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Democratization of Heroism in the Romantic Historical Novel: Manzoni, *The Betrothed*

Abstract: The aim of the present study is to emphasize the idea that, in line with Walter Scott, Manzoni's novel is a typical synthesis of the Biedermeier Romanticism, illustrating the evolution of the heroic novel from Romantic to realistic patterns, from idealism to pragmatism. Manzoni's novel depicts the agony of medieval chivalric structures and the democratization of heroism. For Manzoni, making history means discovering the behaviour of common people who are described in credible situations; stylistically, this means giving up high rhetoric. The main characters, Renzo and Lucy, both of low origin, are expressions of moral heroism, complex natures with an obstinate desire of deromanticization. The purpose of the love plot is to capitalize on the author's ideas concerning social meliorism and the development of a national consciousness that is in the power of common people with great souls. The Christian symbolism of the book gives the main role in the ideology of the novel to a country girl, an anti-Dulcinea, but a terrestrial Madonna: Lucy, the "light". Consequently, Manzoni engages in an obvious polemic with Don-Quixotism, with capitalizing prominent individualities and any attitude that idealizes reality.

Key words: historical novel, chivalric structures, democratization of heroism, anti-Don-Quixotism, indirect socio-political message

The Betrothed "marks a moment of equilibrium in the Romantic landscape, the aspiration to separate the historical novel from the pattern of the «frenetic genre»" (Olteanu 141). With this novel, Manzoni creates a typical synthesis of the tamed Romanticism, the late, Biedemeier Romanticism that, according to Virgil Nemoianu, tempers the High-Romanticism ideal and adapts the idea of Revolution to national microcommunities, pursuing the acceptable solutions of social amelioration. Instead of extremes, the values of moderation summarize an idyllic vision of a life inclined towards moral meanings.

An original and major follower of Scott, the Italian author wrote a single novel that became a masterpiece. The purpose of evocation remains to support moral consciousness and, like in any cultural area lacking a national state, the historical novel assumes the mission of imagining its existence. *The Betrothed*, a representative work of the Italian *Risorgimento*, does this indirectly, substituting one type of oppression with another, namely the Hapsburg domination in Italy in the first half of the 19th century with the Spanish domination of the 17th century. However, right in the middle of its Romantic epic structure,

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one can see the signs of its own negation, as the novel is considered as “one of the capital works that inaugurates a new era, the era of the real, in the history of art” (De Sanctis 347). Manzonian Romanticism establishes a precarious balance between past and present. The writer is a modern being who does not forget his Enlightenment-influenced education that is present in the moral ideas included in the story, in the paternal vision and the ignoble hero, but who also advances towards realism, by considering life both extensively and profoundly and undermining the bookish, fanciful schemes.

The knights are replaced with humble creatures, which means breaking loose from behavioural patterns and accessing complexity; stylistically, this means giving up high rhetoric, a certain degree of deromantization that is necessary after overestimating the code of chivalry. For Manzoni, making history means discovering the way in which common people behave. The general schematism serving the illustration of a thesis is removed in favour of a more realistic and credible vision. The profundity of the characters who are spiritually exhausted because of the determinations brought forth in a crisis, shows that Manzoni is superior to Scott. Romantic idealization, as well as placing the individual in violent antithetic relations could only occur to the detriment of the individual and by eluding the inner dimension of the transforming processes that appear spectacular and, implicitly, artificial. The Romantic dilemma means, inevitably, simplicity; the realistic writers of the second half of the 19th century will discover that the world is much more complex than their predecessors claimed. The Romantic heroes change their life course all of a sudden, indifferent to life’s external circumstances, proving that man’s salvation and loss lies in man himself. Realism conditions their options introducing various pressures – society, own nature, life’s circumstances – and offering them a more articulate and, as far as possible, exhaustive structure.

An ideal world in a wild century

Manzoni keeps the Romantic plot. His couple descends from fairy tales and, representing the Good, confronts the Evil; moral strength opposes political power and defeats it, but the “heroes” are avoided on both sides, exposure to danger being a sign of irresponsibility and contempt of the social order that classifies people in “categories”, in systems of alliances. If Scott thought that the imperfection of the premodern state aroused chivalric impulses among aristocrats, Manzoni believes that such virtues have always existed among the common people whose great merit is that they manage to exercise them despite social injustice, not thanks to it (Pavel 240). Heroism, if it exists, belongs to the oppressed, but it does not involve changing the world through personal endeavours, but tolerating it through indifference supported by attention, receptivity to changing circumstances and trust in divine justice. This typical Manzonian attitude was called, after the character who best represents it, Don-Abbondianism, a term opposed to Don-Quixotism that exalted madness and risk on behalf of an excessive idealism (Călinescu 702). Don-Abbondianism define a cult of “preserving” the individual who, aware that he can’t change the course of events, must accommodate to them and even adapt a chameleon behaviour, in order to survive until the circumstances turn favourable. Don Abbondio’s creed is that “an honest man, who looked to himself and minded his own affairs, never met with any rough encounters” (Manzoni, 1834: 13). Romantic individualism, with its vocation for risk and rebellion,

evolves towards temperate, prudent and flexible options on a social level. Manzoni's lovers do not behave differently; they do not face danger, they would not stand a chance because they are not rich, they are non-heroic, "honest", God-fearing people who run away from it until the crisis is settled. When Renzo, terrified by the thought that Lucy could die of plague, tells his protector, Friar Christopher, that he plans to take revenge upon the man who has caused all the evil, he receives a severe reprimand and is accused of haughtiness. It is not for people do justice and punish; it is famine, war and especially plague – the agents of divine wrath that is responsible with moral selection and social sanity – that does it for them. The "immunity" provided by Don-Abbondianism proves to be salutary.

The story in Manzoni's novel does not break the familiar erotic pattern found both in Scott's and Dumas' works; everything happens between the moment when an obstacle is raised in the way of a couple and the moment when it is removed, but nothing else sounds familiar. The erotic episode is the only plot thread and only in the background one realises that the drama of the couple is, in fact, a metonymy; it is the drama of the entire Italian people that lives in humble conditions and is threatened by national disintegration. The state of crisis in Scott's novels becomes permanent in Manzoni's, where it is caused by Italy's fragmentation and the dependence of its states on the great interventionist foreign powers. Through Renzo and Lucy, the "humble" actors appear for the first time in a different type of novel than the idyllic or sentimental one. The protagonists are two young peasants from the duchy of Milan in 1628. He is a skilful weaver who loves to work, otherwise "an ignorant youth" only 20 years old; she is a shy, beautiful and pure girl on whom the local baron, don Roderick, has fixed his eyes. He wants her on a whim, reminding us of the feudal *prima nocte* right. He stops the village priest from marrying the two lovers and plans to kidnap the girl, but they run away on different paths, following the advice of the kind friar Christopher, a knight-errant of the ecclesiastical world. Renzo arrives in Milan during the days of the bread riots; by mistake, he is considered an instigator, followed and forced to take refuge in the neighbouring state. Lucy seems to be safe at a monastery in Monza, but Signora, the woman whom she had been sent to by friar Christopher's helping network, and her lover Edigio turn her over to the worst villain, Don Roderick's tool, the Unknown knight. However, she is saved from Don Roderick, because the Unknown, a true "Ogre of the fairy tale" with the devil in his soul, repents when he sees how pure she is and gives her to Frederick Borromeo, the archbishop of Milan. As she cannot go back in the area where her persecutor lives, she stays in Milan, working as a maid in a rich household. Meanwhile, plague arrives and the two lovers fall ill, but survive, while the tyrant dies, so they find each other again. Unfortunately, another barrier stops their union, the vow of chastity Lucy took as a sacrifice for her freedom the night she became the prisoner of the Unknown. Friar Christopher releases her from her vow to the Holy Virgin, the two lovers return to their village and Don Abbondio marries them. With the money they receive from selling their goods, they settle down in a different region, where Renzo will prosper as the owner of a spinning mill, and Lucy as the mother of many children. The idyllic triumphs and their will live a peaceful, happy and, epically speaking, terribly boring life, as the narrator admits. And the moral of the story is:

misfortunes most commonly happen to us from our own misconduct or imprudence; but sometimes from causes independent of ourselves; that the most innocent and prudent

conduct cannot always preserve us from them; and that, whether they arise from our own fault or not, trust in God softens them, and renders them useful in preparing us for a better life. (Manzoni, 1834: 452)

This is a love story based on the Romantic confrontation of opposites – freedom and tyranny, innocence and guilt, angelic and demonic – that gathers a number of frustrators and protectors around the two lovers. The frustrators self-eliminate or convert themselves to religion, so that only the protectors enjoy the happy-end; eventually, the benefit outclasses the damage, as it includes the experience that makes you stronger and provides lessons for the future. The history of the couple of lovers is decided by the history of the Italian Seicento with its double emanation of power, Spanish and feudal; the greater history is only suggested, taking place in the background, although it is depicted in the realistic manner learnt from Scott. The individual drama becomes a collective drama owing to Don Roderick, the embodiment of the evil genius of history, and conjures all the existing forces to manifest themselves in order to attract the most humble actors, people who otherwise would live according to the principle “live and let live”. However, only the material is historical, because the world is moral and the first on the moral scale is Lucy. The woman’s centrality is absolutely involuntary; this modern Helen has no merit in causing the disaster, she is just a common girl on whom a powerful man of the time has fixed his ambition and pride. The disproportion between the stake and the extensiveness of the plot emphasises the deep moral meaning of the narrative that could have become the short anecdote of a successful kidnapping. Consequently, the story has a double theme, as Francesco de Sanctis says: “an ideal story interwoven and merged with a rigorously historical plot” (De Sanctis 343).

The science of mediation: between morality and immorality – tolerance; between justice and abuse – adaptation

Guilty of these tribulations that eventually prove useful is the village priest who is intimidated by the Signor and refuses to marry the two lovers. Married, they would have been much stronger together, because a wife is less vulnerable than a lover is; they would not have been separated, at most, they would have wandered in search of a better place to live. By refusing to marry them, the priest breaks, out of fear, both a sacred and a human law, although he has an alternative: he could perform the marriage and then report the Signor’s threats to his superiors. The archbishop reprimands him: “Know you not that iniquity does not depend solely on its own strength, but on the credulity and cowardice of others?” (Manzoni, 1834: 317). And Don Abbondio admits that Perpetua, his uneducated servant, said the same thing: “Just the reasoning of Perpetua” – a unanimity that might make you think all this concentrates the writer’s entire social philosophy, a philosophy typical of eras of aggression, like the 17th-century Lombardy under Spanish domination, a replica of the contemporary Italy under Hapsburg control. However, if the moral rigour characterises the servant of the church, a man of timeless essence, fear characterises the historical man living under “hard times”. This, after all, is understandable. The major opposition established by Manzoni is the one between the decent man, a man of common sense, without qualities, and his conspicuous, angelic or diabolic individuality. Such plain

people are the priest, Lucy, Renzo, Agnes, Perpetua and they are the ones who will choose the middle course. Sometimes, as they are human, they might take a wrong step. The others, the supermen, are intransigent either in their virtues – like friar Christopher, who goes into the plague focus to take care of his sick fellow creatures, or the archbishop, who has the charity of an apostle – or in their vices, like Don Roderick, or they fall out of one extreme into another, like the Unknown or Gertrude, the vocationless nun from Monza who hesitates between self-sacrifice and murder. Thus the noble caste is shaken, torn between conflicting feelings, forced to make categorical, risky gestures and to change its status: from power to downfall, from richness to poverty, from pride to humiliation. The destiny of Manzoni's knights is to give up their actual life and its natural completion for the space of contemplation or death. The massive presence of anonymous individuals, people of low birth, but bearers of the author's social beliefs, is a great step forward towards realism, a step taken right in the heart of the Romantic model. Modernity turns roles upside down: pure virtue characterises not a lady, but a modest peasant girl, and the noble woman Gertrude is deceitful, a victim of her own rude passions and weaknesses. The knights are knights only by name: Don Roderick is a mediocre, a "mediocre tyrant", as Francesco de Sanctis says, far worse than the "extraordinary tyrant", the nameless knight who tries the same exercise of absolute virtue and purity, reminding of Scott's templar's conversion, also very sudden. Idealism, inferred from the feeling of predestination and trust in providence, resists in the pair of lovers, Lucy and Lorenzo, whose names suggest "light" and "victory", as does, paradoxically, the realism that confers authenticity to Scott's plan: of a couple is separated by inauspicious circumstances, the maiden is kidnapped and then recovered. In this case, a much more plausible reason adds to the historical fatality, the necessity to oppose tyranny through patience and compromise, two means that are totally unfamiliar to tyrants. In Manzoni's novel, the idea of equal opportunity, the foundation of any form of political liberalism, meets the idea of providential justice that can lead Christian virtues to triumph.

The clergy representatives, who remind everybody that the scales of the oppressed and the oppressors is balanced by a power different from the political power, are situated between a parasitic, decadent and, above all, foreign aristocracy and the active, morally and physically healthy natives. Morally speaking, the Romantic obsession for the double is present in Manzoni's novel as well, each character having a "negative" correspondent: assumed faith versus formal faith (Lucy – Gertrude), the Saint and the Demon (archbishop Borromeo – the Unknown knight), self-sacrifice and self-esteem (friar Christopher – Don Roderick), hesitation and determination (Don Abbondio – Renzo). Manzoni goes beyond the intransigency of Romantic dichotomy through a sense of limitation and reality that makes the characters mobile, bringing together opposites within the never-ending variety of a private existence through penance, repentance and improvement. Psychological analysis helps the process of adapting the ideal to the accidents and imperfections of history. The novel describes numerous providential encounters during which virtue confronts guilt and indifference; their confrontation leads to mediation, measure and agreement, orienting extreme feelings towards harmony and forgiveness, the key concepts of Manzoni's social philosophy. The relatives of the man friar Christopher killed in his youth forgive him, the archbishop forgives the Unknown, Renzo and Lucy forgive Don Roderick before his death and also Don Abbondio. A master of the science of mediation in all its particulars, Manzoni proves that tolerance must find a place between morality and immorality, and adaptation

should be preferred to humiliation and revenge. The radical knightly vision is tempered by the Christian symbols of the novel whose framework is based, right in the middle of the epic construction and ideation, on a feminine figure, a terrestrial Madonna, Lucy, the "light". *Donna angelicata* loses her noble-mindedness and beauty to gain Christian virtues that go hand in hand with simplicity and modesty.

The light of a plain soul

Lucy is the angelic soul lacking the complications and falsity imposed by external circumstances. Both in herself and in Gertrude speaks the instinct of life, against which life itself – through its forms of persecutions and, eventually, the vow of nunhood – sets off. The difference between the two women is that the former stays within the limits of the choice she has made and acts coherently, while the latter drifts into inner spiritual break to become a perverted being. The "innocent child" wants nothing else but to play the role of her species and waits for the moment of her wedding with a "modest and beautiful joy depicted on her countenance; a joy, however, troubled by a slight shade of anxiety" (Manzoni, 1834: 27). As an archetype, she is the Demeter-type woman for whom „fecundity comes first" (Evola 220) – maintained during a prolonged frustration of her potential capacities. Her Aphrodite-like facet as a sensual woman is always suppressed by the thought of decency; her moral norm implies obedience to her mother, her confessor or God, resistance in the face of misfortune, consistency with herself. She thinks that if she is good, then the world is good too and she judges the others according to her own measure. Consequently, she is stunned when she sees the manifestations of the evil, since these do not belong to her system of values, and hesitates to be part of any stratagem, like the plan to force the priest's hand to pronounce her marriage in front of two witnesses and make it legal. Lucy seems weak because her strength does not lie in her actions, and her "naivety" is merely unconditional trust in the triumph of the good. If she manages to save herself, this happens only thanks to the supreme value that she embodies: charity. Charity, with its facets, defines the Christian hero who, beyond any ascetic exaggeration, identifies himself with pure humanism and in particular with theological virtues, faith, hope and love. Christian heroes are also Renzo, friar Christopher, cardinal Borromeo and all those who make up the world as it should be – good. The moral character is not the privilege of a social class or profession. Renzo overcomes his misfortune because he is very aware of the right that he claims in front of Don Roderick and even in front of God when he discovers that Lucy has taken a vow of chastity. In assessing her ethical evolution, the shaping role of the virtuous and innocent woman, "an equivalent of Dante's Beatrice", is once again asserted (Balaci 136). Like the evil, the good has a contagious force and nothing is more impressive in the novel than the transformation of the brutish beings, a transformation that can be seen as a miracle made by this perfect Madonna, the bearer of divine light. On hearing Lucy's crying, her kidnapper, Nibbio, experiences a new feeling called compassion, which is as "unmanning" as fear; in the Unknown, the human personification of the devil, her plain words awake a "crazy" thought, the hope of redemption: "God pardons so many deeds for one act of mercy! Let me go; for pity, for charity, let me go. Do not make a poor creature suffer thus!" (Manzoni, 1834: 249). Lucy falls apart only when she decides to dedicate her life to the Holy Virgin – the supreme self-sacrifice that also involves Renzo,

without his approval. And precisely because this vow contradicts the one she has taken before, that of betrothal, friar Christopher can release her from it. But her voluntary nature, proved during the dispute between mind and soul borrowed from Corneille, as well as her openness to spiritual experiences, puts her in opposition to Gertrude, the Signora from the monastery in Monza who was forced to become a nun by her tyrannical family.

Gertrude is the most modern character in the novel because the writer, being used to make a clear delimitation of moral categories, treats her with circumspection, says Salvatore Battaglia, fascinated by “the hermetic profundity of Manzoni’s character” (Battaglia 213). As a malefic being, her nature colludes with the social circumstances to build a naturalist character *avant la lettre*, anticipating Flaubert’s Madame Bovary. Gertrude is the heroine of a small independent novel, whose introduction in *The Betrothed* cannot be accidental. And it is precisely because she symbolises the historical and social evil that she belongs with the profound symbolism of the novel, as an emblem of a corrupt era spreading its tentacles over the humble anonymous lives. Gertrude’s irreconcilable contradiction comes from her particular situation as a victim of her own family and a torturer of her own life. The motif of the “persecuted girl” takes a different turn than in Lucy’s case. She is the daughter of a great Milanese nobleman who discovers that his wealth is hardly enough to support his rank, so he destined his descendants to the cloister in order to preserve his fortune for his eldest son. Growing up in the shadow of this destiny, educated in the monastery where she is to become prioress when she has reached the age that allows her to make her own options, which is also the age when she becomes aware of the restlessness of life, the girl has the opportunity to discover that the monastery is a more comfortable and honourable refuge than her parents’ house, where her family loves her on condition she consents to become a nun. And since this is the only way to obtain the thing she has longed for all her life – to be loved – she accepts a segregated existence in which she will enjoy neither joys nor accomplishments, nor the comfort of religion, only remorse and outbreaks from both worlds, alternating chaotically and causing an unbalanced behaviour that eventually leads to sin and murder. The sentiment of transcendence and the change of “direction” can make up for an unhappy existence, as the destiny of the Unknown proves, but if the individual does not see this solution either, his life is lost forever. Aristocracy, says Manzoni, is the environment that favours excess and misrepresentation, and common people like Agnes state firmly that “the nobility, some more, some less, some one way, some another, have all a little oddity.” Gertrude is the image of a failed, faked destiny, attacked by a terrible conflict, a destiny in which all natural impulses – the need for solidarity, love, affection, authenticity – are contradicted and the character will never internalize compromise and will never reach self-reconciliation. Among the other distinctive characters of the novel, the nun of Monza and the Unknown are totally different beings; the more psychological analysis studies them, the more mysterious they become. They remain “two «phenomena» of human psychology whose judgment must be formulated with great caution and suspicion. They both confess our soul’s reactions which are impossible to analyse and their mysterious, unexplainable relation with the divine consciousness” (Battaglia 218).

In Gertrude, we see a new illustration of the Biedermeier style. The revolt is not carried through, neither is humiliation, and the absolute is diluted in favour of psychological authenticity. Lucy’s univocal character and Gertrude’s complex nature, the former’s clarity and the latter’s ambiguity show, from Manzoni’s social philosophy perspective, that the

good is easy to understand and follows a straight path, while the evil is complicated and insidious. Strength and weakness fight endlessly in Gertrude; as a young woman, she bears the atavistic signs of both physical and moral degeneration. Released from her vow, Lucy asserts the triumph of life and her heroism is called resisting the evil. The reputation this extraordinary adventure has brought to this girl precedes and overestimates her, so that the people of Bergamo, where she will settle after marrying Renzo, will be disappointed to see that she is not an integrating feminine model, but a common being unable to nourish their need for myths. The image of the damsel has disappeared; the excellence of the being is just an imaginary product, if imagination still exists, since imagination can be malefic, as Gertrude proves. In this field of envisioning femininity, Manzoni engages in a polemic with Don-Quixotism, with any canon, any attitude that idealizes reality. Don Quixote's peasant must be a Dulcinea in the others' eyes. Lucy, the so-called Dulcinea, should not resemble "a kind of wonder"; she should look as she really is, a peasant, as Renzo pretends:

And what consequence is it to you? said he. Who told you what to expect? Did I ever do so ?
Did I tell you she was beautiful ? She is a peasant, forsooth! Did I ever say I would bring a princess here? She does not please you. Do not look at her, then: you have beautiful women; look at them. (Manzoni, 1834: 451)

Cervantes' conflict, a type of conflict that applied ideal structures to reality, is reversed; what causes dissatisfaction now is the contradiction between the authenticity of the being and the idealising environment. It is a sign that the forms of the community have started to exclude individuality, exception, anything that expresses various emotions and conflicting ideas. Individual dialectics has new options related to a decrease in the role of imagination, simultaneous with a more consolidated trust in action. For the realists, the ideal is no longer a different, abstract, absolute world from far away, it is introduced right in the core of reality, in the historical organism; and here it can be found not in those areas where conventions have placed it, but in the most unexpected environments. The woman lacks the perfection of the prototype, but one cannot doubt her natural greatness; she is the good, the virtue, the light. These are not manifestations of abstract ideas or conventions, as in the medieval imagine of the Lady of the Heart. They are alive and their power has been tested by social practice.

As already seen from above, Manzoni's heroism is the adaptation of a "wisdom of existence" that means not to take action, but to protect yourself, and the dialogue with *Don Quixote*, about the uselessness of taking risks, is implicit. Manzoni's novel lacks the monumental dimension of the great historical novels, like *War and Peace*; more likely it is the "moral-educational novel with an indirect contribution to the creation of national conscience" (Façon 330). Naturally, one can ask why Manzoni chooses an indirect manner of expression, why he considers erotic confusion on the first place and why he does not imagine an articulate social-political conflict. First, because in the image of the couple the idyllic vision is clarified and secondly because the great solutions of social meliorism must be foreseen in the smaller and lower area of existence: man should grow his own garden, his own virtue, so that the world may become a garden itself. It has been noted that the mental transformation of an era into a small part of a real humble life gives the impression of "smallness", which is far from the heroic dramatism of characters like Jeanie Deans or

Rebecca in Scott's novels. Compared to them, Lucy's destiny is just a romance threatened by history. At the same time, this mental transformation leaves the impression of unsuspected insight that only the analysis of restricted areas can give (Lukács 103). The issue of chivalry – with all its adjacent values related to grandeur, loftiness, high-mindedness – presented by Scott in *Ivanhoe* and overtaken as a pattern by Dumas in *The Three Musketeers*, agonizes in the Manzonian novel that discovers the greatness of a simple soul.

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