

ITALIAN LECTURE

MANZONI AND THE CATHOLIC REVIVAL

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Read 28 November 1973

THE Italian writer Alessandro Manzoni, who died in 1873, was the last representative of that romantic movement which had developed in France and Italy sixty years before. Manzoni was in his late twenties, by no means a beginner, when Madame de Staël's book *De l'Allemagne*, and its counterpart, Sismondi's survey *De la littérature du Midi de l'Europe*, both appeared in 1813, to be supplemented by the French translation of August von Schlegel's *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* in 1814. Manzoni's romantic tragedies, *Il Conte di Carmagnola* and *Adelchi*, appeared in 1820 and 1822 respectively. His success as a poet was immediately secured by the fact that Goethe singled him out for special praise in respect of both his first tragedy and his ode on the death of Napoleon in 1821. Manzoni's masterpiece, the historical novel *I promessi sposi*, followed in 1827; before the end of 1828 it had been translated into French, German, and English. Manzoni did not add anything substantial to his small literary output during the rest of his life. He went on sharpening, occasionally toying with, the set of ideas and words which he had had in store since his early creative period. A keen though detached observer of the contemporary scene to the very last, Manzoni outlived all other representatives of the French and Italian Romantic Movement. Lamartine, who was five years younger, died in 1869. In 1870 the very structure of Europe changed radically. The link with the past, which imperial France had somehow preserved, was ignominiously broken at Sedan; revolutionary France could not match the might of the newly established German empire. The revolutionary period was over. No room was left for the romantic idea of intellectual leadership; in their struggle for power and survival neither the ruling nor the working classes could comply any more with the requirements of an independent bourgeois literature.

It is not surprising that Manzoni's death in 1873 should have been mourned with mixed feelings. The news appeared in the columns of *The Times* with the following comments:

Our readers will not so much be surprised at hearing that Alessandro Manzoni, the veteran poet and novelist of Italy, has at last died at the ripe age of 89, as that he was still alive up to Thursday last. . . . It seems strange that in this present year we should be recording the death of a poet and novelist who was four years older than Byron, who has been dead nearly half a century, and was only a few years junior to Sir Walter Scott himself.

In Italy too Manzoni commanded respect rather than affection: he was beyond reach not only because of his intellectual distinction but also because he had led the life of an exile in his own country. A deeply religious man, he considered himself as an exile on earth and the Lord as his exclusive confidant. While being unobjectionable as to his private life, the religious aspect of Manzoni's personality could not be accepted without reservations by most of his Italian contemporaries. His literary work was by now remote but it was undoubtedly outstanding: there was no point in arguing about it. His contribution to the Italian Risorgimento was comparatively small, but no one could fail to acknowledge his foresight. He had championed the cause of Italian unity when the overwhelming majority of his countrymen still clung to the idea of a federation of the Italian states. He had unhesitatingly submitted to Piedmontese leadership and he had welcomed a kingdom of Italy with Rome as its capital, when most of his countrymen were looking for something different. Manzoni had been constantly right in his choice, while being absolutely unselfish. His own and Machiavelli's countrymen could not fail to take the point. Rome, however, was a burning question.

The Catholic Church was not prepared to share its capital with the kingdom of Italy. Manzoni's acceptance of the Italian conquest of Rome was not easily reconcilable with his allegiance to the Church. Soon after his death the point was clearly and forcibly stated by the periodical of the Italian Jesuits, *La Civiltà Cattolica*. The Roman question was a test, but it implied a wider and more important issue: how far was Manzoni's allegiance to the Church reconcilable with his flexible and altogether favourable attitude to a political and social system which was ultimately based on the principles and aims of a free-thinking world? A parallel question was raised by the opposite party: if Manzoni had been a patriot and a liberalist

despite his Catholic faith, should he not be considered as a puzzling and pathetic character, a victim of the yet undecided struggle for freedom against the remnants of a dark age? The argument went on, and it is still going on in Italy, as shown by a recent book by A. C. Jemolo, *Il dramma di Manzoni*, which points to the dramatic character of Manzoni's effort to reconcile his liberal views on political and social matters with his Catholic faith.

We are not going to join the Italian debate on Manzoni's attitude to both religion and politics. I should like to suggest that Manzoni's approach to the problem was not necessarily nor exclusively Italian, and that it may be worth reconsidering it from a different point of view, namely the English.

Manzoni had no easy access to England. In fact he never crossed the Channel and he never cared to learn the English language. His knowledge of English literature and philosophy was entirely based on translations. He was brought up in a period during which England, being the arch-enemy of revolutionary France and of the Napoleonic empire, was generally excluded from continental Europe. Manzoni's senior contemporaries, like Foscolo, had been brought up in a different period: whether they knew English or not, they had been led to consider England as an essential component of modern Europe, in fact the only one which could counterbalance the overwhelming influence of French literature and philosophy. Hence the so-called Anglomania which spread over Italy during the second half of the eighteenth century. Manzoni was untouched by it. Whatever reservations he might have had, he not only accepted the French imperial system, but he even ventured to live in the very centre of it, Paris, from 1805 to 1810. However, he had reservations, as his sudden religious conversion shows. His Italian background had no bearing upon it: there was no evidence yet of a religious revival in Italy, such as the one which was developing in France at that very moment. Chateaubriand's *Les Martyrs* appeared in 1809, shortly before Manzoni's conversion. The French religious revival was not in line with the policy of the French empire. Napoleon was by now confident enough in his genius and power to disregard his previous recognition of Christian values: the Papal State had become a French province, the Pope was a prisoner in France, the Church was harassed both in France and in Italy.

Manzoni had not been struck in his childhood by the bloodshed of revolutionary France, as Chateaubriand had been in his

early manhood. Though horrified by what he knew about that bloodshed, he felt no longing for the *ancien régime*, for the privileges of his own social class: he had been from the start and would always be in favour of the new society brought into existence by the French Revolution. It was a more humane society, though humanly imperfect. Napoleon's policy, however, was far from humane: the revolutionary bloodshed had been temporarily quenched by him at home, only to be renewed on a wider scale and in a more vicious way all over Europe. Military glory and power had no appeal to Manzoni's mind. He had been brought up in Lombardy, in a peaceful and enlightened country, where his grandfather, Cesare Beccaria, had first shown to a still reluctant Europe the indignity of torture and death in the administration of justice. Manzoni had little regard for Roman law, even less for the political and military achievements of ancient Rome. He could not fail to see that Napoleon was following the same path. His loyalty, however, was not shaken: he would not side with the enemies of Napoleon, with England and the rest. He simply withdrew from Paris to his native country. He knew that the Catholic Church would be inflexible in upholding the Christian message of peace and charity. No other message could dispel the pagan charm of war. The Pope, an otherwise mediocre and unarmed Italian, was in a stronger position as a prisoner in France than he had ever been as a sovereign in Italy. Unlike the worldly powers, the Church grew sounder and stronger whenever it was battered.

Such were the political implications of Manzoni's religious conversion. His literary conversion followed accordingly during the next few years. He readily accepted the romantic idea of a new literature in which all European countries would be represented on equal terms, each one relying on its national heritage, each one contributing to a common end. He thought that the national heritage of Italy, loaded as it was with literary pride and political weakness, would need a drastic reform, and that both France and Italy would benefit from a closer relationship with Germany and England. There were, however, obvious limitations to a closer relationship between Catholic and Protestant countries. Manzoni was firm in his belief that the Catholic Church would ultimately prevail, but he was not blind to the fact that religious unity could not be easily attained. He consequently thought that France and Italy should meanwhile go on hand in hand and that their joint effort would be

instrumental in building up a new Catholic Europe. Manzoni was equally firm in his belief that the old structure of continental Europe, as it had been re-established by the Congress of Vienna in 1815, would not last. Its inadequacy, particularly in respect of Italy, did not escape the attention of English observers. They were rediscovering Italy at that very moment after a long interval. Undoubtedly the country had changed during the French turmoil, but the visitors had changed much more. The awkward Englishman of Goldoni's comedies and the gloomy Scotsman of Madame de Stael's *Corinne* had given way to a character whose self-assurance and vigour had no parallel in Europe. The potential of the Italian countryside, its history, art, literature, and every-day life, had never been exploited to such an extent and so masterfully. It was a test of intellectual mastery: the northern renaissance was grasping at, and growing on, the past as embodied on Italian soil. Inevitably the gap between masters and servants, exploiters and exploited, was widening. The nineteenth-century Italian *Corinne*, say Teresa Guiccioli, might survive her English lover, as the harp survives the harpist, but their relationship could not develop into a common life. First of all, there was no common language, except French. Both English and German were national languages of hardly any use in Italy. The position of Italian was different: it still had a European currency as the language of musical poetry, but its very survival pointed to its artificiality, which debarred it from contemporary realities. There were objective difficulties in the way of a mutual understanding. The English colonization of Italy soon became a single-handed affair: on one side the unlimited English superiority turned into a leisurely aloofness, on the other side the Italian inferiority had no choice but to submit once again to France. A turning-point was marked in the early twenties by the unsuccessful attempts made in both Spain and Italy to change the political conditions imposed by the Congress of Vienna. The attempts were based on constitutional premisses which had been laid down by England during the Napoleonic period. Their failure provided conclusive evidence of the fact that England was not prepared any more to support a constitutional reform in continental Europe. In 1824 the most famous English poet and an obscure Italian patriot, Santarosa, who had been in England as a political exile, both went to Greece to fight and die for Greek independence: they would never have met on the same battlefield in Italy.

The close relationship between England and Italy was apparently unaltered during the twenties, as shown by the quantity of English writing on Italy and by the number of Italian refugees in England. In fact, while Italy was rapidly sinking into a state of degradation, England was becoming aware that the mere legacy of the Italian past, disconnected as it was from the present, was losing its value. Germany was the obvious, though uncomfortable alternative. There was no question of conquering Germany in the same way as Italy. The alternative was a sobering one: it paved the way to the recognition that continental Europe as it was would not submit any more to either English or German leadership as it had once submitted to the French one. Each country, whether powerful England or dejected Italy, was gradually shrinking away from its neighbours and concentrating on its own internal problems. Admittedly there were common problems; at least the roots of them might be sought in a common ground. No such ground, however, would appear to exist between England and Italy in the eighteen-twenties. It would not appear to either English or Italian eyes, but the German view of Italy, Goethe's view, was somewhat different: it included and singled out Manzoni as the chief representative of contemporary Italian literature.

English readers of Manzoni's works were confronted with a picture of Italian history, not to say of Italian life, which was utterly different from the one they treasured as their own. In fact more than one picture could be seen in Manzoni's works. The one exhibited by his first tragedy, *Carmagnola*, was not unfamiliar to English readers: it showed the political and military failure of Renaissance Italy and it pointed to the fact that contemporary Italy had not yet recovered from that failure. It was not an exciting picture from an English point of view, but there could be no lack of sympathy in respect of both the past and the present.

Readers of Manzoni's second tragedy, *Adelchi*, were taken back to Charlemagne and to his conquest of Lombard Italy. It appeared that the Lombards, who had ruled most of Italy during two full centuries, had no better claim than the Franks to be camping on a soil which was not their own, and that the anonymous crowd of the Italian servants had no choice but to accept whatever master won the contest. Both masters and servants were bound to enforce the fierce law of the human jungle; neither justice nor happiness would ever grace

their active life. The disquieting aspect of this picture was that it obviously did not apply to Italy more than to any other country. Nor was its significance restricted to a remote period of medieval history. Franks and Lombards, namely French and German armies, had recently been fighting on Italian soil; the struggle for power in modern Europe could be traced back to a barbarian age.

Manzoni's interest in the history of the early Middle Ages was shared by his French and German contemporaries. Gibbon's countrymen were not inclined to share it. Anyhow, Manzoni's picture seemed to imply that England was right in keeping out of the European jungle. The religious implications, however, could not be as easily dismissed as they would have been dismissed by Gibbon's contemporaries. Manzoni's religious position was as clear as crystal. His *Inni sacri*, the ones published in 1815 and the last one, *Pentecoste*, published in 1822, shortly after the *Adelchi*, and his vindication of Catholic morality against Sismondi's strictures, published in 1819, did not leave any doubt as to his absolute adherence to the Catholic Church. Up to the *Adelchi*, however, he had refrained from including any representative of the Church in his literary work. The very subject of his second tragedy, Charlemagne conquering the Lombard kingdom on behalf of the Pope, implied his determination to face the controversial problem of the role which the Roman Church had played in Italian history. Manzoni's contention, as shown by the fundamental essay on Lombard history appended to his tragedy, was that the Church had been the only legitimate representative of Italy in the face of the foreign invaders after the fall of the Roman empire. That was long ago: what about the role of the Church in modern history? Manzoni answered the question in his novel, *I promessi sposi*. The setting of it, Lombardy under Spanish rule during the first half of the seventeenth century, was both unfamiliar and distasteful to the average reader, whether Italian or English. The glamour of the Italian Renaissance was not there any more. In fact one was left wondering whether Lombardy should be considered as a substitute for an irretrievably degraded Italy. In Manzoni's novel the Catholic Church was prominent with its full array of priests, friars, nuns, and a cardinal on top of them all, with its ritual, its cult of the Virgin Mary, its vows, its addiction to bigotry and superstition. It was by no means a flattering picture, but it stood out against the wickedness and weakness of the secular power. Whatever hope was left to the Italian people, it all rested on God's help through the Church.

Manzoni's view of Italian history clashed with the traditional English disparagement of popish doctrines and practices, and it also clashed with the English appreciation of both the significance of the Italian Renaissance and, to some extent, the irrepressible vitality of the Italian people. On the other hand, quite irrespective of Italy, the English attitude towards the Catholic Church had changed since the French Revolution to such an extent that a major constitutional change was by now in sight. Manzoni's novel appeared in 1827: it reached England when the Catholic Emancipation was a burning issue. The first English translator of Manzoni's novel, Charles Swan, was a clergyman, formerly chaplain to H.M.S. *Cambrian*. His *Journal of a Voyage up the Mediterranean* in two volumes was printed in London in 1826, while he was still abroad. As shown by his *Journal*, he was horrified by the Catholic cult in Spanish and Italian churches. In his preface to the translation of Manzoni's novel he raised some pointed objections to the author's treatment of religious problems. 'In every thing else', he says 'I never read, perhaps never shall read, a novel in which Religion looks so beautiful.' I would say of such a comment that it is within its limits as good as the text. The Revd. Charles Swan came back to England soon after publishing his translation in Pisa. A sermon, which he preached in the chapel of Dulwich College, London, and published in 1830, is the last piece of evidence of his life and work I have been able to trace. The sermon was entitled *The Articles of the Church of England, not Calvinistic*. Such a title would soon become topical. The repeal of the Test Act in 1828 had just been followed by the Catholic Emancipation in 1829. It still seemed a marginal and strictly limited, though undoubtedly momentous, event in British internal policy. There was no immediate danger of a Catholic challenge on English ground, and yet the Church of England could not help sensing it. Hence its sudden and growing concern about its own identity, namely about its exact position in respect of both the Roman Church and the Protestant Reformation. Of course the articles of the Church of England were not Calvinistic, but were they as diametrically opposed to Rome as they were to Geneva? If so, what was going to be the role of the Church of England in Europe and indeed in the world? How would it compare and join with the role of the State, of the British Empire? As to Europe, a timely warning had just come from Paris in that very year 1830: revolutionary France was taking the initiative again. One was left wondering whether

the liberal monarchy of Louis Philippe would last. Should it be submerged by a new revolutionary wave overflowing the frontiers of France, England would have to stem the tide of a movement which had already proved incompatible with both her political and her religious structure. Once again England might have to fight side by side with the Catholic Church against a common enemy. No one yet could make the point as firmly and clearly as Newman made it at a much later date in his *Apologia*: 'There are but two alternatives, the way to Rome, and the way to Atheism; Anglicanism is the halfway house on the one side, and Liberalism is the halfway house on the other.' In 1830 Newman had not yet found his way. Gladstone was probably right when he pointed out in his autobiography that during his period at Christ Church from 1828 to 1831 no sign had yet appeared of that Oxford Movement which started in 1833, when the first *Tracts for the Times* appeared. Gladstone's diaries, however, show how tense the atmosphere had become during that period, how sensitive he himself was to religious problems generally, and particularly to the problem of the relationship between the Church of England and the Church of Rome, when he first went to Italy in 1832. In his *Church Principles*, published in 1840, Gladstone aptly compared the revival of religion, which he considered as typical of his own generation, with the revival of poetry which the last generation had witnessed thanks to Wordsworth and Coleridge. Needless to say, no account could be taken any more of either Byron or Shelley. Since Leigh Hunt contributed to the trial and ostracism of his friends, it is worth pointing out that his book on *Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries*, opportunely and ostentatiously published in 1828, was followed by his pamphlet *Christianism, or Belief and Unbelief Reconciled*, privately printed in 1832. Leigh Hunt was aware that the wind had changed, but he failed to realize that the new generation was not interested in reconciling belief and unbelief: the real issue was not Christianity any more, it was the Church. Coleridge of course knew. In his fundamental essay *On the Constitution of the Church and State According to the Idea of Each*, published in 1830, immediately after the Catholic Emancipation, he could claim that the whole summer and autumn and commenced winter of his life had been dedicated to Christianity, but he acknowledged the fact that he was now faced with a different question, namely the question of the Christian Church.

Such were the conditions in which Manzoni's novel made its

first and lasting impact on English readers during the early thirties. It is not surprising that the impact should have been generally outshone by the much wider, much more important issues which were connected with it. It is not surprising either that the prestige enjoyed by Manzoni should have been exploited by the newly emancipated Catholic faction in England in its first attempt to gain intellectual respectability. The very first issue, May 1836, of the Catholic *Dublin Review* included an article on Bulwer's historical novel *Rienzi*, which had just appeared with a dedicatory inscription to Manzoni on the front of it. The second issue, in July, offered a long article on 'Religion in Italy', in which a book by W. R. Wilson, *Records of a Route through France and Italy with Sketches of Catholicism*, was savagely reviewed. The book, published in 1835, did not call for mercy. Its preface included the following statement:

In regard to what I have mentioned of the Roman Catholic Church, I do not consider either my language or my reprobation too severe: particularly at a time when that idolatrous simulation of Christianity, not content with being tolerated in these dominions, is daily growing more insolent in its demands, and, although itself the most despotic, intolerant, and exclusive of creeds, pretends to feel aggrieved because not placed upon the same footing as the National Church.

The Catholic reviewer, namely Nicholas Wiseman, retorted by contrasting Wilson's book with Manzoni's *Vindication of Catholic Morality*, 'a little book', he says 'which we are happy to see has been just translated into English'. The translation, published in 1836, had a most remarkable preface in which the anonymous translator, himself a convert, outlined the prodigious rise of the Roman Catholic Church from the depths of persecution during the revolutionary period to its present exalted position in all Europe and the world. The English translation of Manzoni's *Morale cattolica* could not fail to appeal to readers who were passionately interested in religious arguments, whatever their religious allegiance might be. George Eliot who read it in 1842 complained that Manzoni had suffered sadly in being poured out of silver into pewter. Gladstone normally dispensed with translations from Italian. He read Manzoni's *Morale cattolica* in 1835. I was at first intrigued by the fact that such a strenuous and competent reader should need more than two months for a comparatively small book. I soon discovered that he was reading it at weekly intervals: the reading was part of his Sunday devotions. Gladstone had already read Manzoni's novel in 1834. He read all Manzoni's other

works in 1838, the very year in which he wrote and published his first book, *The State in its Relations with the Church*. While he was still writing it, he became acquainted with François Rio, a champion of the Catholic revival in France. Rio, who was a friend of Manzoni's, had been one of Lamennais's closest friends. Lamennais, once the undisputed leader of the Catholic revival in France, now a reprobate and yet the author of the tremendously successful *Paroles d'un croyant*, provided evidence as clear as one could wish for, that there were exceptions to the blind discipline of the Church of Rome. Manzoni's position was obviously different, but, as far as one could guess from his published work, his firm allegiance to the Catholic Church did not imply an unreserved support of the papal policy: Rome and the Holy See hardly appeared in his work. In fact Manzoni never went to Rome in the whole of his life. Gladstone did not wait for his book to be published. He went to Italy and straight to Milan. Manzoni was not there. Gladstone, who had a letter of introduction from Rio, went to Manzoni's country house and had a long conversation with him on religious problems, chiefly on the question of authority and unity in the Christian Church. Manzoni was adamantly opposed to Gladstone's arguments: he maintained that absolute certainty in all matters of faith was essential and that the recognition of the successor of St. Peter was an equally essential condition of belonging to the Church. They both were impressed by each other and departed as friends. They never met again, nor would there have been any point in a further meeting. Manzoni, who was then in his early fifties, had given up his task as a creative writer. He knew that while he could bank on the lasting success of his novel, the general trend of events was working against him. The Catholic revival, as conceived of by him, should have been conducive to peace and freedom in Europe. In fact peace had been precariously enforced through an intolerable loss of freedom. Inevitably the alternative of an un-Christian revolution was looming ahead once again. While Manzoni's influence was gaining ground in a safe country like England, its decline was noticeable in both Italy and France. The *Westminster Review* was not slow in making it known to English readers. In its issue of October 1837 it included a long article on 'Italian literature since 1830', in which the youth of Italy was peremptorily advised to emancipate itself as soon as possible 'from an influence, useful in its day but now injurious, the influence of Manzoni in literature, Botta in history, and Romagnosi in the

philosophy of history and law'. The author of this article was the leader of the Italian revolutionary movement, Mazzini, who had just settled in England. Incidentally, it is not surprising that on his first approach to contemporary English literature, Mazzini should have been decisively impressed by Carlyle. Nor is it surprising that a few years later (1843), a periodical like the *Christian Remembrancer*, the very opposite of the *Westminster Review*, should publish a highly appreciative article on Manzoni, while in the same issue making a stand against both Carlyle, 'of no use to soul and body', and 'the radical Mr. Dickens'. Of course, Manzoni was totally unaware of any such indirect implications of his influence on England. He was, however, sensitive to any political implications which might affect Italy. There were no objective prospects of a change in the early forties, but public opinion in Italy was stirred by the appearance in 1843 of a tremendously successful book, Gioberti's *Primato morale e civile degli Italiani*. Gioberti's contention was that the standstill in Europe would soon be broken by the initiative of the Catholic Church and that Italy, as represented by the Church, would not fail to reassert her predestined primacy. A more sober but equally successful book by Cesare Balbo, significantly called *Le speranze d'Italia*, appeared in the same year. Both Gioberti and Balbo were making capital out of the growing religious crisis in England: they were right in foreseeing that the Irish question and the resounding conversion of several English clergymen to the Catholic Church would ultimately strengthen the relationship between England and Italy. Manzoni was far more cautious than most of his countrymen, including Balbo, not to say Gioberti, but his correspondence with Gladstone in the middle forties shows that he too was thrilled by the news which reached him from Ireland and England.

The standstill and with it the Italian addition to irresponsible and preposterous expectations came to an end in 1848. The Catholic revival in England reached its climax in 1850 when Nicholas Wiseman became archbishop of Westminster and cardinal: hence the conversion of Henry Manning and James Hope Scott whom Gladstone had always considered as his best friends. Gladstone's Italian policy, as it developed after the European revolution of 1848, was based on religious motivations which Manzoni could not accept, but its tendency to favour the establishment of an Italian kingdom including Rome as its capital, was in keeping with Manzoni's original

idea of the Italian nation. Manzoni was firm in his belief that the idea of nationality, whether it applied to Italy or to any other country, was compatible with the idea of a Christian commonwealth. Gladstone was not so sure, but he had failed in his attempt to solve the problem in respect of his own Church and country, and he had had to adjust to the realities of international politics. Since the Catholic revival had proved incompatible with the traditional standing of the Church of England, one could hope that the revival of Italian nationality would prove equally incompatible with the traditional standing of the Church of Rome. In fact it did, but while the balance of power was provisionally restored, the struggle between the two opposite principles was bound to go on, as we ourselves know far too well. Neither Manzoni's nor Gladstone's ideal of a peaceful Christian commonwealth came nearer to being fulfilled by either the Catholic revival in England or the end of the Papal State in Italy. It still seems to be an open question.