

Amoss on Abelin (2017)

Abelin, Philippe. *Les Nœuds romanesques chez Stendhal: empathie et manipulation*. L'Harmattan, "Critiques littéraires," 2017, pp. 437, ISBN 978-2-343-06852-7

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Philippe Abelin applies to Stendhal's fictive universe the terms and concepts of the German philosopher Max Scheler's phenomenological analysis of human sympathy, which has been translated into French as *Nature et formes de la sympathie* (2003). In the preface, Philippe Berthier attributes Abelin's choice of this focus—empathy and manipulation—to Abelin's career in diplomacy, which parallels Stendhal's own. Berthier points out that both diplomacy and *le beylisme* concern themselves with acting on others in order to preserve one's own independence (that of the state in the case of diplomacy and that of the self in the case of *le beylisme*).

A rewarding result of this conceptual approach is the setting side-by-side of characters who otherwise seem unrelated, revealing unexpected instances of resemblance or contrast. Louise de Rênal and the Abbé de Frilair in *Le Rouge et le Noir*, for example, are both seen to be masters of empathy who succeed thereby in dominating others (51–64). In *Armance*, on the other hand, Mme de Malivert sits at the opposite pole from the Chevalier de Bonnivet. Mme de Malivert, the "idéal d'une figure émotionnelle-empathique" (71), inhabits a world where "tout devient affaire d'émotion, de sentiment, d'affectivité" (82). In contrast, the Chevalier de Bonnivet represents "le type du manipulateur idéal" (71). Showing himself an expert "manipulateur de foules," he imposes religious devotion on this world. But he also proves his ability as a manipulator of individuals.

Abelin analyses the "altruisme maternel" of Victoire de Campireali in *L'Abbesse de Castro* as empathy and manipulation made one; their union unintentionally makes her very daughter a victim. Examples of "altruisme institutionnel" are the doctors who populate *Lamiel* and *Lucien Leuwen*. Their capacity for empathy is at the same time "appréciation subtile et juste de rapports intersubjectifs" and "art et volonté de les manipuler" (153).

The intersubjective relationships that are the focus of this dense study take on a different character in the "roman empathique." In *La Chartreuse*, Fabrice's empathy brings about his self-identification with Napoleon: "Il n'est que rien face à ce tout, il ne s'éprouve rien face à ce tout. Mais c'est décidément parce qu'il n'est rien, parce qu'il ne s'éprouve rien que le dialogue inégal peut se créer. *L'un devient l'autre précisément par leur complémentarité*" (170; emphasis in the text). *Le Rouge et le Noir*, too, establishes this relationship between Stendhal's protagonist and the historical hero (183).

François Leuwen represents a new sort of "political animal," brandishing as his principal weapon a formidable "esprit critique" (210). Abelin calls him an "artiste de la politique," or, in Scheler's terms, an "idiopath" who produces in his listeners a sort of "fusion affective" (211). Following Balzac's identification of *La Chartreuse* as a novel of ideas, the author treats the operations of empathy and manipulation in it not as aspects of individual psychology but of social psychology: "*Toute l'empathie des gouvernants est là, dans leur capacité ou non de se rendre maître de la psychologie des peuples*" (265; emphasis in the text). Discussions of the populist hero Julien Sorel and the technocrat Lucien Leuwen complete this section on the Stendhalian protagonist's role in the political preoccupations of the major novels. A third section then moves from Abelin's identification of the "acmé amoureux" as "la marque et la spécificité même du roman stendhalien," first to Lucien's acquaintance with "la grande passion" thanks to the graces of Mme de Vaize and Mme Grandet, and then to the entry of Stendhal's heroines into the political field.

In a brief fourth section, Abelin turns to ideology and style. One chapter perceptively analyzes the unacknowledged ideological debt of Stendhal's fiction to Hobbesian political thought, a *parti pris* masked by the narrator's and his characters' moral outrage at state abuse of power: "Par la discordance entre un jugement politique implicite et une condamnation morale explicite, Stendhal laisse donc son lecteur dans un monde hésitant, où il doit lui-même poursuivre les pistes d'un dialogisme sérieux sur ces deux plans, moral et politique" (385). A second extends the conceptual framework by citing moments that call forth empathetic responses on the part of the reader: "Perdant en altérité, il pourrait devenir partie même à l'œuvre romanesque s'il devenait membre d'un réseau intersubjectif le reliant aux auteur-narrateur-personnages" (404).

The virtues of this book lie in the identification of a major preoccupation of Stendhal's fiction and its consistent approach to analyzing comparable situations and characters across the corpus of texts—situations and characters not often brought into such clear focus. It also bears the flaws of an insufficiently revised doctoral thesis, including a sometimes heavy conceptual apparatus and a surfeit of examples that threaten to overwhelm the argument. Until the end, the author does not consider an

even richer though admittedly already-mined vein: how the seemingly cynical narrator manipulates his readers—forestalling their likely severe judgments with his own—in order to create empathy for his inexperienced and impetuous heroes. In addition, the text is marred by frequent typographical annoyances—generous recourse to italics, confusion of *accents graves* and *aigus*, hyphens and dashes used inconsistently, stray commas and extra words, missing letters and punctuation. Abelin’s achievement in this busy volume is to have brought to the field a critical approach that shines a new light on a notable element of Stendhal’s œuvre.

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