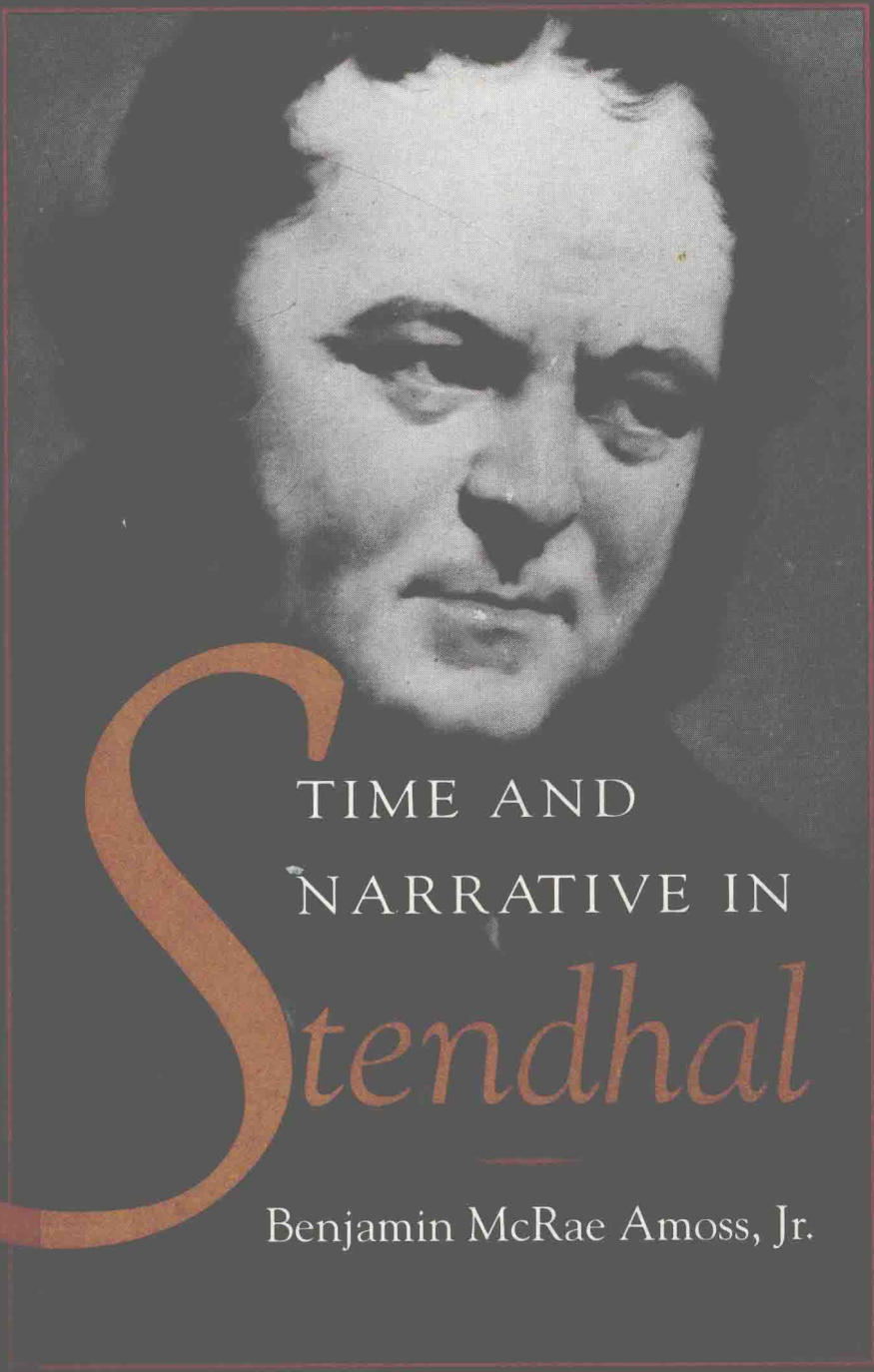

TIME AND NARRATIVE IN *Stendhal*

Benjamin McRae Amoss, Jr.

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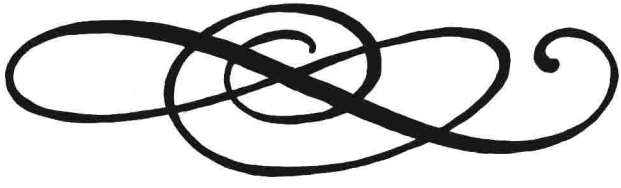

Benjamin McRae Amoss, Jr.

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To my parents

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TIME AND NARRATIVE IN *Stendhal*

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Introduction

That time and literature are inseparably bound each to the other in theory and practice has been an unquestioned postulate of theoretical and critical writings on literature since the ancient Greeks.

Classical literary theory as represented by Plato and Aristotle reveals narration, as much by its unavoidable immersion in time as by its certified ability to give an account of and thereby encompass the three moments of time—past, present, and future—to be the unrivaled manner, validated by tradition and reason, of telling a story in time.[1] Other approaches as well—existentialist,[2] thematic,[3] and technical[4]—agree on the importance of this link, considering it in the light of their respective presuppositions.

A further, current perspective on the problem of time and literature is offered by the hermeneutical philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer. This hermeneutics lays stress not on man's intemporal essence but on the necessarily temporal and historical conditions of his existence.[5] In *Truth and Method,* Gadamer explores the nature of the truth of the human sciences as distinguished from the natural sciences with their reliance on method, namely inductive reasoning. He takes man's understanding of art as a paradigm case for nonscientific truth (90). For Gadamer, art shares man's temporal mode of being; it corresponds to his "historical reality"; the experience of art enters into the "continuity and unity of self-understanding" that is human existence: "Art is knowledge and the experience of the work of art is a sharing of this knowledge" (86–87). Aesthetics is subsumed into hermeneutics, as Gadamer asks how the significance that the historical worlds in which it is written and read invest in a text—that is, the historicity of its production and subsequent self-presentation—bears on its meaning.

Like Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur follows in the wake of Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology. The French philosopher and literary theorist proposes a view of art (in particular, the language of the literary text) as a redescription of reality, aesthetic experience as a form of understanding, understanding the nature of human existence.[6] In *Temps et récit,* Ricoeur explains that narrative is the redescriptive structuring of experience: in this narrative "configuration" of the world of

experience and its subsequent "refiguration" by the reader lies a poetic solution to philosophical puzzlement.

For Ricoeur, following the lead of Aristotle, has rejoined narrative fiction and history to see in récit, common to both, man's response to a philosophical problem that is as central today to our understanding of human existence as it has been throughout the past: according to Ricoeur, narrative offers a poetic solution to the aporetic of time.[7] At its most basic, this problem can be defined as the conflict between the idea of time as impersonal order and a presentless succession and the idea of time as the experience of a tense human spirit uneasily pulled in the different directions of simultaneous memory, expectation, and attention. Conflating Aristotle's ideas of mythos and mimesis in what he sees as an overarching process of *mise-en-représentation*, Ricoeur finds a resolution of this temporal conflict not in philosophical speculation but in a "poetics of narrativity."

Citing Aristotle's definition of plot as the mimesis of an action, Ricoeur sees narration's "mimetic function" as nothing more nor less than a "particular application" of metaphoric reference to the "sphere of human action [*l'agir humain*]" (1:13). Thus it is narrative's involvement with human action that gives it an essential relation to time.

Ricoeur considers the specific ways in which history and fiction, the two arts that make use of narrative, offer a response to this conflict. Historical narrative responds to the insuperable divergence of phenomenological time and cosmological time by "inventing" or "elaborating" a "third time [*tiers-temps*]," what Ricoeur calls "historical time." Thanks to a group of "procedures of connection" enumerated by Ricoeur—calendar time, the idea of a "succession of generations,"[8] and the traditional tools of the historian such as archives, documents, and traces—"historical time" constitutes a "reinscription of phenomenological time onto cosmic time" (3:184), mediating between the two. In this way, history, installing itself in the gap between the two times, serves to bridge this gap: "These connectors provide the idea of a mutual encroachment, indeed of a border exchange, which sutures the fracture on which history establishes itself" (180).

Narrative fiction, on the other hand, eschews history's invention of a single "fixed" historical time in favor of its own "variable" way of exploring the "fault line [*la faille*]" that speculative thought opens between "lived time" and "cosmic time": "Fiction . . . is a reserve of

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imaginative variations applied to the thematics of phenomenological time and to its aporia" (186). Instead of elaborating a "third time," then, fiction invents multiple "fictive experiences of time" that bring together "temporality as it is lived and time perceived as a dimension of the world" (186). In fact, in these "imaginative variations," fiction, unencumbered by history's task of re-presenting the past, "neutralizes" historical time (even as it refers to historical events) in the promotion of its own fictional time: "From the single fact that the narrator and his heroes are fictive, all references to historical events are deprived of their function of re-presentation [*représentance*] with respect to the historical past and are brought into line with the unreal status of the other events" (187). For Ricoeur, narrative fiction contributes to philosophical thought by exploring the very aspect of phenomenological time that the invention of historical time "occults," namely, the "nonlinear traits of phenomenological time" (191). Fictional time "liberates" phenomenological time from the constraints that historical time imposes on it, and therefore delves freely in the phenomenology of time, evoking themes that are hidden in philosophy, ignored in history: the "reunification" of the "temporal course," rent since Augustine in the paradox of the "triple present"; eternity and its encounter with death; the intrusion of myth (191–98). In the end, Ricoeur finds that fiction's resolution in "imaginative variations" of philosophical aporia in no way "dissolves" the problems of time but instead serves to "revive these aporia, indeed to make them more acute" (198–99). "Discordant concord" is both the problem fiction faces and the "ideal solution" it offers (198–201).

Ricoeur contends that in the end the parallel courses of history and fiction come together in the world of the reader where they both bring about a real or "effective refiguration of time" (264). He attributes this "confluence" in a common end to the "interlacing" of history and fiction, which he defines as "the fundamental structure, as much ontological as epistemological, by virtue of which history and fiction each concretize their respective intentionality only by borrowing from the intentionality of the other" (265).

History, which Ricoeur has shown to be "quasi-fictional," and fiction, "quasi-historical," together give birth to "human time," which, founded in narrative, is nothing more nor less than "recounted time." It is narrative that makes possible identity, individual or collective,

marked by the discordant concord of change in permanence, mutability in the "cohesion of a life" (355). Narrative, in the sense of "what is recountable,"[9] mediates, "imperfectly," among the three temporal dimensions of the "horizon of expectation," the "transmission of traditions," and the "force of the present," permitting us to conceive of time as one, though a "plural unity" (371–74). Ricoeur notes in conclusion, however, that there are ultimately boundaries to narrative's ability to resolve the problem of time; it is in moving toward these limits that narrative responds to this temporal "inscrutability": he cites the "limit-experiences" in which fiction explores the borders between time and eternity and the borders between fiction and myth, and the formation of "discursive modes" other than narrative, the "lyricism of meditative thought," for example (374–91).

The important role time plays in the works of Stendhal has caught the attention of many of his most perceptive readers. Critics as diverse in their approaches to literature as Georges Poulet, Victor Brombert, Paul de Man, Hans Boll-Johansen, and Michel Crouzet have seen fit to remark on the presence of this universal theme in Stendhal, attributing to it various (and at times contrary) connotations and significance particular to their respective critical stands.

Poulet, for example, has in his existential studies explored Stendhal's vision of time as it is conveyed through an intersubjective confrontation, that of a reader with the undifferentiated oeuvre of the writer. He discerns in Stendhal a veritable deficiency with respect both to the experience of time and to the novelistic representation of temporality.[10] Brombert, as does Poulet, focuses on Stendhal's attempt to find satisfaction in discrete moments of bliss. For him, Stendhal finds in Rousseau the idea of a "non-erosive temporality," an experience of time that is not susceptible to the degrading effect of time's passage. However, in contrast to Poulet, Brombert also finds in the author's works the experience of time as "a continuous and meaningful flow."[11]

In his essay entitled "The Rhetoric of Temporality," de Man draws attention to *La Chartreuse de Parme* in the context of the problematic categories of allegory and irony in romantic thought.[12] Boll-Johansen contributes a methodologically strict study of how time enters into the

system of relations that is the structure of the Stendhalian novel.[13] For the purpose of examining some temporal aspects of Stendhal's great novels, a series of critics have taken up the framework and terminology Gérard Genette proposes for considering the traditional questions, among them the question of time, in literary narrative.[14] And Crouzet discerns in the works of Stendhal the legacy of a theme inherited from Rousseau: the rift between nature and society.[15]

I propose to study the role of time in Stendhal, first by establishing the presence of a problematic of time in his writings and attempting to explore its source and significance, then by applying Ricoeur's theory of narrative in order to consider Stendhal's creative works as a response to or poetic resolution of this temporal aporia.

An examination of Stendhal's works reveals a thematics of time that operates throughout his texts, narrative and not, and that encompasses Ricoeur's tripartite division of time into, at one pole, cosmological time, at the other, phenomenological time, and finally, human time, a bridge thrown between the two by the "historical time" embodied in historical narrative on the one hand and by the imaginative temporal experiences embodied in fictional narrative on the other. For Ricoeur, "human time" is nothing other than "time recounted" (*Temps et recit*, 3:352). The Stendhalian thematics of time includes such ideas and figures as history, traces, bells chiming the hour, clocks and shotgun blasts that mark the passage of time, the "succession of generations" that comprises predecessors, successors, and contemporaries, documents and archives, posterity, memory and forgetting, expectation and remorse, and promises, vows, and omens. Underlying this thematics of time is the capability of narrative to redescribe human experience, to mediate symbolically between two worlds of human action, the author's and the reader's. Thus we will focus not so much on the specific images as on the recourse to narrative and its techniques as a reconfiguration of and response to human temporality.

From his *Journal* and the *Histoire de la peinture en Italie* to *La Chartreuse de Parme*, then, temporal themes play a role in Stendhal's writings. Following Ricoeur, we should expect to find in the works that assume traditionally nonnarrative forms—works where a philosophical

understanding of time plays a part in the argument, such as the polemical pamphlet *Racine et Shakspeare* (*sic*) and the ideological treatise *De l'Amour*—if not an awareness of, at least manifestations of the problematic character of the individual's existence in time. In fact, perhaps the most salient characteristic of Stendhal's ventures in theoretically nonnarrative forms is the degree to which he uses narration, thereby transmuting these forms. This process we call *narrativization*. Our task is to show how this narrativization acts as a response to theoretical temporal perplexity.

In works that we may call quasi-narrative, such as the *Journal* or the *Promenades dans Rome* (where the fictional elements of the *cicerone* and his charges are one of Stendhal's contributions to the art of travel writing), we should perceive adumbrations of a response to temporal perplexity in the very narrative elements that Stendhal introduces. In his journal, for example, we can easily perceive temporal patterns of anticipatory longing followed by disillusioning realization or unfulfilled remorse—a present successively anticipated, attended to, and recalled—that, transformed by art, provide the narrative structure of episodes in the novels and autobiographies.

Finally, in works where the narrative element is definitive, that is, in works of history or of fiction or, in the case of autobiography, in works where history and fiction conjoin (*Temps et récit*, 2:133n), we may consider the work as a refiguration of temporal experience that responds to or resolves the aporetic of time through what Ricoeur calls "the poetics of narrativity" (3:10).

This study could have been called *Narrative and the Questioning of Time*, where, in the phrase "questioning of time," time is taken to be both the subject and the object of questioning. For I attempt to consider on the one hand Stendhal's questioning of time and his experience of it and on the other hand time's questioning of Stendhal, its putting into question one man's continued identity, his temporal status and his place in history. Both of these questions play themselves out in narrative. I hope to show that, with this idea of narrativity that marks all the works to be discussed, it is possible to bridge the gaps that exist in Stendhalian criticism, wherein his works are often variously

branded or defined as polemical, historical, didactic, or theoretical, and therefore marginalized with respect to the autobiographical and fictional successes. The course we follow takes us along a hierarchy of the temporal problematic that parallels the writer's own chronological journey from the essay to the novel. Though not comprehensive, our scheme is a function of the relative interiority of the confrontation with time, and passes from the theoretical problematic of time through the historical and personal problematic of time to the imaginary exploration and attempted resolution of these problems in the fiction. Thus we move from works with theoretical or polemical pretensions (*Racine et Shakspeare* and *De l'Amour*) to the historical and didactic travel writing of the *Promenades dans Rome,* where the story of this city's history, its identity in time, provides us entry into the story Stendhal tells of his own history and identity in the *Journal* and the *Vie de Henry Brulard,* with its famous opening meditation set above the city of Rome. Among the major fiction I have chosen to study the *Chartreuse de Parme* because it seems to take up where *Henry Brulard* leaves off, with the young Frenchman's discovery of Italy during the Napoleonic campaigns. My readings of individual works are also often sequential in order to preserve in some part the experience of reading, which is itself a sequential one.[16]

My study of time and narrative in Stendhal proceeds in Chapter 1 with a focus on works in which the writer claims to undertake a theoretical treatment of matters that in their own way confront the question of man's temporality, either his place in history or his personal experience of love. Discussion of the two versions of *Racine et Shakspeare* and of *De l'Amour* must adopt a dual perspective, however: for in both cases the author's treatment of these temporal questions, interesting for our study in its own right, reveals the inability of his theoretical or speculative discourse to resist multiple intrusions of narrative discourse. In *Racine et Shakspeare,* Stendhal posits a view of romanticism—the successful romantic artist adapts himself to the particular historical circumstances of his audience—that is in conflict with his own position as an unsuccessful playwright and a writer who felt temporally estranged from his contemporaries, trusting in the reader of fifty or a hundred years later

to make his works successful. But this work implicitly advocates the novel as the form best suited to nineteenth-century society, and Stendhal foreshadows his own turn to narrative forms in these pamphlets' recourse to narrative tools and techniques. Similarly, despite its theoretical or ideological pretensions, the most obvious characteristic of *De l'Amour* is the heaping one on top of another of various narrative fragments: extracts from fictional journals, amorous anecdotes, references to novels and récits de voyage.

Chapter 2 shows how the story of Rome that Stendhal tells in his *Promenades dans Rome* becomes a figure or an analogue for human life. The city's existence in time—where there is permanence despite the changes that take place, for example, between ancient Rome and its rebuilding in the Renaissance, municipal history that the narrator recounts to the visitors—prefigures the story of his life that Stendhal will recount to his readers in the autobiographical *Vie de Henry Brulard.*

Chapter 3 considers Stendhal's own grappling with time as it is expressed in his autobiographical writing. We will see the recapitulation of his life in his *Journal* to be a discovery of the writing process as a way of seizing the self in time. We find however that the purity of this writing, its state as static record, is debased or supplemented by a proliferation of voices—protagonist, chronicler, and rereader—that comes to figure a competition among memory, memoir, and reality. The *Vie de Henry Brulard* reveals itself to be an inscription of self-identity that relies on a scriptural restoration of the past; the writer trusts in his future readers, posterity, to restore to this meditation on time and the self its full commemorative value.

Chapters 4 and 5 undertake to elucidate in the *Chartreuse de Parme* Stendhal's artistic or poetic resolution of his own temporal aporia, that discerned in *Racine et Shakspeare:* the writer's relation to his public. How does Stendhal adapt himself to contemporary society and his contemporary readers (in accord with his own prescription for the romantic writer) while at the same time appealing to posterity and the readers of 1880, 1935, or our own time, who he rightly thought would ensure lasting success for his works? I believe he does so by making use of what Ricoeur calls "les jeux avec le temps" that are made possible by the novel's dual status as, first, an act of narration and, second, narrated actions. Chapter 4 considers the act of narration by which the novelist anchors himself in contemporary society: he creates a fictional narrator

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