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Resurrecting a Polyphonic Past

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The Betrothed is a kind of historiographical novel that invites the reader to enter the dynamic of reading and writing history.

Wellcome Collection, London

A scene from Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed* in which Renzo is accused of intentionally spreading the plague; nineteenth-century lithograph by Gallo Gallina

Reviewed:

The Betrothed
by Alessandro Manzoni, translated from the Italian and with an introduction by Michael F. Moore, and a preface by Jhumpa Lahiri
Modern Library, 663 pp., $28.99

I have over the years met so many Italians who can't abide *The Betrothed* (*I promessi sposi*). They were forced to read it in school, as a kind of national treasure to be admired rather than enjoyed—to memorize its set pieces, to regurgitate its messages. It had been mummified. By the time of Alessandro Manzoni's death in 1873 (Giuseppe Verdi wrote his great *Requiem* in commemoration) the novel had become a symbol of Italian unification, something like the future Vittorio Emanuelle II Monument in Rome. It was to be addressed with reverence and awe, as an edifying illustration of the workings of divine providence. That's unfortunate, since *The Betrothed* is the most original and powerful of European historical novels in the tradition of

Walter Scott. Scott himself claimed that it was the best novel he did not write. It ranks with *The Charterhouse of Parma* and *War and Peace* as a drama of life lived within the dynamics of history.

Manzoni seems to have begun *The Betrothed* shortly after reading Scott's recreation of medieval England in *Ivanhoe* (1819). His turn to the novel followed years of writing poetry and tragedies on historical subjects. In France, the aesthetic pacesetter for over a century, Victor Hugo and the elder Alexandre Dumas were imposing themselves on the national stage, the influence of Shakespeare was everywhere, and Stendhal in *Racine and Shakespeare* told his contemporaries they should throw off the neoclassical rules that had long shackled French theater and devote themselves to dramatizations of national history. When *The Betrothed* was published in 1827, it was an overnight success. Manzoni then undertook a long, largely linguistic revision, finally completed in 1840, to make it an exemplary model of standard Italian—he traveled from Milan to Florence to hear the best use of the living tongue.

When you open the novel, though, something unexpected quickly comes along. Not in the plot, which is as simple as can be: two peasants who want to marry encounter a threatening and seemingly immovable obstacle. We meet the parish priest, Don Abbondio, on an evening stroll in November 1628 near Lecco in the Italian lakes. He looks up from his breviary to discover two *bravi* waiting for him. We soon learn that these thugs have been sent by their master, Don Rodrigo, to command that the marriage not take place. He has spotted the bride-to-be, Lucia Mondella, and wants her for his own amusement. But then, rather than a straightforward exposition of the situation, the narrator offers us long citations from the *gride*, or decrees, issued by various authorities. "The Most Illustrious and Excellent Don Carlos of Aragon, Prince of Castelvetrano, Duke of Terranuova, Marquis of Avola, Count of Burgeto, Grand Admiral, and Grand Constable of Sicily, Governor of Milan, and Captain-General of His Catholic Majesty in Italy" declares a ban on the *bravi* who are making his people suffer. And then another proclamation from another authority prohibiting and threatening the existence of the *bravi*. And another and another.

We get the point without being told: the various conflicting and weak administrations of the northern Italian states repeatedly outlaw, threaten, promise retribution in a situation they are wholly impotent to deal with. Whatever the declarations may say, the *bravi* are there to enforce Don Rodrigo's will. But we come to know this through our reading of the historical documentation that lies at the inception of the novel. Manzoni embeds his sources in his text—citations from the *gride* and old chronicles such as Giuseppe Ripamonti's *Historia patria*. The result is not only a historical novel but a kind of historiographical novel that invites the reader to enter the dynamic of reading and writing history.

It's as if Manzoni had been trained as an *Annales* historian, weighing ancient documents in order to understand and recreate the lineaments of a lost world (though always with a reference to the contemporary world of still-disunited Italy). What we get is not only an evocation of past languages of authority attempting to order a messy reality but an interpretive sociolinguistic game of high stakes. It's a startling new way to write history within fiction. The novel from its start becomes polyphonic or what one can call, in Mikhail Bakhtin's term, "heteroglossic"—a linguistic theater with a multisided clash of voices. Readers find themselves caught up in a drama of heteroglossia that propels not only the plot but the entire historical resurrection that Manzoni attempts.

The uncourageous Don Abbondio follows Don Rodrigo's command. The wedding doesn't take place, an attempt to trick the priest into marrying the couple goes awry, Don Rodrigo's attempt to kidnap Lucia is foiled by the good monk Fra Cristoforo, and Lucia, her fiancé, Renzo, and her mother end up fleeing across the river Adda. Lucia is put into the custody of the nun Gertrude in a convent in Monza, while Renzo goes on to Milan. Here he encounters the bread riots of 1628 and more decrees from various feckless officials to fix prices and control shortages (which Manzoni, as a classic economic liberal, dismisses as folly), gets himself arrested as an agitator, then flees in a night journey that returns him to the Adda and over it to Bergamo, which is under Venetian rather than Milanese rule. Border crossings in northern Italy tell you much about the political mess the world is in. Renzo finds refuge and relative peace in Bergamo, where he becomes a proto-capitalist in the silk-weaving business.

Lucia's adventures lead to the moral core of the novel. The charitable nun under whose protection she is placed turns out to be a terrifying case of a forced vocation, told in a long, interpolated tale, based on a true story and scandal, that became known as *La monaca di Monza* (the Nun of Monza). Often compared to Denis Diderot's overtly anti-conventual and incendiary *La Religieuse* (*The Nun*), it is at once darkly gothic and an extraordinary psychological probe into families, especially fathers and daughters, and the illegitimate exercise of power over others.

Gertrude, secretly carrying on an affair with a man who lives by a breach in the convent wall, becomes wholly subject to his manipulations—he belongs to the network of the powerful and unscrupulous along with Don Rodrigo—and is forced to sacrifice her protégée to the grisly power structure she is caught in. Lucia is abducted and brought to the castle of a man so wicked and feared that he is known only as *l'Innominato*, the Nameless One (probably based on the nobleman Bernardino Visconti), who is far more powerful than Don Rodrigo but obliged by feudal and familial ties to complete his dirty work. The Nameless One is to give Lucia over to Don Rodrigo.

And here something new enters the novel. The sight of Lucia's appealing helplessness and the appalling future he is complicit in giving her provoke a sleepless night during which the Nameless One's mind moves relentlessly back over his life of crime, and he discovers that he is defined by what he has done:

> Time appeared before him stripped of all intention, all activity, all desire, filled only with appalling memories.... Back and back he went in time, from year to year, commitment to commitment, bloodshed to bloodshed, crime to crime.... They all belonged to him; they were who he was.

Dawn breaks at last, and he hears and sees the local villagers flocking down the hillside as to a festival. The great Cardinal Federigo Borromeo, archbishop of Milan, has come to preach. The Nameless One leaves his aerie out of curiosity—and need. His conversion is at hand.

With the Nun of Monza and the Nameless One we run the gamut of ethical possibilities and, beyond that, encounter the question of grace. "God has touched your heart, and wants to make you one of His own," Borromeo tells the Nameless One. Manzoni clearly endorses Borromeo's message, but he doesn't get to it in any simplistic way. His intellectual background lies as much in the Enlightenment as in the church.

Born in 1785 (two years after Stendhal), Manzoni was the son of Giulia Beccaria, the daughter of Cesare Beccaria, author of *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764), the landmark critique of torture and other infamous punishments and the foundation of modern penal reform movements. She apparently was pregnant by Giovanni Verri, a Knight of Malta and playboy, when she married Alessandro's legal father, a minor Milanese nobleman. The young Alessandro was abandoned to various religious schools, then in 1805 his mother summoned him to Paris, where he arrived following the death of Carlo Imbonati, the aristocrat and man of letters with whom she had been living.

The son stayed on with his mother in a milieu of intellectual discovery and ferment centered on the salon of Sophie de Condorcet, widow of the Marquis de Condorcet, who had died in prison (probably a suicide) during the Reign of Terror. Sophie translated Adam Smith and Thomas Paine. Her salon brought in regulars such as the philosophers Destutt de Tracy and Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis, and Madame de Staël; it had once been frequented by Pierre Beaumarchais (author of *The Marriage of Figaro*) and the feminist Olympe de Gouges, with occasional visits by Thomas Jefferson and others. Sophie's lover, the historian Claude Fauriel, became a close friend to Manzoni. It was a heady time for the young man, and clearly formative of his modernist

worldview. He also had cordial relations with the early Romantic Milanese group around the review *Il Conciliatore* before the Austrian censors closed it down.

His mother thought it time he married and arranged for him to meet the seventeen-year-old Enrichetta Blondel, daughter of a Calvinist banking family from Geneva. Both she and her husband would convert to Catholicism a couple of years later, she forsaking the "errors" of Protestantism, he moving from what seemed to be incredulity to acceptance of the church (he would compose a set of *Sacred Hymns* devoted to major holy days). They settled in Milan and a nearby country property in Brusuglio left by Imbonati to his mother. There was always a priest at hand, a family confessor and "director of conscience," the two principal ones of Jansenist persuasion—committed to a rigorous ethics along with a belief that God was hidden and that one could never be sure of one's state of grace. And then the children began to come and more or less never stopped. Enrichetta endured twelve pregnancies, if I count right. A couple of the babies died quickly. Ten survived longer, but only two outlived their father.

The novelist Natalia Ginzburg, ever interested in family dynamics, wrote a book about *la famiglia Manzoni*, which gives a picture of life in the household.* It sounds like a muted bedlam, full of conflict. Giulia, Manzoni's mother, who lived until 1841, was a domineering presence intellectually and in running the house, to whom Enrichetta deferred. Manzoni, congenitally shy, valetudinarian, agoraphobic, averse to going anywhere alone—though by all accounts a genial conversationalist—worked in his study. The priest most often in attendance was Canon Luigi Tosi, who later became bishop of Pavia; he dictated his *Regolamenti* for the family's behavior and was constantly pestering Manzoni to give up his novel and get back to writing the *Observations on Catholic Morality,* a task Tosi had assigned to him. When Enrichetta, exhausted from so much childbearing, died in 1833, Manzoni married Teresa Borri—he needed a wife for the swarm of children—who soon came into conflict with Giulia, creating further riptides in the household. *I promessi sposi* seems born of a long act of sheltering in his study.

In the novel, Borromeo welcomes the Nameless One to a "banquet of grace" and summons Lucia's parish priest, the terrified Don Abbondio, to go with the new convert to retrieve her from his castle. But during the dark night of the Nameless One's soul-searching, she has made a vow to the Madonna: to remain a virgin if ever she is saved. This will be a further impediment to marriage: the *sposi* remain merely *promessi.* With Renzo gone to work with his silk-weaver cousin in Bergamo and Lucia now protected by a respectable elderly couple, Don Ferrante and Donna Prassede, we enter a realm of attempted communication between the separated fiancés, both illiterate, dependent on thoughts communicated via the very imperfect conduit of public scribes and the occasional more-or-less-literate friend.

Manzoni gives us a richly polyphonic rendering of a world in which the spoken and the written, the dialects and the baroque public language —by-product of Spanish rule—demonstrate not only the overweening power of the literate but also the necessity of a national language.

We are in the midst of the devastating Thirty Years' War and its related conflict, the War of Mantuan Succession, fought by rivals backed by Spain and France. Mercenary armies overran northern Italy, already weakened by famine. In the wake of the armies, as so often was the case, came the plague. And here we come upon the greatest pages of the novel and one of the most memorable pictures of the dissolution of human society in the face of overwhelming challenge. By chance, two and a half years ago I was scheduled to teach *The Betrothed*, along with my Italianist colleague Jane Tylus, in a graduate seminar we called Novels of War, Revolution, and Plague—novels centered on critical historical events. We had chosen the title and the texts in the fall of 2019; by the time we taught them, we were on Zoom, in full pandemic mode. And Manzoni's novel took on new resonance.

He tracks official reactions to the plague of 1630 in Milan, which eventually killed about half its population:

> So at the beginning, no plague, absolutely not, by any count: The very utterance of the word was prohibited. Then came the "pestilential" fevers, admitting the idea indirectly, through an adjective. And then, not an actual plague, well, yes, there was a plague, but only in a sense. Not a proper plague, mind you, but something for which there was no other name. Finally, it was a plague without a doubt and without dissent. But another idea had already taken root, the idea of poison and sorcery, which distorted and confused the idea expressed in a word that could no longer be retracted.

And then we are witness to appalling scenes of pathos, resignation, cowardice, heroism, and scapegoating of those arbitrarily accused of being *untori*, "anointers": of intentionally spreading the plague, painting it on doors, for instance. Manzoni also wrote a purely historical work, *Storia della colonna infame* (History of the Column of Shame), about the apprehension, torture, trial, and execution of two barbers who were alleged to be *untori* but were wholly innocent of this fantasy crime, victims of mass hysteria and a corrupt judiciary.

A band of hardened workers, the despised and feared and utterly needed *monatti*, preceded by a man swinging a bell, came to collect the dying and take them to quarantine in the municipal *lazaretto*, while the dead were thrown into the common pit. They became the dreaded rulers of the city. When Renzo returns to Milan in search of Lucia, he is witness to the passage of the *monatti* with a wagonload of corpses. The moment enlists what you might almost call Manzoni's Caravaggesque pictorial sense, a baroque memento mori:

> From around the corner of the church he saw a man appear shaking a bell: the *apparitore,* followed by two horses that struggled to move forward, straining their necks and digging in their hooves as they pulled a cartload of dead bodies. After this came another cart, and then another, and another. Monatti were on both sides of the horses, urging them on with lashes, punches, and curses.
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> Most of the corpses were naked, though some were loosely covered in rags. They were piled high and jumbled together, like a nest of snakes slowly uncoiling in the warmth of spring. At every jolt, every bump in the road, the tragic heap shook and came apart grotesquely. Heads dangled, maidens' braids unraveled, and arms slid out of the tangled mass of limbs to bang against the wheels, rendering an already horrifying sight even more heartbreaking and foul.

Death shall have dominion. There is also the high pathos of a scene in which a majestic young woman places her dead daughter on the cart and tells the *monatto* he should return in the evening when the rest of the family will have died.

It all comes to climax in the inferno of the *lazaretto*, where Lucia turns out to be alive and Fra Cristoforo finds his ultimate mission and sacrifice. Lucia can now be freed from her unwarranted vow by the monk, who speaks a benediction for their union, which is finally made possible: "Thank the heavens for leading you to this condition, not through turbulent and fleeting joy, but through troubles and miseries, to prepare you for a serene and peaceful joy." That would seem also to be Manzoni's conclusion as a pessimistic Christian humanist: it's the best you can hope for.

Manzoni's documentation of the plague in Milan is both precise and vivid, one of the great evocations of human misery, including cowardice, denial, hysteria, and scapegoating, with occasional moments of heroism. He defined the genre he was working in succinctly: "to represent, by means of an invented action, the true state of humanity in a past and historical epoch." Those words come from his essay *Del romanzo storico* (*On the Historical Novel*), where he curiously turns against his own masterpiece to argue that the mixture and confusion of the factual and the fictional in the historical novel is illegitimate. The novelist really ought to distinguish between the historical record and what he's invented. But to do so would destroy the unity and the effectiveness of the novel. It's a bastard form and can only hope for a certain verisimilitude, which Manzoni defines as what "would have seemed probable even to people of that time had the novel been written for them."

And yet *The Betrothed* is largely about people who could not have read a novel if one had been put into their hands. The written word to people like Renzo—in the law, for instance—is a hostile force, designed to keep them under the ferule of men like Don Rodrigo. *The*

Betrothed succeeds because it is a fully literate attempt to see history from the ground up, to represent how it mangles the lives of those who will never write it. Manzoni is interested in the *umili*, in the oppressed and the defeated, those who have been severely tested by forces that they cannot understand. In some ways the unlikely counterpart to *The Betrothed* is *Sentimental Education*, Gustave Flaubert's account of his generation's failure to come to terms with history during the revolution of 1848 and its aftermath.

Manzoni's repudiation of the historical novel as a genre did not stop his long revision of *The Betrothed*: the final version of 1840 entered the national consciousness and the school curriculum as a canonical text. I have read two older translations of the novel, one of them too archaicizing and baroque, the other simplifying to the extent that nuance is lost. Michael F. Moore's new version strikes me as remarkable, extraordinarily well pitched, finding the right levels of colloquialism and eloquence. Moore preserves the heteroglossia of the novel, its rich impasto of spoken and written styles whose incompatibility is one of its deep subjects. And he manages to catch Manzoni's narrative voice, which is not easy to characterize: a confluence of an ironic worldly wisdom, a Jansenist pessimism, an immense pity for the follies of mankind, a respect for the peasant and the laborer, and contempt for those who have power and turn it to bad ends.

The flights across borders from one hegemony to another make the point that in 1840 Italy has yet to become a nation. That would happen in Manzoni's lifetime, and he would be appropriately recognized: made a Senator of the Realm, showered with honors. For subsequent generations of Italian schoolchildren, that meant *I promessi sposi* seemed to come from the embalmer's hand. Not so. It's great stuff, and Michael Moore has made that evident.

Peter Brooks

Peter Brooks is the author of the recent *Balzac's Lives* and *Seduced by Story: The Use and Abuse of Narrative*, to be published in October. (October 2022)

* *La famiglia Manzoni* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983); *The Manzoni Family*, translated by Marie Evans (Henry Holt, 1987). ↩