

«Am Kamin»

Benjamin, Manzoni, and the Novel

[Draft]

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The aim of this paper is to compare Walter Benjamin's theory of the novel with Alessandro Manzoni's, whose *Promessi Sposi* (*The Betrothed*) are the most important novel in Italian literature. The comparison will be established through the study of an image, which in both cases is used to epitomize the author's theory of the novel: the image of the fireplace. In Benjamin's theoretical writings, this image – an emblematic case of what the philosopher calls *Denkbild*, an 'image of thought' – is presented as an «allegory of the novel». In Manzoni, who is also the author of important theoretical writings on this literary genre, the image is present inside the novel (and, as will be seen, in its illustrations) at a metaliterary level.

Manzoni's name appears thrice in Benjamin's works and papers. In the memoir of his first journey to Italy the philosopher recounts his visit to the tomb of Manzoni in the Monumental Cemetery in Milan. The Italian author is also quoted in the entry «Goethe» written in 1928 for the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. Lastly, a two-volume edition of a German translation of *The Betrothed* was present in his library before his exile in 1933.

I will first address the *Denkbild* of the fireplace in Benjamin's writings on the novel, then its metaliterary function in *The Betrothed*. In conclusion I will return on the juvenile visit to the tomb of Manzoni in Milan.

1.

The image of the fireplace in connection with the novel appears for the first time on a diary page dated 1931, later developed in a 1933 review entitled *Am Kamin*, 'In front of the fireplace'; the latter will in turn be taken up in the famous essay *The Storyteller*, published in 1936.

In these writings, Benjamin sketches an opposition between novel as architecture and novel as a fireplace. An illustrious tradition starting from Friedrich Schlegel, the author

claims, described the novel with exclusive reference to its artistic form, the summit of its canon obviously being «the great builder Flaubert». For its part, Benjamin suggests to shift the focus from the formal aspects of the text to its reception by the reader, who tries to warm up his life in front of the novel like in front of a fireplace; from this new perspective, the masterpieces of the genre should rather be sought among the works of Balzac or Dostoevsky.

Here I briefly summarize things well known to Benjamin's readers, in view of the comparison with Manzoni.

The novel reader according to Benjamin is the modern individual eager to find in books what she can no longer experience, or the meaning of life. Within novels, this meaning becomes known as a «sense of an ending», to cite the title of a famous book by Frank Kermode that has many affinities with these ideas; through the contemplation of the parabola of the characters, sealed by the words «the end», the reader can vicariously experience a sense of closure, of completeness that otherwise is not given to him.

From this point of view, argues Benjamin, the exclusive attention to the artistic form has led to excessively accentuating the opposition between epic poetry and the novel, the target of this criticism being obviously György Lukács. On the contrary, observed from the perspective of reception, novels share with epic poetry the «musical element», that is, their common rooting in memory. The novel projects the vicissitudes of the characters into a dimension of completeness that is that of memory, just as the song of the epic poet originates from memory.

It is of course two different forms of memory, which in *The Storyteller* Benjamin accurately distinguishes on the lexical plane, *Erinnerung* for epic poetry and *Eingedenken* for the novel. In this essay, Benjamin also introduces a mysterious third form that he calls *story*, the corresponding modality of memory being *Gedächtnis*.

Both the novel and the story have their roots in the epic, but they differ in significant aspects. First, while the tale is constitutively linked to the dimension of orality, the novel, on the contrary, is consubstantial with writing, and with that radical revolution in the history of this technology introduced by the invention of printing:

What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. What can be handed on orally, the wealth of the epic, is of a different kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of the

novel. What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature – the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella – is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.

Second, the experience of which the narrator is guardian takes shape in the «moral of the story». Here the novel diverges again from the story, to the extent that the center around which it revolves is the «meaning of life»; but the latter is nothing else than «the initial expression of perplexity with which its reader sees himself living this written life», deriving precisely from the loss of experience that the storyteller still receives and transmits. The possibility that the novel transmits the «meaning of life» depends, as seen, on its closure, on the fact that it contains the words «the end»; condition to which the storyteller's narrative is not bound, which can therefore be extended *ad libitum*: «Actually there is no story for which the question as to how it continued would not be legitimate. The novelist, on the other hand, cannot hope to take the smallest step beyond that limit at which he invites the reader to a divinatory realization of the meaning of life by writing “Finis”». On the contrary, strictly speaking, the story can last as long as the storyteller's life lasts, as Benjamin remembers with significant variation on the starting *Denkbild*: «The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story».

2.

As Peter Brooks has observed, the opposition between novel and story is essentially strategic; as such, it goes beyond any form of nostalgia for a historical situation, which, if it ever really existed, in Benjamin's eyes appears irrecoverable. Rather, in evoking the figure of the storyteller it is necessary to read an appeal to the recovery, within and through writing, of some essential coordinates of orality, so that reading would take the form of a listening modality. In this second part of my paper I will try to track down this strategy in *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni, a novel published for the first time in 1827 and in a definitive edition in 1840-1842; I will also show how the Italian novelist tries to activate, alongside and beyond the search for the «meaning of life», a «moral of the story» as a communicable sense of the experience lived by the characters.

The fireplace represents the «topographic navel» of Manzoni's dwellings, the space of a complex ritual concerning the conversation in the first place. The testimonies of the visitors

agree: those who wanted to converse with the novelist had to undergo the heat of his «ardent hearth», at the risk also – as happened to Niccolò Tommaseo – of catching a cold. Louise Colet recalls that the author used to protect his eyes from the glow of the blaze with an old yellow Empire style silk screen; Vittorio Imbriani mentions instead the «green lampshades» used by Manzoni and offered to his visitors.

In addition to being the magnetic pole of conversation, the fireplace is frequently associated in Manzoni with the dynamics of literary creation. Luca Toschi has brought the biographical myth back to a real «fireplace strategy». The fireplace is the inflexible performer of the process of destruction connected to the work of revision, first of all linguistic, to which Manzoni incessantly submits his works.

Beyond the biographical myth, the fireplace is a recurrent presence in *The Betrothed*, in which, as shown by Paolo Trama, it assumes a peculiar metaliterary value. In the constellation of images linked to the fireplace, here the ashes advance in the foreground; not by chance, Trama cites in exergue the well-known Benjaminian aphorism on the critic-chemist (fascinated by the flame) and the commentator-chemist (concentrated on the ashes), a sort of matrix of the fireplace's *Denkbild*. The Italian critic finds in the novel a system of equivalences expressed by the proportion fire : oral word = ashes : written word. The written word corresponding to the ashes is the word of the powerful that «read ashes as they wish, draw empty hieroglyphics and tamper with words»; it is opposed to novel writing, which strives to preserve the fire of the anonymous life of those excluded from writing, by incorporating the oral word within it.

Extending the reading in a Benjaminian key carried out by Trama, we can approach some illustrations of the novel (it must be remembered that the apparatus of illustrations of the definitive edition of *The Betrothed*, 1840-1842, was made under the direction of Manzoni himself). At the end of the *Introduction* we find the representation of the interior of a library (ill. 1), at the center of which is a desk with a book resting on a lectern. On one side of the desk there is a basket full of crumpled papers; on the other, from the back to the table, a man is sitting in an armchair in front of a fireplace in which he can sense a very vivid fire. The man is in a dressing gown, his right hand leaning towards the fire; with his left hand he holds a full-bodied volume on which the word 'FINE' ('The end') stands out clearly.

It is necessary to specify that Manzoni inserts the word 'fine' not at the end of *The Betrothed*, but at the end of the essay entitled *Storia della colonna infame* that was added to the novel starting from the edition of 1840-1842; it must also be added that in the introduction the author evokes two other texts: on the one hand the manuscript of an

anonymous seventeenth century author, from which he claims to have drawn the story; on the other the essay that he claims to have started composing to justify the style of his rewriting.

According to Salvatore Silvano Nigro, who links this image to the initial of the *Introduction* (ill. 2), the scene represents the author as a reader of the seventeenth century anonymous novel. This interpretation is hampered by the cumbersome presence of the book resting on the lectern, in the same position in which the volume of the Anonymous is drawn in the initial.

Other critics (Luca Badini Confalonieri, Giancarlo Alfano) are inclined to identify the volume containing the essay designed to justify the style of Manzoni's rewriting. In this regard it should be noted that the author insists, if ever he was really designed, on the state little more than a sketch of the apologetic book, soon interrupted after the first preparatory notes. No 'end' word could have been affixed to such a draft.

There remains only one possibility, namely that the book in the hands of the author is the same, in manuscript form, which is now in the hands of the reader. A book in which, however, the word 'fine' is missing.

In reality the illustration of the fireplace alludes, visually, to the end of the novel. In the last illustration of the last chapter we see another interior, more modest (ill. 3). Instead of the back of the volumes, in the background we see a plate rack and a coat rack from which hang a hat and a coat; instead of a writer, illiterate common people are present here. However, a table still stands at the center of the scene; moreover, in the lower right, resting on the ground, there is a laundry basket; finally, the shadows projected on the wall allow identifying a light source that is exactly the same as the one illuminating the library, obviously also in this case a fireplace. The light source, the table and the basket draw a rhyme, or rather a visual chiasmus with the library scene.

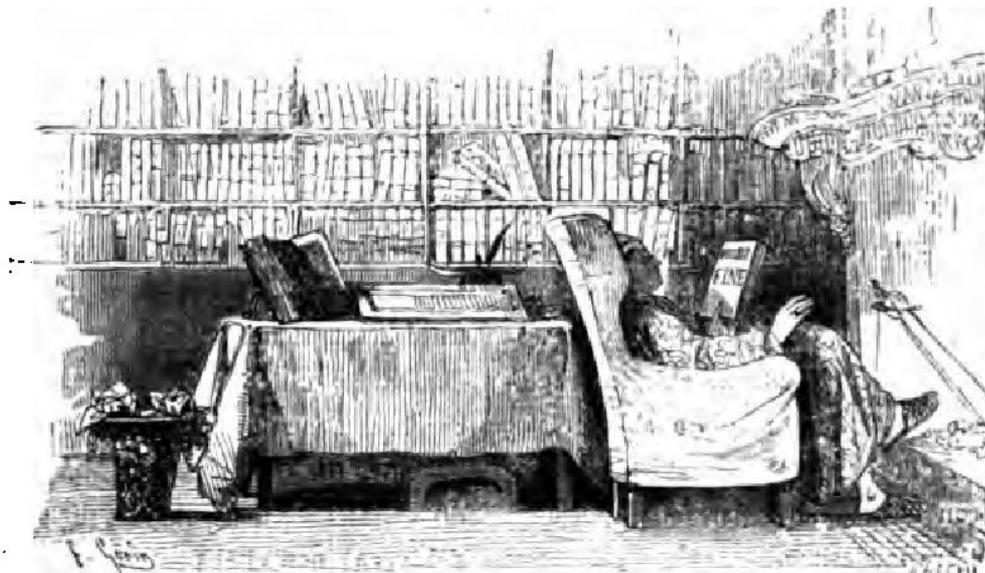
In this last chapter of the novel, Manzoni finally unveils what he calls «the sauce of the story» («il sugo della storia»). According to his Christian faith, it consists in the belief «that misfortunes most commonly happen to us from our own misconduct or imprudence; but sometimes from causes independent of ourselves; that the most innocent and prudent conduct cannot always preserve us from them; and that, whether they arise from our own fault or not, trust in God softens them, and renders them useful in preparing us for a better life». To this moral of the story hints the word 'end' in the illustration of the *Introduction*. In the novelist's voice the oldest one of the storyteller resounds.

Walter Benjamin visited the tomb of Manzoni at the Monumental Cemetery in Milan at the beginning of his first Italian journey in 1912. The impression of the complex was rather painful, so much so that he came to compare the *Famedio* (ill. 4-7), the building in which the remains of the novelist still rest today, to «the atrium of a colonial exhibition» and even to the Pavilion of the Antelopes at the Zoologischer Garten in Berlin (ill. 8). In the kitsch exoticism of the whole, almost erect on purpose to mask instead of remembering the end of human life, Benjamin's impression in front of the tomb of Manzoni (ill. 9-10) is quite contrary to the one aroused by the ensemble in which it is placed: «In front of the entrance is the gray stone sarcophagus with the inscription "Alessandro Manzoni" surmounted by a crown of iron laurel. The shape of the sarcophagus, which somehow resembles a temple and ends in the shape of a tympanum, gives an impression of great severity». The tomb of the novelist restores the sense of the end that, according to Benjamin, constitutes the essential lesson of the novel.

The novel may however aspire to more than this, for Benjamin as for Manzoni. In 1958 the Municipality of Milan ordered a reorganization of the *Famedio* which also affected the tomb of Manzoni (ill. 11-12). The sarcophagus was moved to the center of the nave and raised on a high base of bronze carved in bas-relief. The carved base bears the allegories of Faith and Glory on the long sides; on the short ones those of Prose and Poetry. The latter are depicted in the form of muses: for the prose, Calliope, recognizable by the stylus in his hand; for poetry, with an allusion to a juvenile poem by the author, Urania, canonically represented with a pointing finger upwards. We can rightly state that the new configuration of the tomb corresponds to a Benjaminian idea of the novel: the sense of the end, expressed by the solemnity of the sarcophagus, rests on the «musical element» depicted in the base, which, through memory, links *The Betrothed* to the orality and to the morality of the storyteller.

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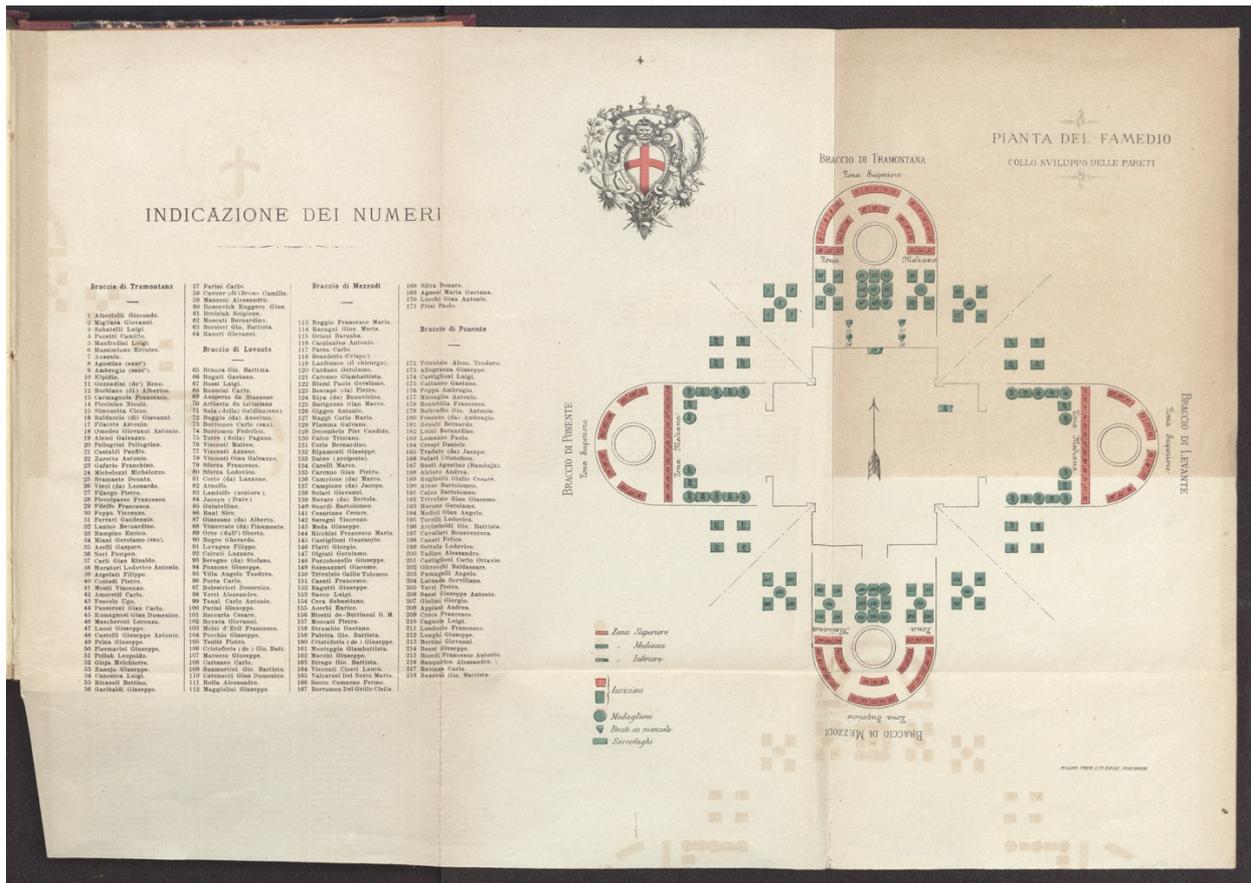


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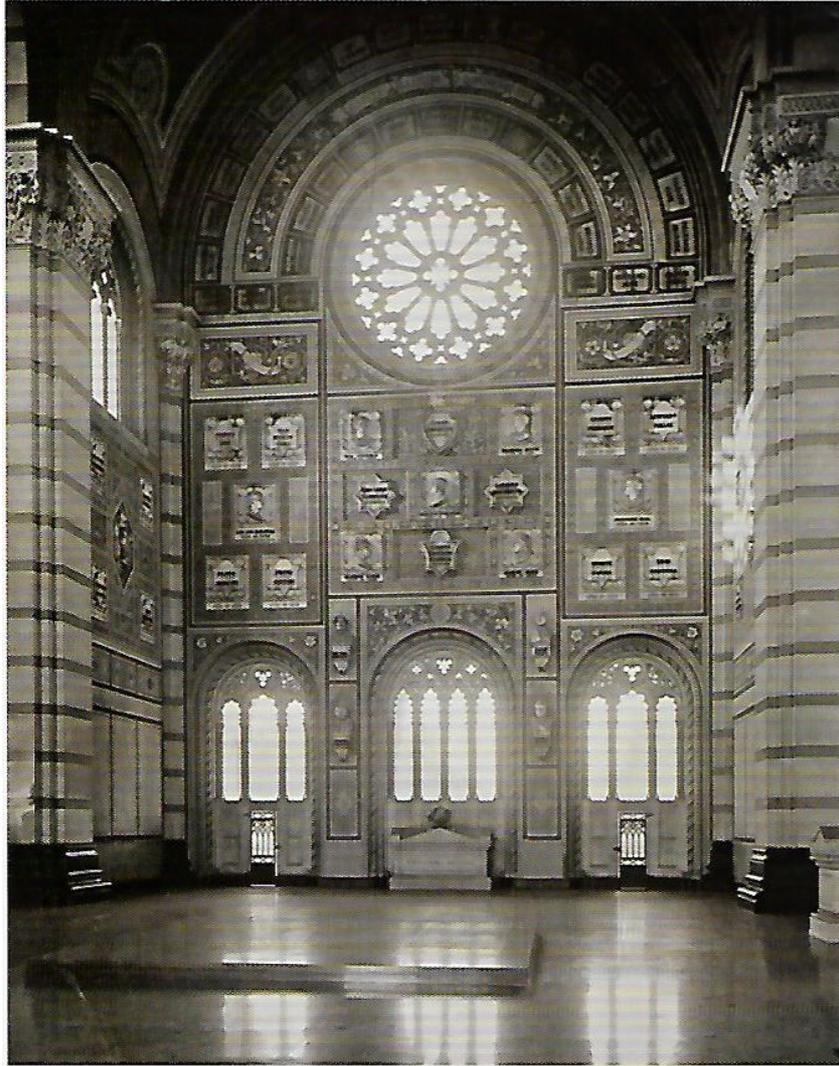




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9. The hall of the Famedio in the late 19th century.

MANZONI ALESSANDRO

SECOLO XVIII-XIX

Braccio di Tramontana, N. 59. — Zona inferiore. Sarcofago.

L'altissimo poeta nacque in Milano il 7 marzo 1785 e morì il 22 maggio 1873. La sua morte commosse l'intera penisola, e la solenne cerimonia dei suoi funerali, decretata dal Comune, chiamò il concorso d'innumerabile schiera



di cittadini e d'italiani d'ogni ordine sociale, dai principi alle rappresentanze operaie, dai grandi corpi dello Stato alle più illustri istituzioni delle scienze e dell'arte. Nel giorno 22 maggio 1883, decimo anniversario di sua morte, la spoglia

Orba di tanto spiro,

per deliberazione del Consiglio comunale, fu deposta con solenne cerimonia nel compiuto Famedio, per consacrarne la inaugurazione.



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