

## **Dickens and Alessandro Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi***

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Dickens's experience in Italy has often been considered as the source for *Pictures from Italy* or for the Italian chapters of *Little Dorrit*, yet Forster stresses the fact that those were times when the writer was still maturing and he was still forming his own world picture. In his meeting with Italian culture at large, Dickens had the opportunity to experience political, religious and, I will argue, literary challenges, which he would draw upon in later times. We know that he visited theatres and appreciated Italian melodrama. In Genoa he also found the time to read one of the most outstanding Italian novels of the nineteenth century, *I promessi sposi* [The Betrothed] by Alessandro Manzoni. The impact of this novel on Dickens has been overlooked by scholars, though it is likely to have played a role in Dickens's personal and professional development. Manzoni – whose novel Dickens had heard of before he left for Italy – must have proved interesting to Dickens both as a man and as a writer. Indeed Manzoni's novel deals with religious issues which apparently concerned Dickens in those very years. However, a most striking literary resemblance is to be felt much later, in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1857-1859), which recalls *I promessi sposi* both in design and in a few minor incidents of the plot.

In nineteenth-century Italy one can hardly speak of a novel tradition. Indeed the few novels that were actually published cannot be said to share a common poetics, nor a common theme, nor even a common readership. For this reason *I promessi sposi* is somewhat of a cathedral in the desert, built upon the ruins of neoclassic poetry. Although it is an historical novel and though its author was a reader of Walter Scott, *I promessi sposi* is more akin to Milton's

*Paradise Lost* than to any English novel. Manzoni's masterpiece is the result of a triple conversion and traces of the former beliefs can still be discerned in the work's texture. Manzoni was an agnostic rationalist and became a Roman Catholic, was a classicist and turned romantic, was a poet and developed into a novelist.<sup>1</sup> The result is a novel deeply religious, going so far as to maintain that history is ruled by Providence; politically committed, pointing out the malpractice of the Spanish rule over seventeenth-century Lombardy (and implicitly condemning the coeval Austrian rule); written in a very modern and even colloquial prose. Manzoni worked at this text with great alacrity and devotion so that the novel was written three times over between 1820 and 1840.<sup>2</sup>

And yet some of Manzoni's former affiliations persist in his work which are apt to make the Italian author particularly appealing to Dickens. From the religious point of view, Manzoni's former rationalism had led him to adhere to a form of Roman Catholicism actually tinged with Jansenism, brought to Manzoni especially through Pascal; Jansenism was exactly the sort of middle way between proper Catholicism and Calvinism, especially with regard to the means of salvation. For Jansenists faith alone could *not* save a man's soul, but at the same time they strongly rejected the belief in the "magical" power of liturgical rites. The most exemplary characters of Manzoni's novel show both a deep faith and a strong inclination to help the poor and wretched neighbours. This protestant quality was pointed out in England as early as 1873, when an article on the *London Quarterly Review* suggested that Manzoni's novel was "not written in the interest of Romanism"; in fact "notwithstanding his vigorous championship of the catholic morality, there was far more

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<sup>1</sup> He professed himself a romantic and authored more than one pamphlet on romantic poetry; yet it must be noticed that north Italian romanticism was of a particular brand, quite different from either German or English. In fact it was not in the least titanic or in any way morbid, but rather politically committed.

<sup>2</sup> The first draft of the novel started in 1821 and was completed in 1823, under the title *Fermo and Lucia*. Manzoni was dissatisfied with this version – which he never published – and set to work on another draft eventually called *I promessi sposi*, published in 1827. During the following fifteen years Manzoni made a thorough linguistic revision of his novel, making his prose more Tuscan, which culminated in the final version published in monthly installments between 1840 and 1842.

of the Protestant Christian than of the Romanist in Manzoni" (*London Quarterly Review*, XLI 1874, cit. in Pallotta 484).

The conversion from classicism to romanticism brought Manzoni to deal with social issues, but without a romantic temperament, i.e. keeping a sense of detachment, Horatian common sense and a subtle irony. Sometimes Manzoni shows also a substantial distrust of words and their circumlocutional power to which Dickens would certainly subscribe.<sup>3</sup>

As for the conversion from verse to the novel form, the heritage of the former is particularly evident in the thorough process of revision that the novel had undergone throughout the years, as well as in its characteristic lyrical passages. Initially Manzoni crafted his novel in imitation of Tuscan prose (the most suited, in his opinion, to express Italian fictional art) which produced the first and the second editions of the novel, but, being still dissatisfied with the bookish quality of the result, he decided to spend a long period in Florence in order to write the way people actually speak; the outcome is the ultimate edition of 1840.

In the end Manzoni's work became a classic masterpiece where historical research, political commitments, religious faith, moral tension, linguistic innovation come together to form a unique national novel. In this respect I think that this is more similar to Milton's poem than to Scott's novels. In the 1830s and 1840s no one who was interested in Italian culture could have overlooked the extraordinary significance of this novel, let alone a novelist like Dickens. Besides *I promessi sposi* soon became very popular all over Europe: the first edition – to be revised in 1840 – was published in 1827, and the next year two French translations appeared, to be followed by others in 1830s and 1840s. Charles Swan's *The Betrothed*, the first English translation, was published in 1828 and was followed in 1834 by Featherstonhaugh's version and by another

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<sup>3</sup> On this particular point Eco argues that, in this novel, the higher the style and the social position of speakers, the more mendacious are the words. This implies that only acts are true because they cannot lie. This attitude of Manzoni's is particularly evident in the episode of Azzecagarbugli, the lawyer, an episode referred to by Dickens as particularly brilliant in the only letter where he mentions the novel.

anonymous one in 1844.<sup>4</sup> Soon the novel became a favourite with intellectuals and writers such as Auguste Comte, Chateaubriand, and Victor Hugo. E. A. Poe enthusiastically reviewed it for the *Southern Literary Messenger* (1835), while the *North American Review* devoted a long essay to the novel in 1840. Walter Scott himself, who also expressed the wish to meet Manzoni, is credited to have said that *I promessi sposi* was *his own* best novel.<sup>5</sup> Edward Bulwer-Lytton dedicated his historical novel, *Rienzi*, “To Alessandro Manzoni, as to the Genius of the Place”.

Although *I promessi sposi* was highly appreciated, it never became so popular in Britain as elsewhere in Europe. The scarce success it enjoyed can be explained by the highly competitive English book market and a sort of instinctive distrust of English readers when a Roman Catholic was concerned. In fact, a few reviewers accused Manzoni of imitating Scott and of deliberately disseminating Roman Catholic propaganda. Augustus Pallotta in his study of Manzoni’s translations points to two further reasons why Manzoni did not achieve greater popularity in Britain in those early days: one was the faulty quality of the English translations, which failed to convey the enormous effort on Manzoni’s part to give life to his characters, developing the widest variety of prose registers ever accomplished in Italy. The second reason depends mostly on the setting, Lombardy. This region fell short of gratifying the readers’ stereotypical idea of a picturesque, sundrenched Italy. Both these reasons however could not hold true with Dickens, who read the novel in the original language (probably the revised version of 1840) under the guidance of an Italian teacher, and who, in *Pictures from Italy*, overtly denounced the inconsistencies of the picturesque stereotype of Italy.<sup>6</sup>

In a letter to Samuel Rogers written in Genoa and dated 1 September 1844, Dickens describes his encounter with the novel in a rather enthusiastic fashion:

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<sup>4</sup> Published in London by James Burns in two volumes, with the same woodcut of the Italian edition. This last version was much advertised on the *Fraser’s Magazine*, the *Edinburgh Review* and in other volumes that appeared at the time.

<sup>5</sup> According to Burke the anecdote was oral and was first written down in 1875.

<sup>6</sup> On this point see my own essay on *Pictures from Italy*.

A little, patient, revolutionary officer, exiled in England during many years; comes to and fro three times a week, to read and speak Italian with me. A poor little lame butterfly of a man, fluttering a little bit at one time, and hopping a little bit at another, and getting through life at some disadvantage, or other, always. If I question him closely on some idiom which he is not in a condition to explain, he usually shakes his head dolefully, and begins to cry. But this is not what I meant to say just now, when I began to allude to him. He has initiated me in the *Promessi Sposi* – the book which Violetta<sup>7</sup> read, that night. And what a clever book it is! I have not proceeded far into the story, but I am quite charmed with it. The interviews between the Bridegroom and the Priest, on the Morning of the disappointment – and between the Bridegroom and the Bride, and her Mother – and the description of poor Renzo's walk to the house of the learned doctor; with the fowls – and the scene between them – and the whole idea of the character and story of Padre Christoforo [sic] are touched, I think by a most delicate and charming hand. I have just left the good father in Don Rodrigo's boisterous Eating Hall; and am in no little anxiety, I assure you. (*Letters* 4: 189)

It is likely that Dickens finished the story, as the editor of the Pilgrim Edition suggests, but unfortunately there is no mention of this in any surviving document. The fact that Dickens does not mention the novel again has probably discouraged scholars from seeking any influence. Yet it should be considered that he does mention it, albeit once, which is more than many books he had in his Gad's Hill library; besides, a casual hint to *I promessi sposi* was hardly eligible to make a common ground of discussion with many Englishmen of his time.

There is also another reason why Dickens may have chosen to be reticent on this reading of his, and it is strictly connected with the deeply moral and religious character of its conception. At the time when Dickens went to Italy, he had joined the Unitarian Church and must have had an inclination towards a sort of ecumenical approach to religion. Dickens despised the Roman Catholic machinery as much as he disliked Puseyism. He found Roman Catholics rather superstitious

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<sup>7</sup> Violetta is a character from a tale titled "Montorio" added to the 1839 edition of Samuel Rogers's *Italy*. Had Violetta been reading something else we would hardly know that Dickens ever read *I promessi sposi* at all.

than pious and associated their religion with disorder and Papist schemes. Dickens was disgusted by Roman Catholic machinery and the processions he witnessed in Rome, but this is only one side of Dickens's relationship with Roman Catholics.

In Dickens's times the words Roman Catholic and Protestant were heavily connoted with a set of social characteristics that had more to do with Guy Fawkes than with Luther's 1517 theses or with the Concilium Tridentinum. In Chapter XXX of *Oliver Twist*, for an instance, Dr Losberne asks Mr Giles, the servant who had shot young Oliver, if he could take an oath that the weapon was actually loaded when it went off. In order to elicit a most conscientious answer he prepares his main question by a preliminary one: "Are you a protestant?" The question aims at (and actually succeeds in) educing a certain pride on the part of Mr Giles so that he will speak the truth, as could be expected from a Protestant. On the other hand, when Dickens criticizes Roman Catholic customs in *Pictures from Italy*, he does not consider any theological tenet either, but censures the superficiality of the procession and the alleged superstition of the worshippers. The words Anglican and Protestant were synonymous with order, cleanliness, political liberty, progress, work ethic; whereas Roman Catholic imported dirtiness, political injustice, disorder, slovenliness, laziness (Sanders *Charles Dickens*).

In fact, theologically speaking, Dickens cannot be said to have been a "good protestant" himself: he attended the Unitarian Church and had a general repugnance for every kind of theological dispute, especially within the Church of England. Moreover he often attributed to action a higher moral significance than he attached to prayer. In a satirical article against the Puseyites titled "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Condition of the Persons Variously Engaged in the University of Oxford" Dickens makes clear what he did and did not mean by Christian:

That it is unquestionably true that a boy was examined under the Children's Employment Commission, at Brinsley, in Derbyshire, who had been three years at school, and could not spell 'Church'; whereas there is no doubt that the persons employed in the University of Oxford can all spell Church with great readiness, and, indeed, very seldom spell anything else. But, on the other hand, it must not be forgotten that, in the minds of the persons employed in

the University of Oxford, such comprehensive words as justice, mercy, charity, kindness, brotherly love, forbearance, gentleness, and Good Works, awaken no ideas whatever: while the evidence shows that the most preposterous notions are attached to the mere terms Priest and Faith. (Slater 62)

Dickens's religious affiliation could not therefore prevent him from sympathizing with the author of *I promessi sposi*. Not only does Manzoni's Jansenistic attitude undermine the importance of liturgical acts, but he keeps referring to the Gospel and to those values that Dickens held dearest – love for one's enemy, compassion, love for one's neighbour, generosity. *I promessi sposi*, with its strong reliance on the New Testament, must have shown to Dickens a more profound and non-stereotypical way to look at Roman Catholics. Both as a Christian and as novelist, Dickens could have sympathized with Lodovico-Cristoforo's conversion (a similar one occurs in *Barnaby Rudge*) or with Renzo's scruples, when the young peasant picks up a loaf from the street on the day of the bread riot in Milan; and with his heartfelt joy when he eventually could "give it back" to a beggar woman during the plague, some 200 pages later, in the form of a similar piece of bread he had just bought for himself. Dickens must also have approved of Fra Cristoforo's enthusiasm, when he begged his seniors to allow him to go and serve in the Lazzaretto hospital during the plague, because "that would be a fine death for a Christian".

Dickens was probably still reading the novel – or had just finished it – when he had a remarkable dream concerning religion, scrupulously related by Forster:

"Let me tell you," he wrote (30th September [1844]), "of a curious dream I had, last Monday night; and of the fragments of reality I can collect, which helped to make it up. [...] I was visited by a Spirit. [...] I knew it was poor Mary's spirit. I was not at all afraid, but in a great delight, so that I wept very much, and stretching out my arms to it called it 'Dear.'

[...] 'But answer me one other question!' I said, in an agony of entreaty lest it should leave me. 'What is the True religion?' As it paused a moment without replying, I said – Good God, in such an agony of haste, lest it should go away! – 'You think, as I do, that the Form of religion does not so greatly matter, if we try to do good?

– or,’ I said, observing that it still hesitated, and was moved with the greatest compassion for me, ‘perhaps the Roman Catholic is the best? perhaps it makes one think of God oftener, and believe in him more steadily?’ ‘For *you*,’ said the Spirit, full of such heavenly tenderness for me, that I felt as if my heart would break; ‘for *you*, it is the best!’ Then I awoke.” (Forster 148)

The letter goes on explaining what suggestions may have induced the dream: the fact that he heard the chimes in Genoa, the fact that there was an altar in his bedroom and a discoloured fresco of a religious subject whose face he could not quite make out.<sup>8</sup>

To us the dream itself is not so interesting as the fact that Dickens decided to relate it to Forster since, by doing so, he showed how seriously he took Mary’s advice. Commenting on this letter, Forster adds that the dream may have been triggered by Dickens’s restlessness about religious issues. The biographer diplomatically comments:

It was perhaps natural that he should omit, from his own considerations awakened by the dream, the very first that would have risen in any mind to which his was intimately known – that it strengthens other evidences, of which there are many in his life, of his not having escaped those trying regions of reflection which most men of thought, and all men of genius have at some time to pass through. (150)

Forster adds that Dickens found a help to “such disturbances” in a book called *Life and Correspondences of Thomas Arnold* (1844), that the novelist knew especially through Forster’s own review.<sup>9</sup> This was published in October, the same year – in fact after the

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<sup>8</sup> It seems reasonable that this was a Madonna, as he states that Mary actually looked like the Madonna. This identification of Mary (!) with a Madonna who comes to rescue him is indeed very Roman Catholic. However we know that Dickens abhorred Mariolatry, even though, as we shall see, a feminine figure is often a necessary catalyst for a true conversion.

<sup>9</sup> According to Dennis Walder, in his review published by *The Examiner* in 1844, Forster picks up all those passages that accuse the Church of England of being slave to the Old Testament, whereas it is in the New Testament the true words of salvation have to be sought.



dream. Arnold, in Forster's summary,<sup>10</sup> contends that the principal function of Christian doctrine is the moral and social life of the community, a tenet very much in accordance with the idea of "broad church" proposed by the Unitarians. Dickens was particularly responsive to the social and practical implications of Christian religion. For this reason I think that *I promessi sposi*, which is exactly a social history of the seventeenth century where the action of Providence is particularly prominent, must have contributed to Dickens's reflections on Christianity and to his understanding of Roman Catholicism. Manzoni had been able to put into novelistic form the precepts and tenets of the Gospel. And for the same reason Dickens was reticent on the novel, as its subject were exactly those trying regions of reflections he did not escape.<sup>11</sup>

We shall now concentrate on what effect Manzoni's novel has had on Dickens as novelist. The strongest resemblances with Manzoni are to be felt in Dickens's great historical novel, *Tale of Two Cities*. It is quite possible that the English novelist re-read Manzoni's novel when he was working at the *Tale*. In fact in Dickens's historical novel we can find a couple of minor episodes which recall the plot of the *Promessi sposi* and – what is even more relevant – the same overall design.

We know that *A Tale of Two Cities* is a thoroughly researched novel. Its main, and acknowledged, sources are certainly *The French Revolution* by Carlyle for the historical background and *The Frozen Deep* by Wilkie Collins for the main incidents. Dickens was in fact both producer and actor of Collins's play at the time when he conceived the *Tale*. Nonetheless we know that Dickens felt unsure about his knowledge of the French milieu and turned to Carlyle who sent him "two cartloads of books" to help his research. Unfortunately we do not know exactly what the carts contained, though it is highly

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<sup>10</sup> Walder is unsure whether Dickens had read the original book or only Forster's résumé, but he seems to opt for the latter.

<sup>11</sup> As for the dream being the reflection of Dickens's actually cogitating upon these themes, we can take his own word for it. In a letter to Thomas Stone (2 February 1851) Dickens says that dreams are an allegorical way to decipher the waking state of the mind. "[I]f have been perplexed during the day, in bringing out the incidents of a story as I wish, I find that I dream at night" (*Letters* VI: 276). More likely than not, when Dickens wrote these words he had in mind, among others, his dream vision of Mary Hogarth.

probable that most volumes were the sources of Carlyle's own book (Sanders 40). In those years the English version of the *Promessi sposi* was often advertised in numerous periodicals and in at least two books about the French Revolution: France's *A History of the French Revolution* (1847), which devoted a whole page to advertizing the novel, and in *The History of French Revolution* by Adolphe Thiers. And what is more, we know that Dickens had a correspondence about the progress of his own novel with Bulwer-Lytton, his close friend, whose historical novel, *Cola di Rienzi*, was dedicated to Manzoni.

The first point of resemblance between *I promessi sposi* and *A Tale of Two Cities* is their historical scope. Both Manzoni and Dickens share the same judgmental attitude towards the times they write about and consider the present far better times. Not only the past was troubled by riots and misgovernment, past corruption extends to everyday life; in former times people were coarser, drank more heavily, streets were dirtier and more unsafe. This contempt for the past, that has no precedent in *Waverley* or *Ivanhoe*, is probably functional to the teleology of the novels, which entails the progress of mankind. Take as an instance this one: "Those were drinking days, and most men drank hard", which parallels another taken almost randomly from Manzoni:

Quel lato del monastero era contiguo a una casa abitata da un giovine, scellerato di professione, uno de' tanti, che, in que' tempi, e co' loro sgherri, e con l'alleanze d'altri scellerati, potevano, fino a un certo segno, ridersi della forza pubblica e delle leggi. (195)

[That side of the convent adjoined a house in which lived a young man who was a professional rogue, one of the many who were able, at that period, with the help of their minions and the alliance of other rogues, to defy justice and the forces of the law up to a point.]<sup>12</sup>

Both Manzoni and Dickens seem to have faced the same problem: how to write a novel that shows the working of God in history.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Translations of *I promessi sposi* into English have been adapted from the e-text <http://www.questia.com/library/book/the-betrothed-i-promessi-sposi-by-alessandro-manzoni.jsp>

<sup>13</sup> Among the sources of the *Tale*, St. John's Gospel stands out, as has recently been argued by K. M. Sroka.

Manzoni contends that history can be equated with progress because the hidden hand of Providence guides it and therefore writes a social novel where the works of Providence can be best appreciated. Dickens, on the other hand, prefers to concentrate on the plight of the individual; hence he chooses to write the stories of Manette and Carton. Yet the result is not dissimilar from Manzoni's; when Sidney Carton dies on the cross-guillotine, his prophetic vision allows him to see a far better world and far better people arise from the present bloodshed. The world, Dickens implies, improves thanks to good – mostly Christian – people who devote their lives to do good.

The double plot of *A Tale of Two Cities* entails a number of binary oppositions. One of these is the parallel between the Old and New Testaments. The revolutionaries, the Defarges, react to the iniquities of the *ancien régime* with the Mosaic law of an eye for an eye and with the curse that sins of the fathers will be visited upon their children. This attitude is shared not only by the new villains who want to slay the descendants of noblemen, but also by Charles Darnay's mother (who is afraid that the sins of her husband may fall on her child's head) and by Dr Manette, who actually denounces the Evremonds and their descendants. Only a gratuitous act of love can break this chain of "legal" injustice: a Christ-like Sidney Carton decides to die guiltless to atone for the sins of others. The core of the Christian doctrine is translated into the code of a secular realistic novel, where Sidney's sacrifice not only saves the Darnay family, but will be remembered as an example for the generations to come. Such sacrifices foster the progress of history.<sup>14</sup> Although Carton can certainly be said to be inspired by divine Grace when he deliberately decides to die on the guillotine, his conversion begins unnoticed thanks to the quiet and motionless influence of Lucie. Lucie, almost Madonna like, irradiates love to the benefit of those who happen to be around her, men and women alike; so far that the sole sight of her standing in front of the prison is said to be a great relief for her incarcerated husband. Carton's conversion is not the

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<sup>14</sup> *A Child's History of England* (1851-1853) is written with same underlying assumption. We must know history because it teaches us not only to avoid past mistakes, but, even more importantly, to remember, honour and imitate great men of the past to whom we owe what progress there has been.

only miracle wrought by Lucie; she is also the agent of her father's conversion from the Mosaic to the Christian Law. Dr Manette repents of the curse he had called on the Evremonds and atones for it in a long painful solitude.

From a functional point of view, Lucie Manette works exactly like Lucia Mondella in the *Promessi sposi*. She never really acts, her character could hardly sustain the novel, and yet she is the centre of attraction for all acting characters and an inspiration to conversion. In the *Promessi sposi* Lucia is the instrument that brings about the conversion of the *innominato*, and often we are told that Renzo abstains from doing evil only on her account. This is an instance taken from chapter 2:

Renzo era un giovine pacifico e alieno dal sangue, un giovine schietto e nemico d'ogni insidia; ma, in que' momenti, il suo cuore non batteva che per l'omicidio, la sua mente non era occupata che a fantasticare un tradimento. Avrebbe voluto correre alla casa di don Rodrigo, afferrarlo per il collo, e... [...] Si figurava [...] di prendere il suo schioppo, d'appiattarsi dietro una siepe, aspettando se mai, se mai colui venisse a passar solo; e, internandosi, con feroce compiacenza, in quell'immaginazione, si figurava di sentire una pedata, quella pedata, d'alzar chetamente la testa; riconosceva lo scellerato, spianava lo schioppo, prendeva la mira, sparava, lo vedeva cadere e dare i tratti, gli lanciava una maledizione, e correva sulla strada del confine a mettersi in salvo. "E Lucia?" Appena questa parola si fu gettata a traverso di quelle bieche fantasie, i migliori pensieri a cui era avvezza la mente di Renzo, v'entrarono in folla. (35)

[Renzo was a peaceable young man and averse to bloodshed – an open youth who hated deceit of any kind; but at that moment his heart only beat to kill, and his mind turned only on thoughts of treachery. He would have liked to rush to Don Rodrigo's house, seize him by the throat, and... [...] Then he imagined himself [...] taking his musket, crouching behind a bush, and waiting to see if ever, ever, that man passed by alone. And, dwelling on this idea with ferocious pleasure, he imagined himself hearing a footstep – that footstep – and stealthily raising his head; he recognized the villain, levelled his musket, took aim, fired, saw him fall in his death-agony, flung him a curse, and rushed off towards the frontier and safety. And Lucia? – As soon as this word was thrown across these grim fantasies, the better thoughts with which Renzo's mind was familiar came crowding after it.]

Likewise Carton assigns to Lucie the same redeeming power (chapter XII):

Since I knew you, I have been troubled by a remorse that I thought would never reproach me again, and have heard whispers from old voices impelling me upward, that I thought were silent for ever. I have had unformed ideas of striving afresh, beginning anew, shaking off sloth and sensuality, and fighting out the abandoned fight. A dream, all a dream, that ends in nothing, and leaves the sleeper where he lay down, but I wish you to know that you inspired it. (157)

Finally I would like to mention three details in the plot of *Tale of Two Cities* that recall Manzoni's novel: the first is the story written down by Dr Manette in the Bastille and read aloud at the trial; the second is a fine example of romantic irony which takes place in analogous circumstances at the expenses of Manzoni's Vicario di Provvisione and Dickens's Monsieur Gabelle; and last a passing reference to one of Manzoni's most striking characters, the nun of Monza.

The main plot of *I promessi sposi* is the story of a vicious Landlord (Don Rodrigo) who covets Lucia, a young peasant, and tries in vain to abduct her one night. His scheme fails, but he prevents Renzo from marrying her, thus setting the story in motion. The girl flees to Monza, and from there Don Rodrigo has her abducted through the help of a senior friend of his, called *l'innominato* [the unnamed one], who sees to her kidnapping and has her imprisoned in his castle. Don Rodrigo's plan is frustrated by the fact that, while *l'innominato* holds the girl in his castle, he is almost suddenly converted to the gospel and becomes a champion of faith. Obviously his first deed is to restore the poor girl to her mother. Dr Manette's letter from the prison, brought to light in the third book of the novel, in the chapter entitled "The Substance of the Shadow", tells the same basic story of a country landlord who seizes a peasant girl, with the important difference that the abduction of the virtuous girl has a much worse epilogue.

In the *Promessi sposi* Renzo, in flight from Rodrigo, arrives in Milan on the very day of the bread riot of San Martino. Manzoni describes at length how the mob ransacks the bakeries and prepares to lynch a state functionary, the Vicario di Provvisione. The

frightened functionary bars all doors and windows and runs up to the loft, where with a bathetic turn, Manzoni abandons the pathos and jokes about the reliability of historical narrations:

Il meschino girava di stanza in stanza, pallido, senza fiato, battendo palma a palma, raccomandandosi a Dio, e a' suoi servitori, che tenessero fermo, che trovassero la maniera di farlo scappare. Ma come, e di dove? Sali in soffitta; da un pertugio, guardò ansiosamente nella strada, e la vide piena zeppa di furibondi; senti le voci che chiedevan la sua morte; e più smarrito che mai, si ritirò, e andò a cercare il più sicuro e riposto nascondiglio. Lì rannicchiato, stava attento, attento, se mai il funesto rumore s'affievolisse, se il tumulto s'acquietasse un poco; ma sentendo in vece il muggito alzarsi più feroce e più rumoroso, e raddoppiare i picchi, preso da un nuovo soprassalto al cuore, si turava gli orecchi in fretta. Poi, come fuori di sé, stringendo i denti, e raggrinzando il viso, stendeva le braccia, e puntava i pugni, come se volesse tener ferma la porta... Del resto, quel che facesse precisamente non si può sapere, giacché era solo; e la storia è costretta a indovinare. Fortuna che c'è avvezza. (236-37)

[The wretched man was running about from room to room, pale and breathless, wringing his hands, appealing to God and to his servants to stand by him and find him some way of escape. But how, and where? He climbed up into the lofts, peered anxiously down into the street through a slit, and saw it crammed full of furious people; he heard the voices clamouring for his death, and, more beside himself than ever, drew back and went to search for the safest and remotest hiding-place he could find. Crouching down in it, he listened and listened to hear if the ghastly sounds were getting weaker or the tumult was abating a little; but instead he heard the bellowing getting louder and fiercer and the bangs on the door redoubling, so that his heart turned another somersault, and he hurriedly plugged up his ears. Then, completely losing control of himself he clenched his teeth and twisted up his face, braced his arms and fists, as if he hoped they would hold the doors firm, then... But what else he did we cannot tell, as he was alone; and history can only guess. Luckily, it is quite used to doing so.]

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Monsieur Gabelle, postmaster and tax collector of a remote country village is similarly besieged during a riot:

Not only that; but the village, light-headed with famine, fire, and bell-ringing, and bethinking itself that Monsieur Gabelle had to do with the collection of rent and taxes – though it was but a small instalment of taxes, and no rent at all, that Gabelle had got in those latter days – became impatient for an interview with him, and, surrounding his house, summoned him to come forth for personal conference. Whereupon, Monsieur Gabelle did heavily bar his door, and retire to hold counsel with himself. The result of that conference was, that Gabelle again withdrew himself to his housetop behind his stack of chimneys; this time resolved, if his door were broken in (he was a small Southern man of retaliative temperament), to pitch himself head foremost over the parapet, and crush a man or two below.

Probably, Monsieur Gabelle passed a long night up there, with the distant chateau for fire and candle, and the beating at his door [...]. (242)

Manzoni makes the most of romantic irony by casting a doubt on his own reliability; Dickens does not adopt the same solution, but still uses ironic detachment in order to avoid taking side in these early phases of the Revolution.

The last resemblance consists of a passing detail in the description of Monseigneur “in Town” (108), which recalls Manzoni’s story of Gertrude known as the nun of Monza, related in chapter 9. Manzoni lingers for a long while to tell the romantic story of Gertrude, a girl who was sent to a nunnery much against her will because marrying her would have been too expensive for her family. When we meet her in the novel she has already been in the convent for some time, where she agrees to take Lucia under her protection. In chapter XIII of *A Tale of Two Cities* we have a similar situation:

Monseigneur, after generations of great luxury and expense, was growing poor. Hence Monseigneur had taken his sister from a convent, while there was yet time to ward off the impending veil, the cheapest garment she could wear, and had bestowed her as a prize upon a very rich Farmer-General, poor in family. (109)

Indeed the whole description of Monseigneur reminds, though without striking similarities, of similar noblemen in *I promessi sposi*, such as il Principe (Gertrude’s father), and il Conte Zio (Don Rodrigo’s

uncle), whereas Don Rodrigo himself and his cousin Attilio, have a counterpart in the Evremond brothers.

We do not know if Manzoni borrowed these fragments consciously or unconsciously, whether they are meant to acknowledge a debt or, more probably, they are a part of his rich conceptual universe. My claim is simply that to this universe the Italian experience has given some noteworthy contributions.

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