

Breaking the Code: Passion and Narrative in Stendhal's

'La Duchesse de Palliano'

Stendhal's *Chroniques italiennes*, as we now know them, were first mentioned by their author in a letter to Sainte-Beuve in December 1834 under the fulsome title of *Historiettes romaines fidèlement traduites des récits écrits par les contemporains (1400 à 1650)* (1). Displacing them slightly geographically, Stendhal was also to refer to them in a subsequent letter as *Anecdotes napolitaines* (2). They only received their current title thirteen years after the death of their author in 1855 in Romain Colomb's edition of Stendhal's *Œuvres complètes*.

Moreover, of the six tales usually grouped under this heading, only four appeared in Stendhal's lifetime (although he was working on 'Suora scolastica' on day he died) (3). They all appeared in the *Revue des deux mondes*: 'Vittoria Accoramboni' and 'Les Cenci' in 1837, anonymously, as Stendhal did not wish to jeopardize his position as Consul to Civita-Vecchia in the Roman states by declaring himself the author of tales detailing the murderousness, venality and lust of various popes and papal legates. 'La Duchesse de Palliano' and 'L'Abbesse de Castro' appeared a year later in 1838, this time under the pseudonym of F. de Lagenevais.

As Dominique Fernandez has remarked, taking the *Chroniques* as a whole, there is a definite progression from one tale to the next, an increasing assertion of Stendhal's own style over and against the original material culled from public and private Roman archives: what Fernandez calls a 'stendhalisation' of the texts (4). Thus 'Vittoria Accoramboni' is the most faithful to the pompous Italianate style of its source text; yet as the tales succeed one another, this slavish reproduction of the original gives way to a style that is briefer, more incisive, more driven and bitingly ironic. 'Les Cenci' starts this process, it is perfected in 'La Duchesse de Palliano', and exercised freely in 'L'Abbesse de Castro'. Yet whereas most criticism has hitherto focussed on 'L'Abbesse de Castro' as the ultimate masterpiece of the *Chroniques*, I would argue that it is 'La Duchesse de Palliano' that constitutes the most revealing experiment, both stylistically and politically, in what Jean-Jaques Hamm calls 'le laboratoire stendhalien' of the *Chroniques* (5).

'La Duchesse de Palliano' is perhaps the most typical, even archetypal, of the *Chroniques*, recounting the murderous intrigues and 'amours' of the religious and political elite of Renaissance Rome. In particular it details the dizzy rise of the Neapolitan Carafa family to the papacy and high political office, their subsequent abuse of power and rapid, irreversible fall from grace via exile, murder, trial and execution. Also, in keeping with Stendhal's original title for the *Chroniques*, 'La Duchesse de Palliano' purports to be a 'traduction exacte d'un vieux récit écrit vers 1566', in fact dovetailing accounts drawn from two discrete sets of legal documents which Stendhal had copied from the original sixteenth-century Italian manuscripts (6).

Yet, I would contend that, far from striving to render the original faithfully, Stendhal's prime concern in 'La Duchesse de Palliano' is to find a way to translate extreme passion into language, specifically narrative. To this end, the first ticklish problem that Stendhal encounters is one of his own making: his consistent identification of intense passion with the Italian national character and, conversely, a dispassionate mastery of language with the French. Thus in the much-cited preface to 'La Duchesse de Palliano', Stendhal explicitly contrasts Italian passion with French vanity:

Ce qu'on appelle *la passion italienne*, c'est-à-dire la passion qui cherche à se satisfaire et non pas à donner au voisin une idée magnifique de notre individu, commence à la renaissance de la société, au douzième siècle, et s'éteint du moins dans la bonne compagnie vers l'an 1734. (7)

(The last date is significant insofar as it marks the advent of French Bourbon rule over the Kingdom of

Naples, and so the subjugation of Italian passion to French vanity).

A striking paradox none the less holds: in more 'factual' works, Stendhal recognizes that the verve and fiery spontaneity of Italian passion, as he conceives of it here, are in no way translated into the daily use of the Italian tongue -- spoken or written. Thus in *Rome, Naples et Florence*, Stendhal notes phlegmatically: 'On ne peut parler vite en italien; défaut irrémédiable'; a defect which he associates with the superimposition of numerous regional dialects upon one another, producing a cacophony of often misleading synonyms (8). These remarks themselves stem from Stendhal's observations on written Italian, of which he writes: 'Un homme qui écrit une lettre ouvre son dictionnaire, et un mot n'est jamais assez pompeux ni assez fort. De là, la naïveté, la simplicité, les nuances de naturel, sont des choses inconnues en italien' (9).

So this inveterate promoter of *la passion italienne* has to resort to its discursive antithesis -- French -- in order to express it at all. He has to efface the reality of the laboured and verbose Italian proper to the source texts of the *Chroniques* beneath the brevity and brilliance of contemporary French; he has first to translate passion into the language of dispassionate *esprit*.

I would argue that this very relationship of passion to language, as Stendhal seems to present it, is reproduced in the story of 'La Duchesse de Palliano' itself, in the internal exile of its principal protagonists. Just as the disgraced Palliano, Carafa and Montbello families are condemned to exile within the papal states for their excesses, so *la passion italienne* is internally exiled twice over in language: once in Italian by the Italians's own refusal to admit it into their speech and writings and, again, in French where those formal qualities most suited to it (brevity, rapidity, simplicity) have been usurped by its very opposite, the studied vanity of fashionable salons. On a more political level, of course, this internal exile of Italian passion in language also reflects the subjugation and estrangement of Italian patriots themselves within the Austrian-dominated Italy of the 1820s and 1830s.

In such a situation (internal exile), any attempt to reconcile passion and language necessarily appears, in the first instance, as a betrayal. And so it is in 'La Duchesse de Palliano'. The tale turns on a series of betrayals, of confessions extorted either under the force of passion itself or of its political equivalent in this text, torture. Thus in exile, Marcel Capece confesses his burning love for the duchess of the title; she in turn confides in her handmaiden, Diane Brancaccio, who, thinking herself deceived in love, betrays the duchess to her husband. Consequently, to hush up the affair, the duke is forced by family code of honour to put his wife and her lover to death, later confessing to their murders under torture.

As these betrayals succeed one another in the text, they become increasingly involuntary, forced, as though once the unspoken code of passion has been broken, Stendhal's characters become more and more reluctant to speak and retreat into an ever briefer, terser discourse in order to recover that space of language proper to passion: a pre-discursive or extra-discursive silence. But the genie is out of the bottle, so to speak, and it proves impossible for any of the characters to retrieve or revert to this pure mime of passion, even in the moment of their own death.

In this respect, Stendhal sets up a fascinating parallel between the executions of the duchess and the principal instigator of her assassination, Cardinal Carafa; a parallel which shows how there is a drive or 'will to silence' working through the text. Significantly, the mode of execution applied to both the duchess and the cardinal is strangulation -- a very physical and literal gagging. Yet in both instances, there are problems with the rope or silk cord used to garrot the condemned: silence like the rope is thus broken, and a certain discourse is reprised. In the case of the duchess, it questions imperiously: 'Eh bien donc, que faisons-nous?'; finding an echo in the cardinal's even more incisive command to the executioner: 'Faites' (10). Stendhal continues: 'Le bourreau l'étrangla avec une corde de soie qui se rompit; il fallut y revenir à deux fois. Le cardinal regarda le bourreau sans daigner prononcer un mot' (11). Thus the cardinal's contemptuous, final silence appears to accord with that of death itself, finishing the tale off with an exemplary instance of not speaking, of not telling at all.

Yet, as a sort of irresistible *mise en abyme* of this constantly frustrated 'will to silence' in the text, the

cardinal's definitive refusal to speak is glossed by a 'Note ajoutée' -- a return of speech -- which relates how Pope Pius V attempted to suppress all record of the cardinal's trial and had all the archives of it systematically burned, only to neglect the one remaining copy held in the Vatican library itself: the ultimate instance of an internal exile, that of passion (spoken then silenced) banished within language itself (the symbolic space of the library) for explicitly political reasons (interned within the heart of papal power itself).

Of course, this textual analysis does not answer the fundamental question of how, in the first instance, Stendhal himself seeks to find a language capable of rendering such unspoken emotion; how he is to find a style to 'translate' passion.

My contention is that Stendhal does so by a double breaking of codes. That is, to break the code of passion (to make it signify in language) he has first to break the narrative code itself (to transgress certain rules governing his tale-telling). There are clearly two senses of 'breaking a code' here: to decipher something into everyday language and to violate certain rules or conventions; and, I would argue, Stendhal uses the latter in order to realize the former.

In practice, this means that the narrative-descriptive matrix of the *nouvelle*, realized in subordination and co-ordination of its sentences, is broken up by Stendhal's preference in 'La Duchesse de Palliano' for juxtaposition and apposition, for a marked parataxis in his style. For example, Marcel's torture is described:

Marcel nia tout; on appela les gardes, et il fut suspendu; la corde lui disloquait les bras; ne pouvant supporter la douleur, il demanda à être descendu; on le plaça sur une chaise; mais une fois là, il s'embarrassa dans son discours, et proprement il ne savait ce qu'il disait. (12)

What is especially noteworthy in this passage is the weak punctuation (commas, semi-colons), the lack of co-ordination and subordination in the sentence structure; what rhetoricians term asyndeton. On the one hand this replicates formally Marcel's own broken speech and literally dis-articulated limbs ('bras disloqués'); and on the other, it infringes the continuous logic of the narrative by denying it any liaison, any 'donc', 'puis', 'et', etc, and so begins to give a voice to Marcel's distracted passion – spoken, silenced and now spoken again.

Other concerted ways in which Stendhal breaks the narrative code in order to articulate passion include 'voices off', the speech of others interpolating anecdotes, footnotes or authorial arbitrary judgements on passages of the 'original' into the tale itself. Thus Stendhal sees fit to add an imbalancing parenthesis to his relation of the duke's trial:

Je trouve dans le procès du duc de Palliano la déposition des moines qui assistèrent à ce terrible événement. Ces dépositions sont très supérieures à celles des autres témoins, ce qui provient, ce me semble, de ce que les moines étaient exempts de crainte de parler devant la justice, tandis que tous les autres témoins avaient été plus ou moins complices de leur maître. (13)

Of course, all of these interventions in the narrative are sanctioned in the first instance by the 'preface' itself: the liminal text *par excellence*, a three-page theorization of *la passion italienne* which, as Jean-Jaques Hamm notes 'ne s'arrête nullement à l'orée du récit mais déborde et constitue celui-ci en *exemplum*' (14). In other words, the preface determines the text it is only supposed to illustrate, upsetting the relationship between foreword and tale and calling into question which is marginal to the other.

Similarly, the generic notion of a 'chronique' defined as 'un recueil de faits historiques rapportés dans l'ordre de leur succession', or 'une tranche de vie intégrale' is shattered by Stendhal's approach, apposing non-sequential historical dates and disparate commentaries on various periods and lives, all of which serve to fracture and fragment the temporal-spatial universe of his narrative (15). The result of this

is that 'La Duchesse de Palliano' employs the narrative-descriptive code of the *nouvelle* but at the same time makes this code explicit, and so transgresses it (16).

This process is most succinctly summed up in two of the most famous quotations from 'La Duchesse de Palliano', referring, appropriately enough, to the first fatal articulation of passion in the text and to its final silencing (the 'Note ajoutée' excepted). Thus when Marcel Capecce first blurts out his love for the duchess, she threatens his life, not for what he has said but for the very fact that he has dared to give it utterance. And Stendhal goes on to note: 'La duchesse s'éloigna transportée de colère, et réellement Capecce avait manqué aux lois de la prudence: il fallait faire deviner et non pas dire' (17). With this last statement Stendhal is not so much elaborating his narrative as laying bare the stylistic code according to which it is written; it is an injunction to the writer, rather than a reflection on the behaviour of his characters. Similarly, when Cardinal Carafa is to be put to death, Stendhal notes: 'Le cardinal montra une grandeur d'âme supérieure à celle de son frère [fellow murderer, le duc de Palliano], d'autant qu'il dit moins de paroles; les paroles sont toujours une force que l'on cherche hors de soi' (18). Again, this last clause does not so much refer to the protagonists's actions but exposes the writer's code simultaneously with the exercise of the writer's art, his narrative. Moreover, in this instance, speech is designated as an external, potentially treacherous tool in implicit contrast to a silent, internal force: the self-possessed, and self-satisfying, *passion italienne* of the preface which 'cherche à se satisfaire' rather than impress a glorious image of itself on one's neighbours (19). So, I would conclude, it is precisely by making the unwritten written (the narrative code) that Stendhal is able to speak the unspoken (the code of passion).

Yet this double code-breaking is more than just a neat literary interpretation; it also carries very real political significance for Stendhal. I have already touched on the political importance of notions of internal exile: of Italians patriots outlawed in an Austrian-dominated Italy. And there is a very real sense in 'La Duchesse de Palliano' that the nationalist *passion italienne* legitimates the actions of those whom it inspires in direct contrast to the strictly legal means by which it is repeatedly punished or suppressed. A mute legitimacy is opposed to a wordy legality; an opposition which justifies on one level Stendhal's increasingly laconic censoring (silencing) of his verbose legal source-manuscripts. Yet this legitimate/legal distinction also translates the claims of a political Italian legitimacy to self-determination over a rule of law that has no justification other than the superiority of Austrian forces ready to impose it.

Stylistically too, the fractured, paratactic sentences of Stendhal's tale correspond, on the one hand, to the reality of the divided Italian regions of the 1830s; yet, on the other, in their very autonomy, they also connote their author's cherished vision of a vital and independent Italian nation state. In this much, they represent a surreptitious -- coded, as it were -- call to insurrection. After all, is not the verb 'oser' predominant in this text? (20)

Of course, 'La Duchesse de Palliano' also serves another political purpose. As with Stendhal's other *Chroniques*, it stands as a sort of aesthetic security or consolation in the face of the failure of the various independence movements of the time, from the Carbonari uprisings in Naples and the North in the 1820s to Mazzini's 'Giovine Italia' in the 1830s. Thus when the New Italy does not emerge from these abortive revolts, Stendhal takes up his pen and invents it through his transposition of a highly stylized Renaissance passion into nineteenth-century French literature. Returning to his original title, he quite literally 'translates' the Rinascimento in order both to inspire and to replace the faltering Risorgimento of his day (21). In doing so, then, Stendhal constitutes 'La Duchesse de Palliano' as a pivotal moment in a literary and political process, beginning with 'Vanina Vanini' (1829) and culminating in *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839), that inscribes, for good or bad, his concept of *la passion italienne* into the narrative, and therefore the consciousness, of nineteenth-century Europe.

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NOTES

1. Stendhal, *Correspondance*, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard 'Pléiade', 1967-8), II, pp. 762-3. This title is couched as a question to Sainte-Beuve, with the following comment appended: 'Mais peut-on dire *historiette* d'un récit tragique?' (p. 763).
2. *Correspondance*, III, p. 20, in a letter to Romain Colomb and Domenico Fiore dated 18 March 1835.
3. The sixth *nouvelle* is 'Trop de faveur tue', left unfinished on 15 April 1839.
4. Dominique Fernandez, in 'Préface' to Stendhal, *Chroniques italiennes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 9.
5. Jean-Jacques Hamm, 'Un laboratoire stendhalien: les *Chroniques italiennes*', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 84 (1984), 245-54. In addition to Hamm here and Fernandez in the above-cited text, Josiane Attuel also singles out 'L'Abbesse de Castro' as the acme of Stendhal's art in the *Chroniques*. See specifically Josiane Attuel, *Le Style de Stendhal: efficacité et romanesque* (Bologna: Pàtron, 1980), pp. 406-10.
6. Stendhal, *Romans et nouvelles*, 2 vols, (Paris: Gallimard 'Pléiade', 1948), II, p. 713. All subsequent references to the *Chroniques* refer to this edition.
7. *Romans et nouvelles*, II, p. 711, his italics. This is an interesting elaboration on a nationalist commonplace in Stendhal's work, expressed more succinctly in *De l'amour* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1959): 'Si l'Italien, toujours agité entre la haine et l'amour, vit de passions, et le Français de vanité, c'est d'imagination que vivent les bons et simples descendants des anciens Germains' (p. 162).
8. Stendhal, *Rome, Naples et Florence* (Lausanne: Éditions Rencontre, 1960), p. 394. The entry is for 10 April 1817.
9. *Rome, Naples et Florence*, p. 394. In the preface to 'La Duchesse de Palliano' itself Stendhal introduces a further discordancy between written and spoken Italian themselves by commenting that 'trois villes seulement, Florence, Sienne et Rome, parlent à peu près comme elles écrivent; partout ailleurs la langue écrite est à cent lieues de la langue parlée' (II, p. 711).
10. *Romans et nouvelles*, II, pp. 729 and 732.
11. *Romans et nouvelles*, II, p. 732. Interestingly, these two sentences were used by Albert Camus as an epigraph for his early evocations of Algerian life, *Noces* (1938).
12. *Romans et nouvelles*, II, p. 726.
13. *Romans et nouvelles*, II, pp. 728-9.
14. Hamm, p. 252.
15. For the definitions of the genre 'chronique', see respectively Hamm, p. 245, and Charles Dédéyan, *Stendhal chroniqueur* (Paris: Didier, 1962), p. 23.
16. In this respect, Stendhal's *nouvelle* employs a similar strategy in order to signify passion as a greater, earlier text about the nature of unspeakable emotions: Mme de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*. While this text, also named after its aristocratic heroine, rewrites certain Renaissance codes of conduct and language, Gérard Genette locates its key transgression or 'extravagance' (and so signification of passion) in the princess's confiding in her husband: a speech-act that is not sanctioned by any implicit maxim of verisimilitude ('vraisemblance'), and so one which lays bare the unspoken compact between reader and text, and between the text's other protagonists, thereby violating it. See Gérard Genette, 'Vraisemblance et motivation', in *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), pp. 73-8.

17. *Romans et nouvelles*, II, p. 720.

18. *Romans et nouvelles*, II, p. 732.

19. This external/internal contrast sketched here between discourse and passion is taken a step further, structurally, in 'L'Abbesse de Castro' where the internal physical spaces of convent and prison cell, as well as the introspective spaces of the principal characters's feelings come to engulf and determine perceptions of the external world. See Attuel, pp. 406-10.

20. *Romans et nouvelles*, II, pp. 716, 718, 720, 721, 722, 724.

21. See Charles Dédéyan, *L'Italie dans l'œuvre romanesque de Stendhal* (Paris: SEDES, 1963), pp. 14-22.