Formative Fictions
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Epigonal Consciousness: Stendhal, Immermann, and the “Problem of Generations” around 1830

For any student of the European novel, the 1830s are an especially noteworthy decade. In 1830, Stendhal published The Red and the Black; in 1839, he followed it up with The Charterhouse of Parma. The same years also marked turning points in the literary development of Honoré de Balzac, who in 1830 bundled his first few novels into a series entitled “Scenes from Private Life,” and in 1839 began to refer to a much-expanded selection of his writings as The Human Comedy. Charles Dickens, meanwhile, serialized the Pickwick Papers from 1836 to 1837, Oliver Twist from 1837 to 1839, and Nicholas Nickleby from 1838 to 1839. The 1830s, in other words, were the years in which French and English writers first began to apply the “realist” style that had been pioneered by authors like Fielding and Richardson to the depiction of complex social systems. This innovation would prove to be so influential that the very term “literary realism” has nowadays become synonymous with the mode of writing introduced during that decade.

German literature, meanwhile, can boast of no Stendhal, Balzac, or Dickens. Its two best-known writers of the period, Heinrich Heine and Georg Büchner, won their fame with poetry and plays, and even specialists struggle to name more than one or two of their novel-writing contemporaries. The very title of one of the few prose narratives from that period to still attract even modest contemporary interest, Karl Leberecht Immermann’s The Epigones (1835), seems to serve as a literary pro- gram. Self-consciously imitative of Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship, The
Epigones can easily be read as a retreat from the literary challenges brought about by an increasingly complex nineteenth-century bourgeois society. In the words of Wilhelmi, whose very name identifies him as an “epigonal” character,

Nowadays, many good-for-nothings look upon the circumstances in Germany as they existed during the last quarter of the previous century . . . with contempt. They regard this time as shallow and inadequate, but they are wrong. It is true that people then did not know or do as much as they do now, and the social circles in which they moved were smaller. But one felt at home in these circles, one engaged in activities for their own sake, and, if you will pardon my use of a hackneyed proverb, the cobbler stuck to his last. Nowadays, no cobbler is content with his last anymore, and consequently none of our shoes fit us. We are, in a word, epigones, and we all carry the burden of having been born too late. ¹

Only a slight change in optic is required, however, in order to discover connections between Immermann’s work and that of his Western European contemporaries lurking in this very same passage. The narrator’s observation that life in contemporary Germany is fundamentally different from (and more dreary than) that in the late eighteenth century resembles Stendhal and Balzac’s sociologically more astute observations about post-Restoration France. And Immermann, like Stendhal and Balzac, uses the Bildungsroman to document these changes, alighting on the narrative of a young man’s development as the perfect literary vehicle through which to render a verdict on the times at large. In this, he sets out into unknown territory, transcending all his hackneyed borrowings from Goethe. Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship gives a poetic form to the experiences of an individual; The Epigones, on the other hand, like The Red and the Black or Balzac’s Old Man Goriot (1835), ultimately aims to speak for those of a generation. The Tower Society includes members of many different age groups; Immermann, Stendhal, and Balzac leave no doubt that their tales are meant to be illustrative of a historical cohort, a fact also grasped by their respective protagonists.

These two competing ways of viewing the novel in the 1830s lead back to the questions about genre studies with which I concluded the opening chapter of this study. In Franco Moretti’s words, are genres the products of “trees” or of “waves”? Is literary history determined by the continuity of local traditions or rather by sweeping conceptual innovations that spread quickly across various national literatures? And should the Bildungsroman ultimately be defined as a series of variations on Goethe, brought about in a political backwater hostile to literary advances supported by the rest of Europe, or rather as a response to a universal problem, such

¹ Karl Leberecht Immermann, Die Epigonen: Familienmemoiren in neun Büchern, 1823–1835, ed. Peter Hasubek (Munich: Winkler Verlag, 1981), 118. All further references to this edition will appear in parentheses in the text.
as the search for an authentic expression of humanity in modern times? The newly found generational consciousness of the 1830s cuts to the heart of this question, because it forces a revision of the historicist mind-set that enabled the rise of the *Bildungsroman* to begin with. Historicism is premised on the notion that all living things are animated by a formative drive, while the *Bildungsroman* struggles to give this drive a narrative shape in which a community of fellow travelers through time might recognize itself. The advent of historicism furthermore coincided with and directly supported a rising nationalist ideology premised on the notion that the formative drive will express itself differently within different communities. Generational thinking merely represents the next logical step in this development: the recognition that formative variation has a temporal as well as geographic component, and that age groups that view one another across the barriers of historical time may have just as little in common as members of one culture have with another.

A century ago, however, Karl Mannheim, then one of the foremost figures in an attack launched by the rising discipline of sociology against the historicist movement in German letters, pointed out that generational thinking exposes an unresolved paradox within nineteenth-century thought. Taking explicit aim at the historicist notion of a *Zeitgeist*, a “spirit of the age” that might lend it a shape and explain its relation to an overall developmental trajectory, Mannheim wrote:

> The concept of the “spirit of the age” with which one had hitherto principally worked, now turns out to be . . . an accidental chord, an apparent harmony, produced by the vertical coincidence of notes which in fact owe a primary horizontal allegiance to the different parts (i.e. the generation-entelechies) of a fugue. The generation-entelechies thus serve to destroy the purely temporal concepts of an epoch over-emphasized in the past (e.g. Spirit of the age or epoch). The epoch as a unit has no homogeneous driving impulse, no homogeneous principle of form—no entelechy. Its unity consists at most in the related nature of the means which the period makes available for the fulfilment of the different historical tasks of the generations living in it. 2

What Mannheim here expresses (and indeed identifies as such on the following page) is a variation of the argument for a “synchronicity of the non-synchronous” that Wilhelm Pinder had recently introduced to art history, and that Ernst Bloch would soon turn into an explicit tool with which to attack the historicist bias of Lukácsian Marxism. Epochs as a whole have no entelechy, he argues, because the actors who comprise them are “differently located” depending on when they were born, and are thus inclined to differing perceptions and actions: “The fact of belonging to the same class, and that of belonging to the same generation or age group, have this in common, that both endow the individuals sharing in them with

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a common location in the social and historical process, and thereby limit them to a specific range of potential experience.”

In discussing examples of events that might produce a “generational location,” Mannheim foremost lists the Napoleonic Wars and thus highlights a series of events that played an important role in many of the works that were written during the 1830s, including *The Red and the Black* and *The Epigones*. Generational consciousness thus provides an example of the kind of transnational “wave” in literary history that Moretti was talking about. It transforms the shape of the *Bildungsroman*, not the least because the kind of developmental unity on which the genre was previously premised can now no longer be taken for granted. As the examples of Stendhal and Immermann show, however, the responses to this formal challenge were far from uniform throughout Europe, and the respective solutions pursued by the two authors explain a lot about the diverging roads traveled by the French and German novel over the following decades.

**“Duodecimo Novels” and the “Common Effort to Possess the Past”**

Among the many comparative studies dealing with the rise of the novel during the nineteenth century, none has been more influential than Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*. Auerbach provides the canonical argument for a bifurcated path taken by the French realist novel on the one hand, and by the German *Bildungsroman* on the other. Whereas in the former case “contemporary political and social conditions are woven into the action in a manner more detailed and more real than had been exhibited in any earlier novel,” in the German example external factors prevented a similarly expansive treatment of contemporary reality:

Contemporary conditions in Germany did not easily lend themselves to broad realistic treatment. The social picture was heterogeneous; the general life was conducted in the confusing setting of a host of “historical territories,” units which had come into existence through dynastic and political contingencies. In each of them the oppressive and at times choking atmosphere was counterbalanced by a certain pious submission and the sense of a historical solidity, all of which was more conducive to speculation, introspection, intellectual cocooning, and the development of local idiosyncrasies than to coming to grips with the practical and the real in a spirit of determination and with an awareness of greater contexts and more extensive territories.

Although he has sometimes been attacked by specialists in German literature for writing these lines, Auerbach was merely repeating a critical commonplace shared by many of his contemporaries, and one that had first surfaced in no less distinguished a work than Wilhelm Dilthey’s *Poetry and Experience* (1906). Here, Dilthey argued that the German *Bildungsroman*, in its early examples following *Wilhelm Meister*, “gave expression to the individualism of a culture whose sphere of interest was limited to private life. The governmental authority of the civil service and the military in the small and middle-sized German states confronted the young generation of writers as alien. But these young people were delighted and enraptured by what poets had discovered about the world of the individual and his self-development.” This oppositional account (French social realism on the one hand; German introspection and intellectual cocooning on the other) prevailed for much of the twentieth century and has only recently undergone serious challenge.

Despite these revisions, Auerbach and Dilthey remain interesting as prime examples of the kind of arguments that give rise to the notion of a “national literature” in the first place. One thing that is immediately striking about the two passages that I have quoted is that both employ a twofold spatial metaphor to explain the stunted development of German realism. The fragmented geography of the German principalities, a literal example of spatial constriction, gives rise to a corresponding figurative constriction in the respective phrases “limited sphere of interest” and “intellectual cocooning” (*Sicheinspinnen*). Left on the outside are the “awareness of greater contexts and more extensive territories” that, one infers by chiasmus, were set into motion by the more expansive political geography of France. Similar spatial metaphors can be found in a number of other studies produced throughout the twentieth century. In his 1935 work on German popular literature during the Restoration period, for instance, Ferdinand Joseph Schneider puns that “the literary Biedermeier consists of duodecimo-novels,” thereby combining a reference to the miniscule paper format used for the literary works of the period with an allusion to German political geography (the tiny states of the early nineteenth century were known as the *Duodezfürstentümer*). Forty years later, Wolfgang Preisendanz speaks of German poetry’s “direct access to the highest court of appeal”

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7. Thus Jeffrey L. Sammons has argued that the nineteenth-century German novel was far more diverse than Auerbach suggested, while scholars such as Naomi Schor and Margaret Cohen, working in French departments, have pointed out that realist authors faced serious competition from sentimental and idealist fictions. See Jeffrey L. Sammons, “The Nineteenth-Century German Novel,” in *German Literature of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Clayton Koelb and Eric Downing (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 2005), 184; Naomi Schor, *George Sand and Idealism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); and Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

(Reichsunmittelbarkeit der Poesie) and thereby expresses the opinion that in the successor states of the Holy Roman Empire, synthetic statements were possible only on a level of abstraction that rivaled that of the famously distant and incompetent imperial court. And in the 1990s, Martin Swales contrasts Western European realism, which focused on big cities like London and Paris that served as synecdoches for the larger world, with German literary production, which frequently centered on smaller “hometowns” in which local customs and traditions were sheltered by a guild economy.

For Auerbach, German literary production is further marked not only by an underlying spatial fragmentation, but also by the country’s fealty to tradition, its “sense of a historical solidity.” France, on the other hand, emerges as the realm of rapid change and innovation. Writing about Stendhal’s invention of realism, Auerbach thus proclaims that “temporal perspective is a factor of which he never loses sight; the concept of incessantly changing forms and manners of life dominates his thought.”

In contrast to the German emphasis on spatial fragmentation and temporal continuity, critics of French literature have provided many different accounts of the realist novel’s ability to compile social data into a spatially unified model. Peter Brooks, for instance, has compared the novels of Balzac and Dickens to elaborate dollhouses and toy cities: architectural structures that are internally compartmentalized and yet afford their owners with a panoptic stance from which an internally unified parallel world springs into being. These putative differences between French and German novel production can be explained as a consequence of the two countries’ very different progression from the ancien régime into the modern period. The French, in the revolutions of 1789 and 1830, replaced hereditary right with popular sovereignty and created an image of themselves as a nation that had wrested control of the future from the clutches of the past: spatial homogeny and temporal heterogeneity. As a result, French realist novels could begin the difficult task of exploring the laws governing a complex but unified social system during times of rapid modernization. The robust public sphere of the July Monarchy, centered in Paris but endowed with the ability to rapidly disseminate information and opinions not only throughout all of France, but also beyond its borders, additionally involved literary realism in a complex network of transnational cultural exchange. The many small states that comprised the Holy Roman Empire, on

10. Swales, Studies of German Prose Fiction, 14.
11. Auerbach, Mimesis, 462.
the other hand, fell only at the hands of an external military power and found a
renewed lease on life under Metternich: spatial heterogeneity and temporal ho-
mogeneity. Faced with external stasis and a fragmented society, German authors
withdrew inward to find referential totality and the opportunity for meaningful
temporal development in the individual.

Since 1990, however, scholars have begun to advance a very different account,
stressing the similarities between various countries during the Restoration period
over their dissimilarities. For instance, the literary critic Martina Lauster claims:

> A cosmopolitan spirit characterizes the period from 1815 to 1848, in which as rarely
> before in European history political developments in one nation were interpreted as
> internationally significant and trendsetting. European interest in the Greek liberation
> struggle preceded these two decades, which in turn saw fiery enthusiasm for the
> July Revolution of 1830 (an event that emboldened constitutionalism all over Eu-
> rope), international support for Polish independence, and continental interest in Brit-
> ish election reforms, Chartism, and the “Irish Question,” not to mention the problems
> of industrialization. . . . The years leading up to 1848 [Vormärzzeit] thus rival the
> Weimar Republic as a period in which cosmopolitan sentiments undermined the au-
> thority of national “codes,” all the while social modernization reformulated precisely
> these codes in such a way that national identity would henceforth be defined through
> the exclusion of everything foreign. 14

A number of different reasons could be cited to explain this shift in interest from
the national to the cosmopolitan, central among them no doubt the resurgence of
“world history” in the works of C. A. Bayly, Jürgen Osterhammel, and others.
Bayly speaks of the period between 1815 and 1865 as a “New World Order,” while
Osterhammel refers to an “international state system” (Weltstaatsystem). 15 More
immediately relevant for the present purposes, however, is the rise of cultural mem-
ory studies, which has singled out the first half of the nineteenth century as an era of
collective stock-taking of the traumata that attended the “age of revolution” and the
Napoleonic Wars. As historian Peter Fritzsche puts it especially forcefully, “While
I recognize differences in the particular organization of historical time in Prussia
and France and Britain and the United States, I do not find these differences as im-
portant as the common endeavor to think historically and to possess the past. This
effort was transnational, even as it was constitutive of the idea of the national.” 16

Lauster (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 1994), 9–10.
(Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 134–38; and Jürgen Osterhammel, Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte
16. Peter Fritzsche, Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History (Cambridge,
On one level, this “common endeavor to think historically and to possess the past” represents nothing else than the culmination of the inexorable process by which the spirit of historicism turns from an obsession of the intellectual few into a preoccupation of the masses. Once the tremors and aftershocks of the French Revolution had passed over Europe, it became impossible even for ordinary peasants to think of their lives as anything other than a product of the contested past. On another level, however, the new obsession with collective memory counteracts the tendency of eighteenth-century historicism to conceptualize temporal flow in terms of national entelechies, precisely because these tremors travel across national boundaries and provide a unifying experience. Here is Fritzsche again, commenting on an 1815 travel narrative:

Figures such as Napoleon, Talleyrand, Blücher, and red-lettered events such as Tilsit or Pamplona, belonged to the repertory of everyday conversations, but their significance was not self-evident; this was argued out among cobbler and tailors, Jews and farmers, Poles and Italians, who do not hesitate to place their own experiences (“Pamplona ‘13”) into the larger picture. What is striking is not simply all the talk about the revolution and the wars, which is taken up again and again, before dinner, “after dinner,” cabin to cabin, but also the exchange of opinion and evidence whereby well-known public events are retold in various personalized versions. The travelers participated in a common historical drama by which they organized and connected the events of their time and through which they told their own stories and found that others were interested in them.¹⁷

On first sight, two interpretive paradigms that I have just described seem irreconcilable with one another. The first, represented by Auerbach and Dilthey, claims that European culture during the 1830s was firmly divided into national traditions whose internal differences were largely the consequence of sociopolitical factors brought about by the Napoleonic conquests. The second, represented by Lauster and Fritzsche, claims that those very same conquests inaugurated a European-wide cosmopolitan memory culture. In reality, however, there is no inherent obstacle that would prevent both of these interpretations from being true simultaneously, as Fritzsche already points out when he describes the new memory culture as “transnational, even as it was constitutive of the idea of the national.” Fritzsche’s riverboat passengers, who “participated in a common historical drama by which they organized and connected the events of their time,” remain Poles and Italians, Germans and Frenchmen, whose individual attempts to possess the past must inevitably be conditioned by the events put at their disposal by their respective national traditions.

¹⁷. Fritzsche, Stranded in the Present, 12.
The novels of Stendhal and Immermann participate in the new cosmopolitan memory culture through their attempts to articulate a post-Napoleonic generational consciousness. Both Stendhal’s Julien Sorel and Immermann’s Hermann believe themselves to be representatives of a historical cohort, and they try to act accordingly. The organization of intellectual life into generational groupings was a common feature of European society during the Restoration period, and one that Goethe himself already anticipated when he wrote, in his autobiography Poetry and Truth: “One may well say [someone] would have been quite a different person if born ten years before or after, as far as his Bildung and his effect on others are concerned.” These lines were written in 1811, before the Restoration had even begun, but they are nevertheless a world removed from anything he might have said fifteen years earlier, at the time of the publication of Wilhelm Meister. Indeed, although the years of Weimar Classicism were a period of considerable change and innovation for the novel, Wieland (born in 1733), Goethe (1749), and Schiller (1759) more often than not provided a united front in aesthetic matters. Jena Romanticism, on the other hand, was very much a generational concern, not just empirically (Novalis, Tieck, and Wilhelm Schlegel were all born within one year of one another) but also ideologically, while the poets and critics of Immermann’s own time defined their entire aesthetic project as a struggle between the “Old” and the “Young” Germany.

My own understanding of “generation” is somewhat looser than the one implied in the foregoing quote, however—a fact that will already be clear from my intent to compare a novel by Stendhal, born in 1783, to one by Immermann, born in 1796. What unites Immermann and Stendhal is not their membership in a

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19. In 1824, Leopold von Ranke became the first person to use the concept of the “generation” as a methodological tool of academic historiography in his History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations from 1494 to 1514. In France as well, generational struggles were a defining feature of intellectual life in the years following the fall of Napoleon. As Alan Spitzer explains, “It was widely believed during and after the Restoration that the most visible and articulate members of a group whose mean age was twenty-three or twenty-four in 1820 constituted a privileged cohort, set apart by its talents and its coherence from older and younger contemporaries.” See Alan B. Spitzer, The French Generation of 1820 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 4. Spitzer also stresses the transnational dimension of these experiences, drawing explicit parallels to the German context: “The trauma of growing up in an age of transition was scarcely confined to our French cohort even in its own era. The most relevant comparison is probably with the roughly identical age group in the contemporary German youth, notably those who formed the association of the ‘Burschenschaften’. They too shared the sense of a world-historical mission for which their elders were inadequate. They too contrasted their stainless lives and selfless idealism with the shopworn and timeserving character of the preceding generation, which had fallen so far short of its own ideals. They felt themselves adrift in a universe without landmarks and yearned for some higher synthesis that would guarantee an indispensable ideological and social coherence. They rejected those skeptical and materialist philosophies that had contributed to the moral void” (267).
common age group, but rather a set of similar experiences the two writers had independently of one another and at different points in historical time. Both writers were young boys when the ancien régime came to a sudden (and as it would turn out temporary) end in their respective countries: Stendhal was six when the French Revolution arrived in Grenoble, while Immermann was ten when he witnessed the demise of the Holy Roman Empire in the battle of Jena and Auerstedt, just a short distance from his native town of Magdeburg. Both authors, furthermore, began their adult life by participating in military campaigns that seemed to foreshadow glorious national futures, only to see these hopes smashed on the rocks of the Restoration. Stendhal was seventeen when he followed Napoleon into Italy, the exact same age at which Immermann, fighting on the opposite side, participated in the “Battle of the Nations” at Leipzig. The importance of these events to the two authors is well documented in Stendhal’s Life of Henri Brulard (1835–36) and in Immermann’s The Youth of Twenty-Five Years Ago (1840)—works that undoubtedly rank among the earliest “generational autobiographies” in literary history. In the opening lines of his text, Immermann declares his intention to describe the experiences of all those Germans who “were at least ten and at most sixteen years old in October of 1806, and who were thus between seventeen and twenty-three on February 3 of 1813.”

Stendhal and Immermann were born thirteen years apart, but their novels confront the same question, namely how to bestow a narrative shape on European culture at a time (the 1820s) in which both France and Germany found themselves torn apart by a historically unprecedented clash of generations. Older men who had come into power and fortune during the ancien régime confronted a rising tide of younger people whose formative experiences had coincided with the Napoleonic Wars. This clash entailed much more than a collision of values and opinions about such subjects as political emancipation and property distribution. Also at stake was a fundamental disagreement about historical narrative, about the ways in which the past should be connected to the present. For obvious reasons, the Bildungsroman is an ideal vehicle with which to meditate on this question; Stendhal and Immermann embraced it eagerly, taking the novel in directions that Goethe could never have anticipated. But although they respond to a common problem, The Red and the Black and The Epigones could hardly be more different from one another, a fact that points to the continued relevance of national circumstance in literary history.

20. As Mannheim puts it, “The fact people are born at the same time, or that their youth, adulthood, and old age coincide, does not itself involve similarity of location; what does create a similar location is that they are in a position to experience the same events and data, etc., and especially that these experiences impinge upon a similarly ‘stratified’ consciousness” (“The Problem of Generations,” 297).

The Red, the Black, and the Young

The writings of both Immermann and Stendhal are marked by a certain elegiac tone, a longing for an earlier age in which literary production could still address itself to a unified public. In Stendhal, this elegiac tone is perhaps most pronounced in a note he inscribed in a copy of *The Red and the Black* in 1834, eleven years after giving up his youthful ambition to become a comic playwright in the manner of Molière: “It has become impossible to write theatrical comedy since the Revolution; there are now two publics: the vulgar one and the refined. A young woman cannot be blond and brunette at the same time. . . . Ever since democracy has populated the theaters with vulgar people, incapable of appreciating refined subject matter, I have come to regard the novel as the comedy of the nineteenth century.” Two years later, he tempered this blunt attack on “vulgar people” (*gens grossiers*) by offering a more nuanced analysis of the two publics ushered in by the Revolution. A performance of Molière’s *The Bourgeois Gentleman* in 1836 would necessarily have to be a failure, Stendhal argued, because one half of the audience would laugh at the bourgeois M. Jourdain while the other would laugh at the disheveled aristocrat Dorante.22 Stendhal’s thesis regarding the impossibility of theatrical comedy in the nineteenth century is, in other words, premised on his recognition that the events of 1789 have wreaked havoc on the historical self-understanding of the French people. A theater in 1830 would, perforce, bring together audience members who regard the post-Napoleonic monarchy as essentially a continuation of the ancien régime, and for whom M. Jourdain is a pretentious upstart, with others who regard the days of the aristocracy as numbered, and for whom Dorante is a mere fossil. In the absence of any interpretive certainty regarding the status of the twenty-five years between 1789 and 1814, it is difficult to know whether to laugh at events that depart from the way things were once supposed to be, or whether to embrace them.

Novels, on the other hand, are consumed in the private setting of a salon or bedchamber. In the act of reading a novel, a fragmented audience can imagine itself as whole again; indeed it can even imagine its fragmentation as the starting point for a more fundamental wholeness. This, at any rate, is the promise that Stendhal holds out in *The Red and the Black*, and which he even seems to inscribe in the novel’s enigmatic title. “Red,” as many exegetes have pointed out, is the color of the Napoleonic army uniform, and thus a metonym for a worldview that values courage, independent thinking, and resolute action. “Black,” on the other hand, stands for the habit of the ultramontanist clergy, and thus for a worldview that privileges obedience over courage, conformity over independence, and stasis over action. The two colors furthermore seem aligned with competing historical interpretations,

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since the “red” seeks guidance for the future from the years between 1799 and 1815, while the “black” attempts to restore French society to the state it found itself in before 1789.

Yet “red” and “black” are also the colors that one can find on a roulette wheel, where they are locked into the same eternal dance around a common center. This roulette metaphor certainly provides an apt description of Stendhal’s novel. *The Red and the Black* presents its reader with a panoramic view of French society, moving from a small village to a midsize town in the Franche-Comté and eventually to the capital. Each of these settings is lovingly detailed and possesses a distinctive cast of characters. But there can never be any doubt that Verrières, Besançon, and Paris are part of the same world, or that they follow a parallel path through history. Of course, each of the three settings witnesses its own struggles between revolution and reaction, between “red” and “black,” but precisely because the shape of this struggle is everywhere the same (and because the “black” everywhere seems to be winning) the novel appears internally unified. There is no better proof of this than the fact that Julien Sorel is able to pursue an essentially unbroken development through all three stages. He improves on his early achievements in dissimulation and flattery during his subsequent stays in Besançon and Paris, but what he has learned in the household of M. de Rênal essentially carries over into the more rarified setting of the Hôtel de la Mole.

It is only upon closer inspection that a number of cracks begin to appear in the unified front presented by this fictional world. When he wrote *The Red and Black*, Stendhal borrowed heavily from an actual murder case that had taken place in the Dauphiné, but made the strategic decision to relocate the action to the Franche-Comté. This was a significant choice, for unlike the Dauphiné, the Franche-Comté was a rather recent acquisition of the kingdom of France. A medieval fiefdom of the duchy of Burgundy, it became a part of the Holy Roman Empire and thus a vassal state of the Spaniards before it was eventually conquered by Louis XIV in the mid-seventeenth century. Even more significantly, it almost did not return to France after the Napoleonic interlude, for the Prussians laid claim to it during the Congress of Vienna. The Franche-Comté, in other words, is a potent reminder of the fact that the Hexagon is a culturally constructed rather than natural entity, and that the territorial integrity of France was in considerable danger after Napoleon’s defeat on the battlefield at Waterloo. Had things gone only a little bit differently, Verrières and Besançon could now find themselves cut off from Paris and the rest of French society.

Stendhal weaves a number of reminders of this contested history into the opening chapters of *The Red and the Black*. The first paragraph of the novel, for instance, explains that “[t]he] Doubs flows a couple of hundred feet below [Verrières’s] fortifications, built long ago by the Spaniards and now fallen into ruins,” while M. de Rênal comes from a family that “is Spanish, ancient, and . . . was established in the
land long before the conquest of Louis XIV.”23 These references to ancient history are given a more contemporary relevance in one of the most celebrated scenes in the novel, in which a foreign king comes to visit Verrières, where the local gentry attempt to demonstrate the political stability of the Restoration by putting on a magnificent spectacle. One of the highlights of the performance is a salute with “an old Spanish cannon belonging to the town” (85), which in turn is operated by “the cannoneers of Leipzig firing five shots a minute just as if they had the Prussians in their sights” (90). Julien, too, becomes a small cog in the inevitable mechanism by which this carnival progresses to its sublime conclusion when, at the very same time in which he is outwardly trying to cut a dashing figure as one of the king’s attendants, he imagines himself as “one of Napoleon’s orderlies in the act of charging a battery” (81).

This progression from a reference to Spanish fortifications in the opening pages to Julien’s hypocritical performance at the culmination of the Verrières episode encapsulates a dynamic that Stendhal stages again and again over the course of his novel. One of the major themes (indeed, the major theme) of The Red and the Black is that “history” is a contested narrative construct, that people remember events differently and will draw from them diverging conclusions. But the objective reminders of such alternate realities are hidden beneath the placid surface of the novel, which, despite its stated intention to be a “Chronicle of 1830,” references neither class struggle nor genuine intellectual dissent to Restoration culture. Upon their first reading, for instance, very few readers will pick up on the fact that Julien owes his meteoric rise within French society not just to flattery and luck, but also to a prolonged territorial dispute between two Restoration officials, the Abbé Frilair and the Marquis de la Mole. “Twelve years before,” we learn in an unmistakable reference to the fall of Napoleon, “Abbé Frilair had arrived in Besançon with a very slender carpetbag [porte-manteau], which, as the story went, contained his entire fortune. . . . In the course of making all this money, he had bought half a property, the other half of which passed by inheritance to M. de la Mole. Hence a great lawsuit between these two figures” (167). Robert M. Adams’s ingenious translation identifies the Abbé as what he really is, namely a “carpetbagger,” who cunningly enriched himself during the years after 1815 and is now fighting off the restitution claims of M. de la Mole, who spent the Napoleonic interregnum in exile and was thus unable to protect his ancestral property. At stake in the lawsuit, then, is a debate over what kind of historical legitimation claims should determine future property relationships in France. But unlike Balzac or Dickens, for whom such a struggle might present the material for an entire novel, Stendhal shows very little

interest in the further legal proceedings. He needs them only in order to have a plausible explanation for Julien’s move to the Hôtel de la Mole.

Another reference to the contested political reality of Bourbon France occurs in the brief passage in which Stendhal whisks his protagonist from Besançon toward Paris. In his mail coach, Julien overhears a conversation between two total strangers. One of them, a man named Saint-Giraud, is complaining of the poor lot that has befallen him ever since he tried to escape the hubbub of the capital by moving to a farm in the Rhone Valley: “For six months the vicar of the village and the local gentry paid court to me; I fed them dinners; I told them I had left Paris in order never again to hear, or be obliged to talk, about politics. . . . But this wasn’t the vicar’s game; and before long I was subjected to a thousand different indiscreet requests and bits of chicanery” (190). Driven to despair by the escalating conflict between the vicar and the local faction of liberals, Saint-Giraud eventually concludes: “I’m going to get my solitude and rural peace in the only place where they can be found in France, a fourth-floor apartment off the Champs-Elysées. And even there, I’m wondering whether I hadn’t better begin my political career in the district of Roule by presenting the blessed bread in the parish church” (191).

This is one of the few places in the novel in which we find a reference to “France” in its entirety, and Saint-Giraud’s description makes it quite clear that he conceives of the nation as a cesspool of political strife. Like the quarrel between M. de la Mole and the Abbé Frilair, furthermore, these struggles largely concern political geography and future property relations, as Julien immediately grasps when he identifies Saint-Giraud as the victorious party in an earlier intrigue concerning a house that M. de Rênal also coveted. And yet when Julien himself arrives in the “district of Roule” (i.e., the Faubourg Saint-Honoré), his overriding concern is to learn how to ride a horse, and his biggest enemy the heavy traffic that moves down the Champs-Elysées. Once again, all material traces of the legitimation struggle that holds Restoration-era France in its grip are sublimated into an episode in Julien’s rise through society.

The historical legitimation struggles that are suppressed on the level of socio-political reality instead erupt with a vengeance within Julien’s personal narrative, and this explains why he represents so many things to so many different people. In his own mind, he is a Napoleonic hero, a reincarnation of the Corsican artillery lieutenant who seized his own place in life rather than settle for what the world had given him. To Mathilde, he is the rebirth not of Bonaparte, but of Boniface, her sixteenth-century ancestor who died as the condemned lover of Queen Marguerite of Navarre. Everything that Julien does, Mathilde interprets not as a symptom of Napoleonic egomania, but rather as a token of true chivalry. M. de la Mole, finally, lives his life as if he were a royal subject of Louis XVI, rather than of Louis XVIII, yet one who has somehow received warning of, and now desperately tries to avert, the impending revolutionary cataclysm. For him, Julien is initially a fellow royalist conspirator, before he morphs into the threatening figure of a Jacobin. At stake
here is far more than a mere conflict between different interpretations of Julien’s character: these are also competing historical interpretations, competing narratives about what French society does and should look like. Stendhal, of course, repeatedly pokes fun at these attempts to put the past into the service of the present, most viciously in the episode in which Julien attempts to woo Mme de Fervaques (herself a devoted student of Saint-Simon and thus mentally stuck in the eighteenth century) with copies of love letters by the Russian prince Korasoff: “The Russians copy French customs, but always at a distance of fifty years. They are just now coming into the age of Louis XV” (325). The ultimate irony in this episode is that Korasoff’s letters are “so ridiculous that [Julien] began to copy [them] line for line without giving a thought to the sense” (338). Their meaning lies not in what they actually say, but rather in their ability to provide the present with a behavioral matrix that carries the authority of the past.

Julien’s peculiar fate in literary history thus is to follow three separate developmental trajectories simultaneously, and to thereby give a literary form to the “problem of generations” as it presented itself around 1830. Julien, Mathilde, and M. de la Mole are, to invoke the language of Karl Mannheim, “differently located,” and yet the conclusion of the novel confirms each of them in their own worldview. For Julien, the murder of Mme de Rênal is the equivalent of Napoleon’s infamous self-coronation: an act of romantic fiat in which he renounces all social obligations and takes his destiny into his own hands, even if this should lead to his inevitable destruction. For Mathilde, that very same act serves as the conclusion to a gothic love story, in which her lover kills the woman who has made her happiness impossible. Finally, for M. de la Mole, the murder merely confirms his darkest suspicions about what Julien is capable of. Each of these characters imposes his or her preferred narrative conventions on the events of Julien’s rise and fall, and each derives vindication.

The beauty of this narrative solution is that it allows Stendhal to depict the internal divisions of his age while preserving the conventions of the Bildungsroman. There can be no doubt that Julien Sorel undergoes an internally consistent development, even if the various characters who surround him would debate the underlying logic that animates it. Sandy Petrey, in a powerful interpretation of the novels of Stendhal and Balzac, has argued that French realist fiction is characterized by the struggle between denotative and constative speech acts, between words that merely refer to external reality and those that set out to shape it. The Red and the Black fulfills this argument with a vengeance, since this self-effacing attempt to present a “Chronicle of 1830” contains no less than a triply constative speech act. Julien’s life and death impose meaning on disorder and chaos, but this meaning is in turn tied to a certain historical perspective, a generational location. In this manner,

Stendhal achieves the illusion of a unified world, even while he simultaneously challenges the reader to recognize that there are different ways of interpreting it.

**Epigonalism and the Novel**

At first sight, no novel could possibly be more different from *The Red and the Black* than Karl Leberecht Immermann’s *The Epigones*. Stendhal’s story possesses the sociopolitical unity so characteristic of realist fiction; only on closer examination does it become clear that it actually contains three very different interpretations of what is happening, and challenges its readers to stake their full confidence on one of them if they ever want to arrive at a picture of the world “as it actually is.” Nobody, by contrast, could ever confuse *The Epigones* with a realist, or even an internally unified, text. More than anything else, it resembles a picaresque tale. It jumps between a large number of different locations, all of which obey their own narrative conventions and only some of which can be located on a map, and it introduces such a dazzling variety of characters that its protagonist at times seems all but forgotten.

Furthermore, *The Red and the Black* ranks as one of the undisputed masterpieces of world literature, while *The Epigones* is now almost forgotten. It has never been translated into English and was last published in German thirty years ago in an imposing critical edition printed on Bible paper—a scholarly godsend, but hardly the kind of format liable to win a larger audience. The hero of Immermann’s novel is a young man by the name of Hermann, who believes that he is the son of a senator from Bremen, though he is actually the bastard child of an aristocrat. He is twenty-four years old in 1820, when the novel begins, which would make him an exact contemporary of his author.²⁵ The opening chapter finds him on his way to see his uncle, a rich industrialist who has acquired ownership rights to the ancestral dominions of a duke who is, however, vigorously contesting these claims with the help of his secretary, Wilhelmi. By chance, Hermann comes across the duke at a local inn, recognizes in him an old friend of his ostensible father, the senator, and renews the acquaintance. Much of the novel is then given to Hermann’s attempts to mediate between the duke and his uncle, an endeavor that carries him to diverse localities throughout Germany. Over the course of these travels, Hermann becomes involved with the liberal student movement and with its enemies, mingles in Berlin salon society, stages a revival of a feudal tournament, and has numerous other adventures.

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²⁵ “Hermann” (Arminius), the name of a Germanic king who defeated the Roman general Varus in 9 CE and stopped the expansion of the Roman Empire at the Rhine, was a popular choice of parents who wished to express their patriotism during the years of the Napoleonic occupation and the Restoration period. Hermann can thus be seen as a kind of German everyman. Immermann’s chronology is jumbled, however. The subtitle of the novel, for instance, describes it as a “family memoir in nine books, 1823–1835.” There are other inconsistencies among the dates given in the text.
This main plot is surrounded by a number of secondary plotlines, a fact that seems to emphasize the origins of the German *Bildungsroman* in the picaresque genre. Among other things, Hermann embarks on a quest to find a tutor for a young circus-performer named Flämmchen, and he also falls in love with a series of women. The first of these is the duchess herself, who is then followed in quick succession by his uncle’s adopted daughter Cornelie, and, finally, by the duke’s sister Johanna, with whom Hermann believes he has intercourse in a darkened room one night. The climax of the novel occurs when Hermann discovers the secret of his aristocratic heritage and finds out that he is a blood relative both of the duke and of Johanna. He thus concludes that he has committed an incestuous act and promptly goes mad. Fortunately, everything turns out to have been a misunderstanding, and Flämmchen reveals herself to be the mysterious lover. Since both the uncle and the duke, Hermann’s last two adult relatives by adoption and by blood, respectively, have meanwhile passed away, Hermann is left as the sole remaining heir on either side of the legal struggle that had provided the narrative backbone of *The Epigones*.

Immermann’s novel was immediately recognized as an important work by its contemporaries but faded into obscurity soon afterward. Besides its cumbersome and often creakingly artificial plot, the primary reason for this change in critical fortune undoubtedly lies in the fact that the book appears to be what its title already promises: an epigonal work that recycles a variety of plot elements from *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, but without animating them with Goethe’s peculiar literary genius. Flämmchen, for instance, is a transparent copy of Goethe’s Mignon, but she lacks Mignon’s grace and innocent mystery, rising from the pages of the later novel as a grossly sexualized child-woman. The nighttime encounter with an unknown woman is lifted from Goethe as well but here takes on a rather more sordid aspect. Numerous other correspondences—between Goethe’s countess and Immermann’s duchess, between the Tower Society and Wilhelmi’s Masonic lodge, for instance—could be mentioned, none of which testify in favor of *The Epigones*. Not surprisingly, the brief passage from Immermann’s novel that I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, and in which the narrator describes his own generation as hopelessly inferior to that of fifty years ago, has often been read as a thinly veiled summary of the work as a whole.

The elegiac tone of this quotation is, however, flatly contradicted by a second passage that occurs much later in the novel:

> But our present age possesses infinite capacities for healing and regeneration, and I could think of no better way to conclude our epistolary conversation, which (like its subject) has admittedly been somewhat chaotic and has violated the temporal order

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It is difficult to reconcile these two passages, unless one reads either one or both of them as fundamentally ironic. The fact that the first of these speeches is attributed to the pedantic character of Wilhelmi, while the second belongs to the pseudoauthorial “publisher” of the “family memoirs” (thus the subtitle of *The Epigones*), seems to suggest that Immermann’s sympathies are with those who would identify contemporary events as indicators of a “rejuvenated race.” There is a third possibility, however, namely that Immermann wanted his readers to regard both passages as possessing equal merit, and as documenting between them the internally conflicted self-understanding of the Restoration period.

This third possibility is supported by a quick excursus on the etymology of the term “epigone.” In contemporary German and English alike, the term refers to “one of a succeeding generation. Chiefly . . . the less distinguished successors of an illustrious generation” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., www.oed.com). As Manfred Windfuhr has pointed out, however, the word had a very different meaning during the eighteenth century and in fact possessed a positive connotation deriving from its roots in Greek mythology, where the *epigonoi* were the sons of the seven heroes of the war against Thebes, who succeeded in conquering the city to which their fathers had ineffectually laid siege. During the 1830s, the term underwent a semantic transvaluation, and indeed, there is some evidence that Immermann’s novel was responsible for the shift. Windfuhr links this development to the newly popular historicist tendency to define the present in terms of the past, and to search for distinctions between one’s own time and that which came before it: “The union of a comprehensive humanist education with a historical sense sharpened by academic historiography led to a reinterpretation of the concept of the epigone toward the beginning of the nineteenth century. An era that regarded itself as epigonal discovered an expression of its identity in a previously marginal ancient myth.”

There is thus a delicious circular reasoning in arguments that would interpret the title of Immermann’s novel as uncompromisingly elegiac: the academic establishment of...
the Restoration period, casting about for a term that would describe its own self-perceived inferiority compared to the age of Weimar Classicism, brought about a semantic transvaluation of the term “epigone.” This transvaluation, enshrined in definitions like the one from the Oxford English Dictionary but still far from universal in the 1830s, was then used to sanction a particular reading of Immermann’s novel, and by extension of German literature as a whole. It is true that Immermann refers to the newer understanding of epigonalism when he describes his own generation as “carrying the burden of having been born too late.” But he could also count on his readers to possess knowledge of the earlier definition, and thus to be aware of the semantic ambiguities of the term. Far from reinforcing a particular attitude, in other words, Immermann’s title opens up a rich field of conflicting possibilities, pointing both toward impotent belatedness and toward vigorous renewal.

The fact that these two contradictory vectors are espoused and clearly articulated by characters within the novel already highlights a basic difference between The Epigones and The Red and the Black. The legitimation struggles that largely remain beneath the surface of Stendhal’s realist narrative, giving his depiction of France a unified exterior, find a much more forceful expression in Immermann, where they contribute to the novel’s fragmented and picaresque character. The action of The Epigones is set in motion by a lawsuit that combines a dispute over territorial possessions with larger philosophical questions about the nature of historical continuity. At the Congress of Vienna, during the same deliberations that ultimately preserved the territorial integrity of France by refusing the Prussian claims to the Franche-Comté, the victorious powers decided to retain a system of miniscule principalities in Germany. In the process, numerous decisions needed to be made regarding the redistribution of property that the French occupational forces had taken away from their aristocratic owners, and the complexity of these decisions enables the uncle’s attacks on the duke’s holdings. One of the duke’s ancestors, so the uncle argues, had married a commoner, and the rightful claims to his estates should thus have passed to the cadet branch of the family, whose last surviving member, a count, sold them to him. The duke’s defense rests on a series of technicalities regarding the way in which the feudal properties in Germany were mediatised, that is, restored to their previous owners after the defeat of Napoleon. Via his secretary Wilhelmi, the duke first tries to claim that the intervening occupation effectively negated all legal claims based on events that took place before the fall of the Holy Roman Empire. After this initial defense is dismissed, Wilhelmi argues that if the duke’s claim to his estates is agnatic (i.e., part of aristocratic privilege), then the uncle, as a commoner, could never have legally acquired them. But this defense too is dismissed;

29. Early reviews of Immermann’s novel, quoted at length in the critical edition prepared by Peter Hasubek, document that contemporary readers were indeed keenly aware of such ambiguities. As one reviewer noted, “[It was] the intention of the author of The Epigones to depict all individuals whom he sketched as being without direction and inner unity” (698).
the process of mediatization, it turns out, has been incomplete. Commoners are now allowed to hold feudal property, and the duke thus finds himself caught in a double bind: the aristocratic world into which he was born (and which, like Stendhal’s Marquis de la Mole, he carried with him into exile once Napoleon took over) has been restituted just enough to let him regain his property, but not sufficiently to allow him to keep it.

The fragmented political geography of Germany thus emerges as the direct cause of the novel’s anxiety about proper procedures of inheritance and about the relationship between generations: in a word, as a direct cause of epigonalism in all its semantic ambiguity. Epigonalism, in turn, gives rise to narrative fragmentation, as Hermann stumbles through a number of disconnected settings, populated by an equally large number of disjointed characters that each express a different strategy to possess the past. Immermann’s world is filled with revolutionaries and reactionaries, and it devotes oftentimes painfully extended space to such debates as the one between the educational councilor and his brother, who argue about whether a proper school curriculum should be modeled on the ancients or the moderns.

The best illustration of the link between epigonalism and narrative fragmentation, however, is provided by the two spatial domains that serve as the opposing poles of the novel: the duke’s castle and the uncle’s industrial park. The duke lives in a wonderful palace, and in one crucial scene of the novel hopes to accentuate his noble lineage by staging a carousel, a faux medieval tournament that was possibly inspired by a widely publicized event that took place during the Congress of Vienna. But the whole endeavor quickly turns into a farce, because none of the noble participants know anything about the customs of such an occasion and at any rate lack the necessary military skills to handle a horse or a sharp-edged weapon. The carousel moves from the farcical to the downright disastrous when a group of bourgeois, unimpressed by feudal privilege, attempts to gate-crash the party and mocks the entire spectacle. “This was the way,” the narrator concludes his description, “in which an imitation of the tournament at Ashby de la Zouche failed in the nineteenth century” (252).

The uncle, meanwhile, lives in an environment that strikes the contemporary reader as almost Dickensian in its outward aspect:30

Machines rattled, coal smoke rose from the narrow chimneys and darkened the air, carts and workers moved past [Hermann] and by their number announced the proximity of an industrious enterprise. Portions of the green valley were hidden from the eye by yarns and textiles hung out to bleach, and the river, which propelled several

30. Jeffrey L. Sammons has, in fact, argued that the uncle “is the first modern capitalist in German fiction and Die Epigonen is the first German novel to describe a capitalist industrial milieu.” See Jeffrey L. Sammons, Six Essays on the Young German Novel (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 132.
The uncle obviously has a very different attitude toward the relics of the feudal past than the duke: he has simply integrated the palace with its medieval battlements, and the monastery with its Gothic towers into his capitalist enterprise. Indeed, the uncle seems intent to similarly repurpose the very landscape itself, for he has constructed a giant machine that is continually pumping water away from the foundations of his buildings, turning inhospitable swampland into a site of industrial activity. And yet this triumph of the modern mind-set turns into tragedy when his son Ferdinand climbs the machine and falls to his death, motivated by foolish credence in the old folk belief (given contemporary currency by the enormous success of Carl Maria von Weber’s opera Der Freischütz [1821]) that lead acquired at the risk of one’s life can be cast into infallible bullets. Precisely at the moment in which he seems to abandon epigonal collage for a powerful realistic depiction of modern life, Immermann thus seizes on yet another romantic cliché. His move is so overt that it seems implausible to regard it as anything other than calculated: an attempt, in other words, to show that the most progressive attitudes of his own time are, in reality, built on rotten foundations, just as the seemingly “modern” nationalism of the liberal student movement required the gothic thrills of Weber’s opera as a catalyst.

The respective domains of the duke and of the uncle are so different from one another that their very coexistence in one text denies plausibility. And yet Immermann asks his readers to accept them as part of the same internally discontinuous historical reality. Even more importantly, he carefully maintains what Ernest K. Bramsted has called his “negative neutrality,” refusing to take sides in the interpretive struggle that is staged by his novel. Pastoral and industrial landscapes, romantic and realist codes, are treated with equal ironic indifference. Immermann mocks the duke for his attempt to hide in the past, the uncle for his attempt to escape from it. The only character that seems immune to all this mockery is Hermann himself, who marches through the disjointed world of The Epigones with stolid determination, ready to respond to each of the new settings with which he is confronted, but willing to commit to none. Over the course of his travels, he encounters a number of different strategies to relate the past to the present, and as their number grows, so does his understanding of himself and of the world around him. But this understanding is entirely negative in nature. Hermann grows wiser because, just like his author, he refuses to commit to any particular interpretation of history and to regard himself as either sadly belated or the first product of a new era.

Acting One’s Age

For all their internal differences, then, *The Red and the Black* and *The Epigones*, two novels that have often been read merely as the foundational examples of diverging national traditions, can be seen as the common outcome of a collective desire to restore narrative order to history. Conventional approaches to the origins of realism have always focused on the novel’s struggle to represent sociological complexity and have assumed the unified nation-state to be a necessary prerequisite for a successful solution to this problem. But just as pressing during this period was the need to relate the present to the past, to figure out whether contemporary events constituted a revolutionary break with history or its continuation by other means. “All at once,” writes Peter Fritzsche, “the past was reenlivened with the identification of foreclosed possibilities. Contemporaries came to see what I call ‘half lives’ in the past and to insist on the possibilities of restoring, however incompletely, neglected itineraries.”32 No longer loyal to the organic entelechy of the Goethean model, the *Bildungsroman* of the 1830s commits itself to tracing such neglected itineraries.

The attempts to stake a claim in the past were at once personal and transnational and thus constitute a perfect illustration of what I have called, following Homi K. Bhabha, a “vernacular cosmopolitanism.” They were transnational, because Metternich’s restoration was transnational, and because the Congress of Vienna, with its Europe-wide efforts at mediatization, provided a spatial metaphor for temporal strife that both Stendhal and Immermann eagerly seized as their own. They were personal, because consciousness of the struggle was disseminated not through the pedagogic instruments of the state but sprang up spontaneously among a generational cohort: those old enough to remember prerevolutionary Europe, but young enough to have grown up in its aftermath. People who were significantly older than Stendhal or Immermann when the ancien régime collapsed in their respective countries, just like those who had not yet been born, tended to lack the dual perspective that rendered life so complicated for the intermediate generation. As Immermann put it, describing circumstances in Germany, “The young people born before the conquest were political nonentities, the young people of today take a contemplative attitude toward politics (if they haven’t fallen victim to fantastical illusions), but the young people of twenty-five years ago suffered and acted for their political convictions.”33

The notion of a generation at odds with itself provides a common theme for *The Red and the Black* and *The Epigones*. But the ways in which this theme is implemented in these two novels remain very different and thereby testify to the importance of local sociopolitical circumstances in shaping literary history. Restoration-era France presented Stendhal’s generation with an almost perfect simulacrum of the

prerevolutionary era, thus fostering the notion that, after twenty-five years of vio-

tent turmoil, the nation had finally returned to a collective and peaceful road into

the future. Stendhal seized on this delusion and created a fictional world that ap-

pears as internally unified as the Bourbon authorities wished it to be. Against this

backdrop, however, he placed the story of a typical Restoration personality, a young

man bent on advancement in the world, and showed how the same “objective”

biographical facts, such as Julien’s courtship of Mathilde or his murder of Mme

de Rênal, might receive dramatically different interpretations (and be twisted into

dramatically different narrative shapes) depending on the historical location of

those trying to impose meaning on them. France, so Stendhal suggests, may appear

externally united, but in the minds of its inhabitants lurks a multitude of compet-

ing realities.

Immermann, on the other hand, found himself in a German state-system more

fragmented than it had ever been before, even during the frequently chaotic times

of the Holy Roman Empire. This geographic fragmentation lent itself to an en-
tirely different narrative treatment, and the result was a picaresque novel featuring

a multitude of different spaces that collectively represent the confusion and general

lack of direction that Immermann saw at the heart of the Biedermeier condition.

Hermann, like Wilhelm Meister before him, moves in ever-expanding historical

circles and is able to compare his life to an ever-increasing number of competing

stories. But whereas Wilhelm eventually is led into the Tower Society, where he

learns that these competing stories in fact run in parallel, Hermann initially ma-
tures only in the extent of his ironic detachment. As a result, Germany appears

externally multiple, but internally united, even if the unity is one of chaos and

indifference.

At least this is true for much of the novel. But much as was already the case with

Wilhelm Meister, the conclusion of The Epigones departs in a startlingly new direc-
tion. Hermann eventually discovers the secret of his aristocratic heritage and real-
izes that he is the rightful heir not only to the domains of the duke, but also to those

of his uncle, who has meanwhile passed away without leaving any male offspring.

The legal struggle that has motivated the plot for the past few hundred pages is

thus rendered moot. In the final pages of the novel, Wilhelmi sums up Hermann’s

inheritance with the following words: “From the detonation of the underground

mines that aristocratic lust and bourgeois greed drove against one another, . . . from

the confusion of laws and rights, there arises a third combination that nobody had

hitherto thought of. The legacy of feudalism and of industrialism falls into the lap

of one who belongs to both estates and to none” (637). Suddenly, in other words, the

novel offers up the possibility of a utopian solution.

This conclusion could not possibly be more different from that of The Red and

the Black, where Julien ends his once so promising career on the guillotine. Im-

mediately before this, he has become doubly fatherless, having first renounced his

actual father, the sawmill proprietor Sorel, in order to take on the fake identity of
a “Chevalier de la Vernaye,” and then lost his symbolic father, the Marquis de la Mole, to the treachery (or honesty, depending on one’s viewpoint) of Mme de Rênal. His fate is thus, in a sense, the exact inverse of Hermann’s, whose happiness is founded on the realization that he has two fathers, the first an aristocrat, the other a commoner. Nor does Julien’s fate do anything to resolve the fundamental contradiction between the various strategies of historical emplotment that have been presented in the novel. Julien’s death can be just as convincingly interpreted as a recapitulation of Napoleon Bonaparte’s supposed murder through poison in 1821, of Robespierre’s execution in 1794, or of Boniface de la Mole’s punishment in 1574. The final lines of the book, in which Mathilde de la Mole cradles the severed head of her lover in imitation of Queen Marguerite of Navarre, while Fouqué looks on in shock and disgust, stage a contrast between two different epochs and two different modes of behavior that is the exact inverse of the conciliatory tone struck at the end of *The Epigones*.

The obvious differences between these two endings can be explained through the rather different ways in which Immermann and Stendhal relate the concept of the generation to the regulative structures of family life. In *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, Goethe used family bonds as a cosmopolitan bridge between individuals who otherwise lacked shared experiences, and thereby restored shades of the eighteenth-century notion of *le monde* to a novel that in other respects foreshadows the rise of the imagined national community. Immermann’s novel picks up on this solution but turns it against itself. Instead of expressing a cosmopolitan dimension, family relationships in *The Epigones* establish a “national” unity that the internally conflicted memory culture can no longer create for itself. In the absence of any consensus regarding what the future should look like and how one might get to it, filial pieties have to plaster over existential anxieties. In his “Youth of Twenty-Five Years Ago,” Immermann would write: “I believe that only in Germany has family life attained its highest degree of perfection. And it would be sad if this weren’t the case, since for a long time the family was the only thing that our nation possessed, and even now, it is the only thing that approaches a fully rounded form [Bildung], while everything else is caught up in a process of becoming.”  

Amid the confusion of modernity, then, the family can still provide the organic ideal that historicism postulated as the driving force behind all individual development.

Indeed, the final chapters of *The Epigones* can be read as a single sustained attempt to drive home the novel’s central point: we are all one family, and by recognizing this fact we can redeem the misery of our conflicted epoch. This is true not only of Wilhelmi’s description of Hermann’s inheritance, but also of the scene that ends the novel, which summons the entire arsenal of Biedermeier kitsch in order to reunite the protagonist with his long-suffering betrothed: “‘It is I, my brother,

and I have come to bring you your bride!’ cried Johanna in the full bloom of her bliss. Speechless, [Hermann] fell first into the open arms of Cornelie, and then into the bosom of his exalted sister. He allowed himself to rest between the two of them, whom he loved from the bottom of his heart. Tenderly they held him. Wilhelmi gazed on the group with folded hands. The general, meanwhile, supported himself with his sword and fought down his emotions. With this tableau, bathed in the red light of the setting sun, we want to say good-bye to our friend.”35 Cornelie is the uncle’s adopted daughter, while Johanna is the duke’s younger sister. The hug that concludes the novel thus fuses not only the warring social classes, but also the competing generations.

Once one recognizes the importance of the family dynamic to Immermann’s ideological project of restoring unity to a conflicted age, it is easy to find many other examples throughout the book. In book 3, chapter 10, for instance, the Spanish refugee is revealed to be the son of the educational councilor in whose house Hermann has taken temporary lodgings, while in book 3, chapter 14, Hermann recognizes as his own aunt a sick woman whom he had previously nursed. In each of these cases, a possible conflict is averted by the timely recognition of intergenerational relationships. Immermann’s use of this topos differs from Goethe’s because so much more is at stake in the former’s novel. The connections between Goethe’s characters might be seen as a poetic legacy of eighteenth-century thought, which still understood political, social, and cultural communities as finite networks rather than as an indeterminate “public sphere.” Immermann, however, premises his entire literary project on the notion of an “epigonal” generation whose individual members are connected to one another only through the accidents of their birth. His proposal to resolve the conflicts of his day through an intergenerational inheritance thus not only strains credulity but also robs his novel of its analytical edge. The fundamental messiness of Mannheim’s “problem of generations,” expressed by Immermann as the feeling of having been born at once too late and too early, is resolved into a tidy generational sequence.

In *The Red and the Black*, things work out quite differently. The crucial distinction here is that Stendhal never falls victim to the illusion that blood relationships between people can adequately suture the social rifts opened up by the experience of modernity. As the novel steers toward its conclusion, Julien too seems poised to make a fateful inheritance. This inheritance, however, is predicated on a series of clever stratagems. Central among these is his romantic conquest of Mathilde de la Mole, whose heart the brooding provincial wins by catering to her melancholic attachment to a lost chivalric era. But the fear of Napoleonic upstarts is so great in French society that even this conquest, together with the resulting pregnancy,

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35. Michael Minden, who has written several perceptive articles on *The Epigones*, rightly condemns this scene as “genuinely awful.” See his “Problems of Realism in Immermann’s *Die Epigonen*,” *Oxford German Studies* 16 (1985): 78.
might not have been enough to win over Mathilde’s father had it not been for another series of deceptions by which Julien has, in effect, already turned himself into a nobleman, the “Chevalier de la Vernaye.” Julien’s transformation thus results from a deliberate falsehood told about the past, much as the legitimacy of the Bourbon dynasty depends on a lie told about an uninterrupted dynastic succession that would link Louis XVIII to his nephew, who had died in 1795.

The contrast between Stendhal’s acid pen and Immermann’s sugary conclusion to The Epigones is all too obvious but should not distract attention from the fact that both authors respond to a common poetic problem. This problem is how to give aesthetic closure to a generational experience that they themselves defined as internally contradictory and directionless. Immermann’s solution consists of reducing social strife to family troubles—no real “solution” at all from the modern perspective, though at least it has the benefit of invoking a Goethean precedent. Stendhal’s solution is far more radical: he acknowledges that in postrevolutionary France, social bonds require performative assertion, and takes the ultimate step of declaring the family itself to be an “imagined community.”

As a thought experiment, one might conceive an ending to The Red and the Black in which Julien marries Mathilde, and their child lives to inherit both Julien’s title of “Chevalier” and his grandfather’s estates in Languedoc. Such an ending would be deeply cynical, but it would offer a successful resolution to the crisis of historical interpretation that plagues France in the 1820s. It would, in other words, successfully answer the question, “How should one live as the member of a generation that has known both Napoleon and the Bourbon kings?” The answer would be “by finding a mutually agreeable lie and living by it, until this lie becomes the truth.” Mathilde de la Mole grasps as much when she describes to her father the consequences that would await not only him, but French society in general should he withhold his blessing from their marriage: “With [Julien], I have no fear of obscurity. If there is a revolution, I am sure he will have a leading role in it” (357). To insist too much on the truth would mean to court disaster. But by turning the private fantasy of the “Chevalier de la Vernaye” into a public one, Napoleonic ambition and Bourbon desire to preserve the status quo can find a mutually agreeable middle ground that is based on a shared misreading of the past.

The fact that The Red and the Black does not end in this fashion can surely be read as a sign of Stendhal’s fundamentally revolutionary temper. The final chapters of the novel are among its most accomplished because they depict the interpretive chaos that erupts in the absence of the shared narrative that a successful marriage would have brought into being. In the light of this catastrophe, Julien, Mathilde, and Mme de Rênal turn to competing literary codes for guidance, all of which also invoke the authority of the past. Julien goes to the scaffold with the resolve characteristic of heroic romance and thereby pays a final tribute to the Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène. Mathilde enacts a bizarre gothic ritual that for her is the only way to reach back to the sixteenth century and the story of her ancestor Boniface. Mme de Rênal,
finally, attempts to stay faithful to the sentimental fiction of the old regime even as her heart breaks under the contradiction of her hypocritical behavior.

It is tempting to add to this list of literary codes and the behaviors that they inspire Fouqué’s more neutral attitude as an example of the nascent realism to which Stendhal himself aspires. But Fouqué is a provincial lumber merchant; what does he truly know about French society? In the July Revolution of 1830, which took place just as Stendhal was writing his novel and which he nevertheless carefully excised from his story, backdating the action to 1827, the French people opted for the kind of compromise that Julien almost pulled off in *The Red and the Black*. Louis Philippe, the “citizen king,” would come to serve, at least for a little while, as a screen on which the bourgeoisie could project its dreams of social mobility even as the principle of aristocratic succession was effectively left intact. It is within the society created by this mutually acceptable compromise that French realist fiction would advance to its next great flowering in the works of Balzac.

Stendhal’s greatest achievement in *The Red and the Black* was thus not that he found a convincing way to represent sociological complexity, or that he gave a unified shape to a multitude of Frenchmen. His greatest achievement was that he correctly understood the role of myth in the modern world. In an age in which even ordinary people had come to understand that “history” is a dynamic system whose narrative shape is subject to endless negotiations, myth has lost its totalizing function. It can at best be a compromise formation that conflicting social groups might equally claim as their own. Louis Philippe, at once “citizen” and “king,” would become one example of such a modern myth; the American “founding fathers,” who mean so many different things to so many different people, provide another. In turning himself into the Chevalier de la Vernaye, Julien aspires to the status of a modern myth as well—at once “red” and “black,” a self-made man in the footsteps of Bonaparte who nevertheless renders obedient service to Restoration culture. The very failure of his enterprise only underscores its potency as it strips bare how many different things he means to different people.

Immermann’s failure to rise to the same level of achievement as his French contemporary should be located not in the picaresque structure of his plots, nor in his inability to transform hackneyed motifs into a realistic picture of his times, but rather in his basic incomprehension of the meaning of modern myth. In a metalinguistic gloss on his own craft that he inserted into the eighth book of *The Epigones*, Immermann compares world history to a flood that covers all details of the physical landscape and leaves behind a uniform expanse of water. To describe this expanse is the work of the historian; as a novelist, Immermann finds himself inadequate to the task, for “only the contemplation of great men can unlock the sense of an entire epoch. We, however, do not possess such great men” (500). Convinced that the “sense” of an epoch can still be found externally, in the actual deeds of living people, Immermann fails to realize that the best that modern men can hope for is what Mannheim called an “accidental harmony” created from the “vertical
coincidence” of different generational entelechies. Immermann instead declares his intention to ascend to the mountain ranges from which all tributaries to the great flood of history spring. Individual characters will represent individual tendencies of his age, and only when they are all brought together will the true nature of an epoch be revealed: the cloying embrace that concludes The Epigones is an attempt at precisely such a fusion.

The contrasting political geographies of Germany and France during the 1830s are thus only partially to blame for the decisive differences between Immermann’s and Stendhal’s fiction. Just as crucial are the authors’ diverging responses to the transnational memory culture that engulfed their countries during that time. And Stendhal, by offering a frayed ending in which multiple efforts to possess the past stand in jarring contrast to one another, says much more about his age than Immermann, who insists on harmony and conciliation. The shocking end of The Red and the Black destroys the illusion of a spiritual unity on which both classical Bildungsroman theory and academic historicism are founded: the eighteenth-century understanding, according to which both nations and individual characters are the products of an organic self-realization gives way to Mannheim’s model of polyphonically contrasted “generation-entelechies.” The Red and the Black draws attention to the profound historical anxieties that ran across national borders during the Restoration period and provided this era with a cosmopolitan unity. Immermann’s novel provides another example of this dynamic but fails to find an adequate poetic expression for it. The ultimate fate that befell this text in literary history is thus not without irony. In detaching the term “epigone” from its semantic bearings, Immermann found a fitting expression for the historical consciousness of his age, but he also tied the meaning of his work to that of his more illustrious forebear. The German Bildungsroman tradition has had to pay a heavy price for this decision, and the stigma of the epigonal clings to it still.