

Are you one of the *Happy Few*? What can Stendhal teach us today?

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Introductory remarks

In 1997, a young philosopher, Alain de Botton, published a best-selling book, *How Proust Can Change Your Life*.ⁱ It had chapter headings such as –

How to take your time
How to suffer successfully
How to be a good friend

It is a deft, intelligent and playful book, which challenges its readers by reviving the notion that novels can be used as a source of instruction. It is also very funny.

What follows is an idea for a book with a similar ambition on another French writer, Marie Henri Beyle (1783 to 1842) who, under the *nom-de-plume* Stendhal, published two great novels, *Le Rouge et Le Noir* and *La Chartreuse de Parme*. If you haven't read them, or not in a while, then I hope to enthuse you to do so. It is a characteristic of fans of Stendhal, that they hold the author in personal affection, and this reveals a truth about both Proust and Stendhal: each entrusted their reader with completing the work of art. *Le roman* (Stendhal wrote) *est comme un archet; la caisse du violon qui rend les sons, c'est l'âme du lecteur*.ⁱⁱ [The novel is like a bow ; the body of the violin, which produces the sound, that is the soul of the reader.] Another connection is that both writers were passionate exponents of mimetic theory.

I should state here that I am not at all a French scholar: my interest in Stendhal stems simply from recognising a fellow spirit. I have been a member of the Girardian community for the past decade and in bringing Stendhal to this year's Colloquium, I am hoping that you too have found his novels, and *Le Rouge et Le Noir* in particular, to be quite outstanding explorations of René Girard's central insight. I work as a psychologist and so I would express that insight as follows:-

Whether it is universally true or not, I cannot say, but in the West we often acquire our own desires by unconscious imitation of the desires of others. This process of building identity and forging relationship by mimesis leads to a crisis, in which we all at once become aware how derivative we are, and we dislike it intensely: in defending ourselves against this unpleasant knowledge, we now perceive our erstwhile model as a dangerous rival and violence of some kind probably then ensues. Only by working at our awareness of mimesis can we transcend the corrosive and isolating effects of unconscious envy and acquire personal authenticity. Otherwise, we become prisoners of narcissism, which is seriously bad news for society, for, as Neville Symington has shown, narcissists actively persecute their social environmentⁱⁱⁱ.

Stendhal dedicated both of his great novels to *The Happy Few*. Just what this might mean has proved a big tease for scholars, as Stendhal surely intended: but then he predicted that his work would not be understood until the year 1935! I like to think it turned out to be 1961, the date of publication of *Mensonge Romantique et Vérité Romanesque*.^{iv} The Happy Few are those, as René Girard might say, whose understanding has penetrated a little way into the dense mysteries of mimetic theory.

Engaging with it is never easy. I frequently fall prey to envy, arrogance and competitiveness in exploring it with others, even though I know I shouldn't. That said, I must confess my puzzlement at the failure of critical studies of Stendhal to grasp the revelatory importance of mimetic theory.^v The *dénouement* of *Le Rouge et Le Noir*, the shooting by Julien Sorel of his former lover Mme de Rênal, puzzled his contemporaries, but *après Girard*, it surely need do so no more.^{vi}

As it happens, I found René's treatment of *Le Rouge et le Noir* in 1961 to be frustratingly brief. Admittedly, Stendhal had to share the book with Cervantes, Flaubert, Proust and Dostoyevsky, but it left me wanting more. However, it was, perhaps, Stendhal who provided René with his French title. In a comment on Cervantes in *De L'Amour*, Stendhal uses the word *romanesque* which we can roughly translate as *novelistic*. Don Quixote was, Stendhal wrote, *toujours rempli d'imaginations romanesques et touchantes;...toujours nourrissant son âme de quelque contemplation heroique et hasardée*.^{vii} [- always full of novelistic and touching imagined scenes.. always nourishing his soul with some fantasy that was heroic and full of daring.] It is the intention of both Stendhal and Girard to expose the lie of romantic desire, and Stendhal does this *novelistically*, both in the story he tells and in the way he tells it.

Were I to open my projected book, *What can Stendhal teach us today?* the following chapter headings would catch my eye.

How to know if you're in love
How to resist defining yourself
How to avoid being bored
How to use your mind to cook up ideas

There would be others, but in the limited time available, I will concentrate on the first.

How to know if you're in love.

Le Rouge et le Noir, which appeared in November 1830, has a remarkably narrow narrative focus upon Jean Sorel's two relationships, one with the wife of his provincial employer M. de Rênal, to whose children he is tutor; and the other with Mathilde, the aristocratic daughter of his Parisian patron, the Marquis de la Mole.

If de Botton is to be my model, and reading a novel contains instruction for living, then it follows, however controversially, that the author's life has a bearing upon what he wrote. Did Stendhal himself know if he was in love? Readers of the affectionate portrait that opens W.G. Sebald's *Vertigo*^{viii} first catch a glimpse of the impetuous teenager in 1800,

during Napoleon's invasion of Italy, discovering the opera *Il matrimonio segreto* [The Secret Marriage] by Cimarosa.

So profoundly was his heart stirred that ... tears came repeatedly to his eyes, and on leaving ... he was convinced that the actress ... had more than once bent her gaze most particularly on him, [and] would be able to afford him the bliss promised by the music. He was not in the least troubled by the circumstance that when the soprano was grappling with the more difficult of the coloraturas, her left eye swivelled a little to the outward, nor that her right upper canine was missing; quite the contrary, his exalted feelings seized upon these very defects.

Sebald, a genius in his own right, and one who knows that he owes much to Stendhal, proceeds to lay out the subsequent course of his love-life, drawing upon Stendhal's own accounts in *De L'Amour, La Vie de Henri Brulard*, his autobiographical novel, and the posthumously published *Souvenires d'Egotisme*. I will quote at some length.

Beyle ... was assigned to the 6th Dragoon Regiment with the rank of sub-lieutenant. Acquiring ... buck-leather breeches, ... a helmet adorned from tip to nape with horsehair, ... boots, spurs, belt buckles, breast straps, epaulettes, buttons and his insignia of rank ..., it was with some satisfaction that Beyle now observed the figure he cut in his mirror.... He felt transformed, as if the high embroidered collar had lengthened his too short neck and he had at last succeeded in shedding his unprepossessing body. ... Once fully apparelled ... this seventeen-and-a-half-year-old went around for days on end with an erection, before he finally dared disburden himself of [his] virginity. Afterwards, he could no longer recall the name or face of the *donna cattiva* The overpowering sensation, he wrote, blotted out the memory entirely. So thoroughly did Beyle serve his apprenticeship ... that ... before the year was out he was suffering the pains of venereal infection ... This did not prevent him from working on a passion of a more abstract nature. The object of his craving was Angela Pietragrua, the mistress of his fellow-soldier Louis Joinville. She, however, merely gave the ugly young dragoon the occasional pitying look.

It was not until eleven years later, when Beyle returned to Milan ... and visited ... Angela once again, that he plucked up the courage to tell her of his ... feelings. She scarcely remembered him. Somewhat discomfited by the passion of her unorthodox admirer, she ... at length felt compelled to capitulate... All the same, she succeeded in exacting from him the promise that once he had enjoyed her favours he would depart Milan forthwith. Beyle accepted this condition without demur and left ... that very same day, though not without recording, on his braces, the date and time of his conquest: 21 September at half past eleven in the morning. ... He wondered whether he would ever again carry off another such victory.

In March 1818, Beyle ... met Métilde Dembowski Viscontini at her salon in Milan. Métilde, married to a Polish officer almost thirty years her senior, was twenty-eight and a woman of great, melancholy beauty. After about a year had passed, Beyle's unspoken, discreet passion was on the point of winning the affection of Métilde, when he himself, as he later admitted, dashed his hopes by committing a blunder for which he could never make amends. Métilde had gone

to Volterra to visit her two sons, ... and Beyle, unable to endure even a few days without seeing her, followed incognito... He bought a ... velours hat with a more than usually high crown, and a pair of green spectacles, and in this attire he sauntered about Volterra, endeavouring to catch sight of Métilde ... as often as he possibly could. At first Beyle supposed himself unrecognised, only to realise, to his still greater satisfaction, that Métilde was giving him meaningful looks. He congratulated himself on this ingenious arrangement and from time to time, to a tune of his own devising, intoned the words *Je suis le compagnon secret et familier*, which struck him somehow as particularly amusing. Métilde, for her part, felt compromised by Beyle's conduct, as can readily be imagined, and...sent him a dry note that put a fairly abrupt end to his hopes as a paramour. Beyle was inconsolable. For months he reproached himself, and not until he determined to set down his great passion in a meditation on love did he recover his emotional equilibrium. [Sebald is referring here to *De L'Amour*, which appeared in 1822.] On his writing desk, as a memento of Métilde, he kept a plaster cast of her left hand, which he had contrived to obtain shortly before the debacle...That hand now meant almost as much to him as Métilde herself could ever have done. In particular, the slight crookedness of the ring finger occasioned in him emotions of a vehemence he had not hitherto experienced.

In 1826, approaching forty, he sat alone on a bench in the shade of two fine trees ...in the garden of a monastery ... high above Lake Albano and, with the cane he now generally carried with him, slowly inscribed the initials of his former lovers in the dust, like the enigmatic runes of his life. The initials stand for Virginie Kubly, Angela Pietragrua, Adèle Rebuffel, Mélanie Guilbert, Mina de Griesheim, Alexandrine Petit, Angéline Bereyter (*qui je n'ai jamais aimé*), Métilde Dembowski, and for Clémentine, Giulia, and Mme Azur, whose first name he no longer remembered...

Beyle wrote his great novels between 1829 and 1842, plagued constantly by the symptoms of syphilis. Difficulties in swallowing, swellings in his armpits, and pains in his atrophying testicles troubled him especially. Having now become a meticulous observer, he kept a minute record of the fluctuating state of his health and in due course noted that his sleeplessness, his giddiness, the roaring in his ears, his palpitating pulse, and the shaking that was at times so bad that he could not use a knife and fork, were related not so much to the disease itself as to the extremely toxic substances with which he had dosed himself for years.

This, I think you will agree, is the story of a man who plunged into experience without counting the cost, and who learnt what life had to teach him with great forbearance. To borrow a thought from de Botton, "Though we can of course use our minds without being in pain, Proust's suggestion is that we become properly inquisitive only when distressed. We suffer, therefore we think, and we do so because thinking helps us to place pain in context, it helps us to understand its origins, plot its dimensions and reconcile ourselves to its presence".^{ix} I admire Stendhal for not succumbing to embarrassment and shame, let alone self-loathing, drink, gambling or the sulks. He managed this, I think, as self-professed dandy's do, by means of a moderated narcissism, accompanying himself scrupulously in his journals, and practising a generous and forgiving self-absorption that was always acutely

conscious of its audience - by which I mean an active, though not necessarily Christian, conscience. His was a critical self-love, forever opening up hopefully, even desperately to others and then returning to itself. His courage was fortified by celebrating life: he embraced *gaieté* - one of his favourite words. Beyond this, in his writings, he turned his own private woebegone and rueful reflections on his failures outwards, in the belief that others might benefit. He developed, for example, a thorough critique of our modern, mechanized world, then in its infancy, in which originality was drowning in mass reproduction. But that lies outside my present scope.

Working out how to know if you're in love is something that occupies us in adolescence and young adulthood. It is one of the principal building blocks of life, determining our self-esteem, our freedom to socialize and the stability of our sexual partnerships: and yet it happens at an age when our resources are characterized more by rash impetuosity than wise consideration. Human nature is a gift to an accomplished *farceur* such as Stendhal. In the abridged scene I will now read from *Le Rouge et le Noir*, the long-awaited sexual consummation of Julien and Mathilde's on-off fascination with each other is promised. Julien has taken a gardener's ladder and climbed it to Mathilde's bedroom at one o'clock in the morning.

The ladder touched the ground, and Julien managed to lay it down flat in the bed of exotic flowers running the length of the wall.

'What will my mother say', said Mathilde, 'when she sees her lovely plants all flattened... ! You must throw down the rope,' she went on with great composure. 'If someone saw it going up to the balcony, it would be difficult to explain away.' ...

Ah! how worthy this man is of all my love! she thought. Julien had just let the rope drop into the garden when Mathilde squeezed his arm. He thought he was being grabbed by an enemy, and wheeled round sharply, drawing a dagger. She had thought she heard a window being opened. They stood motionless, holding their breath. The moon shone full upon them. The noise was not repeated, and they felt no further anxiety.

Then their embarrassment resumed; it was considerable on both sides. ...

Mathilde had succumbed to all the cruel anguish of acute nervousness. She loathed the situation she was in...

He appealed to his memory... and recited several of the finest passages from *La Nouvelle Heloise*.

'You have the heart of a man,' replied the lady, without paying much attention to his fine phrases; 'I wanted to put your bravery to the test, I must confess, my dearest. Your ... determination shows you to be even more intrepid than I thought.'

It was costing Mathilde an effort to use terms of endearment, and she was clearly more preoccupied by this strange manner of speaking than with the meaning of what she was saying. The familiarity of her words, devoid of any tender tone, gave Julien no pleasure: he was astonished at the total absence of happiness; to induce it he eventually had recourse to his reason. He could see he was esteemed by this girl who had so much pride and never praised anyone

unreservedly; this consideration enabled him to feel a form of happiness stemming from self-esteem.

It was not, admittedly, the sweet sensation enveloping his whole being that he had sometimes felt with Mme' de Rênal. There was nothing tender about his feelings on this first occasion. It was the more intense happiness of ambition, and Julien was above all else ambitious. He talked again about the people he had suspected and the precautions he had devised. As he spoke, he was thinking about the means of taking advantage of his victory...

Listening to him talk, Mathilde was shocked by his air of triumph. So he's my master! she said to herself. She was already racked by remorse. Her reason was appalled by the signal folly she had just committed. If she had been able to, she would have destroyed herself and Julien. When from time to time her will-power silenced her remorse, feelings of awkwardness and suffering modesty made her acutely unhappy. She had in no way foreseen the dreadful state she was in.

But I must say something to him, she told herself at length, it's part of the conventions; one speaks to one's lover. And then, to fulfil a duty, with a tenderness that was far more in the words she used than in the sound of her voice, she told him of the various resolutions she had taken concerning him over the past few days.

She had decided that if he was bold enough to reach her room with the help of the gardener's ladder, as instructed, she would be entirely his. But never had anyone adopted a colder or more polite tone of voice to say such tender things. Up until that point, the assignation had been chilly as ice. It was enough to put anyone right off love. What a moral lesson for a rash young girl! Is it worth sacrificing one's future for such a moment?

After much wavering, which might have struck a superficial observer as the effect of the most determined hatred, so difficult was it for a woman's feelings of self-respect to yield even to such strong determination on her part, in the end Mathilde gave herself to him as a compliant mistress.

To tell the truth, the excitement she showed was somewhat contrived. Passionate love was still rather more of a model to be imitated than a reality.

Are Julien and Mathilde in love? How are they, how are we to know? The question can only be addressed if we accept that each protagonist is not one person but several. This is not literally or figuratively true of course, but it is a temporary, psychological fact. Julien and Mathilde are conducting detailed conversations with themselves, as well as with each other. Their various voices comprise pride and self-esteem, doing the right thing by convention, exercising reason, will-to-power, cunning, lust, caution and anxiety. The need to have this conversation arises out of the basic developmental task of discerning where the sphere as a self-conscious agent ends and that of the other person begins. Is what is happening to me consistent with what I have imagined and what I expect; am I in fact inventing it, making it happen? Am I the master or mistress of ceremonies here? Or is it beyond my control, unexpected and unpredictable? Am I in

danger? Should I fight or run away? Or should I rather think of this as exciting? Am I actually discovering something new that I can make my own?

Julien and Mathilde are perhaps most conscious of being agents, acting as seducer and seductress. Stendhal has brought them however to the point where their mimetic foraging, their calculations of advantage and their private disappointments, extending over many previous pages, finally succumb to passion in each other's presence. There is a double motive – to put an end to the uncertainty, and to test the reliability of the models of desire^x; and there is opportunity. *Rien d'intéressant comme la passion*, Stendhal wrote in *De L'Amour : c'est que tout y est imprévu, et que l'agent y est victime*. [Nothing is as interesting as passion : it's because everything is unforeseen and the agent becomes victim]. It is passion, or the first hints of it, that serves to break down their hitherto impenetrable egotism and usher in a wholly new perspective, one in which awareness of the other's interests predominates for the first time. Sex, in other words, acts as a stumbling precursor to an, albeit clumsy, altruism.

This is how Julien and Mathilde learn if they are in love. But what of us, the reader? How might reading Stendhal touch us with affection today? The way to approach this question is to ask, what is *romanesque, novelistic* in the passage. How, in other words, does the writing become, first of all self-conscious, and then self-transcendent? How does Stendhal give himself to us? Self-consciousness is easily illustrated. The authorial voice frequently comments on states of mind, on our behalf:-

Mathilde had succumbed to all the cruel anguish of acute nervousness.

It was costing Mathilde an effort to use terms of endearment...

After much wavering, which might have struck a superficial observer as the effect of the most determined hatred ...

The concluding sentences address the reader directly:-

To tell the truth, the excitement she showed was somewhat contrived. Passionate love was still rather more of a model to be imitated than a reality.

Self-conscious, yes, but self-transcendence? I have three brief arguments.

One. Stendhal had a horror of banality, which would have rendered his work sterile. His strategy for representing reality rested upon *le vraisemblable*, verisimilitude. This kind of realism is achieved by artifice and inspiration. It is not at all the same as veracity. To make the point, Stendhal sowed confusion among literalist and scholastic readers by wrongly attributing epigrams, many his own invention, at the start of each chapter of *Le Rouge et Le Noir*. Elsewhere, he took deliberate misinformation to absurd lengths: two thirds of the minor facts in his biography of Napoleon are inaccurate.

Two. You will not find many descriptions of people and places in Stendhal's novels. Instead he presented them, as it were in mid-scene, and allowed his readers to supply images of their own.

Three. Stendhal made use of dictation in creating the text of his novels, which allowed thoughts to float into his mind instinctively, and by means of obscure connection to what had gone before. It is this, perhaps, that supplies the moment of self-transcendence in the passage under consideration. Such judgments depend, of course, on personal taste, but I, for one, gave a yelp of delight when I first read these lines:-

Ah! how worthy this man is of all my love! she thought. Julien had just let the rope drop into the garden when Mathilde squeezed his arm. He thought he was being grabbed by an enemy, and wheeled round sharply, drawing a dagger. She had thought she heard a window being opened. They stood motionless, holding their breath. The moon shone full upon them. The noise was not repeated, and they felt no further anxiety.

To draw a dagger upon the woman you have come to seduce! - how magnificently absurd is that? Why did Mathilde squeeze his arm? ‘How worthy of my love!’ At first it seems Julien has mistaken an instinctively affectionate gesture for a threat. Julien thinks an enemy is in the room; but then, in the past, he has also frequently thought of Mathilde as his enemy for humiliating him. But then, we read on, Mathilde was not being affectionate. She too was alarmed. “She had thought she heard...” The tense is pluperfect, reaching back to correct our initial impression. Julien and Mathilde wait, and not only does their alarm pass, but so too does the spontaneous opportunity to put all doubts aside and fall into each others arms.

This, I suggest, is an instance of a self-transcending text. One of those moments of apparent confusion, in which various meanings converge, and something larger, more shocking and more real than fiction happens. It immerses its readers, and propels them into a wider understanding, in this instance of how desire and violence can combine.

Are Julien and Mathilde in love? We would have to say no, Eros did not put in an appearance on this occasion. Can you share my affection for Stendhal the writer? I hope so.

ⁱ Alain de Botton *How Proust Can Change Your Life* London Picador 1997

ⁱⁱ Stendhal *La Vie de Henri Brulard*

ⁱⁱⁱ Neville Symington *Narcissism: a new theory* London Karnac Books 1993

^{iv} *Mensonge Romantique et Verité Romanesque*, by René Girard, Paris, Editions Bernard Grasset, 1961, translated by Yvonne Freccero as *Desire, Deceit and the Novel: self and other in literary structure* Baltimore and London, John Hopkins University Press 1965

^v For example, Roger Pearson, fellow and praelector in French at The Queen’s College, Oxford, in the introduction to the Oxford University Press edition (*The Red and the Black* Oxford, OUP 1991): or Richard Bolster, senior lecturer in French at Bristol University, in a critical guide for students (*Le Rouge et Le Noir*, London, Grant & Cutler 1994).

^{vi} I have discovered one notable exception to the ignorance of Girard. *Reading Realism in Stendhal* by Ann Jefferson, (Cambridge University Press, 1988) mentions Girard once, without perhaps appreciating his full significance. However, this intelligent and well-written book is profoundly imbued with the Girardian hypothesis. I have drawn upon its riches in this paper and believe it deserves a wider readership.

^{vii} Stendhal *De L’Amour*

^{viii} W.G. Sebald *Vertigo* English translation by Michael Hulse, London, Vintage 2002

^{ix} de Botton page 73

^x The novel points to Rousseau and Napoleon as Julien's model's and Boniface de la Mole as Mathilde's