

CHARACTERIZATION IN 'I PROMESSI SPOSI'

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In spite of a clearly neoclassical didactic intent, Manzoni's I Promessi Sposi does nevertheless contain both romantic and realistic traits which render it doubly representative of nineteenth-century European literature. Because Italy, unlike England and France, did not have an already established prose fiction tradition, Manzoni had not only to break new ground and make the novel form acceptable, but he must also rely entirely on foreign experience and personal invention for the conception of I Promessi Sposi.

Besides the variety of influences he received, from the English, French, and German alike, Manzoni himself was a most fascinating person. Politically concerned and philosophically oriented, he sought in literature the vehicle for development and expression of the ethical-religious principles he toiled with throughout his long and quiet but deeply probing existence. The novel, written after two verse tragedies (Il Conte di Carmagnola and Adelchi) and concomitantly with more theoretical studies in prose (Lettera sul Romanticismo and Discorso sul romanzo storico),

embodies Manzoni's ideas about literature and life, and thus appears as an extremely complex and comprehensive work.

Manzoni's very choice of subject and setting can already illustrate a multiplicity of tendencies. To the romantic interest in the historical past, he adds a typically Italian concern with verissimilitudes which, as Sergio Pacifici points out in the introduction to his Modern Italian Novel, constitutes an integral part of the Italian literary tradition.¹ The past appears, therefore, not as an ideal alternative for the present, but as an almost metaphorical representation of the crude contemporary reality. But perhaps the area in which the intermingling of romantic and realistic characteristics can be better appreciated and discussed is the realm of characterization. Because of the wide and continuous acceptance of I Promessi Sposi by the Italian public, which as a matter of fact owes to Manzoni the beginning of its cultural unification, most of the characters have been popularized to the extent of having become "types" and, in the case of Don Abbondio and Perpetua, even virtual caricatures. But as to whether, in the literary context of the book, they represent fully motivated individuals or highly generalized human beings, critics have not been able to agree. Are Lucia and Renzo flesh-and-bone characters, duly motivated and believable in their attitudes? Or do they stand for the pure heroine and the somewhat naive but nevertheless undaunted hero of the romance?

Because of Manzoni's unreserved admiration for Shakespeare and his art of characterization, most critics tend to describe Manzoni's characters as following the Shakespearean paradigm. Gian Piero Barricelli, for example, after stressing the novelist's praise of the English dramatist for not slipping "into the easy predictabilities of typification," observes that "it was feelings that elicited Manzoni's interest—feelings and their corollary, the motivations for human actions."² Indeed, if there is anything that would make Don Abbondio believable in his refusal to perform the marriage of Renzo and Lucia, it would have to be a very strong sentiment; only fear and an acute lack of self-respect could possibly explain such behavior in a member of the clergy. Likewise, the totally irrational and apparently unmotivated conversion of the Innominato, his repentance which arises as suddenly

as Don Rodrigo's passion for Lucia, can only have been brought about from within. In this sense, Manzoni's characters are indeed no allegorical abstractions; but to consider them types only in so far as they are representative of a social class and of humanity in general,³ seems somewhat questionable and deserves, therefore, a closer examination.

Barricelli contends that Renzo and Lucia, as well as the most prominent characters of I Promessi Sposi, contain sufficient mixed traits to remain within the framework of realism.⁴ Though he sees Renzo as a symbol of the instinctive endurance of the human race, the critic also recognizes in him "a fundamental good-naturedness and a compassion for the suffering" which, coupled with his basic optimism and naivete, render him fully individualized. Lucia, for her part, appears to Barricelli as possessing a certain degree of ideality without however "losing [any] of her feminine reality."⁵ Even Agnese, because of her typical gestures and reliance on personal and popular sayings alike, seems to the critic to have been cast "in an unmistakably human mold."⁶

However desirable and even admirable it may sound, Barricelli's interpretation is nevertheless difficult to accept wholeheartedly due to the lack of balance between the individualizing characteristics and the traits which enhance representativeness. Lucia is primarily an ideal, a creature of light as the name indicates, and a paradigm of faith and true love; only incidentally does she stand out as a fully individualized human being, and even then so few are her negative traits, if any, that the reader quickly forgets them. Her love for Renzo is so ideally selfless that it does not convince. Agnese, likewise, appears so much as the typical mother and peasant woman that she becomes above all a type. Even her frequent exclamations and motherly worries do not rise above the commonplace. Furthermore, the argument of mixed traits can hardly be applied to Don Rodrigo who, in spite of his similarity with Balzac's Vautrin, does not even subscribe to any basic philosophy of life to make him believable as a human being and who remains, therefore, a mere personification of gratuitous evil. The only one of the major characters who gets approaches anywhere near the realistic paradigm of roundness in characterization is Renzo, who clearly reveals his weaknesses and

mends his ways by having to plunge deeply into experience. And it is indeed interesting to realize that, whereas he worries for Renzo, the reader never wavers in his faith that Lucia will remain untainted.

Because Manzoni dealt basically with the fundamental dichotomy between good and evil (religious morality is after all the central concern of the novel) or, as Marxist critics will have it, between the nobles and the peasants as illustrations of the constant division between oppressors and oppressed, it is only logical that his characters should not ultimately strive for individuality. To judge them according to the realistic criterion leads inevitably to Barricelli's "tour de force" or to Kennard's conclusion that Lucia and Renzo are weak characters.⁷ In spite of Manzoni's outstanding realism in the description of setting and the abundance of specific details with which he renders his narrative believable, the essential features of I Promessi Sposi--the message and the characters--may perhaps remain basically romantic. If so, in the same way that Hawthorne's Dimmesdale and Chillingworth would probably not withstand a close examination by late nineteenth-century standards, neither should Manzoni's characters be analyzed by the tenets of a Flaubert, for example.

One of the best evaluations of I Promessi Sposi in terms of characterization is that of Benedetto Croce in his European Literature in the Nineteenth Century. Croce acknowledges the sense of narrowness which one experiences when reading the novel, a feeling which has given rise to much adverse criticism. "We are not made to feel," he writes,

any of what are called the human affections and passions in their full force and in their full development in that romance. The effort towards the truth, the obsession of doubt, the desire for happiness, the ravishment of the infinite, the dream of beauty and dominion, the joys and sorrows of love, the drama of politics and history, the ideals and memorials of peoples and so forth, which supply material for other poets, are not to be found here.⁸

Croce does not, however, attribute this absence to any lack of experience or knowledge on the part of Manzoni. He sees the novelist as an artist who has risen above the tumult of life and who has achieved such a control over passion that to judge his characters by the standards applied to a Werther or a Hans Castorp would become highly unfair.

Manzoni's is the wisdom of the moralist, who sees nothing but black and white, on one side justice, on the other injustice; on one side goodness, on the other evil; here innocence, yonder malice; reason on the one side, wickedness and fatuity on the other; approving one and blaming the other often with the subtle considerations of the casuist. The world, so various in colour and sound, so closely related in all its parts, so inexhaustible and so profound, becomes simplified, not to say impoverished in his vision.⁹

Even though Croce's criticism must be taken with a certain reserve, especially in what concerns the complexity and colorfulness of Manzoni's world, it nevertheless provides an adequate perspective from which to view the central characters of I Promessi Sposi. Because the human feelings and affections which motivate them have been subordinated to the ethical feeling or, as Croce puts it, colored by "the torch of morality,"¹⁰ the personages have had to incorporate that moral dimension and stand for either good or evil within the complex network of relationship of the novel. They are not, however, merely types in the sense of lacking depth and motivation. They are typical only in so far as they represent a specific stance of a moral conflict. The great merit of Croce's criticism consists thus in providing a specific Manzonian context for evaluating the characters of I Promessi Sposi.

In such a context, for example, the love between Lucia and Renzo does not reach the extreme degree of Werther's devotion for Lotte. Nor can the passion of the Nun of Monza possibly receive the treatment Flaubert gave to the feelings of Madame Bovary. Together, however, Gertrude and Lucia illustrate for Manzoni the

basic dichotomy between love as a natural feeling and love as a violent passion. Without either too much sentimentality or excessive sensuality, they embody the extremes of what Croce so poetically expresses as

the irrational rational, the most direct symbol of life, a mingling of self-love and of self-sacrifice, of voluptuous delirium and of fruitful toil, of weakness and of strength, a fount of purification, or a vortex of impurity: in love, man is dominated by nature, yet he affirms himself to be man as he lifts his gaze to heaven.¹¹

On the other hand, though Manzoni downplays feelings in favor of a moral quality, his characters do not appear as totally unmotivated individuals. Even the Innominato, whose conversion easily invites the classification of an unexplainable miracle, may possibly be seen as the product of deeply probing existential doubts.¹² In the Nun of Monza incident, though Gertrude appears primarily to illustrate an extreme case of self-love, enough family background is provided to render her attitude believable, if not acceptable, in the context of her psychological and social baggage. In this sense, Manzoni approaches the realistic concern for man as a product of his environment. By selecting, however, a peasant girl for his symbol of selfishness, Manzoni may be revealing not only his political sympathy for the common people but, together with an emphasis on environment, a deeply romantic belief in the incorruptibility of man in his natural state. Once again we can see how the novel does not lend itself to an easy and clear-cut classification into the romantic or the realistic mold.

Because of his primary moral concern, Manzoni tends to cast his characters into easily recognizable pairs embodying opposite tendencies. Such is the case, for example, of Cardinal Borromeo and Don Abbondio who illustrate two extreme degrees of religiosity: the paradigm of Christian perfection, selfless and courageous, on the other hand; and the caricature of a bad clergyman, cowardly motivated by self-love, on the other. The measure

of of their opposition: faith. Likewise, Fra Cristoforo and Don Rodrigo, both members of a proud aristocracy, oppose each other in terms of justice and injustice. Whereas Fra Cristoforo through "the rankling of remorse and a vision of something which discards vainglory in favor of altruism,"¹³ transforms his pride and his impulsiveness into weapons against evil and inequality, Don Rodrigo remains impervious to any desire to reform; even Lucia's righteousness serves merely to arouse his lust and his arrogance.

Less important for the development of the novel, but no less striking as illustrations of contrasting social and intellectual attitudes, the two families which host Lucia during her long estrangement from Agnese and Renzo stand clearly opposed. The artificiality and "learnedness" of Don Ferrante and Dona Prassede stifle true religiosity and humanity, whereas the affectionate and humble atmosphere of the tailor's house fosters, through love, the development and cultivation of natural virtues.

All in all, Manzoni depicts in his novel a balanced though deeply complex network of human qualities. His world reveals, in spite of all struggle and pain and suffering, a profound sense of harmony, a universe which divine Providence carefully watches and ultimately redeems. The fate or chance which the Greeks attributed to the selfish designs of the gods and which the realists relocated to the environment and to heredity is dispensed in Manzoni by the omnipotent but nevertheless fair and just hand of God. As Sergio Pacifici recognizes,

There is far too much serenity in Manzoni's cosmos or in his manner of recounting his tale, and we live in a historical moment which has taught us to expect, not to say fear, the improbable, erratic gesture that may well doom mankind. There are, in The Betrothed, far too many happy resolutions: the good people are invariably rewarded, in this life or beyond it, and the bad people are always punished.¹⁴

It is the serenity, perhaps, and not the absence of motivation or mixed traits, which accounts for the lack of force

fulness the reader encounters in Manzoni's characters. For my part, as an individual of a post-Darwinian and post-Freudian era, I experience a very strong reluctance to accept either Renzo or Lucia, or for that matter any other character in the novel, as a believable and motivated individual. But I tend to accept Croce's perspective and recognize that, judged by the tenets set by Manzoni and his grand moral vision, the novel prevails and the people who inhabit the world of I Promessi Sposi could not have been otherwise presented.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

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NOTES

¹ Sergio Pacifici, The Modern Italian Novel (Carbondale, Ill.: So. Illinois Univ. Press, 1967), p.21. For a general examination of the background of Italian fiction see also J.S. Kennard, Italian Romance Writers (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1966), pp. 40-77.

² Gian Piero Barricelli, Alessandro Manzoni (Boston: Twayne, 1976), p. 118.

³ See Barricelli's concept of "representative hero" in Alessandro Manzoni, p. 118.

⁴ Barricelli, p. 122.

⁵ Barricelli, p. 121.

⁶ Barricelli, p. 123.

⁷ Kennard, Italian Romance Writers, p. 108.

⁸ Benedetto Croce, European Literature in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Haskell House, 1967), pp. 145-46.

⁹ Croce, p. 146.

¹⁰ Croce, p. 157.

¹¹ Croce, p. 159.

¹² For an excellent analysis of the Innominato as a well-motivated character see Barricelli, p. 128.

¹³ Barricelli, p.126.

¹⁴ Pacifici, p. 55.