Stendhal and the Age of Ideas
Stendhal remained all his life a man of the eighteenth century, and it is my purpose to indicate the crucial role the Age of Ideas and its writers played in crystallizing some of the novelist's most profound attitudes and beliefs. I shall not attempt to present a complete survey of those authors and books that are discussed at some length in Stendhal's personal writings; obviously the scope of such a study would necessitate a book-length essay. But I should like to delineate the essential features of Stendhal's affinity with the eighteenth century.¹

Paul Valéry, in his typically tentative and skeptical manner, alluded to Stendhal's indebtedness to the eighteenth century by emphasizing the writer's lightness of touch and vivacity of mind: "Beyle tenait heureusement du siècle où il naquit l'inestimable don de la vivacité. La prépotence pesante et l'ennui n'eurent jamais de plus prompt adversaire. Classiques et Romantiques, entre lesquels il se mut et étincela, irritaient sa verve précise."² Whereas Valéry envisaged Stendhal as a man of the eighteenth century primarily because of his style and temperament, Georg Lukács defined the affinity in ideological terms: "Stendhal's attitude to romanticism is . . . a complete rejection. He is a true disciple of the philosophers of the Enlightenment."³ We shall see, however, that Stendhal was never the docile, respectful type of disciple, for even when dealing with authors he most admired—Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau—he adopted
a resolutely independent, irreverent stance, an eminently eighteenth-century attitude.

To begin, the Revolution was the most dramatic and exciting feature in the otherwise gray and uneventful landscape of Beyle’s lonely and precocious childhood in his native Grenoble. In *La Vie de Henry Brulard* Stendhal quite obviously takes keen pleasure in evoking his revolutionary zeal and jubilation and in contrasting his secret feelings of joy and enthusiasm with the utter consternation and dismay of his family, especially of his father, Chérubin Beyle. To be sure, Grenoble was fortunate in escaping the excesses of the Terror, and young Beyle was spared the experience of persecution or the spectacle of mass arrests and executions. And Chérubin Beyle, despite his notoriously royalist opinions, never paid for these with the loss of property, or worse.  

In a particularly vivid scene in *Henry Brulard*, Stendhal depicts his feelings upon learning of the execution of Louis XVI from his distraught father: “Je jugeais la cause entre ma famille et moi lorsque mon père entra. Je le vois encore en redingote de molleton blanc qu’il n’avait pas ôtée pour aller à deux pas à la poste. ‘C’en est fait, dit-il, avec un gros soupir, ils l’ont assassiné.’ Je fus saisi d’un des plus vifs mouvements de joie que j’ai éprouvés en ma vie. Le lecteur pensera peut-être que je suis cruel mais tel j’étais à dix ans tel je suis à cinquante-deux.” But when young Beyle sneaked into the local Club des Jacobins in order to witness a meeting, which was open to the public, this experience turned out to have a sobering effect on him. He was frightened and repulsed by the unruly and foul-smelling mob of spectators and disappointed by the orators. Recalling this scene, the older Stendhal mused that this ambivalent reaction was to typify his politics for the rest of his life. A sincere democrat by conviction, he would nevertheless retain aristocratic tastes and leanings and, when confronted with political tactics or ideology, found it hard to rid himself of doubt, skepticism, and a desire to remain aloof and independent.
At the Ecole Centrale in Grenoble, where Beyle was a student from 1796 to 1799, the professors were all imbued with the philosophy and ideology of the Enlightenment. What he learned from the works and theories of such late Enlightenment thinkers as Condorcet and Helvétius has already been demonstrated. But the most persuasive spokesman for the eighteenth century was the kindly Dr. Henri Gagnon, young Beyle’s maternal grandfather and favorite relative, a man of vast culture, exquisite manners, and a great admirer of the *philosophes* and especially of Voltaire, whom he had personally visited in Ferney and of whom he always spoke with immense respect and affection. A bust of Voltaire adorned his study. Dr. Gagnon’s skepticism, fine sense of irony, and aristocratic charm stood out in stark contrast against the somber background of the Chérubin Beyle household.

By reading books surreptitiously borrowed from the libraries of his father and grandfather, young Beyle came into contact with a number of eighteenth-century authors. Henri Beyle had a special predilection for the historians, chroniclers, memorialists, novelists, and dramatists who could enlighten him on the manners and mores of the Regency. Saint-Simon, Lesage, and Montesquieu were among his favorite authors. He particularly admired Saint-Simon: “J’ai adoré Saint-Simon en 1800 comme en 1836.” Through the works of these writers he discovered fascinating new sociological types: the nouveau riche, the financier, the woman of intrigue, the adventurer, the rake. In an increasingly unstable society a new class of men and women made their appearance, and Beyle saw in them qualities that he considered necessary for social success: daring, resourcefulness, and ambition unencumbered by too many moral scruples. He noted in his *Journal*: “L’histoire de la Régence doit être le morceau de celle de France le plus agréable à étudier. Lire Voltaire pour les faits officiels, Duclos, Saint-Simon, Marmontel et le morceau de Chamfort sur les mémoires de Richelieu et ceux de Duclos.”

The future apologist of strong passions studied with par-
ticular care those authors—especially novelists, memorialists, and moralists—who could probe and analyze human character and social behavior. Of the two major moralists of the eighteenth century, Vauvenargues and Chamfort, he undoubtedly preferred the former for the importance he attached to energy, action, and feeling.¹¹

But what about the major figures who dominated the eighteenth century: Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot? Let us pass in review, without attempting to be exhaustive, these writers as they appear in Stendhal’s personal works.

Montesquieu occupies a special, privileged place. Stendhal, who generally liked to treat even his favorite authors with a total lack of reverence, was always respectful when speaking of Montesquieu. In Henry Brulard the aging novelist, in a moment of melancholy and self-doubt, quipped: “S’il y a un autre monde, je ne manquerai pas d’aller voir Montesquieu, s’il me dit: ‘Mon pauvre ami, vous n’avez pas eu de talent du tout,’ j’en serais fâché mais nullement surpris.”¹² Dr. Gagnon, Henri Beyle’s grandfather, probably aroused the boy’s interest, for he always spoke of Montesquieu in the highest terms of praise. To be sure, Henri could not make sense out of the Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence when he first read it, but he was immediately won over by the Lettres persanes, which he took along with a few other select books when he departed Grenoble for Paris in 1799.¹³ He was to read L’Esprit des lois at a somewhat later date, in 1803, and copied long selections from it. Eventually, however, he expressed one reservation concerning Montesquieu’s great work: he felt that it revealed too much willingness to compromise with established traditions.¹⁴ It is especially as a stylist that Montesquieu fascinated Stendhal, who considered him even superior to Voltaire in this respect and did not hesitate to rank him in the select company of seven other French writers whom he regarded as the supreme masters of style: Montaigne, Molière, La Fontaine, Corneille, Racine, Voltaire, and Rousseau.¹⁵
Voltaire was greatly revered, not only in Dr. Gagnon’s household, but also at the Ecole Centrale in Grenoble. Beyle was therefore introduced to Voltaire at an early age. “Prie mon g(rand)-p(ère) de te lire Zadig de la même manière qu’il me le lut il y a deux ans,” he wrote to his sister Pauline in March 1800. Even Chérubin Beyle, despite his conservative philosophy and strong religious sense, owned a complete set of Voltaire’s works, which he kept in the library of his country house in Claix:

Claix me déplaisait parce que j’y étais toujours assiégé de projets d’agriculture, mais bientôt je trouvais une grande compensation. . . . Je volai des volumes de Voltaire dans l’édition en quarante volumes. . . . J’en prenais deux et écartais un peu tous les autres, il n’y paraissait pas.

And yet Stendhal has frequently repeated that he disliked Voltaire: “Du plus loin que je me souvienne, les écrits de Voltaire m’ont toujours souverainement déplu,” and “Je méprisais sincèrement et souverainement le talent de Voltaire: je le trouvais puéril.” He himself found it difficult to explain this antipathy, since there were so many reasons why he should have been an admiring disciple of Voltaire.

Like so many members of the post-Enlightenment generation, Stendhal had a certain image of Voltaire that was far from fair to the philosophe. He regarded him as a witty writer and storyteller, a talented historian and competent playwright, but as a superficial thinker and a man who knew nothing about the finer, more delicate feelings of which the human heart is capable: “Le conte espagnol le plus commun s’il y a de la générosité me fait venir les larmes aux yeux, tandis que je détourne les yeux du caractère de Chrysale de Molière et encore plus du fond méchant de Zadig, Candide . . . et autres ouvrages de Voltaire.” But if Stendhal professed never to have loved Voltaire, he was a constant and attentive student of his works, especially of his contes, which he considered as a perfect antidote against what he detested most in
the style of his contemporaries: bombastic verbosity and flatulence.\textsuperscript{21}

Young Beyle's revelation of Rousseau was through \textit{La Nouvelle Héloïse}, which he also read in secret and with such intense rapture that he later viewed this experience as one of the most memorable and ecstatic in his life.\textsuperscript{22} Interestingly enough, Chérubin Beyle was a devout Rousseauist: "Dès l'âge de six ans, je crois, mon père m'avait inoculé son enthousiasme pour J.-J. Rousseau, que plus tard il exécrera comme anti-roi."\textsuperscript{23} Despite his strong feelings of resentment against his father, upon whom he looked as the very embodiment of bourgeois pettiness and chicanery, he was willing to give him some credit for sensitivity because of his sincere devotion to Jean-Jacques: "Il faut rendre cette justice au goût de mon père, il était enthousiaste de Rousseau."\textsuperscript{24}

Beyle's veneration of Rousseau was to reach a high point when he sought guidance and solace in books as a shy and lonely youth in Paris in 1799, and when, as an eager if inexperienced horseman following Bonaparte's army in Italy in 1800, he beheld for the first time the beauties of mountains and lakes in Switzerland and Lombardy. Although his initial enthusiasm was to cool considerably in the light of a more critical and dispassionate study of Rousseau, he remained a loyal disciple of Jean-Jacques the dreamer, hapless lover, wanderer, and man of exquisite feeling. Rousseau the thinker and theorist, on the other hand, left Stendhal unmoved and unconvinced, and on many occasions he took the author of \textit{Le Contrat social} and \textit{Emile} to task for what he viewed as an unrealistic, impractical, and utopian approach to political and social problems.\textsuperscript{25}

For Stendhal, Rousseau was primarily the autobiographer, novelist, and analyst of the human soul and its more noble aspirations. He even attributed to his excessive enthusiasm for Rousseau's idealistic vision of men and women his own difficulties in coping with reality:
Il y a un autre défaut que j'ai eu longtemps dont je cherche à me guérir chaque jour. Ne voyant personne chez mon grand-papa, je portais toute mon attention sur les ouvrages que je lisais; Jean-Jacques eut la préférence; je me figurai les hommes d'après les impressions qu'il avait reçues de ceux avec qui il avait vécu. . . . Cette folie me donna quelques moments de la plus divine illusion . . . mais, en général, elle me donna une existence mélancolique, j'étais misanthrope à force d'aimer les hom(mes). C'est-à-dire que je haïssais les hom(mes) tels qu'ils sont, à force de chérir des êtres chimériques, tels que Saint-Preux, milord Edouard, etc.26

On the positive side, however, Stendhal credits La Nouvelle Héloïse for having effectively counteracted the effect of the eighteenth-century libertine novels he was devouring in secret: “La lecture de la Nouvelle Héloïse et les scrupules de Saint-Preux me formèrent profondément honnête homme; je pouvais encore, après cette lecture faite avec larmes et transports d'amour pour la vertu, faire des coquineries, mais je me serais senti coquin. Ainsi c'est un livre lu en grande cachette et malgré mes parents qui m'a fait honnête homme.”27

Many references to Diderot show that Stendhal was thoroughly familiar with those works by the Encyclopedist that had thus far been published. Both his father and grandfather owned complete sets of the Encyclopédie: “Mon père et mon grand-père avaient l'Encyclopédie in-folio de Diderot et d'Alembert. . . . Mon père ne me voyait feuilleter l'Encyclopédie qu'avec chagrin. J'avais la plus entière confiance en ce livre.”28 Other comments scattered in Stendhal’s writings allude to Diderot’s plays and essays on the theater, to his Salons, to his novels and contes, and to his correspondence. On 15 September 1832 Stendhal inscribed Diderot’s name among “les douze premiers, parmi les gens qui donnent du plaisir en français par du noir sur du blanc.”29 Although sometimes criticizing Diderot for lapsing occasionally into what he called “le style emphatique,” he nevertheless exonerated
him by confidently predicting that, by 1850, the Encyclopedist would appear far "supérieur à la plupart des emphatiques actuels."30 In *De l'amour* Stendhal analyzes amorous jealousy in women and remarks: "Je ne connais d'autre remède à un mal si cruel que la mort de qui l'inspire ou de qui l'éprouve. On peut voir la jalousie française dans l'histoire de Mme de La Pommeraie de *Jacques le Fataliste*."31 When Stendhal undertook to become an art critic and salonnier, he became especially aware of the important role Diderot played as the first man of letters who succeeded in treating that genre in an original, creative fashion.32 In January 1805 he noted in his *Journal*: "Je lis la *Vie de Sénèque* par Diderot, bon ouvrage"; and in December of the same year he wrote: "Lire la *Poétique* de Diderot et, en général, ses œuvres. Jacques me paraît charmant."33 In the *Courrier anglais*, Diderot is proclaimed as an "homme d'un génie et d'un jugement peu ordinaires,"34 no small compliment from the pen of such a highly critical and independent-minded writer as Stendhal.

There is another angle from which Diderot helped Stendhal to formulate his own ideas, and it concerns the role of passions and emotions in the creative process. Although wholeheartedly subscribing to Diderot's rehabilitation of the passions as an irreplaceable source of productive energy, Stendhal, in a personal evolution of his thought on the subject that closely parallels that of Diderot, came to the conclusion that emotion untrammeled by judgment and the critical faculties hinders more than it stimulates the writer or artist. Obviously thinking of the *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, he determined to reject Rousseau's concept of the act of writing as a spontaneous outpouring of feeling and thought: "Je trouve froid ce que j'ai écrit dans l'enthousiasme. Je pense que la dissertation de Diderot sur les acteurs, pourrait bien être vraie (qu'on peut jouer, imiter la passion, étant pour le moment très froid, et ayant seulement le souvenir que tel jour qu'on était très agité, on faisait ainsi). Mon extrême méfiance me rend froid."35 Through Diderot, Stendhal increasingly
adopted the Wordsworthian aesthetic that emotion is best expressed when it is recollected in tranquillity. Hence his irritation with his Romantic contemporaries, who placed such complete faith in the direct, uninhibited outflow of feeling and passion: “Il est bon d’avoir de ces états de maximum de passion, car sans ça il ne serait pas possible de les peindre; mais ces moments de maximum ne sont pas les meilleurs moments pour écrire. Les meilleurs sont ceux où l’on peut écrire les choses les plus émouvantes; il faut tranquillité physique et sérénité d’âme.”

It should be apparent from Stendhal’s comments on Diderot that his attitude toward the Encyclopedist was eminently positive, objective, and free from the kind of emotional, subjective involvement that marked his reactions to Voltaire and Rousseau. Neither unduly hostile and sharply peremptory, as when he spoke of Voltaire, nor oscillating between extremes of adoration and rejection, as when he dealt with Rousseau, he approached Diderot in a remarkably calm, unprejudiced, and open-minded manner and, in general, preferred to comment upon specific aspects of Diderot’s thought and works rather than to make sweeping generalizations.

The good Dr. Gagnon also owned a complete set of Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle*, which young Beyle read with great curiosity and amusement and which he recommended to his sister Pauline: “Tu peux demander au grand-papa les *Lettres persanes* de Montesquieu et l’*Histoire naturelle* de Buffon, à partir du sixième vol(ume), les premiers ne t’amuseraient pas.” In Paris, he enjoyed reading aloud certain sections of the work to Adèle Rebuffel, the mistress of Martial Daru, and noticed that she blushed when certain physiological features of apes were described and compared to those of humans. On the whole, his appreciation of Buffon is real, and if he occasionally disapproved of Buffon’s *emphase*, he was grateful to the naturalist for having enlightened him on human physiology and matters of sex at a time when he could get no such information from his prudish and straitlaced rela-
tives. And Buffon confirmed the lesson learned from Montesquieu concerning the importance of climate and geography in the development of laws, habits, and customs.

From a very early age Beyle became familiar with the novels of the eighteenth century. His uncle Romain Gagnon, the local Don Juan whose only interest in literature focused on the more spicy novels, had accumulated quite a collection; and it was not too long before Henri discovered the cache where the volumes in question had been stacked: "Je ne saurais exprimer la passion avec laquelle je lisais ces livres. . . . Je devins fou absolument, la possession d'une maîtresse réelle, alors l'objet de tous mes vœux, ne m'eût pas plongé dans un tel torrent de volupté." Thus it was that young Beyle, his imagination set afire by visions of amorous conquest, went through Duclos, Crébillon fils, and more obscure specialists in the devious ways of boudoir life. And he naturally came upon Laclos's Liaisons dangereuses. He was convinced that the scandalous mores so mercilessly depicted in the Liaisons were those of social circles in Grenoble that he could see only from afar. Even before reading the notorious novel, he had heard all kinds of rumors whispered about certain men and women of Grenoble who were the original models of the characters in the book, for had not Laclos, as an officer in the artillery, been stationed in that town? In Henry Brulard Stendhal tells us that, as a child of nine, he liked to visit an elderly lady by the name of Mme de Montmaur, who was a neighbor of Dr. Gagnon and who always treated him to candied nuts, a delicacy of which he was very fond. It was whispered that this Mme de Montmaur was none other than Mme de Merteuil, now an old woman who walked with a limp. All this greatly intrigued the inquisitive and precocious young boy: "J'ai donc vu cette fin des mœurs de Mme de Merteuil, comme un enfant de neuf ou dix ans dévoré par un tempérament de feu peut voir ces choses dont tout le monde évite de lui dire le fin mot." If Stendhal was, as he asserts, nine or ten when he first heard about the "scandales greno-
blois" that formed the basis for the Liaisons dangereuses, it was in 1792 or 1793, and Laclos had left Grenoble in 1775. Scholars have generally confirmed the reliability of the clef proposed by Stendhal with regard to the historical basis of the main characters and events portrayed in the Liaisons.

There is no doubt that the novel, and the aura of scandal and secrecy that surrounded it, made a great impression upon young Beyle. Later, in 1801, he reread the Liaisons while in Milan and even met Laclos himself, by then an elderly general in Bonaparte’s artillery; the encounter probably took place at La Scala. This was shortly after the victory at Marengo, and Beyle, his mind filled with dreams of emulating Valmont as a successful and cynical seducer, was elaborating a quasi-military strategy of amorous conquest. Although he admired Mme de Merteuil’s tactic of dissimulation and hypocrisy, which he viewed as a legitimate means of defense for superior women in a male-dominated society, he remained totally unmoved by the virtuous and hapless Présidente de Tourvel’s demise: “C’est uniquement pour ne pas être brûlée en l’autre monde, dans une grande chaudière d’huile bouillante, que Mme de Tourvel résiste à Valmont. . . . Combien Julie d’Etange, respectant ses serments et le bonheur de M. de Wolmar, n’est-elle pas plus touchante?”

But though admiring the elegance, clarity, and economy with which Laclos had depicted a corrupt and disintegrating society, though recognizing in Mme de Merteuil and Valmont ruthless, cunning, strong-willed individuals admirably equipped to survive in a world that follows the law of the jungle, in his own outlook on love and life Stendhal felt greater affinity with the philosophy expressed through La Nouvelle Héloïse. His secret sympathies would always go to those incorrigible dreamers and sensitive souls whose idealistic notions made them unfit to cope with reality. At the same time, however, he evidently felt that Laclos and other novelists of this ilk showed the world, not as it ought to be, but as it really is. It is noteworthy that, when he decided to become his sis-
ter Pauline's intellectual mentor, he tirelessly cautioned her against the danger of viewing society through the embellishing prism of youthful naïveté and enthusiasm. He advised her to become acquainted with the treacherous ways of the world by reading the eighteenth-century novelists: "Le tableau le plus ressemblant de la nature humaine, telle qu'elle est en an 13 en France, est encor le vieux Gil Bias de Lesage, réfléchis sur cet excellent ouvrage."44

As for Marivaux, Beyle appreciated his novels more than his plays, which he found too précieux; he had the heroine of La Vie de Marianne in mind when he selected the theme for Lamiel. In both instances the sentimental education of an independent-minded young girl is sympathetically analyzed. Apropos of Prévost, also an author he read with keen pleasure, he noted in his Journal on 17 June 1811: "Je lis ... les Mémoires d'un homme de qualité. Le style en est un peu trop périodique, mais il y a dans cet ouvrage une vraie noblesse, bien au-dessus de la plupart des romans. Il y a même des peintures de mœurs."45

Thus, although Rousseau as novelist occupied a very special place in young Beyle's heart, Lesage, Prévost, Marivaux, Duclos, Crébillon fils, and Laclos were prized as more accurate and realistic analysts of manners and mores. When, in 1839, Stendhal established a list of the best French novels, it is noteworthy that, with the exception of La Princesse de Clèves, all the works enumerated belonged to the eighteenth century and that not a single nineteenth-century novel was included: Lesage's Gil Blas, Prévost's Manon Lescaut, Marivaux's La Vie de Marianne, Voltaire's Zadig and Candide, Duclos's Les Confessions du comte de ***, Crébillon fils's Les Egarements du cœur et de l'esprit, Rousseau's La Nouvelle Héloïse, and Laclos's Les Liaisons dangereuses.46

More and more, as Stendhal grew increasingly disappointed with the turn of events in his own century as well as with the ideology and aesthetics of the Romantics, he tended to look upon pre-Revolutionary France as an age in which he would
have felt in his element. Refinement of taste, lightness of touch, the art of leaving certain things unsaid, the secret of being erotic without being vulgar, the aptitude for hiding one's melancholy and sadness behind a smile or a witticism, all these attributes of *politesse, bon ton*, and *délicatesse* had been lost, he felt, with the triumph of a materialistic bourgeoisie, a class he loathed as much as he empathized with the common people and admired the old aristocracy. His frequent denunciations of the Romantics were but the manifestation of his profound malaise. His exasperation knew no bounds when he was confronted with bombastic verbosity, emotional self-indulgence, religious sentimentalism, and complacent exhibitionism. The public display of private emotions always struck him as obscene, and he could never sympathize with the Romantics' unabashed self-revelations. Chateaubriand especially, the hero of his times, was constantly singled out for sharp reproof or outright ridicule. And no wonder, for in the eyes of Stendhal the author of *Le Génie du Christianisme* was the very embodiment of the obscurantist spirit of his age. For Stendhal, who so greatly prized clarity of thought and expression and economy of words, the sumptuously orchestrated sentences of Chateaubriand, their slow and solemn progression, represented everything abhorrent to him in the way the French language had evolved since *Les Lettres persanes*.


5. *Henry Brulard*, p. 94.

6. Ibid., p. 143.


8. See Alciatore, *Stendhal et Helvétius*; Mason, "Condorcet et Stendhal"; and Del Litto, *La Vie intellectuelle de Stendhal*.


18. Ibid., pp. 23, 260 (cf. also p. 1497 for a similar comment).

19. Ibid., p. 352.


28. Ibid., p. 299.

30. Ibid.


36. *Journal* (11 February 1805), p. 586. See also *Journal*, 15 September 1813: “Je suis le contraire de J.-J. Rousseau en beaucoup de choses sans doute, et en particulier en celle-ci, que je ne puis travailler que loin de la sensation. Ce n’est point en me promenant dans une forêt délicieuse que je puis décrire ce bonheur; c’est renfermé dans une chambre nue . . . que je pourrai faire quelque chose” (*Œuvres intimes*, p. 1241).

37. *Correspondance*, 1:30 (letter of 6 December 1801). In his fifties Stendhal was to take renewed pleasure in rereading Buffon: “On dit Buffon pompier et cependant quel naturel, quelle simplicité, comparé à nos benêts de 1840” (Boyer, *Les Lectures de Stendhal*, p. 17).


40. See ibid. for details on Laclos’s stay in Grenoble.


43. *De l’amour*, p. 221.

44. *Correspondance*, 1:255 (letter written at the end of November 1805).

45. *Œuvres intimes*, p. 1042.