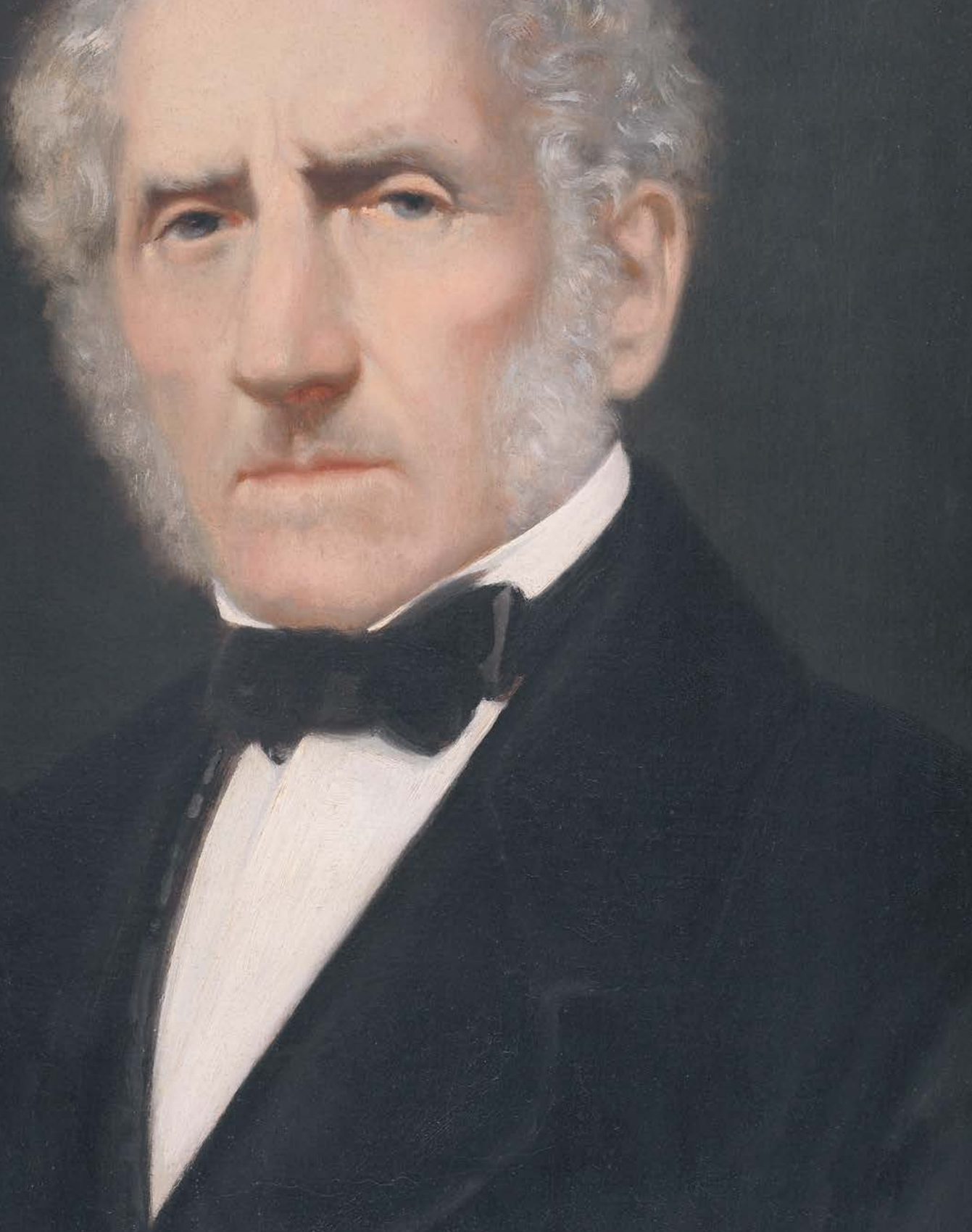


ALESSANDRO MANZONI

Preserver of the past and great innovator
of the Italian language



Texts by

Card. Gianfranco Ravasi, Gian Luigi Daccò, Emanuele Banfi, Giovanni Orelli, Barbara Cattaneo



Manzoni: Two spiritual registers

Card. Gianfranco Ravasi*



Page I:

Giuseppe Molteni,

Ritratto di Alessandro Manzoni,

mid 19th century, oil on canvas,

Sistema Museale Urbano Lecchese (Si.M.U.L.),

Villa Manzoni, Manzoni Museum, Lecco.

Left:

Carlo Preda, *Madonna Assunta*,

first-half 18th century, oil on canvas,

Si.M.U.L., Villa Manzoni, chapel,

Manzoni Museum, Lecco.

On this page:

Giovanni Battista Galizzi, *I capponi di Renzo*,

first-half 20th century, India ink and watercolour,

Si.M.U.L., Villa Manzoni, Manzoni Museum,

Lecco.



Personal memories

Manzoni is well and truly instilled in our minds and hearts thanks to his masterpiece, the novel *I Promessi Sposi* (“The Betrothed”), which we all had to read at school (though as children the experience was not always perceived as enjoyable...), his *Inni sacri* (“Sacred Hymns”) and the *Odi* (“Odes”). Alessandro Manzoni’s influence on the Italian language is still felt today. Many of his characters are referred to in commonly used expressions. We use “*Perpetua*” as a metonym for a cleric’s housekeeper; the more obscure “*Carneade*” is a synonym for an unknown person (“*Chi era costui?*”); and “*Azzecagarbugli*” refers to legal trickery. Many people can still recall lines of Manzoni’s writing: from his famous “Farewell, ye mountains, rising from the waters” and “A true Lombard sky, so beautiful when it is beautiful”, to the ironic “Get you gone, poor anointer, you’ll not be the fellow that’ll ruin Milan!” and Lucia’s words addressed to the formidable Unnamed, “God pardons so many sins for one deed of mercy!”, and the simple yet tragic words “... and the miserable girl replied” which seal the fate of the Nun of Monza.

Just as we can hear the ocean in a seashell, so can we hear some of Manzoni’s verses echoing in our minds, such as the emphatic “Was that true glory? May future generations decide!” from his *Il cinque maggio* (“The Fifth of May”), written upon the death of Napoleon, and his powerful profession of faith in God from the same ode, “[he] who destroys and brings salvation, who torments and consoles”.

I do not intend, however, to write a critical analysis of this great, internationally renowned Italian author. That would be pointless, given the wealth of critical works that exist on the subject. Instead, I want to take a wide-ranging look at Manzoni, the religious man, drawing on my own personal experience. Whilst living in Milan, it was easy for me, as it were, to “rub shoulders with” Manzoni, especially in his old home in Piazza Belgioioso, now a museum dedicated to his memory, where I was often the guest of Giancarlo Vigorelli, then chairman of the National Manzoni Study Centre.

Another of my connections to Manzoni is the position I held for almost twenty years

as Prefect of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, the library in Milan set up by Cardinal Federico Borromeo, who merited a remarkably positive description in chapter 22 of *The Betrothed*. Furthermore, as a member of the Special Committee for the European Edition of Manzoni’s complete works, I have written a major essay on the biblical sources used by Manzoni in one of his most favourite works, *Le osservazioni sulla Morale Cattolica* (“Observations on Catholic Morals”), though this new edition has yet to be printed. So, here we now stand before the abundance of pages so carefully and precisely written by Manzoni, whereby as we proceed we should do well to heed the advice Manzoni himself gave in his introduction to *The Betrothed*: “*di libri basta uno per volta, quando non è d’avanzo*” (“one book at a time is enough; it may even be too much”).

The convoluted nature of the human heart

Let us consider the two apparently opposing registers, or voices, we can detect in Manzoni’s soul. Together they form a harmonic, coherent counterpoint. The first has a dark, gloomy tone: the obvious pessimism that Manzoni reveals in his view of human nature and its convolutedness, the farrago of emotions in the human heart. As he says, “when two strong passions cry out to be heard in the human heart, no one, not even the one who suffers them, can clearly distinguish one voice from the other and confidently say which is predominant”. Then again, “if one listens to



Left:
Luigi Zuccoli, *Ritratto di A. Manzoni*, 1850, drawing, Si.M.U.L., Villa Manzoni, Manzoni Museum, Lecco.

Right:
Giovanni Battista Galizzi, *Il sonno di Renzo*, first-half 20th century, India ink and watercolour, Si.M.U.L., Villa Manzoni, Manzoni Museum, Lecco.

one's heart, it always has something to say about what will be. Yet what does the heart know? Just a little of what has been." Manzoni's bitter realism here is almost certainly the result of the Jansenist influences on his spiritual development. He has a strong, passionately held moral message: Manzoni firmly believes that "whatever comes next is not always progress", as he wrote in his essay *Del romanzo storico* ("On the Historical Novel").

The very last page of *The Betrothed* (chapter 38) – the main work we will consider here – contains an emblematic description that clearly illustrates the author's view of how man is inherently dissatisfied, uneasy and discontent, stressing the basic "frailty" of our existence and being human. In the words of Manzoni:

"[...] man, so long as he is in this world, is like a sick person lying upon a more or less uncomfortable bed, who sees around him other beds that are apparently nicely made, smooth and level; so he fancies that they must be more comfortable to lie on. However, if he succeeds in changing beds, scarcely does he settle down on his new bed than he starts testing its softness, feeling here a sharp point pricking him and there a hard lump pressing into him: in short, we come to find ourselves in the same situation all over again."

Curiously enough, only a few years earlier Giacomo Leopardi had made a similar comment in his *Zibaldone*:

"We, coming into this life, are like a man lying on a hard and uncomfortable bed, who starts to feel ill and cannot be easy; so he keeps turning from side to side and tries in a thousand ways to flatten and soften the bed, always hoping and attempting to find a comfortable position and so fall asleep; thus the time comes for him to get up without his having slept a wink."

Man's state of dissatisfaction then develops into thoughts and acts based on a negative code of ethics. Manzoni's masterpiece, *The Betrothed*, provides us with a brilliant dra-

matic demonstration of this, confirming the saying from the Gospel: "...for the sons of this world are wiser in their generation than the sons of light" (*Luke 16:8*). As Manzoni puts it:



"Those who do good, do it for the sake of good will; once their good will has been satisfied, they are satisfied and do not concern themselves anymore with the consequences of their actions; but those who have a taste for evil-doings, they are much more diligent, following up to the end and never allowing themselves time to rest, because they have a devouring canker within them."

This canker can be seen in the evil works perpetrated far and wide by the wicked throughout history, with the connivance of many and the resignation of the just:

"'Didn't you know,' Cardinal Federico Borromeo asked Don Abbondio, 'that iniquity depends not only on its own strength, but often also on the fears and credulity of others?'"

The chain of evil and the connivance of "popular consensus"

Violence thus runs rampant in society and "crime is a rigid, inflexible tyrant, against which only those who rebel completely can ever make a strong stand". Hence comes the famous outburst in the Second Act of Manzoni's *Conte di Carmagnola*: "Brothers

Giovanni Battista Galizzi, "eranimasto unlupo sotto il letto e tregatti sopra", first-half 20th century, India ink and watercolour, Si.M.U.L., Villa Manzoni, Manzoni Museum, Lecco.

have killed their brothers: this terrible news I give you." Evil propagates evil just as love begets love: "The unjust and oppressive – all those, in fact, who wrong others – are guilty, not only of the evil they do, but also of the perversion of mind they cause in those whom they offend." Hate in the aggressor engenders hate in the victim, an unbreakable chain that grows ever longer. It is pointless to ask for help in such entangled circumstances, because, as Manzoni wrote in a bitter, almost sceptical tone: "Would you have many ready to help you? Be sure not to need them." Of course, there is an antidote to destructive evil: "One ought rather to want to do good, than to be well off: that way one ends up even better off."

Unfortunately, as Manzoni then points out, "so constituted are we mortals in general that we rebel indignantly and violently against minor evils, yet bow in silence under extreme ones". There is another limit to our human nature: it is our inability to make objective judgements, as "right and wrong are never divided with so clean a cut that one party has the whole of either". We tend, sanctimoniously, to adopt the prevailing opinions when making judgements, to base our decisions on what Manzoni called "popular consensus", which is the enemy of good sense: "good sense still existed; but it was kept concealed, for fear of the popular consensus". Manzoni went on to describe the hypocrites with more than a touch of irony:

"[...] those prudent persons who shrink back with alarm from the extreme of virtue as well as the extreme of vice are forever proclaiming that perfection lies halfway between the two, and then they set that midway point to coincide exactly with the point where they themselves are very much at their ease."

Hence, the "midway point" is by no means necessarily a point characterised by perfection, balance or reason.

Manzoni's cutting irony can also be entertaining, such as when he attacks fixed ideas, likening them to cramps in the leg which cause us to have to stomp our feet and walk about to get any relief. Manzoni gives us Donna Prassede as the perfect example of a person with fixed ideas. In describing her,

he said she "acted towards her ideas as it is said one ought to do towards one's friends: she had few of these, but to those few she was very much attached. Among the few, there were, unfortunately, many distorted ones; nor was it these she loved the least." The same could be said of her more "learned" (if that is the right word) and equally bigoted husband. The outcome of such an attitude also has religious implications: "She made it her object to second the will of Heaven; but she often fell into the grave error of taking for the will of Heaven the fancies of her own mind." In vain, therefore, is the warning to adopt "the method [...] of observing, listening, comparing and thinking, before speaking". The reason being that "speaking – this one thing alone – is so much easier than all the others put together; that we, I mean, all men, are to be rather pitied."

The shining light of epiphany

The gloomy, depressing picture Manzoni gives us of the limits and misery of mankind are swept away at the end of the book, replaced by an optimistic outlook: "Providence overcomes [all]." Man, that weak, mortal creature, has within him the spur of his conscience to arm his mind and heart; it is thus "our privilege, or our burden, if we wish not to accept it as a privilege, to be placed between the truth and uncertainty". Indeed, even our doubt, if truly genuine and heart-felt, gives us a certain degree of nobility, because it can indicate we are searching for and awaiting some form of revelation. In his *Storia della Colonna Infame* (the definitive version of the novel, 1842), Manzoni wrote: "Far better it is to be agitated by doubt, than to repose in error." Ultimately the light of God shines upon us and lifts the downtrodden and comforts the suffering. God reveals himself by granting his grace to those who search for the truth with a sincere heart.

Recently there has been a highly imaginative attempt to read a sort of subtle, cryptic protestation or confession of atheism and non-belief on the part of Manzoni in *The Betrothed*. This is quite absurd. While it is true that Jesus Christ is never mentioned in the novel, it is as clear as the light of day that Manzoni firmly stated his faith in God in his



Osservazioni sulla Morale Cattolica (“Observations on Catholic Ethics”, 1819), with Jansenist overtones, similar to Blaise Pascal’s thinking. Manzoni stated that “everything can be explained by the Gospel, everything confirms the Gospel”. This light does, admittedly, only appear at the end of the long dark tunnel of the contradictions and sufferings in the story of mankind that Manzoni conscientiously describes. The free reconstruction of the tormented course of Manzoni’s own life attempted by a modern author only serves to add religious import to his torment.

I am alluding here to Mario Pomilio’s novel, *Il Natale del 1833* (“Christmas 1833”), published in 1983. It was inspired by the poem of the same title that Manzoni had attempted to write as an antidote to the inner turmoil he felt upon the death of his beloved wife Enrichetta Blondel. It was his way of dealing with his grief and the thousand doubts building up inside him and destroying his soul. In his sorrow, Manzoni used some very strong words in this prayer:

“Sì che tu sei terribile / sì che tu sei pietoso! / Indifferente ai preghi / doni concedi e neghi. / Ti vorrei dir: che festi? / Ti vorrei dir: perché? / Non perdonasti ai tuoi, / non perdonasti a te.”

Pomilio described these words as “words and broken sentences scattered across large white sheets of paper, much like tears on the page. Indeed, they are sobs, repressed sighs, scraps of a discourse that is still unformed and stammered.”

It is Manzoni’s discovery that God is unfathomable, sometimes terrible, sometimes merciful, sometimes indifferent and sometimes generous.

This cry from Manzoni the man is eternal: “Why? What have I done?” It is heard innumerable times in the Psalms themselves:

“How long, O Lord? Wilt thou forget me for ever? How long wilt thou hide thy face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” (Psalm 13:1–2)

Manzoni’s verses, too, testify to man’s

struggle between submission and transgression, between faith and protest. Yet the answer leaps from the page: “*non perdonasti a te*” (you did not spare yourself). God did not spare his only begotten son from suffering, in order that the immense sufferings of mankind could be relieved through salvation. By himself suffering pain and death – experiences inherent to man as a being of creation – Christ fecundates our suffering and ensures our redemption until such time that we are freed, when “[God] will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more for the former things have passed away” (*Revelations* 21:4). This was the goal that the author of *The Betrothed* was aiming for. Manzoni was a great, yet tormented, writer and a passionate believer in God despite his suffering. As Pomilio suggested, “After sailing on foreign seas, I shall wreck my ship, O Lord, in yours.”

* *Card. Gianfranco Ravasi*

Arcangiolo Birelli,
*La conversione
dell’Innominato*,
late 19th century, oil
on canvas, Si.M.U.L.,
Villa Manzoni,
Manzoni Museum,
Lecco.



Manzoni & cultural history

Gian Luigi Daccò*



Left:
Francesco Confalonieri,
Monumento ad Alessandro Manzoni,
1891, bronze, Lecco.

On this page:
Orlando Sora,
Olate, il paese dei Promessi Sposi,
first half of 20th century, tempera on canvas,
Si.M.U.L., Villa Manzoni, Manzoni Museum, Lecco.

Manzoni: a Catholic writer?

The journal *La Civiltà Cattolica* published a long interview with Pope Francis on 20 September 2013. In the interview, the Pope said:

“I have read *The Betrothed*, by Alessandro Manzoni, three times, and I have it now on my table because I want to read it again. Manzoni gave me so much. When I was a child, my grandmother taught me by heart the beginning of *The Betrothed*: “That branch of Lake Como that turns off to the south between two unbroken chains of mountains...”

Indeed, Manzoni’s contribution to contemporary Christian thought is immense, and yet, when the author died in 1873, the very same journal, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, described him as a nebulous and ineffectual literary figure, even comparing him with his character Don Ferrante, ironically enough. The Milan newspaper *L’Osservatore Cattolico* wrote that “evil” could be found nested in the pages of his work and he could therefore not be considered a true Christian.

Il Resegone, the Catholic daily newspaper of Lecco, even went so far as to say:

“Oh! How great would the figure of Manzoni have been if he had managed to continue to resist the impact of the Revolution; if he had always clung to the rock of St. Peter, which never fails us. Yet he fell: the Revolution counts him among its proselytes; he applauds those who attacked the Holy Mother Church, and the Mother looks down with tears in her eyes, grieving to see the aberrations of her son. [...] And we, as we place a flower on the tomb of this Christian poet, we, too, leave a tear of grief and pity for this misguided Catholic man.”

It was a time when the Roman Catholic Church was torn by discord, and Catholics were split into two factions: the Liberal Catholics, whose main exponents were Manzoni and Rosmini – who happily embraced the values of what we now call Classical Liberalism in Europe – and the intransigent hardliner Catholics, represented by Don Davide Albertario and Cardinal Giuseppe Sarto, who were uncompromisingly committed

to the defence of the Papal State and totally rejected the principles of Classical Liberalism and social and scientific progress.

The *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) issued under Pius IX effectively condemned the Liberal Catholics. Although Manzoni played no active role in Italian politics, he was still a Senator and as such voted in favour of Rome becoming the new capital of the Kingdom of Italy. Such a position was, at the time, unthinkable for a true Catholic and thus intensified the hostility of hardliner Catholics towards him. Indeed, *L’Osservatore Cattolico* described Manzoni as the “idol of drunken fools”, thereby placing Manzoni’s work on a par with the hated Classical Liberalism and Abbot Rosmini’s philosophy.

Manzoni spent many years in Paris as a young man and had been deeply influenced by French thought. His first “philosophical” period was influenced by the *Idéologues*¹, belonging to the humanitarian theist and sensualist schools of thought; this was followed by a period of admiration for the Liberal Christianity of Hugues de Lamennais and his conversations with the philosopher Victor Cousin, the father of Eclecticism.²

However, it was Rosmini who had the greatest impact on Manzoni. They first met in 1826 and soon became close friends, their friendship lasting until the philosopher’s death in 1855. Both used to spend time on Lake Maggiore, where the subject of their long conversations ranged from religion to philosophy and from literature to politics.

In 1850 Manzoni published his philosophical dialogue, *Dell’invenzione* (“On Invention”), the result of his total acceptance of Rosmini’s philosophical thought. According to Manzoni – and Rosmini – ethics should always be bound to the eternal truth and not seduced by the temptations of “Relativism”, which both Rosmini and Manzoni called “Subjectivism”.

The Roman Catholic Church became even more reactionary in the years following Manzoni’s death. A papal decree entitled *Post obitum* was issued on 7 March 1888 condemning Rosmini’s philosophy. The thinking of the intransigent Catholics had crystallised into the hardline, anti-modernist position held by Cardinal Sarto, later to become Pope Pius X, who in 1907 issued the encyclical entitled *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*,

which harshly condemned the beliefs of the so-called “Modernists”.

This climate of hostility in Rome continued until the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), when it emerged how men such as Rosmini and Manzoni had anticipated the themes of the reforms needed within the Catholic Church. The hostility felt for Manzoni by hardliner Catholics had already weakened by that time, in part due to the fact that the author’s many works dealing with philosophy, ethics and historiography had been deliberately sidelined. Right from the start, acknowledgement of Manzoni’s work had been limited to *I Promessi Sposi* (“The Betrothed”), effectively condemning the rest of his literary achievements to obscurity. *The Betrothed* was published as an abridged school text. Totally unsuitable for the young students forced to read it, it was no wonder that most pupils judged the novel to be “boring”. They were too young to understand it; since it was a required item of curriculum, it became an obligation, not a pleasure, to read.

Yet, Manzoni is too complex an author and thinker to be simply put into a convenient category of dominant ideology. Many labels have been attached to his work, nearly all based solely on *The Betrothed*.

The rest of his great literary output – apart from his poetry – was neglected, almost forgotten, for more than a century. Examples of “banal critique” that even today Manzoni’s work is not completely free of, would easily fill the shelves of a library, though that is not what we want to look at here.

During the last century, historicists adhering to the opinion of Benedetto Croce dominated the Italian cultural sphere and formulated the accepted view of how history should be recorded (historiography). They opposed Manzoni’s approach to historiography (and its moral judgements of historical events and conditions), describing it as “*assurdo*” (absurd). They believed that human deeds can only be understood within the framework of the era and its institutions.

Even historicists influenced by Antonio Gramsci were critical of Manzoni’s views on how to record history. Gramsci wrote about Manzoni’s “satiric sympathy” for his characters, as it was impossible for Gramsci (a Marxist and an atheist) to share the deep-felt Christian compassion that Man-

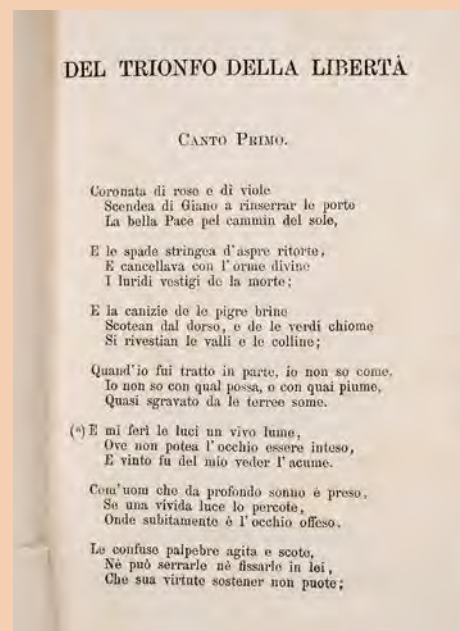
zoni had for all creatures, even those far removed from the Good. It is evident that Manzoni’s position could never be fully embraced by systems founded on the immanent rationality of historical progress.

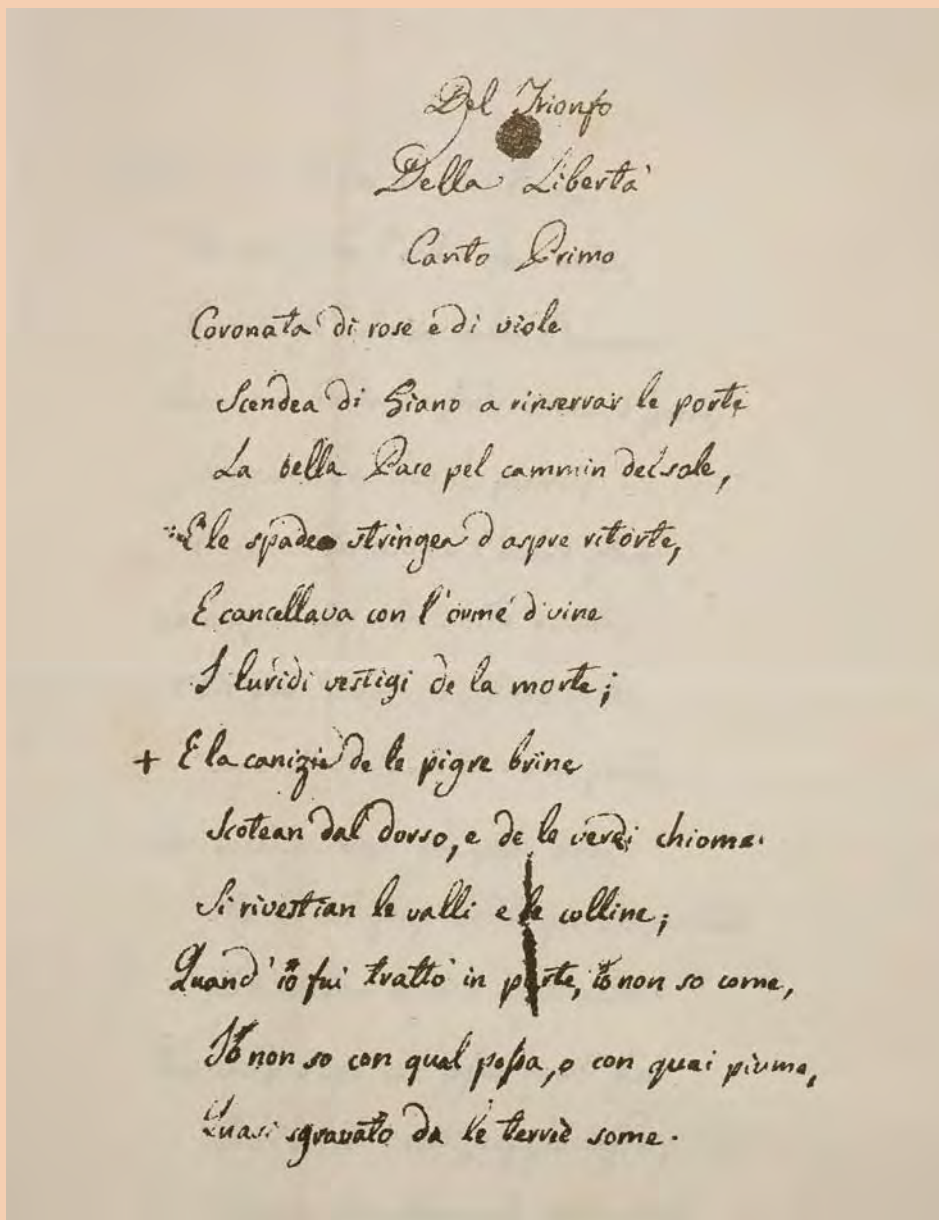
In the context of the prevailing reliance on essential principles governing the historical process independent of the individual, Manzoni’s way of seeing the history of society was associated with acute epistemological uncertainty and thus a virtual lack of epistemological value.

Social thought

On 28 February 1873, Manzoni borrowed several back-copies of a French newspaper – *Le Moniteur Universel* – from the Braidense Library in Milan, as he wished to check certain facts while writing a comparison of the French Revolution of 1789 with the Second Italian War of Independence in 1859 (*La rivoluzione francese del 1789 e la rivoluzione italiana del 1859*). Unfortunately, he died on 22 May that same year, leaving his essay unfinished. Back in 1801, when he was just 16 years old, he had already written his first poem: *Del trionfo della Libertà* (“On the Triumph of Liberty”). Thus, throughout his life, from 1801 to 1873, Manzoni had reflected hard on society, as an adolescent and an adult, right up until his death: 72 years of history, politics, undertakings, reflections and studies.

While still a youth and studying in Lugano, Manzoni was summoned by his father, Pietro





Manzoni, back to the family home in Lecco in 1798 so he could be officially entered in the list of citizens of the Department delle Montagne under the Cisalpine Republic, founded by the French revolutionaries.³ Manzoni was proud to be part of the Revolution, embracing its ideals with youthful enthusiasm. A few years later he would write his *On the Triumph of Liberty*, his first work of poetry. In it he celebrated Napoleon's second Italian campaign and the victory of the ideals of the Revolution over religious superstition and conservative reactionary political attitudes, with typical Jacobinic vehemence.

Later, upon Napoleon's defeat, he wrote *Aprile 1814*, supporting the "Italici Puri" party, a political group wanting to preserve

the independence of the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy. Manzoni, too, wanted there to be an autonomous Kingdom of Italy in the centre and north of the country, calling the revolution "*sage et pure*" (wise and pure), as he wrote in a letter to his friend Charles-Claude Fauriel. However, Lombardy was annexed to the Austrian Empire. Later, in 1848, during the Five Days of Milan, the provisional government considered Lombardy's immediate union with Piedmont: Manzoni was one of those who signed Carlo Cattaneo's appeal rejecting the idea of a "*guerra regia*" (royal war) led by the Piedmont king, Charles Albert, and stressing the need for a federalist form of political and military action instead.

Manzoni, a Northerner, Lombard and

European, had no personal knowledge of the rest of Italy. Nevertheless, he believed in the necessity of the political and cultural unification of his country, strengthened by a common language based on the Florentine dialect. He held that a common language was essential for any national culture; Italy could therefore never exist as a unified country without a national culture expressed in its own language. In Germany, Herder and Fichte's ideas had inspired German Nationalism and this burgeoning sense of national identity was based almost exclusively on the possession of a common language. Johann Gottfried von Herder first proposed the idea of a common language as an expression of "*Volksgeist*" (spirit of the nation) in his *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur* ("Fragments on Recent German Literature", 1767). He then continued to expound his theory in virtually all his later works, stating that without a common language the existence of a "people" was, in his opinion, quite baseless. German Nationalism was rooted in the German language because it was practically the only thing the various principalities had in common, having been divided for centuries.⁴

If this question of language was key to the creation of the German nation, it was also equally important in Italy, where the various states had independent histories going back centuries, even as much as eight hundred years in the case of the Kingdom of Naples and a thousand years in the case of the Papal State.

Manzoni addressed this issue while working on the second version of *The Betrothed* (1840). He felt that a common language was of political and social importance, but it should also be a living language, one actually spoken by all future Italians, and not just a literary language. It should be a language understood by everyone throughout the country, replacing the many different local dialects that were at the time the only languages the people knew. As he wrote in his introduction to *Fermo e Lucia* (1821–1823), the draft version of *The Betrothed*, Manzoni himself knew only:

"[...] one [language] in which I would dare attempt to speak for so long that even the most patient of listeners would

become tired, without committing gross errors and with the ability to immediately recognise any error that might escape from the lips of others: and this language, without any boasting on my part, is Milanese."

Manzoni, in a letter to his friend Fauriel and referring to his work, said that when a Frenchman tries his best to get his ideas across, the richness and variety of expression of his language, one he has always spoken, is all too clear: "*Lorsqu'un Français cherche à rendre ces idées de son mieux, voyez quelle abondance et quelle variété il trouve dans cette langue qu'il a toujours parlé*". An Italian, on the other hand, writes in a language he has hardly ever spoken: "*écrit dans une langue qu'il n'a presque jamais parlé*".⁵

There was a particular political reason why Manzoni chose to write in a language he had hardly ever spoken. It was the social purpose of his work: to experiment with a "united" language that, he hoped, would be used by the future citizens of a united Italy. That language was the Florentine version of Italian spoken by educated people.

Manzoni's contribution to the new nation in the process of being created was, therefore, on a cultural level and not a matter of active politics, as he refused point blank to get involved in political debate. When, in October 1848, he was asked to join the Subalpine Parliament in Turin, Manzoni rejected the appeal and, in his letter of reply, clarified his standing with regard to active politics from a moral and existential point of view:

"Most of the time I dislike what is feasible, I'd even say it is repugnant to me; what I do like would not only appear to be out of place and outdated to others, but would unnerve me too, when it is not a matter of cherishing [a policy] or simply praising it, but actually promoting it, and then having part of the consequences on my conscience. The result would be that, in many cases, especially the most important ones, the sense of my words would be this: I oppose everything and propose nothing [...]. Since this is the case, it is far better to leave politics alone!"⁶

History of “two peoples”

The American historian, Steven C. Hughes (*Manzoni as Social Historian: The Structural Dilemma of “I Promessi Sposi” – 1985*) found that in Manzoni’s introduction to *The Betrothed* Manzoni had shown his intent to break with tradition and to tell a story “of mechanical men and of small affairs” through the humble reporter, the anonymous narrator of the *Historia*. In the Italian version of his article, Hughes describes *The Betrothed* as a “historical novel based on a social story”, adding that “in the face of the dearth of direct testimony regarding the ‘humble’ classes, Manzoni’s attitude was similar to that of many social historians today”.⁷

Indeed, just like a modern social historian, Manzoni used administrative documents, such as the “*Gride*” (proclamations), and newspaper reports covering events that had such a major impact on society that the general population had to be affected by them: the plague, the famine and the Landsknecht mercenaries.

Already when writing his play *Adelchi* (1822), Manzoni expressed his dissatisfaction with the very few works of history available to him that actually covered the period and which provided only a summary and confused account of the Lombards.⁸

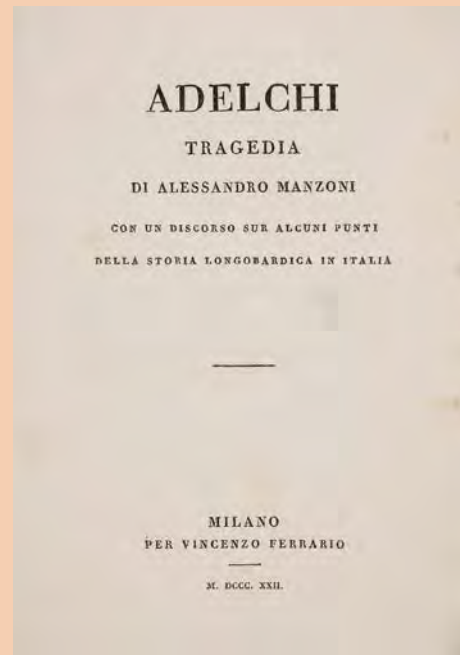
Manzoni – a true example of the Enlightenment writer – took nothing for granted and wanted to check things for himself by turning to the original documents: the *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores* (Lodovico Antonio Muratori’s huge collection of sources) and the nineteen volumes of Augustin Thierry’s *Rerum Gallicarum et Francicarum Scriptores*. Thierry, a great French historian, had collected and published documents from the distant past and developed a theory of “two peoples”: one the Barbarian conquerors (the Franks) and the other the conquered people, the serfs (the Romanised Gauls).

In his discussion of the Lombards in Italy (*Discorso sopra alcuni punti della storia longobardica in Italia*, 1822), a historical study undertaken while writing *Adelchi*, Manzoni adopted a new method of researching his work, one that he would continue to use from then on. He felt it was important to use obscure original documents that could help reconstruct history without being prejudiced by intrigues and plots: the everyday

history “*de livres, de bouquins, de paperasses même, dont plusieurs rares et même uniques*” (from books, leaflets, even papers, the more rare and unique the better).⁹

As he wrote in a letter to Fauriel, he was not particularly interested in the facts that learned historians had gathered, as these failed to take into account the importance of the institutions and mentality in those distant times and, in particular, totally ignored the conditions of the local populations that were subjected to Lombard rule and the feudal property system (“*possédés*”). Not even Paul the Deacon (*Historia Langobardorum*) or later historians deemed them necessary of mention.

Adelchi, the hero of Manzoni’s tragedy of the same name, was far from being a famous historical figure. He was little more than just a name, and even the exact name



is less than certain: it might have been Adelchis or Adalgis. The son of the last Lombard king, Desiderius, he is briefly mentioned in an 11th century chronicle, the *Chronicon Novaliciense*, and in the legend surrounding the foundation of the monastery of Civate on Lake Como. It is interesting to note that Manzoni’s childhood home was in Caleotto di Lecco, just a few kilometres from the monastery of Civate, and he must have known the legend well.¹⁰

The real significance of this tragedy can be deduced from the historical study (*Discorso*) Manzoni undertook when writing *Adelchi*:

A. Manzoni, *Adelchi*, by Vincenzo Ferrario, Milan, 1822, Si.M.U.L., Villa Manzoni, Manzoni Museum, Lecco.

the heroes are not Charlemagne or Desiderius, the Frankish nobles or the Lombard dukes, but the people, the oppressed, “an immense multitude of men, a series of generations, who live and die in this land, their land, unobserved, without leaving any trace.”¹¹ Here too, the idea prevails of “two peoples”, as in Thierry’s theory: the lords and the serfs, the oppressors and the oppressed. The same year that Manzoni wrote *Adelchi* he also started writing *Fermo e Lucia*, published posthumously, and the first draft of what would later become *The Betrothed*. Manzoni explained how he saw the novel in a letter to his friend Fauriel:

“To set forth, albeit briefly, my concept of the historical novel [...], I can but tell you that I see [it] as being a portrayal of a given moment for society, using actual facts and characters so realistically drawn that one could easily believe it to be a real story only recently discovered; to do this, I make great efforts to get an accurate understanding of the age and the land in which I set my story and to depict [these] sincerely.”¹²

Manzoni’s reconstruction of Lombard society in the 1600s was based first and foremost on his own knowledge of the history, backed up by painstaking research using original documents and newspaper reports of the time. The “materials”, as he calls them in his novel, come directly from the original documents of the day: reports about the life of Virginia de Leyva provided the details he needed for the Nun of Monza, others on Bernardino Visconti for the Unnamed and the works of Giuseppe Ripamonti (historian, 1573–1643) and Alessandro Tadino (physician, 1580–1661) for details and episodes used for the great chapters he wrote on the plague. He delved into the archives of Milan to find the proclamations (“*Gride*”) and letters concerning the “*bravi*” (hired thugs) and Landsknecht mercenaries, documents that were both humbling and terrifying in his book. As Manzoni wrote to his friends, “I have thrown in peasants, the nobility, clerics, priests, magistrates, intellectuals, war and famine”.

As a result of these studies, *The Betrothed* is an extraordinary historical novel. It is a

unique work, not a detached look back at the past written to clothe 19th century characters in period costume like nearly all the other historical fiction in the 1800s. Indeed, most of Manzoni’s contemporaries wrote historical novels and ballads set in the past, centred on tales of adventure and misadventure: the historical references served merely to make the plot more “picturesque” and the stories were often deliberately embellished with scenes of horror and cruelty to add more excitement. *The Betrothed*, on the other hand, is a quite different kettle of fish, as the history of society – accurate, carefully researched history – plays a fundamental role in the novel.

Manzoni’s literary invention was only fully appreciated later, once his work became identified as an early example of the realistic/naturalist novel made popular throughout Europe by writers such as Stendhal and Tolstoy. At the time, however, *The Betrothed* was considered hard to read, as it departed from the norm and could never be classified as a “proper” novel according to the particular “rules” for this genre of narrative prose.

His choice of protagonists, Fermo (later changed to Renzo) and Lucia, too, was unheard of and deliberate: it was the first time that members of the “lower” classes had been chosen as the heroes in a book. The two main characters in his novel were also representative of the actual social conditions at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the early 1800s, when Manzoni was writing it: both were mill workers, Fermo a weaver and Lucia a spinner. Manzoni’s choice was also determined by his in-depth knowledge of society in Lecco. The local economy had been based almost entirely on manufacturing, even back in the 1600s, as Manzoni – a competent historian – knew only too well. Nevertheless, nearly all the commentators writing about the novel have called Renzo and Lucia “*contadini brianzoli*” (farm workers from the Brianza area, north of Milan), thus mistaking both their professions and their geographical origins.

The Lombard people in *The Betrothed* have become inured to virtually everything: war, plague, pillage, violence, injustice, humiliation. They are the real protagonists of this book, the real heroes of the story. The powerful enjoyed unlimited arbitrary powers,

enabling them to do whatever they wanted, no matter how capricious, as exemplified by Don Rodrigo's desire to "have" Lucia simply as the result of a wager with Count Attilio.

The theme of the "two peoples", therefore, is evident in the novel, just as in *Adelchi*: the oppressors and the oppressed, "classes having opposing interests and maxims", as Manzoni described them to Fauriel. The oppressors have the upper hand: the violence of the paid thugs ("bravi"), the legal protection of the lawyers (*Azzeccagarbugli*) and social custom. The oppressors have just resignation, religious faith and endurance to fall back on.

The oppressed, the humble, have only the "force" of patience to rely on, that of the Gospel: "And as for that [the seed] in the good soil, they are those, who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience." (*Luke*, 8:15)

The *Vulgate* (St. Jerome's translation of the Bible) uses the Latin word *patientia* for the original Greek word *hypomonè*. However, this Greek term has a wider meaning than just "patience". It can also mean "endurance" and "perseverance", "a state of waiting" and "inspiration", as Simone Weil translated it, in 1942, during the German Occupation of France when researching the history of the Cathars and the force of Love: "its inspiration will [...] little by little make impossible at least a part of the baseness which constitutes the air we breathe".¹³ This correspondence is so profound that even Pope Francis, in his interview with Fr. Antonio Spadaro on 19 September 2013, used the same Greek term to express feelings very similar to those of Manzoni:

"I see the holiness in the patience of the people of God [...]. This is for me the common sanctity. I often associate sanctity with patience: not only patience as *hypomonè*, taking charge of the events and circumstances of life, but also as constancy in going forward, day by day. This is the sanctity of the militant church [...]. This was the sanctity of my parents: my dad, my mum, my grandmother Rosa."

The perseverance and endurance of the oppressed, as they wait for war and destruction to pass, for the famine to come to an

end, for the plague to die out, for people such as Don Rodrigo and his thugs to lose power, for the Landsknecht mercenaries and the "Azzeccagarbugli" to disappear: waiting and endurance, these are the glories of the humble, the "lost people in the world", who "haven't even a master [...], no one", as Don Rodrigo describes them in chapter 11 of *The Betrothed*:

"Justice? Poh! Justice! [...] Who will care for these people at Milan? Who will listen to them? Who even knows what they are? They are like lost people in the world; they haven't even a master: they belong to no one."

This has always been the way of the world and even *Adelchi* – son of a king, born into the class of the oppressors, the dominators of the "dispersed common people, who name have none" – has no choice in the matter. A prince and warrior, he has no choice but to wrong them or pity them. *Adelchi*, a just man, attempts to solve this dilemma by seeking death, to escape the "cruel force" that "the world possesses".

Leonardo Sciascia (the all-round Italian literary figure, 1921–1989) once wrote that, despite all the studies to date, the profound truth of Manzoni's work had yet to be wholly realised: generally considered as the product of a pious, conservative aristocrat from Lombardy, it is actually a disconcerting work, a merciless, cold analysis of Italian society in the past, and today.

I believe that Manzoni's work could be construed as a merciless, cold analysis of society in every country, not just Italy. It is the tale of the inevitable drama of what it means to be a human being – an existential tragedy we should all be aware of and yet one to which we should never resign ourselves because, as Manzoni wrote in his *Storia della Colonna Infame* (his sequel to *The Betrothed*), concerning "atrocious deeds committed by man against man": "[...] one can be forced to be the victim [of such deeds] but not their author".

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Notes

¹ Thinkers who were inspired by the thoughts of Claude-Adrien Helvétius and Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, adopting a sensist gnostology approach to the search for how ideas are formed (hence the name “*idéologues*”) and to the broader fields of ethics and politics. This was not a universal theory of mankind, but the empirical analysis of certain of man’s particular aspects. Manzoni came into contact with *idéologues*, and Claude Fauriel in particular, during his time in Paris. Fauriel and Manzoni would become friends, corresponding on a regular basis. The *idéologues* would have a major influence on Manzoni’s thinking.

² RODOLFO QUADRELLI (edited by), *Alessandro Manzoni, Scritti filosofici*, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milan, 1976.

³ Department of Napoleon’s Cisalpine Republic, set up in 1797; Lecco was its capital.

⁴ GERHARD SAUDER, *La conception herdérienne de peuple-langue, des peuples et de leurs langues, in Herder et les Lumières: l’Europe de la pluralité culturelle et linguistique*, Presses Univ. de France, Paris, 2003, pp. 123-132.

⁵ Letter to Claude Fauriel dated 3 November 1821, in IRENE BOTTA (edited by), *Carteggio Alessandro Manzoni-Claude Fauriel*, Edizione nazionale ed europea delle opere di Alessandro Manzoni, Centro Nazionale di Studi Manzoni, Milan, 2000.

⁶ Letter dated 7 October 1848 to Giorgio Briano, in CESARE ARIETI (edited by), *Alessandro Manzoni: lettere*, Mondadori, Milan, 1970.

⁷ STEVEN HUGHES, *Manzoni storico sociale: il dilemma strutturale dei “Promessi Sposi”*, in GIAN LUIGI DACCÒ – MAURO ROSSETTO (edited by), *Alessandro Manzoni, società, storia, medicina*, Leonardo Arte, Milan, 2000, p. 16.

⁸ Letter to C. Fauriel, 17 October 1820, in IRENE BOTTA (edited by), *Carteggio*, op. cit., p. 263.

⁹ Letter to C. Fauriel, 21 May 1823, in IRENE BOTTA (edited by), *Carteggio*, op. cit., p. 412.

¹⁰ The legend surrounding the foundation of the Monastery in Civate (Lecco) relates how Adelchi, while out hunting, entered, on horseback, a small church on the summit of Mount Cornizzolo. He was struck blind on account of this serious act of sacrilege and only regained his sight after his father, King Desiderio, made a vow, promising to build a large monastery on the site of the church.

¹¹ ALESSANDRO MANZONI, *Discorso sopra alcuni punti della storia longobardica in Italia* (edited by Isabella Becherucci), Edizione nazionale ed europea delle opere di Alessandro Manzoni, Centro

Nazionale di Studi Manzoni, Milan, 2005, p. 79.

¹² Letter to C. Fauriel, 3 November 1821, in IRENE BOTTA (edited by), *Carteggio*, op. cit., pp. 309–310.

¹³ SIMONE WEIL, *Écrits historiques et politiques*, Gallimard, Paris, 1960, p. 84.

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Alessandro Manzoni's "exploration" of the Italian language and his "definition" of modern Italian

Emanuele Banfi*



Left:
Gustavo Rosso (Gustavino),
Perpetua e Agnese, first-half 20th century, drawing,
Si.M.U.L., Villa Manzoni, Manzoni Museum,
Lecco.

On this page:
Luigi Pizzi, *La stradina dei bravi*,
1938, oil on wood,
Si.M.U.L., Villa Manzoni, Manzoni Museum,
Lecco.

§.0. This article looks at Alessandro Manzoni's "exploration" of the Italian language starting with his childhood. The "path of discovery" taken by the great Lombard writer, whose mother tongue was the dialect spoken in Milan and who preferred to use French in all matters cultural, would eventually lead him to choose the Italian spoken in Florence and Tuscany – the most educated and stylistically controlled form – as the basis for his "definition" of what was to become modern-day Italian and Italy's national language.

§.1. At the turn of the 19th century everyone in the city of Milan spoke only the local dialect (*Milanese*), though, of course, the dialect varied depending on a person's social status. Milanese was used not only for everyday matters, but also to discuss issues of a broader nature concerning the city, its citizens and their practical needs. At the time, this dialect was not viewed as being in any way inferior to a proper "language"; indeed, several major poets, including the great Carlo Porta, chose to write in this dialect, thus giving it a certain "nobility". Although Milan was then under Austrian rule (and thus German was the official language), Paris was the focus of its cultural aspirations and French was therefore its cultural language. The upper echelons of society saw French as "the" language of privilege. Many contemporary sources provide details of this sociolinguistic aspect of Milan, where what we now know as the Italian national language was not the vernacular tongue, the spoken language. One curious source is a note dated 1777 by Pietro Verri, a leading philosopher, economist, historian and writer during the Enlightenment, intended for his new-born daughter, Teresa, in which he expresses his hopes for her "linguistic" future:

"I've hired the German woman [*viz.* nanny] so you can avoid the tedium of having to learn, later on in life, a language that I wish I knew and which is extremely useful for us today, living as we do under Austrian rule. I, however, intend to speak to you in French, always, so by the time you are five you will have no problem speaking in three languages fluently."¹

Two years later, Verri updates his brother Alessandro on his daughter's linguistic progress:

"My dear Teresina is such a joy. You ought to see her, when – provided she is in a good mood – she chatters away in German, French and Milanese with me, her nanny and another servant, without any trace of embarrassment and as if each language were her mother tongue."²

The languages mentioned here by Verri are German, French and Milanese. What is most striking is the total absence of any mention of the Italian language. It obviously follows that while a young lady of high social standing was expected to speak German for the reasons Verri gives, it was far more important that she be able to speak (and write) French: the language of privilege and civil conversation. Italian, on the other hand, was used little and then not very well in either spoken or written form.³ Milan was thus essentially bilingual, with the population using both the Milanese dialect and French. Manzoni and the members of his family provide us with further irrefutable proof of this bilingualism. Manzoni's mother, Giulia Beccaria, the daughter of the prominent jurist Cesare Beccaria, was fluent in both Milanese and French, but openly admitted to having problems in spelling and punctuation when it came to Italian.⁴ As one would expect of a noblewoman from



Andrea Appiani,
Ritratto di Giulia
Beccaria col figlio
Alessandro, 1790,
Villa di Brusuglio.

Casimiro Radice,
*La cascina Costa a
Galbiate, 1875.*

Milan at the turn of the 19th century, the majority of her letters were written in French. Paris was the most fashionable city of the time. It was where Giulia lived with her lover, Carlo Imbonati, from 1796 to 1805 and where Manzoni, just 20 years old, joined her in 1805, immediately after Imbonati's death. This is interesting evidence of the sociolinguistic setting in which Manzoni grew up – an environment dominated by the Milanese dialect and French, in a land where Italian was spoken rarely, if at all. Another early linguistic influence on Manzoni were the childhood years he had spent at the family farmhouse in Costa, on the hills above Galbiate, not far from Caleotto near Lecco. Manzoni would always have fond memories of his time in Costa and Caleotto, a time of play and childhood adventures. Those who looked after him there and his playmates would undoubtedly have spoken only the local dialect. It is easy, therefore, to imagine that Manzoni also spoke this country dialect as a young boy, as well as the urban Milanese dialect. Further testimony to the relationship between the Milanese dialect, Italian and French in the early 1800s comes from an entry in a diary written by an Irish lady traveller (Lady Morgan) while staying in Milan in 1821. She notes that French was the common language in Milan – with good pronunciation – together with Milanese, which she calls “*le dialecte national...*”, whereas any attempt to use the Tuscan language (i.e. Italian) caused complications and branded the speaker sociolinguistically:

“Le français est parlé très purement par les Milanais; ils prononcent l'u comme les Français et c'est la pierre d'achoppement des Italiens méridionaux dans la prononciation française. L'italien n'est parlé à Milan qu'en présence de voyageurs du midi de l'Italie, et le dialecte national est le langage familier de toutes les classes. Parler avec l'accent toscan est le 'suprême mauvais ton', et sent l'affectation vulgaire. On dit de la jeune dame fraîchement arrivée de Florence, qui se permet l'accent italien, qu'elle parle *in punta di forchetta*, 'sur la pointe d'une fourchette'.”⁵

In Manzoni's time, the only occasion on which people actually needed to speak “Italian” in Milan was when in the presence of foreigners or people from other parts of Italy, as Manzoni himself pointed out in his work *Della lingua italiana* (“On the Italian Language”, 1868):



“Imagine, therefore, that five or six of us from Milan are at home, chatting about this and that. Another friend arrives and introduces us to a man from Piedmont, Venice, Bologna, Naples or Genoa. As is the custom, we stop speaking in Milanese and switch to Italian. Now you tell me whether the conversation is as smooth as before. You tell me whether we still have access to that abundance of terms and fluency of speech we had just a minute before. Tell me whether or not we now have to use a generic or approximate term, whereas before we would have immediately found the correct special term. Now we have to rely on a paraphrase or description, where before all we had to do was use a specific word. Now we have to guess, while before we were sure of the word we needed; indeed, no thought was involved, it came to us automatically. Now we have to fall back on a Milanese word, adding an ‘as we say here’ in explanation.”⁶

§.2. Manzoni's first attempts at writing poetry were done using the formal Italian found in literature: this was the case with *Urania*, *Adda* and the five finished *Inni sacri* (he had originally planned to write twelve "sacred hymns") composed between 1812 and 1822, as well as his two major "civil" odes, *Marzo 1821* and *Cinque maggio* and the two tragedies *Il conte di Carmagnola* (1816–1820) and *Adelchi* (1820–1822). In a letter dated 9 February 1806 and addressed to Claude Fauriel, his great friend and mentor in the Paris salons, Manzoni already expressed his belief that there was a need to close the gap between the written form of the Italian language – a literary language – and the "real" language spoken by the people. Just 20 years old, Manzoni distanced himself from the purists and embraced the idea of there being a common, everyday national language. Considering the linguistic situation in Italy at the time, Manzoni judged the written language, that of literature, as "almost a dead language".⁷

Fifteen years later, in another letter to Fauriel dated 3 November 1821, Manzoni again expressed his lack of confidence in "literary" Italian, which he felt to be too poor and restricted and detached from the big issues of life:

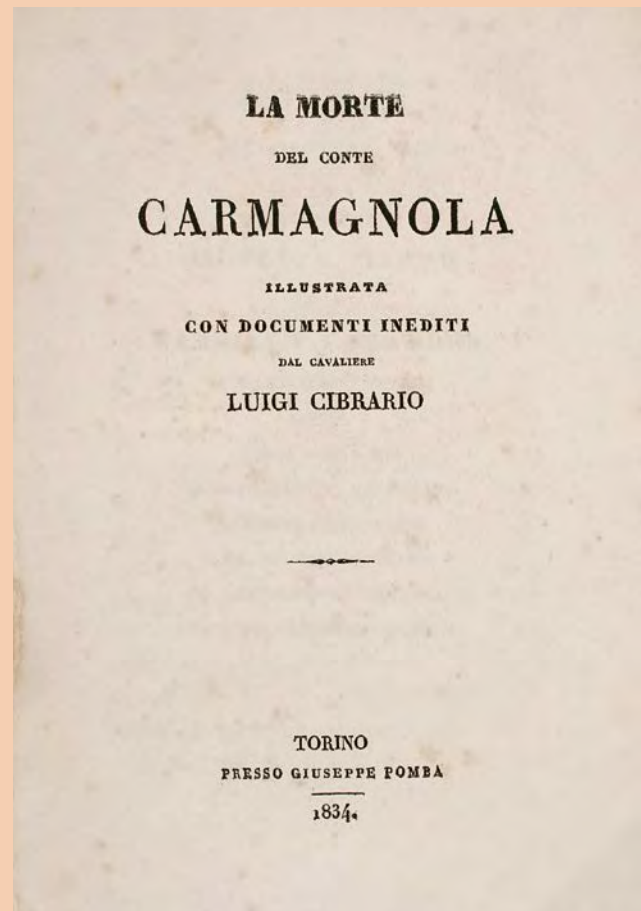
"[...] ce triste fait est, à mon avis, la pauvreté de la langue italienne [...] une langue qui est parlée par un petit nombre d'habitants d'Italie, une langue dans la quelle on ne discute pas de grandes questions."⁸

§.3. The years from 1821 to 1823 are crucial to understanding how Manzoni developed his thoughts concerning modern Italian prose. Those were the years that Manzoni, in his mid-twenties, wrote *Fermo e Lucia*, the early version of what would later be published as *I Promessi Sposi* ("The Betrothed"). *Fermo e Lucia* was written in a language rich in archaisms and Lombard expressions, reflecting Manzoni's background dominated by dialects (dialectophony). In fact, Manzoni discussed this – the "pressure" applied by dialects on Italian – in the introduction to *Fermo e Lucia*:

"When a man who normally speaks in dialect wishes to write in a given language, the dialect – which has served him so well during the most active moments of his life and offered him the most immediate and spontaneous expression of his feelings – is omnipresent, entwined with his thoughts, overpowering them, and even, at times, dressing his thoughts in cliché-like formulae; the dialect will stream from his pen and, if he has not studied the chosen language carefully, it will determine the basis of his writing style [...]."⁹

In other words, Manzoni was conscious that his prose was not satisfactory, and he even explicitly condemned it, calling it:

"[...] an undigested mixture of phrases that are part Lombard, part Tuscan, part French and even part Latin; phrases that belong to none of these categories, but are derived, by analogy and extension, from one or the other of these."¹⁰



A. Manzoni,
La morte del Conte Carmagnola, by Giuseppe Pomba, Turin, 1834, Si.M.U.L., Villa Manzoni, Manzoni Museum, Lecco.

He sadly concluded that:

“I write poorly [...] and if I knew how to write well, I would most certainly not hesitate to do so [...]. Yet I believe that no one actually knows what to write well means. I fear no one can define this in just a few words and I certainly could not do so, even in many, many words. [...] In order to write well, one needs to know how to choose those words and those phrases that, as generally agreed by all writers and orators [...] have that given meaning [...] Words and phrases that entered the written language from the spoken language without sounding too base and entered the spoken language from the written language without seeming affected and which are generally and indifferently used for either one of these.”¹¹

[...]

“Whether or not there is one language in Italy that meets this condition is a question on which I dare not hazard my own opinion. It is definitely true that there are many diverse languages in different parts of Italy [...] I, myself, know only one in which I would dare attempt to speak [...] without committing gross errors and with the ability to immediately recognise any error that might escape from the lips of others: and this language, without any boasting on my part, is Milanese.”¹²

Indeed, Milanese was “his” language. However, another language was to take precedence over it (as well as the other dialects spoken in Italy). This language was the Florentine dialect, the language of Tuscany:

“There is another language in Italy [that is] incomparably more beautiful and rich than this one and all the others, in which more general ideas can be expressed, etc. This language, as everyone knows, is Tuscan [...]”¹³

Manzoni’s choice to favour the “Tuscan language” was all decisive: between 1823 and

1827 he thoroughly revised *Fermo e Lucia* and was assisted in this huge undertaking by others, such as Claude Fauriel and Ermes Visconti, not to mention some very close friends including Tommaso Grossi, Gaetano Cattaneo and Luigi Rossari. The linguistic changes made to the language used in *Fermo e Lucia* resulted in what would become known as the *Ventisettana* edition of *The Betrothed*. This process of revision should be seen as the conversion of a hybrid, multilingual, artificial literary work (*Fermo e Lucia*) into the Tuscan language. It involved rewriting the entire novel: Manzoni made each correction on the basis of documentary evidence, his constant “companion” and authority being Francesco Cherubini’s *Vocabolario milanese-italiano*.

§.4. The very year that the *Ventisettana* edition was published (1827), Manzoni started work on a new edition, as he was still dissatisfied with the language used in the novel. He wanted it to be “correct and enriched”, which involved re-writing the entire novel using the language spoken in Florence by the educated population. This literary exercise would take him some thirteen years to complete (from 1827 to 1840); when the newly revised edition was finally published it became known as the *Quarantana* edition.

In the summer of 1827 Manzoni went to Florence in order to “wash his dirty laundry on the banks of the River Arno” as he described it in a letter to his mother (“lavare i panni in Arno”). He was helped by his Florentine friends Giovanni Battista Niccolini, Gaetano Cioni, Giuseppe Borghi and Guglielmo Libri, whom Manzoni entrusted with proofreading the three volumes of *The Betrothed*.

The aim of this revision was to eliminate all traces of dialect from the *Ventisettana* (especially any Lombardisms), as well as the many archaisms still appearing in the novel. Manzoni continued working on the revised edition in Milan, where he was mainly assisted by Emma Luti and, to a lesser degree, by Marianna Rinuccini Trivulzio, two Florentine ladies living in Milan. Manzoni adopted the following strict criteria to ensure the final revision was a thorough process:¹⁴

- the elimination of all forms of Milanese and other Lombard dialects: *un zucchero* > *uno zucchero*, *inzigasse* > *aizzasse*, *mo* > *ora*, *da per noi* > *da noi*; the deletion of the pleonastic reinforcing adverb *bene*: *lascerà ben entrare* > *lascerà entrare*; the deletion of the adverb *pulito*: *far così pulito* > *far così bene*: *a parlar pulito* > *a parlar bene*; the replacement of “local” forms with the Tuscan equivalents: *ho fatto un marrone* > *ho sbagliato*; *sulla bass’ora* > *sul tardi*; *testa busa* > *testa vòta*; *cascinotto* > *capanna*; *martorello* > *sempliciotto*; *tosa* > *ragazza*;
- the adoption of current Florentine forms: *giuoco* > *gioco*; *spagnuolo* > *spagnolo*; *stradicciuole* > *stradicciole*; *muove* > *move* (though some remained: *cuore*, *buono*, *uomo*); *io aveva* > *avevo*; *guance* > *gote*; *burlare* > *far celia*; *pranzo* > *desinare*; *non ne ho fatte mica* > *non n’ho fatte punto*;
- the lowering of the literary register and the adoption of current forms: *giugnendo* > *giungendo*; *cangiando* > *cambiando*; *veggio* > *vedo*; *ponno* > *possono*; *egli, ella* > *lui, lei*; *pargoli* > *bambini*; *mi corco* > *mi metto a letto*; *guatare* > *guardare*; *picciolo* > *piccolo*; *lunghezzo la parete* > *strisciando il muro*; *l’affissò* > *lo guardò*;
- the reduction of linguistic doublets (etymological twins), which Manzoni felt posed a threat to linguistic unity; the Florentine version was adopted to ensure uniformity: *fra/tra* > *tra*; *dimandare/domandare* > *domandare*; *quistione/questione* > *questione*; *uguaglianza/eguaglianza* > *eguaglianza*.

On the right is an excerpt from the interlinear edition of the two versions of *The Betrothed* (the *Ventisettana* and the *Quarantana*) edited by Lanfranco Caretti. This gives us an idea of how these corrections were made. The excerpt is from chapter 20, where the meeting is depicted between Don Rodrigo and The Unnamed, with a physical description of the latter being given.¹⁵

It is interesting to note the substitutional transformation of certain lexical forms: *cera* to “*viso*” (complexion/face), *adusto* to “*bruno*” (sunburnt/tanned), *calvezza* to “*pochi capelli*” (baldness/a few strands of

hair), *capegli* to “*capelli*” (spelling of “hair”), *gagliardia* to “*forza*” (vigour/strength), *giovine* to “*giovane*” (spelling of “young”).

Complex phrases have been simplified, lowering the linguistic register: *alto della persona* becomes “*grande*” (tall in body/big), *un fuoco cupo che gli scintillava dagli occhi* becomes “*il lampeggiar sinistro, ma vivo degli occhi*” (a dark fire sparking from his eyes/the sinister, yet bright flash of his eyes).

The way verbs govern prepositions has also been altered: *guardandogli alle mani e alla cera* is replaced by “*guardando le mani e il viso*” (the preposition “*a*” has been eliminated); *a chiunque venisse a lui* becomes “*a chiunque venisse da lui*” (“*a*” is replaced with “*da*”).

Manzoni also preferred to use shortened (apocopated) words rather than the full form of the word: *dei piú vecchi* is replaced by “*de’ piú vecchi*” and *dei lineamenti* by “*de’ lineamenti*”.

Last but not least is his simplification of verb catenae: *rispondendo al saluto e insieme squadrandolo e guardandogli alle mani e alla cera* becomes “*rendendogli il saluto e insieme guardandogli le mani e il viso*” (greeting him and looking at his hands and face).

§.5. Once Italy had been united in 1861, the new State was faced with a “question of the language”, which was no longer a matter concerning just a few intellectuals, as in the past, but a real and very serious large-scale political and social issue – at the time, 78% of Italians were illiterate and 97.5% spoke only their local dialect. The problem was how to spread and stabilise a proper understanding of the Italian language. So, in 1865, the Minister for Public Education, Emilio Broglio, asked Manzoni to come up with a detailed plan. This resulted in Manzoni’s report *Dell’unità della lingua e dei mezzi per diffonderla* (“On the Unity of the Language and the Means of Disseminating It”, 1868). Manzoni considered the “educated” Florentine dialect as “the” language to be promoted and disseminated on a national level by means of a process of replacing all local idioms with a single national one (i.e. Florentine). The means he adopted were as follows: teachers born in Tuscany were to be sent to schools throughout Italy; teachers not born in Tuscany were to stop using local dialects and use only the Tuscan language,

Questi rispondendo al
Questo gli andò incontro, rendendogli il saluto, e insieme

squadrandolo e alle alla cera
guardandogli le mani e il viso, come faceva per

abitudine, e ormai quasi involontariamente, a chiunque venisse

a dei
da lui, per quanto fosse de' piú vecchi e provati amici.

alto della persona, adusto, a prima giunta quella calvezza, la canizie dei pochi capegli
Era grande, bruno, calvo; bianchi i pochi capelli che gli

che gli rimanevano, e le rughe del volto, l'avrebbero fatto stimare d'una età assai piú
rimanevano; rugosa la faccia: a prima vista, gli sarebbe dato

inoltrata dei aveva appena varcati: e
piú de' sessant'anni che aveva; **ma** il contegno, le

dei e un fuoco cupo che gli
mosse, la durezza risentita de' lineamenti, il lampeggiar sinistro,

scintillava dagli gagliardía
ma vivo degli occhi, indicavano una forza di corpo e d'animo,

giovane.
che sarebbe stata straordinaria in un giovine.

Gustavo Rosso
(Gustavino), *Il Dottor
Azzecagarbugli*, first
half of 20th century,
drawing, Si.M.U.L.,
Villa Manzoni,
Manzoni Museum,
Lecco.

to be achieved by transferring them temporarily to places where Italian was spoken; a dictionary was to be published that would act as a “repository” of the common language, with “the cheapest possible edition” to be printed to “make it easier for every student to buy one”. Indeed, the first volume of the *Novo vocabolario della lingua italiana*, based on current Florentine, was published in 1870, edited by Giovanni Battista Giorgini (who was married Manzoni’s daughter Vittoria). Three years later, in 1873, the great linguist Graziadio Isaia Ascoli started a scientific discussion on the linguistic framework for a united Italy and the role of schools in promoting the language in his *Proemio* (editorial) in the first issue of the *Archivio Glottologico Italiano* journal. Ascoli upheld the validity of Manzoni’s diagnosis regarding the nature of the problem, i.e. “the lack of linguistic unity among Italians”, but he also felt that it was unrealistic to see Florence as the cultural capital of the nation, not believing that – as Manzoni thought – a linguistically standard language could emanate from there to influence the entire population. Florence was not Paris, he opined. Yes, it was true that Italy had produced some great masters in the past, “but the flock of true disciples

[had] always [been] lacking” and, owing to the absence of the “school” (i.e. educational establishments), there lacked “the kind of diffusion of ideas and proposals from top to bottom and vice-versa that is solely responsible for the advance of civilisation”. The great literary figures of the past had shone brightly, but were only “luminous points”, isolated cases, and passive imitation had prevailed over novelty of content.¹⁶

This debate was conducted in extremely civil terms between Ascoli and Manzoni. Eventually Manzoni’s argument prevailed and the prose in *The Betrothed* was adopted as “the” model, thanks to the extraordinary polyphony of its fabric. This model was initially adopted in schools, the various branches of central government and the press. It has since also been adopted by the mass media. It is an Italian – spoken and written – that always tends to converge on what is basically a single model, although there are still some “regional” differences. Manzoni was essentially a speaker of dialect and French, yet his contribution to the ongoing process of the linguistic “unification” of the nation has proved to be crucial and invaluable.

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Notes

- ¹ GENNARO BARBARISI, *Pietro Verri. Scritti di argomento familiare e autobiografico*, Edizioni di Storia e di Letteratura, Rome, 2003, p. 357.
- ² GIOVANNI SEREGNI (edited by), *Carteggio di Pietro e Alessandro Verri*, Giuffrè, Milan, 1939-1940, p. 239 and pp. 386-387.
- ³ GENNARO BARBARISI, *Pietro Verri*, cit., p. 304.
- ⁴ WILLIAM SPAGGIARI, *Lettere inedite di Giulia Beccaria*, in "Filologia e Critica", 8, 1983, p. 232.
- ⁵ ALBERT MAQUET, *Stendhal sous le charme de la 'lingua della minga'*, in AA.Vv., *Stendhal e Milano*, Atti del XIV Congresso stendhaliano, Olschki, Florence, 1982, p. 271; cf. also SILVIA MORGANA, *Storia linguistica di Milano*, Carocci, Rome, 2012, p. 108.
- ⁶ ANGELO STELLA – MAURIZIO VITALE (edited by), *Scritti linguistici inediti di Alessandro Manzoni*, Centro Nazionale di Studi Manzoni, Milan, 2000, pp. 350-351.
- ⁷ Lettera to Claude Fauriel, 9 February 1806, in ALESSANDRO MANZONI, *Tutte le lettere*, vol. I, edited by CESARE ARIETI with the addition of unpublished or lost letters curated by Dante Isella, Adelphi, Milan, 1986, p. 19.
- ⁸ Letter to Claude Fauriel, 3 November 1821, in ALESSANDRO MANZONI, *Tutte le lettere*, op. cit., pp. 245-246.
- ⁹ LANFRANCO CARETTI (edited by), *Alessandro Manzoni, Fermo e Lucia. Appendice storica su la Colonna infame*, vol. I, Einaudi, Turin, 1973, p. 5.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ MAURIZIO VITALE, *La lingua di Alessandro Manzoni*, Cisalpino, Milan, 1992.
- ¹⁵ LANFRANCO CARETTI (edited by), *Alessandro Manzoni, I Promessi Sposi nelle due edizioni del 1840 e del 1825-27 raffrontate tra loro. Storia della Colonna infame*, vol. II, Einaudi, Turin, 1973, p. 454.
- ¹⁶ ISAIA GRAZIADIO ASCOLI, *Proemio*, in "Archivio Glottologico Italiano", 1, 1873, pp. 27-30.

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ALESSANDRO MANZONI
ALIBIO DELL'ISTITUTO S. ANTONIO
NEL BIENNIO 1798-1799
SI EDUCÒ IN QUESTA CHIESA
ALLA Cattedra
DELLE CELESTI CURE
SOTTO LA DIREZIONE
DEI PP. SOMASCHI
NEL CINQUANTESIMO ANNO DI SUA MORTE
1773-22 MARZO-1798



Manzoni and Switzerland

Giovanni Orelli*



Left:

The entrance to the Collegio Sant' Antonio in Lugano, run by the Somascan Fathers, with a plaque dedicated to Alessandro Manzoni, who studied there from 1796 to 1798.

On this page:

Carlo Pizzi, *Il Resegone*, 1868, oil on canvas, Si.M.U.L., Villa Manzoni, Civic Art Gallery, Lecco.

Dedicated to Paolo Parachini

Manzoni and Switzerland... this title could be read as either a statement or a question (how is this man related to Switzerland, if at all?). Anyone wanting to get an idea of Manzoni's connections with Switzerland would do well to read Fabio Soldini's in-depth investigation into how Switzerland and the Swiss were depicted in Italian literature in the 1800s and 1900s (*Negli Svizzeri. Immagini della Svizzera e degli svizzeri nella letteratura italiana dell'Ottocento e Novecento*) or Renato Martinoni's study of Italy's influences on Switzerland (*L'Italia in Svizzera. Lingua, cultura, viaggi, letteratura*). Browsing the tables of contents and indexes, it is apparent that there are few mentions of Alessandro Manzoni. Judging by the frequency of mentions, we could easily conclude that Montale must be quite important while Manzoni relatively unknown. However, a writer's true literary importance is rarely ever established this way. So, let's start again.

In 1796, Manzoni was an 11-year-old boy being educated by the Somascan Fathers in Swiss Lugano. This is where he first met Francesco Soave, the Swiss philosopher and author (who enjoyed rather an excess of success and respect during his lifetime, though he was not without his merits). Manzoni always thought fondly of his former teacher Soave, but as the years passed this memory of him also became tinged with mild irony, with Manzoni describing him "as gentle in character as in name" (a pun on his surname, as the Italian adjective "soave" means "gentle").

Be that as it may, this is virtually the only direct contact Manzoni had with Italian-speaking Switzerland.

"The Betrothed" at school

There was another link between Manzoni and Switzerland, however, though one of quite a different kind. The fact is that *I Promessi Sposi* ("The Betrothed") became required reading for many generations of students aged 12 to 19 throughout Italy and in Canton Ticino (provided they were academically "up to it", that is). Since students were forced to read this book at high school level and then later also at middle school



level, they were quite prone to developing an aversion towards the novel and its author. The various reasons for this aversion can be left to the imagination. The subject of the *The Betrothed* at school has become so common that the media never hesitate to refer to it when talking about school. A recent example of this can be found in issue n° 25 of the Italian magazine *Sette* (21 June 2013), where we may read the opinion of the vice-president of Giunti Editore (a major Italian publishing house):

"[...] absurd tortures that leave an indelible negative mark, often for one's entire life. The best example, as always, is that oppressive book – *The Betrothed* – the cause of widespread anguish. If I were to ask 'Who has actually re-read this book since your schooldays?', the answer would undoubtedly be 'No one.'"

I myself would have to answer: Yes, I have re-read it with great pleasure and to great advantage! As I am sure many others would too. Romano Amerio (1905–1997) of Lugano, philosopher and philologist (and a leading authority on Manzoni and author of the critical work *Osservazioni sulla Morale Cattolica di Alessandro Manzoni*), condemned the trend of abandoning the practice of

A. Manzoni,
I Promessi Sposi,
Ulrico Hoepli, Milan,
1900, with
illustrations by
Gaetano Previati,
Si.M.U.L., Villa
Manzoni, Manzoni
Museum, Lecco.

learning poems and passages by heart at school in his tract *I giorni e le voci*. He felt people were at risk of forgetting that poetry involves a combination of the senses, sound and rhythm. He spoke strongly against the reduction of poetry to mere mental reading devoid of the acoustic element (remember how St. Augustine was amazed that St. Ambrose read in silence...).

Amerio became even more outspoken when describing how ancient and modern authors are studied in school:

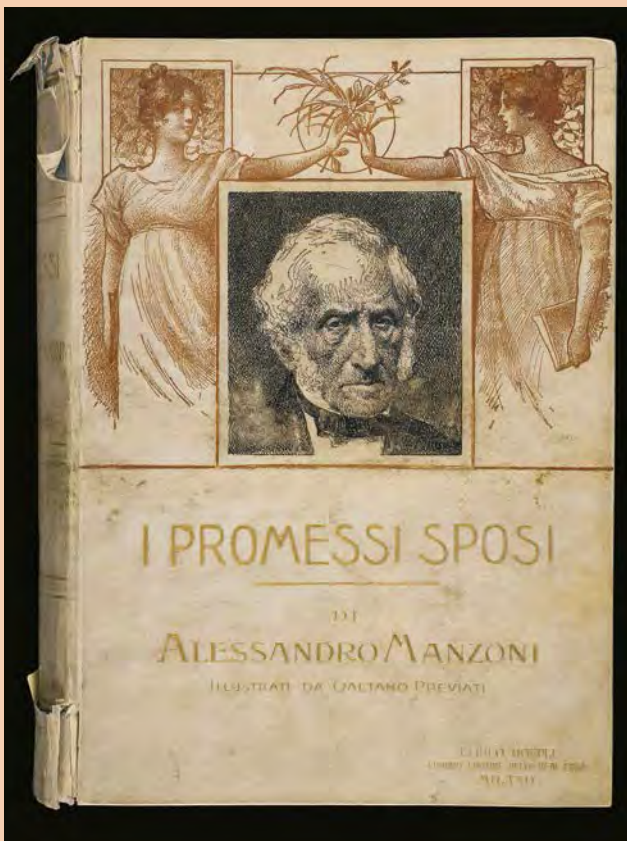
“A horrendous, miserable, abstract set of grammatical points, logical analysis, comments, rules and exceptions, paradigms [inflection] and style used to kill a young student’s ability to appreciate poetry. [...] It is impossible to learn Latin without reading the literary texts out loud, without learning them by heart, without speaking them and without, as it were, enacting them.”¹

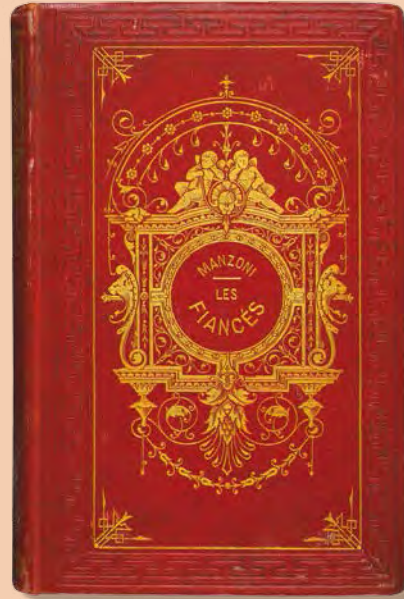
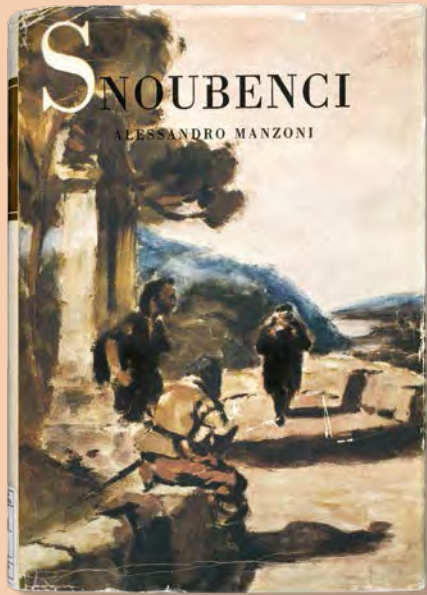
This is not the place to discuss these somewhat excessive condemnations, however. Let us return to *The Betrothed*. Manzoni’s superb passage where the mother of the dead child Cecilia steps out from her humble

dwelling to hand over her dead child to the “*monatti*” (corpse removers) may strike a teacher as an ideal passage for learning the art of text analysis. In Manzoni’s original version (“una donna scendeva dalla soglia”) as well as his final version (“Scendeva dalla soglia [...] una donna”) the subject is “una donna” (“a woman”) and the verb is “scendeva” (“stepped down”). However, the inversion we see in the final version, which moves the subject away from the verb and places the descriptive elements in the middle of the sentence, is far more beautiful. How many steps did Cecilia’s mother have to come down? Perhaps hardly even one, but the inversion and subject-verb separation create the impression of descending a long flight of stairs and therewith communicates a bitter and deeply religious sense of death.

In quasi justification of the widespread aversion among modern school-age children to Manzoni’s work, it is fitting to mention Goethe, one of Manzoni’s more illustrious readers and admirers. Goethe, accustomed to Scott’s historical novels, read the early version of Manzoni’s *The Betrothed*. He did not enjoy the chapters on the war, famine and plague, and believed Manzoni took too long describing the public events, which he described as “unbearable”. Indeed, he felt that the narrator had fallen into the trap of “minutely detailing tedious, dry facts like a news reporter”.² He gave his frank, though courteous opinion: “It is only with great impatience that we can accompany the historian to the places where we had hoped and expected to be led by the poet.”³

The gaping chasm between Manzoni’s masterful prose and the “expertise” of middle school students (11–13 years old) forced to read this book is obvious not only in chapters 31 and 32, addressed by Goethe, nor in the subject of the plague. This fatal gap is already evident in the very first chapter of the novel, where the theme of “the mafia” bursts from the page. Was a passage like the one below, which describes the actions of hired thugs (“*bravi*”) and their conflicting duty to enforce the principles of justice, really intended for young children – in the context in which they find themselves? With his characteristic irony, Manzoni writes:





“It was therefore quite natural that these men, instead of risking their lives, indeed throwing their lives away, for a desperate undertaking, should instead sell their inaction, or even their connivance, to those in power and should only exercise their hated authority and powers when such actions posed no personal danger; namely, by oppressing and harassing the peaceable and the defenceless.”

Manzoni the poet

Let us now leave Manzoni the novelist for the moment and consider him as a poet. Much in the spirit of a Swiss compromise, the literary critic Ezio Chiorboli once wrote of Manzoni's *Inni Sacri* (“Sacred Hymns”) as follows: “Some impressions of his *Natale*, a few parts of his *Passione*, more than a few strophes of his *Risurrezione*, all of his *Pentecoste* and the middle of his *Nome di Maria* are the most sublime [...]”⁴ The work by Zanichelli is extremely useful and shows how Manzoni “developed” into Manzoni the poet, i.e. through his famous “*pensarci su*” (“think about it”). “Think about it” when preparing the text and “think about it” when editing it (cuts, changes etc.). Indeed, when it comes to “preparing the text”, Chiorboli dares to hope that the critics will be more forgiving of the verses written in his youth, i.e. *Del Trionfo della Libertà* (“On the Triumph of Liberty”), which Manzoni had later scorned, being a far harsher critic of his own work than that of others. These verses come under the general heading *Poesie avanti la conversione rifiutate* (“poems rejected prior to conversion”). When the poet, at the age of 15 (“*Vate trilustre*”), composed the four cantos making up his *On the Triumph of Liberty* (1801), I believe that the young Manzoni wanted to emulate the world's greatest poet, Dante Alighieri, more than “the two universally acclaimed bright stars: Parini, the lyric and epic poet and satirist who died a couple of years earlier, and Alfieri, the writer of tragedies, still alive two years later.”⁵ It is not for me to argue the point, even if, when faced with verses such as these:

“Ed il siculo e 'l calabro bifolco
Frange a crudo signor le dure glebe,
E riga di sudore il non suo solco [...]”

one wonders whether the 15-year-old poet-in-the-making foresaw the fate of Sicilian and Calabrian “agricultural workers” in Switzerland.

It is, however, my impression that Manzoni's Swiss readers, as well as his Italian and foreign “Italianist” admirers, were perhaps a bit too quick to overlook Manzoni's “rejected” poems when considering “Dante in Manzoni”. For instance, in the second canto of *On the Triumph of Liberty* one reads:

“Il superbo e deluso decemviro,
Cui stimolava la digiuna e rea
Libidine, e struggea l'insana rabbia,
Che i già protesi invan nervi rodea [...]”

If we ignore the “*insana rabbia*”, a reference to Dante's “*tedesca rabbia*” (German wrath), the last line is very close to Dante's “*dove lasciò li mal protesi nervi*” (“where he left his sin-excited nerves”) (*Inferno* XV, 114). It should be noted that Francesco Chiesa – a major name in Swiss Italian culture – had an ambivalent opinion of Manzoni. This was shared by a small minority of Manzoni's public, without their “thinking about it” too much. In other words, too much attention was paid to superficial matters, being oriented more on the “heroic” Carducci than the “religious” Manzoni. In one of his great *Colloqui di San Silvestro con Francesco Chiesa* interviews, Romano Amerio wrote (20 March 1973):

“Then we thumb through the *Il Corriere della Sera* paper and notice an article by Cesare Angelini on *Fermo e Lucia*. In response to the claim that [Manzoni's] *Ermengarda* is the flower of our poetry and that [his] *Il cinque maggio* is like a Greek chorus without a tragedy, Chiesa is quick to disagree: Manzoni is brilliant in *The Betrothed*, but less so as a poet. I ask him what he means: Is Manzoni less able as a poet than he is as a novelist, or is Manzoni a lesser poet than many others? He replies: the latter.”⁶

It is worth looking at Manzoni's self-censorship both here and in a few of his revisions, which are so representative of Manzoni's drive to “think about it” (“*pensarci su*”), a

Opposite page:
Reproductions of
a frontispiece,
a back cover and the
front covers of some
of the many
translations of
I Promessi Sposi.

Snoubenci, Prague,
1957, Czech
translation, Si.M.U.L.,
Villa Manzoni,
Manzoni
Museum, Lecco.

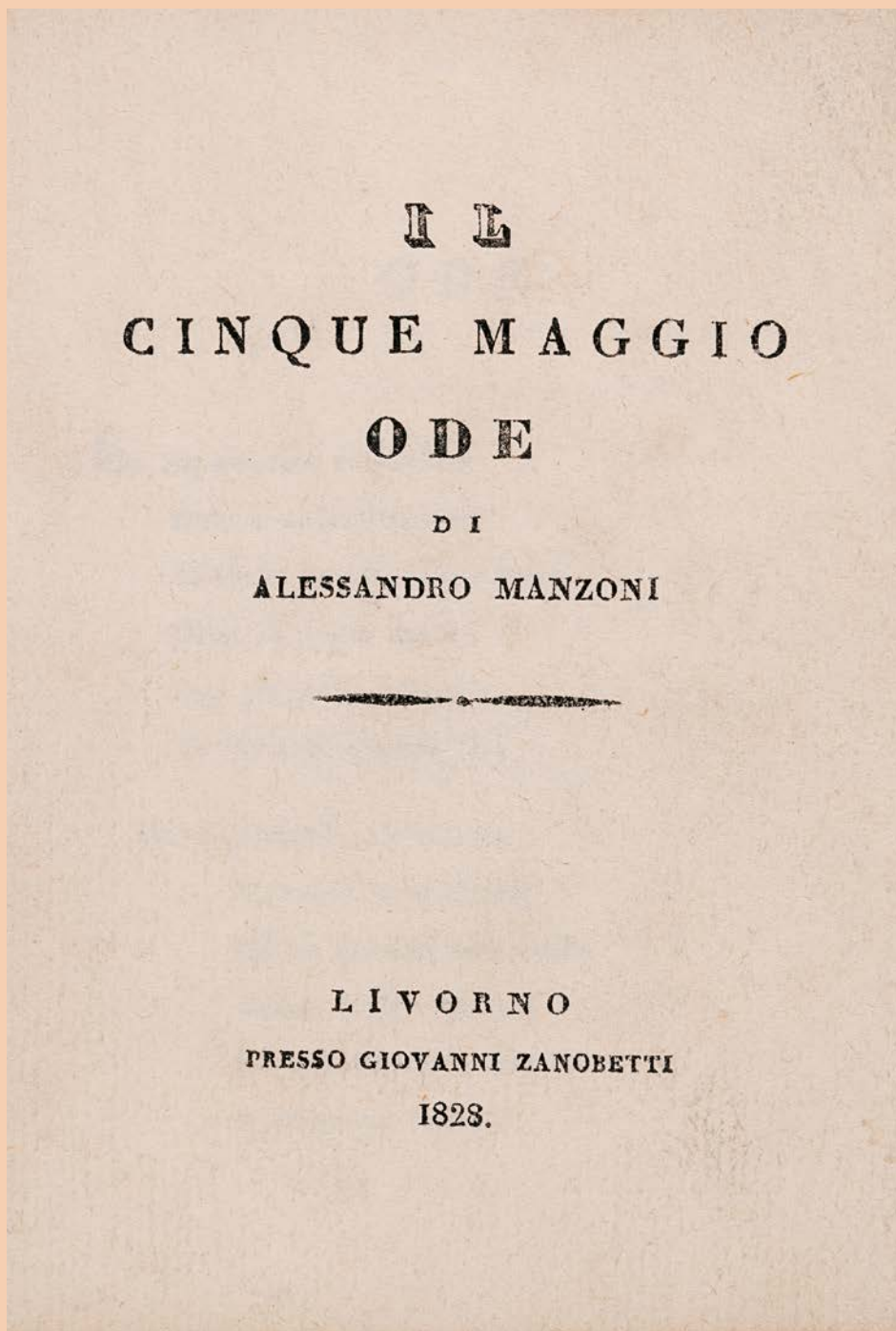
Les fiancés,
Paris, 1877,
French
translation, Si.M.U.L.,
Villa Manzoni,
Manzoni
Museum, Lecco.

Chinese translation,
1943, frontispiece
and back cover,
Si.M.U.L., Villa
Manzoni, Manzoni
Museum, Lecco.

De Trolovade,
1951, Swedish
translation, Si.M.U.L.,
Villa Manzoni,
Manzoni
Museum, Lecco.

Kihlautuneet,
Helsinki, 1946,
Finnish
translation, Si.M.U.L.,
Villa Manzoni,
Manzoni
Museum, Lecco.

A. Manzoni,
Il cinque maggio,
Ode, by Giovanni
Zanobetti,
Livorno, 1834,
Si.M.U.L., Villa
Manzoni, Manzoni
Museum, Lecco.



characteristic also attributed to Chiesa, though to a far lesser degree than Manzoni.

Self-censorship

Let us begin with an astounding deleted/rejected stanza of *La Pentecoste* (from the “Sacred Hymns”, 1812) that formed part of a comparison where the killing of Christ is described as a fatal act for mankind: a macro-event likened to the micro-event of a mother bird being killed as she brings food (“*l’esca usata*” = our daily bread) to her fledgling chicks:

“Come in lor macchia i parvoli
Sparsi di piuma lieve,
Cheti la madre aspettano
Che più tornar non deve,
Che discendendo al tepido
Nido con l’esca usata
Per l’aria insanguinata
Cadde percossa al suol”

Elsewhere I have commented: “The reader will look in vain for these verses by Alessandro Manzoni.”⁷ [...] *La Pentecoste di Alessandro Manzoni dal primo abbozzo all’edizione*

definitiva, edited by Luigi Firpo, is helpful in understanding fully the tormented development of this famous sacred hymn. [...] The sense of fatality and “programming” in our existence are given great weight in this stanza. This “programming” is underscored by the use of the verb “*deve*” (must), which Manzoni probably got from Torquato Tasso: “*Ma ecco omai l’ora fatale è giunta / che l’viver di Clorinda al suo fin deve*” (“But here the fatal hour has now been reached / When Chlorinda’s life must end”) (*Jerusalem Delivered*, canto XII, stanza 64).

Then there is the highly dramatic hyperbole of “*insanguinata*” (bloody): how much blood is lost, technically speaking, when a mother bird is killed by a hunter? Enough to drench the air? Manzoni’s formidable hyperbole (a device used in the much maligned art of rhetoric) can be compared with Shakespeare (*Macbeth*, II, 2) when Macbeth asks: “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas in incarnadine, / Making the green one red.”

There is another comparison that should be mentioned, especially given the title of this essay, *Manzoni and Switzerland*. It is not as “beautiful” as the one above, but it is nonetheless meaningful, a geographical simile found in *La Pentecoste*: the light of the Holy Spirit is ONE, but everyone receives it differently according to his own individual language, just as on the Saint Gotthard, the heart (“*seno*”) of the Swiss Alps (“*alpestre Elvezia*”), the eternal snow is “one” with the water which springs from it when it melts, yet the rivers that ultimately result have different geographical names, the Ticino (“*Tesino*”) to the south, the Rhone (“*Rodano*”) to the west and the Rhein (“*Reno*”) to the north – different rivers with the same origin.

“Tal dell’alpestre Elvezia
Fuor dell’oscuro seno
Sgorga il Tesino, il Rodano
E quel superbo Reno”

Manzoni opts firmly and successfully for a more “ecumenical” comparison in his revised version of *La Pentecoste*, likening the light of the Holy Spirit to a sunbeam and the process of refraction:⁸

“Come la luce rapida
Piove di cosa in cosa,
E i color vari suscita
Dovunque si riposa;
Tal risonò moltiplice
La voce dello Spiro:
L’Arabo, il Parto, il Siro
In suo sermon l’udì.”

The scholars

The word “*cosa*” (“thing”), used in the last simile, was a word dear to Manzoni. He made splendid use of it, as Giorgio Orelli (1921–2013) from Canton Ticino cleverly pointed out in his *Una cosa manzoniana*⁹ (especially with regard to the surprise wedding, arranged by Agnese to thwart Don Rodrigo’s evil plans). Giorgio Orelli is just one of the many scholars who demonstrate that Italian-speaking Switzerland started to view Italy differently after the end of the Fascist era and the terrible Second World War – credit for this change in attitude goes not only to Giovanni Battista Angioletti (1896–1961), as Gianfranco Contini (1912–1990) generously noted, but also Contini himself, while teaching at Freiburg University.

Alongside Giorgio Orelli, many other Italianists worked hard in the second half of the 1900s to improve cultural matters in Italian-speaking Switzerland, just as Contini had hoped, promised and recognised. One was Romano Amerio (1905–1997) who, together with Augusto Guzzo (1894–1986), published the works of authors such as Giordano Bruno and Tommaso Campanella and literary studies on others, including Cartesio, Sarpi, Leopardi and Manzoni. One such work was his *Osservazioni sulla morale cattolica di Alessandro Manzoni: Testo critico con introduzione, apparato, commento, appendice di frammenti e indici, accompagnato da uno studio delle dottrine* (Radaelli insisted that “All the ‘observations’ made by Amerio rotated around the powerful magnet of logic [...]”).¹⁰ Then there was Pio Fontana (1927–2001), also from Canton Ticino, who taught at the University of St. Gallen, and Remo Fasani (1922–2011) from Canton Graubünden, who taught at Neuchâtel, both of whom were convinced of Manzoni’s greatness and warned Italian-speaking Switzerland of the pitfalls of provincial misunderstandings.

Manzoni also included historical individuals and anonymous figures in *The Betrothed*. Manzoni could just as well have mentioned his teacher Antonio Olgiati alongside Ripamonti: originally from Lugano, Olgiati had established a career in Milan and been Cardinal Federigo Borromeo's right-hand man in setting up the Biblioteca Ambrosiana. Indeed, Olgiati was responsible for sourcing all the books in Northern Europe.

Skipping to the chapters on the plague, Manzoni had no time to identify the “*monatti*” (corpse removers) or explain their role (he had other more pressing things on his mind), yet they played an important part in the story, especially when Renzo entered Milan and was mistaken for an “*untore*” (anointer), thereby putting his life at risk. Where did the name “*monatti*” come from? Possibly from “*monatlich*”, a German term meaning “monthly” used to indicate a job that is done periodically each month and the perfect way to describe the horrible work performed by the “*monatti*”, which one hoped “would not last forever”:¹¹

“It can be used to indicate a ‘worker’ (removing corpses during the plague), engaged for a limited period (*monatlich*), on a monthly basis. One hoped (this is mere hypothesis) that the despised and extraordinary job of the “*monatti*” (Swiss? Bündtner?) would not last forever.”

“Men and the passing years will tell me who I am.” This is the last verse in a sonnet Manzoni wrote in 1801, a self-portrait entitled *Il proprio ritratto*. Yet if Manzoni were to return for just a moment, he would perhaps suggest, with an ironic smile on his face, that a title like *Manzoni and Switzerland* would be bound to make one “go mad” while doing the “research”. It is not – he would say – that Switzerland was of no interest to him, and not just because he hailed from Milan and Lombardy. Its history, too, had interested him since he was a child, which he compared to that of Italy. He did not “delete” Switzerland from his mind, but simply put it in brackets. His intent was never to highlight this or that country in his

poetry, verses and prose, but to consider human society, as one of his eminent readers, Gianfranco Contini, once said about Carlo Emilio Gadda:

“With this, the sole, truly democratic (poetic) language that Italy has ever had, was the language of those two sublime Illuminists, one focusing on the human condition, the other on human society: Giordani's protégé, Leopardi, and the idol of his years in Florence, Manzoni [...].”¹²

If Manzoni were to return for a moment, he would also be quick to respond to an observation made by Franco Fortini in his introduction to Luis de Góngora's *Sonetti*:

“There exists today a whole area of artistic, literary and poetic sensitivity that has removed, indeed abolished, the historical dimension and thus the weight and value of references, echoes and, I dare say, every vestige of conscious diachrony.”¹³

As one can deduce from his writings, such as his *Lettre à Monsieur Chauvet*, Alessandro Manzoni always understood the full weight of history, the importance of man's achievements and thoughts. He fully appreciated the emotions involved in men's decisions and plans, their successes and misadventures. Much of what has been left out of the history books has become the domain of poetry.

So, long live both Alessandro Manzoni and Switzerland, and all other nations with their individual destinies. May they all share the same spirit of human society and its values.

* **Giovanni Orelli**

Author

Notes

- ¹ ROMANO AMERIO, *I giorni e le voci*, Pedrazzini, Locarno, 1980, p. 71.
- ² EZIO RAIMONDI – LUCIANO BOTTONI (edited by), *I Promessi Sposi*, Principato, Milan, 1988, pp. 740-741.
- ³ Ibid, p. 740.
- ⁴ EZIO CHIORBOLI (edited by), *Alessandro Manzoni. Le poesie*, Zanichelli, Bologna, 1956, p. XIX.
- ⁵ Ibid, p. VII.
- ⁶ ROMANO AMERIO, *Colloqui di San Silvestro con Francesco Chiesa*, Fondazione Ticino Nostro, Lugano, 1974, p. 240.
- ⁷ GIOVANNI ORELLI, *Fatto soltanto di voce. Poesie e traduzioni del parlar materno della Valle Bedretto, alto Ticino*, Messaggi Brevi, Lugano, 2012, p. 57.
- ⁸ Cf. LUIGI FIRPO (edited by), *La Pentecoste di Alessandro Manzoni dal primo abbozzo all'edizione definitiva*, Strenna UTET, Turin, 1962. Of especial importance: page 46 on “pensarci su”.
- ⁹ Chapter in GIORGIO ORELLI, *Quel ramo del lago di Como e altri accertamenti manzoniani*, Edizioni Casagrande, Bellinzona, 1990, pp. 65-80.
- ¹⁰ ENRICO MARIA RADAELLI, *Romano Amerio. Della verità e dell'amore*, Aurea Domus, Rome, 2004, p. 30.
- ¹¹ EZIO RAIMONDI – LUCIANO BOTTONI (edited by), *I Promessi Sposi*, cit., see notes to pp. 712-715 and especially p. 724 et seq. and the comments.
- ¹² CARLO EMILIO GADDA, *La cognizione del dolore*, containing Gianfranco Contini's *Saggio introduttivo*, Einaudi, Turin, 1963, p. 23.
- ¹³ CESARE GREPPI (edited by), *Luis de Gongora, Sonetti*, with an *Introduzione* by Franco Fortini, Oscar Mondadori, Milan, 1985, p. X.

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The Manzoni Museum in Lecco

Barbara Cattaneo*



Left:
Entrance to the garden,
Si.M.U.L., Villa Manzoni, Lecco.

On this page:
The "noble" courtyard,
Si.M.U.L., Villa Manzoni, Lecco.

The Manzoni Museum was established in the Villa Manzoni just thirty years ago, making it a relatively “young” museum. However, the villa itself – also known as “Caleotto”, after the name of the area of the town where it is located – has a far older history.

The villa represents one of the most important places of Italian literature. It is where Alessandro Manzoni’s novel *I Promessi Sposi* (“The Betrothed”) starts with the famous opening line: “That branch of Lake Como [...]”. This is followed in the novel by a detailed description of the view from the villa: the lake, the mountains and the hills around Lecco. It is an immediate and vivid setting for the story.



The first member of the Manzoni family to live in the villa was the writer’s great-great-grandfather, Giacomo Maria, who was mentioned in a document dated 15 August 1612 as an “inhabitant of Caliotto, in the land of Lecco”. All of Manzoni’s subsequent ancestors were also born and lived in Villa Caleotto, including his father, Pietro Manzoni.

The villa was once the centre of a vast farm estate where grapes and mulberry trees were cultivated. Its current appearance is the result of modifications made by Manzoni’s father, Pietro.

Manzoni spent his childhood and early youth there, before selling the villa in 1818, when he moved to Milan. In 1821, writing in his new elegant residence in Brusuglio (near Milan), he decided to set *Fermo e Lucia* – the first (unpublished) draft of his

masterpiece, *The Betrothed* – in the Lecco area. In his introduction to the novel he called the surroundings “his own lands” and “the most beautiful in the world”.

Lecco has become the oldest and most frequently visited “literary park” in Italy. Indeed, people started visiting the area in search of “Manzonian places” as soon as *The Betrothed* was published in 1827. Some 50,000 tourists from all over Europe still come to Lecco every year to discover the area Manzoni once knew.

The villa

The villa was owned by the Scola family up until 1962, when it became the property of the Municipality of Lecco. Then, in 1979, the Manzoni Museum was set up, under the direction of its first curator, Gian Luigi Daccò.

The inventory drawn up when Manzoni sold the villa to the Scola family in 1881 enables us to identify the furniture that must have belonged to the writer. The furnishings and fittings in the villa have now been fully restored, and copies of all the first editions of Manzoni’s works have been acquired, as have some of his original manuscripts. The villa also houses the Manzoni collections and a research library.

In 1983, restoration of the villa’s bel étage was completed, under the watchful eye of Gian Luigi Daccò, and the Civic Art Gallery was established in the villa. Today the museums in the Villa Manzoni, the Belgiojoso Palazzo and the Palazzo delle Paure form the Lecco museum system (Sistema Museale Urbano Lecchese – SIMUL).

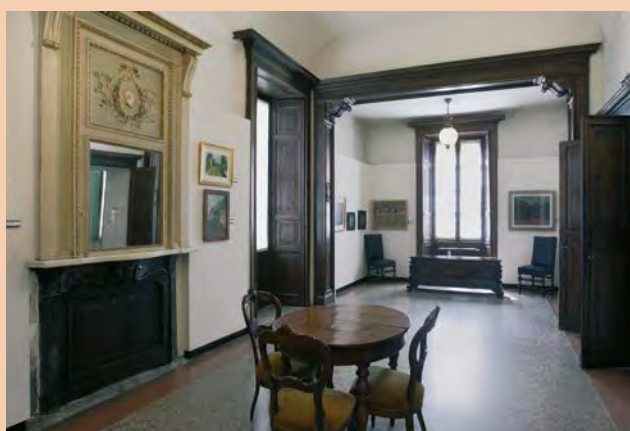
In Manzoni’s time, the small hill on which Villa Caleotto is situated, to the left of the Caldono stream, was still in open countryside, with its slopes covered by vineyards and



Left:
Carlo Pizzi,
La casa di Olate,
last quarter
19th century,
drawing,
Si.M.U.L., Villa
Manzoni, Manzoni
Museum, Lecco.

Right:
Façade looking
on to the garden,
Si.M.U.L., Villa
Manzoni, Lecco.

gardens. The city of Lecco eventually expanded, and the land surrounding the villa was built up with numerous large factories, all of which in the meantime have disappeared. The villa is an elegant neoclassical building, its facade detailed in sandstone. After passing through a large entrance, one finds oneself in a central courtyard surrounded by a portico with sandstone Palladian (“Serlian” or “Venetian”) windows and columns. The chapel is on the left; above the altar is a beautiful painting by Carlo Preda (Milan, 1645–1729) of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, the patron saint of the chapel. Manzoni’s father is buried in the chapel.



Left:
Sala IV,
Si.M.U.L., Villa
Manzoni, Manzoni
Museum, Lecco.

Right:
Sala VIII,
dining room,
Si.M.U.L., Villa
Manzoni, Manzoni
Museum, Lecco.

The garden is to the right of the house and was originally laid out in the “*giardino all’italiana*” geometric style. The rear facade of the villa looks onto the park and dates back to before the modifications made by Pietro Manzoni and is thus all that remains of the early 18th century building.

The museum

The exhibition begins in the “Sala delle Scuderie”, a large room once used to house the family’s carriages.

“Sala I” is another room on the ground floor, previously used to house the farming equipment. A large display case opposite the entrance contains the period costumes used for a TV mini-series (“*I Promessi Sposi*”) broadcast by the RAI (Italian state television) in 1989. Hanging on the wall opposite is the well-known portrait of Manzoni by Giuseppe Molteni (1800–1867); next to this is a bronze bust of Lucia by the sculptor Francesco Confalonieri (1850–1925).

“Sala II” is devoted to showing how Manzoni figures in the history of Lecco. In the centre of the room is a large-scale model of the villa

and its immediate vicinity as they were in 1798, when Manzoni’s father took him out of school in Lugano and made him return to Lecco so that, while still a teenager, he could be registered as a citizen with the Department delle Montagne of the Cisalpine Republic. The wall on the left features an early 16th century portrait (by an anonymous Lombard



artist) of Gian Giacomo Medici, more commonly known as “Il Medeghino”, the brother of Pope Pius IV and a famed soldier of fortune who, in the early 1500s, fought on the side of the Duchy of Milan against the Swiss (the “*Drei Bünde*”) during the Musso War and was rewarded by becoming the Count of Lecco. Next there are a series of panels telling the socio-economic history of the city and several interesting documents on display, including a deed signed by King Francis I of France granting the County of Lecco as a feudal tenure to Girolamo Morone (1515) and a proclamation of the Provisional Government of Lombardy dated 1848 elevating the status of the town of Lecco to that of a city.

“Sala III” contains many original manuscripts and objects once belonging to Manzoni, such as his ink stand, tobacco paraphernalia and spectacles. The display case opposite the entrance to this room shows several views of Lecco from the early 1800s. “Sala IV”, known as the “*tinello*” (small dining room) in Manzoni’s day, is the first of the family rooms. It contains a series of paintings depicting the “Manzonian places” before the industrialisation of the local economy and the urban sprawl of recent decades, which has radically changed the face of the landscapes that Manzoni once called “the most beautiful in the world”.

“Sala V”, traditionally called the “*cucina*” (kitchen), still has a huge inglenook fire-



place with two side benches, typical of northern Lombardy. In the centre of the room is Manzoni's old wicker cradle from the time he was wet-nursed by Caterina Panzeri Spreafico at the Cascina Costa in Galbiate. Five canvases hang on the wall to the right of the fireplace, 16th century copies of Titian's famous work, *The Twelve Caesars*, painted for the "Sala dei Cesari" in the Palazzo Ducale in Mantova and now lost; these are the same paintings that, in the novel, Renzo saw in the office of the lawyer Azzecagarbugli. The room also features the Manzoni family tree, a portrait of Pietro Manzoni and a 17th century walnut sedan chair upholstered in leather.

"Sala VI" was called the "*sala rossa*" in Manzoni's day on account of the original colour of the plasterwork. Today this room is dedicated to Manzoni's works: the research library has some 3,800 publications, including copies of all the first editions; these are exhibited on a rotating basis in the cabinets here.

The first cabinet covers his poetic works. Manzoni started composing poetry at an early age, writing his *Del trionfo della Libertà* ("On the Triumph of Liberty", 1801) at the age of just 15, followed by some sonnets clearly influenced by Vincenzo Monti, and four sermons. In 1803 Manzoni wrote his idyllic poem *Adda*, dedicated to Monti, while living here in the villa.

The second cabinet covers his tragedies. Manzoni's work was concentrated on plays during the period from 1816 to 1822, when he wrote his *Conte di Carmagnola* (1816–1820) and *Adelchi* (1820–1822). Also on display are the notes he made for a third play – *Spartaco* – though this was later abandoned. Manzoni set out his theories about the theatre in his *Lettre à Monsieur Chauvet*. These were based on the principle (further developed in *La Storia della Colonna Infame* and *The Betrothed*) of strict historical accuracy, which, according to Manzoni, is the foundation of the moral and therefore aesthetic value of any literary work.

The third cabinet is dedicated to Manzoni the historian: when writing *The Betrothed*, Manzoni researched his subject in great detail, drawing on the 17th century archives and newspaper reports in Milan. There is also a rare engraving of the execution of the "anointers" in Milan from the 17th century

and the Latin text of a contemporary report of the plague by Giuseppe Ripamonti (*De peste quae fuit anno MCDXXX*).

The last cabinet provides information on Manzoni's many works regarding the Italian language, history, philosophy, aesthetics and morals.

Next is "Sala VII", the "*Salone delle Grisaglie*", the name coming from the monochrome wall paintings (known as "*grisailles*" in French) attributed to Giuseppe Lavelli, a decorator working in the Brianza area and Milan in the early 19th century. Given the cycle and the classical themes of these paintings, it is likely that Pietro Manzoni commissioned these, along with all the other neoclassical decorations throughout the villa. This is the main salon, still with the original pieces of furniture that Manzoni sold to the Scola family, as listed in the inventory attached to the deed of sale. This room has remained unchanged for almost two centuries. A large chandelier hangs from the centre of the ceiling; the inventory indicates that it dates back to at least 1818 and was "graciously given as a gift by Signora Donna Giulia Beccaria, Widow of Manzoni, to Signor Giuseppe Scola". The paintings on the walls depict episodes from the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, mythology and ancient Roman history.

"Sala VIII" also contains some original furniture from Manzoni's time. A display case in the centre of the room documents the success that *The Betrothed* enjoyed (and still enjoys) in a variety of areas, with examples of how the novel has been popularised since 1827 to the present day. Indeed, right from its first publication, the novel has served as inspiration in many different fields: from music, ballet and opera to literary supplements, advertising, theatre, historical re-enactments, parades and masked balls, just as now it inspires films, cartoons, TV series and parodies.

Manzoni was very much aware of the impact of his novel. He was so flattered that he referred to his masterpiece as a "*cantafavola*" ("frivolous epic tale").

The composer Errico Petrella (1813–1877), who studied under Vincenzo Bellini, wrote an opera based on the novel (*I Promessi Sposi*, 1869) of which the score and costumes are on display in this room. Other librettists and

composers, such as Emilio Praga (1839–1875) and Amilcare Ponchielli (1834–1886), also drew on Manzoni's work for inspiration.

This room also highlights topographical studies on places related to Manzoni and featured in the novel and various works by authors who wrote “sequels” to *The Betrothed* and *La Storia della Colonna Infame* describing what came before or after (Antonio Balbiani, Luigi Gualtieri and Marco Giovannetti).

Interest in the novel was so great that many readers of the time were, like today's fans of TV series, eager for the next instalment so they could find out how the story developed; the novel was also “serialised” in the newspapers, re-written in a simpler language but no less full of exciting content.

“Sala IX” and “Sala X” are dedicated to the final version of *The Betrothed* (1840), known as the “*Quarantana*”.

Manzoni published this final version at his own expense, taking great care with every detail. In so doing, he created a new type of illustrated book, unheard of in Italy, with more than four hundred beautiful woodcuttings of drawings by some of the top artists of the time, such as Federico Moja, Luigi Bisi, Massimo D'Azeglio and Paolo and Luigi Riccardi, coordinated by the Piedmont painter Francesco Gonin (1808–1889).

Manzoni envisaged this final version as we would a film today, personally giving the artists all the details to be included in each illustration. He then corrected them all, drawing by drawing, and decided their sequence and layout on the page, as he wished to show visually what he had imagined while writing the book.

There were many reasons for Manzoni wanting to write this second version of the novel. First and foremost, he believed that the earlier version (1827) had been too full of Lombard words and expressions, and this troubled him given his new thoughts on the Italian language. This led to considerable corrections to the text: he was helped in this major undertaking by several Florentine men of letters. Another motive was the fact that many unauthorised editions of the novel had been printed, which, according to Manzoni's calculations, amounted to some fifty thousand copies (a huge amount for that time), all of which yielded absolutely no financial benefit to the true author.

Despite all his efforts, the new version, which was issued in instalments, was a total publishing flop. Manzoni lost a lot of money as a result. This financial fiasco, together with a fire that ravaged his Brusuglio estate and debts run up by his two sons, Filippo and Enrico, had a devastating effect on Manzoni's personal wealth.

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Sala VII
"Salone delle
Grisaglie",
Si.M.U.L.,
Villa Manzoni,
Lecco.



Photo sources and information on the quotations in the financial section and on the cover

The quotations accompanying the thematic pictures in this year's Annual Report were selected by MYRIAM FACCHINETTI. All the quotations and illustrations by GIACOMO MANTEGAZZA (1853–1920) in the financial section and on the cover were taken from ALESSANDRO MANZONI, *I promessi sposi*, Oggiono, 2009.

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The English quotes from Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* were in part taken and adapted from the following public domain translations:

The Betrothed, translated by Richard Bentley, London, 1834 (published by A. Spottiswoode, London) and *I Promessi Sposi*, The Harvard Classics, vol. 21, P. F. Collier & Son, New York, 1909.

Sources of photographs in the cultural section

Si.M.U.L. (Sistema Museale Urbano Lecchese – Municipal Museums of Lecco), Museum Centre of Villa Manzoni, Manzoni Museum: photographs on pages I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VIII, XI, XIII, XIV, XVI, XX, XXI, XXII, XXIV, XXVIII, XXXI, XXXIII, XXXIV, XXXVI, XL, XLI, XLII, XLIII, XLIV, XLVII.

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Acknowledgements

We wish to thank:

- BARBARA CATTANEO, PhD, Director of the Villa Manzoni Museum and Exhibition Centre of the Municipality of Lecco Si.M.U.L, and MARIELLA BONACINA, PhD, for the photographs she kindly made available and for her contributions to the photographic research.
- PAOLO CATTANEO – Cattaneo Editore (publishers) – for the illustrations by Giacomo Mantegazza (1853–1920) from the 2009 edition of *I promessi sposi* published by Cattaneo Editore, which were made available free of charge.

Notes

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