

Exemplarity and Singularity

*Thinking through Particulars in
Philosophy, Literature, and Law*

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Stendhal: Julien Sorel in the footsteps of Napoleon

Robert Morrissey

In the early pages of Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, Julien Sorel is sitting astride a roof beam in his father's sawmill engrossed in reading the *Mémorial of Saint Helena*, when a blow from his father, furious at seeing his slackard son reading instead of working, knocks him from his perch. His father's brute force saves Julien from falling into the saw works, but the book ends up in the gutter below. It is not by chance that in this very work, Napoleon himself affirms that that is exactly where found his crown: "I picked it up out of the gutter; the people placed it on my head."¹ In both of these passages the French word is *ruisseau*, which means stream, but also gutter, and is often used to characterize that which is vulgar, low class. In some sense the whole story of Julien Sorel is the tragic tale of a young man who pulls himself from the gutter to the heights of society only to return. In this scene, Julien was reading one of his three favorite books, among the very few that he knew, what Stendhal calls his "Koran": *The Memorial*, the military bulletins of Napoléon's *Grande armée*, and Rousseau's *Confessions*. Julien reads these books religiously, especially his favorite, the *Memorial*. "He would have died for these three works. Never did he have faith in any other."² They were the key to his understanding of self and society, and, for the reader, they are the key to understanding how Stendhal's builds his protagonist's character – from his pride and ambition to his introspection and resentment.

Rousseau's paradoxical claim to singularity and exemplarity are at the very heart of Stendhal's problematic – indeed of the modern condition. In his *Confessions*, the Genevan philosopher set the tone for Romantic poetics in stating that he was "unlike any other [man] in existence; if not better, at least different," insisting that Nature had destroyed "the mold in which she cast" him (Rousseau 1782, Bk. 1: on line). At the same time, he affirms that his *Confessions* were to serve as the basis of comparison for the study of mankind ("servir de première pièce de comparaison pour l'étude des homes"). The promise of veracity that Rousseau lays out from the beginning of his *Confessions* ("I have concealed no crimes; added no virtues ... Such as I was, I have declared myself; sometimes vile and despicable, at others, virtuous, generous, even sublime"), is echoed in Stendhal's description of his depiction of Julien: "The author has not portrayed Julien like the hero of a novel for chambermaids; he shows all his flaws, all his vices, all his psychological

and moral weaknesses [*tous les mauvais mouvements de son âme*], egotistical because he is weak and the first law of all beings, from insects to heroes, is self-preservation” (Stendhal 2000b: 734–35). Rousseau flaunts social conventions in his self-description; Stendhal flaunts novelistic conventions in the depiction of his hero. In the novel itself, the humiliations of Jean-Jacques exacerbate Julien’s sensibility, nourish his resentment and justify his hypocrisy.

But if Rousseau is crucial to the formation of this latter-day Tartuffe, it is above all the shadow of Napoleon that haunts the corridors of Julien’s mind. Napoleon is his model, his hero, an example to imitate, a way of being in the world, a way of being himself. Stendhal had himself participated in the Napoleonic adventure and had had a very successful career as a supply officer extending from 1800 through the fall of the empire. Erich Auerbach has eloquently described how Stendhal’s strange realism grew out of the post-Napoleonic moment (Auerbach 2013: 461). Julien’s enthusiasm for the ideas of the Revolution has a decidedly Bonapartist tint: the concentration of the general will into that of an extraordinary individual feeds his ambition. The bulletins of the *Grande Armée* provide him with an epic vision of a democratized military heroism. The exploits of the Revolutionary and Imperial armies made history; Stendhal too, in his own way, is making history, or at least chronicling it: the subtitle of *The Red and the Black* is *A Chronicle of the Nineteenth Century*. Julien himself desires nothing more than to make history, but the question is: how? It is here that his favorite work provides the fundamental framework for living out the dream of glory in a degraded world. Situated midway along an axis ranging from the intimate authenticity of the *Confessions* to the glory and epic grandeur of the army bulletins, the *Memorial of Saint Helena* presents a polyphonic text in which the voices of Las Cases and Napoleon meld together in relating everything from the daily doings and *ennui* of their existence in exile on the island to personal memories, reflections on politics, culture, literature, national and world events, as well as the unfolding of some of the great battles of the Napoleonic wars (Morrissey 2013: Ch. 6).

Taken as a whole, the *Memorial* tells a simple, but powerful story: that of two individuals bound together by destiny and forced by circumstances to abandon their homeland and loved ones, who with all the courage of their convictions, struggle valiantly only to succumb to the forces of isolation, the elements, and the tormenting inhumanity of an inexorable persecutor. In the end, Napoleon is dead and the health of Las Cases, who survives to tell the tale, has been permanently damaged. Its free-form ramblings work to establish a link between, on the one hand, the extraordinary, heroic figure of Napoleon and the grandiose economy of glory upon which his empire was constructed, and on the other, the miserable, insignificant daily existence of a band of exiles stuck out in the middle of nowhere. The emperor is portrayed as both the hero and tamer of the Revolution. It was he who had achieved what so many had sought; he had both defended and ended the Revolution and had brought it to a conclusion. “Now nothing can destroy or wipe out the great principles of our Revolution; we wove them into the glow, the monuments, the prodigious feats; we washed out its early stains in waves of glory; now these great and beautiful truths will remain forever.” Glory is no longer a noble

or aristocratic trait, it is a *national* one. “I ennobled all Frenchmen: everyone could be proud” (MSH: 510). It was he, who through his politics of fusion, drew disaffected aristocrats back into the fold. Las Cases, himself an aristocrat who had fled revolutionary France, underscores the powerful allure of this national, heroic, ideal: “After Ulm and the flash of Austerlitz, I was vanquished by glory: I admired, I recognized, I loved Napoleon, and from this moment on I became fanatically French” (488).

Indeed, in the course of the eighteenth century in France, the classical ideal of glory had been profoundly reworked to become an essential element of reflection on political economy. It provided a powerful alternative to the liberal discourse emphasizing self-interest and profit as both a motivating and regulatory principle.³ It was profoundly compatible with the values of the monarchy as well as the nobility. The idea of “showing off” one’s worth to gain the esteem of others – what one might term the “spectacular” nature of Ancien Régime culture – was reshaped and adapted to a more democratic vision where public opinion played a fundamental role in establishing legitimacy and rewarding merit.⁴ The abbé Sieyès, perhaps the most influential of constitutional thinkers preceding and during the Revolution, eloquently expressed this view in his *Essay on Privileges* (1788):

The public must be allowed freely to award recognition for what it deems worthy. Those of you who view things from a philosophical point of view are correct in seeing in this recognition a kind of *moral money* with powerful effects. But if you believe it is for the prince to distribute these awards, you are wrong: nature, more philosophical than you, has placed the true source of consideration in the hearts and minds (*les sentiments*) of the people. It is in the people ... that lies the nation (*la patrie*) to which superior men are called to devote their talents.

(Sieyès 1822: 10)

In this view, virtue and interest are no longer opposed, but rather sublated; the political economy of glory allowed for a range of motivations from self-affirmation to self-abnegation and rewarded individual merit by collective recognition. In the context of a revolution mired in excessive contractual and formal constitutional obsessions, the ideology of glory, based as it was on deeds and sentiment, offered a concrete alternative to the abstraction of the “general will.” The sentiment and enthusiasm that characterize it generate social ties and even fraternity. As laid out in the early days of the Consulate, the economy of glory was not a zero sum game. The glory of one did not come at the expense of another; all profited, individually and collectively; the whole nation floated upward on the waves of glory. Finally the ideology of glory offered a vision of history at a time when the Revolution seemed eternally stuck in the present, a Revolution without end. Emulating and celebrating the glory of great men of French history opened the way to overcoming the revolutionary divide separating Ancien Régime from post-revolutionary France, and it was a way of setting an example so the great deeds of the present would, in turn, be celebrated by future generations. The creation of the Legion of

Honor and the imperial nobility were the most visible attempts to institutionalize the ideology of glory.

The *Memorial* gives ample space to the economy of glory as it was put into place and thrived. In all its descriptions of Napoleon before the fall, he is the heroic paragon, the arbiter and purveyor of glory, the individual who rose from nothing to dominate a world gone astray. In the first instance, then, Napoleon provides Julien with the possibility or rather a *concrete, real-life example* of a world re-enchanted, one in which might and right, individual ambition and the collective good, the individual will of the hero and the general will can all be aligned. It is a world in which merit is rewarded and self-affirmation is channeled toward the greater good. Emulation, because it leads to recognition, is a source of moral enrichment and self-fulfillment. In that world imitation (i.e. *being like another*) is the first fundamental step toward being oneself. It is in competition with great, exemplary figures that one is able to surpass oneself and become one's own example and an example for others. The exploits of Republican and Imperial armies became living proof that the post-revolutionary Moderns had surpassed the Ancients to become themselves examples for posterity. Julien had heard of those exploits first hand from his only friend, the old Surgeon-major who had bequeathed to him both the *Memorial* (along with thirty or forty books) and his cross of the Legion of Honor: "he had listened with rapture to stories of the battles at the bridge at Lodi, of Arcoli, and of Rivoli" (RB: 31).

However, the *Memorial* also emphasizes the betrayal and defeat of the ideals of that enchanted world. While extolling the deeds and aspirations of the common men and the rank and file, it discredits a whole class of men who had profited from both the Revolution and the Empire, but then, when it was to their advantage, betrayed both and went on to hold positions of wealth, prestige, and power. These are the very men who, alongside the reactionary nobles of the Bourbon Restoration, now rule the world in which Julien lives. It is a world of hypocrisy, convention, petty self-interest and boredom. In *The Red and the Black*, from the small town of Verrières to the Parisian salon of the De la Moles, the ingloriousness and *ennui* of the everyday are everywhere overwhelming. Yet, to a great extent, this is also already the world of the *Memorial of Saint Helena*. It is also doubtlessly for that reason that this work is Julien's favorite.

The first enemy that Napoleon confronts, then, is an abstract, impersonal one: that of boredom, of *ennui*. On the Island of Saint Helena, daily existence is as barren as the island's landscape. "The days went by in insipid monotony. Boredom, memories, melancholy were our dangerous enemies" (MSH: 364). The days are made up of non-events. Two entries carry titles with the words "uniformity" and "ennui." "The island is too small for me!" exclaims Napoleon at one point, "Everything here exudes a deadly *ennui*" (562). Early on, Napoleon is tempted by suicide, but is persuaded by his alter ego Las Cases to start writing his memoirs. Overall he takes the position that "dignity in misfortune and submission to necessity have their glory" (95), that "adversity has its heroism and glory" (275). In short, he adopts an attitude that mixes stoic indifference with Christian submission. Las Cases returns frequently to Napoleon's exemplary, heroic calm and

serenity using it to underscore his fundamental disinterestedness. Rather than resist and try to hold onto power, he had submitted and abdicated: self-sacrifice for the good of the nation.

Then there is the problem of recognition. Already on the trip to Saint Helena, the officers and crew were under strict orders not to take off their caps to him and not to address him as anything other than general. Appearing indifferent to such slights, Napoleon responds: "Let them call me what they like, they cannot stop me from being myself" (92). But later, with the arrival of his infamous jailor, Sir Hudson Lowe, Napoleon will change modes, switching from the fallen hero accepting his fate to active resistance. Las Cases notes that this transition occurs when they have arrived at Longwood, their final destination, and the Emperor seemed to have reached the conclusion that "the gaze of the world" would be upon them. As described by Las Cases, the nature of the Emperor's newly adopted position is fundamentally theatrical or spectacular. At this point, he "organizes everything that is around him and adopts the attitude of *dignity oppressed by force*. He traces around himself a *moral barricade (enceinte)* from behind which he defends himself inch by inch against *improprieties and insults*; he doesn't let his persecutors get away with anything, *takes offense at the least occasion* and rejects almost any proposition" (480). For all that he represents – the gains of the Revolution, the victories of the army, the majesty of the Empire – he has chosen to fight. He does so when there is nothing else at stake other than recognition. Fallen as he is, he maintains he should retain the title of Emperor and be addressed accordingly. In the telling of Las Cases, Lowe will systematically seek to humiliate Napoleon, refusing him recognition, reducing his wine budget, limiting his ability to move about on the tiny island, forcing all those with him to address him simply as Bonaparte or be excluded from any contact with him. "He wants to force the Emperor," said Napoleon – referring to himself in the third person –, "to get down into the mud of his daily needs, in order to negotiate with him directly on that level ... He haggles over our very existence, he seems to envy the air that I breathe" (1392). Napoleon responds by refusing submission, isolating himself ever more, refusing to even discuss matters with his persecutor. It is in this crescendo of increasing moral and material vexations and the corresponding physical decline of Napoleon that Las Cases places many of the descriptions of major battles. The struggle for recognition is set in the context of broad conversations, and daily minutia punctuated by narratives of epic events. The *Memorial* thus successfully injects glory into the minutia of daily life by assimilating them to what has become truly a life and death struggle for recognition. But at the same time, because this struggle plays itself out on the level of the banality of everyday life, it makes of Napoleon a figure of everyman: an everyman who heroically chooses to die rather than submit.

Julien Sorel is very much a post-revolutionary everyman, and, in a fundamental sense, *The Red and the Black* can be understood as a reflection on the place, power and consequences of exemplarity in the disenchanting world of the Restoration. It is worth recalling how deeply this "case study" is anchored in that reality. Roughly speaking, Stendhal's protagonist re-enacts the life and crime of

one Antoine Berthet, the son of a village blacksmith, whose trial took place in Genoble in December 1827. Much of the force of the example of Napoleon in the novel derives from the fact that Julien is in some sense a blank slate; his mind is not clouded by an abundance of other models, be they those of family, of history or of novels. But it also derives from the double proximity of Napoleon. Proximity in time: Julien's old friend and early mentor, the Surgeon-major has recounted to him tales of glory that he had lived through and bequeathed to him his much cherished cross of Legion of Honor. But there is also an existential proximity: his favorite book has projected the ideal of glory into the reduced dimensions of daily life and recounted how Napoleon had carried the struggle from the battlefields of Europe to the tiny island of Saint Helena where it became compressed, as it were, into the lonely struggle of one man for recognition.

Even though firmly anchored in the reality of a small town under the Restoration, the story of Julien Sorel follows – in radically reduced dimensions – the general trajectory of Napoleon's rise and fall. He is re-enacting the story of Napoleon on the level of daily life in Restoration France. Stendhal takes pains to show how much Julien feels the gaze of others, how much he is trying to prove himself in their eyes. This spectacular aspect, this "I'll show them" attitude, traverses the whole work: Julien is constantly "showing them" by following the example of his beloved Napoleon. To affirm himself, to be himself, he is constantly acting like another.

While Julien is under the spell of a double proximity, the narrator never ceases to insist on the incommensurable distance separating the two men. Much of the comic aspect of the novel derives from this distance. Maneuvering M. de Rênal into giving him a raise becomes in his eyes a feat worthy of Napoleon.

Dreaming of Napoleon's victories made him see something new about his own. Yes, I've won a battle, he said to himself, but one must profit by it – it is essential to crush the pride of this haughty gentlemen while he's in retreat. That's pure Napoleon. (RB: 75–76)

Studying the battles of Napoleon to seduce Mathilde de la Mole is fundamentally grotesque:

Little by little, self-command returned. He compared himself to a general who has just half won a great battle. The advantage is assured, he said to himself – and is immense; but what will happen tomorrow? All could be lost in an instant.

With a passionate gesture he opened the *Memoirs Dictated at St. Helena* by Napoleon, and forced himself to read them for two long hours; his eyes alone were doing the reading – but that did not signify; he compelled himself to go on. During this strange exercise, his heart and mind, soaring to the highest possible place, worked unconsciously. This is a heart altogether different from that of Mme de Rênal, he was saying to himself – but got no further.

Make her afraid, he cried suddenly, flinging the book away. The enemy will obey me only so far as I frighten him, that's when he daren't despise me. (444)

In daily life, Napoleon's exemplarity provides Julien with both tactics and meaning, that is to say, some measure of self-realization. But, in the eyes of the reader – buttressed in this by the narrator's ironic stance toward his character –, the disproportionality between Julien's situation and that of Napoleon is such that this identification is seen as undermining meaning.

Added to the sense of comic disproportion is the more morally damaging fact that Julien is acting almost *purely* out of self-interest, even in affairs of the heart. The tiny society of Saint Helena is decidedly masculine, but the virile love and devotion that Las Cases expresses for Napoleon could also serve as a model of sorts. The text of the *Memorial* confirms that the mixture of self-affirmation and self-abnegation characterizing the economy of glory could indeed have currency in the reciprocal love between two human beings. Las Cases is certainly devoted to Napoleon, but there is more mutuality between the writer and the emperor than first meets the eye. In fact, Las Cases openly gives himself as a happy example of simultaneous self-abnegation *and* self-affirmation. For him, this is not a zero sum relationship. In the case of Napoleon himself, his defeat gives him a chance to rework the books: it is in defeat that he will at last be able truly to prove his disinterestedness *and* pursue a struggle for recognition. But between Las Cases and Napoleon there is always a third party. The fallen emperor's ultimate sacrifice is in the name of his country and not for Las Cases. Beyond even the recognition that Napoleon might obtain from his enemy Hudson Lowe – the embodiment of all his and France's enemies – there is “the gaze of the world:” that of his nation, his *patrie*, that of posterity.

The Red and the Black, works through the consequences of projecting the ideal of glory onto the level of everyman, but in a world that is no longer purely masculine. Here, the pursuit of glory is acted out on the minute level of campaigns of seduction and, in both cases, it turns out to be a zero-sum game. His pursuit of Mme de Rênal leads to domination: his self-affirmation occurs through her self-abnegation (i.e. her total devotion). This “total” victory is due, in part, to the force of exemplarity: he has a model for action, while she does not. His pursuit of Mathilde de la Mole puts him in pursuit of a woman with the same fundamental values of heroic self-affirmation; but she has the advantage of having a powerful and time-tested example in her aristocratic ancestors. In this case Julien finds himself in a zero-sum game resembling a strange replay of the standoff on the island of Saint Helena. Precisely because Julien is acting primarily out of ambition, there is no possibility of a simultaneous self-affirmation *and* self-abnegation. In the chapter entitled, “What Decoration Confers Distinction?” Mathilde lays out the extreme nature of what is at stake for her in the world as it is: “So far as I can see, thought Mathilde, a sentence of death is the only thing that confers distinction on a man: it is the only thing no one ever buys.” In both her eyes and in Julien's, devotion implies submission and unworthiness both in the eyes of the other and/or in each one's own eyes. Julien's statement that the only way to act with her was “to make her afraid,” perfectly describes the dynamic in place in this relationship.

Despite their intimate nature, there is in both relationships the presence of a third party, but rather than it having the patriotic resonance of “*patrie*” or

fatherland, here it would more accurately be characterized as “society.” Even Mme Rênal needs Julien to be recognized by her society, corrupted though it may be. Indeed, it can be argued that such recognition offers her a way out of a purely zero-sum situation by validating her choice and thus giving meaning to her sacrifice. Even if, at times, she seems to be educating a child,

... a moment later she would look up to him as her master. His intelligence began to frighten her; she believed she could see more precisely every day in this young abbé the great man of the future. She saw him as Pope, she saw him as a first minister like Richelieu. ‘Shall I live long enough to see you in your glory?’ she said to Julien; ‘there is a place ready for a great man; our monarchy, our religion have need of one.’ (107)

Yet over and over again the book returns to the theme of worthlessness in a society where everything comes down to petty, material interests. How much could “showing them” ever really be worth anything in this degrading and degraded world? “Degenerate and boring century,” sighs Mathilde (342).

Julien has fully integrated the idea that he should become model for himself, whence his notion of “duty,” which is always a duty to himself alone, to his notion of himself and his ambition. It is by force of will power that he overcomes any conflicting natural instincts to adhere to the standards of hypocrisy that will allow him to triumph in the society of his day. The only way for him to achieve recognition is by simulating – and assimilating – the baseness and conventionality that, at all levels, characterize this hybrid society of interests. Indeed, emulating hypocrisy while imitating Napoleon, seems to be quite a successful strategy: it propels him to the heights of society and aristocratic status. It is as Julien Sorel de la Vernaye that he is named lieutenant of hussars. “Well, after all, thought he, my romance is at an end [*Mon roman est fini*]. I have been able to make myself loved by this monstrously proud being, he added, glancing at Mathilde; her father cannot live without her, nor she without him” (465). In short, we have a fairy tale ending that consolidates the gains of the Revolution. Napoleon’s affirmation “I ennobled all Frenchmen” is re-enacted through the workings of the novel. This end of the romance, or rather the novel, would signal the happy end of the Revolution as continued in the Empire. In rehearsing the role of Napoleon, Julien has achieved recognition and self-affirmation that even seems to be happily mitigated by a measure of love for Mathilde. Further, Mathilde is pregnant with his child; Julien is thus on the verge of attaining in everyday life what Napoleon also almost achieved on the level of the Empire: as a progenitor he will have a future beyond himself and his achievements.

But the fairy-tale ending is, of course, not to be; this novel is neither a novel for chambermaids, nor a romance. As if to insist on the unconventional and paradoxical nature of the work, the narrator will flippantly put forth his celebrated formulation of realism – “the novel is a mirror” – in the same paragraph that he affirms that “Mathilde’s character is impossible in our age” (RB: 374). In spite of the narrator/author’s statement that: “Politics in imaginative work is like a [gun]

shot in the middle of a concert” (394), the real end of the novel will be decidedly political, and it will begin with a gunshot, that of Julien aimed at Mme Rênal who has denounced him to Mathilde’s father. Captured and imprisoned, Julien will spend much of his time meditating on questions of love, death, and glory. He, too, will think of suicide and the example of Napoleon will, as always, come to mind: “Killing myself! that is the great question, he thought... Kill myself! Good Heavens, no! he said to himself a few days later – Napoleon lived on... Besides, life is pleasant” (478). So he lives on... like Napoleon. He too decides to submit and forego any resistance in the form of a robust defense or appeal. The days go by. The arrival of his childhood priest and protector, now senile and decrepit, demoralizes him: “He had just seen death, and in all its ugliness. All illusions of spiritual grandeur and generous feelings were scattered like the clouds before the storm” (481). But his spirits are revived by the exemplary behavior of Fouqué his childhood friend. Distraught by all that has happened to Julien, Fouqué came prepared to offer the entire fortune that he had earned by the sweat of his brow as a wood merchant, to bribe Julien’s jailer so that Julien could escape: “What sublime aspirations in a small country capitalist! thought Julien,” noting that none of his high-society Parisian friends would have ever been capable of such an unpretentious act of self-abnegation. “His glimpse of the *sublime* gave Julien back all the zest M. Chélan’s appearance had taken away” (*Ibid*).

Stendhal explores in detail the possibility that man’s love for a woman, or, in the case of Mathilde de la Mole, a woman’s love for a man could in some sense replace love of country. In his prison Julien, unlike Napoleon, has the frequent company of Mme de Rênal and the simple pleasures of her love. There develops a truly reciprocal love, but with no illusions of a future. He also has the visits of Mathilde, for whom he has acquired all the cachet of a man condemned to death. Her heroic love knows no bounds: “Exalted by a sentiment of which she was proud, and that overcame all her arrogance, she was reluctant to let a moment of her life go by without occupying it with some remarkable deed” (492). Such spectacular devotion leads Julien to reflect on the on the very nature of heroism:

... in truth he was weary of heroics. He would have found a simple, naïve, even a timid tenderness affecting, whereas, on the contrary, the notion of an audience, of the presence of *others*, was always requisite to Mathilde’s haughty soul. [He felt] that she had an obscure need to astound Society by the intensity of her love and the sublimity of her undertakings. (RB: 492)

Even in this degraded society, she was attempting to rival the examples furnished by her ancestors. But for whom was she showing off? For her ancestors – by eventually equaling Marguerite de Navarre’s gesture with the head of Boniface de la Mole? Why is she so doggedly following the example of the past? Is it not, in the end, to impress a society whose esteem is fundamentally without value for either her or Julien? “What will the Paris salons say when they see a girl of my rank adore a doomed lover to such a degree? To find a love like this one must go back to the heroic age” (493). At any rate, Julien has no ancestors to emulate and he is

in his cell, isolated from the world and facing imminent death. When Fouqué and Mathilde try to talk to him about the agitation and publicity surrounding his trial, he cuts them off: “What do *others* matter to me! My relations with *others* are to be rudely cut off!” (497).

All this will change with the beginning of the trial. For there, Julien will feel the gaze of the world upon him. At first he will become primarily aware of the presence of women (“Turning towards the crowd, he saw the circular gallery dominating the amphitheater was full of women,” RB: 502), a comforting, tearful presence, full of sympathy, compassion and tears. Julien himself is on the verge of breaking down with emotion, when his thoughts turn his enemies and what they might think of him. It is then that he encounters the insolent gaze of one of the members of the jury, M. Valenod who had been Julien’s rival for Mme de Rênal’s affection, whom Julien had always disdained, and who, now as baron de Valenod, had replaced M. de Rênal as mayor of Verrières. More than anything else, it is confronted with the contemptuous gaze of this man, a past master of the art of hypocrisy who has successfully risen to a position of wealth and power and who now, in the name of justice, sits on the jury in judgment of him, that Julien decides to resist in a most spectacular way. “Gentlemen of the jury,” he begins in his famous declamation,

My horror of contempt, which I thought I could defy at the moment of my death, now forces me to speak. Messieurs, I do not have the honor to belong to your class, you see in me a peasant who is in rebellion against the baseness of his lot. I ask no mercy of you ... I now see around me men who, without pausing to think what pity my youth might deserve, will want to punish me and so discourage for ever that class of young men who, born into an inferior class and in one way or another oppressed by poverty have the good luck to obtain a good education and the audacity to mix in what the arrogance of the rich calls Society. That is my crime, messieurs, and it will be punished with all the more severity in that, when it comes to it, I am not being judged by my peers. I see there on the jury benches no peasant who has done well, but only indignant bourgeois... (RB: 504–5).

Julien’s last gesture will be very public and theatrical and will leave the courtroom in tears. Like Napoleon in and through the *Memorial*, he has chosen to speak and to die rather than to endure contempt, submit and tacitly ask for mercy. Perhaps we can see in this sublime moment the power of exemplarity. Julien has surpassed himself and his own hypocrisy. Like the Napoleon of the *Memorial*, he is beyond ambition, there is nothing at stake but forcing the recognition of who he is and the reason he is being judged. There is in all this a profound criticism of the society that Napoleon left behind but also of the Restoration’s attempt to efface the Napoleonic episode from history. As for Julien, he can be seen as having acceded to a certain exemplarity, for, on his own level and on his own terms, he has moved beyond acting like another to be and to act – nobly and spectacularly – for himself and like himself.

Endnotes

- 1 Las Cases (1968) 157: “Je n’ai point usurpé la couronne, disait-il un jour au Conseil d’Etat, je l’ai relevée dans le ruisseau ; le peuple l’a mise sur ma tête : qu’on respecte ses actes !” ; all cited passages are my translation. All references will be abbreviated MSH.
- 2 Stendhal (2002) 28; all passages cited subsequently are drawn from this translation, for which I will use the abbreviation RB.
- 3 On this question, see Hirschman (2013).
- 4 The spectacular nature of exemplarity is a constant; in the context of Roman culture, see Roller’s (2004) interesting analysis in his article; on this same question, concerning the relationship between classical culture and Ancien Régime France, see Morrissey (2013) chaps. 1–4.

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