

I've 71 sheets to wash

Tim Parks



THE BETROTHED

by Alessandro Manzoni, translated by Michael Moore.

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ALESSANDRO MANZONI was born in 1785, the only child of an arranged marriage between Giulia Beccaria, daughter of the Milanese intellectual Cesare Beccaria, and Pietro Manzoni, a minor nobleman. Pietro was 26 years older than his wife. She was bored by his company and it's widely believed that Alessandro wasn't his child. Sent to a wet nurse in the country, the boy spent most of his childhood at Catholic boarding schools, where he immersed himself in classical literature. In 1792 his mother obtained a separation from Pietro, and later went to live with a lover in Paris, where Alessandro joined her in 1805. Domestic stability brought with it an outpouring of poetry, which, after his conversion in 1810 from agnosticism to a severe form of Catholicism, took a decidedly religious turn. For years he followed the long list of rules prepared by his spiritual adviser, Father Luigi Tosi, which included the injunction: 'Your work is to be considered part of the general penitence that God has imposed on the sons of Adam.' In 1815 he published the *Sacred Hymns* and in 1819 *Observations on Catholic Morality*. A first verse tragedy, *The Count of Carmagnola*, was published in 1820, and a second, *Adelchi*, in 1822. But when, in the autumn of 1821, Manzoni told Tosi that he planned to write a novel, the priest wasn't happy and kept a censorious eye on the pages Manzoni sent him.

Manzoni was now 36. In the summer of 1822 his friend Tommaso Grossi was a guest at his house, and read aloud every evening from the novel he was writing, *The Lombards in the First Crusade*. Both men had just read Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* in French translation. Historical novels, they believed, encouraged national consciousness, while also offering an opportunity for veiled political statements. In 19th-century Lombardy, you could be jailed for criticising Austrian rule. Manzoni chose to write about the 17th century, when the region was ruled by the Spanish. After extensive research he had settled on a plot: the night before a young peasant couple are due to be married, the wedding is cancelled because a local Spanish lord has decided he wants the woman for himself. The years from 1628 to 1630 offered a dramatic backdrop: famine, military invasion and a devastating outbreak of the plague. 'The material is rich,' Manzoni wrote to the French historian Claude Fauriel. 'There's plenty of the sort of stuff that puts mankind to shame.'

But there remained the problem of which language to use, of never being sure how a word might be understood in other parts of Italy. 'Suppose there are five or six of us, Milanese, at home,' Manzoni wrote in his essay 'On the Italian Language',

talking together in Milanese, about this and that. Along comes someone with a friend from Piedmont, or Venice, or Bologna, or Naples, or Genoa, and, as good manners demand, we stop speaking Milanese and switch to Italian. You tell me if the talk will flow as it did before . . . if we will have the same readiness and confidence in the words we use that we had only moments ago.

In the early 19th century, Italy was divided linguistically as well as territorially. People from different regions talked to one another, Manzoni said, by falling back ‘on the generic or approximate’. But that wouldn’t do for writing: what was needed was maximum capacity of expression. It’s true that there was an Italian literary language which had served the country well enough for centuries, a sort of distillation of the Florentine of Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch, but it wasn’t an idiom for modern times – not the sort of thing you could put in people’s mouths in a novel. And it had suddenly become very important that Italian writers produce novels.

‘High literature is for the few,’ the poet Ugo Foscolo observed in 1809, but there were now large numbers of literate people with nothing to read but the ‘ignorant malignancy’ of newspapers, ‘the extravagance’ of old tales, ‘the twaddle’ of rhymesters. France, Foscolo thought, had shown that the novel could be used as an educational tool. Giacomo Leopardi made a more obviously political argument: Italy could only make progress toward national unity when ‘she has books suitable for the times, read and understood by common readers from one end of the country to the other.’ But the literary elite still looked down on the novel. When Manzoni let it be known that he was writing one, ‘the mere announcement’, the literary journal *La Biblioteca Italiana* observed, ‘ennobled the profession and encouraged other fine minds to try their hand’.

Manzoni wrote a first draft in the idiom he knew best before rewriting the book with Tuscan words substituted for Lombard ones, since Tuscan was by far the most widely spoken of the country’s many dialects. No sooner was the last of *The Betrothed*’s three volumes published in 1827, than Manzoni, dissatisfied despite its immediate popularity, took his family to Florence for a month to work on a definitive revision. ‘I’ve 71 sheets to wash,’ he wrote to his friend Fauriel, meaning the printed sheets from which the book’s seven hundred pages were folded, ‘the waters of the Arno, and two laundrymen, Cioni and Niccolini.’ Gaetano Cioni was a Florentine philologist, Giovanni Battista Niccolini a Pisan playwright. But even after the two men had been through the text, Manzoni wasn’t convinced. He wanted to recreate the spoken Tuscan of the cultured classes, which he felt combined propriety with comprehensibility. For ten years he set the project aside. Eventually, he asked 23-year-old Emilia Luti, the Florentine governess to a friend’s family, to check that his use of idiom and diction was up to date. There was no attempt to use the language of the 17th century, since Manzoni feared it would be incomprehensible. Even as the 71 sheets finally went to press in 1840, he was still infuriating the printer with numerous last-minute corrections. But it was worth it: twenty years before Italy achieved political unity, the new edition offered a persuasive model of what a future national language might look like. By the 1850s *The Betrothed* was already being taught in many schools, and by the time of Manzoni’s death in 1873 it had become a national institution. In 1923, the Fascist reform of the education system made it compulsory reading for Italian children.

Given Manzoni’s obsession with readability, it’s appropriate that the new English translation of *The Betrothed* is by Michael Moore, a former interpreter at the UN accustomed to focusing on the spoken word and immediate comprehensibility. Bruce Penman’s earlier translation, published in 1972, was already more than readable, but Moore goes further in reformulating Manzoni’s elaborate syntax and giving the narrative voice a strong spoken feel. Compare the way the two translators handle the novel’s wonderfully droll opening: Don Abbondio, the priest in a village south of Lake Como, encounters two thugs, or ‘bravi’, who have clearly been waiting for him. ‘Non potendo schivare il pericolo,’ we’re told, ‘vi corse incontro, perché i momenti di quell’incertezza

erano allora così penosi per lui, che non desiderava altro che d'abbreviarli.' Moore translates: 'Unable to avoid the danger, he rushed into it, since the uncertainty was so painful that all he wanted was to get it over with.' Penman has: 'Not being able to avoid the danger, he hurried to meet it, for he found the moments of uncertainty so distressing that his main wish was to shorten them as much as possible.'

When the thugs demand to know whether the priest is planning to celebrate the marriage of Renzo and Lucia, the betrothed couple, Don Abbondio replies, apologetically, that he is. This prompts the threat that sets the plot rolling: "Or bene," gli disse il bravo, all'orecchio, ma in tono solenne di comando, "questo matrimonio non s'ha da fare, nè domani, nè mai." Moore: "Well, then," the bravo said in his ear, but in the solemn tone of a command, "this marriage ain't gonna happen. Not tomorrow, not never." Penman: "Very well," said the bravo, speaking into the priest's ear, quietly, but in a tone of impressive command, "that wedding is not to take place. Not tomorrow, and not any other time either."

Don Abbondio tries to talk his way out of trouble, deploying the elaborate rhetoric with which the educated bamboozle the uneducated, one of the book's main themes. The thugs are having none of it. "Orsù," interruppe il bravo, "se la cosa avesse a decidersi a ciarle, lei ci metterebbe in sacco. Noi non ne sappiamo, nè vogliam saperne di più. Uomo avvertito ... lei c'intende." Moore: "Enough talk!" interrupted the bravo. "Running your mouth isn't going to fix this. Not another word out of you. Consider this fair warning ... Have we made ourselves clear?" Penman: "Come, now," interrupted the bravo, "if these things had to be settled by talk, you'd make rings round us. We don't know all these things, and don't want to know them. A warning's a warning ... and I'm sure you understand us." This pretty much gives the measure of the two translations: Moore always shorter and sharper, at the risk of straying into paraphrase or the conspicuously contemporary; Penman a little more laboured, tending to explain and expand.

AT FIRST GLANCE the story seems a straightforward tale of good and evil: two despotic foreigners, Don Rodrigo and his cynical cousin Count Attilio, destroy the lives of a wholesome Lombard couple. Yet the characters more interestingly sit at points along a line from the fearful to the courageous to the rash. Early critics noted that the comically cowardly Don Abbondio had an earlier model in Boniface, the monk in Scott's *The Abbot*, but Manzoni's portrait has greater psychological depth. 'When he was forced to choose between two contenders,' we hear of the priest, 'he always sided with the stronger party, but always cautiously, taking care to show the other party that he had no choice in the matter, as if to say: "Why couldn't you have been the stronger man? Then I would have taken your side."'

Other commentators saw an affinity between Manzoni and his creation: the author suffered from panic attacks, found it almost impossible to leave his home unaccompanied, and was extremely cautious about making political statements. While other Italian novels of the period featured bold declarations of patriotism (Foscolo's *The Letters of Jacopo Ortis* being the most distinguished example), *The Betrothed*, for all Manzoni's heartfelt support for the Risorgimento, makes none. The most important event in his life, his conversion to Catholicism, came in response to a moment of intense fear. He and his wife were in Paris during the celebrations for Napoleon's wedding when they were separated in a riot set off by exploding mortar shells. Taking refuge in a church, Manzoni made a vow that if the two were safely reunited he would convert.

In *The Betrothed*, it is precisely when matters of faith become confused with issues of fear and courage that the book becomes something more than a melodrama or a historical essay. Afraid that Don Rodrigo will try to abduct Lucia, the young couple turn to Fra Cristoforo for help. This Capuchin monk killed a man years before in a moment of anger, then converted and has dedicated

his life to making amends. Courageously, he knelt before the vengeful brother of his victim, and now he shows courage again, going to Don Rodrigo to warn him of God's vengeance should he touch Lucia. But the Spaniard, despite a 'remote and mysterious dread', is determined to have his way. Rashly, Renzo wants to force Don Abbondio to recognise a form of marriage: they must simply appear before him unannounced and declare themselves married. Lucia, though, is terrified that this amounts to a sin, and at the crucial moment hesitates long enough to allow the equally terrified Don Abbondio to smother her with a tablecloth to prevent her from pronouncing herself Renzo's wife. The pair escape across the river Adda, aided by Fra Cristoforo. Lucia goes with her mother to Monza and Renzo to Milan, where he immediately becomes involved in a hunger riot and again shows courage by trying to stop the mob from lynching the commissioner responsible for supplying the city's food.

Something similar had happened in 1814, when the Lombard finance minister, Giuseppe Prina, was lynched by a crowd close to Manzoni's house, 'so that for many hours, we heard the shouts of those going after him.' Foscolo risked his life defending Prina; Manzoni locked himself away, fearful of the rioters. But although Renzo is given the courage that Manzoni perhaps wished he had, his boldness leads to disaster. Led on by an agent provocateur, he gets drunk and gives rabble-rousing speeches denouncing tyranny, greed and the subversion of justice, becoming as a result the object of a manhunt that forces him to escape to Bergamo and live in hiding, far from Lucia. Understanding the proper use of courage seems far more difficult than distinguishing good and evil; in a period when patriotic rebellion against an occupying power was in the air, this was a theme Manzoni's readers understood.

Meanwhile, the ever alarmed Lucia finds refuge in a monastery and comes under the protection of Gertrude, known as the 'nun of Monza', the greatest of Manzoni's characters. Her story is based on that of Marianna de Leyva (1575-1650), the daughter of a powerful noble, who as a mother superior had a ten-year affair with a rich hoodlum that produced two children and led to various murders as the couple sought to conceal their relationship. Manzoni tones this down, but provides a disturbing back story: as a young girl, Gertrude is groomed by her father for a religious life for which she has no vocation so he can save himself the expense of a dowry. Here Manzoni was able to draw on his own family history. He would have heard from his mother that her father, under the influence of his second wife, had more or less abandoned her in a convent against her will. Gertrude is frightened at the prospect of being locked up in a religious community and wants to resist, but her father's anger is such that her 'terror at the sound of his footsteps can be neither described nor imagined'. Over thirty pages, Manzoni gives a powerful psychological study of a proud, conflicted woman, longing for an intimacy that, in the context of a convent, can only be considered shameful. She is envious of Lucia, yet protective of her, in the hope of atoning for her own sins; Lucia, on the other hand, is incapable of understanding the complexity and instability of the woman she now depends on.

This episode reveals the novel's great weakness: its central characters are its least interesting. We see this again when, following Lucia's escape, Don Rodrigo asks a 'fearsome man' to arrange her abduction. Since this character was based on a historical figure with living descendants, Manzoni, anxious to avoid offence, makes everyone, out of dreadful respect, refer to him throughout as the Nameless One. This ruthless bully has withdrawn from Milan to a castle in the hinterland where, assisted by an entourage of thugs, he murders, rapes and plunders, 'feared by all'. Soon enough Lucia is seized and brought to the castle, where she makes a vow that if the Madonna saves her, she will live the rest of her life a virgin. What she can't know is that the Nameless One is undergoing a crisis. The idea of death, which once 'instilled in him a courageous rage, now grips him with panic'. He is overcome by 'the terrifying idea of being judged before God'. Lucia's abduction proves one crime too many; after a night of 'tormented contemplations' that bring him

close to suicide, he takes advantage of the visit to a nearby village by Federigo Borromeo, archbishop of Milan, to confess his sins. Lucia is released and sent off with a hundred gold scudi, a small fortune.

Manzoni had considered ending his story here, at the halfway point of the novel as we now have it, with Lucia keeping her vow and a disappointed Renzo going off to fight in foreign wars. But how instructive would that have been? A believer in divine providence, Manzoni was determined that his book should be ‘useful’. That meant persuading people of the value of prayer and religious vows. On the advice of Father Tosi, who was about to become a bishop, he deprived his lovers of the physical passion that might have made them more interesting. They never so much as peck each other on the cheek. ‘One shouldn’t write about love in order to encourage this passion in the reader,’ Manzoni later said. But he is also said to have asked a friend: ‘Don’t you think, for a peasant girl, I’ve idealised Lucia a bit too much?’

He now set about engineering events in such a way that the young couple’s faith would be rewarded. At the same time, his interest was shifting towards historical fact rather than fictional creation: there’s a long digression on Archbishop Borromeo and many pages on the bewilderingly complex wars of succession that led to the Holy Roman Empire invading northern Italy. This conflict brought with it the plague that in 1630 wiped out half the population of Milan. The city’s foreign rulers failed to respond adequately and a collective panic ensued, leading people to believe that the disease was being deliberately spread by evil conspirators – a situation recounted by Manzoni in great and, in this instance, fascinating detail. In a letter to Fauriel he describes his struggle to be faithful to historical fact rather than to manipulate it for the purposes of his story, as he felt other novelists tended to do. Years later, he would theorise the incompatibility of the poetic truth of fiction and the historical truth of chronicle, and conclude that the historical novel was a flawed genre. Certainly, after *The Betrothed* he abandoned the novel form and concentrated instead on poems, sermons and essays. Yet, despite his concern that its historical interludes were now too long, the book’s final scenes are remarkable. Renzo goes to Milan and finds Fra Cristoforo, Don Rodrigo and Lucia in the plague hospital where thousands are dying, ministered to only by heroic priests. A feel-good ending guaranteed the novel’s popularity: providence provides at the last, if only for the two chaste protagonists.

The determinedly orthodox Catholic elements of the novel alienated many of Manzoni’s contemporaries. The influential patriot Luigi Settembrini dismissed it as ‘a work of religious reaction ... written only to glorify priests’. ‘I’m glad you enjoyed Manzoni’s Christian novel,’ Leopardi wrote to his father, unimpressed. But it was exactly this aspect of *The Betrothed* that, together with its linguistic achievement, guaranteed its centrality in Italian culture. Aside from a brief interlude on the accession of Pope Pius IX immediately before the 1848 Revolutions, the Vatican was implacably opposed to Italian political unity, knowing that it could come only at the expense of the sovereignty of the Papal State. Patriotism and religious loyalty were set at loggerheads, undermining the attempt to forge a strong Italian identity: after unification, the Church forbade Catholics from participating in elections, and refused to recognise the Italian state until the Lateran Pacts with Mussolini in 1929. In these circumstances *The Betrothed* – Catholic yet patriotic and suitable, in its chasteness and gentle humour, to be taught to the children of those on either side of the political divide – was a precious instrument of social consensus. Other fine novels were written in the Risorgimento period: Ippolito Nievo’s 900-page *Confessions of an Italian*, published posthumously in 1867, is a marvellous, picaresque account of the first decades of the century. But that book teems with north-eastern regionalisms, and is raucous, provocatively liberal and sexually explicit: not qualities suitable for the classroom, where *The Betrothed* is now mainly read.

Letters

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Tim Parks compares Michael Moore's new translation of Manzoni's *The Betrothed* with the 1972 translation by Bruce Penman (LRB, 5 January). The extracts he quotes from the latter are strikingly similar to the wording in an earlier translation by Archibald Colquhoun. This appeared in 1951, with an interesting account by Colquhoun of his many predecessors: translations into English began in 1828, with three more published in 1834 alone. These were not, of course, translations of the final version of the novel, published by Manzoni in 1840; but they are remarkable evidence that early in the 19th century British readers' sympathy for the Risorgimento could be taken as read. Colquhoun's translation is dedicated 'To the Italians of the Second Risorgimento of 1943-45'.

Anne Summers
Birkbeck, University of London
