
REVIEWS

Dean de la Motte and Stirling Haig, eds. *Approaches to Teaching Stendhal's The Red and the Black*. (Approaches to Teaching World Literature, Joseph Gibaldi, series editor.) New York: The Modern Languages Association of America, 1999. 189p.

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Stendhal's 1830 French novel, *The Red and the Black*, is the object of eighteen essays by experts in 19th-century French literature. Several represent comparative literature, literary criticism, history, and sociology.

In Part One (3-8), the editors review editions and translations, courses and course designs, recommended readings, visual and multimedia aids. The problems specific to the novel are its length and complexity. American students may find the deeply imbedded class conflicts in the novel difficult to grasp without the help of proven comprehension strategies.

Part Two (9-173) contains five sections on "Contextualizing *The Red and the Black*," "Strategies of Reading," "Formal Approaches," "Questions of Gender and Class Identity" and finally "Technology and Pedagogy." The discussion opens with concepts familiar to Stendhal specialists such as "the novel is a mirror being carried along the highway" and "politics in a work of imagination is like a pistol shot in the middle of a concert." Although the authors rely heavily on history/historicity, discursive truth, and historical verisimilitude (Smith Allen), they move progressively from history to sociology (Parkhurst Ferguson), and ultimately imbed the discussion within politics (Brooks). The first section closes with a romantic approach (Birkett) that stresses traits Stendhal admired in Romanticism: "subjectivism, individuality, energy, courage, imagination, the rejection of society's vanity, the happiness of reciprocal love, and the nobility of integrity" (47). The women protagonists in *The Red and the Black*, Mme de Rênal and Mathilde de la Môle, regain the importance attributed to them by Stendhal, but denied them by history and politics. The historical and political backgrounds, and essential dates, center on the French Revolution of 1789, the Reign of Terror, and the decapitation of Louis XVI. Parkhurst Ferguson situates it in 1791, but others indicate 1793 as historically correct. These happenings and the Napoleonic cult announce the July Revolution of 1830 of historical importance, but also important for under-

standing *The Red and the Black*, which is subtitled “A Chronicle of 1830.” The novel, as we learn, does not portray the July Revolution, but rather the events immediately preceding it. Thus a solid grasp of history, society, and politics of the period is essential.

“Strategies on Reading the Novel,” depicts love and a phenomenon called “crystallization,” the effects of imagination on Julien Sorel’s pursuit of emotional happiness, the influence of Rousseau. Savage Brossman emphasizes the role that appearances play in social functioning and their relationship to reality. The first chapters of the novel reveal “a society whose power structures are built on money and perceived status within a reactionary monarchy supported by the church” (51). Day explores scenes of “reading and writing” and how they relate to the novel’s “exemplarity as a mode of literary realism, its symbolic and psychological dimensions, its devices for plot development, . . . its reception as a creative literary artifact” (57).

In the section on “Formal Approaches,” Prince’s narratological treatment includes an impressive number of technical terms. In the end, however, their proliferation (parataxis, syndectic, staccato, legato, narratorial intrusiveness, metanarrative, disnarrated, to cite a few) conveys a dispassionate tone. Ginsburg, on the other hand, explores the novel’s plot and the “notion of yielding a return.” He discovers that Stendhal undermines the ideas of an end-dominated plot and shows a tendency away from the plot which leads to a sense of “freedom” and a novel more fragmented in nature. Willis sets out in search of labor saving devices while studying the depth and richness of *The Red and the Black*. He proposes exploring minor characters, such as Geronimo, Mme Derville and the Duke de Chaulnes. This strategy allows for pointing out the symbolic value of reading, which no longer is a means to success but an end in itself. The novel also raises questions of boundaries: “those between verbal freedom and political authority, between history and fiction, and between authentic and derivative modes of reading, writing and desiring” (66).

From the section on gender and class identity, Algazi’s title “The Quest for the Mother: A Psychoanalytic Feminist Reading of *The Red and the Black*” was selected as an assignment in a class in “Introduction to French Literature.” Without being offered further comprehension strategies, students were asked to point out the contribution Algazi made to their understanding and appreciation of the novel. Overall, the experience proved gratifying. Students wondered about the absence of Julien’s mother and enjoyed reading an essay with a feminist twist. Some discussed their own reactions on the subject; others felt that the feminist approach created barriers, excluding other interpretations. Still others felt that while the

conclusion seemed valid [that “Stendhal creates a space in which women who mother can exist as free individuals” (138)], the discussion leading to it remained less clear. At times, the treatment “seemed” antifeminist, and in conflict with what the title promised to deliver.

In the section on “Technology, Pedagogy and Interpretive Paradigms,” de Dobay Rifelj’s essay, though modest in tone, offers practical solutions. It includes painters of the Napoleonic cult such as David, Gros, Debret and Ingres, Gance’s film *Napoleon*, the Louvre CD-ROM, and topics for class discussion and writing assignments. She draws attention to the ARTFL Project, and proposes guidelines for creating a Stendhal web page. In short, she provides sources and references to technology and multimedia resources that she herself has explored.

One reads in the “Index” the names of time-tested critics such as Auerbach, Blin, Poulet, Starobinski, and Martineau, evidence that good criticism is never obsolete. Among more recent critical theorists we find Lacan, Barthes, and Kristeva, also Giraud, Crouzet, Bakhtin, as well as Derrida and Foucault. They announce highly diverse approaches to the novel. Prévost and Victor Del Litto remain absent. The latter is a scholar passionately devoted to Stendhal. Until 1995, he edited the *Stendhal Club*. The contributors to the journal saw themselves as the “bastion of traditional criticism,” based on solid documentation and of great value even to today’s students. They would chuckle with pleasure in finding themselves ironically designated here as “antiquarians”!

Approaches to Teaching Stendhal’s The Red and the Black has a very attractive cover, in itself a true visual aid, displaying on a black background a portrait of Napoleon in red attire by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. The book is a valuable teaching tool and a pleasure to read as well. It contains a wealth of information and a variety of critical approaches conveniently gathered in a single source that normally would have to be extracted from many scattered documents. This is not the least of its attractions. Specialists, experienced students, and those who read Stendhal for the first time are invited to explore, pick, and choose from many approaches that suit traditional interests, or exotic ones such as comparing *The Red and the Black* to Sand’s *Indiana* for instance (Kadish), or Yourcenar’s *Aphrodisia, the Widow* (Lukacher). The book provides a solid overview of the problems and pleasures related to reading Stendhal’s novel. The essays will be, no doubt, a popular reference, one that is frequently consulted in libraries and private collections. They may shift the balance from the “Happy Few” to the “Many Happy” readers of Stendhal. ✨