

Writing a Life from the Inside
of a Drawing: Stendhal's
Vie de Henry Brulard

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Chora

“WHEN I ARRIVE IN a city, I climb the highest steeple or tower to have a view of the whole before seeing the individual parts, and when I leave I do the same in order to fix my ideas,” Montesquieu confides to his readers in his *Voyage en Italie*, from the late 1720s.¹ A perfect hermeneutic formula is thus captured in the travelling French philosopher’s bodily and conceptual movement between the presumed whole and the experienced detail. The Olympic panorama, the unlimited outlook from above that proliferated in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic culture, is a familiar literary topos. It occurs also in the famous opening scene of Stendhal’s autobiography, *Vie de Henry Brulard*, composed by Henri-Marie Beyle (1783–1842) during a few months in the mid-1830s and published posthumously under his pen name Stendhal in 1890.

Stendhal’s captivating first scene takes place early one morning outside San Pietro in Montorio at the Janiculum Hill. “What a magnificent view!” his alter ego Henry Brulard exclaims, surrounded by the panoramic beauty of Rome (see fig. 5.1).² His thoughts, however, immediately start to wander. He recalls that Raphael’s *Transfiguration* was admired for 250 years in the church behind him before it was buried, as he puts it, in the Vatican. The reader, still on page 1, is given many hints that Stendhal’s evocative rapture of places, times, and events differs radically from Montesquieu’s well-ordered ascension and descension, with its perfect hermeneutic sequence. Stendhal identifies details in the whole, zooms in and out, and lets personal memories and historical events conflate. Whenever he is exposed to a panorama, his gaze turns inward; every outlook results in introspection. The fate of Raphael’s painting leads him to the melancholic fact that his fiftieth birthday is rapidly approaching. This inward movement will later be reversed when the self-investigating subject redirects his gaze outward, towards the world around him.

The lavish description of Rome in the opening scene leaves no doubt that this is a text on architecture, cities, and landscapes, but it is also an effort by Stendhal to capture his very personal and double-pseudonym self in writing. As it turns out, his self-examination also becomes a prism for understanding the built world around him. “Have I been a witty man? Was I sad by nature then?” Stendhal contemplates, posing in front of his potential readers. The possibilities opened up by his many questions, however, are far more important than the actual answers. He continues: “Whereupon, not knowing what to say, I began unthinkingly to admire



Fig. 5.1 Lorenzo Suscipi, “Rome, Panorama from San Pietro in Montorio” (daguerreotype), 1841. Courtesy of SSPL/National Media Museum. Suscipi’s view from the Janiculum Hill was captured only six years after Stendhal praised the same view in the opening scene of *Vie de Henry Brulard*.

once more the sublime sight of the ruins of Rome and of its modern grandeur: the Coliseum facing me and beneath my feet the Farnese Palace with the arches of Carlo Maderno’s lovely open gallery, the Corsini Palace beneath my feet.”³ The subject asks and the world responds. His autobiographical inquiries into his own character become transformed into external views of buildings, places, cityscapes, nature, history, and contemporary phenomena of many sorts.

The rhapsodic associations that unfold on the steps of San Pietro in Montorio between dawn and dusk on 16 October 1835 can be read as a *mise en abyme* of Stendhal’s method of remembering times past and presenting his double-pseudonym self. The same sublime effect is evident in the abundant drawings in his extraordinary memoir.



Natural and urban landscapes are profoundly important in the writings of Stendhal. His fictional and non-fictional textual corpus includes unforgettable buildings, cities, places, and landscapes. It is a universe of geographies and topographies as well as topologies. These landscapes are historically and topographically specific, explored through local distinctions in dialects, habits, psychology, and climate. Indeed, Stendhal's wonderful *De l'Amour* (1822) includes a whole theory of climatic and cultural variations.

"The name Parma, one of the towns I most desired to visit after having read *La Chartreuse*, appears compact, smooth, violet and soft, ... because I imagined it only by this heavy syllable in the name of 'Parme' where no air is circulating, and by all I had made it absorb from the Stendhalien sweetness and the reflection of the violets," the protagonist of *À la recherche du temps perdu* contemplates.⁴ In Marcel Proust's novel, this lingering on Parma as a name and an imagined place may be interpreted as a greeting from one outstanding portrayer of places, spaces, and landscapes to another. Proust – a prominent member of the ever-increasing circle of "the happy few" to whom Stendhal dedicated *La Chartreuse de Parme* – obviously is emulating Stendhal's writing, including his obsession with invoking, creating, and recreating real and fictional places. Clearly, the rare ability to make places seem real invests certain works of literature with almost magical qualities of *evidentia* that blur the boundaries between experienced spaces, dreamt spaces, and spaces we imagine through the pleasures of reading.

To me, one of Stendhal's most vivid and memorable descriptions is of a battlefield during the Battle of Waterloo, in *La Chartreuse*. Fabrice del Dongo, the young hero of the novel, is present at this battle, which later would be considered an especially meaningful event in history. Stendhal's exposition of this event, however, is utterly chaotic, almost absurd. As a highly realistic depiction of war, it stands in stark contrast to the historian's well-ordered, bird's-eye view of the past. In Stendhal's narrative the place collapses and dissolves into so many small, meaningless fragments and misunderstandings that not even the protagonist can explain with any precision where he had been and what he had experienced. "What he had seen, was it a battle?" Fabrice asks himself, 'And if so, was it the battle of Waterloo?' For the first time in his life he takes pleasure in reading newspapers and battle chronicles, hoping to find descriptions that might help him recognize the places he had passed through."⁵ Clearly,

this passage presents an ironic palimpsest. First, it is impossible not to read it as a distorted parody of the historian's desire for order and overview. Stendhal's memoirs also distinguish between the "impartial historian" and the individual who cannot separate historical facts from personal experiences. It is equally ironic that a current reader can imagine this place so clearly that it seems real, although Fabrice could not grasp it, despite being present at the battle. Stendhal thus enabled his readers to experience the historic site of Waterloo far more vividly than did most descriptions of places in European literature.



Architecture, space, and place are inexorable foundations in literature: thematically, compositionally, structurally, associatively, and metaphorically. In *The Life of Henry Brulard* the architectural discourse is unusual, due to its emblematic juxtaposition of landscape, architecture, and remembrance. By describing cities, buildings, public places, landscapes, and interiors, Stendhal strives to capture his own fragile identity. The text's spatial and existential dimensions are even more evident in the remarkable sketches that are included in this autobiography. Through a synthesis of writing and drawing, a double process of remembrance and reconstruction is unfolded. Actually, there are three parallel discourses at work: the writing, the drawings, and the highly significant handwriting on the drawings – as well as the captions that are included under the sketches in modern editions. This stratified arrangement enables Stendhal to develop the narrative from within the drawing, using it not only to help him remember and reconstruct the past but also to create a *place* of remembrance. Referring to a modest sketch (see fig. 5.2), he announces, "I found myself at point H, between the main road and the Isère."⁶ This "I" is projected *into* the drawing, and the point "H" – H is for Henry – functions as a viewpoint, similar to the one outside San Pietro in Montorio in the opening scene. Here, as in many other situations, the drawing provides a pivotal point that permits the view to be changed. Initially the author adopts an aerial point of view to look down at his former self, situated in the drawing, virtually on a piece of paper. Then he constructs new or lost perspectives – perhaps a vista of a landscape or a familiar urban or interior scene – that might enable him to recall something that took place there.

The autobiographer declares, first and foremost, that “a drawing has to resemble nature!”⁸ While his drawings often depict nature, they never resemble nature. Stendhal unabashedly brags that his drawing skills effortlessly capture the essential character of an object, a room, a street scene, or a landscape, but his drawings are anything but mimetic. On the contrary: despite their variety of subjects, the drawings are characterized by a single striking feature – their abstracted, diagrammatic qualities. What may seem at first to be a realistic, topographic sketch – a landscape, a plan of a house, or an urban context – may turn out to be a diagram that provides dimensions and determines relationships between things: objects, persons, events, buildings, or places. This attention to dimensions and relations also explains Stendhal’s fascination with architectural scale models, discussed in his *Mémoires d’un touriste* (1838), which describes being astonished by a collection of cork models in Nîmes. He claims that the abstract models enabled him to grasp the comparative sizes of monuments in a way that real buildings never could.⁹ “In a landscape the human eye can form an environmental image of an object, but from the point of view of the perception of phenomena, the model encouraged theoretical, relational reflection,” architectural historian Renzo Dubbini observes.¹⁰

In Stendhal’s autobiography the distinctive diagrammatic displays of landscapes and architecture have certain rare and remarkable phenomenological implications. “The drawing is a map,” the narrative claims, referring to a Baroque radial city plan. This map, however, does not refer to an existing urban location. It is a diagram of social and existential possibilities, formulated as “roads” of past and future prospects. The caption names the roads on the so-called map: “Road to madness. – Road to the art of getting oneself read. – Road to consideration: F(élix) Faure makes himself peer of France. – Road to a fortune made through trade or job-seeking. – A. Moment of birth.”¹¹ A reader who is familiar with the social distinctions in Proust’s increasingly destabilized high society will be thrilled by this fascinating juxtaposition of picture and text as the diagram can be read as an early form of a fundamental socio-spatial arrangement in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Stendhal’s diagram anticipates the shock that Proust’s elderly narrator experiences when he finally recognizes that there is not only a connection but also a shortcut between the road to Guermantes and the road to Méséglise.

The “road to” formula presents different courses of life as if they existed in the same domain, although the reader subsequently realizes that they are based on spiritual, political, literary, and historical idiosyncrasies. The same formula, along with the location of the moment of birth at a point called “A,” is repeated later in a more complex and multilayered variation (see fig. 5.4):

Road of madness. –L. Road to getting oneself being read: Tasso. J.-J. Rousseau, Mozart. R. Road to public regard. –P. Road of good prefects and councilors of State: administrators: Messrs Daru, Roederer, Français, Beugnot. – Road to money: Rothschild.

A. Moment of birth. –B. Roads taken at age seven, often without knowing it. It is supremely ridiculous at the age of fifty to try to leave road R or road P for road C. Frederick II hardly got himself read yet [sic] from the age of twenty had been dreaming of road L.¹²

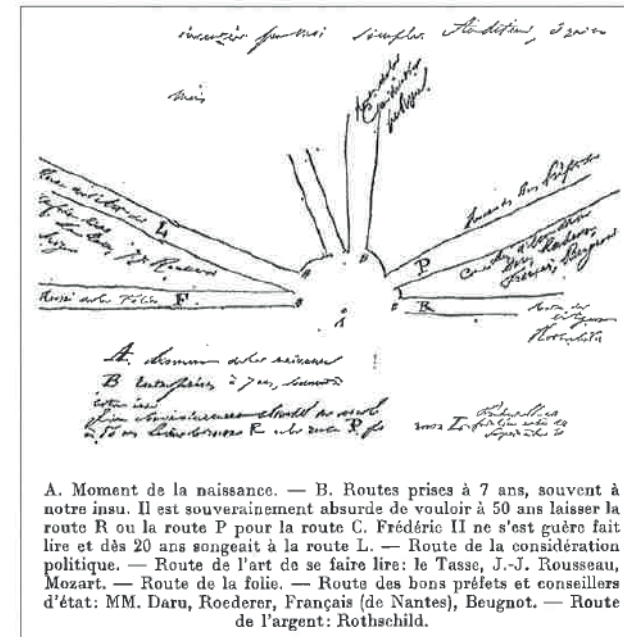


Fig. 5.4 A diagram of social and existential possibilities, presented as a Baroque radial city plan. From Stendhal, *Vie de Henry Brulard*, vol. 2, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 21, 137.

The two types of text in the drawings – the obscure handwriting and the well-ordered caption – demonstrate Stendhal’s philosophical and political wit. However, these drawings are not really maps but existential diagrams in the form of town plans. Their spatial and urban associations illustrate Stendhal’s process of remembrance. As diagrams, their primary aim is to provide dimensions, to define temporal or spatial sequences, or to describe relationships between objects, persons, buildings, or places. This logic is evident even in the drawings that closely resemble architectural drawings. This may explain why his plans of buildings do not suggest a real physical presence. They present relations and dimensions but have no mimetic ambition whatsoever.

The diagram is a paradigm of Stendhal’s method, which aims to recall memories by placing something in relation to something else. In these special constellations of places, events, and persons, points indicate possible occurrences and experiences. A simple and exquisite example is a drawing of an urban square (see fig. 5.5). Rather than referring realistically to the real world, it describes a relationship between buildings and people moving in space. Another diagram (see fig. 5.6) presents a more complex urban situation, with a mountain cross-section and a flagpole as vertical elements. Even a passionate love story is unveiled through coordinates in a diagram. The older Stendhal recalls how he, as a young man desperately and secretly in love with a beautiful mademoiselle, almost ran into her (see fig. 5.7). “I was at H, I caught sight of her at K,” the caption reads. The accompanying narrative describes his anxiety at spotting her on the street: “I took flight, as if the devil were bearing me off along the line of railings F; she, I believe, was at K, and I was lucky enough not to be spotted by her.”¹³ As readers, we expect this description to develop into a love story, elaborated in detail. Stendhal, however, places the beloved one at a point in a diagram, equipped only with a letter (relieved of both her name and her physiognomy). This schematic translation of lived experiences into formulae, numbers, and letters might seem to avoid what we conventionally expect from literature, especially from memoirs. The effect, however, is the exact opposite. As an anti-Proust – Proust, of course, would have expanded fragments of this underplayed scene into a comprehensive narrative in time and space – Stendhal refers briefly and precisely to the points, lines, and patterns of movement on the map. This under-communication of the event’s literary potential causes a tremen-

dous effect. “So much to say for anyone with the patience to describe accurately!” the auto-biographer exclaims.¹⁴ Nevertheless, he prefers to sketch a diagram, offering a line and two letters instead of a painstaking description. The result is peculiar, striking, and spectacular. Stendhal’s spatial diagrams mapped his “living spaces and acted as icons of his states of mind and social and sexual relations,” Anthony Vidler observes.¹⁵ In the diagram of the scene with his beloved, the drama emerges through the tensions between the drawing, the handwritten comment, and the narrative. Together, they establish a literary space in which the passionate and elliptical love story can take place.

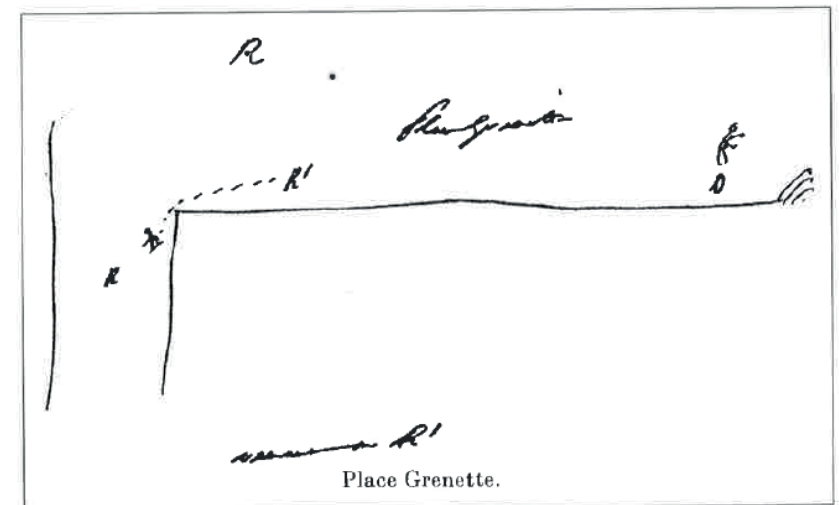


Fig. 5.5 A relationship between buildings and people moving in space. From Stendhal, *Vie de Henry Brulard*, vol. 1, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 20, 84.

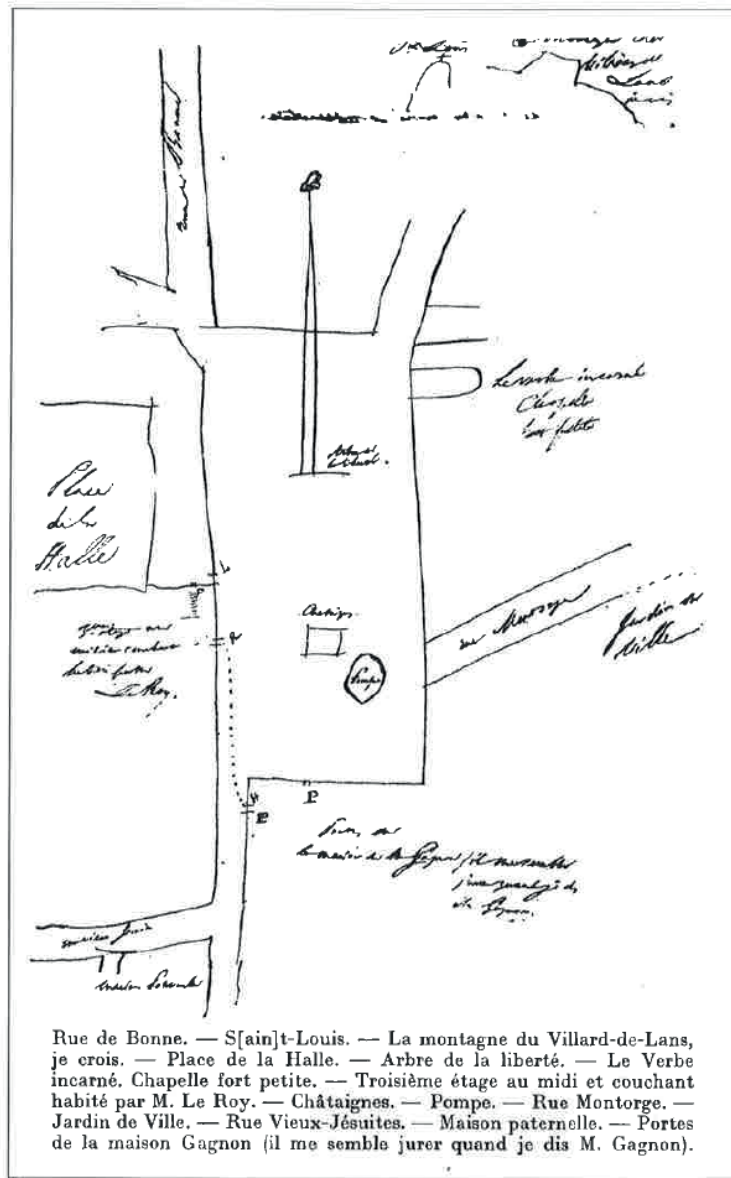


Fig. 5.6 A complex urban situation with three-dimensional elements. From Stendhal, *Vie de Henry Brulard*, vol. 1, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 20, 227.

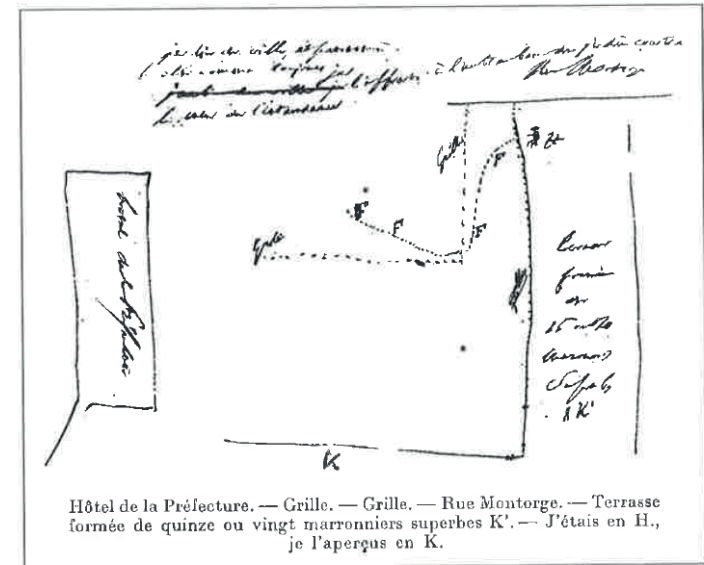


Fig. 5.7 A passionate love story captured in a diagram. From Stendhal, *Vie de Henry Brulard*, vol. 2, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 21, 61.

Stendhal uses the visual-poetological metaphor of a fresco to describe the act of remembrance and the reconstruction of time lost. He compares the fragmented story of his life to “large fragments of frescos on a wall, long since forgotten and suddenly appearing, and next to these well preserved fragments there are, as I’ve several times said, large gaps where only the brick-work of the wall is to be seen.”¹⁶ This fresco metaphor is given a twist as he tries to remember a certain place but says: “Here is the setting for the scene which I can see as clearly as if I had left it a week ago, though not its physiognomy.”¹⁷ Physiognomy, a favoured nineteenth-century literary-urban mode of reflection, becomes a metaphor for the features he cannot recall. As a spatial notion, physiognomy refers to what is not immediately accessible but must be conjured. In composing his autobiography, Stendhal relied equally on drawing and writing to reclaim the physical features of a site where something took place. As with architects, his drawings helped him think. They offered an autonomous field for reflection that enabled him to grasp and formulate particular insights.¹⁸

As conscientious parts of his process of remembrance, the drawings not only served a literary purpose but also *became* literature. Hence, any attempt to privilege the written memoirs over the images would be denied by the very existence of the story *in* the drawings, an existence with its own reality that encourages reflections, perspectives, and reminiscences. Stendhal occasionally identifies more closely with his drawings than with the reality they represent. Thus, the drawings cannot be regarded merely as a scaffold that supports the process of remembrance, to be removed when the memories have been identified and captured as text.¹⁹ Stendhal uses both drawing and writing as an intertwined enterprise to uncover fragments of his past.

This dynamic unfolds in complex and lovely ways throughout *The Life of Henry Brulard*. For example, a plan of a Grenoble neighbourhood depicts streets with names, a church, a schoolyard, and a school with rooms for chemistry, mathematics, Latin, and so on (see fig. 5.8). This geographic description is contrasted abruptly with a caption that refers to point C: “On the first floor, second classroom, where I won first prize ahead of seven or eight pupils admitted one month later to the Ecole Polytechnique.”²⁰ Situating his memory at this point, in this room, the autobiographer develops the story within the drawing. In fact, the diagram *is* the story; amazingly, it becomes narrative. The same logic is evident in a drawing that conflates a topographical sketch of a tract of land and a topological diagram of significant places in the landscape. The caption recommends: “See M. de Bourcet’s map of the Dauphiné (it was in the drawing-room on the terrace to the left).” Here, the author of a work-in-progress uses the drawing to remind himself of something that may turn out to be important. Stendhal’s drawing points to another drawing, an existing map to which he may return later to clarify memories and events. Likewise, in a beautiful drawing of a landscape painting (see fig. 5.9) – a picture of a picture – the text refers to point A as “Tall trees such as I like them.”²¹

Plans, maps, and diagrams are normally assumed to be factual forms of representation. In Stendhal’s drawings, distinctions between objective and subjective realities collapse as personal experiences frequently rise from conventional spatial projections. A highly detailed plan shows a closet in which linen was stored with “some sort of respect.” A handwritten caption next to a staircase reads: “Window giving poor light, opening onto the staircase, but very big and very handsome,” disclosing

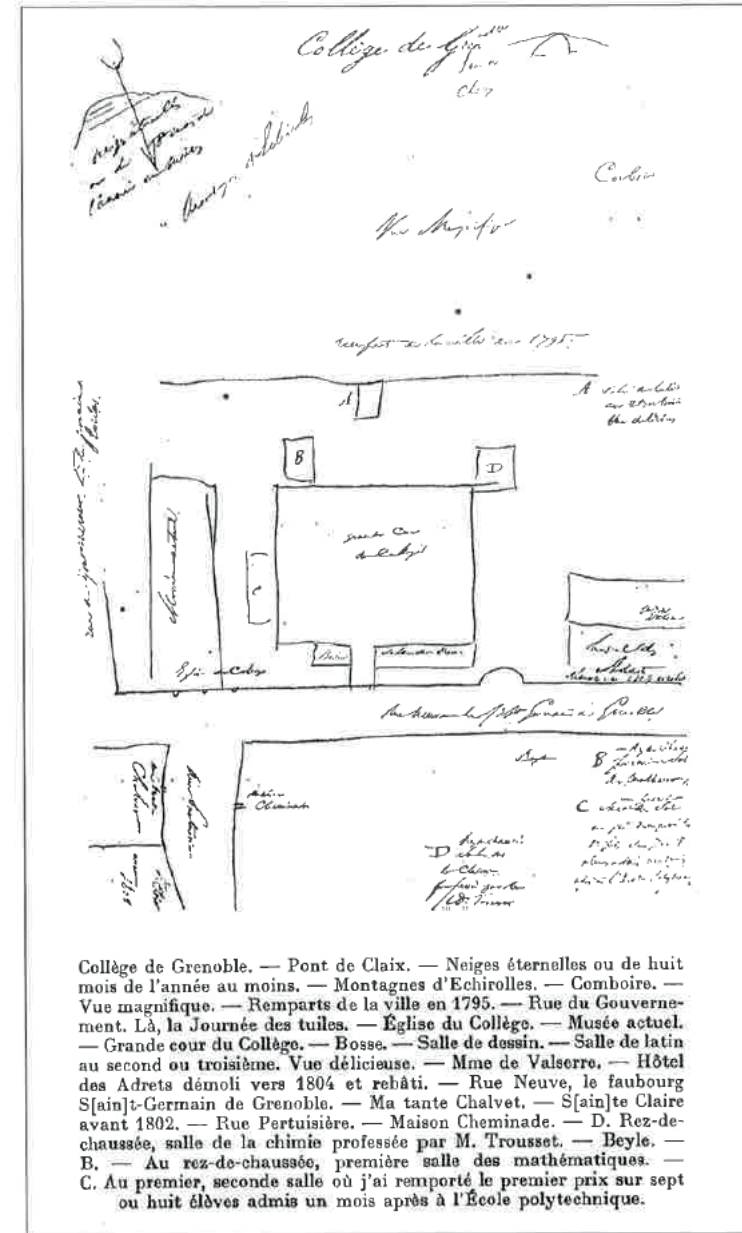


Fig. 5.8 A plan of a neighbourhood, with a specific childhood memory that turns the diagram into a narrative. From Stendhal, *Vie de Henry Brulard*, vol. 2, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 21, 20.

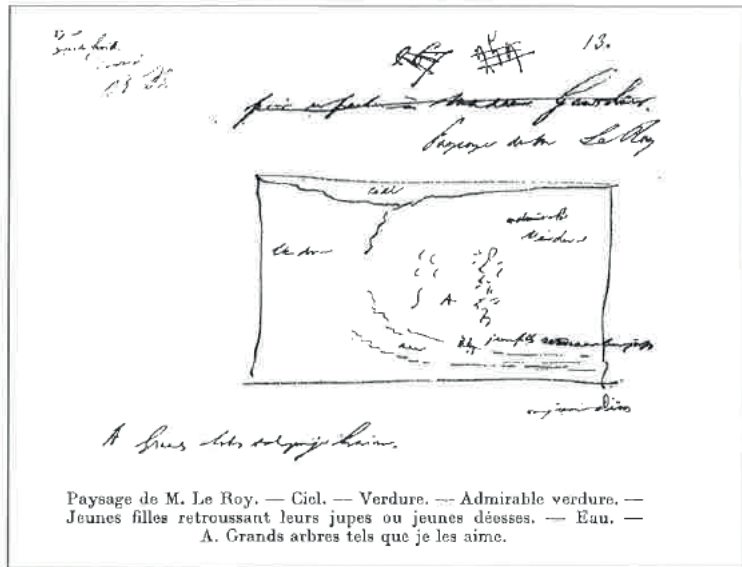


Fig. 5.9 A drawing of a landscape painting. From Stendhal, *Vie de Henry Brulard*, vol. I, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 20, 239.

a memory that invokes the virtual presence of a subject who is sensually experiencing the dimensions of a room and its light conditions. In a map, the text accompanying point R describes a significant place in the elliptical style that is so characteristic of Stendhal: “Country house which played a very big part in my childhood, which I revisited in 1828, sold to a general.”²² A highly dramatic event is presented as a simple cross-section, where point H (Henry) represents *moi*: “H. Me. Point from which I saw the black carriage pass bearing the remains of the M[aréch]al de Vaux, and what’s worse, point from which I heard the guns go off two feet away from me.”²³ Despite his strict father’s strong dislike of the theatre, his beloved maternal grandfather occasionally brought him along. During a performance of *El Cid*, the lead actor was almost blinded during a fencing scene, and Stendhal’s drawing provides a comical and touching perception of the incident from a child’s perspective (see fig. 5.10). Point H denotes “Henri B, not yet six years old,” while point A marks where “The Cid injures himself.” A map sketch (see fig. 5.11) contains much information that one must assume is trustworthy. Point D, however, refers to a completely subjective experience: “Horribly muddy lane

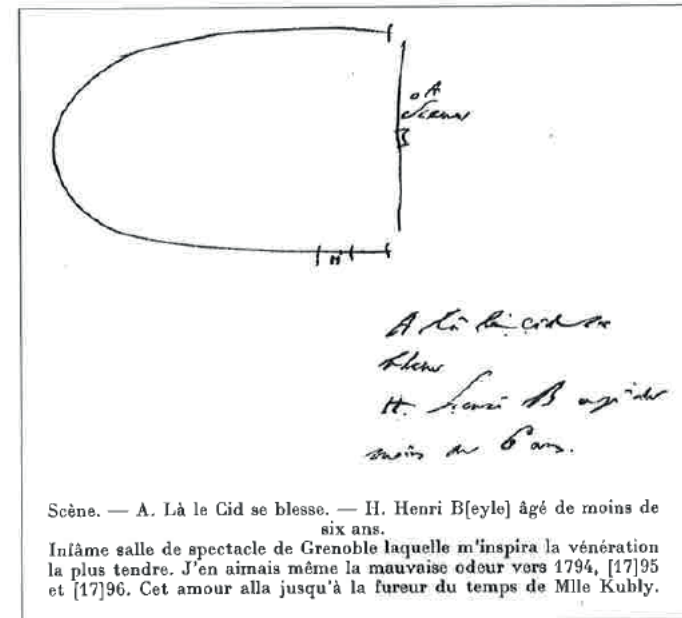


Fig. 5.10 A childhood recollection of an incident in a theatre during a staging of *Le Cid*. From Stendhal, *Vie de Henry Brulard*, vol. I, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 20, 67.

known as *Les Boiteuses*,” reads the caption, illustrating Roland Barthes’ later distinction between *studium* and *punctum* in photography.²⁴ A child’s memory of mud is a detail, a point that may seem trifling but that is sufficiently meaningful to stand out from the whole. This is what enables Stendhal to think in and through drawing. His particular integration of drawing, handwriting, and transcribed captions enables the images and text together to become literature.



This relationship between drawing and text is radicalized in a map-like topological diagram that includes a section of a mountain, a plan of a villa, an urban fragment, a park, a garden with a bench, and room interiors (see fig. 5.12). With Stendhal’s characteristic dry sense of humour, it even includes an aesthetic judgment on his grandfather’s interior preferences.

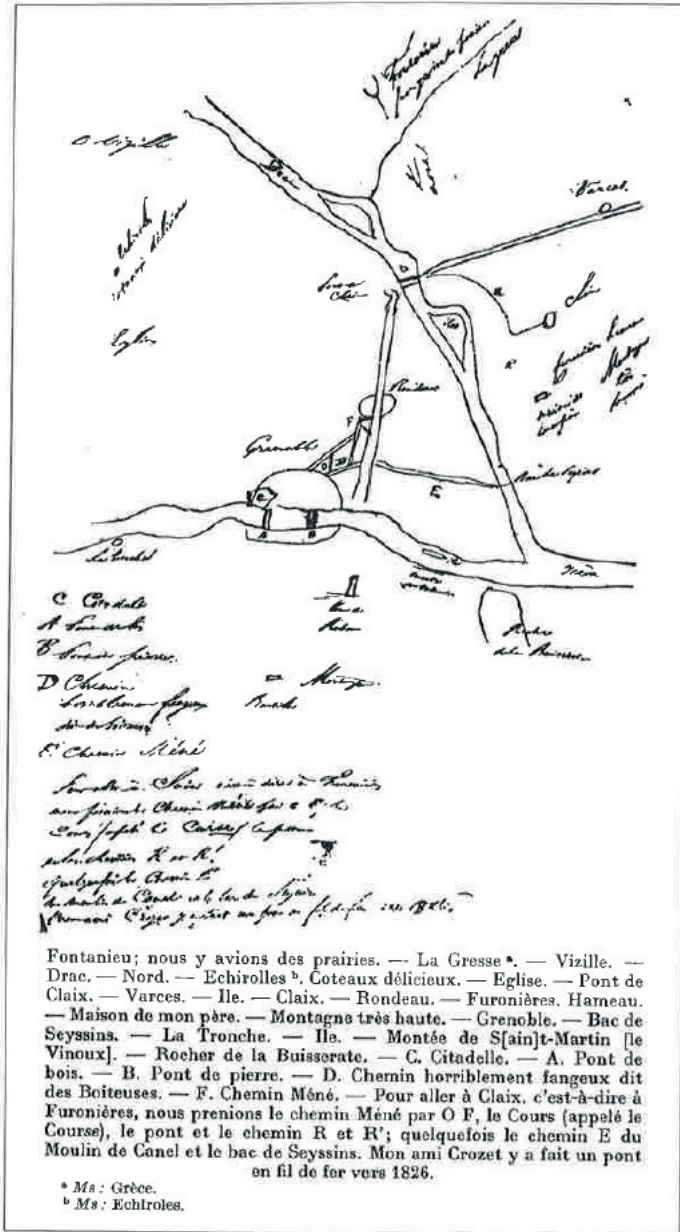


Fig. 5.11 A memory of mud recalled in a map sketch. From Stendhal, *Vie de Henry Brulard*, vol. 1, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 20, 230.

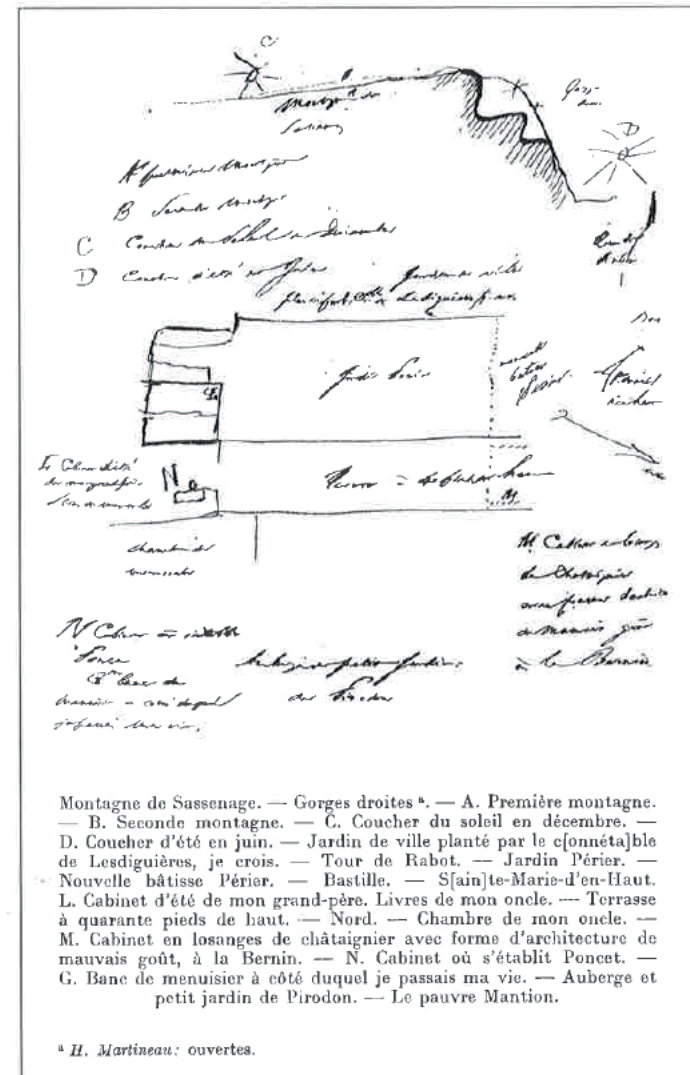


Fig. 5.12 Sunsets in December and June from a lost landscape in the author's childhood. From Stendhal, *Vie de Henry Brulard*, vol. 1, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 20, 249.

Pointing to the letter M, the caption reads: “Cabinet paneled in chestnut wood reminding one of tasteless architecture à la Bernini.” By capturing the sky as well as his uncle’s bookshelf, this drawing presents the same multifaceted dynamic as the initial scene outside San Pietro in Montorio. In a split second – and from inside an image – the focus changes in time and space.

At the top of the drawing, the two suns in orbit above the cross-section of the mountain is what makes this diagram so breathtaking. Points C and D indicate the positions of the sun in December and June, while a connecting line marks the sun’s change in altitude. However, it is not the different positions of the sun throughout the seasons that is being depicted but the *sunset* in December and June, seen from Stendhal’s childhood village. This destabilizes the distinction between objective reality and subjective experience. As is well known, the sun never actually “sets,” but from any subjective point on earth, the sun appears to disappear below a point on the horizon. This very point may be marked objectively, and Stendhal does so. The aesthetic effect of light colouring the evening sky and accentuating the horizon – the phenomenon we call sunset – is captured boldly as points in a diagram, somehow materializing the immaterial. The diagram shows two sunsets over a mountain, a house, a bench, and a collection of books as Stendhal remembers them. It is the relationship between them that Stendhal turns into literature.

Architectural drawings are normally about space, not time; they are static rather than dynamic. This convention is shattered by the fact that time actually passes in Stendhal’s drawing. Temporality is marked not by the seasonal movement of the sun but by a series of previously experienced sunsets. His unusual use of diagrams to capture memories of sunsets results in strong poetic effects with the same literary qualities as the narrative in his writing. The diagrammatic features in Stendhal’s drawings and his generous use of letters and mathematical formulae could lead a reader to believe that Stendhal is quantifying and rationalizing his experiences. The spatial and textual sensuality of these drawings, however, enables both quantities and qualities to arise from the lost landscapes of his childhood. This interrelation of textual and visual narrative embodies a particular mode of reflection. Existential, experiential, and physical landscapes are captured paradoxically in diagrams that are as real as the view from San Pietro in Montorio.

NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Renzo Dubbini, *Geography of the Gaze: Urban and Rural Vision in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 76.
- 2 Stendhal, *The Life of Henry Brulard*, trans. John Sturrock (New York: New York Review of Books, 2002), 4.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 4 Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann* (Paris: Gallimard, Folio classique, 1988), 381. My translation.
- 5 Stendhal, *La Chartreuse de Parme* (Paris: Garnier, 1961 [1839]), 72. My translation.
- 6 Stendhal, *Life of Henry Brulard*, 65.
- 7 Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002), 202.
- 8 Stendhal, *Life of Henry Brulard*, 248.
- 9 Stendhal, *Mémoires d’un touriste*, vol. 2, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 16 (Geneva and Paris: Slatkine Reprints, 1986), 146. My translation.
- 10 Dubbini, *Geography of the Gaze*, 159.
- 11 Stendhal, *Life of Henry Brulard*, 155.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 317. In French, this last sentence reads: “Frédéric II ne s’est guère fait lire et dès 20 ans songeait à la route L.” See Stendhal, *Vie de Henry Brulard*, vol. 2, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 21 (Geneva and Paris: Slatkine Reprints, 1986), 137.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 261.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 341.
- 15 Anthony Vidler, “Diagrams of Utopia,” in *The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architectures from Constant’s New Babylon to Beyond*, ed. Catherine de Zegher and Mark Wigley (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 87.
- 16 Stendhal, *Life of Henry Brulard*, 141.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 18 See, for example, Edward Robbins, *Why Architects Draw* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).
- 19 Peter Eisenman in some sense supports this premise by promoting the diagram as rational as well as mystical, criticizing Freud’s idea that only subjects and not diagrams can recollect and reconstruct the past. See Peter Eisenman, *Diagram Diaries* (New York: Rizzoli, 1999), 35.
- 20 Stendhal, *Life of Henry Brulard*, 234.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 174.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 97.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 68.
- 24 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 25.