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ÉTUDES SUR L'*ÉMILE*

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REFLECTIONS OF *ÉMILE* IN STENDHAL'S *LE ROUGE ET LE NOIR*

par Pamela Park

Those familiar with Stendhal know that Rousseau's ideas had a capital influence on Marie-Henri Beyle, the man, and his work. At the beginning of his literary career Stendhal notes about Rousseau: «Jean-Jacques m'a donné *the character loving and the great loves.*» Like most of the reading public of the XVIIIth century, Stendhal was immensely touched by *La Nouvelle Héloïse.* This work especially moved the very young Stendhal, and he later came to appreciate other works of Rousseau, among them *Émile.* To all of Rousseau's works Stendhal owes some of his deep-rooted tendency to respond pleasurably and forcefully to all that are themselves and whose simplicity and purity are coupled with tenderness or warm sympathy for others, which constitutes a kind of nobility for Stendhal.

Our concern is with *Émile,* a work Stendhal read for the first time when he was very young and which, unlike *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, left him unmoved, and he could not finish it. He later came to revise this opinion and in the Deuxième Préface to *De l'Amour* Stendhal cites *Émile* as being one of those works «qui forcent le lecteur à penser.» An intellectual child of the XVIIIth century, Stendhal, influenced by the sensationalist Helvétius and the ideologue Destutt de Tracy, was passionately interested in what we now call the social sciences. He studied human behavior from an empiricist's perspective throughout his life. His novels have always been praised for their attention to psychology, for their representation of human behavior as Stendhal understood it to operate in reality. A sensationalist work like *Émile*, a beginning passage of which reads: «Nous naissons sensibles, et, dès notre naissance, nous sommes affectés de diverses manières par les objets qui nous environnent...,» (*O.C.*, IV, 248) was bound to impassion a thinker like Stendhal.

In *Le Rouge et le Noir*, Stendhal's second published novel —

it appeared in 1830 – the reader familiar with Rousseau's life and his work finds many superficial allusions to these, and in one instance a direct reference to the *Confessions*: the hero of Stendhal's novel, Julien Sorel, counts the *Confessions* among his favorite books, which number two, the other one being the *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*.

The influence of Rousseau is more profound than this. Our reading of *Le Rouge et le Noir* reveals close connections between the psychological behavior of the novel's characters and the theories of behavior Rousseau provides in *Émile*. The latter, a treatise on education, is actually a treatise on how to raise children for life: «Vivre est le métier que je veux lui [Émile] apprendre.» (IV, 252). He who learns how to live will be happy. Rousseau insists that any educational program be «convenable à l'homme et bien adaptée au cœur humain,» (IV, 243) and the one he proposes is based on a theory of human nature and happiness, which he articulates in *Émile*. It is precisely this understanding of man and happiness that is reflected in Stendhal's novel. I would like to focus in particular on Stendhal's protrayal of Julien Sorel, the hero.

From observation Rousseau sees man as a creature who seeks to survive; he is endowed with *amour de soi*, or love of self, mankind's basic and natural passion, which pushes him to survive: «Nous naissons faibles, nous avons besoin de force; nous naissons dépourvus de tout, nous avons besoin d'assistance...»; (IV, 247) however, man has abilities that when educated impower him to live: «Tout ce que nous n'avons pas à notre naissance et dont nous avons besoin étant grands, nous est donné par l'éducation.» (IV, 247)

Rousseau remarks, furthermore, that man develops in response to sensations, which he categorizes as pleasurable or painful. Pain is the state of being in need, of lacking something, and man is moved by love of self to satisfy this need. This negative state of being liberated from pain is happiness. One feels free, independent, at peace, which is mankind's well-being. For Rousseau, this is all we can know about happiness: «Nous ne savons ce que c'est que bonheur ou malheur absolu. Tout est mêlé dans cette vie; on n'y goûte aucun sentiment pur, on n'y reste pas deux moments dans le même état. Les affections de nos âmes, ainsi que les modifications de nos corps, sont dans un flux continuel... Le plus heureux est celui qui sent le moins de peines; le plus misérable est celui qui sent le moins de plaisirs... La félicité de

l'homme ici-bas n'est donc qu'un état négatif; on doit la mesurer par la moindre quantité de maux qu'il souffre.» (IV, 303) Amour de soi seeks the state of satisfaction of need. In Life man's purpose is to be free: «Le premier de tous les biens, c'est la liberté.» (IV, 309)

Rousseau's feeling that the creator is provident leads him to maintain that God has endowed man with the abilities to be happy. He has given men the power they need to satisfy their needs. Why are most men, then, unhappy? Why are most in the unhappy state of being needy? *Émile* addresses this situation and provides a clear answer: mankind has contracted needs that he is powerless to satisfy. *Émile* can actually be seen as a treatise on desire. The goal of the educational program is to produce an individual who wants only that which he has the capabilities to satisfy, to want only that which, when attained, will procure a feeling of independence and liberty. As is well-known, Rousseau's theory of education is based essentially on a negative principle. The structure of the education exacts that Émile be sequestered from conditions that would give rise to unsatisfiable needs. This structure allows, therefore, for needs to be born in line with his innate powers to satisfy them; about a person so educated Rousseau affirms: «Un être sensible dont les facultés égaleraient les désirs serait un être absolument heureux.» (IV, 304) All needs outside of these limits are unnatural; they make for pain, from which love of self recoils. Man is driven to happiness; it is perverse that he desire that which would provoke the opposite.

Julien Sorel, Stendhal's hero, seeks independence; he strives for the well-being of freedom from constraints. Although for most of the novel this desire is confused with the ambition to achieve glory like Napoleon did, we are given views of Julien, isolated on mountains, exulting in the pure joy of liberation: «Enfin il atteignit le sommet de la grande montagne... Pourquoi ne passerais-je pas la nuit ici? se dit-il, j'ai du pain, et *je suis libre!* Au son de ce grand mot son âme s'exalta... Julien resta dans cette grotte plus heureux qu'il ne l'avait été de la vie, agité par ses rêveries et par son bonheur de liberté.»[1] At moments like this Julien feels more like Napoleon than ever; in fact, at another moment, in a similar situation, Julien, enraptured,

1. Stendhal, «Le Rouge et le Noir,» *Romans et Nouvelles*, Vol. I., (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1952), p. 285-86.

espies a hawk, a symbol for Napoleon, and the narrator remarks: «Ses mouvements tranquilles et puissants le frappaient, il enviait cette force, il enviait cet isolement. C'était la destinée de Napoléon, serait-ce un jour la sienne?»[2] It is Napoleon's supposed freedom from want, which the soaring, isolated hawk suggests, that he really wants, the exhilaration of not feeling checked. Julien's pursuit of this happiness is the focus of the novel. It is what makes him heroic and what commands our sympathy and admiration; it is the goal of the educational program of *Émile* and which Stendhal willed to his fictional progeny.

When we consider how Julien's desire to be free is developed and played out, the connection between *Émile* and *Le Rouge et le Noir* is made firmer. As I have already recalled, for Rousseau what we desire determines our happiness: to the extent that one's powers are able to satisfy one's desires, one feels well-being. As Stendhal conceives his character, the same condition for happiness operates. The fact is, though, Julien wants what he has not the means to satisfy. As he lives throughout the novel, we are witness to the unhappiness his unsatisfiable desire causes him. This behavioral complex conforms to Rousseau's ideas on unnatural desires in *Émile*.

According to Rousseau unnatural desires are wants of opinion, of fantasy: «mot par lequel j'entends tous les désirs qui ne sont pas de vrais besoins...» (IV, 309-310) Such desires are not necessary; they do not develop out of the necessity to survive, nor are they useful to it. They are thus not real needs; their value is insubstantial, it depends upon an opinion, despite the fact that we may intensely want what is unnecessary. Useless wants spring from contacts with other men. Our love of self can provoke us at the view of another to compare ourselves with him. This can give rise to desires that we would not have otherwise and which can have no bearing thus on self-preservation. Far from being useful, such needs are ultimately unsatisfiable. We can never have the means to satisfy them, and they leave us, thus, in the state of pain, the condition of being in want.

Rousseau provides many models of the course of unnatural desires. One of them is perfectly reflected in the behavior of Julien Sorel. Contact with other men, Rousseau warns, may give rise in an individual to the opinion that it would be pleasurable to be like someone else. Man can resonate to the aspirations

2. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

of others, and he can be moved to try to fashion his life according to the format of these with the intention of achieving the happiness they either have or desire. Imitation, Rousseau writes, «nous vient du désir de se transporter toujours hors de soi.» (IV, 340) It is this departure from one's nature that dooms one to the constant state of want. A person who entertains the illusion that he can be like someone else, that he can go out of his own nature, is destined to run after an ideal that it is impossible to attain. For instead of relying on his own powers and his unique relationship with his surroundings to experience life, which alone can produce well-being, he depends on another to prescribe his conduct. But he needs the faculties and experience of this person, which he can never have, to carry out this conduct. Frustration inevitably ensues, which remains constant as long as he entertains the desire to be like someone else. Vanity and envy can be possible products of the desire to be like another. These are appetites that keep one further attached to one's model.

This state of unsatisfaction is the signal to the human faculty of imagination, about which Rousseau passionately warns: «C'est l'imagination qui étend pour nous la mesure des possibles, soit en bien, soit en mal, et qui, par conséquent existe et nourrit les désirs par l'espoir de les satisfaire.» (IV, 304) Were it not for this faculty, man could perhaps drop his impossible desire, but «le monde imaginaire [qui] est infini,» (IV, 305) keeps alive the hope of the person who wants to be another, the illusion of the vain man that he has more advantages than others, and it feeds the envy and hate of those so inflicted, keeping all enslaved, all subjugated to fantasies which prevent the experience of happiness, or freedom from want. The imagination turns impossible desires into unsatiable passions.

It is precisely for what Émile stands to risk if he were raised in society, that Rousseau insists that he be educated apart from men and without books that would open up the moral world to him. Only when he has ample experience of well-being, and with the given that his imagination is not developed, is he ready to be able to compare himself with others. He will be aware then that actions have consequences, and he will be able to see the consequences that befall men with whom he compares himself and reason will preclude that his amour de soi be moved in unnatural directions.

Julien has not had a negative education. He, unlike Émile,

has not been brought to experience freedom through a careful structuring of his environment that gives rise to needs his unique powers can meet. For him, freedom is not a state that is achieved by meeting a need; for Julien, freedom is a need, and as he has contracted it, it is an unnatural want, a desire of fantasy.

Julien finds out about nature through his friend the retired chirurgien-général, who did the Italian Campaign of 1796, in the army of Napoleon. The old man regaled the boy with stories of glorious successes, triomphs over obstacles, and he willed him the hagiographic *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène.* Because of these accounts and Rousseau's *Confessions* Julien, very young, came to see how domination, bending to the will of another or circumstances, weighs on the human spirit and stifles its nature. He felt that happiness lay in being liberated from demands, in being a free agent. He is passionately motivated to win for himself this happiness, but he knows to go about it only as Napoleon did. He misguidedly believes that by imitating Napoleon's behavior, he will acquire for himself Napoleon's supposed freedom. Unlike Émile, Julien has no conscious knowledge of what his abilities are and how he can manipulate these to release himself from constraints. He was exposed too young to heroic tales in which he would have liked to play a role. He sees himself through these. He knows how Napoleon acted, and Julien feels that if he imitates the form of these actions, he will achieve liberation. Napoleon «a fait fortune,» attained the summit of power, Julien will *faire fortune.* The very young boy had the perceptiveness to note that in Restoration France, one could not attain political and social power through the military; rather, one had to enter the Church to do so. Immediately after this realization, Julien began studying Latin.

Rousseau points out in his discussion of La Fontaine's fables and their effect on children, that the young, who are inexperienced, are incapable of assessing the moral behavior of others. The child responds only to the pleasures and the pains and he is impervious to all else: the conditions that give rise to moral behavior and the consequences of it. Not recognizing these, the child may set about imitating the behavior of others, but only to the end of experiencing the frustration and subjugation that I have already discussed in the illustration presented of unnatural desires. Julien's course of trying to wear Napoleon's behavior, and sometimes that of Rousseau's: «Cette horreur pour manger avec les domestiques n'était pas naturelle à Julien...

Il puisait cette répugnance dans les *Confessions* de Rousseau,»[3] leads him directly to the unhappiness that befalls a person who wants to be like someone else to attain his happiness.

Stendhal depressingly shows that the moral climate of Restoration France will snuff out Napoleonic ambitions. Julien Sorel is, in fact, put to death, at the end of the novel, by society. Power is still to be had and wielded, but those who attain it do so by self-abasing and secretive manoeuvres. Julien at first thinks that he must distinguish himself if he is to exert influence, and «il ne voyait rien entre lui et les actions héroïques, que le manque d'occasion.»[4] At the seminary in Besançon, Julien soon realizes that his manifested intellectual brilliance brought upon him only suspicion and alienation. Julien, however, far too taken with Napoleon's glorious coups, finds it impossible to mask displays of superiority, which by their energy threaten the arbiters of power. His nature has become too passionate to hide his ambition and prowess. Because he has a desire he cannot satisfy, Julien's imagination is very active; he lives on fantasies of his future successes. He constantly steals away to consult his Bible, the *Mémorial*, to exult in revery. His passion drives him, and despite himself he cannot control the tendency to impose himself forthrightly, in the face of others. His compulsive imitation of Napoleon warrants him frustration and depression: he cannot exert influence over others; he makes them despise and envy him: his family, the seminarians, and the young nobles of the de La Mole circle. His passion pushes him, though, keeping him a slave to ambition regardless of failures.

Stendhal also shows that Julien's temperament is really unsuited to the Napoleonic form. Julien is naturally sensitive and thus susceptible to passionate attachments, but Julien, like Stendhal, is a «grand timide.» He has difficulty acting on his will, particularly when this concerns women. For Julien, part of the hero's program consists in conquering women. Napoleon, he fantasizes, had adoring women at his feet, a prospect that in itself delights our hero, but he also considers this to be an essential undertaking for he who wants liberty: Napoleon did this, so must he! Julien conceives of the conquest of women in terms of a military battle, but these are campaigns for which he lacks courage. The scene in the garden at Vergy when he takes the

3. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

hand of Mme de Rênal is the beloved example of Julien's technique of seduction à la guerre. Julien considers it his duty as an ambitious man to seduce Mme de Rênal, and he goes about it as though it were a military affair: «Ses regards... étaient singuliers; il l'[Mme de Rênal] observait comme un ennemi avec lequel il va falloir se battre.»[5] However, before the battle takes place, that is that of taking Mme de Rênal's hand, Julien is terrified. He forces himself to go through with it, though, and the satisfaction he finally feels results really not from winning the battle with Mme de Rênal but with himself! Had he lacked the character to do this, Julien would have felt crushing disappointment in himself; he would have considered himself to be deficient, not able to measure up to Napoleonic standards. Julien does know self-disappointment. He has often the anxiety caused by self-doubt and poor self-esteem that stem from his unnatural comparison of himself with Napoleon. This is precisely the painful bind that Rousseau was thinking about and that he hoped to prevent in insisting that young Émile not read books the focus of which is moral behavior.

Besides the frustration and the anxiety that his ill-founded passion causes him, it is also responsible for curtailing the real happiness that Julien unknowingly experienced from time to time in Part One of the novel. I mentioned some of these moments earlier: the scenes of Julien on mountains, and there are others: moments he had at Vergy, the country home of the de Rênal's, in the company of Mme de Rênal. At the end of the novel, Julien, in prison, waiting to be tried and finally executed for having shot Mme de Rênal, is free from ambition. He feels strangely liberated in prison, a sensation that seems really not so strange for us, since throughout the novel we have seen him laboring under the burden of trying to be like someone he is not. The unsollicited information comes to him that he has not killed Louise; she survived the shooting, and this information sets off the activity or remembering that will occupy him until his death. Julien begins remembering those moments in Vergy that the narrator had earlier described in the following way: «Julien... avait vécu en véritable enfant depuis son séjour à la campagne, aussi heureux de courir à la suite des papillons que ses élèves. Après tant de contraintes et de politique habile, seul, loin des regards des hommes, et, par instinct, ne craignant point

5. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

madame de Rênal, il se livrait au plaisir d'exister, si vif à cet âge, et au milieu des plus belles montagnes du monde.»[6] Julien in prison concedes: «J'étais heureux alors... Je ne connaissais pas mon bonheur.»[7] During these moments in Vergy, he escaped from his desire to be like Napoleon, and he experienced exactly what he was hoping to achieve by imitating his grand model. Unfortunately, Julien at Vergy did not see that the means he chose to experience liberation were unsuited to the end. And because the freedom he actually felt in Vergy did not result from the means that he thought would lead him to happiness, he failed to recognize that there, where he acted in conformity with his nature, he was exactly what he was aspiring to be. Rousseau warned against such an ironic situation in *Émile*: «C'est à force de nous travailler pour augmenter notre bonheur, que nous le changeons en misère.» (IV, 305) Julien's passion compelled him to have more – but not what he needed – then he had at Vergy.

Through his representation of Julien Sorel Stendhal gives a concrete example of the misfortune that Rousseau maintains will befall those who have not had the negative education the principles of which he articulates in *Émile*. Stendhal makes the case of Julien all the more poignant, indeed tragic, in that he endows his hero with a desire for true happiness – the kind of happiness that resonates in all of Rousseau's works –, but the way Julien thinks that he ought to go about satisfying this desire itself causes him not to recognize happiness when he has it.

The tragic representation of Julien Sorel includes a scathing criticism of society, with which Rousseau would have been only too delighted. That a person living in society can find out about nature, about what is proper to man, only through reading it; that happiness comes as a revelation to Julien from a source other than his own experience of life constitutes for Stendhal a condemnation of the existing conditions that make this so. As Stendhal recreates France of 1830, he shows that Julien is actually blessed to have read about Napoleon and Rousseau, even though these discoveries cause him pain. Were it not for books, Julien would have developed ignoble desires like those who surround him did: he would have been obsequious in order to acquire the base gratification of vanity and he would

6. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 651.

have been subjugated to the avaricious fear that others would prevent the indulgence of this appetite. Julien's ideal, although he misses it, is worthy: he seeks to be a man, not a slave. Rousseau would have been pleased with *Le Rouge et le Noir*, which owes so much to *Émile*.

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