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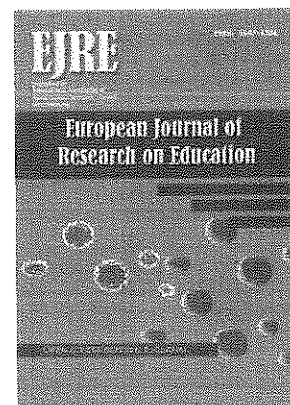
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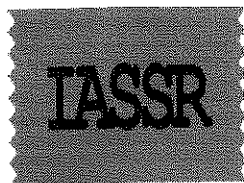
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Literary medium and cultural identity (Between romanticism and post-modernism)

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Abstract

In today's globalized society, characterized by the intersection of communicative practices, the relation among literature, public opinion and collective memory (described also by Walter Benjamin) has proven to be a fruitful interdisciplinary research subject, whose results can be much more effective when aimed to study the social meaning of the literary medium. In this perspective, the research activities carried out by Alessandro Manzoni, a fundamental figure in the Italian literary canon, show the need for modern intellectuals to provide the public with a faithful representation of the events that contributed to the construction of the modern consciousness (as underlined in the prefatory letter to the *Conte di Carmagnola*). Manzoni's moral and intellectual legacy (underlined also by Lukács) was influential for several Italian writers of the twentieth century. Among these, Ennio Flaiano has been perhaps the most sagacious interpreter of the medial society: the myths of progress and collective memory are still in the foreground of his works (*Tempo di uccidere*), also filtered through the moral of *I Promessi sposi*, «the most essential that can be», and through the study of its principal characters: «the figures of Don Abbondio, of the Cardinal, of the Innominate are huge; they are Italian». These characters have become civil emblems, also thanks to the Italian school. In the age of informative globalization and of historical fickleness, school can promote the rediscovery of prominent intellectuals concerned with the exploration of the events that led to postmodern consciousness, thanks to a very close relationship between literature, information and cultural identity.

Keywords: Sociology of literature, post-modernism, cultural identity, literary communication

1. Introduction

The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work – the rural, the maritime, and the urban – is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel (Benjamin, 1968: 91-92).

In the age of memory vulnerability and communicative practices overlap, the relation among literature, public opinion and cultural legacy can be considered a fascinating object of heuristic investigation, centred on the past and present function of the literary medium as a means of national identity construction. The research focuses – specifically but not exclusively – on the works of modern authors, committed to the definition of value paradigms and symbolic worlds that can stimulate the interest of a continuously developing public and able to read, at the same time, the social, political, and economic changes of their own times. Through their work, these authors offer a significant contribution to the development of literary communication, as well as to the knowledge of events that are fundamental to the construction of postmodern social and cultural identity. Their literature can play a social and educational role in step with the development of pre-medial society experiences, where literary writing still plays a major cultural and informative role.

From this viewpoint, the research carried out by Alessandro Manzoni reflects the need for modern intellectuals to introduce the poetical and narrative medium in the bond between usefulness and truth, historical reality and social

humanity, narration and information, in the perspective of an orientation of their literary production according to specific documentary requests. This is a priority pursued by Manzoni both in his novels and historical essays, particularly in the prefatory letter to the *Conte di Carmagnola* (*The Count of Carmagnola*) – as well as in the well-known *Lettre a M. Chauvet* (*Letter to M. Chauvet*) – where he questions the conformity of the Aristotelian unities of place and time, underlying that «people are in the state of illusion claimed by art, and they witness every day and in every country representations where they are not observed; and people are the best witnesses of this subject». Manzoni's is a literature denouncing the abuses suffered by humble and helpless people (*Storia della colonna infame* – *The History of the Infamous Column*) and informing about history evolutions in a well-balanced and truthful way. The glance is directed to the civil and political progress of the Risorgimento society, struggling with the intricate question of national unity, which laid the foundations of today's sociocultural identity.

Manzoni's influence on several twentieth-century Italian writers – from Croce to Gadda – testifies to the authority of a narrative and intellectual lesson based on the cult of usefulness and truth. Among these writers, a leading role is played by Ennio Flaiano, unsuspected Manzonian from the very beginning, and sagacious interpreter of the medial society, depicted with bitter irony and the flâneur's melancholic disenchantment. As an intellectual, he took active part in the development of the Italian culture industry, in the attempt to unveil the social reality and its complexities. As a fervent admirer of the Manzonian novel, he denounced the cultural aporias of mass society through cinema and journalism, after writing his novel based on the autobiographical experience of the war (*Tempo di uccidere* – *A Time to Kill*). His narrative production was characterized by an evident illuministic style, configuring the narrative medium as a communicative and cognitive instrument, based on the relation among time feeling, historical truth and social progress. The myths of progress and collective memory are also filtered by Flaiano through the moral of *I Promessi Sposi* (*The Betrothed*), «the most essential that can be», and through the study of the characters in the novel, expressing an ever topical Italianity.

2. Methodology

A research aiming to investigate the documentary function of modern literature linked to the social and cultural role of writers (and intellectuals in general) cannot exclude some essential considerations of method, mainly concerned with the function taken on by narrative forms in modern society, not only from a diegetic viewpoint, but also from a communicative one. The characterization of the literary medium according to the information of a public involved in deep social and cultural changes imposes a specific meditation on the reasons for the success of the novel form in modern times, mainly in the first half of the nineteenth century. In this period, narrative writing was characterized by the epic of the historical novel and by the dispute on the relation between truth and literary fiction, often dealt with by Manzoni in his writings on literary theory, such as the above mentioned prefatory letter to the *Count of Carmagnola*, and his more famous theoretical essays as the *Letter to M. Chauvet*, and the letter to the Marquise Cesare D'Azeglio, *Sul romanticismo* (*On Romanticism*) (Segre, 2011).

These writings introduce the terms of a coherent comparison with contemporary writers, in the attempt to define the right aesthetic compromise among adherence to the truth, historical research and narrative invention. They also contribute to better focalize some of the problems studied by the sociology of literature, and in particular by the sociology of the novel. It is no coincidence that thinkers such as Adorno, Benjamin, Lukács, Goldmann, Gramsci, McLuhan, Bourdieu, Escarpit have devoted a particular attention to the novel genre, both on a literary and sociological ground, studying at length the social and civil function of literature in order to give voice and form to social actors (Ragone, 2000; Cimini, 2008; Rak, 2011). This kind of sociology sheds light on the specific cultural function of the novel, which is subject to deep evolutionary processes, as in the case of the transformation of the novel genre in Italy represented by the transition from the development of the historical novel at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Manzoni, D'Azeglio, Grossi, Tommaseo, Nievo) to the spread of the psychological novel in the Age of Decadence (d'Annunzio, Fogazzaro, Pirandello), and the existentialist and autobiographical novel of the post-war years (Gadda, Calvino, Pasolini, Malaparte, Flaiano).

In the background, there are the great innovations of the European narrative, from Goethe to Pirandello, through Kafka, Flaubert, Dostojewski, Joyce, Mann, Camus, who have been systematically studied by a number of sociologists of literature committed to analyse the relation between public opinion and literary customs.

These innovations are largely motivated by the mutation of cultural and communicative processes, by the evolution of social and economic paradigms, by the transformation of traditional social coalescences in complex functional systems, characterized by an ever increasing atomization of individual interactions and by the dissolution of symbolic worlds codified by practice. Needless to say, these innovations take on specific sociological meanings, especially if compared to the communicative practices and educational techniques diffused in the reference society, so as to establish a direct link between literary medium and social identity. This is an idea claimed by Goldman with reference to the sociological function of the novel: «Now, the very first problem that a sociology of the novel should have faced is that of the relation between the novel-form and the structure of the social environment in which it developed, that is the problem of the novel as a literary genre and as a product of individualistic modern society» (Goldmann, 1967: 19). This is a question linked to the relation between literary medium and society, finding its own specific heuristic dimension in the diffusion of the novel, connected to the information dynamics of the middle-class literary public opinion, which spread in salons, newspapers, books, and theatres (Habermas, 2011: 32-52). This scenery changed with the appearance of mass society and mainstream media that imposed on intellectuals a renewed ability in reading social changes, in interpreting the course of history and denouncing the behavioural distortions of a society dealing with the incessant wavering of everyday life meanings, subject to the disruptive action of productive and technological accelerations (Mazzoli, 2012).

This is the programmatic mission that Manzoni aimed at pursuing through the novel form and his documentary adjuncts (*Storia della colonna infame - The History of the Infamous Column*), where the feeling of history bursts in all its dramatic actuality, despite the time censure existing between the narrated events and the editorial work of the author. In this way, Manzoni became an acute observer of the masses and their behavioural phenomenology, anticipating some aspects of the works of Tarde, Le Bon, Sighele (Izzo, 2005: 115-120).

Thus, the literary medium can be considered an instrument for the construction of modern identity, grafted on the study of the communicative processes, taking into account both the request of escape on the part of the public and the programmatic needs of intellectuals, and aiming to provide a faithful and authoritative representation of historical developments. This way, we can also justify the attention given to Manzoni's writings on literary theory, in which the need to adapt the literary medium to the aesthetic paradigms advocated in the Romantic age and during the Risorgimento, is claimed.

Considered in this light, the issues linked to the sociology of the novel show an urgent argumentative ratio, directly concerning literary medium production processes, strategies of editorial diffusion and reception modes (Escarpit, 1976). From this viewpoint Manzoni is a literary theorist fully engaged in the productive process of literature industry, in a historical period characterized by the rapid evolution of literary products diffusion techniques. Among the others, Bourdieu has underlined this aspect:

In the order of consumption, cultural practices and consumptions which may be observed at a given moment in time are the product of the meeting between two histories, the history of the fields of production, which have their own laws of change, and the history of the social space as a whole, which determines tastes by the intermediary of the properties inscribed in a position, and notably through the social conditionings associated with particular material conditions of existence and a particular rank in the social structure (Bourdieu, 1992: 256).

The evolution of social space entails the structural change of the work of art, as it submits it to a constant functional resemantization, relying on the taste of a public projected to the sensorial multidimensionality of the digital age. Hence, a sociological approach to literary theory becomes very useful, since it envisages new communicative and literary scenes elaborated thanks to a clever recovery of history and the construction of a language destined to become the mainstream of the unified Italy (Morcellini, 2011). Manzoni is, in fact, able to graft his narrative and dramaturgic activity on a constant theoretical elaboration, supported by urgent historiographical, religious and sociological interests. Hence the possibility to use the study of the literary medium in the light of the productive processes and social space in which it is included, as Lukàcs did by reflecting on Manzoni's refusal of place and time unities: he saw in them «the most difficult obstacle for the realization of historical drama, which he

believed was assigned to its time» (Lukács, 1976: 130). In the foreground, the realization of a people-oriented literary product: this is the great originality of Manzoni's work, that cannot be perceived in its documentary fullness if detached from the social space and productive processes in which it takes shape (Randazzo, 1965).

Manzoni's work appears suspended between poesis and theory, and it must be studied also on a sociological level, in the perspective of establishing our research on the literary medium on the study of mass cultural consumptions, destined to have a significant place in twentieth-century narrative. Let us think to the "sociological" analyses made by Flaiano, whose interests spanned from journalism to cinema, passing through television, radio, fiction, reports, and autobiography. Like Manzoni, also Flaiano observes the masses, not those of seventeenth-century Milan, but those of the economic boom in Rome, with a look on that standardization of values and experiences that the writer partly attributes to television and newsmagazines, lamenting the negative effects of a mass culture considering culture as a consumption product more than as a moment of intellectual growth. This was a society stretched out to the present, but unable to foster the cult of the past and to realize the lesson of history, in the name of an alarming fragmentation of collective cultural identity. The communicative paradigms of image society undergo a deep resemantization, determining a substantial renewal of traditional literary media such as the novel, which Flaiano experiences with *Tempo di uccidere* (*A Time to Kill*), where narration and autobiography are linked in a narrative structure with a clear introspective characterization.

A lucky experiment but not a conclusive one, which does not disclose the narrative doubts of the postmodern narrator, whose task is to reconcile the lesson of the Manzonian moral with the decline of values in mass society:

Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night, full of regrets, wondering: «What am I doing for the Novel?». Now, I am interest in the story of the novel as a critical procedure, what a novel must be, how the narrator must face facts. He prefers to be put in the middle, in the position of the Egyptian scribe looking at facts and recording them. He would like to have a greater mobility than the scribe and a swaying to the left; and therefore a choice of facts with socio-political implications. Merely personal facts are indifferent to us. And we are not talking about memory. Instead: looking at history, society, politics and secreting from these lessons a philosophy that works as a fuel for the novel and helps the reader's progress. [...] If I stand in front of this task of the novel I can only see the thing that must be narrated; and this is already a critical choice (Flaiano, 1996: 341).

Narrating a story and the society: this is the novelist's mission, made clear by the ante-litteram mass-mediologist with the help of the literary lesson carried out by the father of the Italian novel, whose merit is that of having provided his own country with a national book and a mainstream language, well in advance of mass media and social network diffusion. This testifies to the fact that literary works can perform an extraordinary formative role if they are intended as an expressive medium introduced in their cultural space and relative productive processes to which they must adhere on a linguistic, historical, and poietic level. This mission is perfectly embodied by Manzoni as a theorist of literature, and it has had a great influence several important Italian writers of the twentieth century who were involved in the multiple variety of medial productive processes.

3. Findings

The union between usefulness and truth as a characteristic of the literary medium does not only have an ideological value, but it also reveals a greater cognitive connotation, based on valid sociocultural purposes, evidenced by the sociologists of literature, and by Benjamin in particular, who defines the novel as «a somehow handcrafted form of communication». It is no coincidence that Benjamin develops a sociological idea of literature on the lesson given by Lukács, to whom he attributes «the most important explanation» on the cultural legacy of narrators:

Only in the novel...does there occur a creative memory which transfixes the object and transforms it. The duality of inwardness and outside world can be here overcome for the subject 'only' when he sees ... the unity of his entire life ...out of the past life-stream which is compressed in memory...The insight which grasps this unity... becomes the divinatory-intuitive grasping of the unattained and therefore inexpressible meaning of life (Benjamin, 1968: 99).

Inner life and external world: these are the two extremities of the heuristic dialectic at the core of the narrative genre, strictly linked – as Manzoni's and Flaiano's experiences show – to the happenings of theatre and culture industry, destined to evolve into mainstream. This discourse is even more important for those authors who, feeling the urgency of social mutations, decided to adapt the literary medium to the documentary requests of a society looking for a precise identity, whose construction relied on the discovery and diffusion of the main historical events: be it present or past history, the important thing is the act of documentary revelation which makes history a socially active medium (Gallino, 2006: 406-407).

As Manzoni and Flaiano demonstrate, a real social dimension of literature cannot exist if the narrative product is not adapted to the needs of a constantly changing public, that witnessed both a real explosion of the cultural offer in the course of a century, and the gradual reshaping of the theatre due to the development of cinema and television. This cultural revolution was experienced by Flaiano himself without ever losing sight of the illuministic mission of the intellectual: his vocation was to denounce the social – individual, and collective – aporias of life, while exploiting the biting nature of reason and writing:

If one wants to write for the theatre today, he will have to face one single problem, of poetical nature, keeping in mind that society approves the theatre and that our society does not have apparent poetical problems to solve. But we do not exclude that it may have them and appreciate them. You never know. After all, nothingness is the best sign. A playwright is not born out of nothing, but a poet is (Flaiano, 1996: 95).

The communicative action of the writer – and of playwrights in particular – presumes the ability to catch the requests of evasion of a public that has renounced to wonder about great political and cultural issues, differently from what happened at the time of the Classical Romantic debate, to which Manzoni, together with Leopardi took active part, driven by the same need as Leopardi to give shape and content to change, but with an obviously different ideological position (Croce, 1999: 155). Flaiano faces the problem of theatre renewal as a man of theatre, who foresees the (overpowering and reductive) effects of the cultural action practised by television and cinema, able to create ephemeral but equally shared symbolical universes and cultural paradigms. As an ante-litteram mass-mediologist, Flaiano knows well that society approves theatre and not the opposite, with all the consequences that this has on the level of the representation of the mutable problems of daily life existence, suspended between nihilistic anxiety and the longing for identity. This mission has a twentieth-century flavour, inherited through the Manzonian example (as in the case of Gadda). In the name of the historical truth of the facts staged on the scene, Manzoni does not hesitate to declare the overtaking of time and place unities, now unsuitable to give shape to the political, civil, and cultural wavering of the Risorgimento society, approaching a new phase of territorial unity.

Manzoni is among those who contribute to make the Risorgimento a moment of extraordinary identity recovery, based on the discovery (and on the rediscovery) of the historical legacy of a country that can go beyond fragmentation, provided that a common civic and cultural feeling is established. From this viewpoint, Manzoni's historical dramas are not attempts at historical representation preparatory to novel writing, but real examples of dramaturgical and literary experimentation, in which one can find «the decisive intuition of the value of history and of the consequent attitude the writer must take» (Marchi, 1994: 26). This intuition was after used in the novel, where the historical feeling is totally fused with the social redemption of humble, deprived, defeated people, somehow anticipating the diegetic aspect of much modern narrative, the neorealist one in particular. This result is made possible by respecting three cornerstones: the observance of usefulness, the defence of truth, and the validity of the author's viewpoint, who has the faculty of giving shape to the coordinates of the history of humanity.

Thus, writing becomes a cognitive medium, doubly linked to the requests of the community social and educational development. This is exactly the role played by the Manzonian novel in the Italian post-Risorgimento society, also thanks to the compulsory choice of his novel in schools, which has made *The Betrothed* a multidisciplinary educational training involving historical sociological, linguistic, communicative, economic, artistic, religious, and political aspects. The fact that the novel is selected by Italian schools does not diminish the merits of the author, in particular that of having posed the problem of the adaptation of the work of art to the evolution of literary consumption, with a double link to the public sphere (Habermas, 2011: 52-85). This merit is recognized to Manzoni both in Italy and abroad, as the famous conclusion of Lukács' well-known essay, "Historical novel and historical drama", shows:

Of course the tendency to distortion has immediate historical and social causes. However, the artistic product is never a mechanical reproduction of social life. Undoubtedly it emerges as a reflection of life tendencies but, in this field, it possesses its own dynamism, its own way to approach the truth or to distance from it. A great playwright and pungent critic like Manzoni could rightly criticise the distorting effect of this shaping because he understood the problems of form connected to those of the historical life (Lukács, 1976: 131).

By rehabilitating history, the narrator can shape existence through the resemantization of symbolic worlds and categories of experience which (even if forgotten) have left a deep sign in the process of construction of the modern cultural and social identity, which derived from the long sorting out of crucial individual and collective experiences leading to the improvement of the values shared by Romantic writers. This heredity has survived till today, not only in schools or universities, but also in the literary laboratory of those intellectuals committed to promote culture according to the mythographic paradigms of mass media society (Barthes, 1994). Among these, Flaiano often meditates on the topic of truth, by connecting literature, cinema and journalism, and appealing to the authority of his favourite authors: Leopardi, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Gadda. He also treasures the moral lesson by Manzoni, who «remains by far the greatest of all our modern narrators» (Ruozzi, 2012: 34), because he has been able to create perfectly typified characters, mirroring faithfully the different social, cultural, and economic levels of Italian society, in every place and in every time. These human characters are made immortal by the author's extraordinary ability in characterization, by his capacity to take from social history lively and real experiences. To these same characters Flaiano, a sharp observer of social developments, attributes an unalterable anthropological nature, which makes them ever vibrating. This confirms Benjamin's idea that «traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel».

4. Discussion

First we must consider life in his multiple and overlapping forms expressing the inescapable, cosmic flow of history, as underlined by Benjamin:

The "meaning of life" is really the centre about which the novel moves. But the quest for it is no more than the initial expression of perplexity with which its reader sees himself living this written life. Here "meaning of life" – there "moral of the story": with these slogans novel and story confront each other, and from them the totally different historical co-ordinates of these art forms may be discerned (Benjamin, 1968: 99).

The moral of the story Benjamin refers to can be read as an ethics of the story, to which Manzoni dedicates a research aiming to establish the right relation between emotions and time, collective conscience and historical truth, which are fundamental to determine the literary medium according to the aesthetic and communicative norms of a public oriented towards modernity. This is a society unaware of the memory vulnerability of our age and able to take from history the essential myths and symbols to construct collective identity: «by story, I mean not the mere chronological narration of some kinds of human facts, but any ordered, systematic presentation of human facts. This kind of story I want to oppose to the historical novel; and this should be opposed to it even when it is the only thing possible» (Manzoni, 1994: 216).

Manzoni marks a turning point in the renewal of the literary medium, providing it with a narrative quality adapted to binding documentary qualities, introduced through the definition of a language destined to have a crucial communicative function in the unified Italy. This intellectual legacy was inherited by important Italian writers of the twentieth century, who were dealing with the sociocultural changes of a complex society and with the success of medial culture industry, in the peculiar phase of expansion of mainstream communication. These were crucial innovations having a direct influence on the social function of the literary medium, to which the representation of more and more provisional and transient symbolic worlds of modernity was committed (Luhmann, 2010; Giddens, 1994). As a consequence, there were difficulties typical of the process of the representation of existence, subject to interactional fragmentation, as underlined by Adorno: «Just as painting lost many of its traditional tasks to photography, the novel has lost them to reportage and the media of the culture industry, especially film» (Adorno, 2012: 27).

Change is also perceived through the focalization of narrative strategies able to reflect the evolution of enlarged communication practices favoured by the mass media diffusion and the success of culture industry, which relied on the opportunities of participation offered by cinema and television. As McLuhan (2008) has shown, the representative practices of the social world change if technologies change: it is not by chance that Flaiano repeatedly meditates on McLuhan's aphorism «the medium is the message», aware of the changes being made in the public opinion. The consequence of this is the modern writer's discomfort for the inadequacy of the literary medium to signify the multifaceted complexity of social life, which Flaiano represents by experimenting different types of writing, from the novel to the short-story, from *elzevir* to aphorism, in the name of a constant research of the zero degree of writing (Barthes, 2003). The novel reduction to the short-story form is just one sign of the creative anxiety of contemporary writers, facing life ironically and committed to narrate facts by describing social actions:

The novelist had lost sight of his characters. If he remembered well, in the last chapter he had left them sleeping, and now he didn't know how to resume them. Should he keep on by describing their awakening? Shouldn't he stop on erotic scenes? He thought that, after all, his characters were like that, they loved and hated each other, and he could do nothing about it. Characters choose their own novelist, and they make the story. He was a witness and must tell the truth, narrate (Flaiano, 1996: 103).

The twentieth-century crisis of values anticipates post-modern symbolic fluidity, and the fragmentation of the self is at the core of this process of disintegration of collective interactions, which Touraine lessens under the definition «end of the social» (Touraine, 2012). This historical period was characterized by a provisional nature of memory that can be contrasted by recalling the lesson of one of the cornerstones of the national literary canon, such as Manzoni, whose work was crossed and given new meaning by a well-known protagonist of the Italian culture industry like Flaiano. Flaiano's name has recently made a comeback thanks to the success of *La grande bellezza* (*The Great Beauty*), the film by Sorrentino nominated for the Oscar; the film has been matched to Fellini's *La dolce vita* (*The Sweet Life*), scripted by Pinelli and Flaiano. Even here a relevant position is occupied by history and its sociocultural implications, pictured by the representative acuity of the post-modern narrator.

5. Conclusion

Benjamin's emphasis on the poietic function of narrative expresses very well the relevance of communicative issues linked to the evolution of the literary medium, seen in the particular transition from modernity to postmodernity (Lyotard, 2002; Foucault, 2004; Derrida, 2002; Bauman, 2007). This emphasis has a direct influence on the production processes of the literary work, the composition and nature of the reference public, the historical and cultural climate in which the narration takes place. Moreover, these issues involve social studies applied to literature, as Bourdieu's meditation on the social connotation of writing confirms:

Similarly, in the order of production, the practices of writers and artists, starting with their works, are the product of the meeting of two histories, the history of the production of the position occupied and the history of the production of the dispositions of its occupants. Even if the position contributes to making dispositions, the latter – to the extent that they are partially the product of independent circumstances, exterior to the field properly speaking – have an autonomous existence and effectiveness, and they may help to make the positions (Bourdieu, 1992: 256).

As the cases of Manzoni and Flaiano show, the role of the narrator in his own society is strictly linked not only to his position in the social and cultural organization he belongs to, but also to the ability of combining oversight and representative efficacy through the definition of expressive codes matching up with postmodern communicative evolutions. Also, as McLuhan reminds us, every literary innovation originates from the evolution of cultural and communicative processes, in particular from those linked to the communicability of historical memory and the construction of collective identity, in the specific phase of transition from paper to mainstream. This was an epochal transition, lived by Flaiano with the disenchantment of the sleeping spectator, who is called to witness the progressive degenerations of a society strongly influenced by the diffusion of television and cinema. A society which, in its most paradigmatic and typifying traits, Flaiano easily identifies with the Manzonian one. As he claims in an interview given just before dying, the story is the best dispenser of knowledge, especially if applied to the study of social dynamics, that in Italy were characterized by apparent inalterability:

In my opinion, Manzoni is by far the greatest of our modern narrators. Are we aware that *The Betrothed* is the Italian story established forever, his typology eternal, a kind of perpetual calendar, the zodiac with its unavoidable signs? There will always be, in this country, two people who cannot get married nor remain friends because of the Italian public system with its bureaucrats, its horrible troops, misery, plague, war, hypocrisy, fear, disorder. Manzoni embraces us all, his detractors included, and explains our own lives to us. If our national book is this, it is our fault: books must be deserved. We do not deserve, as a national mirror, *Don Quixote* or *War and Peace* or *The Robbers*. Neither with our baseness nor with our greatness we would identify in those stories (Ruozzi, 2012: 34-35).

Manzoni's novel can be seen as a representative paradigm of social acting, projected towards an absolute historiographical and narrative dimension, and destined to contribute actively to the construction of the national identity of unified Italy, as attested by Flaiano himself, who was in debt with the Manzonian ethic lesson, corroborated with the study of humble and oppressed people, long before twentieth-century existential tragedies. Those tragedies founded postmodern identity, as declared by Benjamin, one of the most authoritative representatives of contemporary culture: «The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a concept of history that is in keeping with this insight» (Benjamin, 1968: 257).

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