STENDHAL, *LE ROUGE ET LE NOIR* AND THE UNTOUCHABLE SELF

Abstract

The contrast in Julien Sorel between the *parvenu* and the *âme tendre* is a contrast between a social self and an 'essential' self, conceived as being prior to social determination, that Christopher Prendergast has referred to as "the untouchable Self". The way the text plays with this distinction in its treatment of Julien's love affairs and the convention of the hero of uncertain birth seems to require us to read the ending as a celebration of the untouchable Self. However, the final chapters resist this sort of apotheosizing closure by insisting on Julien's inevitable sociality. The key figure here is Mathilde who intrudes on his dream of romantic inviolability and revives the ruthlessly calculating side of his personality. The novel's apparent drive to closure is thereby undermined by paradox: "we buy peace through cruelty, and disinterested love through self-interested calculation". The sharpest paradox of all is Mathilde's final appropriation of Julien for history as a latter-day Boniface de la Mole.

For a novel that is universally canonized, Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* might seem to offer some easy hostages to fortune in an age of critical suspicion such as our own. Can we any longer worship at the altar of romantic spirituality in a way that the novel's ending seems to require? As we contemplate the apotheosis of Julien Sorel – all given over to quietistic self-possession while the waves of history break fruitlessly against the walls of his prison-tower – might we not be reminded of Sartre's stricture on those nineteenth-century writers who constituted themselves as a symbolic aristocracy of the spirit, detached from their age and social class?[1] Or might we not be troubled by reflections such as Terry Eagleton's on the 'dehistoricizing thrust of ideology'?[2] Even among Stendhal's own commentators – an admiring race on the whole – there are those who have expressed their doubts about the ending. Michel Guérin deplores the book's preference for the reassuring Mme de Rênal over the 'revolutionary" Mathilde,[3] while for Christopher Prendergast all Stendhal's endings are informed by a Rousseauistic belief in 'the untouchable Self' which Prendergast dismisses as a 'fantasy', 'a pure fiction'.[4]

It is Prendergast's comment that alerts us to the source of the problem. This is the presence within the novel of an 'essentialist' perspective on human life that escapes the social and historical determinations posited by the novel itself. In the case of Julien Sorel the problem manifests itself as a dichotomy between Julien the *parvenu*, ruthlessly intent on making his way through Bourbon society, and Julien the *âme tendre*, a man whose vulnerability to feeling is constantly at odds with his worldly project. For while the former is richly implicated in, and defined, by the social and political currents of the age, the latter appears as what Michel Crouzet has called

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'une nature antérieure à la loi sociale'.[5] There is nothing in the novel's representations of society that encourages us to view it as socially 'typical', though it would have been possible to present Julien's tender side as symptomatic of a generation reared on Rousseau and therefore a historically determinate phenomenon. The novel is blind to the historicity of the cult of feeling that is embodied in Julien.[6]

In what follows I intend to explore the implications of this, particularly for the novel's ending, for it is here that *Le Rouge et le Noir* might seem to sail perilously close to the cult of the 'untouchable Self' with all that implies in the way of a complacent and self-deluding rejection of the merely social self caught up in the vulgar toils of history and politics. I shall argue that this is in fact a misreading. First, however, it is necessary to make some brief and rather schematic remarks on two aspects of the novel – the hero's love affairs and the question of his birth – that, by positing the distinction between the social and the essential, set the terms within which that misreading occurs. For the first step towards understanding the ending of *Le rouge et le Noir* is to acknowledge the subtlety and ingenuity with which the novel nurtures the reader's expectation of some celebratory assertion of the "untouchable Self". The second step, however, is to see how that expectation is denied and thwarted by a text that knows the limits of its own essentialism.

My starting point is what one critic has referred to as Julien's 'disponibilité aux désirs d'autrui', meaning the way in which his elusive personality lends itself to inscription by other people's desires.[7] In the case of Mme de Rênal and Mathilde I would argue that those desires both identify and activate potentialities within Julien that correspond to the distinction between the essential and the social. For Mme de Rênal, the Julien of her predilections is the vulnerable youth weeping on her doorstep, the guileless, butterfly-chasing companion of Vergy, the naive and sentimental lover of their first bedroom encounter, all avatars of an essentialized *tendresse*. Much of the tragicomic quality of their early exchanges stems from Julien's insistence on reading her intentions in the light of his own obsession with social differences, whereas for Mme de Rênal social differences are, if not invisible, irrelevant to the particular appeal that Julien has for her.

With Mathilde the opposite is true; her interest in Julien is quickened at the ball by his fiery defence of Danton and by the pride, verging on class-contempt, with which he responds to her attempt to join his conversation with the expatriate liberal, Altamira. It is precisely Julien's social persona, in the sense of his self- projection as the rebellious plebeian, that appeals to her; the narrator remarks at this point that Mathilde 'avait l'air de son esclave' (494).[8] Although she has a patrician awareness of the deficiencies attendant upon low birth (492) and will later express her relief at being spared the married name Sorel (639), the essence of Julien's attraction for her remains this tough, energetic, resisting quality that is, as it were, the emotional correlate of his class. When, at one point, he reveals his

vulnerability to more tender feelings by admitting he loves her, 'Mathilde, sûre d'être aimée, le méprisa parfaitement' (552). As a result, Julien's love becomes an exercise in will, a striving for mastery over himself and thereby over Mathilde, that is a translation of class struggle into the world of private feeling. When Mathilde, tricked into despair by the subterfuge of his liaison with Mme de Fervaques, finally throws herself in submission at his feet, Julien's reaction is one of class triumph: 'La voilà donc, cette orgueilleuse à mes pieds!' (615). Thereafter, he takes care never to expose himself again to her contempt for his softer side.

Mme de Rênal and Mathilde then represent for Julien a choice between *tendresse* and the will-driven strivings of the social self. The way this choice resolves itself in favour of Mme de Rênal and *tendresse*, viewed as some essential, a-social core of the self, is one of the major factors shaping the reader's response to the novel's ending. Another such factor is Stendhal's treatment of Julien's birth – more precisely, his highly individual and dramatic reworking of the convention of the hero of uncertain birth who eventually discovers his gentle lineage.

The novel's hints as to Julien's doubtful parentage are legion and well documented.[9] Nor are they all products of his own parricidal brain, for it is the narrator who first marks him out as anomalous; among his loutish family (his brothers are described as 'espèces de géants' (232) he is delicate-featured to the point of femininity, with the pallor and fiery dark eyes of conventional romantic stereotype (233, 239) – a princeling inexplicably alighted in a sawmill. His own agnosticism about his birth may well be a fantasy but it nevertheless serves to focus the strangeness of his consanguinity with these lumbering oafs. Later, in the Paris section of the novel, it is M. de la Mole who teasingly propagates the idea that Julien is the son of a nobleman, while M. de la Mole's daughter is conveniently on hand and smitten with Julien – whom she at one point describes as 'un prince déguisé' (494) – should the convention work through to its culmination in the hero's marriage into the nobility.

A point to make about this sort of mystification is the way it plays with the notion of social determinacy. The novel seems to hover on the edge of a radical disturbance of its social categories in that it would need only the clinching revelation of Julien's noble birth to give some of his distinctive traits – the delicate appearance, the haughty manner – a different social significance, and to operate a retrospective reorganizing of the reader's response. Nevertheless such an outcome would at least save Julien for history, as it were, by simply re-inscribing him *à la* Fielding into one of the novel's major categories of verisimilitude – social class. That the novel is setting up such an outcome for a contemporary readership to whom the convention was familiar to the point of predictability seems obvious.

Instead of following the conventional path, however, Stendhal defeats the reader's expectations by going off in a direction that threatens to remove Julien from history completely. The three chapters of the novel in which

Julien receives a title and commission, shoots Mme de Rênal, then, on hearing of her survival, falls to his knees in gratitude and repentance[10] constitute what Michael Wood has called a reversing plot.[11] Reversing plots lead the hero, by way of an unexpected and circuitous sequence of events, to some perhaps unconsciously desired outcome. In the case of *Le Rouge et le Noir* that outcome – Julien's abandonment of Mathilde and his reunion with Mme de Rênal – can be read as the translation of the idea of nobility from the worldly realm to the spiritual; from being a man who represses what the novel has defined as his essential humanity in the interests of worldly nobility, Julien becomes a man who throws away worldly nobility and discovers an essential and noble self. The result of Stendhal's playing with convention is again the affirmation of some transcendent, a-social essence – the untouchable Self – that extricates his hero from history.

Stendhal's treatment of both Julien's love-affairs and the convention of the hero's uncertain birth reveals how insistently the novel's essentialist rhetoric works to orient the reader's approach to the final chapters. To read Julien's imprisonment, reconciliation with Mme de Rênal, and death as the text's culminating assertion of Romantic inviolability seems to have a rightness, indeed an obviousness, that follows from this preceding orientation. Yet, in the end, there is too much in those final chapters that is resistant to such a reading. The promised apotheosis fails to materialize; the hero's distinctiveness is not so much celebrated as subjected to the sceptical gaze of a narrator whose attraction to the 'fantasy' of the untouchable Self is checked by his knowledge that it is indeed a fantasy.

Of the critics Wood is the one who is most helpful in understanding the novel's ending:

> (Stendhal) resolves his heroes' lives but he will not leave them simply resolved. He will not, in the end, use fiction to unmix things which are mixed in reality, and we must be careful not to unmix them for him.[12]

The aesthetic implications of this can be seen in the manner in which the ending of *Le Rouge et le Noir* seems to obstruct and defer "resolution" by insisting on the imprisoned hero's persisting entanglement in the world. The most obvious examples are the constant intrusions of the world into Julien's prison cell. There is something faintly comic in the way his initial commitment to a monastic silence – 'On ne me verra ni parler ni écrire' he tells Mathilde (647) – and renunciation of the world – 'Je n'ai plus rien à faire sur la terre' (648) – are followed by his embroilment in a veritable traffic of visitors and a thickening plot for his pardon. Nor is the traffic all one way; Julien's mind reaches out to the world he has left behind in a repeated concern with its opinion of him. 'Que dit-on dans Verrières?' he asks his jailor (648). 'Quelle joie pour les abbés Maslon et les Valenod si je meurs comme un cuistre' he reflects to himself (653).

His determination not to speak at his trial (671) is followed by the most eloquent tirade of his life, after which he exclaims in naïve self-congratulation: 'N'étais-je pas beau hier quand j'ai pris la parole?' (678)

Such incidents reveal, in a relatively superficial way, the persisting hold of the world over Julien. A more significant instance, however, in that it goes to the very root of Julien's personality, is his relationship with Mathilde. The remarkable role of Mathilde in the final chapters has not been given the attention it deserves. Even Guérin, a critic whose exasperation with the ending of *Le rouge et le Noir* has lead him to write a 'plaidoirie' for Mathilde, does not seem to have analysed sufficiently her role in the closing chapters. When he writes: 'Tout se passait comme si, indésirable, elle encombrait Julien prisonnier et importunait l'auteur',[13] he is clearly right with regard to Julien but surely wrong with regard to the author. Writers of fiction are not short of means for disposing of inconvenient characters, or for eliding the issues they represent. Yet all the evidence is that Stendhal refuses to contemplate such means. One wonders whether any novelist intent on celebrating romantic love was ever so insistent in interposing between his elect couple a rejected woman. Mathilde is not so much the ghost at the feast as the principal guest. To vary the gastronomic metaphor, she is quite simply indigestible by an ending that requires her discreet disappearance if it is to achieve smooth progress towards apotheosizing closure: her jealousy, histrionics and anger are too vividly realized, the results of her actions are too expansively delineated (her efforts to save Julien spawn a whole new sub-plot, involving Frilair's ambition to be a bishop, that threatens to relaunch the novel of clerical intrigue). But it is her effect on Julien that is most significant, for in order to safeguard his idyll from her clamour he must revert to the calculation and hypocrisy of his previous self.

'Julien voulait à toute force être honnête homme jusqu' à la fin envers cette pauvre jeune fille qu'il avait si étrangement compromise', says the narrator, before adding 'mais, à chaque instant, l'amour effréné qu'il avait pour madame de Rênal l'emportait' (694). This conflict between Julien's love for Mme de Rênal and decent behaviour towards Mathilde is an insistent motif of the final chapters. He airily orders Mathilde to marry M. de Croisenois (647), the man from whom he has previously striven to take her, then later adds insult to injury by advising her to place their child under the supervision of her rival (665). When Croisenois dies in a duel, he is ready with a new candidate – second-best but serviceable – M. de Luz, who, given his relatively modest genealogy, 'ne fera aucune difficulté d'épouser la veuve de Julien Sorel' (695). He plays upon her character, we are told, 'avec tout le sang-froid d'un pianiste habile qui touche un piano' (678), and we see this talent at work in his shamelessly manipulative rationalisation of the visits of Madame de Rênal:

Vous êtes injuste; les visites de madame de Rênal fourniront des phrases singulières à l'avocat de Paris chargé de mon recours en grâce; il peindra le meurtrier honoré des soins de sa victime.

Cela peut faire effet, et peut-être un jour vous me verrez le sujet de quelque mélodrame, etc., etc. (695)

The repeated 'etc.' is eloquent of the narrator's own boredom with Julien's banal disingenuities.

One could perhaps read all this as the still, quiet voice of spiritual self-possession obstinately protecting its inviolability against the sound and fury of the world. Something like this view is probably not uncommon among readers trying to make sense of the jarring notes referred to above; a version of the argument is proposed by Professor Hemmings;

The other incidents in this culminating drama – Mathilde's intriguing, her furious and helpless jealousy, the attempted bribery of justice, Julien's appearance in court and deliberate taunting of the jurymen to ensure they should not acquit him – all these seem vaguely unreal, for we see everything with minds clouded by the powerful emanation of Julien's enraptured dream-state.[14]

Hemmings is right to insist on Julien's dream-state, but do we the readers share it to the extent he suggests? Surely not in passages such as the following:

– J'ai une grâce à vous demander, lui dit un jour son amant; mettez votre enfant en nourrice à Verrières, madame de Rênal surveillera la nourrice.

– Ce que vous me dites là est bien dur . . . Et Mathilde pâlit.

– Il est vrai, et je t'en demande mille fois pardon, s'écria Julien sortant de sa rêverie, et la serrant dans ses bras. (664–5)

The dream-state is exclusively Julien's and it induces no blindness in the reader towards the suffering he causes. The proud Mathilde's acknowledgement of her pain – the more moving for being so unhistrionically stated – and her shocked physical reaction guarantee that Julien's own emergence from his 'rêverie' to a realisation of what he has done confirms the reader's response.

Of course this is all punctuated by the modest epiphanies of Julien's moments with Mme de Rênal, and it is accompanied by his slow but sure growth to self-knowledge. But part of that self-knowledge is, at one point, a sudden realisation of his own profound and irremediable contamination by his age:

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

What he means by this is not simply that he has had hypocritical thoughts in his conversations with himself, but that these hypocritical thoughts presuppose an imaginary listener: 'Je suis hypocrite comme s'il y avait là quelqu'un pour m'écouter' (692). In other words, not only the content, but also the form of our mental operations is socially given.

This is a crucial moment in Julien's growth to self-knowledge, the moment when he recognises his inevitable sociality and the corruption

this entails. Taken together with his regressive behaviour towards Mathilde and his persisting concern with the opinion of the world he has left behind, it also constitutes the novel's recognition of the limits of essentialism. This does not affect the psychological truth of Julien's reconciliation with Mme de Rênal, but it does undermine its status as closure. Julien's dream is indeed his alone – one element of an ending in which the reader's carefully nurtured expectation of some climactic resolution dissolves into the mutually cancelling antinomies of paradox: in isolation we are social; we buy peace through cruelty, and disinterested love through self-interested calculation.

The ending's bold dissonance of styles is another example of this art that is able to hold contraries together in a vision that denies nothing of tangled human truth. The quiet, elegiac fade-out of Mme de Rênal's death, that anticipates the ending of *La Chartreuse de Parme*, is immediately preceded by the grotesqueries of Mathilde's intervention in Julien's funeral rites, and her conversion of his humble mountain burial-chamber into a mausoleum furnished with lavish marble sculptures. These acts – which are the first steps in her appropriation of his posthumous reputation – are profoundly ironic. Initiating as they do Julien's reincarnation as a latter-day Boniface de la Mole, they mock retrospectively the hero's desire to extricate himself from the world. This is perhaps the sharpest paradox of the novel – where life ends, life (in history) begins – and its final comment on the essentialist ideology of the untouchable Self.

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Notes

1. *Qu'est-ce que la littérature* (Paris, Gallimard, 1948), pp. 158–59.
2. *Ideology: an Introduction* (London, Verso, 1991), p. 59.
3. *La Politique de Stendhal. Les brigands et le bottier* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1982), pp. 15–74.
4. *The Order of Mimesis* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 127–28.
5. *Nature et société chez Stendhal* (Lille, Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1985), p. 35.
6. I have previously developed this view of Julien's personality in "The Writer and History: Love and Politics in the Novels of Stendhal", *Romance Studies*, no. 5 (Winter, 1984–85), pp. 153–56.
7. J. Rannaud, "'Lecture économique' des premiers chapitres du *Rouge et Noir*", *Stendhal, le saint-simonisme et les industriels. Stendhal et la Belgique*, ed. O. Schellekens (Brussels, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1979) p. 89.
8. All page references in brackets are from Tome 1 of the Pléiade *Romans et nouvelles* (Paris, Gallimard, 1963).

9. See, for example, F. W. J. Hemmings *Stendhal. A Study of his novels* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964), pp. 39–40.

10. Chapters XXXIV–XXXVI, of part II of the novel.

11. *Stendhal* (London, Elek, 1971) pp. 9–12.

12. *Stendhal*, p. 92.

13. *La Politique de Stendhal*, p. 16.

14. *Stendhal. A Study of his Novels*, p. 130.