

Literature, Emotions, and the Possible: Hazlitt and Stendhal

“A possible experience or a possible truth does not equate to real experience or real truth minus the value ‘real’; but at least in the opinion of its devotees, it has in it something out-and-out divine, a fiery, soaring quality, a constructive will, a conscious utopianism that does not shrink from reality but treats it, on the contrary, as a mission and an invention.” (Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*)

Since the 1970s, literary criticism has been dominated first by formalist and then by cultural studies approaches with a general attitude of contempt for science, reason, and the truth. Paradoxically, in the last decades, literary critics have avoided confronting what is fundamental in literature: its intrinsic value as literature, and its ability to represent and express human psychology. The ethical and the aesthetic dimensions of literary forms have been neglected in favour of a sometimes vague sociological vision and a repetitive Freudian-Lacanian interpretation; they reduce the immense variety of affective phenomena to a few complexes (Oedipus, castration) or to an empty linguistic game. Fortunately, for the sake of literature, since the 1980s, some analytical philosophers have been interested in the affective dimension, and have been reflecting on the emotions elicited by the arts and on the knowledge value of literature. As evident nowadays, several disciplines are undergoing what can be called the affective turn, and a new vision of literary and artistic phenomena, revisiting some questions debated since Aristotle and very important in the eighteenth century, is shattering the structuralist, poststructuralist, deconstructionist, and postmodern spell. Several philosophers and some critics reject the idea that literature belongs to a purely literary sphere under the tyranny of language, understood as non-communication and shallow rhetoric. Literature has a place in real life, addresses audiences, represents and expresses beliefs, desires, emotions, and values that are crucial for the human beings. Literature offers knowledge.

In past epochs, the concern for the worth of literature was typical, and in the modern time, such concern has been vigorously stated by one of the most important writer of the twentieth century, Robert Musil, whose work, together with that of several Austro-Hungarian philosophers and psychologists of the turn of the nineteenth century, has been a constant object of investigation for Kevin Mulligan. A few years ago I had the opportunity of teaching several graduate seminars with him, often focusing on Musil and Stendhal. Recently we collaborated in the NCCR (National Center for Competence in Research) in Affective Sciences at the University of Geneva. This article owes itself to what I have learned from Kevin Mulligan and from our teamwork.

I will claim that literature provides knowledge. After some introductory considerations on the recent debate on this point, and on some ideas coming from Musil, I will concentrate on Stendhal and William Hazlitt. These two authors of the first decades of the nineteenth century, who have much in common with Musil, have reflected extensively on the value of literature. They are important for the study of emotions in general, can contribute to a general theory of emotions, and can answer questions about literature and cognition. I believe that the contemporary debate will gain from the reconstruction of the thought of past authors, who, using a different terminology from the one we use now, put forward a number of fundamental principles for the study of emotions and the cognitive value of literature.

The link between literature and emotions is evident. What else does a novel or a poem or a drama do if not describe, express, or suggest what happens in the mind of various characters,

and what is the unfolding of their actions and emotions in time? Literature is a good exploration of affective life; hence it offers some truth about human psychology.

Some contemporary philosophers believe that literature lacks knowledge value, or only has a very weak one. Peter Lamarque, for example, argues in a recent book that literature cannot provide knowledge “because fictional (or imaginary) situations do not provide real data”. He considers it a “mistake to suppose that to be *serious* or *reflective* a work must in effect *teach* something”.¹ We cannot measure the bodily reactions, emotions, and sentiments of fictional characters; they cannot be tested. But why should we look for data in a novel?

The second argument by Lamarque against the knowledge value of literature is what can be called the fear of banality. In his opinion, the generalizing truths to be found in a novel or a poem are too simple and plain to offer moral knowledge. In *The Philosophy of Literature*, he takes the example of Charles Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend*. “But if we try to extract a worldly truth from all this, a truth independent of fictional particulars, such as ‘Money corrupts,’ we are back to banality. [...] The novel’s value resides in the working of the theme, not in the theme’s bare propositional content.” But why does the “working of a theme” prevent the acquisition of knowledge about the working of imagination? And is imagination not necessary in order to figure out some moral values (sympathy, for instance)?

Greg Currie, although seeming to believe that the knowledge value of literature is feeble, points out the connection between fiction and emotions; “fictional narratives of real value ought to have some significant relation to what is true, particularly in the domain of human psychology.”²

Those who believe that literature can provide knowledge often insist on the richness of literary examples, or sometimes on the empathic effect of a novel or a poem in the reader’s mind. An enthusiastic appreciation of literature was expressed by Martha Nussbaum in 1986. According to her, we can find the best analysis of accidents that affect real life in literary works: “Greek tragedy shows good people being ruined because of things that just happen to them, things they do not control. [...] Tragedy also, however, shows something more deeply disturbing; it shows good people doing bad things, things otherwise repugnant to their ethical character and commitments, because of circumstances whose origin does not lie within them.”³

Ronald de Sousa developed an argument close to Musil’s: “The Art of the Possible in Life and Literature represents a kind of possibility that we might call *potentialities*. They are not merely tied to the modality of some proposition, but represent *actual* dispositions or potentialities of a particular person or things.”⁴

Some literary critics have argued for the benefits of empathy; for instance, in her *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), Suzanne Keen thinks that the empathy readers feel in reading novels constitutes a real and easy possibility of increasing their disposition towards altruism.

What could be learned from literature about human emotions, vices, and virtues should not be perceived as having quick and direct results. It does not produce immediate appropriate behavior in human affairs. But, would anyone seriously assert that the psychology of emotions or the various theories of arousal, or the collecting of some verifiable data, or the accurate explanation of some ethical concepts have an immediate and infallible application in improving our morality?

¹ Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2009, p. 253.

² Gregory Currie, *Narratives and Narrators*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 209.

³ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 25.

⁴ Ronald De Sousa, “The Art of the Possible in Life and Literature”, in M. E. Reicher, M. E. and Marek, J. C. (Eds.), *Experience and Analysis*, Vienna, 2005, p. 349. Emphasis added.

Let us imagine that we read, for instance, the sad story of Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe*, where the protagonist causes so much pain to his lover and to himself because he is incapable of telling her that he does not love her any longer. Very likely, we will gain little, if anything at all, in terms of empirical knowledge and behavior, and we will persist in our indecisions as much as Adolphe does in the novel. Nevertheless, we will definitely be pressed to think about emotions, virtues, and vices. Promoting reflection is an important step in order to produce conceptual knowledge.

I insist on the power of literature as a means of reflection. Literature does not simply describe and suggest emotion, but also develops our imagination. In his 2002 article "The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge" Noël Carroll refutes the philosophical theses that discard the idea that literature (and art in general) could be an instrument of education and of knowledge. He stresses, on the contrary, the way in which narrative forms of art use the same type of thought experiments that philosophers use, just in a richer and more complex way, since philosophical thought experiments are often too dry and succinct.

Following Carroll's argument, I maintain that literature has a definite cognitive value because it entails an important exercise in imagining the possible, both in terms of other people's life and of our own future. Literary thought experiments provide the same type of mental gymnastic in imagination that is common to philosophical reasoning.

It is not necessary to enter the debate on thought experiments, from their possible Pre-Socratic origins and cognitive procedures, to contemporary theses.⁵ It would be enough here to identify the usefulness of those imaginings. Carroll recalled that thought experiments used in philosophical explanations often take the form of a narrative while functioning as argument. They are a device that can help to refine, "contemplate, possibly clarify, and even reconfigure our concepts, thereby rendering them newly meaningful". They are useful in making distinctions, "proposing possibility proofs, and assessing claims of conceptual necessity".⁶

If thought experiments are valuable in philosophy, they are crucial in fiction, since they constitute the fictional element itself. The whole of *Robinson Crusoe*, for instance, is a thought experiment testing what happens to a man alone on a desert island; it could be said that all novels presenting characters in a given situation are thought experiments. But probably, the many thought experiments displayed within a novel are more important than the overall thought experiment summing up the framing situation. It is the accumulation and the variety of the branching inferences that call for a continuous adjustment of intertwining hypotheses. This requires an exercise implying both quickness and time from the reader. In a novel – or in a good novel – myriads of conjectures blend with descriptions, comments, and digressions. Such is the life of any narrative: it presents episodes and actions (physical and or mental), takes time, and solicits the imagination. Because of its temporal dimension, it often provides more accurate accounts of emotions than the psychological or the philosophical ones

⁵ See Nicolas Rescher, "Thought Experiments in Presocratic Philosophy", in T. Horowitz and G. Massey (Eds.), *Thought Experiments in Science and Philosophy*. Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 1991. For an accurate debate on several contemporary approaches to thought experiment, see Pascal Engel, "Philosophical Thought Experiments: In or out the Armchair?", in K. Ierodiakonou and S. Roux (eds.) *Thought Experiments in Methodological and Historical Contexts*. Brill E-Books, 2011.

⁶ Noël Carroll "The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60/1, 2002. <http://www.filmschool.lodz.pl/files/show/5-398/CarrolThe+Wheel+of+Virtue.pdf> visited October 10, 2011.

which are very dry.⁷ Narratives are crucial in order to understand the difference between an emotional episode and an emotion, since they exhibit what a practical experiment can never do: a chain of emotional events, their motivations, and their aftermaths in a network of beliefs, values and desires. Short term and long term affective phenomena are the domain of narration. The temporal dimension of literature allows for a thick and dynamic account of affective life.

Musiliana

Robert Musil argues that possibilities belong to reality, and that literature enhances that link by fully showing the possible, what could (just) be the case. As stated by Ulrich, the protagonist of *The Man without Qualities*, reality awakens possibilities and art has the capacity of enlarging the portion of what is possible. In a 1911 article, Musil openly defended the thesis of the worth value of literature for knowledge, somewhat correcting the famous definition by Aristotle. In the *Poetics*, the difference between history and poetry is described as the distinction between particular facts and general facts, with the consequence that poetry is closer to philosophy since it deals with the general. Musil, however, overcomes the opposition between the particular and the general, identifying their dynamic relation in art:

To be sure, art represents not conceptually but concretely, *not in generalities but in individual cases within whose complex sound the generalities dimly resonate*; given the same case, a doctor is interested in the generally valid causal connections, the artist in an individual web of feeling, the scientist in a summary schema of the empirical data. The artist is further concerned with expanding the range of what is inwardly still *possible*, and therefore art's sagacity is not the sagacity of the law, but a different one. [...] Where art has value it shows things that few have seen.⁸

For Musil, then, if valuable art shows “things that few have seen”, literature must deal with possible truths—of a type that differs from mathematical truth. Literature has to do with possible worlds, like those hinted at by thought experiments. Discussions of the roles of truth and knowledge should take seriously not the distinction between the general and the particular, but between contingent and essential truths.

Not unlike Musil, Hazlitt and Stendhal suggest the value of imagination, of conjectures about the possible. They did not worry about banality because they understood that literature and art had to vividly express some (possible) essential truths.⁹ Essential truths are often banal, but their presentation in literature is not banal since it should be vivid. What is the “vividness” often claimed by those who talk about aesthetic emotions?¹⁰ Following the

⁷ Peter Goldie is very concerned with the emotional dynamics and the fact that our emotional life takes the form of a long narrative. See Peter Goldie, *The Emotions. A Philosophical Exploration*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

⁸ Robert Musil, “The Obscene and Pathological in Art”, *Precision and the Soul*, edited by Burton Pike and David S. Luft, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 7. (emphasis added)

⁹ On this theme, Kevin Mulligan recommended the work of Nicolai Hartmann who distinguished between *Lebenswahrheit* and *Wesenswahrheit* [*Aesthetik*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1953].

¹⁰ See for example: “This rejection [of human love] of ordinary human passion is nowhere more *vividly* expressed than in the Confessions, where Augustine movingly recalls his own delight in earthly love...” [Martha Nussbaum, “Augustine and Dante on the Ascent of Love”, in Gareth B. Matthews. *The Augustinian Tradition*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California University Press, 1999, p. 61. Emphasis added]. See also: “So the question is not really how probable something is but how *vividly* it is imaginable.”[R. De Sousa, “The Art of the Possible in Life and Literature”, in *op.cit.*, p. 351. De Sousa underlines.] On the theme of the

lesson of Musil, Stendhal, and Hazlitt, it can be said that this vividness represents the inseparable connection between form and content in a work of art.

It is obvious that literature has to do with accidental truths. Novels are filled with the description of places, people, and events (historically true or allusive to history or completely invented), and particular actions and episodes. But more importantly, literature has to do with essential truths, the type of truths that have to be valid in all possible worlds. Essential truths are definitely mathematical and sometimes banal and moral, such as: pain is something bad, or justice is more important than a good meal, or every emotion involves the representation of an object.

Some writers are chiefly aware of their enterprise, and struggle to meet their literary targets. Observing their endeavor in their diaries, correspondence, notes, and theoretical remarks scattered across their fictions or essays, we might state that they have a clear idea that a good novel cannot rely only on accidental truths; it would be just an accumulation of details, and at the best it could achieve picturesque qualities. Neither could a good novel pile up essential truths; it would be unbearable like a series of commandments. A good novel is the combination of the two types of truths. The same can be said of a good essay.

Musil, Hazlitt, and Stendhal constantly reflected on the literary ideal for which they strove, and all believed that style was not an ornament of some ideas or events, but the inseparable blending of form and content. Style was to be understood as the balance between essential and accidental truths in terms of invention and composition, as the whole architecture holding the unity of form. This type of style is what strikes the readers as something “vivid”.

Hazlitt and Stendhal

Hazlitt and Stendhal were attached to both the eighteenth-century philosophy of sensibility, and to some endeavors of the Romantic Movement that conquered Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They occasionally met in Florence and Paris. Stendhal admired the *Edinburgh Review* where Hazlitt occasionally published, and Hazlitt admired Stendhal's *De l'Amour*. They had a similar understanding of important ethical and aesthetic questions.

First of all, they were convinced that the human mind was a complex and unified system composed by intelligence and affects of various types. Because of their interest in human affectivity as intimately connected to reason, Hazlitt and Stendhal occupied a similar position among the Romantics. They opposed the over-sentimental or sentimentalist conceptions of their famous contemporaries (Coleridge and Wordsworth in the case of Hazlitt, and Chateaubriand and Madame de Staël in the case of Stendhal), and were both suspicious of the writer who greatly fascinated the whole romantic generation, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Secondly, Hazlitt and Stendhal thought that there were many different emotions, and not just some fundamental emotions. Consistent with this belief, they realized that emotions can be mixed, self-reflexive, and wrong, fake, or sham, and that their effects and combinations needed to be studied. Hazlitt and Stendhal's subtle descriptions of a great variety of affective phenomena are richer than the accounts given by treatises. Stendhal actually wrote a detailed study of love and Hazlitt, of human disinterestedness, but they generally constructed their philosophy and psychology of emotions in scattered reflections, comments, and essayistic writing. They aimed to establish taxonomies of affects, trying to understand their dynamics, the relation between one emotion and another, as well as between

link between reason and emotions see Anne Reboul, “ ‘La raison est l'esclave des passions’ disait Hume”, *Actes du Colloque GRAME* “L'art, la pensée et les émotions”, Lyon , 2001, <http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/02/90/59/PDF/Raison.pdf> Visited September 16, 2011.

emotions and actions and ideas. Hazlitt refined the form of the essay, and Stendhal achieved his best theory of emotions in his novels.

Hazlitt, who published his numerous essays in journals and reviews, which were then collected in volumes (*The Round Table: A Collection of Essays on Literature, Men, and Manners*, 1817; *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, 1817; *Table-Talk; or, Original Essays*, 1821–22), wrote about the most diverse subjects: theatre reviews, politics, fine arts, prose and poetry, commenting the works and ideas of his contemporaries, studying human actions, emotions, and motivations. In his first book, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805), he rejected Hobbes' vision of the natural human violence and selfishness, without accepting the vision of natural human sympathy as expressed by Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiment*. In Hazlitt's view, human beings are not naturally benevolent, but disinterested. Just as for Hume and Smith, the faculty that can produce this non-selfish feeling is the imagination: "The imagination, by means of which alone I can anticipate future objects, or be interested in them, must carry me out of myself into the feelings of others by one and the same process by which I am thrown forward as it were into my future being, and interested in it."¹¹

Following Shaftesbury and the tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment, for him—as for Stendhal and Musil—the ethical dimension could not be separated from the aesthetic one. His essays on Shakespeare's plays constitute a form of literary criticism, where the link between art and life is so fundamental that art becomes, as in Aristotle, a means of education, a true discipline: "Tragedy creates a balance of the affections. It makes us thoughtful spectators in the lists of life. It is the refiner of the species; a discipline of humanity." ("Othello", SW vol.1, 112)

Hazlitt's essays on Shakespeare's plays analyze the mind of various characters, the intentions directing their emotions and actions, while considering at the same time their effect on the mind of the spectator or reader. For example, the examination of Macbeth, of his hesitations, and of "the stings of remorse" that assault his mind, is contrasted with the analysis of Lady Macbeth: the remark that she shows "obdurate strength of will and masculine firmness" continues with the scrutiny of connected traits of her character and new developments. According to the Aristotelian postulation that a good fiction should, without striking the eyes, produce in the audience a strong effect of pity and fear (*Poetics*, book II; ch. I, section 8), Hazlitt observed our affective response to Lady Macbeth, to her will and all her powerful negative emotions—ambition, guilt, self-will, determination, hardness of the heart, lack of natural affections:

She at once seizes on the opportunity that offers for the accomplishment of all their wished-for greatness, and never flinches from her object till all is over. The magnitude of her resolution almost covers the magnitude of her guilt. She is a great bad woman, whom we hate, but whom we fear more than we hate. She does not excite our loathing and abhorrence like Regan and Goneril. She is only wicked to gain a great end; and is perhaps more distinguished by her commanding presence of mind and inexorable self-will, which do not suffer her to be diverted from a bad purpose, when once formed, by weak and womanly regrets, than by the hardness of her heart or want of natural affections. ("Macbeth", SW vol.1, 100)

Occasionally, in *The Pleasures of Hating* for instance, Hazlitt expanded his Aristotelian vision, in order to investigate complex types of emotions--what we would call

¹¹ William Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action: Being an Argument in Favour of the Natural Disinterestedness of the Human Mind*, *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt* vol. I, edited by Duncan WU, London, Pickering and Chatto, 1998, p.3. (from now on SW).

today “mixed emotions”--trying to determine the web where similar and dissimilar affects can combine:

Nature seems (the more we look into it) made up of *antipathies*: without something to *hate*, we should lose the very spring of thought and action. Life would turn to a stagnant pool, were it not ruffled by the *jarring interests*, the *unruly passions* of men. The white streak in our own fortunes is brightened (or just rendered visible) by making all around it as dark as possible; so the rainbow paints its form upon the cloud. Is it *pride*? Is it *envy*? Is it the *force of contrast*? Is it *weakness* or *malice*? But so it is, that there is a secret affinity, a hankering after, evil in the human mind, and that it takes *a perverse, but a fortunate delight in mischief*, since it is a never-failing source of *satisfaction*. (“On the Pleasure of Hating”, SW vol. 8, 118; emphasis added)

Stendhal’s entire work--from his art history to his analysis of all the sentiments composing love (*De l’amour. Une description complète et minutieuse de tous les sentiments qui composent la passion nommée amour*, 1822), and his novels and various journals--could be understood as a constant “inquiry” into the emotions. Already in his correspondence with his sister Pauline (1804-1805), where he wrote of the typically eighteenth-century question of happiness, he advised her that, in order to come closer to it, it is necessary to be sensitive, to study and know human passions, beliefs and actions: “*Observons donc ; cela ne fait qu’augmenter la sensibilité de notre âme, et sans sensibilité point de bonheur.*”¹²

He had no doubt that one can find the best analysis of the “human heart” in:

1. Direct observation of people in the Salons
2. Good philosophy
3. Good literature

Stendhal urged Pauline to read Molière, Shakespeare, and Hume, and to study the behavior and the passions of her friends and of herself. Since he was concerned with the way in which what he called “passions” could be classified, he identified long and short term passions, and “habits of the soul”.¹³ He recommended that Pauline write lists of passions and speculate about their possible link, compatibility, and transformations. In his *Histoire de la Peinture italienne* (1817), he often uses the phrase: *les nuances de passions*. These nuances encompass two sets of phenomena. On the one hand, there are the *tender* emotions that distinguish the sensitive modern human beings from the emotionally simple, harsh, and limited Ancient men; on the other, there are emotions resulting from the increased expressiveness of the great Renaissance art that he admired. Raphael, Leonardo, and Correggio could infuse their paintings with a subtle gamut of emotions and moods detectable in the expressions and gestures of the human figures, as well as in objects. Writing about *The Saint Cecilia* by Raphael, Stendhal finds the broken musical instruments scattered on the floor especially moving, visible in the foreground of the painting. As much as the expression of

¹² Stendhal, *Correspondance I*, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1968, p. 139 (to Pauline, August 20, 1804).

¹³ “ Il y a des passions, l’amour, la vengeance, la haine, l’orgueil, la vanité, l’amour de la gloire. Il y a des états des passions : la terreur, la crainte, la fureur, le rire, les pleurs, la joie, la tristesse, l’inquiétude.

Je les appelle états de passions, parce que plusieurs passions différentes peuvent nous rendre terrifiés, craignants, furieux, riants, pleurants, etc.

Il y a ensuite les moyens de passion, comme l’hypocrisie. Il y a ensuite les habitudes de l’âme; il y en a de sensibles, il y en a d’utiles. Nous nommons les utiles, vertus ; les nuisibles vices. Vertus: justice, clémence, probité, etc., etc. Vices: cruauté, etc. Vertus moins utiles ou qualités: modestie, bienfaisance, bienveillance, sagesse, etc. Vices moins nuisibles ou défauts : fatuité, esprit de contradiction, le menteur, l’impertinence, le mystérieux, la timidité, la distraction, etc. ” [*Ibid.*, p. 118 (to Pauline, June 1804).]

Cecilia and her companions, they eloquently account for the time just before the sudden and overwhelming rapture that has struck Cecilia. She listens to the celestial music of the angels singing in a cloud high up—her eyes are turned towards the sky: “*L’orgue que tient sainte Cécile, elle l’a laissé tomber avec tant d’abandon, surprise par les célestes concerts, que deux tuyaux se sont détachés*”. Stendhal called the phenomenon of attributing the power of expression to objects: “*l’art de passionner les détails, triomphe des âmes sublimes*.”¹⁴ Stendhal’s comment on the painting is preceded by a short development on Shakespeare. He found *l’art de passionner les détails* in some simple and vivid utterances used in *Macbeth*; for example, when Ross remarks the absence of the King in the banquet and Macbeth tells the ghost of Banquo that “The table is full”.

In 1827, when asked about the state of philosophy in Paris by his friend Gian Pietro Vieusseux, he replied that, besides logics and metaphysics, there was an important branch studying the knowledge and the explanation of the soul (we would say psychology), and more importantly, yet another branch studying “what happens in the human heart when one feels an emotion”.¹⁵

As suggested before, Hazlitt and Stendhal have an analogous position within Romanticism. They give similar accounts of various affective phenomena: pleasure, self-love, *amour-propre*, egoism and egocentrism, aesthetic experience, sympathy, self-deception, false feelings, and sham emotions. They both show some essential truths; that vanity is a vice, and that sympathy and love are indispensable for human society and personal happiness. More importantly, they recognize the value of the “heart”, but never, unlike the great majority of Romantics, at the expenses of reason. Probably the most striking essential truth is the goodness of sentiment, and the inferiority of sentimentality.

Against Sentimentalism

Because they valued sentiment and the arts as the expression of the human mind and as education in humanity, both Hazlitt and Stendhal mistrusted any excessive expression of sentiment. They saw in Rousseau the example of sentimentalism in feeling and style. Interestingly, they both associated sentimentalism with sham emotions and with oratorical style; sentimentalism in feelings leads to a self-centered vision of the world, and to complacency and conceit. Sentimentalist style holds on to an imbalance between form and content, with a large abundance of words in comparison to ideas. Rousseau embodied these excesses, and, in spite of the seduction of his writings, Hazlitt and Stendhal were equally committed to denouncing the draw-backs and dangers they represented, and continue to represent.

Stendhal invented a neologism to refer to his endeavor of eradicating the influence of Rousseau. He wrote and underlined in his *Journal* on Mai 23, 1804: “*Dérousseautiser mon jugement en lisant Destutt, Tacite...*”, and, in August 1804, he warned his sister that, even if Rousseau is admirable, she should remember that “he was always in a bad mood”. The more Stendhal acquired his own ideas about life and style (what he called “*la théorie du cœur humain*” and “*la peinture de cœur par la littérature et la musique*”¹⁶), the more he rejected Rousseau. On July 1, 1820, he wrote in his diary: “*Même dans les moments les plus tendres et les plus mélancoliques, comme aujourd’hui [...], le tour d’emphase de La Nouvelle Héloïse me la rend illisible*.”¹⁷ The emphatic mode of the novel which for decades had obtained an

¹⁴ Stendhal, *Histoire de la Peinture en Italie I*, Paris : Le Divan, 1929, p. 202 and 201.

¹⁵ Stendhal, *Correspondance II*, Paris, Gallimard, Pléiade, 1967, p. 131–132 (to Gian Pietro Vieusseux, December 1827).

¹⁶ Stendhal, *Souvenirs d’égotisme, Œuvres Intimes II*, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1982, p. 468.

¹⁷ Stendhal, *Journal, ibid.*, p. 47.

overwhelming success, cannot attract the writer who aimed at writing with a few clear ideas, and used as an epigraph for his *Le Rouge et le Noir*: “*La vérité, l’âpre vérité.*”

Already when he was very young, he was conscious of the danger of an empty rhetoric of sentiments, and protested against the sham sensibility of those who think of themselves as very sensitive. Sham or artificial (unnatural) emotions are typical of verbose writers, such as Rousseau, Chateaubriand, and Mme de Staël who was a fervent admirer of Rousseau: “*Madame de Staël n’est pas très sensible et elle s’est crue très sensible. Elle a voulu être très sensible [...] Ensuite elle a mis là-dessus son exagération.*”¹⁸

Replying to Balzac’s enthusiastic article on *La Chartreuse de Parme*, and his minor criticism of its occasional harsh language, Stendhal declared:

Le beau style de M. de Chateaubriand me sembla ridicule dès 1802. Ce style me semble dire une quantité de petites faussetés. Toute ma croyance sur le style est dans ce mot....

*Je lis fort peu ; quand je lis pour me faire plaisir, je prends les Mémoires du maréchal Gouvion-Saint-Cyr ; c’est là mon Homère. Je lis souvent l’Arioste [...] Voici le fond de ma maladie : le style de J.-J. Rousseau, de M. Villemain, de Mme Sand me semble dire une foule des choses qu’il ne faut pas dire, et souvent beaucoup de faussetés. Voilà le grand mot.*¹⁹

Comparable remarks are put forward by Hazlitt, whose essay “On the Character of Rousseau” starts with an attack against Mme de Staël because of her misreading of Rousseau, and continues with his criticism of Rousseau’s exaggerated sensibility:

MADAME DE STAEL, in her Letters on the writings and Character of Rousseau, gives it as her opinion, “that the imagination was the first faculty of his mind, and that this faculty even absorbed all the others.” And she farther adds, “Rousseau had great strength of reason on abstract questions, or with respect to objects, which have no reality but in the mind.” Both these opinions are radically wrong. Neither imagination nor reason can properly be said to have been the original predominant faculties of his mind. (“On the Character of Rousseau”, SW vol. 2, 90)

As for Stendhal, who ended his autobiography *Vie de Henry Brulard* with the remark that an over-detailed account hurts tender emotions,²⁰ excess of any sort becomes a fault. Consciously or unconsciously, those who believe that emotions are connected to reason, follow Aristotle’s principle of moderation, and are suspicious of any type of overstatement. Therefore, in Hazlitt’s opinion, Rousseau’s extremely acute sensibility, which is one of the causes of his overwhelming success, ends up being morbid and selfish:

The strength both of imagination and reason, which he possessed, was borrowed from the *excess* of another faculty; and the weakness and poverty of reason and imagination, which are to be found in his works, may be traced to the same source, namely, that these faculties in him were *artificial*, secondary, and dependent, operating by a power not theirs, but lent to them. The only quality which he possessed in an eminent degree, which alone raised him above ordinary men, and which gave to his writings and opinions an influence greater, perhaps, than has been exerted by any

¹⁸ “Si Mme de Staël n’avait pas voulu être plus passionnée que la nature et la première éducation ne l’ont faite, elle aurait fait des chefs-d’œuvre. Elle a voulu sortir de son ton naturel, elle a fait des ouvrages pleins d’excellentes pensées, fruits d’un caractère réfléchissant, et il y manque tout ce qui tient au caractère tendre. Comme cependant elle a voulu faire de la tendresse, elle est tombée dans le galimatias.” [Stendhal, *Correspondance I*, p. 214 (to Pauline Beyle, August 20, 1805)].

¹⁹ *Correspondance III*, p. 395 (to Balzac, October 16, 1840; emphasis added).

²⁰ “On gâte des sentiments si tendres à les raconter en détail.” [Stendhal, *Vie de Henry Brulard, Œuvres Intimes*, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1982, p. 959.]

individual in modern times, was *extreme sensibility, or an acute and even morbid feeling of all that related to his own impressions, to the objects and events of his life*. (“On the Character of Rousseau”, SW vol. 2, 90; emphasis added)

There are many instances of rapprochements between Hazlitt and Stendhal. Furthermore, much could be said about the use of irony in both writers, and the style for which they strove. The familiar style Hazlitt privileged was theorized in his essay “On Familiar Style”:

It is not easy to write a familiar style. Many people mistake a familiar for a vulgar style, and suppose that to write without affectation is to write at random. On the contrary, there is nothing that requires more precision, and, if I may so say, purity of expression, than the style I am speaking of. It utterly rejects not only all unmeaning pomp, but all low, cant phrases, and loose, unconnected, slipshod allusions. [...] To write a genuine familiar or truly English style, is to write as anyone would speak in common conversation who had a thorough command and choice of words, or who could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity, setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes. (“On Familiar Style”, SW vol. 6, 217)

Stendhal’s letter to Balzac expresses his long-term horror for any embellished language and his desire to write in a concise, dry, quick style. In his novels, within a sentence, the narration can rapidly pass from the external to the internal world, from emotions to actions, and vice versa. I have already suggested that the rejection of ornate style was a necessity for both of them in order to achieve the truthful sentiments and the balance between form and content. Their motto could be: no more words than things or ideas. Hazlitt wrote of Shakespeare’s plays that literature must “have the force of things upon the mind” (“Macbeth”); and Stendhal said, also about Shakespeare, in his journal of February 5, 1805, that words should have the truth of facts: “*Il y a une manière d’émouvoir qui est de montrer les faits, les choses, sans en dire l’effet, qui peut être employée par une âme sensible non philosophe (connaissance de l’homme).*”

The two writers were therefore quite alike in terms of their expectations and ethical-aesthetic ideals. Finally another striking similarity in their method was that they used and theorized thought experiments, or conjectures, or the activity of imagination (terms which I use here as synonyms). Recalling the notion dear to Musil, the works of both writers are essays in the most literal sense of “attempts”. *Essaysmus*, according to Musil, is not just a mode of writing but of the aim of the investigation, and it reveals the awareness of the possible in its connection with the real. The Austrian writer declared in “On the Essay” (1914) that for him “ethics and aesthetics are associated with the word *essay*”, since it is the best way of being precise “in an area where one cannot work precisely”. Although the essay does not deal with mathematical truths but with the class of essential truths pertaining to the facts of ethical order and of feelings, “it investigates and presents evidence”.²¹

Stendhal’s way of attempting the possible appears in his use of hypothetical sentences; Hazlitt elaborates upon the “essay” form, pointing to comparison as the bridge between the possible and the real.

“Essaysmus” and comparisons in Hazlitt

Rambling is a term that Hazlitt used often to allude to his own essays. Besides the reference to *The Rambler*, a journal founded by the famous Doctor Johnson around 1750, rambling indicates the attempts typical of the essay. The range of Hazlitt’s investigation through the form of the essay is vast. The analysis of wit and of common sense, of originality, of sham emotions, the critique of Coleridge and Wordsworth, idle speculations about the passing of

²¹ Musil, “On the Essay”, *Precision and the Soul*, *op. cit.*, p. 28 and 49.

time, considerations on taste and comments of paintings, political issues--all these various themes are relentlessly studied. He could spot, through an implacable close reading, the inconsistencies of Joshua Reynolds's theories of painting, and "ramble" in a chain of associations, where self-irony and observation of the world could harmoniously coexist, while never losing sight of his main argument. Rambling is one of the ways of testing the possible.

As I have already said, Hazlitt thought, like Musil, that the real and the possible were linked, and identified the might of the art within that link. In his essay on *Othello*, he expresses his thesis about the cognitive value of literature. The critic expands his initial Aristotelian remark on catharsis to include the understanding of literature as an exercise in sympathy and imagination:

It has been said that tragedy purifies the affections by terror and pity. That is, *it substitutes imaginary sympathy for mere selfishness*. It gives us a high and permanent *interest, beyond ourselves, in humanity as such. It raises the great, the remote, and the possible to an equality with the real, the little and the near.*[...] It teaches him [the reader, the spectator] that there are and have been others like himself, by showing him as in a glass what they have felt, thought, and done. It opens the chambers of the human heart. It leaves nothing indifferent to us that can affect our common nature. It excites our sensibility by exhibiting the *passions wound up to the utmost pitch by the power of imagination or the temptation of circumstances* [...] Tragedy creates a balance of the affections. It makes us thoughtful spectators in the lists of life. It is the refiner of the species; *a discipline* of humanity. ("Othello", vol. 1, 112; emphasis added)

Here, Hazlitt makes an argument about the extended self, continuing the eighteenth century debate on sympathy, simultaneously in ethical and in aesthetic terms. The effect of good fiction, the product of the writer's imagination, is that it sets off the imagination of readers, pushing them to overcome selfishness.

Needless to say, the effect of Shakespeare is the opposite of Rousseau's. The emphasis of the one is quite different from the vividness of the other. As hinted at in Hazlitt's essay, Shakespeare's powerful mind observes the world and the human heart; it brings forth inventive responses from the audience or the readers, and improves their capacity for observation, over a mere projection of the self. In Shakespeare, the passions are "wound up to the utmost pitch", and, as Hazlitt wrote in his essay on *Macbeth*: "All that could actually take place, and all that is only possible to be conceived, what was said and what was done, the workings of passion, the spells of magic, are brought before us with the same absolute truth and vividness." In Rousseau, passions, on the contrary, are drowned in floods of words:

His [Rousseau's] fictitious characters are modifications of his own being, reflections and shadows of himself. His speculations are the obvious exaggerations of a mind giving a loose to its habitual impulses...Hence his enthusiasm and his eloquence, bearing down all opposition. Hence the warmth and the luxuriance, as well as the sameness of his descriptions. Hence the frequent verbosity of his style; for passion lends force and reality to language, and makes words supply the place of imagination. ("On the Character of Rousseau", vol. 2, 91)

In the same line of some of the contemporary philosophers mentioned at the beginning of my article, Hazlitt suggests here that successful literature is "vivid", offering the possibility of refining the imagination, and the good writer should provide experiments for the mind and not speculations coming from his "habitual impulses". Even if Hazlitt does not use the term "thought experiment", he is aware of what can challenge thinking habits. He almost prefigures what Carroll suggests in the aforementioned 2002 article: thought experiments "help to contemplate, possibly clarify, and even reconfigure our concepts, thereby rendering them newly meaningful". They are ways of proposing distinctions.

According to Hazlitt, the sparkle of experimental thinking is comparison. As stated by Carroll, it should be understood as a device whose aim is not to reach empirical discoveries, but to foster conceptual refinements and relationships. Talking about paintings in “On Imitation”, Hazlitt expands once more upon his Aristotelian starting point. Like Aristotle in his *Poetics*, he considers that we take pleasure in mimesis (representation, or imitation to use the more ancient term), and contemplates the same phenomenon Aristotle talked about: the fact that we take pleasure in the representation of unpleasant or even disgusting objects. But Hazlitt adds a new development in his attempts to account for that puzzling pleasure. He actually comes across the primordial emotion with which Aristotle started his *Metaphysics*: that of wonder and astonishment, the cognitive emotion that causes the wish of investigating and knowing:

Objects in themselves disagreeable or indifferent, often please in the imitation. A brick-floor, a pewter-plate, an ugly cur barking [...] have been made very interesting as pictures by the fidelity, skill, and spirit, with which they have been copied. One source of the pleasure thus received is undoubtedly *the surprise or feeling of admiration*, occasioned by the unexpected coincidence between the imitation and the object. [...] One chief reason, it should seem then, why imitation pleases, is, because, by exciting curiosity, and inviting a comparison between the object and the representation, it opens a new field of inquiry, and leads the attention to a variety of details and distinctions not perceived before. This latter source of the pleasure derived from imitation has never been properly insisted on. (“On Imitation”, SW vol. 2, 75; emphasis added)

This passage about the comparison between the represented object and its artistic rendering is a rich description of the indissoluble bond between art, emotions, and cognition.

Hypothesis in Stendhal

Stendhal’s novels are huge thought experiments. *Le Rouge et le Noir*, for example, investigates what happens to an ambitious and intelligent young man of a low social class when he is put in situations of social advancement; *La Chartreuse de Parme* deals with the way in which bright minded characters operate under the tyranny of a cunning Prince. In both cases love operates as the discovery of true feelings after so much self-deception. Stendhal’s novels meditate on the “just possible”, and within them, several narratives develop with descriptions, dialogues, actions, beliefs, desires, and analysis of what has happened in the past and of what might happen in the future. Therefore, several thought experiments occur within the storytelling, which are often marked by the use of hypothetical sentences and the method of nesting imaginings.

These imaginings develop the analysis of a single character, most often the protagonist Julien. He observes, through the prism of his own prejudices and his often wounded social sensibility, the world of the rich, and tries to understand who they are, how they think, and how he can prevail on them. He often reflects in his numerous soliloquies about the way in which he should face that world. I will examine one of many examples of this in *Le Rouge et Le Noir*. The day after conquering Mme de Rênal, the wife of the Mayor of the small town of Verrière in whose house he is the tutor of the children, he mistakenly feels offended by an expression in the Lady’s face. He believes that she acts coldly toward him, wrongly attributing what is actually her embarrassment to her social class, thinking that she has the “deliberate intention to put him in his place”. He is then upset with himself for his reaction and speculates:

“Only a fool,” he told himself, “loses his temper with other people: a stone falls because it is heavy. *Am I always to remain a boy? When am I going to form the good habit of giving these*

people [the rich] their exact money's worth and no more of my heart and soul? *If* I wish to be esteemed by them and by myself, I must show them that it is my poverty that deals with their wealth, but that my heart is a thousand leagues away from their insolence, and is placed in too exalted a sphere to be reached by their petty marks of contempt or favour. (emphasis added)

The narrator specifies in the next paragraph that these musings give to his features “an expression of injured pride and ferocity”. But what matters here is the use of the conjunction *if*. The whole sentence is nevertheless in a conditional mode. The initial questions are, in fact, just the interrogative formulations of Julien’s hypothesis: “if I were not a fool, I would not lose my temper”, and “if I do not want to remain a boy, I should take the good habit...”.

Further, in this same chapter (“A Journey”, Book 1, ch. 12), the misunderstanding between the two lovers grows stronger. Julien takes a journey on the mountains and stops in front of the imposing landscape, an ideal place to forget his agitations in Verrière, and to experience the sublime within nature. He is truly moved by the spectacle of the sublime immensity of the night, and, very quickly, his imagination jumps to his future life:

In the midst of that vast darkness, his soul wandered in contemplation of what he imagined that he would one day find in Paris. This was first and foremost a woman far more beautiful and of a far higher intelligence than any it had been his lot to see in the country. He loved with passion, he was loved in return. If he tore himself from her for a few moments, it was to cover himself with glory and earn the right to be loved more warmly still.

Conjectures pile up, while indirect speech (“*This* was first and foremost a woman...”) and the hypothetical sentence (“*If* he tore himself...”) portray the triumph of the possible existence Julien imagines leading in Paris.

The dream is interrupted by another series of hypotheses which fill the whole gamut of real, possible, and impossible conditions, as well as conflating the conjectures of several minds:

Even *if* we allow him Julien's imagination, a young man brought up among the melancholy truths of Paris *would have been aroused* at this stage in his romance by the cold touch of irony; the mighty deeds *would have vanished* with the hope of performing them. (emphasis added)²²

The passage sketches a dazzling trip toward the real and the possible. Julien is absorbed in his reverie; the narrator presents his character as differing from his nineteenth-century contemporaries. The novel subtitle is in fact *Chronique du XIXe siècle*. The narrator is aware of conjecturing a character, as much as he is of his way of blending the characteristic of the historical novel and of the romance. Then there are the young Parisians, cynically aware of the hard realities of existence. Finally, the ambiguous “we” at the beginning of the passage leaves the reader uncertain about the degree of the fiction’s verisimilitude (as we will see in the next passage I will quote).

Stendhal here offers one of his quick and dense explorations into the state of imagination. This includes the imagination of people in their everyday conjectures about the future; as mentioned above, de Sousa points out that a whole class of emotions could not exist

²² Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le noir*, *Œuvres romanesques complètes* II, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2005, p. 412 and 414. For the English version: <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300261.txt>, visited October 20, 2011. From now on, RN. Emphasis added.

without the possible, such as fear hope, doubt, and trust. This also hints at the imagination of the writers composing their fiction, whose role is to stimulate the minds of narrators, readers, and characters.

Stendhal puts forward what is perhaps the most eloquent exploration of the state of imagination in the chapter in which Mathilde, the bright young Parisian aristocrat constantly seeking noble values and virtues, admits to herself that she is in love with Julien. Stendhal interrupts the flow of narration with one of his authorial interventions, submitting his cogitation about the real, the possible, and the impossible. Appearing in a long paragraph in brackets, this passage shows a complex outburst of various types of irony: playful self-irony; tender irony towards his beloved invention, the character of Mathilde, who is “a sublime soul”; and sharp irony against his contemporaries, whose values are morally low and whose sole passion is self-interest. Tender and satirical moods blend together.

This page *will* damage the unfortunate author in more ways than one. The frigid hearts *will* accuse it of indecency. It does not offer the insult to the young persons who shine in the drawing-rooms of Paris, of supposing that a single one of their number is susceptible to the mad impulses which degrade the character of Mathilde. This character is wholly *imaginary*, and *is indeed imagined quite apart from the social customs* which among all the ages *will* assure so distinguished a place to the civilisation of the nineteenth century. (RN, 670; emphasis added)

Through the use of the future tense appearing several times in these lines, the narrator imagines what his nineteenth-century reader might imagine: that, for example, *Le Rouge et le Noir* is indecent because it portrays a character who does not correspond to the real people of the century. Of course, the ironic sentence mentioning “the mad impulse which degrades the character of Mathilde” (her falling in love and aspiring to virtue) spells out the opposite of what the writer thinks, as he believes that is worthwhile to imagine *possible* characters, since literature, to use the words of Hazlitt in “Othello”, refines the species and disciplines humanity.

If the last sentence of the aforementioned lines seems to imply that Stendhal believes, like writers of romances, that fiction is fanciful imagination detached from the real, the following paragraph steers in the reverse direction, showing a realist novel whose ambition it is to mirror reality.

The following passage starts with an imagined answer to a reader who would have protested against the relentless way in which the realist writer reveals people’s vices:

Ah, Sir, *a novel is a mirror carried along a high road*. At one moment it reflects to your vision the azure skies, at another the mire of the puddles at your feet. And the man who carries this *mirror* in his pack *will* be accused by you of being immoral! His *mirror* shows the mire, and you blame the *mirror*! Rather blame that high road upon which the puddle lies, still more the inspector of roads who allows the water to gather and the puddle to form.

Another final leap seems to confirm the nature of romance, but the narrator is actually ironically claiming his right to a constructive utopia:

Now that it is quite understood that the character of Mathilde is impossible in our age, no less prudent than virtuous, I am less afraid of causing annoyance by continuing the account of the follies of this charming girl. (*Le Rouge et le Noir*, 671)

Divine irony meanders from mind to mind, from provocation to provocation, and rambles in directions that seem dispersed only to those who do not like to exercise their minds, but actually never loses track with essential truths! The point is that the narrator

contests the wrong belief that the real and the imaginary are opposites, while proposing that literature should be both: observation of reality and imagination, the real and the possible. Wouldn't this be an essential truth about fiction? And about life!

The novel has knowledge value precisely because it investigates the possible as a region of the real; as the contemporary critic D. A. Nuttall said about Shakespeare, the successful writer can "join verisimilitude and wonder".²³ These two aspects recall those Hazlitt alluded to when, in his "On Imitation", he suggested the importance of surprise in the pleasure we take from mimesis. Both Stendhal's hypotheses and Hazlitt's comparisons hint at the possible in art and in life.

Once more, how close they are to Musil! They show that literature can weave together the real, the possible, and the impossible in order to "treat" reality "as a mission and an invention".²⁴ How close they are to the speculation of Ulrich in that early chapter of *The Man without Qualities*, where the question of the possible is debated: "Then comes a man who first gives the new possibilities their meaning and their destiny; he awakens them. [...] Since his ideas, insofar as they are not mere idle phantasmagoria, are nothing else than as yet unborn realities, he too of course has a sense of reality."

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²³ Anthony David Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007, p. 236.

²⁴ Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, translation by E. Kaiser and E. Wilkins, London, Picador, p. 11.