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Literary Notices: Book Review of Alessandro Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi*, or the Betrothed Lovers

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Napoleon of the realms of criticism," as to congratulate our readers on the appearance of a work, which promises to be the commencement of a new style in novel writing. Since the days of Fielding, unimitated and inimitable—and of Smollett, between whose different productions there was scarce a family likeness, we have had a succession of *dynasties* reigning over the regions of romance. We have had the Ratcliffe dynasty, the Edgeworth dynasty, and the Scott dynasty; each, like the family of the Cæsars, passing from good to bad, and from bad to worse, until each has run out. Partial movements in the provinces have occasionally set up the standard of rival aspirants: but these have soon passed away. Heroines from the bogs, and heroes from the highlands of Scotland, or the Polish wilds, could not maintain their pretensions, though uniting in themselves all that is admirable both in the civilized and the savage character. Perhaps this was the reason. We like to read of things that may a little remind us of what we have seen in real life. Sir Charles Grandison in the Scottish Kilt, is a startling apparition.

The younger D'Israeli has indeed, occasionally flashed upon us the light of his capricious genius; but one of his caprices has been to disappoint the hope that he had raised. He has shown us what he could do, and that is all. Mr. Bulwer too, in a sort of freak of literary radicalism, has set up for himself. He scorned to add to the number of those who dress themselves in the cast-off habiliments of Scott; and study, as at a glass, to make themselves like him, as if ambitious to display their thefts. *He* learned the craft of plagiarism in the Spartan school, where *detection* was the only disgrace. He would not steal, not he, from any but "the poor man, who had nothing save one little ewe lamb, that lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter." He would imitate none but himself, and draw from no other models. His novels are all echoes of each other. There is hardly a page which might not be known for his, nor a favorite character which is not an exhibition of one of the phases of his *exquisite* self. The variety is between what he imagines himself to be, and what he imagines that he might have been, had he been a cavalier of the seventeenth century, or had circumstances made him a highwayman or a murderer. We are aware that he denies all this, and may be unconscious of it: but his identity can no more be mistaken than that of the one-eyed companion of Hogarth's "idle apprentice." We are aware too, that Mr. Bulwer is a member of a certain literary cabal, who aspire to direct the public taste, and bring all the influence of wealth and fashion and political connexion in aid of their pretensions. He is a sort of literary Jack Cade. "His mouth is the law." We know that the "amphitriion on *Pon dire*" is always the true amphitriion. But we never expect to travel as caterers for a public journal. We in the south do not do that sort of thing. We are not taught so to "raise the wind." We are not up to perpetual motion, nor to the art of making our living by taking our pleasure. We feel ourselves therefore under no obligation to admire Mr. Rogers's poems, though he be a banker—nor Mr. Bulwer's novels, nor himself, though he be a member of Parliament; nor though his female *doublure* Lady Blessington, "have the finest bust," and "the prettiest foot," and be "the finest woman in London." *We* do not put the names

LITERARY NOTICES.

I PROMESSI SPOSI, or the Betrothed Lovers; a Milanese Story of the Seventeenth Century: as translated for the Metropolitan, from the Italian of Alessandro Manzoni, by G. W. Featherstonhaugh. Washington: Stereotyped and published by Duff Green. 1834. 8vo. pp. 249.

The appearance of this work strongly reminds us of the introductory remarks with which the Edinburg Review, thirty years ago, prefaced its annunciation of Waverley. We would gladly appropriate them, were it fair to do so; but "honor among thieves!" Reviewers must not steal from Reviewers; and what is it but theft, when he who borrows, can never have anything worthy of acceptance to give in return?

We may, nevertheless, so far imitate "the grand

of our fine women in the newspapers. The business of female education with us, is not to qualify a woman to be the head of a literary *coterie*, nor to figure in the journal of a travelling coxcomb. We prepare her, as a wife, to make the home of a good and wise and great man, the happiest place to him on earth. We prepare her, as a mother, to form her son to walk in his father's steps, and in turn, to take his place among the good and wise and great. When we have done this, we have accomplished, if not *all*, at least *the best* that education can do. Her praise is found in the happiness of her husband, and in the virtues and honors of her sons. Her name is too sacred to be profaned by public breath. She is only seen by that dim doubtful light, which, like "the majesty of darkness," so much enhances true dignity. She finds her place by the side of the "Mother of the Gracchi," and of her whom an English poet, who well knew how to appreciate and how to praise female excellence, has simply designated as

"SIDNEY'S SISTER, PEMBROKE'S MOTHER."

We much fear, that after all this, the author of the work before us will have no reason to thank us for our praise. On the contrary, there may be danger of involving him in the displeasure, which we may draw upon ourselves from that same cabal, which has its members on both sides of the Atlantic. "Ca me; Ca thee," is the order of the day. If half the praise be due, which is lavished on the works that daily issue from the press, we may live to see the writings which instructed and delighted our youth, laid on the same shelf with Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. Men can no more read every thing than they can eat every thing; and the *petits plats*, that are handed round hot-and-hot, leave us no room to do honor to the roast beef of old England, nor to the savory Virginia ham. But these are the food by which the thews and sinews of manhood are best nourished. They at once exercise and help digestion. Dyspepsia was not of their day. It came in with *French Gastronomy*. Are we mistaken in thinking, that we see symptoms of a sort of intellectual dyspepsia, arising from the incessant exhibition of the *bon bons* and *kickshaws* of the press?

Well! here is something that will stick by the ribs; a work of which we would try to give a sort of outline, but that it cannot be abridged. The machinery of the story is not intricate, but each part is necessary to the rest. To leave anything out is to tell nothing.

It might be too much to say that this novel is, in every sense of the word, original. The writer is obviously familiar with English literature, and seems to have taken at least one hint from Sir Walter Scott. The use made by that writer of the records and traditions of times gone by, has suggested this hint. It naturally occurred to Manzoni, a native of Italy, that much of the same sort of material was to be found among the archives of the petty Italian states, now blotted from the map of Europe. It is obvious that the collisions of small states, though less interesting to the politician than those of mighty nations, must afford more occasion for a display of individual character, and the exercise of those passions which give romance its highest interest. But what is known of the great and good men who nobly acted their parts in these scenes, when the very theatre of their acts is crushed and buried beneath the rubbish of revolution? To drag them

from beneath the ruins, and permit the world to dwell for a moment on the contemplation of their virtues is a pious and praiseworthy task. It is sad to think how the short lapse of two centuries can disappoint the hope that cheered the last moments of the patriot and the hero. "For his country he lived, for his country he died;" his country was all to him; but his country has perished, and his name has perished with it. With the civil wars of England we are all familiar; and our hearts have glowed, and our tears have fallen, in contemplating the virtues and the sufferings of those who acted in those scenes; but, if we may credit the traditions embodied in this book, a contemporary history of the Italian Republics would display characters yet more worthy of our admiration and our sympathy. The Cardinal Borromeo is an historical character. The writer obviously means to paint him as he was; and the annals of mankind may be searched in vain for a more glorious example of the purity, the enthusiasm, and the inspiration of virtue.

We might suspect that something of a zeal for the honor of the Romish Church had mingled itself in the rich coloring of this picture. But Manzoni was as much alive, as Luther himself, to the abuses of that church. In an episode, which will be found at page fifty-eight, he discloses some, of the precise character of which we were not hitherto aware. We knew that something was wrong, but what that something might be, was never certainly known. The author has unveiled the mystery. He has withdrawn a curtain, behind which we had never been permitted to look. We had guessed, and we had read the guesses of others; but we never knew precisely what was there. The moral coercion, more cruel than bodily torture, by which a poor girl, the victim of the heartless pride of her parents, without command, without even persuasion, (for both it seems are forbidden) is driven to the cloister, that her brother may have more ample means to uphold his hereditary honors; this was a thing inscrutable and inconceivable to us. In reading such works as Mrs. Sherwood's *Nun*, we feel that we are dealing with conjectures. We turn to the scene exhibited in this work, and we *know* it to be real life. We would gladly grace our pages with it. It would probably be read with more interest than any thing we can say; but it is before the public, and we have no right to discharge our debts to our readers, by giving them what is theirs already. We will only pray their indulgence so far as to offer a short extract, as a specimen of the writer's power. It is a picture of some of the horrors of the plague, as it raged in Milan in the year 1628. It may serve to show us that the pestilence, which lately stooped upon us, was in comparison, an angel of mercy.

The cars spoken of in the following extract, are those in which the uncoffined bodies of the dead were borne to a common receptacle, "naked for the most part, some badly wrapped up in dirty rags, heaped up and folded together like a knot of serpents." The "monalti" were men who, having had the plague, were considered exempt from future danger, and were employed to bury the dead.

"A lady came from the threshold of one of the houses, whose aspect announced youth advanced, but not yet passed away. Her beauty was obscured, but

not obliterated, by distress and mortal languor; that sort of beauty, at once majestic and soft, which is so conspicuous in the Lombard race. She walked with pain, but did not stagger; her eyes shed no tears, but bore marks of having done so abundantly. There was, in her grief, a something inexpressibly quiet and deep, betokening a soul imbued and filled with it. But it was not her own appearance alone, that in the midst of so much wretchedness, marked her especially for commiseration, and awakened in her favor a feeling now deadened and worn out in all hearts. She bore in her arms a girl about nine years old,—dead, but dressed in a white frock of spotless purity, with her hair divided in front, as if her own hands had adorned her for a feast, long promised as the reward of her goodness. She held her, seated on one of her arms, with her breast upon the lady's breast; and she might have been thought to be alive, but that her young white hand hung heavy and lifeless on one side, like wax-work, and her head lay upon her mother's shoulder, with an air of abandonment heavier than that of sleep. Her mother! If the resemblance had not proclaimed the relation, the distress of the survivor announced it too plainly.

"A coarse monalti drew near the lady, and silently offered to relieve her from her burthen, but with an air of unwonted respect and involuntary hesitancy. But she, with an action betokening neither disgust nor scorn, drew back, and said, 'No; do not touch her now; I must lay her on that car myself; take this.' She opened her hand, showed a purse, and dropped it into his. She then continued: 'Promise me not to take a thread from her, and to suffer no other to do so, and to put her in the ground just as she is.'

"The monalti placed his hand on his breast, and then with an obsequious zeal, rather like one subdued by a new and strange emotion, than as if prompted by the unexpected gift, he busied himself to make room on the car for the little corpse. The lady placed her there, as on a bed, laid her straight, kissed her cold brow, spread over her a white sheet, and then spoke for the last time. 'Adieu, Cecilia! Rest in peace! This evening we meet again, to part no more. Pray for us, my child, and I will pray for thee, and for the rest. You,' added she to the monalti, 'when you pass again at vespers, will come and take me too, and not me alone.'

"Having said this, she re-entered the house, and presently appeared at the window, holding in her arms a still younger darling, alive, but with the marks of death on its face. She stood, as if contemplating the unworthy obsequies of the first, until the car moved, and while it remained in sight, and then she disappeared. What remained, but to lay her only surviving babe upon the bed, place herself by her side, and die with her; even as the stately blossom, with the bud beside it on its stem, falls before the scythe that levels all the plants in the meadow."

There is a power in this to which we do not scruple to give great praise. We regret to say that the translation has many faults. We lament it the more, because they are obviously faults of haste. The translator, we fear, was hungry; a misfortune with which we know how to sympathize. The style is, for the most part, Italian, in English words, but Italian still.

This is a great fault. In some instances it would be unpardonable. In this instance, perhaps, it is more than compensated by a kindred excellence. In a work like this, abounding in the untranslatable phrases of popular dialogue, it gives a quaint raciness which is not unacceptable. It does more. Such translations of *such works*, would soon make the English ear familiar with Italian idioms, which once naturalized, would enrich the language. It is already thus incalculably enriched by the poetry of Burns and the novels of Scott. A familiarity with Shakspeare, (which is not the English of the present day,) preserves a store of wealth which would else be lost. The strength of a language is in the number and variety of its idiomatic phrases. These are forms of speech which use has rendered familiar, and emancipated from the crippling restraint of regular grammar. They enable the speaker to be brief, without being obscure. His meaning, elliptically expressed, is distinctly and precisely understood. Should any other work of Manzoni fall into the hands of Mr. Featherstonhaugh, we hope he may have time to correct those inaccuracies of which he is doubtless sensible; but we trust he will not consider his popular Italian idioms as among his faults. Smollett, in his translation of Don Quixotte, through extreme fastidiousness, threw away an opportunity of doubling the force of the English language.

This work comes to us as the harbinger of glad tidings to the reading world. Here is a book, equal in matter to any two of Cooper's novels, and executed at least as well, which we receive at the moderate price of forty-two cents! It forms one number of the Washington Library, published monthly, at five dollars per annum. At this rate, a literary gourmand, however greedy, may hope to satisfy his appetite for books, without starving his children. The author has our praise; and the translator and publisher have our thanks.
