

Imagination and Memory in Stendhal

Renato Janine Ribeiro

Stendhal said of one of his most significant works, *De l'amour*, published in 1822, that it was 'ideological'. 'Ideology' in a pre-Marxist sense, the meaning used by Comte Destutt de Tracy, a contemporary of Napoleon, to whom we owe the term's invention, is a science. Emerging from the language developed by the empiricists, particularly the British ones, ideology as a discipline has the task of describing ideas, their components and especially their origins, its aim being to understand how ideas emerge and evolve. But instead of trying to study how an idea develops, Stendhal admitted that he was more interested in a particular feeling. And he embarks on a description of love, particularly from the second chapter on, with the clear aim of reaching an understanding of the emotion's components. In fact he will concern himself only with 'passionate love', *amour passion*. And this is important for several reasons that I shall explain, the context of the period being one of the most salient. At that time love was turning towards 'passionate love', that is, the passion *par excellence*. For the idea of love that had prevailed prior to the 19th century was not associated with passionate love. It is true that Stendhal had not failed to quote the *Lettres de la religieuse portugaise* (a 17th-century work, attributed to Mariana Alcoforado, a Portuguese nun, but which, as we now know, is part of French literature), nor other texts earlier than the 17th and 18th centuries that evoked a type of emotion as strong as passionate love. But, as the 18th turned into the 19th century, passionate love was, generally speaking, a novelty and Stendhal is among those who were to elaborate most extensively on this theme.

At that period there were several important developments. Love was becoming passionate love or passionate love was turning into the supreme passion. The thinking previously devoted to the passions of the soul was henceforth to focus on passionate love. The connotation, hitherto negative, of the word 'passion', and with it the Greek term *pathos* from which it stemmed, was about to take on a positive slant – and there is a whole literature that demonstrates this u-turn. To take in the significance of this change we might refer, for instance, to pre-Romantic morality,

Copyright © ICPHS 2004

SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, www.sagepublications.com

DOI: 10.1177/0392192104041693

which saw *pathos* as something that reason, will and the soul were supposed constantly to restrain or even repress.

Pathos then raised the great problem of what I would call 'philosophical and conceptual slavery': the soul's subjection to the passions, which 17th- and 18th-century thinkers often compared with those, black Africans for example, who were condemned to forced labour in captivity and without pay. According to this reasoning enslavement of blacks, Indians or offenders might be legitimate because it could lead to the 'right path', obtaining, so to speak, a moral and religious recompense previously refused and – after death of course, never before – the soul being delivered from the yoke of the passions. This subjection to the passions was therefore generally considered by philosophers as more grave, more serious than the African prisoner's 'empirical' slavery. The terrible aspect of the soul's subjection to a passion was that it might lead to spiritual perdition, but also to despotism, a regime where the sultan, who enslaves his subjects, is himself enslaved to passions. The precedence of this 'conceptual and philosophical slavery' over 'empirical' slavery went so far as to justify the latter, occasioning all kinds of explanations for the enslavement of blacks.

In this context it is instructive to see how the authors of the period used the word 'slavery'. It very often appears to relate primarily to this emotional enslavement, this subjection to the passions, rather than the forced labour to which a considerable section of the population of a country like Brazil, or even the whole of the American continent, was nevertheless subjected. In short the main idea of this pre-19th-century model was that passions, being deceptive, should be subjected to the control of a combination of reason and will – and here will is to be understood as an approximate equivalent of the soul. Richard Hooker, an Anglican church thinker during the reign of Elizabeth I, had expressed this quite well in a maxim: 'the will is the controller of appetite'. That is to say that appetite, which is at the level of the desires, the passions, the body, encourages me to eat a-plenty, drink a lot, give myself up to abandoned sexual behaviour, etc. – but will reminds me that if I eat too much I feel ill, if my sexual behaviour is out of control I will go to hell, and so on. It is obvious that this appetite can be compared to slavery.

However, the same *pathos* that was previously so ill-considered suddenly, at the turn of the 18th to 19th century, acquired the positive image that we find in Rousseau, the Romantics – and also in Stendhal, a writer who in other ways is scarcely Romantic but is perhaps the greatest author to have written about passionate love. This *pathos*, freed from its negative nature, was thus to reflect nothing less than the most profound aspects of the soul – in short, it was to tell us the truth about feelings and about ourselves. This belief in a plunge into the depths of the soul that would reveal an intimate truth, or an intimacy that was bound to be true, might be compared, if only in order to see the difference more clearly, with Freud and the notion of a 'psychology of the depths', which in the past has been a synonym for psychoanalysis. But the differences are unavoidable: the Freudian descent into the depths leads to the discovery of the *id*, which is generally perceived as aggressive, hostile, anti-social. On the other hand the Romantic descent into the depths, though it is likely to be at odds with society and even to be revolutionary, appears to be a loving, authentic impulse.

And so from Rousseau onwards truth was to be situated within the context of intimacy, that is, private life, but a private life seen as the locus of pure, uncorrupted feelings. This intimate life had been neither valued nor recognized in the 17th and 18th centuries. Then life in society was more important than private life. Human relations, conventional, arbitrary, unnatural, expressed a courtly truth in tune with a detailed etiquette. It was an acquired form of behaviour that had first to be learned. But, although it was artificial, this courtly behaviour was valued more highly by people because it was thought to express God's will, meaning a hierarchical society. It was precisely this link with the divine that Rousseau was to cut. He was to show up that way of life for what it was – full of artifice and therefore incompatible with any kind of divine justification. And so the divine link was repositioned in the most intimate place, at the very heart of what is human. It was no longer the social hierarchy but the inner being of each individual, his own heart, that was to forge the bond with the divine. All this sounded the death knell for state and sovereign as mediators with the divine. God's children could henceforth do without that umbilical cord.

It was essentially this congruence of circumstances that was to allow *pathos*, despite its status as an emotion, to acquire validity as an expression of truth. Since passionate love, and even passion, became the supreme expression of love, the emotions began to assume a positive image that meant they could become part of our heritage. The conviction that pure emotions were valid grew stronger and more widespread – this is in fact the topic of the analysis carried out a few years back by Richard Sennett under the title *The Fall of Public Man*. So how did it come about, the flowering of this emotion called passionate love that was the supreme expression of truth? This is precisely what Stendhal attempted to describe, stage by stage. I will simply touch on the main developments:

- the first step is admiring beauty. I see someone, I admire her and think it would be good to kiss her and be kissed by her, to love her, to be loved by her;
- as for the second step, which is decisive for the emergence of passion, this is the stage of hope. Stendhal's central idea is that, with all her beauty and attractiveness, a person could not arouse love or passion in me, only admiration, unless I hoped to be loved in return. Even those rather eccentric people who fall in love with a writer or an actress are only truly in love if they can fantasize that they might, for instance, be rescued from an accident by the object of their passion, so meet them and in their turn rescue them. They need to imagine the encounter will occur. Thus this step introduces the imagination, one of the themes I shall develop later;
- the third step is the one that makes the previous ones endure. 'Crystallization' is the name Stendhal gives this idea, which is very well known even though *De l'amour* is far from being the most widely read of his books. This idea would have an influence that exceeded by far that of Stendhal's whole *oeuvre*. He was inspired by the Salzburg saltmines in Austria. You could throw a twig into one of those disused mines and find it maybe one, two or three months later covered in crystals – and the salts that have accumulated give this ordinary little dried-up twig the appearance of a precious jewel. Stendhal thought this was the way time works on memory, letting it preserve love's good moments.

Here we need to focus on the relationship between imagination and memory. In fact this prolonging of love, this continuing of the initial moment of passion, hope and perhaps conquest, is made possible only by this work of imagination carried out over time, a process comparable to the accumulation of crystals on the twig. And this whole memory is a construction of the imagination. Thus it will be noted that the very separation or distinction between imagination and memory disappears. Granted, we might say memory and imagination are different from one another because the first refers to something that really happened, whereas the second enjoys a greater freedom in this regard. But if we examine how this crystallizing memory is made up, we can see that the difference between imagination and memory is not an essential one: the significant thing is not what occurred; it is the whole construction around the event that eventually turns it into a jewel. Events by and of themselves are unimportant. What is interesting is everything that the work of the imagination makes of them.

However, if our desires are always satisfied, love dwindles and comes to an end. Love fully realized is a love that loses its value, Stendhal said. Another step must intervene, and that is the moment of doubt, the moment of frustration, when the lover, who was proceeding from victory to victory, from satisfaction to satisfaction, finds himself facing uncertainty, the possibility of rejection or abandonment. This moment of frustration will also prolong emotion over time. So we have the image of a pendulum that swings between hope and doubt or, if we adopt the classic terms of the ancient opposition inherited from the Romans, one that alternates between hope and fear. We swing between moments of fierce hope of winning the heart's chosen one and sharing with them the best things in life, and moments of fear of losing or having already lost them. A single one of these two poles could not ensure that love would endure. If we have satisfaction only, love will lose its interest; if we have only frustration we eventually give up on that love. It is precisely the alternation between a plethora of permutations of those two moments that allows enduring love to be built up and the flame of passionate love to be kept alive. An excess of confidence would kill love just as would an equally excessive lack of security, as is demonstrated by an example not from Stendhal but Proust, Swann's love for Odette de Crécy in *Du côté de chez Swann*, the first volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. As long as it lasts, Swann's passion for Odette de Crécy feeds as much on the remnants of hope that he still entertains as on the very many frustrations that increase in number till love eventually gives up and disappears.

Here too we find the idea – and Stendhal formulated it quite clearly – that doubt and fear fix memory and make love last, foregrounding the role of the imagination and the passions in the construction of memory. What conclusions can we come to at this stage? First, that memory is above all the work of the imagination and has little to do with reason. Those crystals around it are fatal to what we might call 'naïve realism'. In philosophical terms 'naïve realism' would be associated with a memory that would be a copy of the perceptions received. However, what we can see, thanks to Stendhal's thinking on the passions, is precisely that memory has very little connection with reality. Memory is not photographic; memory is made up of imagination and passions.

Given that today we are constructing future memory, we should particularly

stress that the memory we are talking about is not only, and especially not, evocation. It may even be a memory that has little to do with the past. It is a prospective memory, rather than a retrospective one. It constructs our future. When I build my crystallizations out of the best moments of love that I have experienced or am experiencing, I am building up and feeding my hope of continuing to love and be loved. It would be erroneous to see lovers who maintain these crystallizations as prisoners of their past – even if it no longer matches their partner's inclinations. However that may be, memory is focused on the future. It may be a poor perspective but it is nevertheless a perspective. It is a memory that we might compare with the memory of computer programs, because it is at the same time an action programme. It is not a 'memory.doc' but rather, as we might say in computer jargon, a 'memory.exe'. What it brings into play is an action – or inaction – programme, even if the crystallizations no longer let us avoid a feeling that has become a source of frustration. We might even say, playing with words, that it is a *passion* programme, since the word 'passion' could be contrasted with the words 'reason' and 'action'. Be that as it may, passion starts to play an important part in the action of the crystallizations on the future. This provisional conclusion also brings out a pendulum action between hope and doubt or hope and fear. During the 17th and 18th centuries the opposition between these basic emotions of our psyche was often expressed in terms of physics, as two poles, positive and negative, of bodies that attracted and repelled each other. If we refer to Thomas Hobbes's work, this oppositional logic is found in his proto-biology between aversion and appetite or in his proto-psychology between fear and hope.

I mentioned Hobbes because we must note that this topic was studied by the English philosopher, to whom Stendhal owes much, having read him extensively when he was young. However – and this may be a somewhat marginal comment – what he has consciously retained from Hobbes is completely different from the theory of passions. Stendhal refers sometimes to a Hobbesian theory of laughter, which is hardly important at all in Hobbes but takes on a fundamental significance for the French writer, who in his younger years wished to be the greatest playwright, the greatest writer of comedies, of his time. Criticizing improper behaviour was for him a method of supporting the young French Republic – hence the importance of laughter for the young Stendhal. It was a question of *castigare ridendo mores*, 'punishing behaviour by laughing' – especially behaviour that might be judged too selfish or inappropriate in a Republic. Thirty years after his intensive study of Hobbes's works in the Parisian Bibliothèque Nationale, Stendhal came to the conclusion that all that had become impossible. In a splendid article entitled 'La comédie est impossible en 1836' (Comedy is impossible in 1836), he notes that the audience is divided in its laughter: if I find the humour clever, half the audience does not laugh; if it is funny to the more intellectually challenged, it leaves me cold. Achieving collective laughter has become impossible.

Stendhal does not say laughter exists only if is privatized, but this is implied in his melancholic 1836 conclusions. And private laughter is feeble laughter. Laughter is heartier when there is an audience. Laughter means a lot more when it helps to form a *communitas*, a *res publica*, in short, a republic. However, this is just a parenthesis. Stendhal owes little to Hobbes on the subject of imagination and memory precisely

because the English thinker also makes very little distinction between imagination and memory. Hobbes says: 'Imagination and memory are but one thing, which for diverse considerations hath diverse names' (*Leviathan*, ch. 2).

An example of this is the moment when he is discussing the topic of dreams and then wonders: How can I know whether I am awake or dreaming? Should it not be the contrary? When I am dreaming, am I not awake? And when I am awake, am I not dreaming? To quote him in his own terms: 'Hence it cometh to pass that it is a hard matter, and by many thought impossible, to distinguish exactly between sense and dreaming. For my part, when I consider that in dreams I do not often nor constantly think of the same persons, places, objects, and actions that I do waking, nor remember so long a train of coherent thoughts dreaming as at other times; and because waking I often observe the absurdity of dreams, but never dream of the absurdities of my waking thoughts, *I am well satisfied that, being awake, I know I dream not; though when I dream, I think myself awake*' (emphasis added). It is interesting to remark that Hobbes formulates this explanation in very weak terms: 'I think', 'I suppose', etc.: it is truly hard to separate imagination from memory.

This point finally brings us back to the question of passionate love. Everything that is said about it applies to all the passions. The whole sphere of the emotions is more understandable from the supreme vantage-point of the emotion of passionate love, in other words the deepening of the 'I' and the positioning of truth in the intimacy of feeling. Here there is a certain difference from Freud, maybe because, with him more than the Romantics, the deepening takes place totally separately from the superficial dimension. For them, granted, there is a separation but a less definite one. In any case this profound 'I', romantic or passionate, has little connection with the superficial 'I' that is hungry for advantage and gregarious in Nietzsche's sense, for example. Furthermore this profound 'I' may have a link with death, as expressed by the medieval troubadours who made a connection between love and death – *amor mors*, they said, to Stendhal's delight.

We find the same link between love and death, or between love and the refusal of social conformism, in Stendhal's novels when the most authentic characters end up sacrificing themselves, either for the sake of love or when they lose what makes life worth living. This happens in *Le Rouge et le noir* with Julien Sorel and the woman he loves, Madame de Rênal. In *La Chartreuse de Parme* it is also the case of Clelia and Fabrizio, who die when life ceases to have any meaning for them, when the feelings have vanished that gave meaning to their lives. Occasionally this profound 'I' appears when we fall in love with a person about whom we know nothing. This is what happens to Lamie in the eponymous novel, when she falls for someone who was about to be revealed as the great murderer of the time, the killer Lacenaire, a noteworthy character who figured in the French crime reports under Louis Philippe's reign. The intimate truth about the person is thus seen as a revelation, one might even say a break-in, almost a trauma; this truth arrives suddenly, almost *ex nihilo*. But all that can only be constructed through emotion and imagination. This raises a problem: if Stendhal explains the origin of the feeling of love, or rather passionate love, from a logic of physical opposition, such as the one between the magnets – in short, from a *logic* – how can it be that passionate love has such great power that it allows access to truth? How can a vector of truth be explained as a

mechanical device? Is passionate love then something un hoped for, uncontrolled – or rather something that we can control by revealing its logic?

In order to answer this question it may be convenient to remember the circumstances that led Stendhal to write *De l'amour*. He was in love in Milan with a young woman called Mathilde Dembrowski. She left for the nearby town of Volterra forbidding him to go with her and, being in love with her, he decided to go and see her even if he could not speak to her. He went there in disguise, wearing a false moustache and some other accoutrements. She recognized him and refused to see him ever again. And every time he tried to justify himself she would return his letters, still unopened. Stendhal then decided to write a book, hoping she would read it, understand him and come back to him – which of course proved not to be so. The very construction of the book tries then to produce an effect. He thought that, if he had correctly understood passionate love, he would be capable of winning back Mathilde's love – which in some way contradicts the unpredictable nature of emotion. So we have in this book a constant play between the assertion of the unexpected, uncontrolled, independent nature of an emotion as strong as that, on the one hand, and on the other the attempt to control it, shape it. On the one hand there is a compulsion to elaborate, build up; and in this respect Stendhal is similar to Saint-Simon, the Utopian socialist who bet on the 'industrialists', and in whose work we find something like this idea of constructing a destiny. On the other hand there is the idea of that love that Nietzsche was to call *amor fati*, that is, a love *fatum*, a fated love, love as destiny as it is celebrated, for instance, in the 'Habanera' in Bizet's *Carmen*: 'Si tu ne m'aimes pas je t'aime, et si je t'aime prends garde à toi' (If you don't love me I love you, and if I love you beware!).

A love relationship that has been constructed by a sophisticated strategy will always be inferior – according to Stendhal – to spontaneous passionate love. In *Le rouge et le noir*, after losing Mathilde de la Mole's love, Julien Sorel employs a complex strategy in order to conquer her again. The account of what he does occupies many pages of the novel. It is the funniest part of *Le rouge*, maybe the only funny part of that book. And yet, however, some time after Mathilde comes back to him, he ends by finding he truly loves another woman, the less sophisticated Mme de Rênal. Even the passionate love Julien thought he felt for Mathilde was made up of deductions: I am cold with her, *then* she loves me; or, *if* I open my heart to her, she will disdain me. He is able to make her love him, but since it has been produced, constructed, it can be no more than a false love. And Mathilde may believe she loves him, but even after his execution, when she mourns him, we feel it is a literary love, not a genuine one. She will re-enact her ancestor's love to Queen Margot of Navarre, she will not live a true story with Julien. Her – and his – *amour de tête* are inferior to the only genuine love Julien has ever lived, the one that linked him to Mme de Rênal. The conscious use of the *laws* that rule the production of love – those laws that Stendhal tried to understand in *De l'amour* – ultimately bring out nothing but failure. *De l'amour's* science of love may be insufficient. It helps us to explain love, not to create it. It did nothing to help Stendhal with Mathilde Dembrowski. It did help Julien in his affair with Mathilde de la Mole, but in so doing gave him only a pale imitation of true love. It is a science with no technology. It is a knowledge of no avail in practice.

We could also remember an oft-quoted passage from *La Chartreuse de Parme* where

the Comte Mosca della Rovere, an Enlightenment figure and one of Stendhal's most positive characters, is observing Gina, the woman he loves, talking to her nephew, Fabrizio del Dongo. And he tells himself that, if they ever talk of love, he is lost. He can see they love each other or at least that his wife loves his nephew deeply without knowing it, without knowing that the feeling she is showing for him is love. The Comte is aware that, if the word 'love' is ever pronounced, he will be lost, the woman he loves will be his no more. But he loves her so much that he will tolerate the situation as long as she does not realize she loves someone else and does not act accordingly.

Here we should note that the emotions, even the most intense ones, depend on what we call them. If we do not give a name to an emotion, it does not develop its full potential. It is alive but it has no effect. Imagination is not sovereign. It is strong, but unconscious – there are some movements that language alone or its synonym, consciousness, can carry out. Unlike what I described earlier, language here becomes crucial for something to be revealed. The Polish film-maker Jerzy Kawalerowicz made a remark about this after shooting the fine film *Mother Joan of the Angels* (1961, also known in English as *The Devil and the Nun*), a story of demonic possession where the priestly exorcist also ends up being possessed by demons. When he meets the mother superior, a beautiful woman, both of them are gripped by an emotion that neither recognizes as being love, since both are devoted to the religious life; they imagine they are possessed by demons. The lack of a vocabulary or of a language can lead some people to make serious mistakes, dazzled as they are by their emotions. In both cases, Comte Mosca and Mother Joan of the Angels, the feeling was unable to develop its potential because it was not named. That same imagination we discussed before, which brings forth feelings and rules their economy, relies then on verbalization. Here crystallization is not enough, words have to be added. Imagination may be less powerful than we thought. We need, so to speak, a linguistic extra for imagination to begin constructing memory. Prospective memory, the one we are talking about here, is partly imagination, partly memory.

Action does not depend only on crystallization. In order to act I need a repertoire of meanings that allow me to decipher my own sensations and emotions. That is why Comte Mosca does his best in order to keep his wife from uttering the fatal word. Seeing his beloved in love with another man, he deploys an extremely detailed strategy to prevent Gina from ever recognizing what emotion she is motivated by. A subtle strategy, a lover's strategy, but an extremely well-targeted one for the purpose. Then language itself may be a *fatum*, carrying potential and destiny.

And so we come back to the pendulum, swinging between two opposite poles that were the object of a particular preoccupation in Stendhal's thought: on one side the idea that passion breaks in, seizes, conquers, lays waste, and may lead to death even; on the other planned, meticulous action, the scientific claim, 'the ideological book', knowledge, prudence that try to control everything. Just as Stendhal tried to make Mathilde return to him, and failed, Comte Mosca tries to stop Gina discovering that she loves his nephew, and achieves some success.

In conclusion, I wanted to show how that burst of passionate love, the object of admiration, surges forth. We could go so far as to compare the two most important novels in history, which are in my view *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary*. I do not

mean they are the best, but maybe they are the most important because they are novels about the novel and both deal with the dangers of reading romances. They are in a way precisely plotted novels, self-critical novels. Both characters find their destiny in death, or something close, in madness. Don Quixote is driven mad by the heroism in the books of chivalry he has read, whereas Madame Bovary is driven mad by the hope of love she has found in novels. Nevertheless it would be impossible to transfer Madame Bovary to the period of Don Quixote; such a great passionate love could not be found there.

From the moment passionate love becomes admired, the power of the imagination in the memory grows, until it is able to cut the link between memory and reality, and even break with the idea of memory as a reflection of reality. At the same time, however, the emergence of this passionate love throws down a challenge: to go beyond the knowledge of that universe of the most profound 'I', emotional, intimate, in order to try and control the powers of passion that are now identified. And it is still in this game between freeing the emotions and trying to control them in order to reach a better life that human beings find themselves today.

Renato Janine Ribeiro
University of São Paulo

Translated from the Brazilian Portuguese by Francine Marthouret and Frances Albernaz
Translated from the French by Jean Burrell