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Francesco Manzini, *Stendhal*. London: Reaktion Books, 2019. 208 pp. Illustrations, references, and bibliography. £11.99 (pb). ISBN 9781789141573.

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I have had the pleasure of reading and teaching Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830) on several occasions, and have more than once been taken aback by the visceral reactions stoked by the novel's lead protagonist Julien Sorel. A fellow classmate in a graduate seminar pounced mid-discussion on the character's driven and ultimately fatal quest for social advancement, concluding with the uncategorical blurt "Julien est détestable!" Several years later, when I was leading my own seminar, a student almost accusingly demanded of me, "Who is this guy?"

It is precisely the question "Who is this guy?" that Francesco Manzini thoughtfully, humorously, and engagingly applies to Stendhal (né Henri Beyle). But now, thankfully, the question is asked warmly and generously by a Stendhal scholar who is keen to dispel any prejudice against an otherwise seemingly flippant writer whose "contemporaries found him obscure, cynical and irritating" (p. 158). Manzini does not let us fall into any traps that might lead to knee-jerk condemnations, whether they be leveled at Stendhal or his characters: "These young men and women would remain forever baffling to us were we not to learn to see the world from their peculiar perspective" (p. 11).

And this perspective, of course, ultimately depends on that of Stendhal. Manzini's biography is not a mere tracing of a chronology, or an exhaustive probing of the details of Stendhal's life and works, but a friendly invitation to become acquainted with the key people who shaped the author's outlook, to analyze thoroughly his unique and liberating conception of friendship and love, and to turn to (or reconsider) the works that were all motivated by the unexpected and thus necessarily forgivable psychological effects of passion. To be sure, Julien Sorel shoots his former lover Mme de Rênal point blank in a church.[1] But, as Manzini explains, a generous reader is one of the "happy few" to whom Stendhal famously dedicated *Le Rouge et le Noir*, an initiate who understands that our whims and follies stem from the complexities of our lives: "To be generous is to make the effort to understand the perspectives of others in all their complexity: to produce multiple, sometimes contradictory judgements, and never to moralize [...] or otherwise reduce one's subject" (p. 22).

Manzini's introduction succeeds straight away in encouraging us to become members of Stendhal's "club." The main requirement for admittance is a keen sense of humor, and Manzini routinely demonstrates that he has it (one wry example out of many: "[Stendhal] was dismissive

of German philosophy for the excellent reason that he had barely read any" [p. 42]. Manzini claims that his biography is different from preceding ones precisely because he is aware that he is not supposed to take the enterprise too seriously. After all, Stendhal, who wrote biographies at the beginning of his career [2], quickly turned to autobiography since he was "easily bored" and did not want to do any "actual research" (p. 15). Citing a delicious quote from Stendhal's never finished autobiography *Vie de Henry Brulard*, Manzini acknowledges the irony that Stendhal would have been deeply skeptical of academics: "poets possess courage, whereas scholars, properly speaking, are servile and craven" (p. 12). [3] Alas, the reader whom Stendhal seeks is not the present reviewer, nor presumably anyone who happens to come across this review. It is not even Manzini, as he himself readily concedes: "We're the very last people likely to be able to embody one of his hero(in)es, for we're all too often male, middle-aged and middle class, which makes us highly likely also to be self-important, conformist, and easily cowed" (p. 12).

Aside from the humor that arises from this paradox, Manzini here touches upon a potent way to connect a nineteenth-century writer with the young teenagers and twenty-somethings who dominate our classrooms. Stendhal, with his unconventional, erratic, and deeply flawed characters, inspires a sense of freedom that allows us to view situations through multiple and always-changing perspectives. Stendhal never lets us have clear view of a character, and it is precisely this ambiguity, according to Manzini, that is the hallmark of what is true: "for truth itself, whether simple or bitter, is as inaccessible as the God that Stendhal liked to tell his friends does not exist, which is another way of saying that all of our human truths are no more than fictions" (p. 19).

As Manzini underscores throughout the book, it is especially female characters who exemplify this defiant freedom, an observation which positions Stendhal as a proto-feminist. It is thanks to Stendhal's own experiences with women and the psychological drama that emerged from them that he learned to be such a master of paradox and subtlety: "this is what Angela, Métilde, and Alberthe all taught him: that we should never reduce people in our head, or at least not if we hope to write well" (p. 152). Manzini even argues that Mathilde de la Mole, a young Parisian aristocrat in *Le Rouge et le Noir* who becomes romantically involved with Julien Sorel, is the novel's "true central protagonist" (p. 151). Alluding to the trap of misogynistic dichotomies that have positioned Mathilde as narcissistic and Julien as "entirely self-begetting" (p. 152), Manzini counters these biases by pointing out how Mathilde, by upholding freedom in the most stifling of Restoration atmospheres, lives out the hybrid ideal of fervent independence and aristocratic elegance that Stendhal sought to emulate his entire life. These characters easily dupe us into labeling and categorizing when in fact their roles elude and even upend stable definitions. The joke, in other words, is on us.

Taking a chronological approach that links Stendhal's works to current events and personal experiences, Manzini invites us to suspend judgment and consider alternate ways of seeing, lest we overlook or condemn the few heroes that remain in our modern world. The first chapter starts, not with Stendhal's birth and childhood, but with the numerous identities that the author cultivated in no small part due to a childhood afflicted with tyrannical family members and tutors. Manzini thus begins his account of Stendhal's biography through the lens of *Vie de Henry Brulard*, a pseudo-autobiography in which we see the "avatar" more than the person himself. But, getting to the "truth" of Stendhal requires processing all of his distortions of reality, his relishing in pseudonyms, and his contradictions: "In order to make sense of Stendhal, we need to generously

acknowledge his inconsistency not as something to be resolved but rather to be enjoyed” (p. 29). The “real” story of Stendhal (a mother who died young, the stultifying provincial milieu of Grenoble, a despotic father, earnest studies in math as a way to get out of Grenoble and move to Paris) is not the heart of the matter. Instead, truth is defined by all of the identities we seek and that we work to cultivate: “It is when we seem least the person we ought to be that we are in fact most ourselves—not so much our ‘real’ selves as our singular selves, that is to say our own creations” (p. 28).

The idea of revolt explored in the second chapter, particularly seen through Stendhal’s enthusiasm for the Revolution, his defiance of his domineering father, and his admiration for independent-minded female characters (whether historical or literary ones), is what allows Stendhal to challenge “normative nineteenth-century morality” (p. 46). What emerges here, though, is not a bitter writer who moralizes and condemns, but, on the contrary, a generous and warm writer whose focus on friendship allowed for the possibility of learning, tolerance, and growth: “what Stendhal was always hoping to find, at whatever personal cost, was a perfect exchange of empathetic goodwill, founded on open communication and allowing for unresolved agreement” (p. 53). However, as the third chapter entitled “Truth” indicates, it is first and foremost an examination and understanding of the self that is necessary for this kind of friendship. A sense of self, Manzini argues, is even the essence of *beylisme*. Here, Stendhal’s revolt against his Jesuit tutor but formative rapport with his math tutor provide a good window into his systematic efforts to squash biases in order to follow his own intuitions and desires.

Chapter four amply demonstrates how Stendhal attempted to discover a sense of self in the age of Empire, which was no easy feat for a provincial would-be writer in Paris trying not to be homesick. After scrapping his math studies, he “schmoozed” well-stationed relatives and took on clerical work before joining the Republican army. After being stationed in Milan, Stendhal gained enough experience with women to be able to come back to Paris and start writing seriously. Citing the influence of Plutarch and Stendhal’s fraught grappling with Rousseau, as well as a number of contemporary influences, Manzini turns especially to the gallery of women who, in his view, “reshaped Stendhal’s outlook and therefore helped define both his sense of self and his fictions” (p. 92). Here, in this examination of six women in particular whom Stendhal encountered during his zigzagging around Europe in his role as an officer, the sex was not the crucial component (especially since there was, more often than not, none of it), but more the way in which Stendhal’s relationship with women helped him “rethink everything about the way human beings engage with one another” (p. 92).

It is after this pivotal chapter that we arrive at the middle of the book, which proceeds to divide each span of years left in Stendhal’s life by the work that marked it. Chapter five highlights lesser-known works that are in fact, as Manzini convincingly demonstrates, crucial for understanding the author’s later and famous novels. Women again serve as the impetus of Stendhal’s views on human nature, and help establish his tone in the important and revealing treatise *De l’amour* (1822). The Restoration period and the novel *Armance* (“perhaps the least understood and the least understandable French novel of the nineteenth century” [p. 130]) are the focus of the following chapter, where Stendhal makes another big pivot from biographies, essays, and reviews to fiction. Continuing to travel, and thus continuing to encounter women along the way, Stendhal’s series of rejections and disillusionments led him to a novel that is confusing precisely because its author was exposing “the problem of the near-impossibility of male heroism, while starting to explore the possibility of female heroism” (p. 142).

In the wake of *Armance*, along with yet another unsuccessful overture in the domain of romance, Stendhal was prepared to create his famous character Julien Sorel in 1829, at the cusp of the July Monarchy. In *Le Rouge et le Noir*, which Manzini describes as “the fruit of years of reflection on con artists and their marks” (p. 149), Julien’s neurotic narcissism serves as the impetus of the entire novel, as the young character systematically sells out at any price during his crawl up the social ladder, thereby creating a new brand of male anti-hero. Mathilde, in contrast, is the “azure skies” whose noble sense of freedom and purpose serves as the antidote to hypocrisy and a hopelessly lame and uninspiring century. Here, Mme de Rênal is somewhat surprisingly left out of the discussion (in a way, she also engages in “self-invention,” since her affair with Julien untethers her from her dim-witted husband and lethargic provincial life), but Manzini’s revealing analysis of narcissism coupled with empathy nevertheless leads to the central question of the novel: is sincerity possible between two people?

Now appointed a consul in Civitavecchia (part of the Papal States), which Stendhal considered “a hole” (p. 159), the established novelist traveled regularly throughout Italy and made extended sojourns in Paris. A political novel that Manzini describes as addressing “the end of the Revolution’s Rousseauvian dream” (p. 165), *Lucien Leuwen*, the subject of chapter eight, also seems to encapsulate all of Stendhal’s major themes: himself, high society, friendship, love, family ties, and the enduring struggle between empathy and narcissism. But, never publishing the novel due to the fact that he was serving as Louis-Philippe’s consul, Stendhal switched to the autobiographical *Vie de Henry Brulard*, which Manzini aptly describes as “the most important, interesting, self-aware, and formally inventive literary autobiography of the French nineteenth century” (p. 171). Extending what was supposed to be a brief leave of absence to a three-year-stay in Paris, Stendhal continued this series of unpublished projects until he published *Mémoires d’un touriste* in 1836. Here, “the muddy roads of France” (p. 176) seep through as the traveling protagonist, a successful industrialist, exposes the ills of modern French society. When it comes to the figure of Napoléon and revisiting his legacy, there are no more illusions.

The penultimate ninth chapter considers *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839), a novel that merges sixteenth-century (anti)-heroes with nineteenth-century Italy, alongside *Lamiel*, an unpublished novel that recounts the experiences of an independent female orphan. *La Chartreuse*, famously admired by Balzac, is an amalgam of all of the familiar Stendhalian themes and preoccupations synthesized by the overriding question of freedom. This time, the setting of Italy alongside his impulsive and passionate characters allow Stendhal to explore the imagination as providing the fearlessness necessary for attaining this freedom (again, despite evidence to the contrary, it is the female lead who surprisingly ends up positioned at the center of the novel). *Lamiel*, though never finished due to Stendhal’s declining health, relates the “radical freedom” of the eponymous female character as she navigates the “muddy” landscapes of Normandy. Stendhal died at this point, in 1842, but here Manzini adds a brief coda in his discussion of *Les Privilèges*, twenty-three articles (written in 1840, but posthumously published) that form Stendhal’s parodic response to the *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen*. In writing articles from the vantage point of his own unique perspective, Stendhal extols the universal forces of freedom and happiness despite all of the odds: “Stendhal was one of the first people to work out that our chief human right is each to be privileged” (p. 189).

This is an enjoyable biography that succeeds in demonstrating all of the complexities of Stendhal and the psychological depths of his characters and plots. Anyone familiar with Stendhal’s prose will enjoy Manzini’s humor and vivacity, and will especially appreciate his thoughtful approach

to writing the biography according to how Stendhal might want to read it. Manzini's account, however, speaks more to the nineteenth-century specialist than to a general or even undergraduate audience, since he presupposes that the reader comes equipped with the full breadth of Stendhal's plots and characters. Despite the chronology suggested by the chapter headings, Manzini does not proceed in a strictly linear or fluid fashion. Various works, names, and references pop up pell-mell throughout the book, which sometimes pose a challenge to the reader. Those looking for helpful plot summaries of Stendhal's novels might be disappointed by Manzini's tendency to dissect one or two characters, or one overarching theme or problem.

Nevertheless, Manzini is to be applauded for providing compelling evidence as to why Stendhal remains relevant in our present. Like a good friend, he shows us how reading Stendhal is a way to acknowledge and absorb different perspectives, which is certainly an appropriate or even necessary exercise in our 21st-century polarized political and cultural landscape. What may please us about Stendhal is his irony and humor, but thanks to Manzini, we realize that what remains most enduring about the author's legacy is his cultivation of empathy and the profound bonds that it forms between human beings. Behind every move or sleight of hand or passionate outburst, each character in Stendhal's universe is figuring out how to experience genuine love, and no one can be faulted for that.

NOTES

[1] The irony for those who abhor Julien Sorel's murderous drive for revenge is that the church shooting was based on actual events. Stendhal built the entire novel around this sensational news item.

[2] These include *Vie de Haydn, Mozart et Métafaste* (1815) and *Vie de Rossini* (1823). Stendhal's reflections on Italian art in *Histoire de la peinture en Italie* (1817) could be seen as comprising a series of critical biographies of the artists concerned.

[3] Manzini cites Stendhal's *Vie de Henry Brulard* here: "Chose singulière, les poètes ont du cœur, les savants proprement dits sont serviles et lâches" (*Œuvres intimes*, ed. V. del Litto, vol. II, Gallimard, 1982, p. 759).

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