

# Henri Beyle (Stendhal): a capsule biography

When the rotund Henri Beyle dropped dead in a Paris street in 1842 — ‘of apoplexy’ — only three mourners accompanied the coffin to its resting place in the Cimetière de Montmartre: one of them was the younger writer Prosper Mérimée. Incensed by the fact that no words had been spoken at the grave at this ‘pagan funeral’, Mérimée wrote a short memoir of their friendship. In fact, he didn’t know much about his friend other than that he had served in the Napoleonic campaign and been a mostly indifferent diplomat in Italy, and that he was known in Paris as an occasional wit (*homme d’esprit*) and writer with a mania for disguises; what he had read of his books didn’t inspire him terribly. Perhaps because he didn’t know so much about the social figure, the sketchy portrait he left, with the bare title HB, is a captivating one.



For a son of the post-revolution like Mérimée, Beyle (born 1783) had the traits of a man of the previous century, and a contradictory man at that, ‘All his life he was dominated by his imagination, and never did anything except abruptly and with enthusiasm. However, he got it into his head that he acted in conformity with reason. “One must be guided in everything by LOGIQUE”, he would say, pausing between the first syllable and the remainder of the word. But he had no patience for those whose logic differed from his own.’<sup>1</sup>

In fact, Stendhal was every bit a fully-fledged 19th-century writer of self-exploration, and he anticipated his own discovery in the 20th (in his autobiography *The Life of Henry Brulard*<sup>2</sup> he states that he is addressing the readers of 1935, not his

contemporaries). Long before Flaubert and Proust, he was aware of the fitfulness and ambiguity of memory, its elusiveness when we try to snare it. Hence his famous digressive style, the comic zigzag he took from Sterne.

Stendhal had his mnemonic devices too. As a young boy in Grenoble he had been made to take drawing lessons by his father: this got him out of the house, which he found stifling. The 175 sketches which can be found scattered through the text of his autobiography, showing mostly street scenes or room arrangements, reminded him of that brief moment of freedom, and served as a visual framework for his writing. Feeling that there was truth in spontaneity, he wrote quickly (his autobiography was written over 4 months in the winter of 1835); and although he often presents exact dates in his writings (his early ability in mathematics had allowed him at 16 to quit the damp provincialism of Grenoble and enter the new Ecole Polytechnique in Paris), he was often slapdash in respect of chronology. What counted for Stendhal was the exact, discriminating account of motive or emotion. His famously dry book on love talked about it in terms of a ‘crystallisation’.

And there is the famous light, Mozartian touch: he was unsparing of himself as he was of others, the young provincial who hoped to cut a figure in the world and become a celebrated *Don Juan* even though he didn’t have the physique (or indeed the inheritance) for it; writing his autobiography under an assumed name at 53 he is prepared to acknowledge that all he will be able to convey is the *chasse au bonheur* — the pursuit of happiness and not the experience itself. No cynicism is involved; only a serene wistfulness.

Stendhal’s dedication to the brisk, discursive, associative feel of experience makes it an exhilarating experience to read his journals and travel books. Every situation in his life seems to lend itself to epigrammatic expression; and anecdotes themselves are occasions for expansive writing: on leave from his consular job at

Civitavecchia and visiting his own country in 1837 and 1838, he dashed off a book called *Memoirs of a Tourist*.<sup>3</sup> Here is a snapshot from Lyons, on May 19:

*‘Three days ago Mr Smith, an English puritan who had been living here for 10 years, decided it was time to leave this life. He swallowed the contents of an ounce bottle of Prussic acid. Two hours later after being very sick he was anywhere but on the point of dying, and to pass the time was rolled about on the floor. His landlord, an honest cobbler, was working in his shop in the room beneath: startled by the odd commotion and fearing that his furniture was getting damaged, he went upstairs. He knocked on the door. No reply; so he entered the room through a boarded-up door. He was aghast to see his tenant prostrate on the floor, and sent for Mr Travers, well-known surgeon and friend of the sick man. The surgeon came, treated Mr Smith, and very quickly brought him out of danger. Then he asked him: “What the devil did you drink?” “Some Prussic acid.” “Impossible, six drops would have killed you in a jiffy.” “Well, they told me it was Prussic acid.” “Who sold it to you then?” “The little chemist on the Quai de Saône.” “But usually you get your prescriptions made up at Girard, your neighbour right across the street here, the best pharmacist in Lyons!” “That’s true, but the last time I bought some medicine from him, I had the impression he was overcharging me.”’*

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### REFERENCES

1. Leys S (trans.). *With Stendhal*. Melbourne, Black Inc, 2010.
2. Sturrock J (trans.). *Stendhal: the life of Henry Brulard*. London: Penguin Classics, 1995.
3. Stendhal. *Memoirs of a Tourist*, tr. Seager A. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1985.

### FURTHER READING

Many of the novels by Stendhal are available in passable translations: *The Charterhouse of Parma*, *The Red and the Black*, *Armance*, *The Life of Mozart*, *On Love*, etc.

Website dedicated to Stendhal: [www.stendhalforever.com](http://www.stendhalforever.com)

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