

Alessandro Manzoni and the Historical Novel in the Low Countries: Influence and Reception of a European Icon in the Genre

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In this paper, I would like to investigate both the reception and the influence in the Low Countries of the literary and essayistic works of one of the greatest nineteenth century European historical novelists. This contribution is not only meant to provide insights into the reputation of Alessandro Manzoni in other parts of Europe; its comparative nature will also reveal interesting differences between Belgium and the Netherlands regarding the reception of Manzoni. I will argue that these differences are caused by significant distinctions between the literary systems of Belgium and the Netherlands in the nineteenth century. Those distinctions, for their part, are largely the result of the political climate in both countries.

After having successively been part of the Spanish (1581-1713), the Austrian (1713-1794) and the French empire (1795-1815), the Southern Provinces – now Belgium – were in 1815 (re-)united with the Northern Provinces (which had been independent for centuries, forming the Dutch Republic from 1581 until 1795, the Batavian Republic from 1795 until 1806 and the Kingdom of Holland from 1806 until 1810) in the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. This Kingdom was expressly erected as a buffer-state against France. Only fifteen years later, however, the Southern Provinces rose in revolt against their king, and in 1830, Belgium – for the first time in history – became an independent nation-state, albeit with two national languages: French and Flemish (a variant of Dutch which shares the latter's orthography and, with a few exceptions, its grammar, but differs in lexicon and pronunciation). King William I strongly opposed the Belgian breakaway and would not recognize Belgian independence until 1839, which in part helps to explain the difficult relations that existed between Belgium and the Netherlands, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Moreover, Belgium's independence as a nation-state was greeted with great scepticism in the rest of Europe. Here is just one example of how the French regarded the Belgian state after ten years of independence (there are countless similar examples to be found in Europe; see Lope 433-40):

la Belgique n'a point d'histoire. Dans le passé elle est morcelée et dépendante; et jusqu'à sa jonction avec les Pays-Bas, elle ne se débat

ni pour se concentrer, ni pour s'affranchir. [...] La Belgique n'a point de centre, point de nationalité qui lui soit propre: elle n'a pas de nom, si ce n'est que, rompant le fil des traditions, elle a repris dans la Gaule antique un nom oublié; et ce nom même témoigne contre toute prétention à une vie distincte; la Gaule, en effet, peuple et territoire, allait jusqu'au Rhin. La Belgique n'a donc point d'histoire à elle. Son histoire est dans cette France où elle se confond primitivement, où elle rentre plus tard; elle est dans l'empire germanique, l'Espagne, la Hollande, dont elle est devenue un appendice, et toujours en France pour tout ce que la vie des peuples a d'intrigue et de spontané [...]. ("Belgique" 553)

As we will see later on, this international scepticism had quite a serious effect in the cultural sphere (see also Bemong, "A State Just out of the Cradle").

Due to a number of factors, Belgium was confronted with a cultural deprivation in comparison to other European nations. Literacy was extremely low – by 1866, 53 per cent of the population could still read nor write – and for more than a century there had been practically no literary tradition whatsoever, apart from quite a lively oral story tradition, on the one hand, and what was produced by the chambers of rhetoric, on the other. Just before Belgian independence, a number of men of letters became more active around some small periodicals like the *Gazette de Liège*, and they began to introduce foreign, Romantic authors. Original prose literature was almost completely unknown in Belgium until the first historical novels started appearing in the 1830s, first in French by authors like H.-G. Moke and baron Jules de Saint-Genois, from 1837 on also in Flemish.¹ Partly because of the political situation, the genre of the historical novel became extremely popular in Belgium, for it proved to be of great help in creating a national identity for the young nation-state by constructing a 'collective cultural memory' (see Bemong, "A State Just out of the Cradle").

In the Netherlands the genre was popular as well (see for instance Van der Wiel and Drop), but there, the situation was quite different, since the Netherlands had already been independent for a far longer period of time and there was no need to defend the Kingdom against international scepticism. The communicative functions of the genre thus were somewhat different in the northern part of the Low Countries.

While there are certainly important differences between the political and cultural situation in nineteenth century Belgium and Italy, there are also some striking similarities. The main difference lies in the particular sequence

¹ The very first Flemish historical novel, Hendrik Conscience's *The Miraculous Year* (1566) (the published English translations actually bear a different title, which refers to the protagonists: *Ludovic and Gertrude*), was translated in Italian as *L'anno portentoso* (1566), *quadro storico del secolo decimo sesto* in 1854, and again, as *L'anno portentoso: racconto fiammingo*, in 1884.

of events. In Belgium, the need for the artistic expression of a national identity was felt only when the political independence of the nation-state and the unification of previously independent counties and duchies had become a fact. In Italy, on the other hand, the nation and national identity had already become important literary themes with Dante and Petrarch (Musarra 554). Manzoni can be regarded as the nineteenth century scion of this tradition. With his historical novel *I promessi sposi* he kindled the desire for unification, this time within the cultural context of Romanticism, where the notion of 'nationality' had grown to be very important. Only between 1860 and 1870, the actual political unification of Italy (the Risorgimento) would come about. But in Belgium, too, it was the literary genre of the historical novel that played a catalyzing role in the process of identity formation. A novel like Hendrik Conscience's *The Lion of Flanders or the Battle of the Golden Spurs*, which was published in 1838 as the second Flemish historical novel, and which was almost immediately translated in major languages such as French, English, German, Italian and Spanish (and later also in minor languages such as Polish, Swedish, Norwegian, Rumanian, Croatian, Serbian, Czech, Esperanto, etc.) became extremely popular in the following decades and to this day plays an important role in the idea of what it is to be Belgian (or, in later contexts, Flemish).

Both Alessandro Manzoni and Hendrik Conscience – who was the first Belgian novelist to write in Flemish and who would become Belgium's most important and famous historical novelist – also still had to 'create' the language they wrote in as they went along. In neither of these linguistic areas did a tradition exist that they could turn to, a linguistic norm. For political and religious reasons, the Catholic Flemish writers refused to simply take over the Protestant, Dutch language, so in order to form a distinct Flemish literary language, Conscience (and his Flemish colleagues after him – these observations do not pertain to the French-writing Belgian novelists) took elements from different dialects, from medieval textual sources, etc. Like Manzoni, Conscience and his colleagues wanted to create a national language which had to be the mirror of the national soul.

A third similarity lies in the fact that, while the Italian Minister of Education appointed Manzoni to coordinate and direct all national initiatives intended to strengthen the linguistic unification of Italy, Hendrik Conscience received a direct commission from the Belgian government to write a national history (which was published in 1845), in order to strengthen the Belgian national awareness not only through works of historical fiction, but through historiographical works as well.

This short sketch of the cultural-political context in the Low Countries and Italy should suffice as background for my discussion of a range of texts that in some way or other deal with the repercussions of Manzoni's literary and essayistic work in Belgium and the Netherlands.

The first category of texts that I want to discuss consists of translations of Manzoni's texts. Already in November 1827, a chapter from *I promessi sposi*, translated in French by Louis Barré, is published in the Franco-Belgian periodical *La Sentinelle du royaume des Pays-Bas*. The first complete translation of *I promessi sposi* to be published in Belgium appeared eleven years later in Brussels at the National Society for the Propagation of Good Books, in two volumes, as *Les fiancés*. A reprint of this anonymous French translation appeared six years later, in 1844. Moreover, in France at least fifteen translations by authors like Rey Dusseuil, M. Gosselin, le Marquis de Montgrand, Auguste de Tillemont, etc. appeared between 1828 and 1897, and a number of them must have circulated in Belgium as illegal reprints as well (Deprez 124). Still another Manzoni 'event' took place in 1844, when the first Flemish translation of one of Manzoni's texts was finally published in the opening volume of the Flemish Catholic periodical *De School- en Letterbode, of Bydragen ter bevordering van onderwys, letterkunde en geschiedenis* (The School and Letters Messenger, or: Contributions to the Advancement of Education, Literature and History). It was not a translation of Manzoni's historical novel, but an anonymously published ten page excerpt from the third chapter of the *Osservazioni sulla morale cattolica* from 1819.² From this article, however, it does become clear that Flemish men of letters, and possibly readers, must have known the existing Dutch translation of *I promessi sposi*, because in the introductory remarks there is a reference to the translation that the Dutch classicist Petrus van Limburg Brouwer published in 1835 ("Onderscheid" 477). Van Limburg Brouwer's three volume translation *De Verloofden, eene Milanesche geschiedenis uit de zeventiende eeuw* was the first complete and unabridged Dutch translation of Manzoni's novel, but earlier on in that same year, the Dutch critic E.J. Potgieter had already published a translation of part of the first chapter of *I promessi sposi* in the Dutch periodical *De Muzen* (The Muses), as part of quite a long introduction to Manzoni's works (the immediate cause for the article being the announcement that a Dutch translation of *I promessi sposi* would shortly be published by the Dutch publicist W. Van Boekeren). Immediately after Van Limburg Brouwer's death, in 1849, his Manzoni translation was reprinted in a cheaper four volume edition.

A second category of texts that can be distinguished consists of articles published in newspapers and periodicals. These texts include reviews of Manzoni's own texts and of their translations in the Low Countries, as well as articles that in any way deal with Manzoni's writings. In Belgium, there are very few articles to be found. Apart from the translations that I just

² The translation is based on the text as it was published in "a foreign periodical," but it is not clear if this was an Italian magazine, or rather a French or German translation ("Onderscheid" 477).

Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Dutch primary and secondary sources are my own.

mentioned, only three other texts deal with Manzoni's writings. Interesting is a series of seven letters that are all entitled "Du romantisme." These letters appeared in the liberal periodical *Mathieu Laensbergh, Gazette de Liège* between April and May 1826. The letters, which are signed "Y.," are most probably written by Jules Van Praet, bibliophile, collector of paintings, personal friend of Stendhal, jurist, historian, *wunderkind*, personal secretary, diplomat and *Ministre du Roi* of King Leopold I (period 1831-1865), mentor of King Leopold II (period 1865-1887), and as such the second most influential man in Belgian politics for over four decades. The letters can be regarded as the first true campaign in defence of the relatively young Romantic movement against the background of the ruling classical poetics. In the fourth and fifth letters (published on 19 and 27 April 1826 respectively), Y. argues that the classicistic law of the three unities (action, time, space) is not only completely useless, but also harmful, and he strongly opposes the artificiality of the "règles classiques" to the romantic genius and "la nature." At the end of the fourth letter, he mentions the sources of his arguments: M. de Stendhal, Visconti's *Dialogue sur l'unité de temps et de lieu dans les ouvrages dramatiques*, G. Schlegel and "la lettre à M. Chauvet sur l'unité de temps et de lieu dans la tragédie, par Manzoni": "Cet excellent morceau de critique littéraire écrit, il y a quelques années, par un des premiers poètes de l'Italie, est ce que j'ai vu de plus complet et de mieux raisonné sur la matière." (Y., "Du romantisme. [4e lettre]").

Also important is the 1833 article "Le poète Manzoni à Milan" which is published both by *L'Union* and the *Journal des Flandres* (8 May 1833). It is a translation of an article that the German professor Carl Von Witte published in the Leipzig newspaper *Blaetter für literarische Unterhaltung* as a result of his visit to Manzoni's country house Brusa in October 1831, where he met the poet and his mother and son-in-law. Von Witte recounts having been immediately struck by what he terms 'Manzoni's most singular characteristic,' ("Le poète Manzoni à Milan") to wit his shyness and bashfulness whenever the conversation turns to his literary works. From the moment his works were published, Manzoni tended to regard them as imperfect, tedious, not worthwhile, which is also why he found it so difficult to accept praise for his achievements. Von Witte mentions the well-known example of Goethe's famous laudation of *I promessi sposi* and Manzoni's uncomfortable reaction. Von Witte informs the reader that the Italian novelist has prepared an answer to Goethe, in which he vehemently disapproves of the historical drama and the historical novel – a genre Von Witte explicitly calls 'Manzoni's own genre' ("son propre genre") – "comme des mon[s]tres littéraires":

il soutint que tout récit devait être ou fiction ou vérité; et il condamna la fiction comme un mensonge, et par conséquent

Comment [J1]: Source? →

Comment [NB2]: These journals don't have numbered pages; the same goes for the article entitled "Du romantisme" in the paragraph above. That is why I did not include any references here: in the previous paragraph, I already begun my sentence with "At the end of the fourth letter...", and here, the information was also given in the previous sentence. But I suppose that including the references makes things more clear?

comme immorale. En vain je lui répondis que la fiction pouvait produire un effet moral, en vain je lui citait ses *Fiancés* comme exemple. Il persista à dire qu'il ne faut pas employer des moyens contraires à la morale pour atteindre un but utile. ("Le poète Manzoni à Milan")

Other subjects that are briefly touched upon in the interview are Manzoni's erudite knowledge of the different Italian dialects, the efforts he has made to enrich the (literary) Italian language, and politics. An animated discussion sprouts from Manzoni's and Von Witte's different religious opinions, and the protestant Von Witte admits to having been struck by the sincere and genuine piety of the Roman Catholic Manzoni. Von Witte ends his account with a reference to Manzoni's *Osservazioni sulla morale cattolica*, of which the fourth edition had appeared in Paris in 1830, adding: "il regarde maintenant cet écrit comme incomplet, insuffisant." ("Le poète Manzoni à Milan").

The only significant mentioning of Manzoni in a Flemish periodical can be found in 1845 (which is twelve years later!) in J.F.J. Heremans' long literary-historical essay "Over den roman" (On the Novel) which was published in *Het Taelverbond* (The Linguistic Union). Heremans devotes a short passage to Manzoni and to *I promessi sposi*, the second edition of which had been published some years earlier (Heremans 221). At first sight, it might appear a testimony to the limited fame of Manzoni's works in Flanders that Heremans incorrectly attributes Carlo Varese's *Sibilla Odaleta, episodio delle guerre d'Italia alla fine del secolo XV: romanzo storico* (1827) to Manzoni (Heremans 221), but the mistake actually has to be attributed to the Dutch translator of Varese's historical novel, who in his preface claims that the novel is written by Alessandro Manzoni (*Sibilla Odaleta* vi).

Heremans praises the lively portrayal of scenes, which he deems more poetic than those of Walter Scott (although Scott is proclaimed to be Manzoni's superior in writing enchanting descriptions), particularly the bold and truthful but at the same time poetic description of the plague scenes. His negative criticism is threefold: the masses of common people are not portrayed dynamically enough (they appear as a "leaden mass"), Manzoni devotes too little attention to the depiction of the ancient manners and traditions, and a synthesis between the scientific knowledge of Manzoni the antiquarian and his talent as a poet is lacking (Heremans 221). In 1851, the Dutch reviewer of the *De Boekzaal der geleerde wereld* (Library of the Scholarly World) seems to share Heremans' opinion with regard to the factual matter, but his value judgment is quite the opposite: he judges that Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* is not a "regular" historical novel, in that the historical component ("the historical truth") is not "distorted and corrupted" by fictional elements and remains faithful to "the true history" (H.T.L. 576-77). He therefore prefers not to talk about a "historical novel" when referring to *I*

promessi sposi, but to make a distinction between “its history” and “its novel” (576). Yet, fifteen years earlier, the reviewer of the Dutch magazine *De Recensent, ook der Recensenten* (The Reviewer, also of Reviewers) considered the elements of invention to have been ingeniously yet very naturally combined with a truthful depiction of the political, social, intellectual and moral state of a part of Italy during the seventeenth century (“*De Verloofden*” 310), and the reviewer of the (equally Dutch) *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* (National Exercises in Literature) shared this opinion in his critique of January 1836 (“*De Verloofden*” 38).

With regard to the reception in Belgium, two things strike the eye. First, it is clear that Manzoni was much better known in the Francophone part of the country than in Flanders, and that the Francophone critics paid attention to him already some twenty years earlier than the Flemish did. Second, the attention for Manzoni was quite diverse and ranged from personal characteristics (for instance his bashfulness) over his essayistic writings – on Catholicism (the *Osservazioni*) as well as on Romanticism (*Lettre à M. Chauvet* [1820-1823]) and on the genre of the historical novel (his response to Goethe) – to his creative work (*I promessi sposi*, but also the historical tragedies *Il conte di Carmagnole* [1820] and *Adelchi* [1822], which were very popular in Germany, according to Von Witte, and which were at least introduced to the French-speaking circles in Belgium by the article in the *Journal des Flandres* and *L’Union*, if they were not already known).

In the Netherlands, the attention of the literary critics was much more centred around (the translation of) *I promessi sposi*. In 1963, the Dutch Italianist A.J. Verschoor published an inventory of Dutch *I promessi sposi* reviews. He discusses six reviews; that number includes the partial translation of the first chapter that the Dutch critic E.J. Potgieter published in the periodical *De Muzen* some months before Van Limburg Brouwer’s three volume translation appeared. Next to Potgieter’s article, Verschoor mentions two anonymously published reviews of Van Limburg Brouwer’s translation that were published in 1836 (one in the *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen*, one in the *Recensent, ook der Recensenten*). In 1837, a review signed V.G. appeared in *Atheneum* (subtitled: Magazine for Science and the Arts).³ Two other reviews deal with the 1849-1850 edition that appeared shortly after the translator’s death: a short anonymous one in the *Algemeen letterlievend maandschrift* (General Literary-Minded Monthly) (see Verschoor 106), and a longer one by the critic H.T.L. in

³ The critic V.G. seems to be the most well informed one: “We know most of Alessandre [sic] Manzoni’s works”, he states, including his lyric works and his tragedies (327). With regard to Manzoni’s artistic quality, V.G. judges that the Italian author surpasses all his contemporaries in talent, taste, erudition, and devotion to his studies in art and history. Contrary to Van Limburg Brouwer (see below for a discussion), V.G. shares Van Praet’s anti-classicist poetics and hails Manzoni as “the first who in his historical tragedies threw off the shackles of the French [i.e., classicist] school” (327).

the *Boekzaal der geleerde wereld*, in which the novel is already called “a classic” (576). These last two reviews were both published in 1851.

These six reviews, together with Van Limburg Brouwer’s own preface to his translation, lead Verschoor to conclude that Manzoni had received “little to no attention” in the Netherlands (107). But Verschoor has overlooked a number of articles that attest to a somewhat greater popularity of Manzoni. In 1837, Potgieter published three articles in the first volume of the Dutch periodical *De Gids, Nieuwe Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* (The Guide, New National Exercises in Literature) that all deal with various writings by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.⁴ All three articles are quite long (eight to twelve pages each), and in every one of them, Potgieter discusses the by then already quite renowned analyses that Goethe had made with regard to Manzoni’s novel.

In the first article “Mengelingen” (Miscellaneous), Potgieter discusses Goethe’s opinions on some of his most famous contemporary men of letters, including Walter Scott and Alessandro Manzoni. On *I promessi sposi*, Potgieter informs the Dutch reading public, Goethe has written that it “soars far above all that we know of the kind”,

that the interior life – all that comes from the soul of the Poet, is absolutely perfect, and that the outward – the delineation of localities, and the like, is in no way inferior. That is saying something. The impression in reading is such, that we are constantly passing from emotion to admiration, and again from admiration to emotion; so that we are always subject to one of those great influences; higher than this, I think, one cannot go. (134, translated after Oxenford 270)

However, Potgieter states,

as soon as Göthe [sic] had read the third part of *I promessi sposi*, he mixed some lemon juice with the honey of his praise; the historian in Manzoni is said to hurt the poet; don’t you remember, Reader! that in reading that long introduction, those tedious records, you would have wanted to cry out, together with Göthe: ‘How could such a genuine Poet even for a moment sin against Poetry?’ (134)

Potgieter concludes the passage by announcing that he will discuss Goethe’s answer to that very question in a next article that will deal with Goethe and

⁴ “Mengelingen. Goethe en eenige zijner beroemdste tijdgenoten” (Miscellaneous. Goethe and Some of his Most Famous Contemporaries), “Goethe en Schiller. (Uit Johann Peter Eckermann’s *Gespräche mit Göthe*)” (Goethe and Schiller. From J.P. Eckermann’s *Conversations with Goethe*), and “Wenken van Goethe, over het Duitsche tooneel en de Duitsche tooneeldichters” (Suggestions by Goethe on the German Theatre and German Playwrights).

Schiller. In that second article, Potgieter quotes Goethe's verdict that Manzoni's "fault" is that he "suffers from too great a load of History" ("Goethe en Schiller" 263-64, translated after Oxenford 273). Potgieter also seizes the opportunity to bring to mind the advice he gave to the Dutch Manzoni translator in his article in *De Muzen* two years before, namely to leave out certain passages from the original novel, like the description of war, famine and pestilence (advice the translator did not pay heed to; see below). Potgieter contentedly points out that Goethe had given the same advice to the German translator, suggesting to leave out a great part of the war and famine descriptions, and no less than two-thirds of those of the plague (263).

Potgieter's third article on Goethe deals with some of Goethe's suggestions on German theatre. In this article, Potgieter also inserts a lengthy passage in which he quotes Goethe's remarks on his own stance vis-à-vis the central question for the genre of the historical novel, i.e., the question of the relation between fact and fiction, between history and imagination. It is in this respect, Goethe states, that Manzoni lacks confidence and attaches too much importance to historical facts:

Manzoni wants nothing except to know what a good poet he is, and what rights belong to him as such. He has too much respect for history, and on this account is always adding notes to his pieces, in which he shows how faithful he has been to detail. Now, though his facts may be historical, his characters are not so, any more than my Thoas and Iphigenia. No poet has ever known the historical characters which he has painted; if he had, he could scarcely have made use of them. The poet must know what effects he wishes to produce, and regulate the nature of his characters accordingly. If I had tried to make Egmont as history represents him, the father of a dozen children, his light-minded proceedings would have appeared very absurd. I needed an Egmont more in harmony with his own actions and my poetic views; and this is, as Clara says, *my* Egmont.

What would be the use of poets, if they only repeated the record of the historian? The poet must go further, and give us, if possible, something higher and better. All the characters of Sophocles bear something of that great poet's lofty soul; and it is the same with the characters of Shakespeare. This is as it ought to be. Nay, Shakespeare goes farther, and makes his Romans Englishmen; and there, too, he is right; for otherwise his nation

would not have understood him. (“Wenken van Goethe” 358, translated after Oxenford 213-14)⁵

Thus, Potgieter was not only responsible for the introduction of *I promessi sposi* to the Dutch public with his 1835 article in *De Muzen*, he also passed on the larger European Manzoni critique to his fellow-countrymen (although a passage in V.G.’s 1836 review of Van Limburg Brouwer’s translation reveals that certain Dutchmen – probably the ones with a [semi-]professional interest in literature and the arts – were already familiar with Goethe’s writings on Manzoni [V.G. 328]).

Potgieter truly played a crucial role in the Manzoni reception in the Netherlands. His 1835 article was mostly meant as an attempt to encourage Dutch translators to turn to the recent Italian production, instead of time and again translating French and German novels. As a sort of introduction to contemporary Italian literature, Potgieter first discusses a number of Italian poets and novelists. Then he turns his full attention to Manzoni, speaking of the enormous acclaim that both *I promessi sposi* and Manzoni’s historical tragedies – especially *Il conte di Carmagnola* – have received in large parts of Europe. He informs his readers that by this time (1835), *I promessi sposi* has already known twenty reprints in Italy and that Lucia and Renzo instil a keen interest in no less than three quarters of the European nations.

That typically southern tableau soon became an indispensability in the library of every fashionable lady in the Fatherland of the Muse of the Historical Novel, and in 1830 many a Parisian beauty trembled with fear as the cholera drew near, while they read the skilful descriptions of the horrific plague that depopulated Milan two centuries ago. (“Fraaije Letteren” 64)

Strangely enough, in the remainder of his text, Potgieter – who is known to have been one of the most severe literary critics of the Netherlands in the nineteenth century – does not ‘act as a judge’ towards Manzoni’s novel. He only insists on giving some advice to the Dutch translator. Since, as Potgieter points out, “a lively action has become a prerequisite for any novel,” he suggests shortening the Italian version somewhat; passages that could be left out are the introduction and the digressions on the Bravi and the plague.⁶ As such, the novel would gain in importance for the Dutch readers, since northern people are more in favour of short and powerful scenes, Potgieter

⁵ In Belgium, similar remarks are made in defence of the genre of the historical novel. See Bemong, “‘En Toch, Wat is Eigentlyk het Historieke Roman?’” for a discursive analysis of prefaces of historical novels and critical reviews dealing with these genre-related issues.

⁶ The original Dutch text reads “post” (‘mail’) instead of “pest” (‘plague’); see Verschoor 103 for the correction.

argues (“Fraaije Letteren” 65). Van Limburg Brouwer, however, did not follow Potgieter’s advice. He chose to translate the entire novel without leaving anything out, although he interestingly takes up Potgieter’s advice in his preface and defends his choice not to comply with it (Van Limburg Brouwer ix-xi).

Potgieter’s lasting attention for Manzoni in his 1837 articles might also have been partially responsible for the success of Van Limburg Brouwer’s translation. The cheaper new edition that was published in 1849-1850 testifies to the fact that this translation indeed attracted quite a wide audience. In the years after the publication of Van Limburg Brouwer’s translation, other works by Manzoni like the *Inni sacri*, the *Adelchi* and *Il conte di Carmagnola* were also mentioned in some reviews (V.G. for instance does so in 1836 in *Atheneum* [327]), and it seems as if Manzoni soon came to enjoy great fame in the Netherlands.

In 1838, two more texts appeared that included references to Manzoni, and that are not mentioned by Verschoor. Both times Manzoni is hailed as one of the greatest historical novelists of Europe. In the anonymous review of one of Van Limburg Brouwer’s own historical novels, *Diophanes* (1838), Manzoni is regarded as the only historical novelist who can compete with “the great Caledonian”, Walter Scott. His greatest talents, the reviewer argues, are his capacity to entertain, the historical truthfulness of his depictions of older times, and his high moral and religious standing (557). J.A. Bakker’s article “Opmerkingen over romans en romanlectuur” (Notes on – the Reading of – Novels) is similar to Heremans’ “Over den roman” (see above), in that it also offers a literary-historical account of the genre of the novel from antiquity onwards. On top of that, Bakker also discusses different ways of reading novels, with their particular advantages and dangers. Throughout his text, Bakker pays special attention to the genre of the historical novel, which he deems the most valuable kind of novel. Like in almost all contemporary discussions of the genre, Walter Scott is regarded as the true genius, but *I promessi sposi* is praised as “a worthy match” for Scott’s best work (137).

The last article on Manzoni not mentioned by Verschoor that I want to discuss is a two page article that professor Wap wrote on 15 May 1851 in his one-man monthly magazine *Astrea*. Wap wrote the article on the occasion of the publication in Italy of three new Manzoni texts: *Del romanzo storico*, *Dell’ invenzione* (Wap’s text actually reads *Sull’ invenzione*) and *Sulla lingua Italiana*. He pays special attention to Manzoni’s changed opinions on the genre (or, as he calls it, “the false school” [53]) of the historical novel as these are recorded in *Del romanzo storico* (1850), but he does not mention the title of Manzoni’s essay. He reports that Manzoni (whom he calls “the Italian Walter Scott”

[53])⁷ has come to consider the genre as a failure – even as an impossibility – from an aesthetic point of view, since the problems that accompany any attempt at synthesizing the world of fantasy and fiction on the one hand and that of historical truth on the other, are insurmountable:

for, when Fiction becomes predominant, History ends: in that case, the author no longer portrays people that have lived and times that are gone by, but people and times as his mind – often an ill mind! – has created them, and which are not to be found in the real world. On the other hand: when the Historical element becomes predominant, then a piece of rubbish is born that is even worse than a dry and dull historical text. (53)

Wap himself deems Manzoni's judgment that historical novels, historical tragedies and epics alike have no future other than complete oblivion, both a merciless and a bizarre one since it is pronounced precisely by a writer whose fame – at least in the Netherlands – lies in his historical novel and historical tragedies.

A last category of texts where Manzoni's influence can be traced consists of creative works of literature. Remarkably, I have found no mottos taken from texts by Manzoni, although I did find mottos from almost all other great historical novelists. In Belgium, not a single historical novelist refers in any way to Manzoni – not in mottos, not in prefaces, not through characters, etc. The only writer who does refer to the Italian author is Léopold-Amédée, but the status of his text is somewhat different. His 1838 *Souvenirs d'Italie, par un catholique* belongs to the (at that moment) relatively new genre of the travel story: it is a collection of letters written to his sister Louisa – together with whom he has often read and admired “les beaux ouvrages de cet excellent homme” (53)⁸ – during a stay in Italy in 1833. One of these letters, dated 9 November 1833, recounts Léopold-Amédée's meeting with Manzoni in Milan. Like in the articles in Belgian periodicals that I discussed earlier, the focus is again on Manzoni's personality, his character (especially his “angélique vertu, plein d'indulgence pour les autres” [49]), and his ideological stances on which he wrote a number of essays that received attention in Belgium. From Léopold-Amédée's letter, one might infer that Manzoni must have been highly respected (also in Belgium) as a truly modest man, an “illustre catholique,” “un génie philosophique” and “un des plus beaux génies

⁷ It is interesting to note how critics constantly compare Manzoni to Walter Scott (and most of them consider Manzoni to be the better historical novelist of the two, e.g., the critic of *De Recensent, ook der Recensenten* [310]), while his Dutch translator Van Limburg Brouwer argues that the two novelists should not and in fact cannot be compared with each other (ii).

⁸ Which works they have read is not clear. Only *I promessi sposi* is mentioned (46).

poétiques de notre époque" (59). But again, Manzoni's literary works are no topic of conversation. Topics that *are* discussed by the two men of letters are precisely some socio-political issues which Belgium and Italy shared in this period and which Manzoni had commented upon in some of his essayistic writings. These topics include the extraordinary status of Belgium as one of the first European constitutional monarchies, and the link between the Catholic faith on the one hand and the opposition to foreign despots and a longing for freedom on the other hand (56). These themes also find their embodiment in *I promessi sposi* (the novel is situated in a time when Italy was under Spanish rule), and it is on this level that there is quite a strong similarity with the genre of the historical novel as it was practised in Belgium. Most Belgian historical novels deal with periods of foreign rule and present the national past as an age-old, uninterrupted succession of foreign tyrannies (Spanish, Austrian, French, etc.), while they emphasize the resistance put up by the ancestors against the successive conquerors.

In the Netherlands, lastly, the popular female historical novelist A.L.G. Bosboom-Toussaint wrote a short novel with the title *Don Abbondio II* (1849), in which the leading character is nicknamed Don Abbondio. In a two page passage, the narrator explicitly makes the association with "that idiot priest from Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*" (14), upon which a masterly description of the priest – who is reported to be known "by all" – follows. Here, Manzoni's Don Abbondio is turned into the prototype of a weak coward and comes to lead a second 'literary' life in quite a different context.

This overview of the reception of Manzoni in Belgium and the Netherlands in the nineteenth century clearly reveals some interesting distinctions between both countries. I want to argue that these differences are the result of significant distinctions between the literary systems of nineteenth century Belgium and the Netherlands, and that those distinctions, for their part, are caused to a high degree by the political climate in both countries, and more precisely, by the influence of politics on the literary system, i.e., by the degree of autonomy of the literary system.

Belgium's independence as a nation-state (1830) was greeted with great scepticism in the rest of Europe, and since Belgium did not have a national literary tradition, Belgian men of letters devoted themselves entirely to the development of a national literature during the first decades after 1830. The importance of concepts such as 'national character' had significant consequences in the field of literature: due to the fact that literature and national identity became so closely associated, Belgian literature closed in on itself. Interesting in this respect are "Y."s series of letters entitled "Du romantisme." Apparently, in 1826, before Belgium became independent and all attention was focussed on the national theme, there had been a gradual increase in attention for what was happening outside of the national borders.

In the context of the battle between the classicists and the romantics, at least some 'Belgians' (to use the term anachronistically) looked to the greater European picture. But after the Belgian uprising and subsequent independence in 1830, things drastically changed. The Belgian literary ranks were closed: in order to arrive at a truly and uniquely *Belgian* (in this period, bilingual) literature, foreign models had to be rejected and style, form, content, characters, etc., all had to be organically linked to a unique Belgian national character. As a result, there remained little attention for what was happening outside the national borders in the field of literature, except when there were similarities with regard to ideological issues. And even then, in spite of the similarities in the socio-political context and the resemblance between frequently occurring themes in Belgian historical novels and certain themes in Manzoni's novel (like the atrocities resulting from the lack of a strong centre of power), *I promessi sposi* does not seem to have been well-known in Belgium at all.

What is even more striking in this respect is that it was the *Dutchman* Van Limburg Brouwer who most emphatically pointed out some of the strong similarities between the Belgian and the Italian context and the bearings these situational similarities had on the forms of historical novels in both countries. Van Limburg Brouwer discussed these similarities in the preface to his translation, particularly at those points where he took issue with the opinions of Rey Dusseuil, one of the many French translators of *I promessi sposi*. In a footnote on the second page of his twelve page preface, Van Limburg Brouwer sets the tone by introducing Dusseuil to his readers as an advocate of "that so-called freedom that is nowadays so widely defended, especially in France and Belgium" (ii). There is a similar reference to the Belgian uprising in the *Athenaeum* review, where the anonymous critic writes with regard to the popular revolt depicted by Manzoni: "its description reminds us of all the outrageous acts committed during the Belgian uprising by the mobs who were spurred on by priests and other [!] agitators, and who defiled honor and duty, law and order in an ogreish frenzy" (328-29).

Because of his political beliefs, Dusseuil (according to Van Limburg Brouwer), as a friend of democracy and of a people's government, had to be greatly displeased at Manzoni's portrayal of the origins and progress of the popular movement in Milan and by the sharp portrayal of the follies that every people, in every uprising, commit: "For who likes to see his sovereign portrayed with all his faults and weaknesses?" (ii-iii). Van Limburg Brouwer claims that Rey Dusseuil's literary judgment has been clouded by his anger over Manzoni's portrayal of the masses and that his own, quite different, political beliefs have led him to judge the descriptions of the masses quite negatively, while Van Limburg Brouwer himself considers them to be "masterpieces" (iii). The Dutch translator characterizes Dusseuil's judgment as follows: "what is actually the frenzy of an insane mass, that destroys

bakeries in order to get to cheap bread in times of famine, he calls 'an uprising of the people against a tyrannical and brutal rule'" (iii). He judges this to be "a remarkable *addition* to Manzoni's description", something that Dusseuil has evidently read *into* the text. And he continues:

Dusseuil says that Manzoni wanted to portray the Spanish domination. This good man, who sees domination wherever the mob ["het janhagel"] does not act the boss, has certainly not understood that Manzoni justly finds the cause for the disorderliness of society in the seventeenth century in a lack of *domination*, in an impossibility to keep in check the great and small *advocates of freedom*, that is to say: they who only want freedom for themselves, just like the supporters of propaganda nowadays. (iii)

One Dutch critic, however, who writes for the *Boekzaal der geleerde wereld*, agrees with Dusseuil's interpretation: he talks about the people of Milan, "oppressed and treaded on by foreigners" (577).

Van Limburg Brouwer accuses Dusseuil of having portrayed Manzoni not only as a "fantastic and romantic writer" (vi) – which is a very serious accusation in a literary climate such as the Dutch one (and the Belgian one, for that matter) in this period, where the labels 'fantastic' and 'romantic' are quite insulting and are mostly used to refer to immoral French novels (see Bemong, "Nulla fides Gallis", and Van den Berg) – , but also "as an advocate of an unrestricted popular freedom, probably because both are fashionable nowadays" (vi). Yet, as the Dutch translator hastens to add, even Dusseuil on some level has sensed the beauty of the work "and must have realized that it does not truly belong neither in the fantastic, nor in the romantic school" (vi). In these passages, Van Limburg Brouwer's classicist background and poetics become clearest. The Dutch Manzoni translator was a professor in classicist studies and in his original creative prose work,⁹ too, he professed his classicist poetics. In 1823, he had written an essay on the question whether there was a national, Dutch tradition discernible in the genre of the tragedy. In that essay, he sided with Dutch (classicist) theatre critics from the first two decades of the eighteenth century and vehemently opposed the defenders of a (more modern) 'romantic drama' (Van den Berg 238). The standard which he laid down for the Dutch theatre was that of the classical drama. He limited the 'romantic' to purely external characteristics (like the merging of the comical and the tragic, and the abandoning of the unity of time and place) and considered them to be "an aberration from the classical ideal" (Van den Berg 247). His strict and severe prescriptive, classicist beliefs made him use the

⁹ For instance in his two original historical novels, which are both set in antiquity. The first one (*Charicles en Euphorion*, 1831) was initially presented as a pseudo-translation.

term 'romantic' in the sense of "irregular, poor, imperfect, transgressing the eternal laws of beauty and good taste, inferior to the classics" (Van den Berg 247). Thus, while the Belgian critic "Y." (Jules Van Praet) cites Manzoni's *Lettre à M. Chauvet* as one of the most important sources for his defence of the Romantic school, Van Limburg Brouwer refuses to view Manzoni's literary works as belonging to this new literary movement. He even goes so far as to conclude his polemic with Dusseuil by stating that the French translator of *I promessi sposi* has not succeeded in correctly passing on "the real contents and true tenor of the original work" (x).

The fact that no Belgian novelist or critic seems to have worked out Van Limburg Brouwer's findings is even more significant of the degree of closeness of the Belgian literary system in the nineteenth century. In spite of the gradual 'rapprochement' between the Dutch and the Flemish literary systems by the end of the 1840s – the organization of the first Biennial Conference on Language and Literature in Ghent in 1849 may be seen as one of the first tentative approaches made by Flemish men of letters towards their northern neighbors – the closeness of the Belgian literature still persisted long afterwards.¹⁰

In the Netherlands, on the contrary, there was not only a different political climate (there was a longer tradition of independence as a nation-state), there also already existed a 'national' literary tradition that writers and critics could turn to (with authors like Vondel, Hooft, Bredero, etc.). As a result, Dutchmen showed greater interest in the literary production *as literature* in the rest of Europe. Illustrative is the fact that there existed a periodical in the Netherlands called *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen*, which bore the subtitle "Journal for the arts and sciences, in which the books that are published daily in our fatherland and abroad are reviewed both judiciously and candidly". Critics like Potgieter and Busken Huet were the pacesetters in this respect. They not only paid attention to foreign literatures, but also to the larger context of the European reception of these literatures. Potgieter's discussion of Goethe's opinions on Manzoni, Schiller and Scott served as an example of this tendency in this paper. Another characteristic that testifies to the greater openness and relative autonomy of the Dutch literary system in this period is the fact that Manzoni's fervent Catholicism did not seem to have affected his reception in the protestant Netherlands. Discussions that were found on Manzoni in the Netherlands mainly dealt with his literary practice and his view on the historical novel. But of course, Manzoni's fervent Catholicism may well have been the exact reason why in the Netherlands, no critic paid attention to Manzoni's writings on religion, contrary to what we encountered in the (catholic) Belgian periodical press. For even the Dutch

¹⁰ By the middle of the century, the Flemish and Franco-Belgian literary subsystems had gradually begun to drift apart, thus opening up new perspectives for the Flemish men of letters to re-orientate themselves towards their fellow Dutch-speaking neighbours in the North.

literary system had not yet reached the degree of autonomy that it would reach in the twentieth century, and not all Dutch critics judged literary works on the same, purely literary criteria as Potgieter did.

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