

“THERE IS NO DOUBT IT MUST HAVE A FIGURATIVE MEANING”: HOW MANZONI READ, INTERPRETED AND TRANSLATED HISTORY IN THE *STORIA DELLA COLONNA INFAME*

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to demonstrate that Alessandro Manzoni’s reading and writing of history, as shown in the *Storia della colonna infame*, are consistent with the acts of interpretation and translation as defined in most conventional senses, and may therefore be helpfully analysed from a translation studies perspective. These interpretative and translational acts are also often expressed in language reminiscent of allegorical exegesis: for Manzoni, history is a text to be read and interpreted according to its figurative as well as its literal meaning, and translated accordingly. Such an indirect approach to historical discourse, and indeed the use of history itself, was in part due to contingent reasons, for example the need to avoid excessive scrutiny from the authorities. The discussion focuses on three aspects in particular: interlingual translation; intersemiotic and extratextual translation; and textual history, understood as translation.

KEYWORDS: Manzoni, Translation, History, Allegory, Metaphor, Censorship

1. Introduction: theoretical framework

In his introduction to a recent collection of essays, Luigi Alonzi (2023) uses the term ‘synchronization’ to describe the relationship between different periods of time in historical discourse. Synchronization, he argues, “connects, past, present, and future”, by “disrupting and resetting time, as well as creating complex temporalities differing from linear chronology”; in so doing, it addresses what he refers to as “the central problem of historical inquiry”, namely “anachronism” (Alonzi, 2023, p. 1). In the sense in which he uses the term, ‘anachronism’ signifies largely historical difference – the ‘foreignness’ of the past as a ‘foreign country’ – which it is the task of the historian to translate to the more familiar setting of the present, by ‘synchronizing’ it. In the same way that interlingual translation posits equivalence between the meanings conveyed by both original and translated versions, while at the same time leaving scope for the translator to exercise their creative faculties, so too the historian assumes, identifies or establishes parallels between different times in history, interpreting the earlier one on the basis of their own understanding, and representing it in terms appropriate to the later one.

The language in which these historical and translational processes is expressed, however, is reminiscent also of a third phenomenon, which may predate or underlie the

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I should like to thank the staff of the Biblioteca Braidense Nazionale in Milan, Italy, for enabling me to consult the autograph manuscripts discussed in this article, and Barbara Colli for helping me to reconstruct their genesis. English translations from the *Storia della colonna infame* and its earlier versions are my own, mainly for two reasons. First, the *Storia* itself has only ever been translated into English on two occasions: the first time as part of the definitive, 1840-1842 edition of *I promessi sposi*, published by Longman in 1845, a version which presents various difficulties; and the second by Kenelm Foster, published separately in 1964, in many ways an excellent translation but too free to be used for detailed discussion of the original (see Gibbons, 2025b, pp. 57-58, p. 72). Second, the analysis of Manzoni’s text in this article draws also on previous, unpublished versions of the *Storia*, which, as such, have never been translated before into English.

others. The act of identifying a similarity between two discrete entities, and focusing on it to the exclusion of what may be many other differences, with the aim – more or less consciously – of arriving at a new way of perceiving reality, is fundamentally the same process as that involved in making metaphor.¹ From a hermeneutical standpoint, like the historian or translator, the interpreter of metaphorical or figurative discourse must retrace the steps taken by the author, recognize the fundamental similarity, focus on it to the exclusion of all else, and then apply it to their own situation. The equivalences between history, translation and metaphorical or figurative language inevitably call to mind the work of Hayden White, who described tropes as a useful tool “for understanding the operations by which contents of experience which resist description in unambiguous prose representations can be prefiguratively grasped and prepared for conscious apprehension” (White, 1975, p. 34). As a result of his insights, and those of later scholars such as Alonzi, it is now less controversial than it once was to assert that the writing of history can be translational or metaphorical; or that the reading of history can be interpretative and/or exegetical (in the sense of being comparable to glossing figurative discourse).

A corollary must be added for cases in which the focus is on historians who themselves are from previous centuries. Here a third temporality comes into play: what constituted the present for the historian, is history for the contemporary observer. Thus, in the same way that a three-way equivalence can be postulated between history, translation and metaphor, so too a triangulation may be established between the historian’s past (the period with which they were concerned), the historian’s present (the time in which they wrote), and the present of the contemporary observer (the present day). These three temporalities, in the discourse of historians viewed from a current perspective, may be said to be synchronized (to use Alonzi’s term), translated (sequentially, as the first temporality is translated to the second, and the second is translated to the third), and interpreted figuratively (in that the similarities between them can be highlighted, and their implications which transcend temporal difference analysed).

What follows is an attempt to probe these triangulations by focusing on the approach adopted by one historian in particular. That the author concerned is better known as a novelist is of little consequence; the fact that his historical discourse was expressed in and around a work of fiction does not make him any less a historian for this reason. My aim is to illustrate how this author interpreted and/or exegeted the events of the period about which he chose to write, how he identified points of contact between it and his own, and how he put his readers in a position where they could recognize the parallels and draw their own conclusions regarding them. My purpose is also, to a lesser degree, to highlight some reasons why this may still be of interest.

¹ Metaphor and translation are so structurally interlinked that they share the same etymology (Guldin, 2016, 2022).

2. Alessandro Manzoni: fiction, history, translation, allegoresis

The doubts that ultimately undermined Alessandro Manzoni's idea of writing a historical novel in the style of Walter Scott—doubts which ensured that his *I promessi sposi*, the most famous novel in the history of Italian literature, would be his first and only work of fiction—are sufficiently well known not to require explanation on this occasion. Suffice it to say that those doubts, which were aesthetic as well as ethical, were expressed most memorably by the author himself years later, when he asserted that “only the truth is beautiful” (Manzoni, 2000, p. 12).

What is less commonly acknowledged is the fact that the historical sections of Manzoni's novel—including the epilogue entitled *Storia della colonna infame* (hereafter, also the ‘*Storia*’) an account of the miscarriage of justice committed against those falsely accused of spreading the plague in Milan in 1630, which was omitted from the first version of the novel published in 1825-1827, extensively rewritten, and then reintegrated into the second, definitive edition released in 1840-1842—are themselves almost as indirect a way of telling the truth as the fiction he later decried. To write about the past was, for Manzoni, among other things,² a way to comment on the present while remaining at a safe(r) distance from the consequences of doing so. To discuss current affairs critically and in public under the restored Austrian administration in the 1820s might have exposed him to a series of threats, ranging from censorship (Albergoni, 2007, 2008; Frajese, 2014) to arrest, exile or imprisonment, as befell some of his friends and acquaintances (Becherucci, 2020).³ Conversely, to comment on such affairs at one stage removed from the present—by writing about historical events that showed parallels with them—not only solved some of the ethical issues raised by the writing of fiction, but also enabled him to avoid some of the more serious repercussions of doing so. The decision to write history may therefore be seen as in one sense an act of self-censorship (Centenari, 2024), through which Manzoni threw a veil of discretion over his views on some of the most sensitive topics, before the authorities had an opportunity to object to them.⁴ It is a technique which, moreover, he

² A new reading has been proposed recently by Adriano Prosperi, whereby the *Storia* represents Manzoni's response to the memory of the French revolution and the ‘hidden danger’ to the public posed by conspiracy theories (Prosperi, 2023; cf. also Centenari, 2024, p. 27). This new reading is, however, not incompatible with the more established view of Manzoni's account, nor does it negate the text's translational dimension in the sense of establishing a parallel between the historical and recent past (see, for example, Prosperi, 2023, p. X, quoting a letter from Manzoni to Adophe de Circourt written in 1843: “[...] il m'avait semblé que sous tout cela il y avait pourtant encore un point, qui touchait aux dangers toujours vivants de l'humanité [...]”).

³ In 1821, when Manzoni started work on the first draft of his novel (known as *Fermo e Lucia*, albeit never published with this title), of which the material that came to form *Storia della colonna infame* was an integral part (Raboni, 2020, p. 123), only two years had passed since *Il Conciliatore*, the journal edited by the leading exponents of Milanese liberal circles, had been closed down, forcing some of Manzoni's friends and acquaintances into exile, while others were soon sentenced to death for their role in the 1821 disturbances.

⁴ Manzoni's use of history in this sense is analogous to Carlo Cattaneo's decision to embrace the technical subjects that came to represent the focus of his writings, as a result, among other things, of the struggles he encountered with the censor's office in trying to have his *Interdizioni israelitiche* published in 1835. As Cattaneo himself said, writing much later (in 1860, when censorship was no longer an issue), he had been

recognized in some of the historical sources on which his account of the plague and the ensuing trials was based: events that occurred almost two centuries before he sat down to write about them.

It is with Manzoni's use of historical discourse as a form of indirect expression that I am concerned in this article, in the *Storia* in particular. The central argument is based on the following theses: first, that this mode of writing and reading history is, by any conventional definition, comparable to and consistent with the acts of interpretation and translation; second, that these interpretative or translational acts are often presented by Manzoni in language reminiscent of allegorical exegesis; and third, that the reader has a role to play in the hermeneutical process, frequently being invited to complete the translation themselves. The analysis will focus on three main aspects: interlingual translation; intersemiotic and extratextual translation; and textual history as translation.

3. Interlingual translation

Interlingual translation is an integral part of the historical discourse written by Manzoni, in the sense that— at the risk of stating the obvious—most of his sources wrote in Latin, while he himself was writing in Italian.⁵ Several examples are found even in the chapters of *I promessi sposi* that deal with the plague, in particular quotations from his main historical source, Giuseppe Ripamonti's *De peste*, in which the original Latin phrase is included after the Italian, often following a semicolon, as an indication of the reference's translated status.⁶

The same technique is evident throughout the *Storia*, in which interlingual translation is also a regular feature. Here the examples come not only from historians such as Ripamonti but also legal sources, including the text of the trial conducted against the alleged plague-spreaders,⁷ or the works of the jurists, whose opinions are often cited and discussed critically. The latter, indeed, are described as 'interpreters', private individuals who interpreted the official texts on the subject of torture, most of which derived from Roman law, and translated them for their respective generations. Manzoni acknowledges the inappropriateness of private citizens effectively becoming legislators, especially with regard to so critical an issue as torture (Manzoni, 2002, p. 25). At the same time, though,

unable to intervene publicly in the main political debates of the time because of what he called the "lack of free speech in my country", which forced him to devote himself to more "practical" subjects instead (Cattaneo, 1860, p. v).

⁵ Reference to 'Italian' here is contentious given the non-heterogeneous state of the languages spoken in the peninsula in Manzoni's time, not to mention his own role in forging a language that would be fit for purpose with a view to the creation of a single nation-state. It is also, however, inevitable on this occasion, simply for reasons of space.

⁶ See, for example, the phrases "*sed belli graviore curas*" (Manzoni, 2022, p. 579; Manzoni, 2023, p. 792), and "*pro patriae hostibus*" (Manzoni, 2022, p. 584; Manzoni, 2023, p. 798).

⁷ The translated status of Manzoni's references to the trials is stated explicitly in the first version of the text, known as the *Appendice storica su la Colonna infame*, when he quotes from the final verdict regarding the plague-spreaders' torture and death: it is "repulsive", he says, to "translate and write down" the verdict, and imagines it will be equally difficult and repulsive for the reader to read it in his version (Manzoni, 2002, p. 252).

he highlights the translational nature of their work, and often translates the salient points made by them.

As well as historical and legal sources, the *Storia* also features translations from classical authors. These include Virgil, who is cited in Annibal Caro's Italian translation, and Horace (Petrocchi, 1985), whose *ridiculus mus* reference from the *Ars poetica* is quoted near the start of the essay.⁸ Manzoni had in fact translated both authors during his youth. His versions of *Aeneid*, V, ll. 286-361 (the funeral games for Anchises organized by Aeneas) and *Satire*, I, 3, ll. 1-56 (Horace's satire of indulgence) date from 1800, when he was around fifteen, and represent some of his earliest works.

His later return to these classical models, however brief, in the definitive version of the *Storia* composed some four decades later, is interesting in its own right, but the presence of classical historians quoted and translated is even more significant. Such historians include Plutarch (whose *Lives* are cited in Girolamo Pompei's translation), Tacitus (*Annals*), and, most importantly, Livy (*History of Rome*). In Chapter V, for example, Manzoni tells of how one of the men accused in the trial, the barber Giangiacomo Mora, under torture to reveal his non-existent accomplices in an alleged act of plague-spreading, blurts out the name of "the first person to come to mind, prompted by his pain" (Manzoni, 2002, p. 122): a formulation that translates a phrase from Livy's account of the conspiracy against Hieronymus in the Second Punic War. Livy's importance for Manzoni as a historian is attested by a reference in one of the earlier drafts of the novel, as well as an 1824 letter to his friend, the librarian Gaetano Cattaneo, again quoting the *History of Rome*,⁹ not to mention the reference in Chapter XXXII of the definitive version of *I promessi sposi* (Manzoni, 2022, p. 610; Manzoni, 2023, p. 838). The historian of Rome is also alluded to in an earlier draft of the *Storia*, as will be discussed presently.

4. Intersemiotic and extratextual translation

The translational dimension of Manzoni's version of history goes deeper than interlingual translation, however, also embracing, for example, intersemiotic and extratextual translation. In looking at the processes by which this dimension emerges, three aspects in particular will be discussed: signs, actions, and figurative interpretation.

4.1 Signs

With regard to the first of these aspects, even a superficial reading of the *Storia* shows that the interpretation of non-linguistic signs is an important issue in it. For example, the column itself is a non-linguistic, material signifier, that serves to convey a given message from previous generations to later ones. In the first version of the text, the *Appendice*

⁸ Virgil is cited at the end of Chapter VI, when Manzoni compares Caterina Rosa, one of the two women responsible for unfair charges being brought against the accused, to Allecto, who was summoned by Juno to initiate war between the Latins and Trojans (Manzoni, 2002, p. 143: cf. Virgil, 1812, p. 241, l. 789). For Horace, see Manzoni, 2002, p. 3 (*Ars poetica*, l. 139).

⁹ Cf. Manzoni, 2006, I, p. 498; and Arieti (ed.), 1986, I, p. 356, quoting Book III, § 35 of the *History of Rome* ("*impedimentum pro occasione arripuit*").

storica su la Colonna infame (hereafter, also the *Appendice*), Manzoni evokes the monument's purpose through the use of the verb 'eternare', meaning to render the memory of the judges' actions 'eternal': a noteworthy ambition, undermined ironically by the author who observes that the monument was pulled down less than a century and a half later (Manzoni, 2002, pp. 272-273). The column's demolition by the Austrian authorities in 1778 resulted in a second column being constructed: a textual rather than a material column, namely Manzoni's *Storia*, which addressed the problem of what had become an absent signifier by replacing it.

There are a number of similarities and differences between the two columns. Both, for example, function as signs that require interpretation. In both cases, moreover, the correct interpretation is non-literal as well as literal. For the former, the monument's signification functions ironically (antiphrastically), its correct meaning being the opposite of what those who decreed its construction meant it to be.¹⁰ They intended it to remind later generations of the role they had played in safeguarding the city from mortal danger, ensuring that justice was done and the guilty parties were punished. In fact, as Manzoni begins by saying, while the monument did testify to their role in these events, it was memorable for all the wrong reasons. For the latter 'column', meanwhile, though it does contain outright criticism of those responsible for this miscarriage of justice, its target was not only them but also the Austrian authorities in Manzoni's day, who had unfairly tried, exiled and imprisoned his friend Federico Confalonieri and others like him (Dionisotti, 1988, pp. 251-253; Centenari, 2024, pp. 17-19). Here too, the message, or one of the messages, is expressed indirectly (allegorically on this occasion, rather than ironically).

The column of infamy is a sign, and as such — whether through its presence, absence, or replacement by a different form of sign — demands interpretation. The process by which meaning is attributed to it can be described in terms of translation, as the response to more recent controversial monuments has been (Bellentani, 2021). Manzoni here shows remarkable prescience, his reading of the past raising implications not only for his own generation but future ones as well. Within half a century of the *Storia* being published, the city centres of the Italian peninsula were filled with what one historian has called a "forest of statues" (Banti, 2007, p. 659), displaying the heroes of the Risorgimento for posterity.¹¹ While the message conveyed by these statues was meant to be unambiguous, their legacy for later generations (their 'translation' in this sense) has proved more complex, as historians such as Banti (2007) have shown. Furthermore, the recent phenomenon of statues being demolished as a way of drawing attention to the historical injustices of colonialization suggests that the semiotic process set in motion by the institution of public signs such as monuments is still relevant today. The way in which

¹⁰ Note the comment in the *Appendice* (Manzoni, 2002), where the author states that "a monument is not history: indeed at times, not only is it far less than history, it is actually the opposite" (p. 231). On definitions of irony based on antiphrasis in relation to Manzoni, see Gibbons, 2025a, p. 527.

¹¹ This "forest of statues" in Milan would include one of Manzoni himself, by Francesco Barzaghi, erected in Piazza San Fedele in Milan in 1883, ten years after the author's death.

such signs produced and produce meaning, and the meanings attributed to them, can be analysed effectively from a translation studies perspective.

4.2 Actions

Regarding the second aspect, actions, there is a passage consisting of three consecutive paragraphs in the 'Introduction' to the *Storia* which, through a series of verbs, illustrates how the translation process as a whole functions. The process starts with the act of perception, followed by interpretation of the perceived data, and culminates in an emotional, ethical and ultimately even theological response.

With regard to the first action, perception, the first verb used by Manzoni is to 'recognize' ('*riconoscere*'): the truth of evil conduct can be known or "recognized" (Manzoni, 2002, p. 6) by the observer—be seen for what it really is—not so much through words, which are frequently deceptive, but through human "acts" (p. 6), which are harder to dissimulate. Once these 'acts' have been 'recognized' as such and the truth has emerged, the sign can have only one referent, the semiotic process functions correctly, and the proper meaning is successfully assigned to it. In this case, the point serves to introduce Manzoni's main argument: that the evil in this historical injustice was caused not, as Pietro Verri (2002)¹² had suggested, by the fact that seventeenth-century medical knowledge was ignorant regarding how infectious diseases are transmitted, or the barbarian nature of jurisprudence at the time (which, in following the precedent of Roman law, continued to make provision for torture as a valid method of interrogation); rather, it was caused by what Manzoni (2002, p. 6) describes as "passions that pervert the will". He implies that such passions were common in his day too ("such causes sadly were not exclusive to one period of history in particular"; 2002, p. 6), leaving the reader to infer that similar miscarriages of justice could have occurred in the recent past as well, with the trials and sentences of Silvio Pellico, Confalonieri and the others still fresh in the memory. This hermeneutical nudge enables the reader to draw parallels between the historical and contemporary situations, almost without Manzoni being implicated in their judgements.

Next, the narrator takes a step back and asserts that if readers merely "see" (a weaker act of perception than actually 'recognizing') the atrocious events recounted as being the "effects" (Manzoni, 2002, p. 7) (similar to, but also different from, the "acts" referred to above (2002, p.6), as the surface manifestations of deeper phenomena) of an earlier and less enlightened period of history, they will experience a confused set of emotional responses, triggered by what is fundamentally a wrong interpretation. They will certainly feel horror at the injustice committed and compassion for those who suffered as a result; however, they will also experience "discouragement" and "despair", because they "appear to see" (2002, p. 7) (again, the perception is a mistaken one) these atrocities as historically determined and therefore unavoidable. Such a misperception implies that

¹² Verri, one of the best-known thinkers of the Milanese enlightenment, had used the same trial materials to make a strong and impassioned case against torture in his *Osservazioni sulla tortura* (Verri, 2002), a work which Manzoni admired even though he took issue with some of its detail.

human beings are driven by forces larger than themselves to commit acts of the most horrendous injustice, compelled by passions they are unable even to “notice” (2002, p. 7) (a term equivalent to ‘recognizing’).

The tangled emotional response goes further than wrongly experiencing discouragement and despair, however. The “indignation” (Manzoni, 2002, p. 7) that arises spontaneously in the reader when they realize the gravity of the injustice committed by the Milanese judges—a response that Manzoni describes as being “noble and holy” (p. 7) — starts to seem “unreasonable” (p. 7) if the historically determinist reading is correct, because there was nothing the judges could have done to prevent themselves from acting so abominably, hence it would be unreasonable to hold them to account for doing so. Consideration of the ‘holiness’ or otherwise of the reader’s response suggests that the frame of reference has moved from the emotional to the ethical and theological. Indeed, Manzoni suggests that the reader may be brought to the point of questioning (or even “denying”) the existence of divine providence if the latter allowed, or caused, such events to occur, or “accusing” (p. 7) it if it does exist, on the grounds that it should have prevented them. Manzoni characterizes both responses as “blasphemous”, and the mere entertaining of such conclusions as “madness” (p. 7). Paradoxically, his interpretation of the past offers a more hopeful message: by ascribing responsibility to individuals who made wrong choices, after allowing themselves to be blinded by “passions” such as fear and anger, he preserves the possibility of a reading whereby history does not have to repeat itself. From this perspective, human beings can and should open their eyes to the evidence before them, and act justly as a consequence.

The same distinction is maintained later on in the same paragraph, where he writes of “looking more carefully” at the “facts” (Manzoni, 2002, p. 7) (a term which, together with the previous ‘acts’ and ‘effects’, constitutes a third way of referring to what might be described as ‘signs’). ‘Care’ is required by the reader in observing the facts because, if the message were to be stated too clearly, it might also be understood by the wrong recipients (the censors, or others prepared to denounce those sympathetic to the democratic cause). If the reader does “look carefully” (p. 7), however, what they ‘discover’ is that the column of infamy episode, rather than an unavoidable consequence, was an act of injustice, one that could have been ‘seen’ (properly, that is, in the sense of being ‘recognized’) at the time, and so prevented, even by those who committed it.

This act of looking at a sign properly, giving it due consideration, entertaining the possibility that it might mean more than it appears to do based on a superficial reading, and then interpreting it accordingly, is in every way analogous to the act of allegorical exegesis. For Manzoni, the process of reading or translating the signs of history appears to be similar to that of interpreting sacred texts. The revelation that this process yields for the column of infamy episode—namely that human beings must take responsibility for their actions, regardless of the historical period they live in and the limitations such times may have—produces a sense in the reader not of “discouragement” or “despair” but “relief” (2002, p. 7) and also (although Manzoni stops short of saying so) allows providence

(Parisi, 1999, 2023) to retain its privileged position as the most effective explanation for the workings of history. While history can and does often repeat itself, it is not ineluctably predestined to do so: the circle can be broken if observers are prepared to read and interpret history properly, to learn from its lessons, and allow themselves to be changed by them, even when this means confronting their own blindnesses caused by passions such as fear of authority and popular sentiment, or anger in the face of phenomena they do not understand (including pandemics such as the plague of 1630).

4.3 Figurative interpretation

The third and last aspect of the intersemiotic and/or extratextual dimension of Manzoni's translational approach to history is what I have described as figurative interpretation. Perhaps the clearest example of this phenomenon is found in the so-called "digression on posterity" (2002, pp. 295-298), in which Manzoni critically analyses the truism whereby the misjudgements of all centuries are said to be corrected by posterity's impartial and infallible judgement on them.

The digression was probably composed in 1823, while the effects of the trial of Confalonieri and the others were ongoing. In the *Appendice* it came immediately after reference to the physical column's demolition, but the manuscripts show that Manzoni omitted it even from this first, unpublished version, hence it was inevitably excluded from the definitive edition published in 1840-1842 as well.¹³ The reasons for this omission remain the subject of speculation, but one might be the fact that it specifies the links between past and present too overtly. Such explicitness, while potentially dangerous for Manzoni, makes the digression particularly important for the purposes of this article, because it reveals the author's translational approach to history with especial clarity.

The discussion is based on a metaphor, that of posterity as a courtroom, in which the participants are judges, and the judgements issued are verdicts on historical events. The metaphor is developed further on a couple of occasions, when Manzoni qualifies his description, characterizing individuals as "disputants" in the trial rather than "judges" (p. 297); or when he describes human beings as "indulgent judges of our own cases" (p. 298). However, the basic concept is the same, and it requires no great leap of the imagination to understand how the metaphorical development of a hypothetical trial might affect a reading of Manzoni's literal account of a historical one: if one figurative application is possible through the development of the metaphor, another such application—from past to present, with reference to the recent trials in which his friends and acquaintances had suffered their own miscarriages of justice—is also possible.

¹³ The sheets on which the digression was written were removed by Manzoni from the *Appendice* (Manz.B.X.3: see p. 38d in particular, which contains the first words of the digression, duly crossed out) and kept separately (they are catalogued as Manz.B.XXXIV.2). All the autograph manuscripts cited in this article may be consulted through the Alessandro Manzoni portal which contains, among other things, an extensive archive of digitized manuscripts. Available at: www.alessandromanzoni.org (Accessed: 7 April 2026).

There is, though, a second underlying metaphor, stated less openly than the trial one but present nonetheless, in which the events of history are seen as a text and so can be read textually; in the same way, that is, that Manzoni reads and attempts to make sense of the initial proposition. Not only is the terminology described previously evident here also,¹⁴ but the approach taken in interpreting the central proposition is again that of non-literal exegesis. The first step, he argues, is to construe the proposition literally; if, as is sometimes the case, this first move produces a nonsensical interpretation, the breakdown in the semantic process triggers the next stage, which is figurative ('metaphorical'). The proposition that historical misjudgements are eventually and permanently corrected by posterity cannot literally be true, Manzoni asserts, for the term "posterity" (2002, p. 297) refers to a judgement that begins when the generation concerned passes away, and lasts "to the end of time" (p. 297). This is manifestly not the case on this occasion, for the proposition implies that at some point a change in the verdict occurs. If it were true, moreover, general rules would have to be established by which to 'discover', or identify, the point at which this metaphorical 'posterity' starts and the fallible version of it ceases. But when we try to establish such rules, we find it impossible to identify a given point in time at which the judgement of posterity becomes uniform, accurate and unchanging. Furthermore, human passions cloud impartiality of judgement with regard not only to the present but also the past, meaning that one generation inevitably thinks they are the ones who are enlightened, while the previous generations with whom they disagreed are simply "poor souls" (p. 296).

Like the courtroom metaphor, the history-as-text metaphor falls just short of making clear exactly how historical events are being translated to their contemporary applications. Manzoni does come very close to doing so at one point, however, when discussing the reasons why people are moved to study history in the first place, or why they study certain historical periods or events as opposed to others. The reason, he suggests, is the interest that derives from current affairs: we study a given historical episode in the hope that it will yield wisdom, whether as a model to imitate or an example to avoid. Without such an interest, that is, in cases where there is no direct relation with "our own present matters", from which we can derive "a judgement that is valid also for ourselves" (2002, p. 295), historical analysis becomes cold and arid. At this point the digression comes to an abrupt end, with Manzoni saying that the legal and popular verdict it was decided to recall through the column of infamy "presents all the characteristics referred to above" (p. 277). The fact that the discussion ends here, and that Manzoni never returned to it in this form, suggests that this too might be an act of self-censorship, the author stopping before more contentious allusions become too obvious.

¹⁴ For instance, Manzoni asks whether all judgements expressed by a plurality of individuals should be "recognized" as the infallible verdict of posterity; and invites the reader to "look carefully" into the matter (2002, p. 296).

5. Textual history

5.1 The textual history of the 'Storia'

The digression on posterity, a fragment omitted from the published version of the work, also forms a suitable starting point for discussion of the third aspect of the translational dimension of Manzoni's historical discourse being discussed in this article: its own textual history. The manuscript variants that survive are themselves material signs that require interpretation and translation: relics and remnants of previous versions, that tell the story of the work's genesis. They too function as historical monuments, much like the column of infamy itself. On this occasion it is not the authorities' metaphorical attempts to rewrite history that require translation, but Manzoni's literal attempts to rewrite the history of his text. For example, how are we to interpret the fact that, though the drafts that made his views on the links between past and present clearest are the ones which he shelved, they survived nonetheless, unlike some other of the digressions he subsequently abandoned, such as the treatise on language which, according to Manzoni's stepson, Stefano Stampa, the author "burned to the very last page" (Stampa, 1885, p. 88)?

To summarize the work's textual history briefly, the *Storia* began life as Chapter V of Book IV of *Fermo e Lucia*, the first redaction of *I promessi sposi*, completed on 17 September 1823 (the date at the end of the manuscript leaves no room for discussion). It soon became clear, however, that Manzoni's account of the trial had outgrown the space allocated to it, running to around 120 pages, far too long for a single chapter. The manuscript held by the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense (Manz.B.X.3) reveals the different strata of its genesis in both the title and page numbering (Stella, 2023, pp. 13-14). The original title, 'Capitolo V', is deleted, replaced first by 'Appendice storica', then by 'Appendice' (these too deleted), before finally, at the top of the page, the title *Storia della Colonna infame* stands unaltered. The change in the page numbering, meanwhile, with the original sequential numbers of the novel's manuscript (page and chapter) deleted in favour of a new sequence starting from scratch, confirms the hypothesis that a separate work was emerging. Some sheets, such as the digression on posterity, were removed and kept separately. The final manuscript, which contains evidence of a thorough revision process, served as the basis for the copy submitted to the censor's office (Manz.B.X.4) which in turn shows further corrections by the author. The dating of all this material is contested, but recent scholarship (Raboni, 2017, p. 113; Raboni, 2020, p. 128) suggests it was all completed in the final months of 1823. Meanwhile, an advertisement transcribed in the censor's copy of the second redaction of the novel,¹⁵ stating that the *Storia* was 'in the press', suggests it was only discarded at the last moment. Fifteen years later, in 1839, again according to the most recent scholarship (Raboni, 2017, p.113.; Raboni, 2020, pp. 131-132), Manzoni returned to his appendix, revising it heavily (in the manuscript now catalogued as Manz.B.X.5), and eventually published it as the novel's epilogue in the definitive, 1840-1842 edition.

¹⁵ Manz.B.V., which contains the *admittitur* of the censor Ferdinando Bellisomi and the *imprimatur* of his colleague Bartolomeo Zanatta, the latter dated 3 July 1824.

5.2 The textual history of Manzoni's historiography: the case of Giuseppe Ripamonti

Against this backdrop, analysis of the more explicitly historiographical sections of the treatise and their development is of particular interest in shedding light on its translational dimension. The comments on Manzoni's main source Ripamonti in Chapter VII of the *Storia*, and the changes from the earlier to the later versions of them, are especially enlightening.

On this occasion it is helpful to start from the final version (Manzoni, 2002, pp. 144-146). Two of Ripamonti's qualities as historian are cited in praise of him: one stylistic, the other ideological. Firstly, he is described as being the only writer of his time who was "not obscure" (p. 144); and second, he is said not to have spoken "exclusively according to the common credence" (p. 144). Both these qualities are expressed as double negatives, and the latter is immediately qualified when Manzoni writes that Ripamonti is a "curious example of that tyranny which a dominant opinion can often exert on the words of those whose minds it has been unable to subdue entirely" (p. 144). Immediately he provides examples of what he means: on the one hand, he says, Ripamonti never expressly denies the guilt of the accused, Guglielmo Piazza and Giangiacomo Mora, and at one point "appears" (p. 145) (the same terminology already witnessed on several occasions) expressly to affirm it; on the other, he also "seeks to imply the opposite" (p. 145) of what his words actually say. In practice Ripamonti does so through a series of techniques that are listed by Manzoni: "raising the occasional doubt, timidly and fleetingly, regarding the most important of circumstances"; "directing the reader's attention to the correct point, through the odd word"; "putting words in the mouth of the accused that are better able to assert their innocence than they themselves could have"; and, finally, "demonstrating compassion of the kind that is felt only for those who are innocent" (p. 145). Further examples are given before Manzoni states that Ripamonti expresses his sentiments most clearly when "he protests he does not want to express them at all" (p. 145), namely when the narrative forces him to take up a position regarding whether or not he believed the plague-spreaders actually existed. If he denied their existence, Manzoni quotes Ripamonti as saying, he would face consequences given how "deeply rooted" (p. 146) the prevailing conviction was at the time. To combat such an opinion would be "hard and pointless" (p. 146), so he chooses the only available option: not to affirm or deny, but simply to repeat the opinions of others (cf. Ripamonti, 2009, p. 148). Manzoni brings his discussion to a close by replying to a hypothetical objection—that Ripamonti, if he did not believe what he was writing, might have been well advised not to write at all—by reminding the reader that he was also the official city historian, and so one of the few men who could be ordered to write history or not to do so.

It is a remarkable passage, and a highly instructive one too. In reading, interpreting and translating Ripamonti's historiography for his own readers, Manzoni is effectively saying that it cannot and should not be taken only at face value. The careful reader must be attentive to the presence of textual clues—the odd word here or there, by which the historian gives notice that his true meaning is other than what the words themselves

signify—to arrive at a full understanding and translation of his history. The irony is that Ripamonti's historiography in fact imitates the approach taken under torture by those he is describing. The testimony given by Piazza, for example, consisted of what Ripamonti describes as "ambages" (2009, p. 116), another term traditionally associated with allegorical exegesis, and contained "many contradictory and conflicting responses, through which he revealed his crime even while he sought to deny it" (p. 116). Mora, meanwhile, having repeatedly denied any involvement in the non-existent crimes, only produced what was considered to be a credible version of the truth, or something approximating to it, when the torture he was enduring became too much for him to bear (2009, p. 122). As the real truth in both cases was clear to anyone who, such as Ripamonti, was minded to look carefully at the evidence, so too it was clear to those of his own readers who had ears to hear the intended meaning.

A further level of irony is added by the fact that, as Ripamonti, like Piazza and Mora, was giving his testimony under pressure from the threat of punitive consequences, albeit less immediate (hence the expressive strategy adopted was likely to be more conscious), so too Manzoni's account of Ripamonti's follows the same approach. He too, feeling that he was unable to articulate his version of the truth directly, regarding the way in which justice was or was not being done in his time, raises the odd doubt, directs the reader's attention, puts words in the mouths of his characters which make clear where his sympathies lie, and so forth. The hope or expectation is that in this way the attentive reader will pick up these clues, interpret their meaning correctly, and translate them in order to arrive at the intended conclusion.

The passage thus brings together many of the strands discussed in this article. However, the survival of a previous version of it (Manz.B.X.3, pp. 45a-49a) adds a further historical dimension which in turn requires interpretation. The first point to note is that the earlier version is much longer, and forms part of a strongly-worded defence of Ripamonti against the charges of previous critics, in particular Girolamo Tiraboschi, who accused him of using a style that was "inflated and pompous" (B.X.3, pp. 45a-b). In response Manzoni embarks on a lengthy and structured analysis of Ripamonti's style, in which it becomes clear that the two qualities expressed by means of double negatives in the final version were condensed from a much longer list of qualities, all expressed positively. Far from being inflated or pompous, Manzoni argues, Ripamonti's style was unusual among Latin writers of his time for its "propriety", for the way in which it is "deliberately proportionate to its subject", and for its "calm and orderly energy" (B.X.3, p. 45c).

It is also remarkable, he says, for the detail of the pictures he paints, to the point where in certain passages, the reader might be forgiven for thinking they had a copy of Livy in their hands (Manz.B.X.3, p. 45d). The reference to the Roman historian is no coincidence, as the references mentioned earlier on in this article indicate. Such a comparison would have been high praise for Ripamonti, and the manuscript shows that Manzoni had second and third thoughts regarding to it. He began by writing that "in some

places the reader of that book might think they had Livy”, then deleted the final three words, replacing them with “for a moment”, then completing the phrase with the words “they held Livy in their hands” (B.X.3, p. 45d), before making several attempts at qualifying the comparison, saying that the nature of the events Ripamonti recounted would soon have reminded them they were reading a modern not an ancient author.

A further stylistic quality is then cited in response to Tiraboschi’s criticisms—the wealth of observations on the customs and ideas of people of different classes of the time contained in Ripamonti’s history—before Manzoni comes to his main point: that Ripamonti stood out from his contemporaries primarily for his independence of judgement, especially on the subject of this “tangled mess of potions and plague-spreaders” (B.X.3 p. 46b). On this occasion, however, he justifies Ripamonti’s failure to “express his opinion positively” by reference to what he describes as “the unhappiness of the times” (B.X.3 p. 46b). This phrase too underwent several different formulations: first Manzoni wrote that “the unhappiness of the times did not allow Ripamonti to express his judgement clearly, a judgement which was opposed to the common sentiment”; after deleting much of this, he wrote that the same reason “could not prevent him from alluding to it secretly on every occasion, sometimes through stylistic devices, sometimes in the narration of circumstances, and sometimes by putting words or reasonings in the mouths of others, through which he expressed compassion: words that can only be found by those who actually feel them” (B.X.3 p. 46b). Finally Manzoni settled on a version in which, while the unhappiness of the times meant that Ripamonti was unable “to express his judgement positively, and even exacted from him the odd phrase that appears to articulate the common opinion, still it could not prevent him from alluding to his own thoughts sincerely on several occasions: covertly perhaps, but in such a way as to leave the careful reader in no doubt” (2002, p. 280). The consistency of the terminology used again confirms that allegorical exegesis is the preferred hermeneutical method; and the translational dimension is underlined in the subsequent passage where he says that Ripamonti, in refusing to express his opinion, does so more eloquently than anywhere else, which Manzoni translates interlingually: “we will translate this passage too, as best we can”, he writes, for “it depicts very keenly the difficulty faced by a writer who feels strongly both disgust at the popular falsehood and a desire to express the truth that he sees, while at the same time anticipating the cries of opposition that the truth he is proclaiming will attract to him” (B.X.3, p. 47b-c).

How, then, is the ‘careful reader’ to interpret these previous versions of Manzoni’s text, and their survival? The first point to note is surely the removal, from the first version to the second, of this reference to the ‘unhappiness of the times’ as the historical justification for Ripamonti’s acts of self-censorship. In the final version, while the times in which wrote may have been infelicitous (this is not in doubt), and his official role as historian to the city put him in an unenviable position, these pressures are no longer used as an excuse for his not telling the truth openly and unambiguously. The only mitigation offered is that, if Ripamonti failed explicitly to deny the guilt of Piazza and Mora, so too did

all other historians who wrote on the subject until Pietro Verri more than a century later. Meanwhile, the reduction in the number of qualities for which Ripamonti is praised to just two, plus the fact that even these are expressed as double negatives rather than positively as in the previous version, suggests that Manzoni had reined in his previous high opinion of Ripamonti somewhat. The historian remained a model for Manzoni's own historiography, but this did not mean his decision to speak the truth indirectly could be justified, even on historical grounds. As is so often the case with Manzoni, truth-telling is a matter of moral courage; and if Ripamonti was only prepared to tell the truth "timidly and fleetingly" (2002, p. 145), this was bound to affect the ethical judgement that Manzoni and posterity would have of him and his work.

At the same time, however, Manzoni was conflicted between, on the one hand, his own need to tell the truth regarding the injustice of current affairs, and, on the other, the likely implications of doing so. The fact that he qualified his opinion on Ripamonti in the sixteen years between the first and second versions of his text is as eloquent a comment on himself as it is on Ripamonti. Circumstances had changed in the intervening period, and with hindsight Manzoni may have felt he should have spoken out more clearly: the 'unhappiness of the times', in which a repressive foreign regime was using all of its powers to put down liberal opposition, including free speech, in no way excused him from his own moral and theological obligation to tell the truth. Contingent historical circumstances may provide some explanation, but never justification.

6. Conclusion

Manzoni, we may therefore infer, intended his historical discourse to be read in the same way that he read Ripamonti's. His *Storia* is to be read literally, as history, but at the same time the reader is invited to go beyond the literal. The additional level of interpretation required is comparable to allegorical exegesis, and it is this, fundamentally hermeneutical act that allows Manzoni's narrative to be usefully analysed from the perspective of developments in translation studies.

The parallel between past and present which enables the reader to interpret allegorically here is the responsibility that individuals must bear for allowing their judgements to be clouded by what Manzoni describes human 'passions', resulting, in such cases, in the most atrocious miscarriages of justice. This interpretation or translation process results in 'synchronization', in which the similarities noted between two periods of history result in them being joined across the centuries and in linear chronology being disrupted. The relevance of the trials of Piazza and Mora to those of Pellico, Confalonieri and the others is established by inference rather than directly, in the same way that Ripamonti hinted at parallels between events in the time of the alleged plague-spreaders and his own.

If, finally, the synchronization process, as suggested at the outset, extends beyond the establishment of parallels between the historian's period of interest and their own period, to embrace the perspective of the present-day observer as well, it comes as little

surprise that Manzoni's *Storia* should have had such a relevance in recent decades. While the significance of monuments and their demolition referred to above remains unexplored for the moment, and though the relevance of the *Storia* and the plague materials in the novel to the recent pandemic has begun to receive scholarly attention (Prosperi, 2023, p. VIII), its denunciation of miscarriages of justice has had a decisive influence on much of the fiction and non-fiction written by contemporary authors in Southern Italy and in particular Sicily, for obvious reasons (Agovino, 2025). The importance of human beings taking individual responsibility for acts of injustice is an issue that continues to command attention, and demand translation, through the centuries.

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