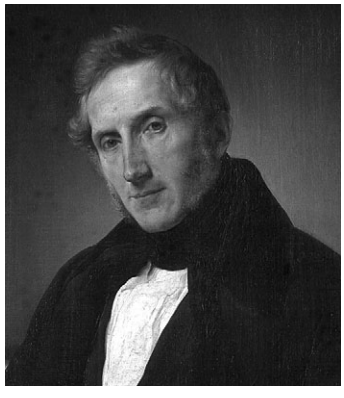
criticism in translation

Letter on Romanticism

ALESSANDRO MANZONI



INTRODUCED AND TRANSLATED BY JOSEPH LUZZI

Introduction: A Gentle Prophecy

IT WAS A FOREIGN CRITIC, IRONICALLY, WHO GRASPED THE INSURMOUNTABLE NATIONAL CHALLENGE THAT ALESSANDRO Manzoni posed to himself and to Italy's future authors with his monumental novel *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed* [1827, rev. ed. 1840]). Manzoni's basic theme, Georg Lukács writes, is "much less a given, concrete, historical crisis of national history" than it is "*the* tragedy of the Italian people as a whole" (70). This eternal plight—distilled into the story of the courtship and separation of two peasants in seventeenth-century Lombardy during plague, riots, and Spanish occupation—encompassed Italy's perpetual struggle against foreign rule, its lack of a unifying language and polity, and its reticent modernity, especially its tensions between religious tradition and secular progress. According to Lukács, the universality of the text combined with the abiding, unchanging nature of the problems it fictionalized essentially exhausted the genre of the historical novel that it introduced to Italy. Posterity has vindicated this assessment. Manzoni abandoned the genre soon after *I promessi sposi* to dedicate himself to historical writing proper,[1] and his novel remains ensconced in the Italian public imaginary, just behind Dante's *Commedia*, as the towering, mythic work that helped occasion Italy's belated unification in 1861.

Yet few outside Italy and specialized academic circles have heard of him or his novel. The reason lies partly with the militant *italianità*—"Italian identity"—of Manzoni, a public intellectual for whom literature was valuable in direct proportion to its utility. By extrapolating a general historical synthesis of the *caso italiano* in *I promessi sposi*, Manzoni did little to ensure his text's accessibility to readers not versed in the saga of Italy, an elusive yet indestructible "imagined community," to use Benedict Anderson's term, that required about two millennia to coalesce into nationhood. For another explanation of the limited foreign reception of *I promessi sposi*, one might look to the text translated below, "Letter on Romanticism." Manzoni claims,

Above: detail of a portrait of Alessandro Manzoni by Francesco Hayez (1791–1882). Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan (Scala / Art Resource, NY).

JOSEPH LUZZI, assistant professor of Italian at Bard College, recently completed a book-length study of European Romanticism and the question of Italy. His latest work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *American Scholar*, *Comparative Literature*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *MLN*, and the *Yale Journal of Criticism*.

© 2004 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in one of the more radical statements of early-nineteenth-century poetics, that "in Romantic theory I seem to discern a Christian inclination." This remark both explicates the providential design structuring the narrative of *I promessi sposi* (by book's end, the peasant main characters' Christian piety brings them to marriage and helps them overcome their powerful foes) and reveals why so few of Manzoni's foreign contemporaries could accommodate his untimely—and occasionally antimodern—thought.

"Letter on Romanticism," however, does not propose that Romantic theory spells out a doctrinal adherence to Christian dogma; rather, it claims that the principles and practices of Romanticism prove consistent with many of the cornerstones of Christianity. Manzoni writes that Romanticism, like Christianity, "freed literature from paganism," promoted the "true" and "good," and critiqued a moral "voluptuousness." Manzoni concludes the letter by predicting that Romanticism will emerge triumphant in European literary circles because, in its drive for theoretical rigor and sophistication, it has already begun to shape nineteenth-century debates about poetic judgment. "In all the wars about Romanticism," he writes, "the only thing that has perished is the word 'Romanticism.'" His notion of *il romanticismo* paralleled his conception of the Christian God: Romanticism was like a circle whose circumference was everywhere but whose center was indiscernible—an idea that, "without a name, lives and grows tranquilly enough."

By his own admission, Manzoni composed his letter at the twilight of the so-called question of Italian Romanticism. Seven years had passed since Germaine de Staël's inflammatory essay on translation stimulated heated debate in Italy about the place of mythology in modern literature, the merits of originality over imitation, and the need for Italian authors to look to the poetry and poetics of northern Europe.[2] Staël's challenge led to the creation of perhaps the most polemical and programmatic of all European Romantic movements, one whose marginality then and now owes considerably to the fact that its principals devoted as much energy to attacking or defending their views as they did to producing new work. Manzoni was unique for combining his religious view of the classic-Romantic debate with a systemic and philosophically inflected understanding of Romanticism that transcended the contingencies of Italy's culture wars and incorporated larger, Continental currents of thought. "Letter on Romanticism" is thus valuable as a document of the difficult transplantation of European (especially German) Romanticism into Italian Catholic and neoclassical soil and as a comprehensive review of the aesthetic and philosophical principles that gave theoretical coherence to the pan-European revolt against classicism.[3]

Any approach to the originality of Manzoni's thought and voice should mention a characteristic that often escapes notice: his sense of humor. Though the polemical intent of "Letter on Romanticism" is clear—after all, its addressee, Cesare d'Azeglio, was a doubter of the Romantic cause—the register throughout is gently ironic. A figurative if not actual child of the Enlightenment (Manzoni was the grandson of the acclaimed philosophe and legal theorist Cesare Beccaria), the author has a witty and provocative style that recalls the spirited banter, or *causerie*, of intellectual forebears like Voltaire, Diderot, the Verri brothers in Milan, and their encyclopedist interlocutors. This genealogy is more than formal: Manzoni's spirituality, especially in the period of his famous Roman Catholic conversion as a young adult, exhibited the same Jansenism that lent to the faith of many of his French *maîtres à penser* its rational skepticism and intellectual rigor.

Enlightenment legacies help to account for the charged rhetoric of "Letter on Romanticism" and for its admittedly somewhat Olympian tone.[4] It is no wonder that one of the few foreign contemporaries to promote Manzoni's work, Goethe, was accused of a similar rhetorical pretence and unfashionable ambition to move authoritatively between the various genres and disciplines.[5] But different gods sanctioned Goethe's and Manzoni's wishes for universality. For Goethe, the Faustian

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

notion of attaining expertise in areas ranging from color theory to botany and poetics drew energy from ancient Greco-Roman cultural traditions that combined moral philosophy with an erudite paganism. Manzoni, however, defied Italy's neoclassical ranks and correctly predicted in "Letter on Romanticism" that Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and other vestiges of ancient literature would soon lose their hold on literary representation ("I do not think that mythology is dead, but I do believe that it is mortally wounded"). He refused to accept the de facto prestige of the classics and instead traced their complex historical reception, especially during the resurgence of mythology as a literary force in the Renaissance. In his critique of literary neoclassicism, Manzoni's main target was allegory, which he believed relied too heavily on rarefied allusions and mythological characters that had lost their currency in the modern age. His demystification of neoclassical hegemony required more than an uncommon erudition and capacity for abstract thought; above all, his critical archaeology drew on his commitment to the ethical responsibilities of the writer. "Letter on Romanticism," with its painstaking elaboration of literature's cultural and social uses and their spiritual dimensions, thus anticipates the motives that would push the older Manzoni away from art and into politics. The Italy he helped create was grateful: in 1860 he was named senator of the new Italian kingdom; his death in 1873 occasioned a national day of mourning and inspired Giuseppe Verdi's *Requiem*.

Notes

[1] In *Del romanzo storico* (*On the Historical Novel* [c. 1851; Manzoni 459–538]), Manzoni ultimately disavowed the form of *I promessi sposi* as an untenable aesthetic hybrid, a "species of a false genre that includes all those works that mix history with invention" (484).

[2] Staël's essay, "De l'esprit des traductions," appeared in Italian as "Sulla maniera e la utilità delle traduzioni" ("On the Manner and Utility of Translations"), a translation by Pietro Giordani, in the inaugural issue of the Milanese journal *Biblioteca italiana* (1816). Staël drew responses from such illustrious literary figures as Giovanni Berchet, Pietro Borsieri, Ludovico Di Breme, Giordani himself, and the eighteen-year-old Giacomo Leopardi.

[3] Consistent with Manzoni's view of Romanticism as an inherently critical and analytic aesthetic mode—Manzoni calls it an alternately "positive" and "negative" system in "Letter on Romanticism"—Rajan notes that early German Romantic theory was "a typological rather than chronological category that signified perpetual dissatisfaction, in contrast to classicism, which Hegel associated with the totality of the Idea" (429).

[4] See Eco's memorable description of the opening pages of *I promessi sposi*: "Manzoni begins . . . by assuming the viewpoint of God, the Great Geographer, and little by little assumes the viewpoint of human beings who live in the landscape. . . . If you read properly, you will realize that Manzoni is designing a map; he is setting up a space. Looking at the world with the eyes of the creator, Manzoni competes with him . . ." (73). An ingenious mapping of the tension in Manzoni between secular and spiritual narrative strategies is in Moretti 43, 45; see also Raimondi's description of space and sentiment in Manzoni 82–96.

[5] The substantial amount of criticism on Manzoni by Goethe—who described Manzoni as a "Roman Catholic without bigotry" (143)—served as the preface for an early edition of Manzoni's poetry in 1827.

Works Cited

Eco, Umberto. *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. "Klassiker und Romantiker in Italien, sich heftig bekämpfend." *Werke*. Vol. 46. Weimar, 1887–1919. Tokyo: Sansyusya, 1975. 133–43. 143 vols.

Lukács, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1983.

Manzoni, Alessandro. *Opere*. Ed. Guido Bezzola. Vol. 3. Milan: Rizzoli, 1961. 3 vols.

Moretti, Franco. *Atlante del romanzo europeo 1800–1900* [*Atlas of the European Novel*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1997.

Raimondi, Ezio. *Romanticismo italiano e romanticismo europeo*. Milan: Mondadori, 2000.

Rajan, Tilottama. "Imagining History." Introduction. *PMLA* 118 (2003): 427–35.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Letter on Romanticism

Brusuglio, 22 September 1823

Dearest Sir [Marquis Cesare d'Azeglio],[1]

I owe you many thanks, both for the honor you did me by republishing my hymn ["La Pentecoste"] and for the copies that you sent to me.[2] I am also especially grateful for the letter that you graciously enclosed with these copies. The length that I expect this reply of mine to reach will be proof—perhaps too convincing—of the regard that I hold for both your letter and this opportunity for correspondence you have offered.

I did not originally intend to publish the composition that has allowed me the opportunity to correspond with you; my plan was to provide this piece with some literary companions before having it printed. But to satisfy the wishes of some friends, and because I did not want to burden the public with such an insignificant thing, I had a small number of copies of "La Pentecoste" published.[3] Since I do not have a single copy here at home with me, please allow me the honor of sending you the one edition that I do have of the two published Latin versions of the hymn, both of them praised by experts for their respective orders of merit.[4] The existence of these two versions liberates you from the responsibility of being the first to publish the piece. In reality, however, if you had been the first to do so, you would be responsible for nothing other than having excessively flattered my vanity by serving as the publisher of a work of mine.

I also thank you for thinking enough of me to send along those noble and affectionate thoughts with which you tried to soften the sufferings of me, your friend, one to whom God has shown great mercy. And should the need ever arise, I assure you that I will avail myself of your blessing, only because you so graciously sent it to me.

Thanks also—I have to repeat this expression because you give me so many occasions to do so—thanks indeed for informing me of that grave topographical error that occurred in the voyage of my deacon of Ravenna.[5] In reading the passage about this mistake in your treasured letter, I began to wonder how I could have ever made such a misinterpretation when I tried to imagine and describe the coordinates you indicate, which are in fact accurate. I soon realized that my error rests in the words "Alla destra piegai verso aquilone" ["I bore to the right, toward the northeasterly wind"]; this error resulted from the fact that, when I wrote those words, I completely forgot that I was describing the deacon of Ravenna's return home from Val di Susa to Italy. I paid no attention to the deacon's actual position, and I imagined him turned back toward the camp of Charlemagne, the direction toward which his thoughts were aimed. Should Adelchi live to see another edition, I will profit from your kind advice, and perhaps it will then please you to have corrected errors of even greater significance.[6]

In your overly indulgent judgment of my scant and small dramatic works, however, you have revealed a none-too-favorable opinion of—or at least a premonition of a short life for—the theory of poetry according to which these dramatic works of mine were composed. What on earth have you done? With a few lines of modest doubt, you have brought on yourself God knows how many pages of energetic reply. You mention in your dear letter a *cause* that I favor and partly follow, and this cause is the literary movement that goes by the name "Romanticism." This last word, however, is applied in so many senses that I feel a real need to explain them all, or at least to describe to you my intentions in using the term, because I value your opinion so highly. In addition to the problem inherent in all words designed to represent complex ideas and judgments—such words are generally understood in different ways by different people—this poor Romanticism has different meanings in

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

France, Germany, and England. If I am not mistaken, a similar diversity of opinion, or indeed a greater confusion, about this word "Romantic" reigns in the part of Italy where it has been discussed. I believe that the situation is such that in some parts of Italy the name "Romanticism" has never been invoked, unless sometimes by accident, as if it were a magical term. If I am again not mistaken, in Milan, where there has been more discussion about the matter than elsewhere, the word "Romanticism" has come to represent a system of ideas that are more reasonable, ordered, and comprehensive than anywhere else. I could refer you to a work that expounds and defends these ideas much better than I ever could.[7] I confess, however, that the honor you did me in showing me this problem has tempted me not only to define for you a comprehensive concept of Romanticism but also to undertake my own personal consideration of the matter. I will attempt both tasks in the most concise way possible, or at least in a manner that makes the least intrusion on your patience.

The first challenge that presents itself to someone who wishes to explain this aforementioned Romantic theory is the necessity of distinguishing its negative and positive principal parts.

The first part of Romanticism tends primarily toward excluding the following: the use of mythology, servile imitation of the classics, rules founded on specific cases and not general principles, and rules founded on the authority of rhetoricians and not on reason, especially with regard to the so-called dramatic unities of time and space attributed to Aristotle.

In terms of mythology, the Romantics said that it was an absurd deed to speak of false things as if they were true, just because others at different times have believed they were true; a cold deed to introduce into poetry elements that recall no memory or feeling from real life; a boring deed to repeat endlessly such cold and false things; and a ridiculous deed to repeat them with seriousness, with a reverential air, with invocations, and, one might even say, with austerity.[8]

The classicists countered these Romantic assertions by arguing that when you remove mythology from poetry, you divest it of its imagery and lifeblood. The Romantics responded that mythological inventions derived in certain historical eras from commonly held beliefs, from a spontaneity, and from a naturalness that cannot be reborn in our modern compositions without being forced. And to prove that these modern works can live without myth (and live so vigorously!), the Romantics cited the most praiseworthy texts in which mythology surfaces here and there but as though hidden and fleeting, texts in which mythology could be removed without either compromising the coherence or detracting from the beauty of these modern works. Let me say that as examples of these mythology-free modern works, the Romantics are especially fond of adducing Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, compositions in which a marvelous quality of the supernatural, rather than the pagan, plays a fundamental role. The Romantics also mention the spiritual poems, political treatises, and love lyrics of Petrarch and the *Orlando furioso* of Ludovico Ariosto, a work that features not gods and goddesses but magicians and fairies, to limit myself to just a few of its characteristics. Finally, the Romantics cite various foreign authors that enjoy a great renown not only in their native cultures but also in the learned circles of all Europe.

Another argument advanced by the classicists was that mythology contains a set of the most brilliant allegories. The Romantics responded that if beneath these mythological fakeries there was indeed an actual and reasonable meaning, then one should immediately express it. If, the Romantics continued, writers in remote times believed that it was good to say one thing in order to intend another, then they must have had reasons for doing so that no longer apply to our situation today. Likewise, according to the Romantics, there is no reason why this exchange of ideas imagined in the past should remain a doctrine and a timeless convention.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Then, to prove with facts of their own that mythology can indeed please even modern poets, the classicists contended that the use of mythology had been a literary constant up until the present. To this the Romantics replied that mythology, since it was perpetually interwoven with Greek and Latin literature, naturally participated in the beauty, culture, and originality of this same ancient literature. This, according to the Romantics, was the opinion of the learned, who sought out mythological texts during the Renaissance with curiosity, enthusiasm, and quasi-religious admiration, as was only natural. It was in no way strange, the Romantics continued, that the attractions of mythology should have compelled modern poets to carve a niche for mythological invention from the beginning. Nor was it difficult to understand, the Romantics added, why this mythological practice—transmitted from generation to generation with the earliest studies and transformed into a doctrine—not only was maintained but also, as happens in abusive practices, kept growing until it invaded all poetry and became its living embodiment. In sum, the Romantics concluded that while certain absurdities may persist for a while, they can never establish themselves as eternal. The moment of the fall will come eventually, as it now has for mythology.

In fact, the truly extraordinary and apparent vigor that mythology has acquired among us could be considered a sign of this fall, for this vigor represents not the expansive force of an innate power of poetry—or the exercise of poetry's most vast and powerful inner substance—but rather the increasingly exaggerated application of something extrinsic and random. When one thinks about the matter, it is difficult to see how the use of mythological inventions, whether taken as the subject of a poetic composition or, more and too commonly, introduced as the agent and cause of private and public events, could become a permanent poetic form. It should also be difficult for someone to imagine which limited part of mythological invention could remain useful to him, in what proportion and distinction such a use could be maintained, and where he could find a special explanation for this limited part, when its whole system is recognized as unreasonable by all.

The above were the principal reasons adduced on behalf of and against mythology as I remember them, since I write from memory and with no document from these discussions before me.

I confess to you that the arguments of the Romantics seemed to me then, and seem to me now more than ever before, extremely convincing. I do not think that mythology is dead, but I do believe that it is mortally wounded. I take it as a given that Jupiter, Mars, and Venus will pass away, just as before them Harlequin, Brighella, and Pantaloon—who also had many ferocious and even brilliant supporters—passed away.[9] Even then, these supporters said, in taking away these respectable characters, we would destroy the life of the theater and lose a particularly Italian form of theatrical glory (and what strange places this glory can choose to dwell in!). Even then, we heard pathetic laments that now make us marvel, and not without a bit of laughter, when we find the same laments in the writings of that time. And yet I accept it as axiomatic that very soon we will speak of mythology and its end.

By "end" I mean—just as the Romantics always meant and suggested in all their works—the end of mythology as an active presence in poetry. This brings to mind another objection raised against the Romantics, which is a curious example of the too common practice of enlarging and transforming public opinion to combat it more easily. Opponents of Romanticism claimed that, were we to follow Romantic principles, we would have to change not only poetry but also everyday speech. We would no longer be able to utter such expressions as "Herculean force," "martial aspect," and "propitious auguries," as well as any number of other explicitly mythological locutions. This claim is easy enough to rebuff. Long-standing institutions, practices, and opinions in all cultures leave

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

traces of their past existence in language, and these traces survive with meanings acquired through modes of expression that are independent of a word's original meaning. This is the same answer I could give to someone who says, either restore honor to astronomy or banish from language such words as "influx," "ascendant," "disaster," and similar derivations.[10]

For fear of provoking laughter that would precede or impede my explanations, however, I would never admit to just anyone the reasons for which I find the use of mythology detestable and the theory that aims to exclude it useful. But I will not refrain from sharing my reasons with you, since you know how to advise me without laughter, if you find my ideas lacking. My reason is that I believe that the use of fable is idolatrous. You know better than I that idolatry was never a mere question of believing in certain natural or supernatural facts. Such facts merely represent the historical dimension of the matter. The moral aspects of idolatry, however, have always been based on love, respect, and desire for earthly things; on passions and pleasures brought to the point of worship; and on a faith in these earthly things as ends in themselves capable of giving happiness and salvation. Defined in this manner, idolatry can persist even without a belief in its historical dimensions or in its cult; idolatry can unfortunately persist even in minds given over to the true [Christian] Faith. I use the word idolatry, and I do not believe I am abusing the term, in the way that Saint Paul expressly invoked it against the greedy, when he described the stomach as the god of the gluttonous.[11]

So, then, what is mythology preserved by poetry, if not this idolatry? And what more explicit proof of this idolatry can one hope to find than those arguments always adduced on behalf of mythology? Mythology, we invariably hear, serves to represent the moral passions and even the virtues in a lively way and to paint them interestingly. And how does mythology do this? By entering, as much as possible, into the ideas of men who used to see gods in these qualities. Mythology uses the languages of these ancient men and aims to replicate their beliefs, and it retains from idolatry all that we now recognize as being false in it. We can therefore recognize the general effect of mythology to be that of bringing us back to the ideas of an era in which Christ had not yet appeared and men neither anticipated nor desired his arrival. Mythology makes us speak today as though Christ had never taught us; it protects the symbols, expressions, and formulas of the feelings that Christ sought to destroy. Mythology makes us set aside the judgments of things that Christ has given to us, as well as the language that is the true expression of these judgments, so that we will retain the ideas and beliefs of the pagan world. And one cannot say that the mythological language used today in poetry does not affect our ideas and permeate ideals that the intellect holds resolutely and jealously. For why else would we use mythological language, if not because of our affection for that which it expresses and if not to produce sympathy for and agreement with it? For what other end does one write and speak? Blessed, then, be this war that has been waged and is being waged against mythology. And may we witness the transformation into a general precept of the following verse exhortation once uttered at a particular occasion by an illustrious friend of yours [Diodata Saluzzo di Roero], who was one of the very few to anticipate Romantic theories: "Vate, scorda gli Achei, scorda la fole" ["Poet-prophet, forget the Achaeans, forget the crowd"]. This friend sought and often found real poetic beauty in the ultimate truth, where the intellect resides, and not in those sad outward forms or those agreed-on formulas that reason neither understands nor refutes and that would embarrass any writer.

Along with mythology, the Romantics wanted to exclude imitation of the classics—not their study, as the adversarial party would have us believe. If I have understood well the writings and the discourses of some of the Romantics, none of them has ever dreamed of attacking the study of the classics. They know all too well—

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and who could not?—that when we observe in ourselves the impressions produced by the words of others, we learn (better yet, we acquire the skill) to produce similar impressions in others. The Romantics also knew all too well that witnessing the progress, discoveries, and manifestations of the minds of others is a beacon for our own minds and that these minds of ours, even when they do not apply such a desire to reading, remain nourished and refined without being aware of it. The Romantics understand also that many accepted ideas pleasing to the mind are steps leading to other images and ideas that may have seemed initially remote. In sum, the Romantics realize that to learn and write, you need to read and that this training is most useful when you read the works of extremely brilliant and erudite authors, especially the brilliant and erudite writers from antiquity that we call classics.

The Romantics never ceased, therefore, to protest against the extremely false label that they reviled the classics and regarded the remaining works of antiquity as obsolete goods to be cleared away. In reality, the Romantics never lost any occasion not only to laud the classics in general but also to note distinguished attributes of them that not even their most fervid admirers had marked. One of the Romantics even praised the beauty of the classics in many lovely verses. He reproduced some classical gems through a translation so successful that anyone who pretends to love the classics more than he will indeed exhibit a great esteem for them as well as for this author himself.[12]

What the Romantics fought was the practice of imitation that consisted of adopting and attempting to reproduce the general principles and viewpoint of the classics—the theory that promotes the model used by the classics, the characters that the authors have impressed on these literary forms, the disposition and relation of the different parts, as well as the order and the development of facts, etc. This classical practice of imitation—some of whose points I touched on, though only barely—is founded on the a priori supposition that the classics have already discovered all the different literary forms of creative expression and that the types of these literary forms have existed since the Renaissance. Perhaps this a priori supposition was never developed into a perfect theory, but it was applied to thousands of cases, accepted as a given in thousands of decisions, and promulgated in a great deal of literature. We need only observe this phenomenon in a single genre, the literary apology. Almost everyone who wasted time defending works from those who had wasted time censuring them adduced the examples and the authority of the classics as the works' most obvious and definitive justification. The practices I am describing were never reduced to a theory. Perhaps this is the greatest and least acknowledged labor of those who wish to combat commonly received false ideas: that of taking the ideas from here and there, composing them, working them into a coherent form, and then placing them in order, so that they can be fought. This classical practice of imitation was neither reasoned out, nor proved, nor seriously discussed. Moreover, to tell you the truth, contradictory propositions opposing it were always put on the table and repeated, and there was always a negative word against servile imitation and always praise for and recommendation of originality. In effect, however, imitation was always promoted. Ultimately, one always rehearsed the pros and cons of the matter, depending on the situation, without confronting these pros and cons and without ever establishing a general working principle. The Romantics wished once and for all that, as litigants of good faith, they could define the point of the question about imitation and then extrapolate a reasonable theory. They asked us to admit openly that, however many beautiful things the classic authors had written, none of the works—or, for that matter, no work by any other writer—has ever or will ever attain universal, immutable, and exclusive poetic perfection. And the Romantics not only demonstrated in abstract terms the arbitrariness of the classical theory of imitation, but they

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

began also to articulate concretely the many obviously unreasonable elements that imitation of the classics has introduced into modern literature. For example, without such a tool of imitation, would it ever have occurred to the mind of any modern poet to represent shepherds in the conditions and customs that are found both in the eclogues and in related works written by authors from Sannazaro to Manara, if before the former and after the latter there were not other bucolic poets, whom I am ignorant of or have forgotten?[13] And since a blind and material imitation dissolves so quickly into caricature, one day it happened that all the Italian poets—those who had composed few or many verses in Italian—transformed themselves (figuratively speaking, I mean) into so many shepherds who lived in some region of Peloponnesia under names that were neither ancient, modern, pastoral, nor anything else. All the works of these writers, of whatever genre and on whatever subject, spoke about or alluded to their herds or their bagpipes or to their meadows and their huts. These practices persisted tranquilly for a generation and, indeed, resisted and outlived the extremely effervescent and emotional satires of a Giuseppe Baretti.[14]

Taking advantage, as it is easy to do in such cases, of the contradictions put forth by their adversaries, the Romantics said to the classicists, "Did you not effusively praise both the originality of the classic authors and the fact that each has his own unique, spirited, and personal character? Is it not, then, in not being imitators that according to you we should imitate them?"

As you will no doubt have noted, the Romantics are quite coherent in their reasons for excluding mythology and imitation. Romantics form a united front in condemning arbitrary rules, especially those relating to the two dramatic unities. I will not speak of this to you—perhaps I have already carried on too much about it in print, and I do not know if I should be sad or happy that I do not have a copy of a letter of mine published on this matter in Paris.[15] I hope that my present correspondence with you—whose length, to tell the truth, is beginning to embarrass me—will not rival the length of that earlier letter. But the good will you have shown me encourages me to continue.

If memory serves me properly, here are the principal Romantic assertions with regard to rules in general. For any rule to find a home among men, it should exhibit a logic that reflects the nature of the human mind. From the single fact that a certain classic author writing in some genre might have succeeded and touched perfection, if you will, through certain forms, it does not necessarily follow that the same forms should be considered a universal rule, unless it is possible to demonstrate that they are applicable or indeed necessary to all similar cases. Such is the law of human reason. Many of these forms that we discern in the classics were suggested to the works by the particular nature of their subject and were appropriate to that subject, which was, in a manner of speaking, unique. The fact that we find these forms appearing as they do reflects the talent of a writer, but it is not reason enough to lead to establishing rules; indeed, it is a reason for not establishing rules. Moreover, the classic authors may even have erred in their selection of these forms. Why not? In such cases, we must look not for an example to follow but rather for a pitfall to avoid. Therefore, to profit with reason from experience and take from this situation an illuminating guide, one has to distinguish the following in the classics: that which is of eternal truth and that which is of incidental applicability. If such discernment had been attempted and realized by philosophers, it would have been necessary to set great store by their labor, without, however, blindly receiving their decisions. But, instead, the realm of this matter was almost always invaded, trammeled, and tyrannized by rhetoricians who in reality had nothing to do with the study of the human mind; and they deduced from the facts at hand, as best as they could understand them, the laws they desired. They ignored or repudiated the few philosophical investigations of this material; or they

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

appropriated philosophical inquiry, commented on it after their own fashion, misread it, and sometimes even placed it under the name and authority of their own poor and strange prejudices. To receive without examination and scrutiny laws of this nature and laws made in this manner flies in the face of reason. What, the Romantics asked, is the actual and most natural effect of rules thus conceived? First, they distract the inventive genius from contemplating the subject and finding its essential and organic qualities. Second, they engage the creative genius in the search for and the fulfillment of conditions completely extraneous to the subject at hand—conditions, therefore, that impede the subject from receiving suitable treatment. Is not such an effect obvious? For the most part, have not these rules been an obstacle to all those whom the entire world calls writers of genius and a weapon in the hands of all those it calls pedants? What happened each time this first group, writers of genius, wanted to liberate themselves from such obstacles? What happened each time these writers, after meditating on their subject, found they had to violate the rules to avoid degrading their subject? The second group, the pedants, lay in wait for them, and, without examining or wishing to understand what these writers of genius were calling violations—and without even trying to establish, or realizing that it was incumbent on them to try to do so, that following the rules would have been a better way to treat the subject—these pedants railed repeatedly against the license, judgment, and ignorance of our writers of genius. The Romantics now ask, Since this extremely passive respect for laws has always given so much strength to pedants against brilliant writers, why do we continue to countenance such confusion and such an instrument for tormenting our finest literary minds? Have not these geniuses already suffered more than their share?

Moreover, the Romantics continued, is it not true that, after a certain time, the same violation of rules, which was once cause for accusation against so many writers, becomes a subject of praise in their memory? Is it not true that what was once called lack of rules is eventually called originality? And, the Romantics asked (just as they did in the debates about mythology), do not we Italians praise our treasured poets, and other cultured nations theirs, for having abandoned accustomed norms, for having transcended these norms, and for having chosen a road not previously taken or not foreseen—a road for which contemporary criticism had not yet established a theory, because it did not yet know the appropriate road, because only genius was supposed to discover it? If for these reasons, the Romantics asked, the transgression of rules has been a means of improvement, why must we continue to repeat that rules are essential conditions for success?

I remember that, in general, the classicists gave the following unoriginal but singular response to the above Romantic critical interpretation of rules: many things are permitted to great writers and to them alone, and their practices are no examples for others. I confess that I have never been able to fathom the force of the argument that seems implied in this response. When I consider the reason that has motivated great writers to violate rules to achieve their goals, I am always drawn to the following conclusion: when great writers discerned in their subject an essential form that did not correspond to the parameters of any existing precept, they henceforth discarded rules, returned to the natural form of the subject, and in so doing gleaned from their subject the most and the best that it could offer their intellect. I do not see what the licit, the illicit, and the permissible have to do with the matter; such terms seem to me abstract concepts that, in this case, have no real meaning. The reason I have been exploring is by no means limited to great minds. It is universal and comes from the subject's nature, and it indicates the means by which the great and the small, each in proportionate measure, can do the best job possible.

"But, oh!" the classicists will counter, "the mediocre will never manage to gather from a

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

subject those splendid, original, and grandiose forms that appear to great minds." Perhaps the mediocre never will arrive at an understanding of this kind, but how in the name of God are rules going to help them get there? Either the rules are reasonable, in which case great minds should not dispense with them, because doing so would deprive them of things that allow for more forceful treatment of their subject. Or the rules are unreasonable, and then even mediocre writers should dispense with them, because these rules can only impede them, pull them further away from the truth of the concept, and create a confusing mess, without which there could have existed at least a minor form of perfection. Thus, the more I think about this double standard of rules—in which certain rules are mandatory in some cases but not in others—the more it seems absurd to me. This double standard emerged, if I am not mistaken, as a means of escape from the following impasse: when we see a contradiction between two propositions, both of which we wish to affirm equally and neither of which we wish to set in opposition to the other or abandon—and when we do not know how to bring our contradictory propositions into harmony—we invent a third proposition from them that reconciles at least their letter if not their spirit. Such a false reconciliation does not stand to reason, but it gives a response that carries the most weight for us in the end. But even if we were to admit that such a strange distinction could exist, what could we do with this distinction in practice? How could we apply it to a specific case? A person who, in the act of composition, found himself embattled by rules and his own feelings would have to ask himself the bizarre question, "Am I, or am I not, a great writer?" And how would he extricate himself from this question? The classicists say, "Oh! Rely on your own genius, if you have it, and let others talk." Rely on your own genius! Experience can inspire such great confidence—and how can these classicists say to themselves "rely on your own genius" when they have of course been trained to uphold vigorously all those critical instruments that are always used to take confidence away from the greatest minds and that have in reality taken the confidence away from more than one of them? Let others talk! It seems to me that, instead of counseling the few unfortunates who carry the burden of genius not to pay attention to our words, we should begin to weigh our words a bit more carefully.

But I forget that I am speaking to a judge, and I have let myself drift into squabbling with my adversaries. Please be so gracious as to excuse this flight of mine, and excuse me also for having begun once again to tax your time.

I do not remember if the other proposals the Romantics placed on the table against arbitrary rules have received replies, and I do not see what one could say against them. Many said that the goal of Romantic theory was to erode all literary conventions, authorize and promote all manner of extravagances, and place beauty in the service of disorder. What can I tell you? The world has always been accustomed to reason and respond this way.

Before abandoning the debate about rules, permit me to offer you an observation I do not recall having heard anyone mention: the subject of the Romantic debates, which has existed for such a long time, has never been defined with precision. The word "rules," on which so much of this dispute centers, has never had a fixed meaning. A person who hears this discussion about rules for the first time would certainly suppose that these rules have been determined with precise formulas and described in a beautiful code known and recognized by all those who accept the rules—rules, presumably, of a predetermined number and no more or less, of a predetermined manner and no other. Indeed, the first condition for compelling someone to accept a law is to tell him what the law is. You, of course, know whether or not this has been the case. And if one of those who deny this indefinite dominion of rules says to one of those who fight on its behalf, "I am convinced; this word 'rules' has something

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ineffable about it that seems to dominate my intellect. I surrender, and to give you a proof of my reasonable nature, I will propose something to you that is broader than anything that has been uttered in any dispute thus far. Pronounce one by one all the formulas of these rules, which have been adopted, as you say, by all the learned, and to each of them I will respond: amen," then the speaker, with such an apparent display of docility, in reality will, as you can imagine, play quite a nasty trick on the other and place him in a strange predicament.

I am truly far from believing that I have completely expressed the negative component of the theory of Romanticism. Many aspects of the discussions on Romanticism escaped my attention when the question was debated; many other aspects have escaped it since, because they eluded my memory; and I have left out many other things on purpose, either because they did not fall naturally under the few headings I have taken for my theme or because of my perhaps unrealized desire for brevity. I dare to believe that even the little of Romantic theory I have communicated here may be enough to make us sense its connections and the vast and coherent applicability of this theory to many facets of literature. Perhaps my words may even lead us to see Romanticism's vast and fecund applicability to the idea of literature itself. I should now move to the positive part of Romantic theory and hurry ahead, but I cannot refrain from speaking of an objection to—or, to put it better, a criticism of—the Romantic theory that I have touched on.

It was said that all those Romantic ideas, all those references, and all those proposals for literary reform were old, well rehearsed, and dispersed in hundreds of books. The fact that all this anti-Romantic talk was directed at certain individuals and not at any school of thought is quite clear. As I see it, the actual question should have been whether certain Romantic ideas were true or false. What did it matter if they were old or new? Once the truth of the ideas in question was established or their falseness proved, research into their originality could be useful to the history of human cognition. But to place this research at the fore and make it the principal subject of the Romanticism debate meant changing the terms of the question, in order to liberate its litigants from having to resolve it. Moreover, these accusations of plagiarism that are leveled against the Romantics contradicted the tag of "brash innovator" that was also applied in equal measure to them. In any case, I will not hesitate to label this charge unjust. I will not speak of the new ideas fielded by the Romantics; the opposition to these ideas in itself already created a great many new ideas. But the cohesion of the old ideas, the relation discovered and indicated between them—and the illumination and reciprocal force that came to all these ideas from the sole fact of classifying them according to a single principle, namely, Romantic theory—who ever imagined, proposed, or reasoned it out? Is it not a praiseworthy theory that gathers disconnected and accidental thoughts, truths felt rather than understood and suggested rather than proved, from the dispersed intellectual riches and confused depositary of human cognition? that subordinates these truths to a general precept that establishes among them a previously unnoticed link? that changes the intuitions of brilliant people into demonstrable knowledge and removes uncertainty and exaggeration from many ideas? that dissolves the mix of truth and falsehood that had previously led many to reject these ideas wholesale and others to accept them with an unreasonable enthusiasm? that links these ideas with others, which serve simultaneously to limit and prove them? Is it easy to achieve such praise? Who ever desired or imagined a theory that contained only new ideas?

Moreover, this anti-Romantic rhetoric lists no clear transgression. The accusation of plagiarism has always been leveled against writers who say original things. People have always scoured earlier books to find if such and such a principle was previously imagined, taught, etc. People have always said that it was the hundredth time that

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

such and such an idea was proposed. And what could these writers have responded? Perhaps, "All the worse for you classicists, then, since you did not listen the first ninety-nine times that the idea was mentioned." Or, "All the worse for you classicists, then, since you already had access to these ideas in so many books, yet you did not notice them, and you continue to argue as if these ideas have never been proposed. Now we have forced you to be aware of these ideas, and, if nothing else, at least this is something new in itself."

If someone were to try to prove that the merit I just mentioned and other similar virtues do not appear in Romantic theory, I believe I would listen to the evidence with much curiosity and calm attentiveness. Until now, however, as far as I know this has not been done or attempted. In the meantime, I cannot help recognizing the merit of this system. In reading literary, didactic, and polemical works that precede Romantic theory, I often stumble onto ideas that are very reasonable yet independent of the text's general meaning—ideas on the fly, so to speak—which in Romantic theory are rationally connected and transformed into something stable and productive. Similarly, in the books of brilliant but paradoxical writers, I often encounter specious and vacillating opinions that have about them the air of both trivial truth and strange error. Then I reflect with pleasure that, when the same ideas are transported into Romantic theory, they become linked and tempered in such a way that their truth is preserved and appears more manifest and important, while their falsity and strangeness are naturally excised and excluded. With all this, the negative aspect of Romantic theory is without a doubt its most notable aspect, at least with regard to what has been discovered and discussed until now.

The positive aspect of Romanticism is not wholly formed, nor is it as precise, direct, or above all extensive as the negative part. In addition to the general condition of the human mind, which makes it more active in destruction than creation, Romantic theory's particular nature was bound to produce this effect. Because Romantic theory proposes to eliminate all norms not truly universal, eternal, and reasonable in all aspects, it leads to a reduction of the quantity of these norms, or at least it renders their selection more difficult and slow. Another reason for the comparative weakness of the positive part lies in the brief duration of the discussion and the character it assumed from the beginning of the Romantic debates. Since the negative part was naturally the first subject to be treated, it came to occupy almost the entirety of that brief early period. The discussion then unfortunately assumed a certain scornful tone, as usually happens. And, as in all debates treated scornfully, there is a greater advantage in attacking than in defending. The Romantics were, therefore, naturally compelled to insist on and emphasize the negative part, in which, truth be told, they were at ease. As far as the positive part goes, they were motivated to stick to the most general of principles, which allow less space for quibbling and parody. Even so, Romantic theory could not avoid derision. But at least those who wished to deride it were constrained to exaggerate it or to invent a theory of their own and apply it to those who would never have proposed or dreamed of proposing it—a method completely discredited but nearly infallibly successful, one that will probably cease only with the end of the world.

Had the Romantic dispute continued—or, to put it better, if instead of a dispute there had been a united inquiry—one would have passed from exclusion to proposal; indeed, the majority of brilliant intentions would have focused on this. The opinions, presumably, would have been as varied as they were abundant, and many brilliant people, moving outward from a common center, would have radiated in many directions, even distancing themselves at times from one another as they proceeded. Such is the general rule for intellectual inquiry undertaken by many. But Romantic theory could not, or did not, arrive at this point. This fact notwithstanding, a great criticism made against its supporters

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was that they did not even agree with one another. They should begin, it was suggested, by harmonizing their ideas before proposing them to others as the truth. I cannot think about this criticism without wonder. Those that reasoned thus asked something that genius, as a general rule, has not ever given and can never give. This perfect concord among people in all points of a moral system has never existed. To attain it, everyone would have to adopt a fixed set of opinions and formulas for judging the points of the moral system. Many men would have to become one, so that they could apply their generic judgments identically to each new case. There is indeed an order of things in which an essential and immutable concord exists, but this order is unique, and its characteristics and circumstances are incommunicable. This order is religion, which imparts a knowledge that the intellect cannot discover on its own, a knowledge that man can only receive by revelation and the testimony of the Church. This single revelation includes a single doctrine, and therefore a single faith. Even within this religious order, the concord is not ordained, except where it is eminently reasonable for it to be so—that is, in those points wherein the truth cannot be known except from the testimony of those who have received its revelation, namely, from the Church. This concord is not commanded except for the moment in which the sole witness to the divine has spoken. In human matters, however, this form of testimony does not exist. No one is given or promised knowledge or assistance with decisions. Judgments, therefore, vary according to the variety of intellects and tend to be generally so dissimilar that when we call a judgment a system, we do not ask of it the impossible—that it harmonize all judgments about an unspecified general topic. Rather, we ask of it the difficult and rare task of harmonizing many judgments made on the principal points of this subject.

In the particular case of Romantic theory, then, this rebuke of internal disharmony seemed to me strangely applied. If those who made it had reviewed the story of human theories, they would have found, I believe, that few such systems presented less discord than Romanticism. If they had looked a bit into the theory called classicism—which they wished us to prefer—they would have immediately seen how much more grave and numerous are conflicting opinions, uncertainties, and various applications therein. They would have seen how much more difficult it is to reduce classicism to general formulas, to extract from it, so to speak, a confession generally accepted by all who accept the term "classic." And if they had looked back and sought the reasons for the very great difference between the classic and the Romantic doctrines or opinions, they would have had in part to recognize that the complete incapacity of their classical theory to be reduced to a synthetic form derives from the fact that it is not an application of principles to a complex of special cases but rather a hodgepodge of incidental facts converted into principles. As a consolation (*solatia victis*),[16] the classicists could have observed that an advantage that the Romantics had was the fact just mentioned—that the Romantics did not get very far in the special and distinct application of rules to practical matters, wherein disagreements could have or should have arisen, as is the case with allies who, united in combat against a common enemy, become embroiled when they come to deal with the distribution of conquered territories after victory.

The area, then, in which the opinions of the Romantics were unanimous, it seemed and seems to me, was this: that poetry should make truth its objective, as the unique source of a noble and enduring delight. Although the false can fascinate the mind, it can neither enrich nor elevate it. This pseudofascination is, by its nature, unstable and temporary, since it is capable, as should be the case, of being destroyed or even changed into something tedious. Such a change may be brought about by a transcendent sense of truth or by an ever-increasing love of truth. As the most natural means of rendering such poetic

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

effects easier to produce and more accessible, Romantics wanted poets to choose subjects that, while sufficiently interesting to the most learned, also appealed to many readers' natural curiosity and interest, born of memories and daily impressions of life. Consequently, Romantics asked poets to give final burial to subjects that interested only the literary class—and not the entire literary class but only the part of it that derived its predilections from scholastic habit—and another part of the public, neither literate nor illiterate, holding a reverence for these subjects that was not heartfelt but was certainly accepted.

I do not want to lie either to you (which would be a poor and vain maneuver) or to myself, for I do not wish to deceive myself about how indeterminate, uncertain, and vacillating in application the term "true" is with regard to works of the imagination. The obvious and generic sense of the word cannot be applied to works of the imagination, for we all agree that there should be something of the invented in imaginary works, which is equal to saying there should be something false. Truth, which should find expression in all its forms, *et même dans la fable*, is therefore something different from the normal meaning of the word. To put it a better way, truth is often undefined: indeed, to define it seems sometimes a rather fruitless, if not impossible, endeavor. However viable our attempts at definition may be, any uncertainty about truth is not particular to the Romantic principles I attempted to explain to you earlier. Rather, it is a common problem in all systems of thought, and it has been so for ages. Romantic theory suffers less from this ambiguity of literary truth than do other literary theories, because in its negative form it specifies the false, useless, and damaging aspects that it seeks to exclude. It indicates—and circumscribes with opposing ideas—something more precise, a sense more lucid, than anything we have had until now. Indeed, in a recent system of thought, we should look not at what it has already accomplished but at what it is capable of doing. From this perspective, the formula that recent Romantic theory expresses can remain general; the words of this formula, though they may appear strange to us, can at least evoke a sound or presentiment that is very beautiful and wise. The factual material needed for experimentation is so abundant as to make us believe that, in its original form, Romantic theory may actually be transmitting from one person to the next ideas, explanations, and assertions whose quantity and importance may be impossible to foresee concretely at present. In any case, this is the opinion I have created in my mind—an opinion that elates me, because in Romantic theory I seem to discern a Christian inclination.

Did those who first proposed and approved Romantic theory ever intend this Christian inclination? It would be frivolous to assert that this was everyone's intention, since in many Romantic theoretical writings, indeed in the greater part of them, literary ideas are not subordinated expressly to Christianity. It would be cowardly, however, to deny this Christian component, even in a single writer, for in none of these Romantic writings, at least in those I have read, is Christianity excluded. We have neither the facts, the right, nor the need to make such a judgment. Such a possible Christian intent, while certainly desirable and no small matter to us, is not, however, necessary to make us voice our preference for Romantic theory. It is enough for us that this Christian tendency is present in Romantic thought. Romantic theory, let us remember, freed literature from paganism and liberated writers from, so to speak, a moral voluptuousness that was haughty, fierce, circumscribed by time, and improvident in this sphere; antisocial, even when it was patriotic; and egoistical, even when it was not hostile. In this regard, Romantic theory tends to make it less difficult for one to introduce into literature the ideas and sentiments that should inform any discussion. In another sense, because Romantic theory proposes in general terms the true, useful, good, and reasonable, its words, if nothing else, converge with the goals of Christianity—or, at least, the terms of

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Romanticism do not contradict those of Christianity. However indirect the Romantic literary system's efficacy may be, I dare to believe myself safe in assuming that you will not judge it to be indifferent, for no doubt you have observed many times how greatly religious sentiments have been influenced by the different ways of treating the moral sciences, all of which ultimately have links with religion, however much arbitrary distinctions and classifications might separate them in appearance and word. You have noticed many times how, without even seeming to touch on religion, without even naming it, a branch of moral philosophy seems to bend in a direction opposite to religion and reaches conclusions that are logically irreconcilable with its teachings. And then you have witnessed how sometimes the same moral philosophy, bending even further in the direction of its disciplinary procedures, rejects its own conclusions and reconciles itself with religion—always without even naming religion and without even being aware of it. I do not know if I deceive myself, but it seems to me that more than one science has charted this happily retrograde course. Political economy, for example, in the last century on many points adopted, fairly universally, strictures completely opposite to the Gospel. Political economists proposed these tenets with such perseverance, imperiousness, and threats of disdainful pity for those who hesitated to accept them that many weak people who encountered the principles were persuaded that the science of the Gospel was thin and petty and that its precepts could not possibly have encompassed all the potential manifestations of the social relations to come. Many others, who thought that they were accepting purely philosophical ideas, therefore adopted with an uncritical passivity doctrines opposite to the Gospel. Now, in the name of progress in the economic sciences, and in the name of a more attentive and extensive examination of facts and a reasoned change of principles, other writers in this century have discovered the falsity and the fanaticism of those unquestioned strictures. On celibacy, luxury, prosperity founded on the ruin of others, and other points of equal importance, these writers have also established doctrines that conform to the precepts and spirit of the Gospel. And, if I am not mistaken, the more the science of political economy becomes reflective and philosophical, the more it becomes Christian. The more I consider the matter, the more it seems to me that Romantic theory tends to produce—and has already begun to produce—a similar change in literary thinking.

If I had to write these thoughts for publication, I would find myself constrained to add quickly here many qualifications to my above argument, so that others would not or will not believe I mean that Romantic theory will render all literature more spiritual, will make of poets so many missionaries, etc. But in writing to you, if I doubt the strength of my ideas I have at least the satisfaction of being certain that they will be interpreted according to their intent. And in all this prattle of mine, I can at least spare you words intended to prevent false interpretations and the form of affected misunderstanding that many find it more convenient and shrewd to pursue than an understanding of the actual truth.

After having given you the inside and outside of my opinion—perhaps with more faith than discretion—of a matter that you barely touched on in your own kind letter, I do not know if I have any right to speak about an issue that you alluded to more directly: the eventual triumph or fall of Romantic theory. But since in many places of this long ramble of mine, I allowed myself the liberty of stating, with much confidence, some favorable prophecies about Romantic theory—prophecies that at first sight might seem to contradict actual facts—I should at least provide the reasons motivating these predictions, reasons that seem to me to be reflected in the real state of things, once we look beyond appearances.

Certainly, if some foreigner, having heard talk of the debates that took place here [in Italy] about Romanticism, asks where the question of Romanticism stands, one can bet a thousand to

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

one that our foreigner will receive the following type of reply: "Romanticism? It was talked about for a while, but now it is no longer mentioned; the word itself is forgotten, except on those rare occasions when someone pronounces the epithet 'Romantic' to describe a strange proposition, a troubled brain, a futile cause, and—let me see what I can add—an excessive request, a poorly joined piece of furniture. But I would not counsel you to speak seriously of it: to do so would be comparable to asking people if they still enjoy playing with the kaleidoscope." If our foreigner, receiving such a response, is one of those people who understand that a word can have many meanings—and if he insists on knowing what his interlocutor means by the word "Romanticism"—he will learn that his interlocutor has in mind an unimaginable muddle of witches, specters, systemic disorder, extravagant quests, and abuses of common sense. In short, our foreign gentleman will learn about a kind of Romanticism that one would have much reason to refute and forget, had it ever in fact been proposed by anyone.

If by "Romanticism," however, we mean the sum total of the ideas a part of which I have poorly described for you above, then this Romanticism is far from decaying but lives, prospers, and diffuses itself day by day and invades little by little all aesthetic theory, with results that are increasingly reproduced, applied, and considered the basis of good judgment in poetic matters. In practice, then, one cannot fail to see in poetry today a tendency to reach for Romanticism's goals and to gather from and represent the notion of the beautiful about which Romantic theories have given us enough of an idea, however abstract and fleeting, to make us find its opposite disgusting. Another manifestation of the life and vigor of Romantic theory is the applause universally given to some works that are felicitous applications of Romantic principles. I will cite one of them, for it is a pleasure for me to describe the justice that has been rendered to the work of a man to whom I am linked by the bonds of fraternal friendship. When the *Ildegonda* [by Tomasso Grossi (1820)] appeared, the question of Romanticism was at a boiling point. It would therefore have been no great wonder if the aversion that many held for Romantic theory had turned their judgment against this work, which its author did not deny was composed according to Romantic theory. And yet the matter went quite differently. Opinions divided about Romantic theory were unified (morally speaking) in a sort of love for the work. Now, with the passage of more time than is generally conceded to works of ephemeral success, that high opinion of Grossi's work—I should say, that enthusiasm for it—has evolved into an esteem that appears to be perpetual. In all the wars about Romanticism, the only thing that has perished is the word "Romanticism." Resurrection of the word is not desirable; this would only renew the wars and perhaps damage the idea, which, without a name, lives and grows tranquilly enough.

Here I am, finally, at the end. My continual remorse about all this prolixity has forced me many times to ask you to excuse me for it. I have asked so many times that my excuses themselves have become longwinded, and I no longer dare to repeat them. Please be so kind as to accept instead my expression of the sincere respect and deep gratitude that I hold for you. Please accept also my cherished wish of being able to share these sentiments with you in person, whenever the opportunity should occur, sentiments with which I have the honor of wishing you well.

Your most devoted and obliged servant,
Alessandro Manzoni

P.S. So as not to delay further my response to your extremely kind correspondence, I will send you this letter filled as it is with marks and cancellations. You will excuse me for this, remembering that one cannot show benevolence to others, as you have shown to me, without inspiring in them a little familiarity.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Translator's Notes

I thank Giorgio Alberti, Silvia Carlorosi, and Alessandro Polcri for their assistance with this translation.

[1] The translation is based on "Sul romanticismo: Lettera al marchese Cesare d'Azeglio," edited by Guido Bezzola (Manzoni 425–57). I draw the information in my explanatory notes largely from Bezzola's edition. Manzoni's letter—addressed to an eminent Italian cultural and political figure and father of the patriot Massimo d'Azeglio—was initially published without authorial consent in the Parisian journal *L'Ausonio* in 1846. Manzoni's own—incomplete—edition of the letter eventually appeared with his annotations in his *Opere varie* (Milan: Rechiedei, 1870–71). Bezzola's edition begins with the early sections of the text from *L'Ausonio* and then switches to the revised version that appeared in the *Opere varie* (I indicate this transition in my notes). Bezzola also reproduces Manzoni's prefatory note, which the author included in the *Opere varie*:

> NOTICE
>
> This letter was not written for publication, as is clear from certain points in the text. The author, however, in finding it published by others—and after having either retouched or updated it in various places—believed that the work, notwithstanding its remaining imperfections, could find a place in the present edition. The letter recalls an episode in Italian literature [the Romantic debate] that has been finished for some time now, but this episode certainly did not leave things as it found them and did not fail to have a certain impact even outside Italy. The author's notes have been added for this edition.

[2] In the interests of readability, I have often broken Manzoni's elaborate periodic sentences into smaller units and interpolated the appropriate connectives. I have at times incorporated terms at junctures when Manzoni leaves implicit a fact or phrase that today's reader is unlikely to register (e.g., "question of Romanticism" for *questione*). Brackets indicate an addition to or modification of Manzoni's text that is more than stylistic. I have also updated certain key words to reflect their contemporary critical equivalents (e.g., I have used "theory" for *sistema*).

[3] Fifty copies of "La Pentecoste" appeared at Milan in Ferrario's edition of 1823.

[4] These two Latin versions of "La Pentecoste" were translated by Luigi Ballò (Cremona, 1823) and Fedele Sopranzi (Milan, 1823).

[5] The deacon of Ravenna is a character in Manzoni's verse drama *Adelchi* (1822).

[6] Here Bezzola switches from the text that appeared in *L'Ausonio* to the text from the *Opere varie* of 1870–71.

[7] The allusion is most likely to the systematic and theoretical exposition of Romantic principles in the work of August Wilhelm Schlegel.

[8] Manzoni inserts the following note: "It was a true disgrace (literary, of course) that none of the Romantics knew or remembered that a similar judgment had been expressed in nearly equivalent terms by a man whose authority would have briefly astounded any opponent. I refer to Torquato Tasso and the following words from his first *Discourse on Poetic Art*: 'And whatever fascination—if this word is indeed merited—that the work of the Jupiters, Apollos, and other deities of the Gentiles may elicit, this fascination is not only far from any verisimilitude but also cold, insipid, and lacking in virtue. Anyone with even a modicum of judgment who reads those poems based on the falsity of the ancient religion will be able to notice this.' It took, however, about two and a half centuries for the majority of poets and their readers to notice."

[9] Manzoni refers to the commedia dell'arte and its stock personages, whose ardent defenders included the eminent playwright Carlo Gozzi.

[10] Each of the words in the original Italian—*influsso*, *ascendente*, and *disastro*—has a technical etymological connection to astronomy that is not clear from its modern usage.

[11] The biblical references are to Ephesians 5.5 and Philippians 3.19.

[12] Manzoni inserts a lengthy footnote here transcribing the Italian translation by Giovanni Torti of Hector's speech to Andromache in the *Iliad* (Fagles 6.531–74).

[13] Jacopo Sannazaro wrote the pastoral *Arcadia* (1501). The writings of Prospero Manara reflect the rarefied tastes and militant classicism of Italy's many eighteenth-century Arcadian literary societies, whose members sometimes attended meetings dressed in the garb of ancient shepherds and poets.

[14] Baretti published strident attacks against Arcadian literary practices, most famously in his journal *La frusta letteraria* (1763–65).

[15] Manzoni includes a note here to indicate the title of his seminal "Lettre à M. C*** sur l'unité de temps et de lieu dans la tragédie" ("Letter to Monsieur Chauvet on the Unity of Time and Place in Drama" [Manzoni 281–424]), written in French in 1820 and published in Paris the same year "Letter on Romanticism" was composed (1823).

[16] "Consolation for the defeated"; the allusion is to Vergil, *Aeneid* 5.367.

Works Cited

Fagles, Robert, trans. *The Iliad*. By Homer. New York: Viking, 1990.

Manzoni, Alessandro. *Opere*. Ed. Guido Bezzola. Vol. 3. Milan: Rizzoli, 1961. 3 vols.

Torti, Giovanni. *Sulla poesia, sermone*. Milan: Ferrario, 1818.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X22747 Published online by Cambridge University Press