c’est moi,” but Stendhal put his own heart and soul (if not his real name) on the page, making us particularly inclined to believe him, and side with him.

Writing and Revolution

The Red and the Black was Stendhal’s second novel, and it vies with *The Charterhouse of Parma* for the distinction of being his greatest. It has a particularly important role in the historiography of the Restoration, as it was written in the summer of 1830 and is subtitled as a chronicle of that year—the year of the July Revolution, which ended the Restoration period. The Restoration, meaning restoration of the Bourbon monarchy deposed in the Revolution of 1789, had lasted since Napoleon’s exile in 1815. At that time, Louis XVIII, brother of the guillotined Louis XVI, assumed control of France. When Louis XVIII died in 1824, a third brother, Charles X, replaced him. The regime of Charles X was a reign of old men, a

veritable gerocracy that steadily became more and more repressive. The regime culminated in a series of measures (censorship of the press, dismantling of the chamber of deputies, restrictions on the electorate) that combined with economic insecurity to push the country into revolution. The resulting insurrection forced Charles X to abdicate, and France passed under the control of Louis-Philippe who, significantly, was not a Bourbon. With this transfer of power, the divine right of kings had given way to a "Popular" monarchy. This 1830 revolution, however, was not a revolution in the twentieth-century sense, nor in any particularly idealistic sense, and it certainly did not catapult the country into democracy. Louis Philippe's principal supporters were members of the wealthy middle class—indeed, they supported him because under his rule, money talked and the bourgeoisie rose in social status. The conditions of the working classes actually deteriorated under this elitist ruler, and in 1848, another revolution deposed him. But in 1830 these deteriorations were several years away, and the coming of revolution signified the opening of social doors, the end of the repressive, old-school *ancien régime*, and a new day in French history.

The Red and the Black is the most explicitly politically engaged of Stendhal's novels, but it is not entirely partisan. Stendhal was ambivalent about democracy. The good news of 1830 was that royal blood and aristocratic title were no longer the *sine qua non* of social and political influence: That influence was now theoretically open to anyone with money and connections. But that openness, of course, was also the bad news. The *ancien régime* standards were oppressive, but at least they were standards. And although Stendhal was an enthusiastic Bonapartiste, he nonetheless understood democracy in the Platonic sense, as a voice granted to the lowest common denominator. This did not please him: He was a clever man who wanted clever people to be in charge. Not surprisingly, then, there are various nostalgic musings on the elitism of the *ancien régime* in his novels and in his personal writings. In *The Red and the Black*, Mathilde laments the end of the exciting seventeenth century: "Civilization and policemen have eliminated danger, and the unexpected never happens."² And more to Stendhal's point: "Nothing is ridiculous, M. de La Mole used to say, in a country where there are two parties."³ In order for there to be ridicule, there must be someone to do the ridiculing; someone with the intellectual and social authority to proclaim something ridiculous or to exile a ridiculous person from high society. Stendhal bemoaned

2. *RB*, p. 265–66.

3. *RB*, p. 253.

the occasional arbitrariness of social judgments but was also capable of lamenting the sort of level playing field that would allow anyone with money and influence an equal voice.

Because of its detailed description of the French Restoration and the revolutionary moment, because of its fine commentary on political hypocrisy, this novel stands as a historical as well as a literary document. One may therefore encounter it in a history rather than a literature course or, at the very least, find oneself deciphering the historical references in order to better “get” the literary picture. Because of the proliferation of political allusions, because of their sometimes daunting complexity, one very important element of this novel sometimes gets lost and should be mentioned here. Often, when wandering through the myriad political references, the comings and goings of Julien and company, the religious intrigue, the one-upmanship of romance, student readers miss an extremely important quality of *The Red and the Black*: its comedy! Yes, there is a great deal of humor in this novel. Mathilde wanders around in gravest mourning for an ancestor decapitated centuries earlier, to the bewilderment and eye-rolling of others in the house. Julien sends a series of borrowed, prewritten love letters to Madame de Fervaques, not even bothering to read them or edit their content. Madame de Fervaques then falls for those letters, even though the details they contain make no sense to her or to Julien. Julien at the seminary tries to make friends with a student who “lived in the odor of sanctity, listening submissively to some paralyzing drivel”; a storm begins, and the “saintly student” shoves Julien away so as not to be struck by lightning in case Julien is blasted by God.⁴ The ironic eye in the midst of religious humorlessness is a staple of comedy—think of Dudley Moore’s sleeping on a wooden pillow and jumping with the trampolining nuns in *Bedazzled*. So, too, is the act of posing, of pretending to be what the audience (readers or other characters) knows one is not.

Posing, or role-playing, is Julien’s daily activity, rendered in an interior monologue so constant and darting as to seem slightly crazy. The humor of this monologue is particularly visible when one compares the novel with film versions thereof. In the 1997 film version, for instance, the interior monologue is rendered through dialogue—either through Julien’s articulating a thought to another, or, sometimes, through another who speaks to him. In the novel, though, these labyrinthine dialogues are between Julien and himself, and remain within his overpopulated head. For this reason, film Juliens cannot have that strange combination of insincerity, haplessness, and furious intensity that both bewilders readers and

4. *RB*, p. 149.