

Review of *Stendhal. Critical Lives*, by Francesco Manzini. London: Reaktion Books, 2019. 208 pp, with 30 illustrations. £11.99

We may be living in an age of cant, akin to the one Stendhal, after Byron, deplored in the early nineteenth century. Intellectual and political speech, or simply unorthodox behavior, while no longer repressed by Western governments, can be strictly policed and monitored by various ideological camps, from the simply politically correct to the extreme of what has become known and derided as ‘cancel culture.’ Henri Beyle, known by his most famous (but by no means only) pseudonym, Stendhal, was anything but conventional. It’s no wonder, then, that Stendhal, an idiosyncratic thinker and often deliberate provocateur, isn’t particularly in fashion these days in the Anglophone world, just as he was relatively obscure in his own time. For most of the twentieth century, however, Stendhal was one of the most studied and taught authors of the French canon; according to WorldCat, he is the subject of more than 4,000 print books. And yet, in Anglophone French Studies at least, it’s rare to see a conference panel on Stendhal and rarer still a seminar dedicated to his work. In his wonderful new biography of the French author, Francesco Manzini describes the paradox of Stendhal’s active selection of his readership as he flatters those of us dedicated readers (the ‘happy few’) and confounds the rest by writing in a sort of ‘code’.

The ‘happy few,’ as WorldCat’s statistics suggest, are disproportionately inclined to write about Stendhal and have forced his work into the canon. But for those not yet initiated and who are looking to understand Stendhal and his writing code (fortunately, rather easy to crack since Stendhal leaves it laying in plain sight), Manzini offers a perfect introduction. With a great deal of wit and also sympathy for Stendhal’s eccentricities, Manzini takes on the role of guide and friend, arguing that the only way to do justice to Stendhal’s life is to strive towards sincerity and intimacy. Wisely eschewing an exhaustive account of Stendhal’s day to day life, since so many biographies already exist among those 4,000 books and no one these days has time to read a multivolume biography, Manzini hones in on what Stendhal claims are the ‘five or six main ideas’ (we never get an exact count) that he obsessed over throughout his life, while also covering the main places and people Stendhal loved. Interwoven with Stendhal’s life are analyses of his works, both canonical and more obscure, that gain depth and complexity when juxtaposed to Stendhal’s life, though Manzini is careful to insist that the life and the work are irreducible to each other. Particular attention is given to Stendhal’s conflicted relationship to the Napoleonic legacy, his admiration and disappointment for the man as well as the politics. Manzini also stresses the varied and competing perspectives of Stendhal’s characters, especially Mathilde de la Mole, who can’t fit easily into social categories or prescribed ways of thinking. Stendhal challenges us to imagine the world from radically different points of view from our own. My only quibble with the book might be that Manzini identifies more with Lucien Leuwen, whereas I am more of a Julien Sorel, to whom Manzini is a bit harsh – yet Manzini shows that Stendhal’s (anti-) heroes are complex and diverse enough to inspire competing loyalties.

Whether you are already a devoted Stendhalian or even a skeptical reader wary of dead European males, this book is a must-read as it challenges us to confront an original thinker in all his quirks and obsessions. A delightful read, full of useful illustrations, Manzini’s *Stendhal*, we can hope,

may yet crystalize a new era in 'beylisme' and tempt readers and scholars alike to reengage with Stendhal's rich and idiosyncratic body of work.

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