

# Scarlet and Black<sup>1</sup> : The Silent Pistol

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by Michael Tatham

*Any political idea in a work of literature is like a pistol shot in the midst of a concert.*—Stendhal.

## I.

It was Silone, I believe, who proposed that we might be communists without the Party and Christians without the Church. Individually, perhaps: collectively, it can scarcely be doubted we lack the necessary courage and self-discipline. Belloc, I suspect, came closer to evaluating our gifts when he advised 'always keep ahold of nurse. . . .' The difficulty is, of course, that most of our nurseries are empty of nurses—the last wraith of a political nanny had disappeared some time before Mr Wilson sent for his famous removal van, and now that those long-serving retainers, the Latin Mass and the 1662 Anglican Communion, are skipping among us as vernacular folk masses and Second and Third Series, it is understandable that we should be in some confusion. Indeed, despite Silone, our predicament is such that we cling yet more tightly to the only security available. It is perhaps pleasantly ironic that for many of us the last and most esteemed resource is none other than Progressive nanny. Orwell could see the way of it a quarter of a century ago.

'Almost everyone nowadays, *even the majority of Catholics and Conservatives* is progressive, or at least wishes to be thought so. . . . We are all of us good democrats, anti-fascist, anti-imperialist, contemptuous of class distinction, impervious to colour prejudice, and so on and so forth', (*England your England*. Secker and Warburg.)

Regrettably, some of the pleasanter aspects of such a position are now more in question than they were when Orwell wrote—colour prejudice wears all the dignity of democratic consensus—but for the most part the position remains unaltered and has probably been strengthened by the dominant position of television as a means of influencing public attitudes.

Yet, it is Education in its new role of substitute religion, which has become the chief repository of Progressive faith, and the opiate which provides the most comforting fantasies. At such a time it would be as ridiculous to look for anything deviant on the pages of the Tuesday Guardian as to expect the Courses provided by the Open University

<sup>1</sup>Stendhal's *Scarlet and Black*: A new translation by M. R. B. Shaw. Penguin Classics 1953. Since reprinted. Also published in the same translation by the Folio Society.

to escape the prevailing orthodoxy. Indeed, it is much to the credit of the O.U. that of the two Second Level Arts Courses, one should be an excellent study of the Renaissance and Reformation. More expectedly, the Age of Revolutions course reveals various characteristics of the progressive attitude. Thus, the American War of Independence is presented without undue reference to the large number of Loyalist regiments in arms for the Crown, or particular emphasis on Dr Johnson's pertinent inquiry: 'Why is it that the loudest whines for liberty come from the drivers of negroes'!

Similar attitudes to interpreting the past reveal themselves in the Units devoted to Art and Literature. Students reading 'Art and Politics in France' learn that Charlotte Corday was 'a young royalist sympathiser from Caen who associated with the Girondins' and that her favourite reading was the Biblical story of Judith. Marat, on the other hand, is described as 'genuinely sympathetic towards the poor and an unwavering patriot'. Any doubt is neatly quelled by the opinion of a Scottish physician who was in Paris in 92 and expressed himself in terms precisely calculated to earn the contempt of any self-respecting progressive, 'This Marat is said to love carnage like a vulture and to delight in human sacrifices like Moloch, God of the Ammonites'. In Unit 29 students discover that while David welcomed Napoleon as a defender of the Revolution, he became critical of him when he made himself Emperor. How pleasant if someone had asserted that, for all his great skill with a brush, David was a sycophant who studiously protected his own interests and found no difficulty in forgetting Revolutionary sentiments when it became convenient to accept Imperial commissions or to defer to Imperial censorship.

However, it is in its treatment of Stendhal's *Scarlet and Black* that we find the problem of reconciling the author's—admittedly often ambiguous—words, and the progressive position, at its most acute. For while the novel offers too much resistance for any completely one-sided analysis, there is, nevertheless, a confused attempt to present the book as an historical work in which the forces of democracy, represented by Julien Sorel and the Spirit of Napoleon, triumphantly expose the incompetence and decadence of a reactionary clerical regime. Arnold Kettle<sup>2</sup> writes: 'Black is the colour not merely of the priests (the villains of the piece) but of the whole of the Restoration Society which they serve and permeate'. And, more topically:

'It all depends', he seems to be saying, 'which side you are on'. If you sympathise with the Restoration of the Bourbons and look back with horror at the Revolution, then you will sympathise with people like the Marquis de la Mole and even M. de Renal, for

<sup>2</sup>All quotations from Professor Arnold Kettle and other critics are to be found in *Open University Unit A202.28* and its accompanying *Study Guide*, and A302.8-9.

according to their lights they act intelligently. But if you sympathise with the values of the Revolution—the radical ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity—then you will respond to Julien's aspirations and to his boundless contempt for the values of Restoration France. Perhaps it is not too difficult for late twentieth century readers, with personal experience of a young generation, many of whom have attitudes to established society not unlike Julien's, to appreciate what Stendhal was getting at.

Elsewhere the stress is different and students are told that from the first Julien is not simply seen as an individual case history(!) but 'as a social and historical phenomenon.' There are times, moreover, when Kettle is at pains to mitigate the effect of such a reading: he remarks, rather confusingly, that he does not want students to read *Scarlet and Black* for the light it throws on the period and says that it cannot usefully be thought of as a propagandist work. In discussing Stendhal's point of view he uses terms which are valuable as a means of reconciling contraries, but which, by their very peculiarity, remind us of the difficulty of the task.

There is much in him of both the eighteenth century aristocrat and the nineteenth century fervent democrat—he looks at France of the 1820's from the point of view of a cultivated gentleman who is also an atheist and a revolutionary—he values above all sincerity and realism. But sincerity to him is not a purely subjective quality, a quality of being: it is the quality of seeing life without illusions and acting with perfect realism.

More helpfully, he also writes that, 'When we refer . . . to the novelist's point of view, what it is that gives his imagined world coherence, we are referring to something less like an opinion or an idea than an imaginative sensibility'.

The critic, G. Lukacs, qualifies his initial agreement 'The fate of these characters is intended to reflect the vileness, the squalid loathsomeness of the whole epoch' by developing a further dimension, 'All Stendhal's heroes save their mental and moral integrity from the taint of their time by escaping from life.' It is an interesting qualification and partly bridges the gap between those critics who see the book as essentially political and others, such as Mrs Leavis, who believe *Scarlet and Black* has qualities which can be defined as 'pessimistic or nihilistic.' While specifically rejecting her position, Kettle argues—I think mistakenly—that 'Stendhal's implied judgments of his characters, his ironical standpoints, are not based upon some rigid, unchanging view of human nature, some "truth" about life which only the elect among his readers can share, but upon a sense of the inexhaustible relativity of human development.' One is aware of the anti-elitist drift, but whatever Kettle's exact intention, it is obvious that when Stendhal chose 'Elective Affinities' as the title for Chapter 7 he

was raising obstacles in the path of an interpretation which allows much for 'inexhaustible relativity'.

## II.

It is already clear that the most maddening and yet attractive quality of *Scarlet and Black* is its sheer ambiguity; its unfailing capacity for making critics advance contradictory opinions. Nor was Stendhal above setting traps for the unwary. Few things could be less helpful than to suppose his well-known epigram, that a novel is a mirror passing down a road, has anything useful to tell us about his methods or intentions. Whatever else the book may be, it is in no sense a documentary. The colour of blood which Julien sees on the church floor immediately prior to his first meeting with Madame de Renâ, is a device of the intellect and not a chance reflection.

In one sense, of course, *Scarlet and Black* is quite unambiguously a product of its time, a novel of Restoration France: but this is to say no more than that all works of art reflect circumstances of time and place—it tells us nothing of the qualities which enable a few works to supersede these limitations and to deserve attention long after all the circumstantial details have changed. Thus, I believe, *Scarlet and Black* retains its importance not because we follow an inefficient and despotic government in tactical alliance with the Church through the Congregation and the seminaries, but because we are engaged in problems which accompany the struggle of man's spirit as it fights its way through the restrictions of existence. Indeed, perhaps only in the exaggerated pursuit of this freedom is the novel an entirely typical product of the Romantic movement—while at the same time moving beyond such limiting definitions. The tradition in which we set the figure of man grappling with circumstances runs back through Shakespeare to Sophocles and Job, and it is through defeat of the kind experienced by Julien that catharsis is obtained. It is not accidental that in the final chapters Stendhal has several references to Othello, or too difficult to find some parallel between Julien's fate and the Moor's.

We can seldom be in doubt that Stendhal is deliberately confounding our Romantic sympathies. Always there is that mocking usage—for example his sudden turning aside to address the reader—which firmly establishes him in the conventions of the eighteenth century. Not only are we reminded of Fielding, alike also in the mock heroism of such phrases as 'his heroic duty' and 'stupendous courage' when all that is involved is holding a young woman's hand, but we are led from the flippancy of: 'This page will damage its author in more ways than one. Ice cold hearts will accuse him of impropriety' to the conversation about asterisks. 'Here the author would have liked to introduce a page of asterisks. That will not look elegant, says the

publisher, and for such a frivolous book a want of elegance means death.' For anything quite comparable we may well have to turn back to Tristram Shandy—a similarity apparent elsewhere, and never more evocatively than in the descriptions of the King's visit to the shrine of Saint Clement.

His Majesty sank, or rather flung himself, on the prie-Dieu. It was only then that Julien, pressed close against the gilded door, was able to see, under the bare arm of one of the young women, the charming statue of Saint Clement in the garb of a young Roman soldier, concealed beneath the altar piece. He had a large wound in his throat, from which blood seemed to be flowing. The artist had surpassed himself. The languid eyes, although half-shut, were full of grace; a budding moustache adorned his charming mouth, with lips half-closed yet seeming still to move in prayer. The young woman next to Julien shed hot tears at the sight, and one of her tears fell on Julien's hand.

To move from this digression to consider Julien's character and enlarged understanding of society is to be made aware that, at the deepest level, Stendhal has provided his central figure with an attitude which is essentially apolitical. Something of this is recognised by Arnold Kettle in his note on Balzac for Third Level students in which, having contrasted the two writers, 'Stendhal was a republican of the Left, an anti-clerical atheist: Balzac was a conservative, nailing his flag to the ideas of the Monarchy and the Catholic Church', he goes on to affirm that 'Both despised the money-grubbing obsessions of the middle class—' Unfortunately, Kettle does not appear to be fully aware of the implications of this similarity, for, as Stendhal must have realised as he corrected his proofs in 1830, when the new Revolution came it was to be the work of those same middle-class money-grubbers—the Valenods whom both he and Balzac so thoroughly despised. In so far as *Promenades dans Rome*, which was written at approximately the same time as *Scarlet and Black*, provides any clues, we learn that Stendhal believed that the aspirations of the petty bourgeoisie, encouraged by good education and stifled by lack of opportunity, would create pressures to ensure that the majority of great men of the future would probably come from that class. He argued that 'in contrast to the effete upper classes they preserve their will-power because they *feel* so strongly'. It is an idea which emerges in the course of Chapter 17 and to which we shall return. Yet the idea seems more literary than political and to have been realised in literary terms almost a hundred years later by men such as Wells and Lawrence. Or have we been mistaken in not attaching to the term 'great men' most of the ironic value given to it by Fielding? Certainly, in worldly terms, Julien fails to qualify and his failure is central to the book.

Our young 'hero' first wins the heart of Madame de Renâ, wife of his employer, the Mayor of Verrieres, and then, after an unhappy interlude in a seminary, is equally successful with the beautiful daughter of an Ultra politician, the Marquis de la Mole. Finally, he completely destroys his position by attempting the life of his former mistress and conducting the defence at his trial in such a way that there can be only one verdict. If anything is clear about *Scarlet and Black* it is that Julien sacrifices his prospects of worldly success under the influence of a generous and unconditional passion: a passion, moreover, which has as its object the well-bred and aristocratic Madame de Renâ.

### III.

The value that we ascribe to *aristocracy* is of absolute importance in arriving at a balanced understanding of Stendhal's attitude and I suggest that it is impossible to speak convincingly of those modifications which would have the term denote some aristocracy of talent—some meritocracy—in order to salvage something from Stendhal's uncompromising and unfashionable assertion of aristocratic worth. It does not matter at all whether simple details like the gift of some shirts, or the price of a bottle of wine, are at issue, or more serious affairs of love and honour; we are shown repeatedly and convincingly, that the standards which are worth cultivating are those of the genuinely well-bred and aristocratic.

Neither can it be argued that Stendhal's values are solely a matter of spiritual integrity and sympathy—important though these qualities are—for the circle of the Moles is, in point of behaviour, contrasted favourably with the provincial vulgarities of Besançon, while in the provinces, Julien has no difficulty in distinguishing the Mayor's household from M. Valenod's. It is Valenod who typifies the extreme vulgarity of the rising bourgeoisie, and it is appropriate that in a society in which aristocratic values are an encumbrance (as politically they must be) that M. de Valenod should finally oust de Renâ from his position as Mayor. At the same time within the de Renâ household Stendhal differentiates between the nobility of Madame de Renâ—for whom money is neither a practical nor a theoretical consideration and the debased character of her husband who has become so pre-occupied by commercial considerations that when Julien fancies himself insulted in his position as tutor, de Renâ can only imagine that he is asking for a rise. As Julien reaches the centre of political influence in Paris and sees the Ultras and their circle at first hand he is in a good position to judge their pretensions, but however much ennui and futility dominate their social round there is no mistaking his respect for the Marquis de la Mole's simplicity and kindness. Stendhal suggests that such traits were a consequence of attitudes acquired when M. de la Mole was an émigré, but one senses—as in the stress

upon Fr Pirard and Fr Chelan's clerical poverty—that something of more fundamental importance is involved. We are in no doubt that the Marquis' treatment of his humble secretary is entirely generous and honourable. Julien considers that if M. de Renâl had done a hundredth part of what the Marquis had done for him he would have felt himself shamed for ever. Stendhal makes the point amusingly when Julien treads on his patron's toes in his anxiety to allow the Marquis to precede him through a door. Such details, when coupled with Stendhal's first description of the Marquis, established beyond doubt his appreciation of the aristocratic ideal.

This descendant of the friend of Henry III seemed to him at first rather shabbily dressed. He was thin and fidgeted a good deal. Julien soon remarked however that the Marquis had a type of politeness even more agreeable to the man he was addressing than that of the Bishop of Besançon himself.

Even at a physical level there is a perceptible movement away from Julien's ignoble origin as old Sorel's youngest son—a reiterated slight doubt about his birth that Stendhal chooses to leave largely unresolved. Both mentally and spiritually the revulsion from plebian values is unambiguous.

On high festivals, sausages and pickled cabbage were served out to the seminarists. Julien's neighbours at table noticed that he was insensitive to such delights. That was one of his first crimes; his fellow students saw in it an odious symptom of the most assinine hypocrisy. 'Look at that proud, finicking fellow', they would say, 'posing as if he despised his portion. Sausages and pickled cabbage! Shame on him, nasty uppish fellow! The devil's darling!'

At the same time it is not solely a question of birth taking precedence over wealth in the author's scale of values: for, disregarding Julien's position, we find that his humble friend, Fouque, is capable of heroic sacrifice on Julien's behalf, and several other minor figures are useful in establishing virtues which the hero must make his own in contrast to the glorious aspirations which originally motivated his behaviour. In this connexion Altamira has considerable importance; for when Julien on his arrival in Paris is surprised to find that wealth cannot cure boredom, he is enlightened by Mademoiselle de la Mole's comment—apropos Altamira—that a death sentence was the only thing money could not buy. The remark not only points towards the honourable nature of Julien's end, but hints that *this alone* is a fitting goal for the highest ambition.

#### IV.

Perhaps in all this the best gauge of Stendhal's political sophistication can be seen in his use of the convent-educated Madame de Renâl

—dreaming naively of what her lover may one day do for his King and Church, as a means of illuminating Julien about the greed and corruption which formed the raw material of political life.

The education through love, given him by a woman with very little learning, was a stroke of luck for Julien, for it enabled him to get a direct impression of society as it is today . . . a veil fell from before his eyes; he understood at last the kind of things going on in Verrieres.

In his sympathetic portrait of Madame de Renâl, Stendhal is at pains to preserve a balance of political innocence and worldly understanding: she cannot be entirely naive without forfeiting our respect. On one occasion, wishing to irritate her husband, she reminds him that in 1816 he had helped to make certain arrests, 'There was that man who had taken refuge on his roof. . . .' We discover, subsequently, that the man had been killed. The problem of accounting for such an attractive 'reactionary' is inevitably a difficulty in any progressive scheme. Professor Kettle offers a detailed account of part of Chapter 17 and from this the students learn:

It would be a mistake to conclude that Stendhal is asking the reader to dislike Madame de Renâl because of her reactionary views, which he certainly doesn't agree with. On the contrary the distinguishing mark of Madame de Renâl is that, in comparison with the other members of her circle, she is innocent and honest and, because of this, able despite herself—to fall in love with Julien.

One notices the delightful, parenthetic, 'despite herself' but the difficulty she poses can be illustrated best by looking at several more assessments. We find Madame de Renâl's politics described as 'naive but realistic' and, in another rather remarkable two-way bet learn that '. . . the great mark of her superiority as a person was that, despite or because of her innocent naivete, she tells him (Julien) the truth about Verrieres'. Slightly later her stupidity becomes more precise; 'In her frank simplicity (Madame de Renâl) gave away information which can only add fuel to Julien's already subversive and revolutionary thoughts'; one could scarcely guess from such remarks that Julien proceeds to work conscientiously for the Minister of a very reactionary government. But perhaps it is in his account of paragraphs 7 to 9 that Professor Kettle demonstrates the inadequacies of the progressive view most effectively.

The relationship between Julien and Madame de Renâl is one between two people belonging to opposing social classes. It is her prejudice as a lady of inherited wealth and good family which leads to Madame de Renâl's 'look of cold disdain', for having money herself she can afford to have 'absolutely no interest in money'.



It is, of course, true that her lack of interest in money might owe everything to her secure position, but we have only to remember Fouque and her husband, or to refer to our own experience to realise the question is nothing like so simple. An examination of the passage reveals that her 'look of disdain' owes as little to a sense of class superiority as does her contempt for her husband. Stendhal tells us that she actually thinks of her lover as wealthy, and that her coolness stems from her rejection of his careerist ambition which she associates with all that is most evil in men like Valenod. It also arises from fear that she has endangered their relationship by offending him. The ambitions she dislikes are those which can be attributed to 'people of that sort', a category which as comprehensively embraces her husband as Valenod and the Liberals. It is true that, in the character of the still relatively immature hero, Stendhal describes her as having been brought up in 'the enemy camp', but he at once qualifies the partisan implications of this by making Julien announce that if he were Mayor of Verrieres 'justice would triumph'. We have moved decisively from misunderstanding to normative concepts beyond class or party.

## V.

Unlike the progressives, Stendhal saw injustice and corruption as a malady which affected the entire society and was closely related to the human condition. But he also believes that certain people somehow (by grace?) escape a great part of the contamination and that we are obliged to recognise an 'elective affinity' between them—with all that this implies. It is because Julien is a patrician both in appearance and character that Madame de Renâl can fall so profoundly in love with him—albeit, initially unaware of her falling—and his love, though at first owing a good deal to his pride and yet more to 'the angelic sweetness of Madame de Renâl's temper' and very good figure, is ultimately strengthened by their shared sensibility. They are drawn together as her husband laughs at the sufferings of a dog run over by a carriage, or busies himself to throw stones at a peasant girl. Whatever the dimensions of Julien's absurdity, complemented by Mathilde de de la Mole's extravagances, there is never anything in the least despicable about him. We are still in the first half of the book when Stendhal comments, 'He was now, at this moment, an aristocrat through and through'. It is a remark of the utmost importance and is implicitly restated when both his mistresses recognise that Julien embodies the noblest characteristics. In writing of Julien's relationship with Mathilde, Arnold Kettle correctly evaluates their common attitude to society, 'Both are shocked by the lack of sincere conviction and purposeful energy around them', but he fails to give sufficient weight to the fact that it *is* a common attitude and that references to

Julien's origins are totally beside the point. If birth were a matter of real significance we should have to account for the fact that all the Revolution had meant for old Sorel was money . . . he is as corrupt as the worst members of the bourgeoisie and Kettle accepts that no natural bond exists between him and his son. In such circumstances it is hardly valuable to contrast Mathilde's birth with Julien's, 'born aristocrat' with 'born plebian', or to suppose that there is some essential difference which can be explained in class terms. It is tempting to believe that a good deal of this confusion is a consequence of inverted snobbery. But, whatever the reason, it leads to some extraordinary judgements. In the Third Level Unit on Balzac, Kettle compares Julien with Cousin Bette, 'peasants from the mountains of eastern France, both having as their heritage the tough determination and strength of will of the peasantry which has benefited from the Revolution of 1789—both are intensely realistic, cunning and intelligent'. Realistic and cunning scarcely seem appropriate descriptions of Julien. Equally quaintly Arnold Kettle writes:

But whereas Bette adopts for her own ends the values and aims of the bourgeoisie, using her guile to destroy, in alliance with the Marneffes, the decadent Hulots, Julien has nothing but contempt for aristocrats and bourgeoisie alike and asserts in his romantic death (preceded by a philosophical analysis of the whole situation of most moving sincerity) the values of quite a different sort of realism.

One has to take hold upon oneself to remember that the 'decadent Hulots' are none other than Bette's cousin—another young (realistic, cunning, etc.) peasant girl, and her decadent husband 'one of the giants who stood by Napoleon's side'. And if we look a little further we shall perhaps find that if Professor Kettle is referring to Julien's speech in court when he writes of 'a philosophical analysis of the whole situation' he is overlooking the fact that Julien had intended to remain silent and merely spoke in order to protect himself from contempt and to secure his own conviction—the issue of class having only the slightest relevance in so far as he realises it will provoke petty minds to anger and fear. Perhaps the point can be left with the reminder that Mathilde herself—secure from confusion with the peasantry of the country—is 'disgusted by the decay of the aristocracy' and is as aware of the hollow sham of dignity and honour removed from serious responsibility as Julien who, in Kettle's words, feels 'contemptuous of a society whose pretensions he sees through'. Conversely, of course, it is the less aristocratic ingredient of insincerity and affectation, of playing a part, that establishes Mathilde's inferiority to Madame de Renâ. It is this artificiality that Julien finds so tedious and secures Madame de Renâ's right to die shortly after her lover.

A less direct confirmation of Julien's genuine nobility of char-

acter is established by means of his friendship with Count Altamira and the high regard in which he is held not only by de Mole but by the two good priests.

A new world opened before him. Among the Jansenists he made the acquaintance of a certain Count Altamira, a man nearly six foot tall, a Liberal; under sentence of death in his own country, and very pious. He was struck by this strangely contrasted love of God and love of freedom.

Such passages should be sufficient to prevent any idea that the novel is, *per se*, anti-religious, and it is also worth noticing that although Professor Kettle is confident that Stendhal must have detested the Marquis' opinions, this gentleman, instead of confining his patronage to the Jesuits, those 'foremost agents of the right wing government', was actually so foolish as to support both Fr Chelan and Fr Pirard, and even obtained his confidential secretary through Fr Pirard's recommendation. Indeed, we are carried so far in sympathy with the Marquis that his horribly undemocratic assertion, 'I see nothing any more but candidates paying court to unwashed majorities' appears to have much of the author's approval. The complexity of Stendhal's political position may also be illustrated by his equivocal use of the term Liberal: although the word has good connotations in association with Altamira, we notice that M. de Renâl becomes a Liberal in an attempt to regain his former position as Mayor, and that when Julien makes his brilliant appearance in the guard of honour, the author comments:

You should have heard what the wealthy manufacturers of printed linens, who morning noon and night would talk themselves hoarse in the cafes preaching equality, had to say on the subject.

## VI

Two aspects remain which deserve notice: Stendhal's psychological insight helps to establish the novel as a work transcending the limitations of a particular period and his use of irony affects our relationship with Julien in his role of hero. There are, indeed, certain passages in which the two elements merge:

Despite his suspicions of Mademoiselle de la Mole, which by the way he did not definitely admit to himself, Julien found her extremely attractive. . . . In the midst of all these torments, she only loved him all the more and almost every day subjected him to a frightful scene.

Irony is the first characteristic of Stendhal's style and serves to protect our sympathies from over-exposure. Thus, Julien's first 'victory' on

the field of love arises from the amusing notion that he owes it to himself to become Madame de Renâl's lover. Appropriately, in such circumstances, this early triumph is not a pleasure. Rather similarly, on the last occasion when Julien embraces his mistress before entering a seminary, the intensity of her emotion renders her totally inanimate—she is a beautiful living corpse.<sup>3</sup> Stendhal remarks that although Julien is deeply impressed by the lack of warmth in these embraces and turns round in his saddle as long as he can see Verrieres, he enters Besançon shortly afterwards to accompanying dreams of military glory and finds his attention almost immediately captured by Amanda Binet as she leans provocatively over the counter of her bar.

When they make love for the last time before Julien's departure for Paris—and Madame de Renâl, stricken by remorse, has steadfastly rejected his advances for some time—she at last surrenders to a mood of frivolous amorousness and not only reveals her beauty by lamp-light, but playfully accepts the risk of her lover remaining all the following day in her room. Not content with such levity, Stendhal arranges for her to conceal Julien's hat by undressing before her husband while her lover is hidden barely three feet away beneath the sofa.<sup>4</sup> Later, she aggravates the danger by talking loudly in bed. Nowhere in the novel is the sequence of events more skilfully handled to provide a sense of disjointed movement and tension: the piece of bread which Madame de Renâl has been at such pains to obtain for her lover, and which lies forgotten in her pocket, is a paradigm of Stendhal's ability to convey intense emotion through something at once trivial and comic.

Always one is aware of a subtle tension between ironic understanding and the customary operations of the human mind: we find that although Julien is well aware of the advantages of having his mistress come to his room at night rather than risk the greater danger of going to hers, he actually regrets the lost opportunity for reading. It is an insight that foreshadows his remark in the cells that the worst evil of being in prison is that one can never bar one's door. Stendhal

<sup>3</sup>An extremely interesting fragment of harsher realism is to be found in the description which Altamira gives of the sister who concealed him.

'She's still pretty, kind too, and gentle. She's an excellent mother to her family, faithful to all her duties, and religious without being excessively so . . . the moment she heard of Marshal Ney's execution, she began to dance!'

<sup>4</sup>It is difficult to account for M. de Renâl's lack of marital interest in his young and attractive wife. He only appears on this one occasion and then apparently for conversation. Graham Greene's novel, *A Burnt Out Case*, contains a conversation which affords some contrast. '. . . I'm jumping to the heart of what really troubles me, I don't believe my wife understands the true nature of Christian marriage . . . Sometimes she even refuses her duties.'

'What duties?'

Her duties to me. Her married duties.'

'I've never thought of those as duties.'

'You know very well the Church does. No one has the right to abstain except by mutual consent.'

does not leave it there, he uses Madame de Renâ€™s letter—written under the stress of imminent discovery—to carry our appreciation further: ‘From now on it won’t be so easy to come by our happiness. Will that vex you? Yes, maybe on days when you haven’t received some interesting book. . . .’ One can scarcely praise such perception too highly, and Stendhal’s psychological sophistication and courage are evident when we consider the danger of total absurdity which follows from the lovers’ discrepancy in age: Madame de Renâ€™ is ten years older than Julien. But, as with the question of reading at night, Stendhal neatly sidesteps the danger by making Madame de Renâ€™ herself explicitly aware of it. She reminds herself what the provincial view of such an affair between a young man and an older woman has always been, and in doing so she disarms criticism. Nevertheless, we cannot but marvel that any writer should have deliberately taken such risks.

As the book draws to an end Julien’s youthful dreams of military glory come tantalisingly close to fulfilment, but it is only as he turns away towards his trial and death that the spirits who inspired his boyhood with dreams of honour and glory—the ghost of Napoleon’s old army surgeon and of the Emperor himself—are laid to rest. At one level Julien has failed: in a deeper sense he has achieved the only honour that matters, and nothing that can be said about the court’s class bias at his trial will serve to bring the novel back to a convenient political position, for indeed, in so far as there is any bias it operates entirely in Julien’s favour. Technically, he was justly condemned for attempted murder—but one feels there is more than a little truth in the remark that his death could be regarded as a form of suicide.

When Julien returns to his cell after the trial he reflects on his position in moderately conventional terms:

Good heavens! if I meet the God of the Christians—I’m lost! He is a tyrant. . . . But if I meet the God of Fenelon! He will say to me perhaps: ‘Much shall be forgiven thee, for thou hast loved much’.

It is the ‘religious’ aristocrat, Madame de Renâ€™, whose words startle us by their romantic fervour:

. . . The moment I see you, all sense of duty vanishes, there’s nothing left of me but love for you, or rather love is too weak a word. I feel for you what I should feel for God alone—respect, love and obedience intermingled. . . .

The outburst is less surprising if we remember that the passionate identification of lover and beloved was to become a cliché of Romantic literature and that in a world littered with moribund forms of

Christianity love must take particular care to disguise herself.<sup>5</sup> As it is it requires all Mathilde's ceremonial extravagance with Julien's severed head and candle-lit cave to restore a proper sense of the absurd, but nothing comes to our aid to reanimate the vanished perspectives of a progressive view.

<sup>5</sup>Goethe's suggestion that the women of *Scarlet and Black* are too romantic is very reasonable. Nevertheless the circumstances of Henrietta Wentworth's death following the execution of the Duke of Monmouth establish at least one precedent for the death of Madame de R  nal. They both left several children. Mathilde is difficult to take quite seriously. She has several of the qualities of Sheridan's Lydia Languish who not only amused herself with risqu   books from the Bath circulating library but was determined to lose her fortune in a romantic elopement.

# Professor Geach and the future

by Patrick McGrath

In his article on the future in the May issue of *Blackfriars* Professor Geach argues at some length against the thesis (which I will henceforth call fatalism) that the future is definite and determinate. I am just as firmly convinced as Professor Geach that fatalism is incorrect, but I am not at all sure that the reasons which he puts forward against this theory are sufficient to refute it. Geach's main argument against fatalism appears to be contained in the following passages:

The simple fact to which I want to draw your attention is the fact that not everything that was going to happen eventually did happen. Human agency often averts impending disasters. . . . What is prevented was going to happen, but didn't happen; the preventive action changes what is going to happen, changes the future . . . (Fatalism asserts) that if it is true at some later time that Johnny will die of polio, then nobody ever was able at some earlier time to bring it about Johnny was not going to die of polio. And this of course we do not believe: Johnny could have been preserved by a suitable injection, but his foolish parents neglected the precaution.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>P. T. Geach 'The Future' in *New Blackfriars*, vol. 54, number 636 (May, 1973), pp. 209, 211.