Ruminations on Stendhal's Epigraphs

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An arid statistical survey would soon show that in *Armance* Stendhal inserts ten epigraphs with texts from Shakespeare and two only from Byron, whereas in *Le Rouge et le noir* he turns seven times to Byron's *Don Juan* and only four to Shakespeare; and that every time he puts the name of Schiller after an epigraph, Stendhal himself seems to be the author! I shall here avoid such magisterial precision in favor of a more properly Stendhalian (that is to say, playful) approach. Our author himself expressed a modest view of the function of the epigraph when he noted in May 1830:

> Je cherche des épigraphes le 25 mai 1830 en corrigeant la 9e feuille de Julien. L'épigraph doit augmenter la sensation, l'émotion du lecteur, si émotion il peut y avoir et non plus presenter un jugement plus ou moins philosophique sur la situation.

Should we accept the author's reticence? Why bother researching this old novelistic convention? But then why did Stendhal himself bother?

An epigraph in *Le Rouge et le noir*, one attributed by Stendhal to Malagrida, a Portuguese Jesuit, *and* to Talleyrand, gives an initial clue: "La parole a été donnée à l'homme pour cacher sa pensée." Now this sentence had already appeared in *Armance* (chap. 25). Thrice quoted, could these words in fact hide something as well? We know, of course, that Octave, in *Armance*, had a secret—his impotence, which is never mentioned in the text. Julien Sorel also has numerous secrets: his love for Napoleon, his atheism (he knows the part of Tartuffe by heart [p. 523]), his symbolic marriage to Mathilde (Cimarosa's opera *Il Matrimonio segreto* is mentioned several times), and another secret, one that is fictional, one his dreams have invented—the "secret" of his birth. Julien would give everything to have been the illegitimate son of a squire or of a man of noble blood, instead of the "offspring of a woodcutter" (M. de Renal's disdainful words). Julien’s story can (if we remember Freud's theory of the "family romance") easily be read as his quest for a secret, substitute father: the surgeon-major, Abbé Chélan, Abbé Pirard, Comte Altamira, the Marquis de la Mole, and even (and perhaps, above all) M. de Renal, all are father figures, Julien’s imaginary and secret fathers. The secret surfaces only when dream has
apparently (and for a brief moment) become reality: Julien has been named Lieutenant de la Vernaye; rumors concerning his "secret" noble origins circulate; his clandestine "wife" Mathilde is expecting his child (he is convinced it will be a boy), and Julien exults: "mon roman est fini, et à moi seul tout le mérite" (p. 637). But his "novel" is not complete—he will race off to attempt to kill Mme de Renal; the novelist controls the novel; it is he who commands "the word," even when his characters are "speaking." What secrets are hidden in his words? Does he express himself to hide, instead of to reveal?

When an author chooses an epigraph, he provisionally becomes a reader; he instinctively satisfies the Baudelairean criterion for the modern poet, one who is simultaneously creator and critic, writer and reader. And when Stendhal notes, in 1830, that he is selecting epigraphs while correcting proofs, he is at that moment the interpreter of his own text. His choice of epigraphs constitutes an essential interpretative gesture. The words that disguise the thoughts, his words, yield to the words of another, which, in contrast, unveil and reveal, since a reader decodes while an author encodes. The author's mask falls at times, since the choice of an epigraph can give us, the readers of the author-as-reader, a subtle signal for possible interpretations of Stendhal's text. In choosing an epigraph Stendhal somehow seeks to appropriate some of our freedom as readers, interpreters, and critics by revealing himself as the reader of another's text, the text from which the epigraph was drawn.

The importance Stendhal attaches to reading is manifested by a network of associations in Le Rouge et le noir. If Stendhal is the reader of the epigraphs to be selected, Julien Sorel is equally avid as reader; he quotes rigorously selected passages from the Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène, from Rousseau's Confessions and La Nouvelle Héloïse, from Tartuffe (pp. 523, 539, 678). When we first encounter him, he is sitting on a roof reading that Mémorial which, in its Napoleonic gospel, has replaced the Bible, which Julien can quote without really having read: "Mon métier est de faire réciter des leçons et d'en réciter moi-même" (p. 347). Both Stendhal and Julien are thus inveterate quoters, but with this difference: whereas Julien has a dazzling memory and quotes without error, Stendhal offers us quotations quite often deliberately distorted or else invents a quotation or attribution in order to send out a purposely confused but nonetheless perceptible signal.

When Mme de Renal sees Julien Sorel for the first time (chap. 6, "L'Ennui"), the famous meeting takes place under the sign of an equally famous epigraph: "Non so più, cosa son / Cosa facio," identified laconically as "Mozart (Figaro)." This reduced title, Figaro, also constitutes a quotation and serves to remind us that Julien, scaler of ladders, seeks to reach the summit of society while remaining free to criticize its foibles exactly like Figaro, who represents the now upwardly mobile people and its entrepreneurial energies and who allows himself the freedom to denounce the aristocracy that has earned its
eminence by merely taking the trouble to be born. If Figaro is a prophet of the Revolution, Julien is perceived as the Danton of a future uprising by the monarchists in the Hôtel de la Mole. But let us not forget that the epigraph is taken from an aria sung by Cherubino in the first act of the opera, not from the play. In it he laments his inability to resist the call of love. Julien, in turn, cannot help but win the approval of the local girls, thanks to his "pretty face" ("la jolie figure" [p. 231]). Cherubino will know an impossible love for a married woman, the countess; Julien will love Mme de Renal, a married woman and mother. But the true signal sent by the epigraph is more subtle still. Cherubino, whose name embodies his juvenile features, is the first page of Count Almaviva, but his part is always sung by a mezzo-soprano. In act 2 the mezzo-page is to replace Susanna at her nocturnal rendezvous with the count; to assume a female disguise in act 3, Barberina, trying to rescue Cherubino from the threat of exile in the army, puts him into a peasant woman's costume. In other words, the pattern is of a certain sexual ambivalence, which redirects our reader's eye toward other signals in the text. Thus, Julien is described with tears in his eyes ("les larmes aux yeux" [p. 230]), with a young girl's face ("cette figure de jeune fille, si pâle et si douce" [p. 237]), as weak in appearance ("faible en apparence"), and as a nineteen-year-old who looks more like seventeen (p. 239). Mme de Renal at first thinks that Julien is a young girl in disguise ("une jeune fille déguisée"), with his young girl's blushing timidity ("son air timide d'une jeune fille qui rougit" [p. 240]); she is struck by his beauty ("son extrême beauté"), and the almost feminine cast of his features ("la forme presque féminine de ses traits" [p. 242]) makes her feel younger as she momentarily forgets the vulgar manners of M. de Renal. Julien has no mother, and the sexual ambivalence signaled by the epigraph's associations indicates that at Verrières at least he is still at the androgynous Oedipal stage. Beaten repeatedly by his brothers and by his father, Julien fails in the world of men: he is seeking maternal love—he finds a "mother" in Mme de Renal, who responds in kind when she seeks to escape adultery by transforming her passion into a desexualized love:

Souvent au milieu du récit de quelque friponnerie savante . . . l'esprit de madame de Renal s'égayait tout à coup jusqu'au délire. Julien avait besoin de la gronder, elle se permettait avec lui les mêmes gestes intimes qu'avec ses enfants. C'est qu'il y avait des jours où elle avait l'illusion de l'aider comme son enfant. Sans cesse n'avait-elle pas à répondre à ses questions naïves sur mille choses simples qu'un enfant bien né n'ignore pas à quinze ans? Un instant après, elle l'admirait comme son maître. Son génie allait jusqu'à l'effrayer; elle croyait apercevoir plus nettement chaque jour le grand homme futur dans ce jeune abbé. Elle le voyait pape, elle le voyait premier ministre comme Richelieu.—Vivrai-je assez pour te voir dans ta gloire? disait-elle à Julien, la place est faite pour un grand homme; la monarchie, la religion en ont besoin. [Pp. 305-6]

Psychoanalysis has taught us that the archetypal family structure in psychi-
cally caused homosexuality is the matriarchy—we find the pattern in Armance, where Octave's mother and fiancée are in league against him; we also find it in the lives (and works) of Gide and Proust. It is that matriarchy that the motherless Julien is seeking with Mme de Rénal—he seeks and finds that mother unconsciously, of course, but he will remain faithful to the image even at the apogee of his social triumph: when, thanks to the Marquis de la Mole, he has changed name and identity in becoming M. de la Vernaye (p. 637), when he has become Mathilde's fiancé and is about to become a father himself. He forces the marquis to look into his credentials and his past by writing to Mme de Rénal: Julien is thus himself responsible for his fall. And why? Because he was tired of heroism ("fatigué d’héroïsme" [p. 663]), tired of the virile world of Mathilde with her dreams of swords, her Salomé-like obsessions that make her want to relive the decapitation of her ancestor Boniface. Julien shoots twice at Mme de Rénal, not to punish her, not through jealousy, but so that he can be punished and be forever united with his ideal Jocasta in death.

Another epigraph provides further signals. At the opening of the chapter describing their first night of love, we read:

Amour en latin faict amor
Or donc provient d'amour la mort,
Et, par avant, soulcy qui mord,
Deuil, pleurs, pieges, forfaix, remords.

[P. 294]

For it is in prison, as Victor Brombert has demonstrated, that Julien finds happiness of a sort (just like Fabrice in La Chartreuse): “Jamais il ne pensait à ses succès de Paris; il en était ennuyé” (p. 662). He wants to rid himself of Mathilde, of his father, of the whole virile world. As for his own as yet unborn son, he states his cruel but psychologically necessary plans to Mathilde herself: “Mettez votre enfant en nourrice à Verrières, madame de Rénal surveillera la nourrice” (p. 663). This “son” will obtain what Julien wanted, that mother he was deprived of, for Julien will proclaim his secret to the very tribunal that will condemn him to death: “Madame de Rénal avait été pour moi comme une mère” (p. 672). But the real psychic crime, his consummation of Oedipal desire, will not thus be admitted; Julien uses words to hide his thoughts, when he tells the jury he is Figaro, not Cherubino: “punir en moi et décourager à jamais cette classe de jeunes gens qui, nés dans une classe inférieure et en quelque sorte opprimés par la pauvreté, ont le bonheur de se procurer une bonne éducation, et l'audace de se mêler à ce que l'orgueil des gens riches appelle la société” (pp. 664–75). Julien and Mme de Rénal finish operatically, in ecstatic stichomythia: “Who could have thought it true!” (“Qui me Peut dit!”); “never had they been so happy” (“jamais il n’auraient été si heureux” [p. 681]). And the novel ends with a sentence that in the perspective of the epigraph from Figaro strikes me as eminently equivocal: “trois jours après Julien, elle mourut en embrassant ses enfants” (p. 697).
One might be tempted to protest at thus being steered along a map of misreading, that this network of sexual ambivalence hardly depends on the epigraph. But the signals both sent and screened by “Non so piú, cosa son / Cosa facio” have not yet been entirely decoded. Like his hero Julien, Stendhal knew all too well the *Confessions* of Rousseau and the story of Mme de Warens. And Henry Brulard (that is to say, Henri Beyle [Stendhal]) lived that story: “Ma mère, Madame Henriette Gagnon, était une femme charmante et j’étais amoureux de ma mère. . . . Je voulais couvrir ma mère de baisers et qu’il n’y eût pas de vêtements. Elle m’aimait à la passion et m’embrassait souvent, je lui rendais ses baisers avec un tel feu qu’elle était souvent obligée de s’en aller. J’abhorrais mon père quand il venait interrompre nos baisers.”

Let us not forget that Julien Sorel had no mother (Henry Brulard lost his when he was seven). Julien found a mother in Mme de Renal; he covered her with kisses and without clothes. But let us also not forget that the hated father, the father of Marie-Henri Beyle, bore the name of Chérubin-Joseph Beyle.

If the epigraph as covert signal from an author who is simultaneously critic, reader, and interpreter is what interests me most immediately, such a limited view by no means exhausts the richness of the epigraph’s functions in *Armance* and *Le Rouge et le noir*, moving toward its ultimate disappearance from *Lucien Leuwen* and *La Chartreuse de Parme*. The epigraph can be inserted as an apparent generative or motivating force in the text. Let us remember that Cherubino in Mozart’s opera has to hide, first behind a chair, then under dresses in the armchair, to avoid meeting the count; Julien, hearing M. de Renal about to enter his wife’s room, has to slip under the sofa to avoid the jealous husband. Cherubino escapes through a window and falls in the flower beds, and Julien escapes from Mathilde’s room the same way a few pages after letting the ladder (his means of access) fall into the flower beds near the wall (p. 538). In a chapter narrating the birth of Julien’s love for Mme de Renal (chap. 16), we find an epigraph from Byron’s *Don Juan*: “He turned his lip to hers, and with his hand / Call’d back the tangles of her wandering hair” (p. 297); two hundred fifty pages later we notice that verses (from this same stanza) that Stendhal had read but did not quote contributed to his novel:

> “Come, come, ’t is no time now for fooling there,”
> She whispered, in great wrath—“I must deposit
> This pretty gentleman within the closet.”
>
> [Canto 1, stanza 170]

For at the sound of steps in the room adjacent to Mathilde’s, she hides him in a mahogany armoire (p. 541). At another key moment, Julien, proud to have fulfilled his heroic task of taking Mme de Renal’s hand, now resolves to hold her hand in the very presence of her husband; the epigraph of the chapter in question, also drawn from *Don Juan*, shows the origins of his strategy:

> Yet Julia’s very coldness still was kind,
And tremulously gentle her small hand
Withdrew itself from his, but left behind,
A little pressure, thrilling, and so bland
And slight, so very slight that in the mind
'Twas but a doubt.

[P. 275, canto 1, stanza 71]

An epigraph that seems to me to express one key way these quotations function
is attributed to Ennius (p. 234): “Cunctando restituit rem” (“Delaying restitutes
the thing”). Many of the epigraphs that activate the text—that is, that are
incorporated or transformed within the body of the narrative—are, so to speak,
textual time bombs: they explode into significance with some delay. For
example, Fleury’s remark, “Un curé vertueux et sans intrigue est une Prov­
dence pour le village” (chap. 3, p. 223), would seem most innocuous, were it
not that two hundred pages later Abbé Pirard will tell Julien: “Il ne faut jamais
dire le hasard, mon enfant, dites toujours la Providence” (p. 442). An epigraph
attributed to Girodet—“Se sacrifier à ses passions, passe; mais à des passions
qu’on n’a pas! O triste XIXe siècle!” (p. 610)—perfectly describes Julien’s
subsequent situation in prison and contains the text of his reflections in the
penultimate chapter, eighty pages later: “L’influence de mes contemporains
l’emporte, dit-il tout haut et avec un rire amer. Parlant seul avec moi-même, à
deux pas de la mort, je suis encore hypocrite. O dix-neuvième siècle” (p. 690).

This time-fuse effect can also lead from the text to the epigraph. In describ­
ing the Hôtel de la Mole, Stendhal brings out its vacuity in the following
formulation: “La moindre idée vive semblait une grossièreté. Malgré le bon­
ton, la politesse parfaite, l’envie d’être agréable, l’ennui se lisait sur tous les
fronts” (p. 457). This will form an epigraph, attributed to Faublas, in the
following chapter: “Une idée un peu vive y a l’air d’une grossièreté, tant on y
est accoutumé aux mots sans relief. Malheur à qui invente en parlant” (p. 467).
The effect of such an epigraph is structural, almost musical. Isolated in the
midst of white space, the epigraph draws itself to our attention as a leitmotiv
whose importance will be definitively revealed only in the total structure of the
text. It therefore constitutes an ironic interface, a subliminal meaning depend­
ent on the total text perceived simultaneously, not in linearity. Thus, the
epigraph of the novel itself, “La vérité, l’âpre vérité,” attributed to Danton,
seems to steer us toward a realistic reading of Le Rouge, whereas what matters
is the name Danton—he was decapitated in 1794, and his fate foreshadows
Julien’s. Three hundred pages later we find a chapter entitled “Serait-ce un
Danton?”, a question Mathilde answers: “Ce sera un Danton! . . . Eh bien! la
révolution aurait recommencé. . . . Mon petit Julien brûlerait la cervelle au
jacobin qui viendrait l’arrêter” (pp. 512–13). And one hundred fifty pages later,
Count Altamira will explain to the prisoner Julien that the night before his death
Danton said whimsically that the verb guillotiner could not, in the first person.
be conjugated in the past tense. At the Rénals’, as at the Hôtel de la Mole, the threat of the great Revolution hangs as a sword of Damocles. As a witness to one of Julien’s terrible rages, Mme Derville is reminded that humiliation has shaped the personality of the dreaded Robespierre (p. 268); Mathilde’s brother says of Julien: “Si la révolution recommence, il nous fera tous guillotiner” (p. 512).

The same effect of *cunctando restituit rem*—first a false or screened meaning before the unveiling of the true kernel—characterizes the epigraph of the first chapter: “Put thousands together / Less bad / But the cage less gay,” which Stendhal attributes to Hobbes. The reader, deceived by the linearity of his first reading of the novel, here sees what strikes him as an evocation of the town of Verrières, whose mayor, M. de Rénéal, spends time and money erecting walls: “plus on batit de murs, plus on acquiert de droits aux respects de ses voisins” (p. 219). Later the epigraph would seem to apply to the cell in the seminary at Besançon from which Julien has a splendid view of the two walls. But a more important meaning is made manifest only at the end of the novel, when we realize that the “cage” is the dungeon where our would-be Don Juan finds ineffable happiness with Mme de Rénéal, the ideal mother and mistress.

“Ce siècle est fait pour tout confondre! Nous marchons vers le chaos” (p. 631). These words by the Marquis de la Mole reflect the pessimistic view of the nineteenth century reiterated by the vision of the novel. “Il n’y a plus de passions véritables au XIXe siècle: c’est pour cela que l’on s’ennuie tant en France” (p. 494), Altamira says. The la Moles are aristocrats, and Mathilde thinks only of her ancestor Boniface, decapitated in 1574; Julien remembers Napoleon, is nostalgic for the *grande armée* and for Rousseau, his spiritual brother. And Stendhal? He should be viewed not as a political thinker but as novelist and creator. He does not want to write a realistic novel, he does not want the truth, the bitter truth; what he strives for in *Le Rouge et le noir* (and ultimately achieves in *La Chartreuse*) is the lightness, the aleatory, the joyous energy of Montesquieu, of the Cimarosa of *Il Matrimonio segreto*, of the Mozart of *Figaro*; the carefree humor, the freedom of narrative techniques of Scarron’s *Roman comique*, of Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, of Diderot’s *Jacques le fataliste*. He wants to write a novel that, taking as its point of departure the Berthet affair chronicled in the Gazette, will achieve freedom within the constraints of the historical givens. And Stendhal will use the epigraph to lighten the ponderous weight of the bitter historical truths of his *Chronique de 1830*, the subtitle of *Le Rouge*.

A few chapter titles from *Tom Jones* will sound the right note:

The hero of this great history appears with very bad omens. A little tale of so low a kind that some may not think it worth their notice. A word or two concerning a squire, and more relating to a gamekeeper and a schoolmaster. [Bk. 3, chap. 2]
A most dreadful chapter indeed; and which few readers ought to venture upon in an evening, especially when alone. [Bk. 7, chap. 14]

Obviously, in 1830, with the example of the laconic chapter titles of a Balzac as exemplary, Stendhal could not easily return to the playfulness of his beloved eighteenth century, especially when *Le Rouge* is subtitled *Chronique de 1830*. He turned instead to the freedom afforded by the epigraph, which serves as surrogate eighteenth-century Fieldingesque title describing the chapter it heads. For example, the last chapter of part 1 of *Le Rouge* has the Marquis de la Mole explaining to Abbé Pirard that he is involved in various legal plots and needs a discreet and competent secretary—that will be Julien, of course—to assist him in the judicial proceedings. The epigraph is supposedly taken from the *Edinburgh Review* (for which Stendhal served as correspondent): “Il n’y a plus qu’une seule noblesse, c’est le titre de duc; marquis est ridicule, au mot duc on tourne la tête” (p. 414). The epigraph as chapter title explains the motivation behind la Mole’s machinations “pour faire accepter à la fois au roi et à la nation un certain ministère, qui, par reconnaissance, le ferait duc” (p. 414). The title marquis is used nine times in the course of the first three pages of the chapter to designate la Mole. The effect is to reduce the political plot to ironic social ambition. Another chapter, “Pensées d’une jeune fille,” dramatizes the amorous Mathilde’s distress, her insomnia, her remorse at having written those compromising notes to Julien, concluding with his plans to leave town. The epigraph, attributed to Musset, sums up the action of the chapter, which contains at various moments words taken directly from the epigraph:

Que de perplexités! Que de nuits passées sans sommeils! Grand Dieu! vais-je me rendre méprisable? Il me méprisera lui-même. Mais il s’éloigne. [Epigraph; p. 525]

Le jour de la bataille était presque celui des moindres perplexités. [P. 526; italics mine here and in the following quotations]

En ce temps-là . . . Mathilde ne pouvait dormir. [P. 527]

Quelle phrase eût-on pu leur donner à répéter pour amortir le coup de l’affreux mépris. [P. 527]

Il avait oublié de songer sérieusement à la convenance du départ. [p. 529]

The false seriousness of the epigraph makes the movement of the game of amorous strategems so comic and unromantic that Julien says to himself, like a real eighteenth-century Marivaux lover: “Il paraît que ceci va être le roman par lettres” (p. 529); these words are uttered by the young hero who is so excessively aware of living a nineteenth-century novel of social mobility made possible by ambitious energy: “Au milieu de tant de péris il me reste MOI” (p. 528).

An epigraph supposedly by Schiller, that apostle of dynamic Sturm und Drang, introduces Julien’s hesitations at Mathilde’s order to him to climb to her room on a ladder in the moonlight. “Est-ce un complot?” is the chapter title (p.
531); and the epigraph: "Ah! que l'intervalle est cruel entre un grand projet conçu et son exécution! Que de vaines terreurs! que d'irrésolutions! Il s'agit de la vie. —Il s'agit de bien plus: de l'honneur!" (p. 531). The action of this chapter recounts precisely this painful interval, and Julien himself quotes the words of old Don Diégue in Corneille's *Le Cid*, "Mais il n'est qu'un honneur!" (p. 532), before hiding copies of Mathilde's letters in a volume of Voltaire in the la Mole library. One final example is another fictitious attribution to Schiller: "Et elle me l'avoue! Elle détaille jusqu'aux moindres circonstances! Son œil si beau fixé sur le mien peint l'amour qu'elle sentit pour un autre!" (p. 547). In this chapter, entitled "Moments cruels," Mathilde does precisely what the epigraph-as-chapter-title indicated to torment the jealous Julien. She tells him what she had felt for MM. de Croisenois and de Caylus (p. 548). And Stendhal intervenes (by what Victor Brombert called "the oblique road"), like a real eighteenth-century playful narrator:

le sujet de conversation auquel ils semblaient tous deux revenir . . . c'était le récit des sentiments qu'elle avait éprouvés pour d'autres. . . .

On voit que Julien n'avait aucune expérience de la vie, qu'il n'avait pas même lu de romans; s'il eût été un peu moins gauche et qu'il eût dit avec quelque sang-froid à cette jeune fille. . . . Convenez que quoique je ne vaille pas tous ces messieurs, c'est pourtant moi que vous aimez. [P. 549]

It is no accident that in this essential function of the epigraph, the replacing of the whimsical chapter titles dear to a Fielding, Stendhal usually invented the epigraphs themselves, while playfully attributing them to the most serious writers of his own and preceding times.

With a political background in his *Chronique de 1830* that is so controversial that Stendhal was obliged to write a fictitious disclaimer informing the reader (and the censor) that his novel had been written in 1827 (three years before the events of July 1830 [p. 215]) and with a plot drawn from the *Gazette des Tribunaux* (the case of Anthoine Berthet, who was guillotined in February 1828), Stendhal must make a real effort to "lighten" his novel, to remove it at least partially from the realism that allowed the eminent stendhalien Henri Martineau to call *Le Rouge" un roman de mœurs et un tableau politique en même temps qu'un roman psychologique* (p. 199). What Stendhal is seeking (and will only truly find in *La Chartreuse*) is the playful tonality and sparkle of Cimarosa, of Scarron, of Diderot: "Comment s'étaient-ils rencontrés? Par hasard, comme tout le monde. Comment s'appelaient-ils? Que vous importe? D'où venaient-ils? Du lieu le plus proche. Où allaient-ils? Est-ce que l'on sait où l'on va? Que disaient-ils? Le maître ne disait rien; et Jacques disait que son capitaine disait que tout ce qui nous arrive de bien et de mal ici-bas était écrit là-haut." By these questions (and the frivolous answers) Diderot establishes a playful tone, that of a novel where metaphysical questions will be treated with the light touch. Stendhal will fully acquire this luminous freedom of the nar-
ratology of the Enlightenment only in La Chartreuse; in Le Rouge, he will use the epigraph to modulate the seriousness of his plot and his chronicle of 1830 into a playfulness worthy of his predecessors. Sometimes the text of the epigraph itself will have less importance than the purported name of the author in the ironic texture of the novel. Thus, the four epigraphs attributed to Barnave are there because their author was decapitated; another, in a joke at the expense of one of the great traditional sources of epigraphs, is attributed to Mme Goethe. At times, an epigraph of utter vacuity will bear the name of a famous author. “Que fait-il ici? s’y plairait-il? Penserait-il y plaire?” (p. 456) is supposedly by Ronsard; and “Hélas! pourquoi ces choses et non pas d’autres?” (p. 622) is by Beaumarchais.

The disparity between the epigraph and the content of a particular chapter similarly produces an ironic effect: “O rus quando ego te aspiciam?” (“O countryside, when shall I see you?”) inaugurates a chapter detailing that the countryside is as filled with political intrigue and schemingly ambitious men as the metropolis. And the name of the “author” adds to the irony; the quotation is not from Virgil, as Stendhal pretends, but from Horace’s Satires (2. 6. 60). We then remember that at the Rénals’ Julien had memorized only the Bible, but that he had learned Horace subsequently and had thereby impressed the bishop of Besançon. Finally, he uses his knowledge of Horace to show off in the salon of the Hôtel de la Mole—and with all this Stendhal mistakes Virgil for Horace! Sometimes, too, the epigraph is a mere word game that lightens the realistic materials of the novel. Thus, the narration of Julien’s first days in the capital at the house of la Mole follows an epigraph whose concluding figurative words, “Ma tête se perd,” will finally assume an all too literal (and prophetic) meaning.

Stendhal’s continuing struggle against his “triste 19e siècle” manifests itself most strikingly in the most famous epigraph of Le Rouge et le noir: “Un roman: c’est un miroir qu’on promène le long d’un chemin” (p. 286). Generations of critics have seen in this epigraph the signboard of Stendhalian realism. They conjecture that since the author of the lines is Stendhal himself and since the author of Racine et Shakespeare is an admirer of Hamlet’s “mirror up to nature,” he must be speaking of his novel and of his preoccupations as chronicler (Saint-Réal, the purported author, is a bit of Stendhalian whimsy, though the pun on the root of réaliste/Réal is amusing). But this invented epigraph reenters the text of the novel precisely at the moment where the author is most successful in appropriating the narrative voice of the eighteenth century—in a chapter narrating Mathilde’s night at the Italian opera, hearing that sparkling piece of eighteenth-century froth, Cimarosa’s Il Matrimonio segreto. She spends the whole night singing the cantilena from the opera, “Devo punirmi, / Se troppo amai” (p. 554). Then Stendhal picks up the epigraph he introduced two hundred fifty pages earlier, this time in the middle of a long parenthetical authorial intervention worthy of Diderot:
Eh, Monsieur, un roman est un miroir qui se promène sur une grande route. Tantôt il reflète à vos yeux l’azur des cieux, tantôt la fange des bourbiers de la route. Et l’homme qui porte le miroir dans sa hotte sera par vous accusé d’être immoral. Accusez bien plutôt le grand chemin où est le bourbier, et plus encore l’inspecteur des routes qui laisse l’eau croupir et le bourbier se former.

Maintenant qu’il est bien convenu que le caractère de Mathilde est impossible dans notre siècle, non moins prudent que vertueux, je crains moins d’irriter en continuant le récit des folies de cette aimable fille. [P. 555]

The figurative meaning of the mirror is rendered comical by a reduction to the literality of the highway inspector, but what really matters is that Stendhal is here celebrating not realism, but his narrative triumph over realism.

We might now ask the arid statistical question once more. Why two epigraphs from Byron’s Don Juan in Armance as against seven in Le Rouge? Armance is a novel that is both a satirical depiction of Paris salons in 1827 and a profoundly serious psychological study of psychic impotence. The latter is by far the more important theme, especially because of Stendhal’s own preoccupation with the subject. The author forces himself to use words to hide Octave’s affliction, which is in fact never mentioned. In Le Rouge, on the other hand, Byron can assume greater importance because, like Stendhal in 1830, he wrote with prodigious rapidity and could never resist irony when speaking of love; Byron has the feeling for the couplet of an Augustan. In Le Rouge the epigraphs from Don Juan are there to allow Stendhal to mock the love strategy of the would-be seducer, Julien Sorel, who finds a mother in his mistress and who will himself become the “mistress” of the virile Mathilde, whose extravagant energies surpass his own. Julien does not succeed in living the Napoleonic saga, but Mathilde makes him play the drama of Boniface de la Mole. Julien will not be Don Juan, although he is certainly aware of his Byronic incarnation: “Julien s’obstinant à jouer le rôle d’un Don Juan, lui qui de la vie n’avait eu de maîtresse, il fut soit à mourir toute la journée” (p. 293).

In the courtroom Julien accuses himself of matricide, and in a grandiose operatic aria he denounces society and makes the ladies in the audience cry. But Stendhal has him race off to Verrières in an apparently implausible (and much criticized) twist of plot, not to allow the author to finish his novel expeditiously, but to allow Julien to finish his own. Lieutenant de la Vernaye now, Julien cries out: “Mon roman est fini” (p. 637). He is wrong; his novel does not conclude with this apogee. His novel must finish “novelistically”: a wild horseback ride to Verrières worthy of a Sturm und Drang narrative, two pistol shots in a church. Yet these are pistol shots that are the very parody of heroic action, because, like Uncle Vanya, Julien does not kill his victim even when shooting at such close quarters (p. 642). In this miserable nineteenth century, it is already too late for real actions, for heroism. The novel is set in an age of intrigue, of money, of corruption, not of heroism. Stendhal no longer needs the
epigraph in his last chapters to communicate his irony: the entire novel floats in an ironic half-light, illuminated only by one authentic flame, the love that unites mother and son-and-lover: Mme de Malivert and Octave; Mme de Rénal and Julien; Henriette Gagnon and Henry Brulard—Henri Beyle—Stendhal. The last word should be Byron’s:

Don Juan was a bachelor—of arts,
And parts, and hearts: he danced and sang and had
An air as sentimental as Mozart’s
Softest of melodies; and could be sad
Or cheerful, without any “flaws or starts”
Just at the proper time: and though a lad,
Had seen the world—which is a curious sight,
And very much unlike what people write.

1. All quotations from *Le Rouge et le noir* are taken from Stendhal, *Romans*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1952); page numbers are given immediately after the quotation.

2. This basic pattern has, of course, often been observed. See the excellent study by Gilbert Chaitin, *The Unhappy Few* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972); and more recently, Steven Sands, “The Narcissism of Stendhal and Julien Sorel,” *Studies in Romanticism* 14 (1975): 337–63.


