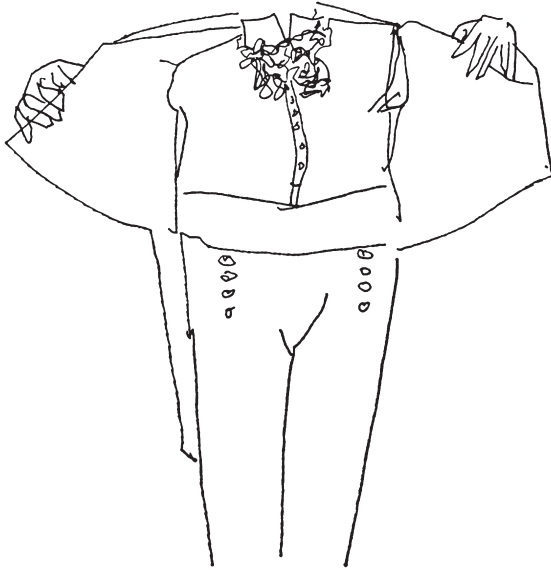


An Overcoat

Scenes from the Afterlife of H.B.

Jack Robinson



ERRICO BEYLE
MILANESE
VISSE, SCRISSE, AMO
QUEST' ANIMA
ADORAVA
CIMAROSA, MOZART E SHAKESPEARE
MORI DI ANNO . . .
IL . . . 18 . . .

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H.B., Milan, 1820:
“Every day I thought of this inscription, really believing that the
grave was the only place I could be at peace. I wanted a marble
plaque in the form of a playing card.”

He had no belief in an afterlife, but one has to believe
in it for him.

– F. W. J. Hemmings, reviewing a biography of Stendhal
in the *London Review of Books*, 18 December 1980

The other one we are lives in a distant city.

– Frederick Seidel, 'Prayer'

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Phrases within double quotes are the (translated) words of Beyle/Stendhal himself (1783–1842), quoted from one or other of the books listed on page 133.

I The Disguise

■ In June 1819 Henri Beyle followed the woman he loved from Milan to Volterra, in Tuscany, where she had gone to visit her children. He was thirty-six; he had written no novels, yet, but had published books on music and painting and the cities of Italy, making liberal use of writing by other authors, and he had met Mathilde Dembowski in Milan the previous year. Dembowski was aged twenty-nine and had two children and was separated from the Polish army officer she had married at seventeen.[°]

During the journey to Volterra Beyle put on green glasses and an oversize overcoat – the kind you might choose for shoplifting, with deep pockets; or the kind worn by SS officers in war films^{°°} – so that he could observe Mathilde without being recognised, his reasoning being that if he greeted

[°] There are no known portraits of Dembowski. Beyle linked her to a painting in the Uffizi in Florence of Salome being presented with the head of John the Baptist; she is looking away, dreamily, barely aware of the waiter arriving with the glass of red wine she has forgotten she ordered.

^{°°} Or a *carrick*, which Nabokov insisted was the correct English translation for the garment that furnished the title of Gogol's *The Overcoat*: 'deep-caped, ample-sleeved'.

her openly (a) she'd rebuke him for following her, and (b) everyone in town would assume he was her lover: "Therefore I shall show her far more respect by remaining incognito."

In January 1980 the French artist and writer Sophie Calle followed a man in Paris, lost him after a few minutes, then saw him again by chance that evening at a gallery opening, where he told her he was soon to travel to Venice. She followed him there, taking a suitcase in which she had packed 'a blond, bobbed wig; hats; veils; gloves; sunglasses'. In her account of the following days, the days of following, she names the man as 'Henri B'.

■ *Of course* Mathilde Dembowski saw through Henri Beyle's disguise. It was joke-shop, not even skin-deep. If you want to pass yourself off as a fishmonger, being able to tell a cod from a haddock might help; if you put on a dog collar, you should at least know your way around the Prayer Book. Actors, spies, fugitives, con-men and novelists who aspire to realism know this; as do people applying for jobs in which they've had no experience. But Beyle wasn't trying to be someone else, it was anonymity he was seeking, a harder thing;[°] or rather, he was seeking to be there but not have his thereness noticed, like an author with the kind of style

[°] "For me the supreme happiness would be to change into a lanky, blond German and walk about like that in Paris."

that gets called transparent. The man who had sold him his overcoat swore it was an invisibility coat. But it was second-hand, there were rips and stains, and some of the invisibility had worn off.

In 1819 Beyle retreated, chastised, and on 11 June he wrote a letter of apology to Mathilde; he longed to hate her, he claimed, but couldn't. When Dembowski returned to Milan she refused Beyle as a lover but allowed him to visit her once every two weeks. They talked, according to the (imagined) maid who listened at the door, about books, music, politics[°] and love in the abstract. In 1820 Beyle completed the first draft of *De l'Amour* and sent it to France, where it was lost in the post for over a year.

■ In *L'Abbesse de Castro* – a late novella that Beyle based on a Renaissance manuscript – Giulio, a brigand, is determined to visit the woman he loves, Elena, whose father has locked her away in a convent. Giulio's captain offers advice "as to the best way of carrying out this amorous and military

[°] Dembowski was closely linked to the Carbonari ('the charcoal burners'), a secret society that sought to free Milan from Austrian rule. Beyle too was sympathetic to the Carbonari, but his consistently inconsistent behaviour led both the authorities and those plotting against them to suspect he was an agent for the other side, and in 1821, after arrests by "the idiotic police", he had to quit Milan for good.

undertaking”: travel in disguise; “never confess your true name”; never tell the truth (and if “you see no advantage in any particular falsehood, lie at random”); do not approach the town directly, and “enter by the gate farthest from the road by which you arrive”.^o

Dissimulation. Many of the characters in Beyle’s novels practise this. Julien in *Le Rouge et le Noir*: “If she sees how much I love her, I shall lose her.” In society, Julien achieves success by expressing, with a certain wit, the opposite of what he believes (which is fun for a while but becomes tiresome: “Julien achieved such a degree of perfection in this kind of eloquence . . . that he ended up boring himself with the sound of his own voice”). Beyle too made a habit of deception: his multiplying pseudonyms; his books published with prefaces that disclaimed his authorship; his marginalia written in code. Everything he yearned for was locked away in a convent, and could only be attained by following elaborate rules of subterfuge – a tangle of desire and disguise.^{oo}

^o The captain’s advice resembles those ‘tips for writers’ that trend on the net and sometimes fill column inches in the broadsheet books pages. Here’s another tip: if you’re planning to write about someone who existed in history, be wary. Once you put an actual person into a book, they become larger than life, because larger than death. They become monsters. Beyle knew what he was doing when he kept Mathilde out of his book on love.

^{oo} Anita Brookner (*TLS*, 30 May 1980), after listing some of Beyle’s handicaps in his pursuit of happiness – ‘narrow and confined

To live as if one were a character in an over-plotted opera is essentially comic.^o So are disguises. I’m pretty sure that anyone who dons a disguise – beard, forged papers; green glasses, overcoat – *expects* to be seen through.

■ In Beyle’s own attempt to replay in writing the Volterra episode, which was also his first attempt at fiction – Mathilde is renamed Bianca, the would-be lover is Poloski, and between them there’s a lesbian duchess – he got no further than the first chapter.

childhood, the eternal need to earn money and position and favour, stocky and graceless body (even in his twenties), thin hair and bad teeth’ – approves his furious attempts ‘to measure up to the rules of the game, even when [my italics] *there was no game being played*’.

^o “In Milan the primary, if not the exclusive source of comedy lies in observing the antics of a man who has lost his way among the labyrinthine paths which lead to the object of his heart’s desire.”

II Almost Bucolic

I



■ People are worried, and orders have come down from on high, and now, on the way in, there are security checks. Could you open your bag for me, sir? says a man standing at a table – an entirely innocent table on which flowers or fruit would gladly delight – and Beyle rests his bag on the table and opens the flap. The man pulls a notebook forward, pushes a printed book back (*Mrs Hutchinson's Memoirs*, “it is one of my passions”), tilts a water bottle, looks down to the bottom of the bag (a crumpled receipt, a paperclip). He’s satisfied. He closes the flap and as Beyle retrieves his bag the man smiles and nods, just slightly, a gesture which in other circumstances – walking into your office, say, at ten in the morning (late, there were delays on the Tube, not your own fault but still, you are at fault) and passing the regular guy on reception, who is on the phone to someone who has just said something funny, or rude – would indicate familiarity, recognition, but which here carries a hint of apology, is virtually a *shrug*: sorry, sir, it’s just the way things are. He doesn’t say, Have a nice day. He doesn’t say, Enjoy your visit.