

SISMONDI AND MANZONI: TWO FENCERS IN THE DARK?

Beniamino Bedini

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This essay reaffirms the question of the polemic between Manzoni and Sismondi in regard to the negative effects of the Catholic religion of the Counter-Reformation on the character of the Italians. As compared with the existing studies, the author inserts that polemic within the living fabric of Manzoni's opus, also availing himself of numerous and little known archival sources. The outcome is a relationship of communication and confrontation between the two great intellectuals that is far more elaborate and fruitful than what might have been thought. Even Manzoni nurtured reservations as to Counter-Reformation culture, and if in the *Osservazioni* written against Chapter CXXVII of the *Histoire des Républiques italiennes* he had put forward an almost integral confutation of the Genevan's thesis, in other works he supposedly showed a far more complex thinking on the matter. The author also shows how the reading of Sismondi's work (not only the *Républiques*, but also the *Tableau de l'agriculture toscane* and even the *Histoire des Français*) turned out to be decisive for the founder of the Italian historical novel.

Keywords: Sismondi; Manzoni; Catholic religion; Counter-Reformation; Historical novel

Beniamino Bedini, *Sismondi et Manzoni : deux duellistes dans la nuit ?*

Cet article se concentre sur la polémique entre Manzoni et Sismondi au sujet des effets négatifs de la religion de la Contre-Réforme sur le caractère des Italiens. S'appuyant sur les études déjà existantes et sur de nombreuses archives méconnues, l'auteur situe une telle polémique au cœur de l'œuvre manzonienne. Cette enquête met à jour un rapport de communication et de comparaison entre les deux grands intellectuels qui sont bien plus articulés et féconds que ceux auxquels nous pourrions nous attendre. Manzoni nourrissait également des doutes sur la culture de la Contre-Réforme et si dans ses *Observations* contre le chapitre CXXVII de l'*Histoire des Républiques italiennes* il avait formulé un rejet quasi entier de la thèse du Genevois, il aurait manifesté dans d'autres œuvres une pensée plus complexe sur la question. De plus, l'auteur démontre combien la lecture des œuvres de Sismondi (pas seulement des *Républiques* mais aussi du *Tableau de l'agriculture toscane* et même de l'*Histoire des Français*) s'est révélée décisive pour le fondateur du roman historique italien.

Mots-clés: Sismondi; Manzoni; Religion catholique; Contreréforme; Roman historique

Beniamino Bedini, *Sismondi e Manzoni: duellanti nella notte?*

Questo saggio ripropone la questione della polemica tra Manzoni e Sismondi a proposito degli effetti negativi della religione cattolica della Controriforma sul carattere degli italiani. Rispetto agli studi esistenti, l'autore inserisce tale polemica nel tessuto vivo dell'opera manzoniana, avvalendosi anche di numerose e poco conosciute fonti d'archivio. Ne risulta un rapporto di comunicazione e confronto tra i due grandi intellettuali ben più articolato e fecondo di quanto si potesse pensare.

Anche Manzoni nutriva delle riserve sulla cultura della Controriforma, e se nelle *Osservazioni* scritte contro il capitolo CXXVII della *Histoire des Républiques italiennes* aveva mosso una confutazione pressoché integrale delle tesi del ginevrino, in altre opere avrebbe manifestato un pensiero assai più complesso sulla questione. L'autore dimostra anche quanto la lettura delle opere di Sismondi (non solo le *Républiques*, ma anche il *Tableau de l'agriculture toscane* e persino l'*Histoire des Français*) si fosse rivelata decisiva per il fondatore del romanzo storico italiano.

Parole chiave: Sismondi; Manzoni; Religione cattolica; Controriforma; Romanzo storico

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Between spring and summer 1818 Alessandro Manzoni stopped writing *The Count of Carmagnola* to begin composing *The Catholic Morality*, which on July of the following year would be published by Antonio Lamperti. This «booklet»¹ was meant to stand up to the accusation of Genevan Jean Charles Léonard Simonde de Sismondi, who had gathered in the last chapter of his *History of the Italian Republic during the Middle Ages*, a long series of criticisms towards the «mutated attitude of the Italians». He reckoned that four institutions, which will be deeply analyzed later, were to be blamed for this decadence: religion, education, legislation and point of honour, even though it was the «prodigious imperium» of religion what affected the human animus most.

The Genevan speaks out against the Catholic morality with no less than twenty-two points of accusation: Manzoni replies to some of them, proposing to separate facts from principles, the sin from the sinner, giving life to an apologetic work which is unique in its field, because it aims not so much to defend the Catholic issue as the Truth.

Reading the beginning of the *Vindication*, especially the section devoted to the reader, it is clear that Alessandro Manzoni, moved by charitable Christian spirit, wants to get rid of any possible misunderstanding to avoid that his «small work»² might be misused or used for different purposes.

In the first lines we can read: «The first part of this work aims to defend the morality of the Catholic Church from the accusations written in chapter CXXVII of *History of the Italian Republics during the Middle Ages*».

Nevertheless, this defence has not harsh, destructive or belittling intentions, as previous apologies contemporary to Alessandro Manzoni had, but it is undertaken under the conviction that a Christian is compelled to speak out for the truth in which he believes, aware of its limits, facing the task with humbleness and spirit of brotherly correction, as he

*I thank dr. Gabriele Venerdini for his valuable support in the translation of the text.

¹ In the third volume of *Opere inedite o rare di Alessandro Manzoni*, published by Ruggiero Bonghi (Milano, Fratelli Rechiedei, 1887), in the «Appendix containing some Fragments of the first part of A Vindication of Catholic Morality», we can read that in a draft of introduction, which the author reviewed and amended afterward, Manzoni wrote: «The reader is used to finding in works of this kind a spirit of dispute. The author of this booklet hopes to be inspired by a different kind of spirit. Only the wish to support the truth convinced him to write».

² So Manzoni defines the *Vindication* (in Italian: *Osservazioni sulla morale cattolica*) from the first lines of the introduction; with his understatement, with the habit of belittling his capacity, of escaping any compliment. It is useful to mention that he referred to his great novel using nice definitions like «cantafavola» (the term was also used by Piero Floriani in his *Studies for Umberto Carpi, The Betrothed, a «cantafavola esplorativa»*) or «tiritera»; «and Goethe was right when he said that Manzoni had just one fault: he never realized how great he was and how many rights he was entitled to claim», as the mentioned work by G. Macchia, p. 37, reports.

writes in chapter VII of «About religious hates»: «it is perpetual doctrine of the Church that mistakes must be despised and those who make mistakes must be loved»³.

We know that in Manzoni's time «In works of this kind, the apology was meant to be a showdown, if not an assault or an offence»⁴, but he behaved differently proceeding off the beaten track.

In the manuscript of *Vindication*, preserved in Milan Braidense Library, Manzoni Room, we can read:

An essay which introduces itself as confutation needs a clear statement about its author's feelings. The reader usually expects to find in books of this kind a certain spirit of challenge; he also expects the same books to be more focused on showing that the confuted author is wrong, than committed to establish important truths.

Revising the text for printing, he modified the beginning in these terms:

Weak but sincere apologist of a morality the aim of which is love; convinced that the feeling of benevolence which rises in the heart of the simple, is nobler and more important of the sublime concept conceived by a great thinker; persuaded that the different opinion of the others should induce in us feelings of esteem and affection towards them, just because our corrupted inclination might unfairly lead us to the opposite conclusions: if in this booklet I did not observe the most thorough regards towards the Author I was confuting, that certainly happened against my intention⁵.

As I mentioned before, the Genevan historian moved twenty-two accusations, but in his dissertation Manzoni voluntarily avoids the three charges which refer to historical facts and that therefore are not connected to faith.

In order to help the reader to understand the relations between the Genevan and the Great Lombard, let us read the following correspondence, which allows us to focus on the mutual feelings of esteem and respect, lived in awareness of their convincements.

Geneva, 20 December 1829: Sismondi writes to Mrs. Fulvia Jacopetti, daughter of Pietro Verri, who had sent him a copy of *A Vindication of Catholic Morality*. Here is the most significant part of the letter⁶:

I am much obliged, dear lady, for the book by Mr. Manzoni you have sent me: first of all I have to confess that I feel flattered by the fact that such a famous and admired man confuted my theory; that I am infinitely sensitive to the way he spoke about me in the prologue; that I admire the fact that even in a dispute so close to his heart, he maintained such a courteous language. I may add that I knew even before that on the main issue we would have agreed more than we thought, because when it comes to religion every man is committed to the highest level of his soul, and I was pretty sure that Catholicism grew and became noble in Manzoni's heart. Though when I come to think about the controversy itself, I must confess that it impressed me very little. We look like two fencers dueling at

³ Every quotation from *Osservazioni sulla morale cattolica (Vindication of Catholic Morality)* comes from 1819 edition (Milano, Antonio Lamberti), p. 81.

⁴ Antonia Mazza Tonucci, «La nuova Apologetica: Le Osservazioni sulla morale cattolica», in *Manzoni nella terra ambrosiana. Atti del Convegno della diocesi di Milano nel bicentenario della nascita, 19-21 aprile 1985*, Casale Monferrato, Piemme, 1985, p. 49.

⁵ A. Manzoni, *Vindication...*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁶ Antonio Cojazzi, *Osservazioni sulla morale cattolica di Alessandro Manzoni. Parte edita, parte inedita e Pensieri religiosi. Studi introduttivi, note e appendice*, Torino, Società Editrice Internazionale, third reviewed edition, 1951, p. 98.

night-time who cannot see each other; while he thinks he is cornering me, I am standing in the opposite corner and we cannot get any closer. We do not give the words the same meaning.

On 31 July 1835, with open polemical intention, Abbot Claude Pierre Challamel, Canon of the Cathedral of Annecy, professor of theology and ecclesiastic censor, sent to Sismondi his French translation of *A Vindication of Catholic Morality*, attaching a brief note which is mentioned in Mirena Bernardini's contribution to *Acts of International Conversation on Sismondi* – Pescia, 8/10 September 1970.

Dear Sir, it is a pleasure for me to send you a copy of the translation of Manzoni's excellent work about *Catholic Morality*; it will interest you more than any others; it is definitely the necessary appendix of your *History of the Italian Republics during the Middle Ages*. I hope the reasons of this great writer will appear clear, well-argued and straight to you. Furthermore, the essay of the admirable Manzoni is an example of urbanity, moderation and delicacy. As for the note I have added, I must confess that the path was suggested in order to remove any danger for ignorant people and to make the essay comprehensible to most readers.

I beg you to believe my deep respect and esteem.

Your humblest and obedient.

Servant Challamel.

Sismondi answered with a letter dated 18 August 1835 (also this letter comes from the above mentioned *Acts of International Conversation on Sismondi*):

Sir, I have long since known the observations of Count Manzoni on Catholic morality. That book is written with the urbanity of a honourable man, with the benevolence and the charity of a Christian. I had criticized the abuses, he defended the principles. He stood for what had to be, I had blamed what didn't have to be. We did not agree, but I believe that this discussion has not weakened our reciprocal esteem.

You have absolutely changed the book that you translated. You cancelled the quotations, replaced the benevolent sentences with expressions of blame.

It is really simple. The style is the man; it is possible to recognize the manners and the heart of a man from his language. I cannot understand why you sent me a copy of the book or why you wrote to me, but I thank you anyway, because you have given me the opportunity to know who you are, an ecclesiastic censor.

You can be sure that his translation will not change in any terms the feeling of respect and veneration which I will always keep for Count Manzoni.

One of your most sincere admirers.

Jean Charles Léonard Simonde de Sismondi

Nevertheless, it is clear that this unpleasant correspondence had made Sismondi so much uneasy, that he wanted to inform Manzoni that he did not know anything about it. I report the answer which Manzoni sent to Sismondi from Brusuglio on 26 August 1835 and that, as comes through in the mentioned precious contribution by M. Bernardini Stanghellini, «May be reckoned the most valuable and authentic proof of what our major writer felt for

the Genevan historian; on the other hand, Sismondi already knew his feelings through a mutual girlfriend and requited them with the same intensity»⁷:

Sir, the extreme indulgence and, more precious yet, the affectionate goodness which you demonstrate towards me, make superfluous any assurance that I am not involved in any terms in what you have been so kind to inform me of. You must not doubt, Sir, the displeasure I felt: and I do not dare think what my affliction would be if I believed that this incident might keep us distant. In fact, the rule which legitimates personal attacks on these matters may be reasonable, but I believe that high admiration, deep esteem and sympathy can sometimes justify the transgression of this and other rules; and I hope that these feelings will help me be forgiven for what I want to say once and for all: talis cum sis, utinam, utinam! Nosteresses!

Sir, these feelings were born a long time ago, before your great masterpieces raised your name to the highest place.

I think that your Treaty on Tuscan Agriculture is the first book about agriculture I have ever read, and definitely the first one that taught me to love this art; a love which fortunately is still alive.

The description of life and places, along with the reasoning about agronomy, these sharp views cast on history which drew so much charm and interest towards this book, announced what you could have done with broader and more interesting subjects. Madame Jacopetti, with a joy she knew I would have shared, spoke to me about her hope of seeing you here some day.

Making your acquaintance would be a sensation for my vanity, but if it is not possible to silence this poor feeling, I really hope to have let you know that it is neither the only one, nor the stronger of the feelings which make me wish this occurrence with all my heart.

Please accept my assurance of the high esteem with which I am honoured to sign.

Your humblest and obedient
servant Alessandro Manzoni

Certainly the mutual courtesy of both writers, so different from the harsh style commonly used in literary disputes, pays them great honour. We have often wondered whether Manzoni's extreme kindness might have sometimes risked weakening the effectiveness of his confutations. As Pasquale Leonetti reminds us, in the first place we have to take into account: «The aristocratic inclination of the author, incline to reserve and inconspicuousness»⁸, combined with a deep Christian spirit which makes him state: «The most absolute triumph of any literary theory cannot make up for resentment between two men or an offensive line»⁹.

The spirit of the Catholic apologist will never be aggressive because the conviction of believing the Catholic morality perfect provides intellectual serenity. And not only are the Catholic's mistakes powerless against this morality, but they are also condemned by it.

According to Stefano Stampa's memoirs (son of Manzoni's second wife, Teresa Borri, married in 1837), Sismondi said: «Mr. Manzoni describes the Catholic morality as it should be, and I described the abuse of it». It was for that reason that the Genevan, in the above mentioned letter, had compared themselves to two fencers dueling in the dark. Actually I

⁷ Mirena Bernardini Stanghellini, «L'Archivio Sismondi nella Biblioteca Civica di Pescia», in *Atti del Colloquio internazionale sul Sismondi*, Roma, Accademia dei Lincei, 1973, p. 27.

⁸ Pasquale Leonetti, *La coscienza di Alessandro Manzoni attraverso il suo mondo morale e poetico*, Napoli, Società anonima editrice Dante Alighieri, 1932, p. 1.

⁹ Ferruccio Ulivi, *Manzoni*, Milano, Rusconi, 1984, p. 263.

agree with Romano Amerio, when he says that the blows of both are precise and well-aimed, and that the duel is based on doctrinal features and not on the abuses, as Sismondi feared.

It is not possible to believe that Sismondi's reasoning concerned just the morality and not the theory and the Catholic idea of it. Instead, the Genevan follows the path of French and Italian Enlightenment writers, from Voltaire to Pilati, who claimed the Italian nation to be corrupted and depressed not for infidelity, but just on account of the faith to the morality preached by the Catholic Church, which spoilt and destroyed Gospel's principles. In conclusion, the *Catholic Morality* is an essay about a controversy essentially theoretical and doctrinal, or rather dogmatic, in which an author accuses the Church's dogmas of being principles of corruption for people, whereas Manzoni stands up for the same dogmas and demonstrates that they are just principles of holiness and justice¹⁰.

But I think that it is fair to remind that the dispute arose just about religion, and that the Genevan positively affected many other works of the Great Lombard. If the reading of *Tableau* depended on the shared love for agriculture, the Genevan's historical essays, as observed by Michele Barbi and later by Aurelia Accame Bobbio¹¹, provided more than a hint for several Manzoni's works. In particular, volume VIII of *Histoire* may be considered «the main source Manzoni used to compose the *Carmagnola*»¹².

After all, in a letter dated 25 March 1816 addressed to his friend Claude Fauriel (1777 – 1844), sent from Milan, Contrada del Morone, Manzoni wrote:

The subject is the death of Francesco Carmagnola; if you want to explore every particular of his life, open volume VIII of Sismondi's Italian Republics. The action begins with the war declaration of Venice to the Duke of Milan (page 378) and finishes with the death of Carmagnola, described towards the end of the volume.¹³

Manzoni recalls Carmagnola's «superbe et impétueux»¹⁴ temperament, already noticed by Sismondi, and both claim that, in letting his Milanese prisoners free, the Count followed the military rules of the time, and that for that reason he was not to be blamed. In their opinion the character is victim of the Reason of the State, and they both condemn the lack of civil freedom of the Serenissima and refuse the total subordination of the individual to the State. The difference between the two authors is that Sismondi is focused on the political side of the issue, while Manzoni «tries to put together Enlightenment and Christian values, to add to the debate a distressing request to consciences»¹⁵; this is the original feature of Manzoni who, though stimulated by Sismondi's reasoning, is stern on condemning brother against brother war, immorality and hypocrisy. The dramatic conflict

¹⁰ Romano Amerio, *Osservazioni sulla morale cattolica di Alessandro Manzoni. Testo critico con introduzione, apparato, commento, appendice di frammenti e indici, accompagnato da uno studio sulle dottrine*, Napoli, Ricciardi, 1966, p. CVIII.

¹¹ Aurelia Accame Bobbio, *La crisi manzoniana del 1817*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 1960, p. 23.

¹² Giuseppe Nava, «Il Manzoni e l'*Histoire des Républiques italiennes* del Sismondi», *Studi letterari*, 1967, p. 144. A special thanks to Collegio Ghisleri of Pavia for the text.

¹³ A. Manzoni, *Lettere*, Milano, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1999, p. 158.

¹⁴ G. Nava, «Il Manzoni e l'*Histoire des Républiques italiennes* del Sismondi», *art. cit.*, p. 152.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

which draws his interest is the one between what is right and a society which is not so, and that strands the individual reducing him to a victim. This is the eternal conflict between the «ideal» and the «real».

The influence of Sismondi is also perceivable in the historical preliminary works that Manzoni carried out for the *Adelchi*, and that were later used for *Discourse on some points of Longobard History in Italy*, which Manzoni attached to the Tragedy.

The first volume of the *Histoire* provides the hint for the three main issues that Manzoni intended to develop in the *Discourse*¹⁶, in which he comes to conclusions quite different from the main stream opinion, mainly based on works like the *Annali* by L.A. Muratori: in Manzoni's opinion, the Longobards and the Latins have never formed a united people, being separated by the mutual hate which Desiderio, in the tragedy, calls insurmountable barrier between the oppressed and the oppressor. In fact, the natives live in slavery and submission. It is for this reason that Adriano I (Pope from 772 to 795) is not to be blamed for having called the French, being the call a remedy and not a mistake.

If we look into the «debate» we can see that in chapter CXXVII of his essay Sismondi shows in details the reasons behind the destruction of the richness that nature had provided to Italian people.

Neither the Italian sun is less shining, nor the soil is less fertile; the several views of the Apennine are still joyful; the Italian countryside is still irrigated by clear water; the trees still grow rich and magnificent. Every animal close to the man maintains its beauty and its ancient instinct; the man himself, being born in this favorable country, is still gifted of the same lively and prompt imagination, of the same liveliness of effects, of the same capacity of noticing everything, of learning everything at the same time.

In the meantime, only the man is changed, and he is changed on account of the social orders: they receive the man from the hands of the nature and modify him; their might invest him from every side at the same time.

As anticipated at the beginning of this brief essay, in Sismondi's opinion the four institutions which most affect the human behavior are religion, education, legislation and point of honour. Before looking into the theme of Catholic religion as the first cause of the degradation of Italian people, I wish to examine briefly what the Genevan historian called the other «moral forces which act over society»¹⁷.

The second force is education, which the author reckons tightly connected to religion in a relation of mutual influence. He affirms that two new Religious Orders «take possession» of the culture of the time, negatively affecting the education of the youth: the *Societas Iesus* founded in 1540 by Spanish Ignazio Lopez de Loyola and the *Ordo Clericorum Regularium Pauperum Matris Dei Scholarum Piarum*, founded by Giuseppe Calasanzio in 1622.

¹⁶ Manzoni himself mentions the *Histoire* in the appendix of chapter III, to confute a particular passage about the relationship between the two peoples, which identified Scabini of Franks with Sculdasci of Longobards. In particular he mentions chapter II and VI of Volume I, pages 75 and 384, indicating on it «Paris 1809». In the notes of *Discourse* Manzoni also mentions the *Histoire des Français*, as a proof that he was familiar with the Genevan's works.

¹⁷ Sismondi, *History of the Italian Republics during the Middle Ages*, Capolago, Tipografia Elvetica, 1831, t. XVI, p. 369. Digital text.

The colleges and schools run by Jesuits and Scolopis privileged the teaching of human sciences, theology and Christian activities, which, according to Sismondi, made the young dependant by the ecclesiastic authorities and cancelled every inclination to think autonomously.

This severe criticism to classic education is typical of protestant culture, which, as witnessed in *The Protestant Ethics* and *The Spirit of Capitalism* by Max Weber, leans towards modern Institutes devoted to technical education and industrial and commercial professions.

The third force which affects negatively these «monastically educated kids» is legislation, which welcomes them «ready to pay the same obedience to their principles»¹⁸. In Sismondi's opinion submission is the most important political duty and a major principle of prudence; laws are just the expression of the sovereign's will and they are defined «*motu proprio*» because in writing them he does not accept any advice. Legislation, failing to bind citizens to their country and to make them behave brotherly to one another, made them lazy and diffident «giving them selfishness for prudence and cowardice for defence»¹⁹.

In Sismondi's opinion the fourth cause, the point of honour, has the purpose to repair the damages provoked by bad legislation, but in actual fact it made some features of Italians' character even worse. The origin of the unwritten rule comes in particular from Castilian and Arabian cultures, and came over to Italy in 16th century with the Spanish army. Basically the point of honour comes down to three fundamental principles: the defence of women's decency, whose shame falls equally on fathers, brothers and husbands; the respect of man's value, which likewise spreads to whole family; the «religion» of vengeance which doesn't ask anything but the death of the offender. And to reach this aim any mean is allowed.

In the second part of *A Vindication of Catholic Morality*, which Manzoni preserved among his «papers», at the beginning of the chapter *About National Hates* we can read:

The way chapter CXXVII of *History of the Italian Republics during the Middle Ages* depicts modern Italians' morality is such, that for an Italian it is difficult to examine it dispassionately, and consider calmly whether that is the real portrait of the Nation he belongs to. So, if I impose silence to what it seems and to every National partiality, that picture will look unfair to me. But I replied to the accusations moved to that unhappy Italy, only when religion arises as the cause of that unhappiness.

Undoubtedly, Manzoni shared the Genevan's opinion about the other accusations: in the episode in which young Gertrude is forced to take the veil (chapter X of *The Betrothed*), we can find in the character of Prince-father the theme of education and psychological culture of Jesuits, on whom the judgment is hard, though rarely declared so clearly. It is clear, though, that «his terrible art consists on injecting in his victim a feeling of blame and fault, and consequently the will of redemption and the wish of being welcome again in the order (the familiar one and the social one, which takes the form of the Convent)»²⁰.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

²⁰ Romano Luperini, Piero Cataldi, *La scrittura e l'interpretazione*, Firenze, Palumbo, 1999, t. II, p. 829.

The character of Azzecagarbugli (chapter III) shows the theme of legislation, which will be dramatically developed in *History of the Infamous Column*; in Don Rodrigo, Attilio and Count Uncle we can find the theme on family honour, while the episode of Lodovico (chapter IV) tells us about the wish of revenge which comes from the family of the killed.

While Sismondi saw the causes of this fall in a certain historical period, Manzoni's position follows themes close to Blaise Pascal: every mistake and every fault of societies of any time do not come from the ignorance of the century, but from the dominance of human passions over Divine Law. In his works we can find some examples of this theme:

It was not the man of the sixth century who reasoned the other way round: it was the man of the passion²¹.

In chapter VIII of *The Betrothed* Manzoni writes:

In the middle of this convulsive series of events, we cannot stop for a second to reflect. Renzo, who shouted at night-time in someone else's house, where he had broken in furtively, and where he kept the house owner in a room as prisoner, looked like an oppressor; in actual fact, he was the oppressed. Don Abbondio, surprised and frightened while he was attending to his own affairs, might look the victim; yet, he was the real oppressor. *So, it is the way it goes... I mean... so it went in the 17th century.*

The ironic one-liner which ends the reasoning tells us the deep thoughts which lie behind it: Manzoni is not talking just about the 17th century, but also of his, of ours, of Italy of any time. After all, the entire novel is a desperate portrait of Italy, even though I do not know whether that will be totally understood and, what's more, when it will be taught at school from this point of view²².

Finally, I will quote the proverbial line at the end of chapter III of *The Betrothed*, about the impossibility of obtaining human justice: «The groom left, his heart in a storm, repeating continuously those strange words: *Finally, there is justice in this world!* So it is true that a man overwhelmed by the sorrow no longer knows what he is saying»²³.

Now, let us try to analyze the fundamental issue of this essay, the defence of Catholic morality undertaken by Manzoni: facing the accusations moved by Sismondi, who relished international fame and the approval of a great number of readers, Monsignor Tosi had probably thought to his spiritual son for an authoritative and prestigious reply. And, probably, Manzoni wouldn't have undertaken this work without the request and the guide of the canon, for the occasional nature of the task and for the controversy which could follow, situations which were in contrast with Manzoni's *forma mentis* and deep Christian spirit.

But certainly Manzoni was not a man to whom a dissertation on a theme of which he was not convinced, could be imposed. It would have been contrary to the artistic rule he had

²¹ A. Manzoni, *Storia della colonna infame*, Roma, Biblioteca Economica Newton, 2009, p. 35.

²² Leonardo Sciascia, «Il caso Tortora», *Panorama*, 7 September 1986.

²³ A. Manzoni, *I Promessi Sposi*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1972, p. 63. In a note of comment Luigi Russo writes: «The dramatic end reveals Manzoni's pessimism about human justice: there is only one justice, and it is the justice of God».

proclaimed to be faithful: to feel and meditate²⁴. I may add that it would also be contrary to the motto the young Alessandro had expressed in *Carmen in Carlo Imbonati's death*: «Never betray the True Saint».

I could show some «evidence» to prove what I have said so far, but I would rather mention some quotations from Manzoni himself, which in my opinion are particularly meaningful:

As to me, I have stopped writing my tragedy (*Count of Carmagnola*) for a year on account of another work I have undertaken and finished, and which I hope to send you with this letter. It is a vindication, in other words a kind of work in which the shallowest passions of literature (and this is much to say) have exercised: I would like you to have a look at it in order to judge the spirit which dictated it to me²⁵.

It is true that the Catholic religion filled and dominated my intellect; I see it at the beginning and at the end of every moral issue; whether it be invoked, whether it be excluded; truths themselves, when not supported by it, do not seem full, well-grounded and indisputable unless you convey them to Catholic religion, and they finally appear what they are, just consequences of its principles.

The intimate awareness not only of the respect, but also of the trust I feel for religion, and for the Church which teaches it, protect me from the fear of culpably offending it in my works. Yet, every time someone acknowledges it, I seem to hear, along with the compliment, a reproach, a severe voice which tells me: Why all that talking about my justice?²⁶

Finally, I would like to mention the meeting between Manzoni and Honoré de Balzac (1799 – 1850) which took place in 1845, and during which the French writer boasted about his having also tried the religious genre, though without success. Stefano Stampa recalls the episode: «After Balzac had left, I remember that Manzoni observed that you cannot succeed in religious genre if you face it as any other literary speculation, and that instead you have to be deeply convinced by it»²⁷.

²⁴ A. Cojazzi, *Vindication*, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

²⁵ A. Manzoni, *Lettere*, *op. cit.*, p. 177. To Claude Fauriel, Paris, 26 July 1819.

²⁶ Both passages come from the letter to Countess Diodata Saluzzo di Roero. The sentence in italic is a quotation from Psalm 50 (49), vers 16: «To the impious God says: why do you keep repeating my decrees and keep talking about my alliance?»

²⁷ A. Cojazzi, *Vindication*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.