

# eScholarship

## California Italian Studies

### Title

Alessandro Manzoni's Historical Works: Passionate Immunity and the Limits of the Dialectic

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1st3k1dv>

### Journal

California Italian Studies, 11(1)

### Author

Trigg, Nicole

### Publication Date

2022

### DOI

10.5070/C311154307

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2022 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

# Alessandro Manzoni's Historical Works: Passionate Immunity and the Limits of the Dialectic

Nicole Trigg

*[It is] the very nature of language, which, uniquely ambiguous, both subject and object all at once, [...] intentional meaning and articulated system, necessarily projects two distinct and discontinuous dimensions (or "objects of study") which can never be conceptually unified.*

*As for conceptual thought, if we grasp the problem as one of escaping from the purely individualizing categories of ethics, of transcending the categories into which our existence as individual subjects necessarily locks us and opening up the radically distinct transindividual perspectives of collective life or historical process, then the conclusion seems unavoidable that we already have the ideal of a thinking able to go beyond good and evil, namely the dialectic itself.*

—Fredric Jameson<sup>1</sup>

*[I]f community breaks down the barriers of individual identity, immunity is the way to rebuild them, in defensive and offensive forms, against any external element that threatens it.*

—Roberto Esposito<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

In this paper, I present an “imaginary resolution of the objective contradictions” encountered in two works by Alessandro Manzoni: the *Promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*) and the *Storia della Colonna Infame* (*History of the Infamous Column*).<sup>3</sup> Specifically, I examine the narrative pattern each text exhibits, of instrumentalizing the figure of women to curb the amplitude otherwise evoked by historical inquiry. My imaginary resolution, in response to the demonstrably fabular role of gender difference in these works aimed at conjuring *real* (men’s) history, is an ethical stand: I insist—consciously willfully<sup>4</sup>—that there is a problem.<sup>5</sup> In *The Political Unconscious*,

---

<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 108, 116.

<sup>2</sup> Roberto Esposito, “Community, Immunity, Biopolitics,” trans. Zakiya Hanafi, *Angelaki* 18, no. 3 (2013): 85.

<sup>3</sup> Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 118.

<sup>4</sup> Sara Ahmed discusses the feminist significance of willfulness as attitude, subject position, and critical method in *Willful Subjects* (2014) and elsewhere. Discussing the related topic of “feminist killjoys,” she elaborates on willfulness as follows: “Willfulness is a kind of disloyalty: think of Adrienne Rich’s call for us to be disloyal to civilization. ‘We are not over it if it has not gone. We are not loyal if it is wrong.’ Willfulness could be rethought as a style of politics: *a refusal to look away from what has already been looked over*. The ones who point out that racism, sexism, and heterosexism are actual are charged with willfulness, they refuse to allow these realities to be passed over.” Sara Ahmed, “Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects),” *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 8, no. 3 (2010): 8.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful for Susan Buck-Morss’ lucid articulation of why it is important to resist certain dicta of academic scholarship. She writes: “[The scholar Louis] Sala-Molins pronounces Rousseau’s silence ‘racist’ and ‘revolting.’

Fredric Jameson writes: “we wish to avoid [...] a perspective—the ‘ethical binary’ is ‘wrong,’ that is to say, evil—in which the ideological closure in question would end up drawing the entire analysis back into itself.”<sup>6</sup> However, Jameson also insists that the periodic tendency to evaluate our own habits of thought and call on a different paradigm follows from concrete and contradictory historical circumstances, namely: “a transitional moment in which two distinct modes of production, or moments of socioeconomic development, coexist. Their antagonism is not yet articulated in terms of the struggle of social classes, so that its resolution can be projected in the form of a nostalgic [...] harmony.”<sup>7</sup> So Jameson infers that deeming a dominant paradigm problematic is meaningful not so much as a reinstatement of the binary (which it is), but rather as an indicator of historical change and the gestation of new consciousness. At the heart of the issues I take up—passionate immunity and the limits of the dialectic, and their sociopolitical effects—is patriarchal, possessive individualism: an enduring problem in the West, the ideological complement to advanced capitalism, and, as such, a proven threat to life on this planet. I hope Jameson is right, and that my insistence on these points bears some relation to the advent of systemic change.

“I will argue that only the dialectic provides a way for ‘decentering’ the subject concretely, and for transcending the ‘ethical’ in the direction of the political and the collective.”<sup>8</sup> Jameson speaks of individual subjects “locked” into their schematization of the world by binary oppositions, and argues for thinking beyond this trap via the dialectic.<sup>9</sup> However, differentiated others, such as those who fall into gendered and/or racialized groups, are “locked” in an alternate way—into the margins around and *outside* of subjectivity.<sup>10</sup> Embarrassingly, then, the task of “decentering the subject” has no relevance for the billions never centered in the first place. Such schematization etches a negative borderland around the positive term and thereby secures it: “Derrida has shown how all these axes function to ratify the centrality of a dominant term by means of the marginalization of an excluded or inessential one.”<sup>11</sup> This is precisely the self-centering configuration that Jameson’s dialectic means to disrupt; yet to remove the subject from the center, placing him at a *critical distance* instead—far enough to set sights on the big picture of “collective life or historical process”<sup>12</sup>—may flip the script without actually challenging the

---

Such outrage is unusual among scholars who, as professionals, are trained to avoid passionate judgments in their writing. This moral neutrality is built into the disciplinary methods that, while based on a variety of philosophical premises, result in the same exclusions. Today’s intellectual historian who treats Rousseau in context will follow good professional form by relativizing the situation, judging (and excusing) Rousseau’s racism by the mores of his time, in order to avoid thereby the fallacy of anachronism. Or, today’s philosopher, who is trained to analyze theory totally abstracted from historical context, will attribute a universality to Rousseau’s writings that transcends the author’s own intent or personal limitations in order to avoid thereby the fallacy of reduction ad hominem. In both cases, the embarrassing facts are quietly allowed to disappear.” Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 34.

<sup>6</sup> Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 117.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida’s useful concept of the “constitutive outside” applies here, in reference to *proper* subjects; the latter are defined negatively, by what they are not. See Jacques Derrida, *Limited, Inc.*, trans. S. Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 114.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

presumption of authority. In other words, the center moves with the subject instead of the subject being decentered.

Particularly in the case of gender and race-based differentiation, such patterns of marginalization are not mutable, but continually reproduced and entrenched, leaving some (non-gendered, non-racialized) individuals to remain “whole,” in unchallenged possession of themselves.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Hegel’s master-slave dialectic runs aground in several ways,<sup>14</sup> but it particularly fails as a mechanism for the continual exchange of power when the positions are calibrated to male-female and/or white-black.<sup>15</sup> In these cases the inferiorized term is inferiorized forever, at least so long as we live under racial, natalist capitalism, a complex of forces far more powerful than any one person, but with which the ideology of possessive individualism precisely dovetails. In this master-slave (non-) dialectic, the word, power, and agency remain with the privileged player, even when he passes benefits to the outside, such that there is never *antithesis* nor *synthesis*, only the same *thesis* in perpetuity.<sup>16</sup> That is, there is no movement.

Indeed, the requisite condition for the actualization of Hegel’s prescription under current conditions is sameness; thus, in a word, is the limitation of the dialectic. In *Valences of the Dialectic*, Jameson cites

Engels’s famous recapitulation of the three laws of the dialectic [in *The Dialectics of Nature*, 1940], which it is now worth quoting in their entirety, for a definition of dialectical materialism which is far from outmoded: “The law of the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa; The law of the interpenetration of opposites; The law of the negation of the negation.”<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Paul Smith elucidates the term “individual” as follows: “the term ‘individual’ is ideologically designed to give the false impression that human beings are free and self-determining, or that they are constituted by undivided and controlling consciousnesses.” Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xxxiv.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Buck-Morss offers an illuminating study of how Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1806), in which he first theorizes the master-slave dialectic, has been gradually estranged by preeminent—white, European—Hegelians from its historical material origins: the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), which Hegel was in fact referencing, Buck-Morss shows. This devastating slippage from the concrete liberation struggle of enslaved Africans in diaspora, to a *metaphor* of slavery used to delineate an idea of political freedom for white colonizers, is the epitome of the exclusion of difference that, despite best intentions, embroils the dialectic. See *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*.

<sup>15</sup> Frank B. Wilderson, III addresses the body of thought known as Afro-Pessimism in an interview with C.S. Soong, comparing here the constitutive violence of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic applied to class struggle (via Marx) on one hand, and violence against the Black body on the other: “what [Orlando] Patterson is arguing [in *Slavery and Social Death*], and what people like myself and professor Jared Sexton and Saidiya Hartman at Columbia University have extended, is to say that what we need to do is begin to think of [racist] violence not as having essentially the kind of political or economic utility that violence in other revolutionary paradigms has. Violence against the slave sustains a kind of psychic stability for all others who are not slaves.” Frank B. Wilderson, III, “Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation,” in *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Racked & Dispatched, 2017), 15.

<sup>16</sup> Carla Lonzi articulates this immobility in terms of the distribution of equal rights to marginalized groups. In the essay “Sputiamo su Hegel” (1970, “Let’s spit on Hegel”) she writes: “L’uguaglianza è quanto si offre ai colonizzati sul piano delle leggi e dei diritti. E quanto si impone loro sul piano della cultura. È il principio in base al quale l’egemone continua a condizionare il non-egemone” (“Equality is what is offered as legal rights to colonized people. And what is imposed on them as culture. It is the principle through which those with hegemonic power continue to control those without.”) The dominant position remains dominant because it remains the only position of any (positive) value. Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel e altri scritti* (Milan: et al./ Edizioni, 2010), 15. Translation by Veronica Newman, in *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*, edited by Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 41.

<sup>17</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 2009), 13.

Such elegant flexibility of thought and form, which Engels discerns all throughout “Nature,” is blocked precisely where we need it most: in other words, where opposites are revealed not to have parity, but rather to correspond to a ranked structure in which the lesser position is gendered and/or racialized and thereby immovable. Unlike class-based rankings, these “essential” assignments are fixed and non-transferable, given their ties to the body and visibility. To elaborate, the beautiful motion between and across the “two distinct and discontinuous dimensions which can never be conceptually unified” that each text unfolds as we attempt to discern its relevance—“intentional meaning” on one hand and “articulated system” on the other—is sadly limited.<sup>18</sup> Because the embedded, authorial, *intentional meaning* of the vast majority of the Western canon will typically belong to the subject-position of a non-gendered, non-racialized, “universal” white male with a particular and profitable rapport with his *articulated system*, i.e. language itself. In this (typical) scenario, the dialectical method, in spite of its vested interest in contradiction, fails to actually accommodate difference, using it, rather, to reproduce privileged sites of “normal” “neutrality.” As such, the dialectic is a form of soliloquy, and its powers of expansion are null.

### Un/certainty of the Text

There is much to the work of Alessandro Manzoni,<sup>19</sup> in addition to a Manichaeic worldview and overbearing moralism. Above all, Manzoni is interested in narrating the past differently and more intricately. His means to this end are dialectical, and most conspicuously so in terms of genre: in both works I will discuss, the historical novel and the literary (historical) essay, Manzoni combines literary genres that are, by his own admission, discordant. The space of contradiction is fundamental; it is in this *uncertain* space that the text itself accumulates, where something beyond (or between) two opposed terms might be discerned. That something is history as absent cause, being nowhere present in and of itself as an element of subjective reality, and discernable only in retrospect. In Manzoni’s case, this open form has paradoxically Romantic and conservative underpinnings; again, the default to schematize along lines of good and evil may be interpreted as “a form of social praxis, [...] a symbolic resolution to a concrete historical situation,” writes Jameson.<sup>20</sup> In the *Promessi sposi*, the uncertainty and ambivalence that characterizes the text on various levels is housed within and made acceptable by a marked teleology. The book’s guarantee of closure is already evident in the title, with reference to the promise of matrimony that holds true despite hundreds of pages of intervening obstacles. Put briefly, in the lead up to class consciousness, Manzoni’s fallback on good and evil—specifically the “good” of the properly “Italian,” scrupulously Catholic, middle-class couple of child-bearing age, and the “evil” of unruly crowds as well as foreign occupiers<sup>21</sup>—is accounted for as a portent of socioeconomic transformation.<sup>22</sup> If the rise of the bourgeoisie is necessary to the coincident rise of the proletariat, which is in turn necessary to the eventual communist revolution in Marx’s prescription, then upward social mobility—as demonstrated by Renzo—has its role to play.

---

<sup>18</sup> Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 108.

<sup>19</sup> Jameson describes the *Promessi sposi* as having “an appearance of breadth and variety, and a totalizing ‘completeness,’ scarcely equaled elsewhere in world literature.” *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>21</sup> Emanuel Rota highlights the racist underpinnings of Manzoni’s proto-nationalism in “Is Immunity a Historical Concept? Medical and Juridical Immunity in the European Enlightenment,” *Configurations* 25, no. 3 (2017): 340.

<sup>22</sup> Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 148.

Interestingly, in Manzoni, misanthropic notes that are particularly transparent in his descriptions of crowds, mingle with a chilling depiction of the absolute, supra-legal power of the ruling classes—exhibiting a mixed attitude towards the everyman that oscillates between compassion and wariness. Perhaps this confusion is suggestive of an imminent paradigm shift. The major problem with this (vulgarly) Marxist analysis however, as many feminists and others have argued, besides its historical determinism, is that it neglects to consider vectors of oppression other than class difference through which capital is extracted and accumulates. Indeed, capitalism’s collusion with sexism, racism, colonialism, and xenophobia is made invisible through this lens—an entanglement that perpetuates systemic oppression and, accordingly, inhibits revolutionary assembly.

In the space of this paper, I examine the machinations of one such gender-related problem, prevalent in Western literary representations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond, as exemplified by Manzoni: the propagation of the “woman” category as *other* than (hu)man, and its (her) devaluation and subsequent exploitation as a symbol—whether positive or negative. Jameson insists that “transcending the categories into which our existence as individual subjects necessarily locks us and opening up the radically distinct transindividual perspectives of collective life or historical process” are the stakes of the dialectic.<sup>23</sup> If so, then its imbrication with the logic of absolute difference that determines and centers individuals by chronically excluding others (*non-* or *sub-*individuals), must be seriously considered. I attend to the systematic way in which Manzonian uncertainty is bounded: by reiterating the well-established ideogeme of the gender binary. Both the *Promessi sposi* and the *Storia della Colonna Infame* shut down textual ambivalence and draw to a close by sacrificing the constituent/s marked as female. “Woman” is a vessel of sure meaning and closure when the uncertainty produced by the text proves unbearable. By sacrifice, I mean the exclusion of the experiences and perspectives of persons differentiated by sex from the historiographical endeavor, and their conscription to types or roles calibrated to patriarchal interests.

Lyn Hejinian explores the relationship between closure and justice, in her essay “Continuing Against Closure”:

That the bringing about of closure is often impossible to distinguish from an act of vengeance (as in the carrying out of capital punishment) is, apparently, of no consequence. Which makes a certain sense—closure, by definition, establishes the condition of “no consequence.” But this means that, if one is committed to consequences (to history, to social responsibility, to the ongoing liveliness of living), one has to be wary, to say the very least, of closure.<sup>24</sup>

The *individual* is the implicit actor in Hejinian’s discussion, looking to reinstate wholeness and boundedness that have been compromised by disorder (aka the evil *in people*, in Manzoni’s lexicon, since divine Providence excludes chaos). With justice served to the offended party, the search is over, along with a painful feeling of tension and exposure. In the subsequent “condition of ‘no consequence,’” then, knowledge is presumed to be complete, such that nothing of what is known begs any more questioning or complication, and all that is not yet known, excluded from knowledge, or unknowable is abandoned without reserve. Yet if there is one thing that the historiographical project that I have hinted at and that Manzoni means to engage requires, it is

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>24</sup> Lyn Hejinian, “Continuing Against Closure,” *Jacket* 14 (July 2001), <http://jacketmagazine.com/14/hejinian.html>.

openness to what lies outside knowledge. Such openness is already present in the body itself, with respect to its elaborate interconnectedness with other life-forms, and the intricacies of its complex function—all of which remains largely uncomprehended by science.

Thus the body must be acknowledged as integral to a reparative, historiographical project, motivating and in a certain sense modelling it. Manzoni attests to this indirectly in the essay “Del romanzo storico” (“On the Historical Novel”). Ventriloquizing imagined critics of the author of such a hybrid, he writes:

L'intento del vostro lavoro era di mettermi davanti agli occhi, in una forma nova e speciale, una storia più ricca, più varia [...] non un racconto cronologico di soli fatti politici e militari [...] ma una rappresentazione più generale dello stato dell'umanità in un tempo, in un luogo, naturalmente più circoscritto di quello in cui si distendono ordinariamente i lavori di storia [...] Corre tra questi e il vostro la stessa differenza, in certo modo, che tra una carta geografica [...] e una carta topografica...<sup>25</sup>

(The purpose of your work was to make manifest before my eyes, in a new and special form, a richer, more varied history [...] not a chronological account of mere political and military facts [...] but a broader representation of the state of humanity at a certain time, in a certain place, more circumscribed of course than that which works of history ordinarily unfold [...] Between these works and yours runs the same difference, in a way, as that between a paper map [...] and a topographical map...)<sup>26</sup>

The description may of course be read ironically: the doubtful critic compares such a form to a magical apparition conjured by an illusionist. On the other hand, the passage bears striking resemblance to Raymond Williams' serious if elusive idea of the “structure of feeling,” first presented in 1961. By this term, Williams intended the “*felt sense* of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which particular activities combined into a *way of thinking and living*”; “a particular *sense of life*, a particular community of experience hardly needing expression”; “the culture of a period: it is the particular *living* result of all the elements in the general organization.”<sup>27</sup> Williams points to embodied, immersive, “actual experience” as the focal point and measure, much like Manzoni contrasts History's authoritative, “objective” catalog of political and military conquest with the *generale* (i.e. shared, communal) point-of-view of sensate bodies cohabiting a particular, now extinct time and place. The spatial metaphor—from the two-dimensionality implied by “distendersi” (to lay flat, extend or unfold) to the more voluminous space and its contents suggested by “essere circoscritto” (being circumscribed or contained)—effects a perspectival shift that Manzoni pushes further using the analogy of cartography. History (capital *h*-) is like a conventional map—bearing zero relation to an actual, physical experience of the territory it signifies—while the historical novel compares to the topographical map, which represents three-dimensional space by charting the surface of an

---

<sup>25</sup> Alessandro Manzoni, “Del romanzo storico,” in *Opere*, ed. Riccardo Bacchelli (Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1953), 1056.

<sup>26</sup> Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Italian are my own.

<sup>27</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001), 63–64. My emphases.

area, or body, of land, thus inviting the reader to conceive of it in a less abstract way—that is, as a body in relation to another body.

“[V]olete che rifaccia in certo modo le polpe a quel carcame, che è, in così gran parte, la storia” (“You wish for me to restore, in some way, the flesh to that carcass that, in such a large part constitutes History”), writes Manzoni, in response to imagined critics.<sup>28</sup> Once hybridized with fiction, the chronicle as skeletal remains might have living flesh again. Manzoni’s speculation that the composite of the historical novel could beget an embodied history or history of embodiment is complicated by the elision of desire and knowledge in the essay. “[N]el conoscere ciò che è stato davvero, e come è stato davvero, c’è un interesse tanto vivo e potente, come speciale” (There is a quite lively and powerful interest, a sort of special interest, in knowing that which really was, and how it really was).<sup>29</sup> Is this a mysterious gesture to the recognition of one vital presence by another across time, a bond arising spontaneously from the life-force common to both? Or does Manzoni’s “special interest” have more to do with the pleasure in claiming certain knowledge, given a reliable source? I am inclined toward the latter interpretation, seeing as Manzoni devotes a significant amount of his discussion to the likelihood that an author will deceive his reader, intentionally or not, in the process of mixing history and fiction. He thus implies the subordination of the reader on one hand and the author’s unchecked authority on the other; the reader as conceived by Manzoni relishes in his author’s guarantee. Moreover, “istruzione e diletto” (“learning and pleasure”) are inextricably linked in the reception process, such that if a text is not pleasing, it cannot also educate, and if a reader does not imagine he is learning something *reale* (real), then he cannot enjoy it.<sup>30</sup> The intervention of the author in the reader’s own experience of the world is not received with hostility here but rather a powerful, felt sense of satisfaction and security, setting up a discrete telos: afflicted by not knowing, we assuage ourselves by pinning down semblances of the truth, whether by our own authority or another’s. From this angle, the body’s role in doing history seems fraught with the usual, patriarchal problems.

### Good and Bad Passions

*Storia della Colonna Infame* was written in 1829 and published in 1840 alongside a second edition of the *Promessi sposi*. In the essay, Manzoni returns to investigate more fully, “con l’estensione che merita” (“with the length it deserves”), a historical episode referenced in the novel: that of the *untori* (anointers<sup>31</sup>) of Milan, memorialized for nearly 150 years by the monument known as La Colonna Infame (the infamous column), between 1630 and 1778.<sup>32</sup> The essay aims to reopen and redress the legacy of a number of individuals accused of having deliberately spread the plague, by “anointing” the walls of buildings with infected excrement. The so-called *untori* were scapegoats, Manzoni insists, victims of the “perverse passions” of the interpreters of the law, rather than of the law itself.<sup>33</sup> Amending Pietro Verri’s earlier treatment of the same subject, *Osservazioni sulla tortura* (Remarks on Torture), written in 1776, Manzoni writes: “L’ignoranza in fisica può produrre degl’inconvenienti, ma non delle iniquità; e una

---

<sup>28</sup> Manzoni, “Del romanzo storico,” 1060.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 1057.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Beside its literal meaning, “untore” carries the specific connotation of “plague-spreader.”

<sup>32</sup> Alessandro Manzoni, *I promessi sposi* (Milan: Garzanti, 1999), 455.

<sup>33</sup> Alessandro Manzoni, *Storia della Colonna Infame* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2009).



cattiva istituzione non s'applica da sé" ("The ignorance of physical science may result in inconveniences, but not iniquitous actions; and an evil institution does not run by itself").<sup>34</sup> Fear and anger are the passions in question, surfacing in individual judges yet originating with the masses, the ungovernable *moltitudine* (multitude). Manzoni hypothesizes the root cause of "iniquitous actions" against the *untori* in terms of these negative affects, querying whether

la rabbia contro pericoli oscuri, che, impaziente di trovare un oggetto, afferrava quello che le veniva messo davanti; che aveva ricevuto una notizia desiderata, e non voleva trovarla falsa; aveva detto: *finalmente!* e non voleva dire: *siam da capo*; la rabbia resa spietata da una lunga paura, e diventata odio e puntiglio contro gli sventurati che cercavan di sfuggirle di mano; o il timor di mancare a un'aspettativa generale, altrettanto sicura quanto avventata, di parer meno abili se scoprivano degl'innocenti, di voltar contro di sé le grida della moltitudine, col non ascoltarle...<sup>35</sup>

(rage against obscure dangers, that, impatient to locate an object, would grab hold of whatever was placed before it; that, receiving a longed-for piece of news, would not have wanted to discover it false; that would have said: *finally!* and would not have wanted to say: *back to square one*; rage rendered merciless by long-drawn-out fear, become hatred and obstinacy against the hapless who sought to slip free; or the dread of failing at a general expectation, equally secure and foolhardy, to seem less capable if innocents were discovered, of turning against the cries of the multitude, of not listening to them...)

By attributing human traits, actions and language to *rabbia*, Manzoni both reminds us where to find and condemn this "bad passion"—in people—and at the same time generalizes it away from any particular agent, as something "in the air" between people that progressively infects them—thereby assembling the mob. The judges are contaminated along with the rest, easily influenced and intimidated by the crowd's volatile will. Fittingly, in this treatment of a story concerning an actual epidemic, contagion as metaphor is prevalent. For Manzoni the body is a liability, susceptible to the spread of both disease and bad ideas—"errori contagiosi" (viral, contagious errors)—through physical proximity with others.<sup>36</sup>

Further complicating his troubled relationship with the body, Manzoni both condemns its "passions" and eulogizes them in his pursuit of justice for the *untori*. Evidently some are good and some bad, yet they are all *passioni*, with etymological origins in the Latin verb, *pati*, to suffer, and in the Greek noun, *pathos*, meaning suffering, experience, or emotion. Indeed, Manzoni's own passionate feeling would seem to be his guide, the equivalent of which he aims to rouse in his reader, eliciting their "sdegno" ("scorn") and "ribrezzo" ("revulsion") to carry on the good fight.<sup>37</sup> So while "perverse passions" are the blameworthy object, the author models and aims to transmit distinctly nobler passions as the exemplary object. More importantly, these negative passions begin and end with the masses, while positive passions are proper to the self-contained individual.

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 7.

After pointing out that Verri failed to complicate his argument against torture, so as to maximize its impact, Manzoni sympathizes, writing:

Così almeno avvien d'ordinario: che chi vuol mettere in luce una verità contrastata, trovi ne' fautori, come negli avversari, un ostacolo a esporla nella sua forma sincera. È vero che gli resta quella gran massa d'uomini senza partito, senza preoccupazione, senza passione, che non hanno voglia di conoscerla in nessuna forma.<sup>38</sup>

(Or so it happens ordinarily: that whomever wishes to bring to light a disputed truth, will find among its proponents, as among its adversaries, resistance to the revelation of its veritable form. It is true that that great majority of men yet remains, without any party, without any concern, and without passion, who have no wish to know [the truth] in any form.)

The idea that neither representative of the two sides of a given debate (for and against) can reconcile with the “truth” of the matter—because it inevitably crosses between these sides, and spreads over them, encompassing epistemological rifts and incommensurabilities—seemingly corresponds to a dialectical form of thought and the eschewal of the law of non-contradiction.<sup>39</sup> At the same time Manzoni clearly suggests that a lone individual can reasonably expect to possess such “veritable forms” over and above others, and that he will have to insulate himself and his insights from contamination by popular resistance to the truth. He justifies two levels of social atomization to that end: first, the sequestration of the knower away from any interlocutors, whether they be in agreement or disagreement; and second, his isolation from the masses—imagined here as an unthinking and uncaring aggregate. Rather than advocate neutrality when confronting historical unknowns, Manzoni assumes the passionless-ness of the inscrutable “majority,” and equates it with apathy. So there can be no critical questions, no historiographical project at all without (good) passion, which the masses do not have, as meanwhile their empty heads risk becoming vectors for (bad) passion, thereby spreading evil. This non-sense actually accords with an outlook in which “complete” persons—exceptional individuals—are differentiated from masses of “incomplete” others who have yet to earn their personhood. On the one hand the *Storia della Colonna Infame* seems to herald the practice of *microstoria* (microhistory) in Italy, associated with Carlo Ginzburg<sup>40</sup> and others over a century later, invested in bringing forward untold histories from the perspectives of the persecuted, and on the other it

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>39</sup> See Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*.

<sup>40</sup> Luca Poggi considers the comparison at length, writing that “in entrambi i casi l’attenzione verso gli umili deriva, a sua volta, da un comune atteggiamento correttivo nei confronti della storiografia tradizionale (in soldoni, la storia politica classica). In modi e forme diverse, sia Manzoni che Ginzburg mirano a correggere la visione parziale e distorta di quest’ultima, contestandone l’esclusivo ed escludente interesse per quella che chiamerei la Grande Storia, cioè la storia raccontata come se fosse fatta unicamente di macroeventi e da grossi personaggi” (“in both cases the attention to the lowly derives, for its part, from a shared, corrective approach to confronting traditional historiography [in a nutshell, classical political history]. In various ways and forms, both Manzoni and Ginzburg aim to repair the partial, skewed vision of the latter, contesting its exclusive and exclusionary interest in what I would call Great History, that is history recounted as if it consisted solely of macro-events and major personalities.) Luca Poggi, “Ginzburg e Manzoni: Tra La Storia e Il Romanzo,” *Italica* 89, no. 2 (2012): 228–29.

pronounces the author's misanthropy.<sup>41</sup> To reiterate, a genuine interest in the lived experiences of others competes with the fear of contamination. Is it only after they have been outcast and executed that certain persons may be safely considered human? On this note, in the case of the great European witch-hunt as well as countless other genocides, even such retrospective humanization has yet to occur on any significant scale.<sup>42</sup>

Manzoni's peculiar blend of -philic and phobic social views, and his contradictory position on "the passions" and their corporeal host, constitute the uneven grounds for both the historical essay and the novel. The author's choice to address the outbreak and infamous *untori* sheds some light on the situation. He may have had several motivations; one, due to the discrete Italian literary tradition of relating the pestilence to storytelling since Boccaccio; two, because the episode illustrates the power of human society to withstand calamity and uncertainty, and even to gain from its losses;<sup>43</sup> and three, because infection offered a convenient metaphor through which to popularize the idea that the people *en masse* are a breeding ground for iniquity.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, although positive passions can also rub off—and this is Manzoni's express purpose in the essay—they are transmitted at a distance, from writer to reader, thus obviating physical presence.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Then again, Robert Dombroski suggests that Manzoni showed relatively less contempt for "the masses" than fit his time and milieu. He notes that compared to eminent Enlightenment predecessors such as "Swift, Locke, Rousseau, Diderot and Voltaire," Manzoni's "beneficent condescension" towards the populace, "believ[ing] in their splendor and sanctity," constituted a progressive, if religious attitude that inched towards democracy. I would argue, however, that such an attitude is perfectly compatible with colonial and neocolonial attitudes towards racially, ethnically, and culturally differentiated (from white and European) persons and peoples. Robert S. Dombroski, "The Ideological Question in Manzoni," *Studies in Romanticism* 20, no. 4 (1981): 507.

<sup>42</sup> Although I will not fully address the topic here, it is significant that Manzoni's references to *stregoneria* (witchcraft), the persecution of women as witches that prevailed in 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, are minimal and ambivalent when compared to his abundant concern for the *untori*, and therefore entirely out of proportion with the relative numbers of persons actually killed.

<sup>43</sup> In the *Promessi sposi*, Manzoni attaches the most Malthusian point of view to his ambivalent but mostly damnable character Don Abbondio, who remarks near the conclusion of the book: "È stata un gran flagello questa peste; ma è anche stata una scopa; ha spazzato via certi soggetti, che, figliuoli miei, non ce ne liberavamo più: verdi, freschi, prosperosi: bisognava dire che chi era destinato a far loro l'esequie, era ancora in seminario, a fare i latinucci" ("This plague was a great scourge; but it was also a broom; it swept away certain parties that, my little ones, we could not get free of anymore; green, fresh, prosperous: it must be said that whomever was destined to prepare their funerals, was still in seminary, reciting Latin"). In this rare instance, the author's point of view—that Providence will also provide the removal of immoral characters from the world—matches Don Abbondio's, who in his personal self-interest would like his tormentors to disappear. Manzoni, *I promessi sposi*, 530.

<sup>44</sup> Emanuel Rota goes further to suggest that, by choosing the actual outbreak of bubonic plague on the Italian peninsula in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as his backdrop, the pro-unification Manzoni was able to figure, via Renzo and Lucia's quest, the elimination of the weak masses and survival of the fittest individuals and their progeny, as well as the absolute villainy, moral bankruptcy, and biological degeneracy (as the plague's purported transferors) of foreign populations. Viewed in this light, the *Promessi sposi* subtly entrenches a racist, xenophobic attitude. The hated outsiders are colonial and imperial powers, which I do not deny; I only point out the limitations of the inferiority complex that answers this oppression—the nation-to-be figuring itself in the image of the "inferior" sex and pure victim, Lucia. While such a geopolitical stance may set the tables turning, eventually making "winners" of the "losers" and vice versa, such a reversal does not constitute reparation for the violence of settler colonialism. (From the standpoint of difference feminism, such a process would necessarily depart from methods of domination.) Nonetheless, as Rota shows, the above is entirely consistent with nation-building in the age of biopolitics. Rota, "Is Immunity a Historical Concept?"

<sup>45</sup> Given Manzoni's immense distrust of the "popular," which on one level may be compared with Marxian critiques of ideology, it is ironic that the *Promessi sposi* has been required reading for high-school students in Italy for over 150 years. On the other hand, the regulated and sterilized educational context would seem to meet Manzoni's

Manzoni understood the reading public to be thoroughly impressionable; in “Del romanzo storico,” he describes the reader’s mind as “soggiogata, portata via dall’arte” (“subjugated, carried away by art”).<sup>46</sup> The choice of words exhibits Manzoni’s discomfort with readerly acquiescence; not only “subjugated,” the reader’s mind is “carried away,” evacuated by the power of art. In this light, the reader and the constituents of the *moltitudine* are equally passive, equally susceptible to influence. At the root of the paranoid thought that a reader will not question the printed word, and may even transfer it mimetically to his reality, lies a concept of ideal personhood as closed, bounded, and sequestered. It further suggests an inability to imagine that *anyone other than oneself* might also be capable of actively discerning the world, from within a shared milieu—not a bubble of immunity—and that their *different* observations and ideas exist just the same. In other words, Manzoni’s paranoia betrays the failure to conceive of the other’s difference, except as the negation of oneself. This ideal of individual wholeness and impermeability—everywhere disproven in a materially and discursively viral climate such as that of the *untori*—is the source of ample confusion, and nonetheless integral to Manzoni’s logic.

In the best case scenario, a captive audience of readers may be instilled with morals, and at the same time spared the physical closeness of unknown others carrying infectious diseases, ignoble feelings, and received ideas. When, in the first chapter of the *Promessi sposi* the author addresses “i miei venticinque lettori” (“my twenty-five readers”), we can thus rethink a self-deprecating tone—perhaps there is a secret benefit to such a sparse and manageable group.<sup>47</sup> What is more, the exceedingly low literacy rate in 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy (recorded at around 25% by the census compiled in 1861) would have benefited Manzoni and other elites by securing and insulating them as the ruling class. The constitutive outside in this instance comprises the majority of the population.

Manzoni’s position is clear however: this majority, *il popolo* (the people), is unequivocally to blame for the injustice done to the *untori*. Their unsubstantiated claims are brought to court verbatim: “E con queste parole, già piene d’una deplorabile certezza, e passate senza correzione dalla bocca del popolo in quella de’ magistrati, s’apre il processo” (“And with these words, already full of a deplorable certainty, and having passed without revision from the mouth of the people to that of the magistrates, the trial begins”).<sup>48</sup> The “certainty” of the viral accusation is “deplorable,” but the inverse certainty of Manzoni’s objection is exemplary. In *La scrittura dell’inquietudine* (The Writing of Disquietude), Pierantonio Frare points to the “mimetic mechanism” of the crowd as the definitive object of Manzoni’s reproach:

La grave responsabilità dei magistrati consiste nell’aver abdicato al loro ruolo di giudici e nell’essersi fatti “complici o ministri d’una moltitudine”: in tal modo, essi hanno abolito la differenza tra sé e la folla, cadendo vittime anch’essi del meccanismo mimetico e favorendo quella in-differenziazione tra le persone che sarebbe loro compito primario ostacolare.<sup>49</sup>

---

prerequisites for “proper” dissemination. This raises one of Manzoni’s key problematics: where and how does the infectious spread of ready-made ideas begin and end? Why are Manzoni’s own ideas exempt from this formula?

<sup>46</sup> Manzoni, “Del romanzo storico,” 1059.

<sup>47</sup> Manzoni, *I promessi sposi*, 18.

<sup>48</sup> Manzoni, *Storia della Colonna Infame*, 13.

<sup>49</sup> Pierantonio Frare, *La scrittura dell’inquietudine: Saggio su Alessandro Manzoni* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2006), 69.

(The grave liability of the magistrates consists in their having abdicated their role as judges and in having been made “accomplices or ministers to a multitude”: in such a way, they abolished the distinction between themselves and the madding crowd, thus also falling victim to the mimetic mechanism and furthering the indifferentiation between people that would have been their primary task to check.)

Manzoni implicates *la folla* (the crowd) because it spreads identical ideas; it is therefore to be avoided, much like the literal plague. As Frare interprets Manzoni, the proper task of the judges is to *differentiate* people, one from another, not to mention themselves from the masses. Only thus, by individuating people, can they accurately pinpoint innocence and guilt. The concept of mimesis that Frare highlights is of course pertinent to our discussion of sameness and difference, certainty and uncertainty, boundedness and permeability, wholeness and partialness, etc.—the one being ideal and the other a liability in their typical appearances in the texts at hand. However, it is precisely the *sameness* of the viral feeling, action, or idea, reproduced without question, and the consequences of the intolerance of uncertainty given grave circumstances that led to the persecution of the *untori* in the first place, in Manzoni’s own version of the story. The contradictions abound: here Manzoni encourages independent thinking, the refusal of ready-made conclusions, and the cultivation and expression of divergent points-of-view; elsewhere, as already indicated, he seems not to trust anyone but himself to perform such acts. (Or if not himself then one of his twenty-five reader-disciples, following precise instructions.)

Like passion, difference is ambivalent for Manzoni: there is the “good” difference of individual citizens from their fellows in liberal society, enabling autonomous yet harmonious initiatives to arise at a cool distance from one another; and the “bad” difference of those lacking the requisite markers of class, race, and sex to qualify as citizens in the first place, thus forming an indistinguishable and mutually violable, teeming *mass*, “the masses,” instead.<sup>50</sup> Then again, we encounter Manzoni’s more materialist sensibility fitted together with these conservative ideas, as if working in tandem. For instance, his favorable interest in difference as it spontaneously arises—as versus what is possible to invent—reappears in “Del romanzo storico”:

Per circostanziare, verbigrazia, gli avvenimenti storici, coi quali l’autore abbia legata la sua azione ideale [...] dovrà mettere insieme circostanze reali, cavate della storia o da documenti [...]; perché qual cosa potrebbe servir meglio a rappresentare quegli avvenimenti nella loro forma vera, e dirò così, individuale? e circostanze verosimili, inventate da lui.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> From the perspective of the socially marginalized, on the other hand, (their) difference can be reclaimed and resignified; indeed, it is only from this latter point of view that my initial discussion of the failures of the dialectic computes and can be computed. To reiterate, when the dialectic is wielded along lines of absolute difference (the “bad” difference outlined above), it effects the assimilation of so-called “others” to the same—the One, dominant paradigm of self and society. Chela Sandoval’s characterization of a key, “differential mode” of feminist consciousness illustrates what I mean by the resignification of difference. Sandoval writes: “Differential consciousness represents a strategy of oppositional ideology that functions on an altogether different register. Its powers can be thought of as mobile—not nomadic, but rather cinematographic: a kinetic motion that maneuvers, poetically transfigures, and orchestrates while demanding alienation, perversion, and reformation in both spectators and practitioners. Differential consciousness is the expression of the new subject position called for by Althusser—it permits functioning within, yet beyond, the demands of dominant ideology.” Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 44.

<sup>51</sup> Manzoni, “Del romanzo storico,” 1060.

(In order to substantiate, for instance, historical events, with which an author has correlated his ideal action [...] he will need to combine real circumstances, gathered from history or from written records [...]; because what could better serve to represent those events in their true, and I would even say, individual forms? with verisimilar circumstances that he has invented.)

So, the creator of verisimilitude also produces sameness, albeit with much more care and calculation than the crowd, while the *vero* is distinct. Here Manzoni appears to valorize what is particular, unforeseeable and unsubstitutable over what can be “invented” via mimesis—made in the image of the world as we (already) know it.<sup>52</sup> Yet these more familiar representations are prescribed as the filler and frame for the real lives and events being told, in effect assimilating them to readymade, “ideal forms” harbored in the mind of the author. While Manzoni’s interest in depicting a richer history peopled by characters too complex to fabricate is apparent, he both keeps his distance, and holds fast to his authority and attendant ideological guarantees.

### New Scapegoats

In the *Storia della Colonna Infame*, passion is at once the root of all evil, and the root of all truth and goodness. Beware the thoughtless reproduction of received feelings or ideas, and follow your passion to think independently for the good of your fellows and society. On the one hand Manzoni invites us to challenge ideology, and on the other he disseminates it. Still more antithetical is the fact that Manzoni answers his own call to acknowledge the innocence of certain tyrannized individuals in history (Mora, Piazza, et al.) by tyrannizing others—two women—in their stead. Manzoni effortlessly passes the guilt to Caterina Rosa and Ottavia Bono, as he revisits an era coinciding with the great European witch-hunt of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, in which hundreds of thousands of women were tortured and killed in less than 200 years.

In his discussion of the essay, Frare acknowledges that Manzoni moves from blaming the crowd, to individuating Caterina Rosa as its original mouthpiece, but he asserts that “poteva essere chiunque” (“it could have been anyone”)—since Manzoni meant only to emphasize the importance of personal responsibility to his readers.<sup>53</sup> How strange that Frare does not consider the unique appearance of women in this work, in which Caterina Rosa and Ottavia Bono are depicted and condemned as insane temptresses, to have anything to do with their gender. But the oversight is less strange than typical, just as Manzoni’s own choice to frame his work in this way is unlikely to have surprised readers at the time, habituated to the cliché of blaming women. Manzoni himself finds it quite ordinary: “E non paia strano di vedere un tribunale farsi seguace ed emulo d’una o di due donnicciole; giacché, quando s’è per la strada della passione, è naturale che i più ciechi guidino” (“And it does not appear strange to see a tribunal fashion itself acolyte and imitator of one or two little ladies; since down the avenue of passion, it is natural that those who are the blindest, lead”).<sup>54</sup>

With the words “una donna che poteva essere una Caterina Rosa” (“a woman who might

---

<sup>52</sup> *Mimesis* has various, complex significance in the history of Western thought and aesthetics. It both refers to imitation or mimicry as a bio-social, adaptive human capacity, and to artistic representation. These meanings are in conflict for Manzoni: the rowdy, unpredictable, “primitive” crowd disposed to virality is contrasted with, and—Manzoni hopes—defanged by the quiet, reasonable conformism of the bourgeois individual, passively absorbing media at a distance.

<sup>53</sup> Frare, *La scrittura dell’inquietudine*, 71.

<sup>54</sup> Manzoni, *Storia della Colonna Infame*, 35.

have been a Caterina Rosa”), Manzoni shifts into a conspicuously narrative register, from an anonymous woman to a *type like* Caterina Rosa, such that countless “Caterina Rosas” instantly proliferate.<sup>55</sup> The fact that she is named—unlike the judges—is indicative of her prominent role. While Piazza and Mora are the unexpected protagonists, she is the expected villain. With no further explanation Manzoni describes Caterina Rosa’s as “una mente la qual non vedeva che unzioni” (“a mind that saw nothing but unction”), such that she mistook an inkpot for a jar of contaminant.<sup>56</sup> This is exactly the kind of unfounded accusation that Manzoni takes issue with in the same piece of writing, for instance when he mocks his predecessor Antonio Gomez for condemning certain “giudici severi e crudeli” (“cruel, severe judges”) as seeking vain glory by administering torture: “Diletto e gloria! quali passioni, in qual soggetto! Voluttà nel tormentare uomini, orgoglio nel soggiogare uomini imprigionati!” (“Pleasure and glory! what passions, in what subject! Delight in tormenting men, pride in subjugating prisoners!”).<sup>57</sup> Why would anyone take pleasure in dominating and torturing others? What good reason could they possibly have? He protests incredulously. By the same token, what good reason would Caterina Rosa have to be fixated on spreading contagion? But Manzoni does not waste his time or that of his reader to ask, because again, “non paia strano” that “una donnicciola” would be out of her mind, and at the same time inviting to others, spreading dangerous ideas.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, we cannot pass over Manzoni’s stunning recapitulation of Caterina Rosa’s timeless, inhuman qualities by comparison to an “infernal goddess” from the *Aeneid*, even citing the latter text: “Caterina Rosa, *L’infernal dea che alla veletta stava*, intonò il grido della carnificina” (“Caterina Rose, *infernal goddess who stood watch*, chanted the cry of carnage”).<sup>59</sup> Evoking the classical work in his penultimate chapter, Manzoni achieves the satisfying and resonant effects of closure—the end of uncertainty—so the body feels “vivo e potente,” “speciale” (“alive and powerful,” “special”). Moreover, nothing is lost, since women are inferiorized as a rule, exploited and discarded, from literature to life and back again. (Manzoni has already done his part by overturning the legacy of the *untori*, and so stops there, but the *way* in which he stops is loaded with consequences.) Gendered bodies, like all bodies avowed as such, make partial, heteronomous subjects embedded in complex social structures, yet by means of sexual differentiation they are not granted the privilege of (the illusion of) sovereignty. They are therefore not the intended incarnation of Manzoni’s *io* (self), when he advocates for individualism as a final word to his *Storia*. He argues that the problematic, regenerative power of institutions is undermined “dallo spirito d’individualità: l’*io* si crede troppo ricco per accattar dal *noi*. E in questa parte, è un rimedio; Dio ci liberi di dire: in tutto” (“by the spirit of individuality: the *I* believes itself too rich to submit to the *we*. And in this it is a remedy; God frees us from saying: all for one and one for all”).<sup>60</sup> But the individual does not and cannot create difference—

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>58</sup> In her pertinent study, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, Silvia Federici accounts for the witch-hunt of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as an attack on the perceived threat of women’s social power—“a whole world of female practices, collective relations, and systems of knowledge that had been the foundation of women’s power in pre-capitalist Europe, and the condition for their resistance in the struggle against feudalism.” Given the context it is interesting to note one piece of Federici’s evidence in particular, that 17<sup>th</sup> century food riots tended to be women-initiated and led. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004), 103, 80.

<sup>59</sup> Manzoni, *Storia della Colonna Infame*, 84.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

i.e., challenge the conservative authority of institutions—in a vacuum. In a vacuum he can only create more of himself, more of the same. This is the impasse that Manzonian logic delivers.

### Lucia's Difference

By comparison to the *Storia della Collona Infame*, the *Promessi sposi* accommodates a more ambiguous depiction of women. From one angle, Lucia's story arc unfolds in conspicuous juxtaposition with Renzo's, reinscribing the novel's patriarchal worldview. "The plight of Lucia, for instance, gives [Manzoni] the material for a Gothic novel, in which the feminine victim eludes one trap only to fall into a more agonizing one, confronting villains of ever blacker nature."<sup>61</sup> Here Jameson summarizes the function of Lucia in contrast to that of Renzo, whose "own episodic experiences . . . provide a quite different narrative register from that, inward and psychologizing, of the Lucia narrative: the experience of social life."<sup>62</sup> The analysis aligns neatly with Paul Smith's distinction between two keywords, "subject," and "individual":

The "individual" is that which is undivided and whole, and understood to be the source and agent of conscious action or meaning which is consistent with it. The "subject," on the other hand, is not self-contained, as it were, but is immediately cast into a conflict with forces that dominate it in some way or another—social formations, language, political apparatuses, and so on. The "subject," then, is determined—the object of determinant forces; whereas "the individual" is assumed to be determining.<sup>63</sup>

Renzo acts, Lucia is acted upon. Renzo enters history and all its unknowns, while Lucia reinforces the foundation—making Renzo's adventure story possible in the first place—as the embodiment of good at the mercy of her evil opposites. Towards the end of the book, when the author, via Renzo, seeks Lucia as a form of closure—enough of entering history—he describes Renzo's beeline "to find women" at the Lazzaretto: "Ma né agli uni [i monatti] né agli altri [i cappuccini] si sentiva di far domande, per non procacciarsi alle volte un inciampo; e deliberò d'andare, andare, fin che arrivasse a trovar donne" ("But he was unwilling to inquire with either the corpse-carriers or the Capuchins, so as not to procure for himself any stumbling block; and he determined to go and go, all the way until he found women).<sup>64</sup> Carefully avoiding dialogue—and therefore the prolongation of uncertainty—with either the *monatti* or the monks, Renzo is ready to find Lucia: on whom both the end and the moral of the story depend. She is promised to him, and to us, as such; and at the level of the plot she is never *not* promised, either to Renzo, or the Virgin, or both: arrangements explicitly made for her protection, and our (eventual) satisfaction. Renzo chooses to promise himself, whereas Lucia can only *be* promised. It is striking that at a certain point in the book, due to overlapping vows, she is promised to Renzo, the Virgin, as well as both author and reader at the meta-level, as the bearer of an instructive, happy ending. In the earlier version of the novel, *Fermo e Lucia*, Manzoni confirms as much with the following, concluding lines: "Questa conclusione benché trovata da una donniciuola ci è sembrata così opportuna che abbiamo pensato di proporla come il costrutto morale di tutti gli

---

<sup>61</sup> Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 143.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>63</sup> Smith, *Discerning the Subject*, xxxiv.

<sup>64</sup> Manzoni, *I promessi sposi*, 489.



avvenimenti che abbiamo narrati, e di terminare con essa la nostra storia” (“This ending, though discovered by a little lady, seemed so opportune to us that we determined to offer it as the moral edifice of all the events here narrated, and to terminate our story with her”).<sup>65</sup>

While Jameson aptly characterizes Lucia’s sum presence in the novel (above), I am intrigued by her less allegorical appearances, occurring at the outset and very end of the book. Indeed, it is even possible to (willfully) discern, in Manzoni’s Lucia, an aperture onto radical feminist difference. We first encounter Lucia in Chapter 3 as she prepares for her wedding. Renzo arrives with news of the delay, and his shock and disorientation at the interference of Don Abbondio, Don Rodrigo, and Don Rodrigo’s *bravi*, are hardly matched by Lucia. On the contrary, she is well-aware of the web of relations that ensnares her, as evidenced by her answer of “Pur troppo!” (“Unfortunately!”) to Renzo’s question, “Dunque voi sapevate...?” (“So then you [already] knew...?”).<sup>66</sup> She swiftly takes action, sending away friends assembled for the wedding, offering an explanation to Renzo and Agnese, and soon after, when the opportunity arises, resourcefully taking advantage of a monk begging alms, to send a message to Fra Cristoforo. Unlike the plan to go by the book and seek the assistance of corrupt lawyer Azzecagarbugli, Lucia’s impulse to leverage her own and the monk’s mutual dependency is savvy and effective.

Jumping to the novel’s final pages, following Lucia’s sudden transformation from divine, iconic beauty, to “una contadina come tant’altre” (“a country girl like any other”) she teases Renzo in answer to his long list of lessons learned: “‘e io,’ disse un giorno al suo moralista, ‘cosa volete che abbia imparato? Io non sono andata a cercare i guai: son loro che son venuti a cercar me. Quando non voleste dire,’ aggiunse, soavemente sorridendo, ‘che il mio sproposito sia stato quello di volervi bene, e di promettermi a voi’” (“‘and me,’ says she one day to her moralist, ‘what would you wish that I had learned? I did not go looking for troubles: it is they that came looking for me. Unless you say,’ she added, smiling sweetly, ‘that my blunder was in loving you, and in promising myself to you’”).<sup>67</sup> The addendum that perhaps—if *you say so*—she did have agency after all, and brought her misfortunes on herself, is offered up for Renzo’s benefit: the chance to unload some of his growing burden of personal responsibility. As usual she displays a readiness to take the fall, to serve Renzo’s purposes before her own. At the same time her marginal status as *non*-masterful and *not* (individually) responsible, aware of her heteronomy and how to navigate contingencies, suggests a different form of freedom than *vogelfrei* (“free as a bird, not bound”). Karl Marx identifies the latter condition as a special kind of trap for the proletarian subject, in which the liberal humanist subject is also caught although differently. I speculate Lucia’s freedom in relation to Rosi Braidotti’s vitalist, posthumanist notion of endurance, as “an ethical principle of affirmation of the positivity of the intensive subject” that “suggests freedom of understanding through the awareness of our limits, and hence also of our relative bondage. This transformation results in the freedom to affirm one’s essence as joy, by encountering and mingling with other bodies, entities, beings, and forces.”<sup>68</sup> Lucia’s knowing smile indicates that the “spropósito” of loving Renzo is on some level a choice, on another an obligation. I read willfully between the lines here, prying them open to accommodate new

---

<sup>65</sup> Alessandro Manzoni, “Fermo e Lucia,” in *Alessandro Manzoni: Tutte Le Opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Florence: Sansoni Editore, 1988), 304.

<sup>66</sup> Manzoni, *I promessi sposi*, 32.

<sup>67</sup> Manzoni, 538, 541.

<sup>68</sup> Rosi Braidotti, “The Politics of Life as Bios/Zoe,” in *Bits of Life: Feminism at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience and Technology*, eds. Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 184–85.

narratives.<sup>69</sup> What if the intelligence of Lucia's worldliness, her being in and of the world, could set a different kind of example: not as the "donna di casa" emblematic of simple Christian goodness and personal sacrifice, but as a partial subject, beholden to others, without illusions about autonomy, and nonetheless affirmative?

## Conclusion

"[The individual] offers a fiction of cohesion that bears as its symptom a belief in a fully enabled and self-conscious power."<sup>70</sup> The individual is also the protagonist of the dialectical method, traversing oppositions and foregrounding uncertainty, in the attempt to produce an embodied history, a history of experience, or a sense of being between. Who else but "the individual" would be missing their sense of embodiment? Indeed, this social fiction is a figure in denial of partiality, permeability, and vulnerability. Alessandro Manzoni's solution to "the problem of the anonymity of the masses" on one hand, and "the self-interest of the ruling classes" on the other was, precisely, an ideology of individualism sutured to Catholic moralism.<sup>71</sup> I have repeated that such a decisive gesture curtails the possibilities of thinking dialectically—and that we can easily recognize the lines it reinscribes to be sexist and racist. Indeed, when wielded by those who experience themselves as disconnected and detached *individuals*, rather than as beings in relation with other beings, the dialectic conserves the structure of disavowal and the social hierarchies it makes recourse to. The contemporary political paradigm of immunity that the philosopher Roberto Esposito discusses in relation to thanatopolitics, or the politics of death, is imbricated with both the intellectual tradition of critical distance, and the politics of liberalism, both of which Manzoni in the guises of idealist and nationalist subscribed to.<sup>72</sup> At the same time, the passion that moved him to defend the persecuted—mixing with an impulse to quarantine—admits the truth of being a body: that it is subject to others. Esposito posits *community* as antidote to the associated fear: "If immunity tends to shut our existence up into non-communicating circles or enclosures, community is not so much a larger circle that contains them as it is a passage that cuts through their boundary lines and mixes up the human experience,

---

<sup>69</sup> Silvia Valisa works in a similar manner in the monograph, *Gender, Narrative, and Dissonance in the Modern Italian Novel*. In a chapter devoted to "A Somewhat Unusual Nun" in the *Promessi sposi*, Valisa credits Manzoni for conferring on Gertrude "unprecedented narrative and ideological latitude." In contrast to Lucia, who gives human form to the moralism cinching the book—although I have proposed a willfully feminist reading in which she exceeds this ideology even while representing it—Gertrude's sexual desire clashes with the religious function imposed on her, setting her definitively out of bounds of social norms. Valisa reads the story of Gertrude as ultimately inconclusive, suggesting that her final appearance in a situation of "supplizio volontario," or self-inflicted torture as religious penance, "opened up room for her to maneuver between necessity and free will, between female objectification and male subjectivity, and to willfully problematize the gendered structuration within which she found herself existing." Lucia's excess can be pictured more easily in the company of Gertrude as read by Valisa: as a limit case for the condition of women. Silvia Valisa, *Gender, Narrative, and Dissonance in the Modern Italian Novel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 55.

<sup>70</sup> Smith, *Discerning the Subject*, xxxiv.

<sup>71</sup> Dombroski, "The Ideological Question in Manzoni," 507.

<sup>72</sup> As Emanuel Rota points out, medical immunity was not yet established as a concept during Manzoni's time, and legal immunity was anathema—associated with political and ecclesiastical corruption and the gaping disparities of feudal society. If Manzoni's divided concerns between the preservation of individual liberties, and the prevention of systemic abuses of power are characteristic of that interim, we can observe that the former concern has increasingly overtaken the latter in the realm of public policy in the West ever since, dovetailing with the rise of neoliberalism. Rota, "Is Immunity a Historical Concept?"

freeing it from its obsession with security.”<sup>73</sup> In the interest of cultivating community and leaving passages open rather than shut, I refer back to Roland Barthes’ well-known pronouncement over fifty years ago, that the authority of the text is dead; that it is the reader of literature, the “destination” of a text, who comes to meet it, actively participating in the construction of meaning.<sup>74</sup> Rather than no longer read our great, canonical writers, we can resist restoring their authority ad infinitum, as if they always already thought our thoughts, as if a person could derive or possess thoughts in a vacuum, as if there were only so many thoughts to think. Literature and politics are linked in this way, being discourses that we reproduce between us and can also derail. As Ida Dominijanni writes in her testament to the pertinence of a politics of difference, informed by Italian feminism: “The [new] criterion of measurement is not the conquest of power, but rather the reshaping of the subject. Difference interrupts the eternal return of the-always-the-same.”<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> Esposito, “Community, Immunity, Biopolitics,” 85.

<sup>74</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 148.

<sup>75</sup> Ida Dominijanni, “Heiresses at Twilight: The End of Politics and the Politics of Difference,” trans. Brett Neilson, *The Commoner* 11 (2006): 108.