

## Amoss on Thompson (2013)

Thompson, Christopher W. *Explorations stendhaliennes: d'Armance à la «Fraternité des arts»*. Paris: Hermann, 2013. Pp. 477. ISBN: 978-2-7056-8717-5

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Turning from the geographical explorations detailed in his masterly *French Romantic Travel Writing: Chateaubriand to Nerval* (Oxford, 2012) to explorations of another kind, Christopher W. Thompson has contributed this monograph on Stendhal, which brings together newly written chapters and updated versions of articles originally published as early as 1971. A rich compendium of ideas and insights based on substantial scholarship, it is clear proof not only of Thompson's great erudition, but also of his continued enthusiasm for the protean and elusive writer whose *Chartreuse de Parme*, he says in the introduction, still takes his breath away.

Wide-ranging in scope, the book comprises four sections ranging from three to eight chapters. Throughout, in argumentation often dense with references, Thompson moves agilely among Stendhal's texts and those of his sources, critical works, and ancillary documents. The first part of the book analyzes themes and techniques that structure individual narratives or that become typical of the *œuvre* as a whole: tatterdemalion form and games of chance in *De l'amour*; the myth of the warrior priest in *Armance*, *Le Rouge et le Noir*, and *La Chartreuse de Parme*; the gendering of conflicts in *Le Rouge et le Noir*; the problem of endings, especially in the *Souvenirs d'égotisme*; images from popular culture in *Féder*. The final two chapters in this heterogeneous first section present a detailed analysis first of *Vanina Vanini*, whose artful characters and structure illuminate the social and political situation in Italy, and then of Stendhal's resetting in *Le Chevalier de Saint Ismier* of a Spanish original.

The second section sharpens the focus on Stendhal's readings and other inspirational encounters. Thompson devotes a chapter each to Casanova, Byron, and Shelley, and in further chapters shows how the evolution of Stendhal's relationship to these singular figures, who variously illustrate the link between *libertinage* and social revolt, informs a proper appreciation of marginality in *Armance*. Thompson identifies ambivalence—sexual and otherwise—and not impotence as the key to Octave's drama, and uses it to elucidate the thematic coherence resulting from the novel's dense web of literary, mythological, visual, and personal allusions.

Chapters in the third section consider Stendhal's contributions to contemporary debates around painting and the relationships among the arts—"la fraternité des arts" of the title—as well as the role these interests played in his literary creation. Surveying references to the *Histoire de la peinture en Italie*, Thompson concludes that this work was better known in artistic and intellectual circles than its slow sales would suggest. In his Salon criticism from the 1820s, Stendhal's idiosyncratic embrace of the new, despite his personal tastes and the polemical style he employed in support of Romanticism in painting, distinguish him from his contemporaries and remain historically important. Thompson relates the writer's persistent admiration for paintings with a musical motif to his belief in a sacred language for communicating with the Happy Few. In discussing a scene from *Le Rouge et le Noir*, Thompson explains Stendhal's position in the fraught debates between poets and prose writers on the convergence of the arts and then shows how his practice became exemplary for his friend Mérimée's *Âmes du Purgatoire*.

In the final and shortest section, Thompson considers first the importance and calculatedness of the printed notes in Stendhal's texts, which seem to promise affective and intellectual intimacy with the author and even more playfully are sometimes supplemented by a secondary note. Then he makes a case for studying the passages Stendhal underlined in books he read: signaling the intensity of his engagement with other writers' texts, these passages have psychological and aesthetic significance for Stendhal's own literary creation.

A consistent thread throughout all four sections of this handsome volume, which contains twenty-eight illustrations and very few typographical errors, is the thought that Stendhal, despite his self-proclaimed preference for working *à l'improviste* and a style whose grace and liveliness seemingly realize the Renaissance ideal of *sprezzatura*, was in fact a deliberate and knowing experimentalist, following, playing with, and subverting the tropes of Romanticism and the generic conventions of the age. The title of this book is ambiguous: the phrase *Explorations stendhaliennes* leaves open the question of who is doing the exploring, Thompson or Stendhal. In the end, making good on that ambiguity, Thompson proves himself as companionable and intrepid an explorer as his subject.

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