

*Rhetoric of the historical novel: studies on the narrative technique of Manzoni*

Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873) is one of the most important authors in Italian literature. His main work, *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*, 1st ed. 1825–27, revised ed. 1840–42), is one of the most successful historical novels in the history of Western literature, and is considered in many aspects as the first modern Italian novel. Although he was influenced by the works of Walter Scott, the founder of the historical novel genre, Manzoni paid much more scrupulous attention to historical facts and attempted to represent the historical and social realities of the past as they were. This attitude had a radical effect on the narrative structure of his work. In the present study, I make clear, through analyses of the narrative technique, that the fictional and historical parts of this novel remain separate from each other, even though the narration as a whole experiences no loss of unity or homogeneity.

In the first and introductory chapter, we provide a general overview of the work, or rather, works in question, taking into consideration three different phases of composition: the first draft, the first edition, and the definitive edition. Of course, particular attention is paid to the narrative structure. We then explain the important and peculiar position that *I promessi sposi* occupies as a work of modern fiction in the history of Italian and Western literature, and how atypical it is in the historical novel genre. We also briefly explain Manzoni's poetics, in which facts (and non-romantic reality) are of great significance.

In chapter 2, we consider the technique of the “found manuscript”, which plays a key role in Manzoni's novel. Within the fictional frame, the narrator finds an anonymous manuscript dating from seventeenth century, which he proceeds to tell while translating it into modern Italian. He also relays historical facts while making reference to authentic sources. A detailed analysis of the sections in the novel in which the records of the historical characters are narrated makes it clear that the fictive reference (to the anonymous manuscript) is made if and only if the description has no historical source. However, this distribution of sources is not perfectly arranged in the first draft (1821–23) of the novel, known as *Fermo e Lucia*. Thus, in the final published version, it becomes possible for the reader to distinguish historical facts from realistically imagined ones.

The object of analysis in chapter 3 is the narrator, especially his use of the first person. The narrator uses both the first-person singular “*io* (I)” and the first-person plural “*noi* (we)”,

the latter of which is generally known as the royal «we» or the author's «we». Some studies based on an analysis of the different uses of the first person have already thrown into relief two different features of the narrator's behavior. However, in the dichotomy between “io” and “noi”, they tend to consider all of the narrator's speeches with “noi” as more or less homogeneous. With a more detailed analysis, we reveal that there is another significant type of «noi»—*il «noi» affettivo* (the affective «we»)—in numerous cases of use of the first-person plural. By distinguishing the “genuine” author's «we», which refers only to the narrator, from this other type of «we», it becomes clearer that the narrator utilizes different kinds of rhetoric according to whether he is narrating historical or imaginary facts.

In chapter 4, we focus on the figure of the reader delineated in the text. In the novel *I promessi sposi*, the narrator is speaking to an undefined readership, ironically called «*venticinque lettori*» (“25 readers”). As is shown in several studies on various forms of the narrator's address to the reader, the figure of the reader(s) in Manzoni's novel exhibits characteristics typical of the “modern novel”. However, by also taking into consideration “the affective «we»”, which indeed includes the reader, we come to notice an excessive quantity of addresses to the reader in *I promessi sposi*. Frequently being spoken to, it becomes more difficult for the reader to identify with the protagonists and be completely absorbed in the story, and this is exactly what the author's poetics require. In this way, the reader can see the truth or reality of a (past) life more objectively.

Chapter 5 is mainly dedicated to an examination of the historiography of the novel, with a consideration of the technique of quotations. Because of the full use of the “pseudo-citation” of the anonymous manuscript, studies on the narrative technique in *I promessi sposi* have emphasized the formal (textual) similarities between the fictitious story and the historiographical sections. However, a more careful analysis reveals that on the formal level, this unity is only superficial. We then compare the historical and fictitious parts in terms of the textual characteristics of the historiography, and particularly in terms of the efficient use of citations. Therefore, it becomes clear that in the narration of facts, Manzoni displays great ability as a historian, while in the imaginary story, the imitation of the formal features of the historiography is more limited than ordinarily expected.

By contrast, chapter 6 examines the narrator's allusion to the “realistic” of fictitious events. Manzoni is not content with simply telling a story that appears to be real, but rather emphasizes such verisimilitude under the reader's eyes. Such an attitude can clearly be seen in the metanarrative and metaliterary discourses inserted by the narrator of *Fermo e Lucia*. At first

glance, these claims in the text that the story is realistically conceived seem to disappear in the published version of the novel. Nonetheless, on closer investigation, we find that, in more implicit but by no means insignificant ways, even the narrator of *I promessi sposi* underlines the “realisticity” of the story being told.

Then, in the seventh and final chapter, having seen how much attention Manzoni paid to both parts of the novel, the historical account and the fictitious events, we focus our attention on the common elements that bind them. One of the clues is the battle against traditional representations of reality, which is shared by both parts. The clear violation of the “separation of styles” convention, with people of humble origins serving as the protagonists, positions *I promessi sposi* as a type of “anti-Literature”, while the “anti-History” of the novel drags “Princes and Powers” down to the level of quotidian reality. Such orientation penetrates to the level of not only the storyline, but also the discourse or expression. Therefore, although these two components do not mix together completely, *I promessi sposi* can be considered an organic whole under the common aim of the total representation of the social and historical realities of seventeenth-century Italy.