

STENDHAL

*Fiction and  
the Themes of  
Freedom*

*With a New Introduction*

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for Beth  
for Gino Magnani  
*ricordando le ore emiliane . . .*

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STENDHAL

*Fiction and the Themes of Freedom*



# I

## *the Temptations of Autobiography*

### THE VOICES OF THE SELF

Some fervent lovers of Stendhal would cheerfully relinquish one of his major novels in exchange for yet another volume of his unfinished autobiography, *Vie de Henry Brulard*. These fanatical "Brulardistes" make up the extreme wing of that self-recruiting sect of happy few known as Beylistes. Henri Beyle, their hero, is for them not merely the creator of Julien Sorel and Fabrice del Dongo, but a supreme master of the art of life, the very model of the free man, and a spiritual ally in their quest for sincerity. In him they irreverently revere the incarnation of paradoxes: the tender cynic, the passionate ironist, the self-conscious nonconformist, the lucid daydreamer.

For *Beylisme* is not so much a set of beliefs as a complex of attitudes. It suggests a special sensibility as well as a way of masking it, an unpretentious and unsentimental self-centeredness, a stance that is both pleasure-seeking and almost austere in its refinement.

It is Stendhal the novelist, rather than *Beyle* the egoist, who interests us: his themes, his techniques, his vision as transmuted and realized in the work of fiction. Yet *Henry Brulard* may well serve as a valuable starting point. True, Stendhal undertook this self-exploration in the autumnal years of his life, during his consular exile in Civitavecchia, when he discovered the fascination and consolatory thrills of long backward glances. But the resilient text of *Henry Brulard*, in which he relives with zestful precision the affective moods of his childhood, plunges us into the midst of typical Stendhalian problems. More explicitly than anywhere else, the author reveals his basic attitudes, his most intimate modes of feeling, as well as his permanent obsession with the riddle of the personality.

Fiction and biography are in fact intimately bound up in the Stendhalian context, not merely in the ordinary genetic sense, but in the very manner in which Stendhal understood the "metaphysics" of fiction. The writing of his novels corresponds to the quest for an elusive synthesis of being and existence. Biography and fiction dramatize with particular sharpness and complexity the irresolvable tension between man's concept of his destiny and of his freedom. For fiction, as well as biography, brings into permanent clash not only antagonistic temporal orders, but independent and frequently conflicting manifestations of human freedom: that of the "self," or objectified character as project and desiderative agent, and that of the author as observer-judge in search of meaning. This cleav-

age is, of course, an essential experience of the autobiographer. And these tensions, which characterize all fictional constructs as well, are at the heart of Stendhalian dialectics. They account in large part for the ambiguities of his tone and of his style.

The autobiographic urge became particularly acute after 1831, when the boredom of consular chores, as well as the self-imposed censorship of the newly appointed official of Louis-Philippe's government, apparently discouraged any sustained creative effort. In a letter to Henri Dupuy (23 June 1832), the author of the recently published *Le Rouge et le Noir* states his intention not to have anything of his appear in print while in the employ of the government. But the demon of literature was stronger. In his peculiar "franglais" he soon admits to himself that the true vocation of his soul still remains "to make chef-d'oeuvre."<sup>1</sup> In fact the autobiographic temptation was not at all a retreat from literature, but the natural blossoming of a lifelong tendency. The many posthumously published texts and marginal commentaries bear testimony to his assiduous self-observation and self-assessment. From the time of his arrival in Paris as a provincial adolescent, he indulged in endless note taking, diaries, "psychological" discussions and dialogues with himself, intimate accounts, plans for amorous action, analyses of his defects and qualities, and almost clinical "self-consultations." Even some of the notations he scribbled on his clothes (cuffs, belts, or suspenders)—betray a permanent tendency to view himself as both object and subject. This creative disseverance is at the center of his adolescent *Journal* (1801–1823) and culminates in his two autobiographic masterpieces, *Souvenirs d'égotisme* (1832) and *Vie de Henry Brulard* (1835).

On the surface, *Souvenirs d'égotisme* (the word "égotisme" points to self-knowledge as much as to self-concern) provides lively sketches, heightened by impertinent comments, irrelevant flashbacks, and peppery anecdotes, of Stendhal's life in Paris during the years 1821–1830: his stay at the Hôtel de Bruxelles, his nostalgia for Milan and for Métilde Dembowski who would not yield, evenings at the Tracy's where he met the aging General Lafayette, midnight punches in the apartment of the opera star Mme Pasta, a trip to England and touching adventures with prostitutes, his relations with Mérimée, his frequentation of the Liberal group meeting at Delécluze. But the real subject is not his life during these specific years; it is the very possibility of writing autobiography, of discussing oneself—in other words, the vexing problem of sincerity.

But is sincerity enough? The eye cannot see itself, as Stendhal sadly observes in an almost existentialist mood. "Quel homme suis-je?" ("What kind of man am I?") is the question that appears on the very first page of *Souvenirs d'égotisme*. But where and how is one to find the answer? The anguish of an impossible lucidity is enough to create insomnia. "I do not know myself; that is what sometimes, when I think of it at night, torments me." The trouble is that not even the "others" are of help in this puzzled search for the self. Even to the most basic questions—is he clever? is he good? is he courageous?—no answer is forthcoming from the outside. Trapped between the urge to reveal himself and the fear of being penetrated by another's consciousness, Stendhal can only further complicate his search for the elusive self. The mask he always wears to protect his inner being does not help him unveil it to himself. Ultimately, only the creative act—

whether that of the autobiographer or of the novelist—will permit him to reconstruct, or rather to construct, the truth of himself. That, in a sense, is the great intuition Stendhal had early in his life, long before he himself knew that he was to become a creator of fiction. It explains not only his self-directed adolescent dialogues, but his chronic tendency to treat himself as a “character” and his obsessive fondness for pseudonyms.

Many of Stendhal’s self-revelations and much of the impertinent charm of *Vie de Henry Brulard* can be found in the earlier autobiographic attempt *Souvenirs d'égotisme*. Although Stendhal may have trouble knowing who he is, he does know with sharp clarity what he hates and what he loves. And he hates many things: vulgarities, extreme heat, superficial French wit, boredom (which he always considered an irredeemable sin), the ugliness of Paris, where, like Rousseau (perhaps because he had read him too much), he deplored the absence of mountains. He is, in fact, proud of his “irritabilité nerveuse”; though robust and even paunchy, he delights in his own “délicatesse de nerfs italienne.” But the aversions he so zestfully evokes also account for his fervor. Stendhal’s capacity for enthusiasm thrives on indignation and displeasure. *Souvenirs d'égotisme* thus concurrently provides an inventory of loves: the operas of Cimarosa and Mozart; Italy, and in particular Milan, his adopted fatherland; the pleasures of a beautifully made dress, of daydreams, of anonymous perambulations in strange cities. The catalog is unpredictable; what counts is not the impressiveness of the object, but the quality of the reaction. Shivering with pleasure at the unexpected sound of familiar names, dreaming of the magic powers Tasso attributed to Angelica’s ring, delighting in the servitudes of his

heart, Stendhal thoroughly enjoys his own inability to sound pompous. Much like Count Mosca in *La Chartreuse de Parme*, he preserves, close to the age of fifty, a freshness of sensations and an emotive vulnerability heightened by irony and lucidity. Even the writer's vocation is presented with lack of solemnity by means of the metaphor of the silkworm, who, when tired of eating, climbs up to make its prison of silk.

But the lightness of touch must not deceive. There is also the recurrent temptation of suicide: upon his return to Paris, after 1821, he is in the habit of drawing pistols in the margins of his manuscripts. There is the bitter pain of awakening, on certain mornings, to rediscover afresh his loneliness and despair. Above all, there is that typically Stendhalian *pudeur* or restraint, that muteness of strong emotions, that latent fear of being exposed and of cheapening what he holds most dear. He will thus always "skip happiness" for fear of deflowering it.

We are touching here on the all-important theme of dissimulation and disguise. "I would wear a mask with pleasure, I would change my name with joy." The primary urge is that of remaining impenetrable to the glance of others, "n'être pas deviné." To hide his wounds as well as his enthusiasms, Stendhal learns to parade as a cynic and becomes, as he puts it, the buffoon of his own soul. But to hide means to play a role, to become another. "I am used to appearing as the contrary of what I am." The taste for incognito, the need for a mask, is thus closely related to the urge to impersonate. Wearing a mask becomes a trying out of roles in the service of self-discovery as well as of escape. But, paradoxically, escape and the act of intellectual disguise serve as the instruments of an oblique confession and ultimately of the creative act. The effort to

hide and the wish to be other than oneself play, in his case, into the hands of the novelist: they bring about a state of permanent flirtation with other selves.

*Vie de Henry Brulard*, written several years after *Souvenirs d'égotisme*, provides even more penetrating insights into the relationships between self-search, self-concealment, and fiction. The very use of a pseudonym for the title of an autobiography (though the initials H. B. correspond to Stendhal's real name, Henri Beyle) indicates a subject-object relationship that clearly separates the author from his protagonist. On another level, the choice of a pseudonym could be interpreted as an act of protest, as an affirmation of rupture with parental and social origins. The rejection of the patronym, as Jean Starobinski brilliantly argues, is thus not merely a substitute for parricide, but a refusal of any form of predestination.<sup>2</sup> The recurrent myth of a special birth in Stendhal's novels corresponds to the yearning to grant himself his own destiny. The author—"ens causa sui"—strives to become his own creator. In fact, the combined themes of liberation and self-identification are at the heart of *Vie de Henry Brulard*. His entire childhood appears to him as a confinement from which it is his compelling vocation to escape. The father image thus becomes the very symbol of ensnaring pettiness and oppression. The search for freedom and identity ("Qu'ai-je été, que suis-je?") corresponds to a father-rejection, which in the novels assumes the form of a father-search; and the search for an identity for which there exists no a priori tag in turn predisposes him to treat himself as his own "creation." The human being evoked thus appears simultaneously as the child he was and continued to be into adulthood—a free agent capable of surprising the author-observer—and as the fixed eye that as-

esses this child. Fragmentation and continuity, innocence and experience, time lived and time retrieved are here locked in a contrapuntal relationship.

The setting and movement of the opening scene communicate a double voice and the telescoping of a double temporal perspective. The narrator, from the Janiculo, surveys the Roman landscape. As he distinguishes Frascati and Castel-Gandolfo and, much nearer him, the orange trees of a monastery, he muses on the fact that in three months he will be fifty years old. Historical time is brought into juxtaposition with personal time: all of Roman history in a panoramic display—the tomb of Cecilia Metella, Saint Paul, the pyramid of Cestius, the palace of Monte Cavallo, the Appian Way, the gardens of the Pincio—is set against the dates of his private history—1783, 1793, 1803 . . . the Napoleonic era, and now, here and already almost past, the evanescent moment on this sunny 16 October 1832. For there is yet another contrast within the contrasted historical and personal times: the past and the present. (“All of ancient and of modern Rome . . .”; the day of the Battle of Wagram and today.) And yet all these elements seem to move and glide into one another. In this remarkable introduction, private reminiscences and lyric meditation merge to bring about a peculiar poetic movement, self-conscious, unstable, and, as it were, under the very sign of relativity.

This is not to underestimate the sheer documentary value of *Vie de Henry Brulard*, which tells us most of what we know about Stendhal’s childhood in his native Grenoble. The manner in which, as a boy, he reacted to his bourgeois background and to his family attached to the Ancien Régime explains a great deal of his ambiguous feelings toward Napoleon, the Restoration, the July Mon-

archy, and the growing democratization of attitudes and tastes. Aristocratic by inclination and Jacobinic by reaction, Stendhal is a man of two centuries, condemned to look both forward and backward with almost equal doses of curiosity and nostalgia.

Contrasts and antitheses account indeed for the most habitual patterns of his imagination. His childhood world is sharply divided: on one hand, the petty, contemptible creatures (prefiguring his villainous Valenod and Rassi); on the other, the free spirits, the elect, the happy few. This chronic need to compare and contrast—these dynamics of contempt that account for the vigor of his lyric enthusiasms—finds an early expression in the manner in which he clearly separates the members of his own family into two irreconcilable camps. On his father's side is moroseness, bigotry, and uninspired materialism. Stendhal's father is for him the very embodiment of bourgeois provincialism, while the image of his mother, who died when he was only seven years old and for whom he claims to have felt the first transports of physical love ("I wanted to cover my mother with kisses, and also that she should have no clothes on"), symbolizes grace and poetic sensitivity. To this Gagnon side of his family he attributes an "Italian" origin, his own love for Tasso and Ariosto, and the uncalculating surrender to the passionate and generous movements of the soul, which he defines by the vaguely Corneillian concept of "Espagnolisme" of which his aunt Elizabeth is the outstanding incarnation. Espagnolisme and provincialism were of course destined to clash in his novels.

Stendhal does not claim that all his *facts* are correct; he never bragged about the accuracy of his memory. It is the emotional memory that he asks us to trust, echoing Rous-

seau, whose writings, especially the *Confessions* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, had a far greater influence on him than is commonly granted. Significantly, he refers to his autobiography as his own *Confessions*, “au style près, comme Jean-Jacques Rousseau . . .”<sup>3</sup> He is at his best when he recalls with amusing but painful vividness the humiliations, repressed hatreds, and suffered or imagined injustices. On his tyrannical aunt Séraphie, who took over the direction of the household after his mother’s death; on the loathsome memories of Grenoble; on the hypocrisy of his Jesuit tutor, the abbé Raillane, who succeeded in making him hate religion forever, he rises to the height of indignation. There are the grim memories of an embittered and rebellious boy: his joy at the news of the king’s execution, his thanking God at the time of his hated aunt’s death. But there are also humorously tender and lyric moods: his discovery of *Don Quixote*, his decision to become another Molière, his enthusiasm for Bonaparte’s dragoons passing through Grenoble on their way to Italy, his silent love for the actress Kubly, his clumsy behavior upon his arrival in Paris, and his ecstatic joy at crossing the Saint Bernard Pass and discovering Milan.

The problem of memory is at the center of the autobiographic enterprise. In the case of Stendhal, it casts a most revealing light on his creative processes. The inadequacies of memory invite not only discovery but also the compensatory assistance of imagination and interpretation. About Stendhal’s own lack of faith in his recall and objectivity of information there can be no doubt. He knew that the 1835 perspective was different from that of 1790; he also knew that it was not possible to limit one’s vision to a single temporal point of view. Moreover, the most blanked-out moments, the ones most difficult to res-

urrect in their entirety, are those of the most intense emotions—precisely the ones that count the most. These “*manques*” he compares to the ruined parts of a fresco. Yet, in the unevenness of remembrance, in the juxtaposition of luminously clear sectors of the past and of zones of meaningful emptiness, lurks the potential of the creative impulse. The multivalence of perspectives can be a source of error but also of invention. And the metaphor of the fresco suggests that entire areas could be restored. Repeatedly, Stendhal explains that he makes discoveries while writing: long-forgotten parts of the fresco “appear suddenly.” Many things “come back in the process of writing.” The re-creative act of evoking and explaining the past turns out to be primarily creative. Stendhal himself is the first to be surprised: seeking himself as he was in the past, he discovers himself as he is in the present, spontaneously reacting to his search.

Yet this “creative” discovery, or reinvention, implies not merely the blanking out of strong emotions within the author’s memory but the elaborate camouflage of his most passionate commitments in his relations with others, and most specifically in his relations with his imagined reader. *Vie de Henry Brulard* admirably illustrates these forms of disguise, the fear of self-revelation that steadily accompanies the need to reveal himself. Thirst for candor goes hand in hand with joy of dissimulation. The young boy quickly learns that it is dangerous to convey one’s enthusiasm to others and that, in the face of ironic smiles or reprobation, silence is the best protection: “During my entire life, I have never spoken about the object of my passion; the least objection would have pierced my heart.” Revealing one’s secret dreams may be the greatest wish; but it seems like blasphemy to the young Henri Beyle. Next to

silence, the best protection of the secrets of one's inner life is the lie. "Mentir n'est-il pas la seule ressource des esclaves?"

The same tendencies appear in Stendhal's attitude toward the half-written page and, beyond the act of writing, in his relations with his unknown reader. "One spoils such tender feelings by describing them in detail." It is on this note of lyrical refusal that the text of *Vie de Henry Brulard* comes to an end. Happiness, in particular, whether upon his arrival in Milan or during his boyhood excursions to regions made famous by Rousseau, refuses to be encompassed and analyzed. Stendhal prefers the *negative* approach: to evoke the unpleasant condition from which this specific happiness is excluded. "The only way, it seems to me, in which I could paint a picture of this enchanting pleasure, pure, fresh, and divine, would be by enumerating the miseries and boredom by whose complete absence it was produced." Or, better still, there is the poetry of silence, that which Stendhal himself calls "le silence du bonheur"—the poetry of the unspoken, perhaps even of the unfulfilled. But such poetry, rooted in self-revelation and self-dissimulation, marks an essentially creative act. Fiction is here wedded to the dialectics of sincerity and alibis.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS FICTION

Sartre is no doubt right, at least in philosophical terms, in saying that one must choose between living one's life and viewing it from the outside like a work of art. To treat oneself, while alive, in a posthumous manner, to impose on one's existence a definitive or even temporary horizon, signifies a denial of life. One must be either inside or outside—one cannot be both.<sup>4</sup> For time itself is not reversible; and every act—including the act of writing autobiography—separates us from our past and modifies it. The principle of heterogeneity reigns between the past and the present. Man, by projecting his freedom into the act of living, affirms himself precisely as being *other* than his past.

In fact, any account of “meaningful” behavior, any value imposed by man on his own acts, derives from the imaginative process. Conversely, the creative enterprise implies a multiple perspective on the self. Thus all fiction tends to decipher a psychology in movement, while embodying at the same time the specific notion of “freedom” it seeks to communicate.

The paradox of the act of creation stands at the center of *Vie de Henry Brulard*. Stendhal was, moreover, perfectly lucid about it. He knew that he had undertaken not a simple recounting but an act of creation and that what he was creating was precisely the boy Henry Brulard, if not Beyle-Stendhal himself. The fictional tendency is quite explicit. Stendhal at one point asks his reader—taking for granted that Henry Brulard is really the name of the narrator (which is of course a prime element of fiction)—to

imagine that the name Brulard had been replaced by Bernard: the result, he explains, would be “a novel written in the first person singular.” The comment is made as a form of apology to justify the self-centered nature of the book. But the suggestion carries other implications as well: first of all that the appearance of subjectivity and objectivity can be misleading. Thus modern novelists have discovered that first-person narration allows for degrees of objectivity that the so-called omniscient and “objective” narration, because of the very involvement of an omnipresent author, cannot truly achieve. This paradox explains why Stendhal, at the very moment that he toys with the notion of a novelistic perspective (one of the first versions contains the significant *lapsus* “ce roman”), repeatedly utilizes the word “roman” in a derogatory sense. “Je ferais du roman,” he warns himself, as he feels he is about to indulge in sheer invention. Fiction and untruth become almost synonymous. One is reminded of the fictional subversion of fiction as practiced by Diderot in *Jacques le Fataliste*. The self-mockery of the novelist’s stance is not only a form of intellectual debunking but an oblique manner of affirming the independence of both narrator and character. The game, in either case, is in the service of freedom. But Stendhal’s game is further complicated by the fact that his anti-novel is ostensibly not a novel at all.

“I am another man,” writes Stendhal, as he compares the Henri Beyle of 1835 with the one of 1800. But this otherness is not exclusively temporal. “It seems to me that I am making discoveries about someone else.” In a marginal commentary, Stendhal states his own surprise. Expressions such as “un autre” or “ce caractère” testify to a creative separation from himself. He indeed sees himself not merely as *having* but also as *being* a character. This

*dédoublement* accounts in large part for his treatment of himself in the third person singular. "Henri B., age less than six years," he writes under one of the numerous little sketches that are props to his memory. Elsewhere he marvels at this "caractère de Henri." He objectifies himself in order to judge himself; but the reverse is also true: his commentaries, much like the novelist's intrusions in *Le Rouge et le Noir* or in *La Chartreuse de Parme*, protect the independence of his hero.

The explicit sense of treating himself as a protagonist is allied to the self-conscious awareness of having a prospective reader. Stendhal, seeker of sincerity, claims to write without lies and without illusions, as though he were addressing a letter to an intimate friend. But he is also writing for that distant and hypothetical creature he calls "mon lecteur" whose imagined reactions necessarily imply a literary strategy. Thus, in marginal comments, he shows his concern for dramatic development and for suspense: "Style. Ordre des idées. Préparer l'attention . . ." The speed with which he writes does not prevent him from worrying about sustaining the interest of his invisible reader. The presentation and construction of episodes trouble him. He wonders, for instance, whether or not the end of the chapter provides an apt conclusion to the episode of his childish infatuation with the actress Kubly. Elsewhere he expresses his dissatisfaction with the "scholarly coda" of a given paragraph. Hesitations such as these are reflected in the very body of the text. He promises himself that he will correct, transpose, eliminate certain passages. He refers to his life story as his "conte"; he is aware of composing a literary account. At one point, he even advises himself, in a parenthesis in English, to "cut there." This artistic self-consciousness is perhaps brought

out most sharply in a musical metaphor (“ . . . il faudra que je travaille et transcrive ces morceaux”) and in the humorous allusion to *Tristram Shandy* (“ . . . I am about to be born”).

The awareness of the intangible but wished-for reader is the corollary of the author-protagonist relationship. The past self thus undergoes a steady process of heroization. Gilbert Durand very astutely points to the mythical dimension of *Vie de Henry Brulard*. The trivial detail is in fact never meant to be trivial; it appears wearing the buskin, and suggests the forces of a destiny.<sup>5</sup> The almost archetypal patterns of Stendhal's autobiography deserve to be studied in greater detail; they cast light not merely on this specific text, but on the structure, deeper motifs, and texture of his novels.

The most significant among these patterns is conveyed through the family myth. Henry Brulard's hatred of his father is not a fortuitous factor to be dismissed as a regrettable antipathy and the original cause of the young boy's rebellious nature. Its deeper significance is that it justifies and almost requires the notion of a double paternity. Stendhal repeatedly explains that his “true father” was his grandfather, Dr. Gagnon. It was he, much like the surgeon-major in *Le Rouge et le Noir* and the abbé Blanès in *La Chartreuse de Parme*, who initiated the young boy to the spiritual life. In fact, Dr. Gagnon's lessons in astronomy, during the summer nights on top of the mysterious terrace of his house, seem endowed with a magic quality and prefigure the astrological apprenticeship of Fabrice in the priest's tower. Such an initiatory prestige explains why his grandfather's lineage seems to him “dear and sacred.” Inadvertently—the *lapsus* is revealing—he refers to himself as the “fils de M. Gagnon,” thus substituting

for the reality of his father's paternity the fiction of a maternal begetting, a fiction in which he indulges all the more freely because his mother died when he was a small boy.

The father-rejection is deeply involved with an identity-creating search for the true father. Stendhal's family myth, a recurrent motif in his novels, is further nourished by repeated suggestions of "exceptional" origins and of an almost miraculous birth and development. The young boy's dreams of freedom go hand in hand with dreams of prestigious ancestors. "Might I not be the son of a great prince . . . ?" he asks himself half seriously, as he constructs what he calls the "fable" of his formative years. This "fabulous" background and education are corroborated, in his view, by the melodramatic escape to Avignon of his mother's putative Italian ancestor after he committed a crime of passion. The myth of Italy, so important in Stendhal's work, is thus linked with the combined themes of energy and of an ineffable beauty.

This toying with fictional and mythical possibilities is stressed by a steady, though ironic, dramatization of his childhood. He insists on his difference from other children, on his enforced segregation (his family did not allow him to play in the street), on his withdrawal and capacity to "dream alone." Like Rousseau, whose *Confessions* were obviously on his mind while writing *Vie de Henry Brulard*, he discovers, as a mere child, the brutal reality of the world's injustice and of his vocation as a rebel. The sufferings of young Henry are presented as elements of a broader dramatic development. He literally refers to the "sad drama of my childhood" and to the "personages" with whom, or rather against whom, this drama is played out. But this suffering itself is not an ordinary,

fruitless suffering; it is the indispensable and self-redeeming apprenticeship of the hero. Just as all the “malheur” of his life in Grenoble made possible the “bonheur” of his life in Milan (the principle of value-by-contrast is once more verified), so the very tyranny of his education played into the hands of liberty. Stendhal significantly speaks of a “happy unhappiness” (an “heureux malheur”). Even the boy’s first amorous experience, combining anguish and frustration, brings about a tragic illumination. Love, he discovered, is “a serious and fearful thing.”

The sense of loss and nostalgia, singularly unsentimental, likewise points to a myth-making tendency. Henry’s childhood, viewed as a private golden age, is thus linked with the prestige of a bygone period (the elegance of the Ancien Régime) or with the dynamic virtues of the Revolutionary and Bonapartist epoch. Stendhal repeatedly establishes temporal and affective parallels between his personal existence and the drama of modern history. This insertion into a historic continuum extends to literary history as well. His satisfaction at having witnessed, as a young boy, the end of Mme de Merteuil’s world is not simply a reference to Laclos’ *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, but confers a retrospective aura on the otherwise lusterless daily existence of a clumsy provincial boy. This ironically poetic illumination and amplification of the trivial events of an existence—an illumination that transforms this existence into a destiny—finds its most symbolic expression in the transmutation of the countryside near the family property in Echelles into the scene of Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*.

Metaphoric visions of the décor go with metaphoric visions of the self. Stendhal recalls himself as a little Tasso at the age of sixteen: “un centième du Tasse,” he adds

modestly. There is irony in the parallel. But there is also a characteristic esthetic elaboration of the raw materials of his existence. He casts himself not only into the roles of significant artists (he almost becomes a reincarnation of Rousseau as he arrives in the land of Zuietta), but far more revealingly into existing roles: as an amorous character in Voltaire's *Zadig* writing the initials of his beloved in the sand, as Laurence Sterne's protagonist, as Beaumarchais' Chérubin timidly in love with love, as a paradoxical mixture of Saint-Preux and Valmont. And in the midst of his own esthetic construction, he sees himself surrounded by "personages" straight out of a bitter comedy by Molière. This metaphoric vision, a transfiguration of self, finds its most acute and its most humorous expression in repeated artistic and historical analogues, which transform young Henry now into a painted figure of a passionate Saint John, now into a typical Roman Stoic, now again into a rebellious people ineffectively tyrannized by myopic popes, medieval potentates, or contemporary despots. "All tyrannies resemble each other." This remark also serves to remind us that, in the case of Stendhal, the sense of personal drama is inextricably linked to a passionate concern with the drama of history.

The fictional virtualities of *Vie de Henry Brulard* are further brought out by elements of literary construction, dual perspectives, and speculative rumination. The apparently capricious, ambling, and digressive development obeys in part certain inner laws that are more significant than the laws of chronology. Stendhal exploits titillating delays, accelerations, and shortcuts. His elliptic résumés and prolepses, his techniques of approximations and amplifications, all serve to direct the reader's reactions and to shape apparently casual accounts into patterns of mean-

ing. The playful creation of hypothetical situations and the ironic toying with other possibilities for a given scene or a given action are indirect ways of imposing, or superimposing, fictional structures. In his novels also, Stendhal shows himself fond of the conditional approach, which serves to introduce at almost every point new levels of fiction. Henry Brulard is thus seen as a would-be rascal, a "coquin," who might have immorally acquired an immense fortune, or as a lackey in the service of a Neapolitan composer. Stendhal goes so far as to provide hypothetical dialogues. Even his self-directed irony assumes a hypothetical quality, as he imagines, for instance, the verbalized opinions of Count Daru discovering that his much-recommended protégé—this "brilliant humanist"—cannot even spell an ordinary word correctly.

Stendhal delights in distorting, correcting, or compensating what was with what might have been. Thus two separate voices are almost constantly at play—voices that correspond to the two temporal orders: time in its fragmentary and spontaneous immediacy as it is apprehended moment by moment, and time as a continuous and meaningful flow when it is viewed in retrospect. But sophisticated retrospection in turn brings about a nostalgia for the poetic voice of inexperience. Stendhal is, of course, perfectly aware of the interlocked double points of view. After attributing a shrewd piece of strategy to the boy Henry, he adds: "But I find this reasoning a bit ahead of his age." Nonetheless, he takes pleasure in juxtaposing, combining, and confusing the two perspectives. At times, the very same sentence carries a dual effect. "For more than a month I was proud of this vengeance; this trait pleases me in a child." At other times, it is not a blending but a contrast that is effected: Ariosto as seen by the infat-

uated young reader and Ariosto as judged by the sophisticated (and opinionated) man of letters are far from one and the same thing. Stendhal finds a scandalized enjoyment in this strabismus, or obliquity of vision. "But, good heavens! who will read this? what gibberish! . . . Does the reader know now whether he is in 1800, with a madman's start in life, or with the wise reflection of a man of fifty-three?"

The counterpoint of the two voices serves both a thematic and a dramatic function. Much as in Proust's novel, where the narrator's voice of analysis and worldliness constantly clashes with the voice of poetic immediacy, so in *Vie de Henry Brulard*, though in a different register, a retrospective sense of necessity constantly plays against and paradoxically underscores the motifs of spontaneity and freedom. For the retrospective orientation, as Gilbert Durand points out, is frequently of an "oracular" nature.<sup>6</sup> It would be easy to illustrate Stendhal's repeated suggestion that all that happened pointed forward, that his past is a permanent projection into the future, that all his childhood experiences are properly part of a meaningful apprenticeship. Whether it be his vocation as unhappy lover or his first descent into suffering, his past is filled with significant thresholds and omens. His mother's death is not an end but a beginning: "là véritablement a commencé ma vie morale . . ."

Even more obvious are the proleptic techniques by means of which the author repeatedly reminds his reader that this is not a mere string of anecdotes and disconnected reminiscences, but that he has a "story" to tell. "Soon after, the famous letter arrived . . ." Similarly, Stendhal announces that he will soon speak of the military campaigns of 1800, of 1809, of the retreat from

Moscow, of the campaign of 1813. Whether or not he fulfills these promises is another matter. What counts is the feeling of impending events. This suspense technique is humorously summed up in Chapter 33, when Henry Brulard is compared to a great but still tranquil river about to be precipitated into an immense cascade.

What emerges, despite Stendhal's love of masks and disguises, is a solidarity with what he takes to be his destiny, which also assumes a negative quality: he may not know what he is, but he does know what he would not have wanted to be. Certainly he would have wanted to be neither Félix Faure nor Edouard Mounier, his old friends who are now *pairs de France*. Whatever the riddle of his own personality, he prefers himself to others. Thus the events of his life all contribute toward a singular elaboration of the self. Nothing is really a chance occurrence—or rather, even chance is made to contribute toward a goal. “Chance has guided me by the hand in five or six important circumstances in my life. I truly owe *Fortune* a little statue.” Even incidental, self-mocking commentaries reveal the same fatidic pattern. “God destined me to have good taste,” writes Stendhal the atheist, remembering how as a boy he felt critical of vulgar erotic engravings in Voltaire's *La Pucelle*.

How is one to reconcile this satisfied acceptance of circumstances with the tensions of a will bent on affirming itself in the very process of living? To be sure, Stendhal insists on the young boy's resolution: “At the age of seven, I had resolved to write comedies like Molière.” Or again: “From that point on my vocation had been decided: to live in Paris, while writing comedies like Molière.” But such assertions, within the structure and texture of the book, hardly dismiss the paradox that poses destiny against

a quest for freedom. This fundamental paradox is further heightened by Stendhal's cult of the *imprévu*, by his cult of energy. Only a binocular exposure, implying an orientation and a perspective strictly opposed to the oracular viewpoint, can protect spontaneity and freedom. Thus Stendhal exploits, simultaneously with omniscient effects, the liberating resources of a limited horizon.

Georges Blin has masterfully analyzed the techniques of the "restriction de champ" as they appear in the novels.<sup>7</sup> This subjective restriction of the field of vision, implying a glance that is free from the tyranny of foresight and ubiquity, manifests itself repeatedly, in *Vie de Henry Brulard*, through a fade-in technique that leads us, by way of the protagonist's consciousness, directly into a given situation. Awareness is always fragmentary. "Without knowing how I arrived there, I see myself in the little room Gros occupied . . ." These repeated autobiographic *medias res* ("je me vois marchant . . ."; "je me vois logé . . ."; "Tout à coup je me vois . . .") provide a sense of contingency and unpredictability.

All fiction no doubt depends on this subtle interplay of necessity and gratuity. The balance and dosage may vary; the synthesis of being and existing may be more or less satisfactorily achieved. But this fundamental tension is what makes *Vie de Henry Brulard* an enterprise of the imagination as much as of memory, what makes it in fact a work of creative retrospection. Nothing is more revealing in this respect than Stendhal's habit of toying with the other possibilities of an irreversible occurrence. This conditional, speculative approach to the past, which makes him wonder whether any of his interpretations is valid, typically introduces a transfiguring element into many of his reminiscences. "I ruminate incessantly on

what interests me; by considering it from different *positions of the soul*, I end up by seeing something new, and I make it *change its aspect*." This crucial statement in Chapter 31 clearly indicates not only how the ability to relive with intensity is related to the very intensity of "doubt," but also, conversely, how this speculative approach, which accompanies the intensity of memory, stirs the powers of the imagination.

If the mystery of the personality explains Stendhal's self-search and self-creation, his literary enterprise, in turn, exploits this mystery as its central subject. More often than in *Souvenirs d'égotisme*, Stendhal, in his account of his childhood in *Vie de Henry Brulard*, insists on this elusiveness of the character, on its mobile and protean nature. "I will be fifty years old; it would be high time to know myself. What have I been, what am I?" But in fact, he does not know and cannot answer. He repeatedly eludes himself. The mobility of the observer makes it doubly difficult to fix the mobility of the subject. Thus Stendhal, by the very nature of his own awareness of the self, is led to develop the themes of motion, restlessness, instability, change, and continuous becoming. These will be the themes of his novels as well as the principles of their built-in subversion, because the impossibility of confining and defining reality, of making literature and life coincide, is at the heart of Stendhal's literary venture. An instrument of self-criticism, his writing is for him also an instrument of discovery, in the process of which memory and imagination become interchangeable, and cerebral masquerades serve his pursuit of truth.