

# Manzoni and Leopardi— Kenelm Foster's Interpretation

Michael Caesar

To a former student like myself, to whom Kenelm's conversation about the Italian Ottocento was as stimulating over the years as his teaching on the subject had been sure and authoritative in undergraduate and postgraduate days, it was always something of a shock to remember how relatively little he had published in this area of Italian literature. Two major essays, both of which started life as lectures, two invaluable translations, a scattering of lesser articles and reviews<sup>1</sup>—these, combined with his presence as teacher and talker, were enough to ensure his status as an indispensable point of reference in any discussion of the early nineteenth century in Italy.

The two lecture-essays—on the idea of truth in Manzoni and Leopardi (1967) and in commemoration of Manzoni on the centenary of his death (1973)—are not so much the report of specific pieces of research as syntheses, dense and sometimes tense, of what Kenelm judged to be the most important things he had to say about the subject. And the subject mattered to him a lot. Manzoni was important because, as he put it in the centenary lecture, he was 'that uncommon thing, a considerable Christian artist'—adding in pen to his own copy the word 'very' before 'considerable'—and Leopardi was in some sense his antithesis. What Kenelm had in mind when he thought about Christian art is discussed elsewhere in this issue. What I would like to stress here, by way of entry to my subject, is how problematic and contradictory he saw Manzoni as being, both culturally and psychologically, and how Kenelm appeared to delight in these contradictions: the Christian who was a child of the Enlightenment and the Revolution, the Liberal who was a Catholic whose obedience to the Church in matters that pertained to the Church was total, the gentleman who detested the aristocracy, the writer who laid the foundations of modern Italian narrative prose and was at the same time the least Italian in any narrow sense, the most European, of the major writers of the peninsula. Not surprisingly, perhaps, when he discussed Manzoni's life, it was not the later years of relatively settled though often desperately unhappy family existence that engaged his attention, so much as the attraction in his teens and twenties away from Italy to France, the interplay of competing ideological positions, and of course the conversion itself.

To Kenelm Foster, Manzoni's conversion was of central concern: it was the crucial event in the writer's long life, not only because it was a 'thinking again' (if I have understood Kenelm's use of the term *metanoia* correctly), 'a total self-surrender to God as revealed in Christ' (1974, 16), but also because underpinning and flowing from this radical redirection of his life lay that concern with moral questions that remained at the very heart of Manzoni's work. It was in the moral sphere that the conflicts and contradictions outlined above were focussed most sharply. In the youthful Stoicism of Manzoni's poem in memory of his mother's lover, Carlo Imbonati—'feel and then reflect (...) never be false to sacred Truth'—the critic discerned the 'germ' of a great truth—'that right and wrong, the just and the unjust were inherent qualities of human behaviour' (1974, 18), and in a marginal note added to his copy of the centenary lecture, he underlined the enormous potential of that pre-conversion seed: 'just' and 'unjust', he noted, were to be understood 'in the precisely moral sense—so that a given possible action will *require* to be done—its not being done being simply, of and in itself, abhorrent. And vice versa, with the "contrary" action being similarly lovable.' This insight, he thought, raised the requirement of an ultimate principle; yet in the Christian perspective of Manzoni's post-conversion writing, the moral urge, 'the claims of justice', is seen as one term of a conflict, the other being humanity's drive for happiness; the two terms can be brought into harmony only in another, immortal, life. Human history, the very subject-matter of Manzoni's poetry, is 'borne onward by an inward conflict which cannot be resolved within history itself' (1967, 252); to seek to resolve the conflict by absorbing morality into the desire for happiness, as the Utilitarians did, was merely in Manzoni's view to beg the question. Kenelm situated Manzoni's Christianity between these two poles of rational Stoicism and Utilitarianism, the poet inheriting his loyalty to reason from the one and sternly resisting the sapping of the will entailed by the amoral blandishments of the other. The role of poetry itself, constructed on a principle of life-likeness, verisimilitude, fidelity to the truth, is ultimately to bring the choices of the will into focus: 'the truth about man, which is poetry's truth, "il vero poetico", will be a showing of justice and injustice, good and evil, a "vero morale"' (1967, 251).

A belief in mankind's necessary aspiration to happiness is something that both Manzoni and Leopardi inherit from the Enlightenment, and about the only conviction that they share. Beyond that, their paths diverge, Manzoni struggling through the conflict between intellect and will manifested in history, Leopardi not really interested in human nature in its social aspect, not sharing Manzoni's special concern with morality. This is one of two points in Kenelm Foster's presentation of Leopardi on which I respectfully disagree with him, but it is a

disagreement more of method than of substance. In his 1967 lecture, Kenelm tried to distinguish between the two poets in terms of what he called 'attitude', meaning 'characteristic and basic ways of taking stock of the human situation.' With this emphasis on the 'basic' (not necessarily synonymous with 'characteristic'), a great deal of what Leopardi wrote, especially in his later years, and of what since the war had been written about him, could be boiled down into an essential core, an initial point of departure, an original vision, out of which Leopardi forged a view of human life which differed from Manzoni's in that the latter contemplated actions 'as at once inter-personal and morally responsible; whereas in general the relationship Leopardi was most deeply concerned with was only unilaterally personal and not ( ... ) properly ethical at all' (247). But I would ask, whether it is right to characterize writers in terms of the essential, 'deepest', qualities, and not to take into account the interplay of surfaces, the stratification of layers of meaning, of which writing is composed? Do we get a better view of the inside—I ask without expecting an answer either way—by taking a cross-section of the house or by boring down from the roof to the cellar? To be consistent, I should object to the same drilling procedure being applied to Manzoni. But in the case of Leopardi I feel an unintended distortion resulted. Not only were Leopardi's genuine moral and social concerns (cf. the 'operette morali', the 'machiavellismo di società' entries in the *Zibaldone*, the later poems in the *Canti*, the *Paralipomeni*, the *Pensieri*, etc) made to pale into relative insignificance as a consequence of this perspective, but (my second point of disagreement) the central core of Leopardi's pessimistic vision was itself reduced to a pathological accident. Thus while as an account of the peculiar emotional force of Leopardi's last great poem *La ginestra* Kenelm's description in his 1967 lecture is brilliant, his identification of its source is, I think, not quite satisfying: 'The picture is indeed tremendously clear; but the ideas involved—matter, existence, man, reason, truth, happiness—each of these notions has become in the poet's mind a focus of thought and feeling expressing attitudes of attraction or revulsion; each lives in him by the emotional charge it carries, and what it expresses in the last resort is Leopardi's personal misery and his struggle to come to terms intellectually with it' (254). Kenelm saw Leopardi as a visionary, dramatizing, in a sense self-dramatizing, Romantic whose home-base consisted of a series of emotional discoveries about himself in relation to the world, and whose subsequent work took the form of sallies out from this origin, 'essays' as Kenelm called them, to which, however, he always returned. This is a powerful interpretation, it is the very likeness of that Leopardi who at the age of twenty consoles by refusing all consolation, and nine years later declares himself 'maturo alla morte', the poet of a despair which allows no escape (and Kenelm, whose Manzoni reached in

his novel a 'new perspective' informed by love and hope, understood no less acutely the poetry the hopelessness): but it is in the end as limiting as the psychologistic procedure which seeks in a primal scene, reconstructed largely from and through the poet's own words, the source, and object, of those same words. It is the gap between the individuality of experience and the universality (or claimed universality) of expression which remains unfiled, and perhaps only a study focussing on the poet's language could supply it.

But Kenelm's interest, in his unpublished lectures and notes as well, lay always more with Leopardi's thought than with his language. The case of Manzoni is slightly different, and what we must most regret—if we have to think of the 'might-have-been'—is that he did not go on to complete the analysis of *I Promessi Sposi* which would have been the core of the volume on Manzoni he was preparing for the Cambridge University Press in the last months of his life. There we would have seen a different Kenelm, one familiar to his students, but not hitherto in print, fascinated by the design and structure and texture of the novel, engaging with questions of narrative technique, putting to good use his enormous knowledge of and love for the tradition of nineteenth-century European realism.

Yet his concern with Manzoni's moral vision would of course have remained central—and it is that commitment to raising the moral questions of and about the writers that he read for which I am personally most grateful. That, and the 'detachment' which he so admired in Manzoni, and of which he was in turn so admirable an exemplar in his own fidelity to truth.

- 1 The writings discussed or alluded to in this article are the following: 'Blasphemous Poets' (Carducci, Leopardi, Baudelaire), in *Blackfriars* XXXIV, 402, Sept. 1953, 394—403; 'Manzoni and the Italians', now in *God's Tree*, London, Blackfriars Publications, 1957, 85—92; 'The Idea of Truth in Manzoni and Leopardi' (British Academy Italian Lecture 1967), in *Proceedings of the British Academy* LIII, 243—257; 'Alessandro Manzoni (1785—1873)' (lecture delivered at Cambridge University, March 1973), in *Italian Quarterly* XVII (1974), 67, 7—23; A. Manzoni, *The Column of Infamy*, tr. K.F., London, O.U.P., 1964; A. Manzoni, "'Pentecost" and other Poems', tr. K.F., in *Comparative Criticism. A Year Book*, vol. 3, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1981, 199—205.

In the early and mid-fifties, Kenelm devoted some study to religious thought in nineteenth-century Italy, especially to that of Antonio Rosmini, the centenary of whose death fell in 1955. See: 'Rosmini in 1848—'49' (1955), now in *God's Tree* cit., 93—101; 'Burke, Rosmini and the Revolution', in *Blackfriars* XXXVIII, 447, June 1957, 256—260.