

## THE (NARRATIVE) PROTOTYPE OF TOTAL INSTITUTION: *THE BETROTHED*, XXXI

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### Sommario

*Il saggio si focalizza sul peso diegetico che il lazzaretto di Milano assume nei Promessi sposi (cap. XXXI), laddove l'intento narrativo si innesta su istanze di indagine storica e analisi sociale, anch'esse rilevanti ai fini dell'affermazione del romanzo come “medium dell'Italia unita”. Ricovero coatto degli ammalati di peste, il lazzaretto potrebbe apparire come un'istituzione totale “ante litteram”, proposta da Manzoni in netto anticipo rispetto all'analisi degli Asylums sviluppata da Erving Goffman nel 1961 in riferimento agli ospedali psichiatrici. Il lazzaretto è lo spazio dell'isolamento non solo fisico, ma anche psicologico, sociale ed esistenziale, generato dalla stigmatizzazione collettiva del contagio. L'isolamento è l'anticamera della morte fisica, preceduta da quella psicologica e morale, atteso che “una tale dittatura era uno strano ripiego” (cap. XXXI). Di qui la possibilità di configurare il lazzaretto milanese come un paradigma dell'isolamento individuale e della marginalizzazione collettiva, declinato da Manzoni attraverso l'interazione perversa tra malati, “monatti” e presunti untori. In questo senso, la metafora manzoniana della stigmatizzazione fisica si configurerebbe come vera e propria invenzione letteraria, tale da poter fornire utili chiavi di lettura alla comprensione delle “paure legate alla demarcazione dei confini” e dell’ “idea della segregazione e della separazione fisica”, nel segno del rapporto tra storia, letteratura e indagine sociale.*

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### 1. Literature and the myth of social total institutions

Literature provides us with a great number of incidents dealing with the social role of total institutions, especially prisons, monasteries and sanatoriums, along with the asylums and reformatories sheltering the

unfortunate, with particular reference to the literary representation of disease<sup>1</sup>.

Being sick indicates isolation and segregation: the search for safety legitimates the demonisation of any kind of stigma allegedly endangering collective balance<sup>2</sup>. The negative myth of discrimination is founded on the celebration of evil subjects, destined to arise in the role of main literary characters<sup>3</sup>. Sometimes society may be responsible for criminalising the weakest part of its structure, as Goffman's and Foucault's studies on total institutions effectively show<sup>4</sup>. Being sick or diverse indicates stigmatisation, as political and civil dissenters well know.

The representation of life inside any kind of total institution has to do with the phenomenology of the so-called "inmate world", probed by Goffman according to a sociological point of view. "The total institution is a social hybrid, part residential community, part formal organisation: therein lies its special sociological interest. There are other reasons for being interested in these establishments, too. In our society, they are forcing houses for changing persons; each is a natural experiment on what can be done to the self"<sup>5</sup>.

Unfortunately, history is full of human experience suffering through imprisonment in jails, lagers or asylums. To the fore are human beings interned against their will in psychiatric hospitals or mental homes. Novelists have portrayed in detail the interior tension stemming from the denial of freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> On the relationship between literature and disease see Manferlotti, 2014. What Richard Sennett (2011:34) emphasises about the Jewish ghetto in Renaissance Venice shows the effects of cultural and religious stigmatisation, especially in terms of racism and discrimination. Once again, literature can express the consequences of forced cohabitation better than any other historical report: "If *The Merchant of Venice* can be read, as I think it can, as one kind of premonition about modernity, about the experientially eviscerated meaning of freedom in the modern world, the ghetto of Venice offers another premonition".

<sup>2</sup> As regards the social impact of diversity in the global risk generations see Beck, 2016:187-198.

<sup>3</sup> On the growing complexity of narrative characters in the twentieth century see Eco, 1978.

<sup>4</sup> From different epistemological approaches, in their works Goffman (1961) and Foucault (2012) analysed the way total institutions change or spoil human identity. For an insightful analysis of this topic see Habermas, 1990:238-265.

<sup>5</sup> Goffman, 1961:12.

Belonging to a total institution implies the loss of ordinary identity which the self also founds on the defence of privacy. If we take into account that Jews and other inmates imprisoned in lagers were bereft of any personal effects, it is easy to understand that “some of the things one must give up are those with which one has become especially identified and which one employs for self-identification to others”<sup>6</sup>.

Writing has the therapeutic power to heal the bleeding wounds hidden within the innermost recesses of the soul. “It is thus that a man in a monastery may be concerned about his one privacy, his letterbox, and a man on a frigate about his canvas clothes bag”<sup>7</sup>. Goffman refers, respectively, to *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the autobiography of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, and to *White Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War*, Herman Melville’s fifth book, first published in London in 1850. The latter is inspired by the author’s fourteen months’ service in the United States Navy, aboard the frigate USS *Neversink*<sup>8</sup>.

As these (and other) novels highlight, excessively wearing jobs and existential misfortunes may determine the loss of freedom and feed an insolvable state of psychic compression, increased by the inflexibility of behavioural rules<sup>9</sup>. As Foucault also underlines, one of the main endeavours of a modern society is to monitor and condemn in order to fuel the sense of safety deriving from the exercise of control. Those who violate the social contract undergo social segregation and criminal conviction. Likewise, sick people are seen as a looming danger, especially when infection is more than a remote hypothesis<sup>10</sup>.

Hence follows the confinement in hospitals to restrain personal liberty. Goffman already focused on the condition of ostracised people due to their inability to conform to standards that society calls normal. They are disqualified from full social acceptance, since some of their attributes do not correspond to the social stereotype conventionally

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<sup>6</sup> Goffman, 1961:248-249.

<sup>7</sup> Goffman, 1961:249.

<sup>8</sup> For further investigation see Goffman, 1961:12-35.

<sup>9</sup> Goffman also hints at T.E. Lawrence’s *The Mint* and George Orwell’s *Such, Such Were the Joys*.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault (2002:231-256) dwelt on the construction of “austere institutions” aimed at segregating such unfortunate subjects.

accepted<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, wounds of the soul are different from physical wounds, since they are not perceptible to the eye, whereas any visible trace of contagious disease produces refusal and denial, thus determining social and individual stigmatisation<sup>12</sup>.

Literature abounds with stories of segregation promoted by the fear of infection, which can be intended also in a metaphorical acceptance. Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed* provides an outstanding narrative interpretation of history founded on the exaltation of poor people, destined to succumb to the power of rich people and to be vindicated in the hereafter. It is the plague in Milan that draws the novelist's particular attention; he dedicates some of the most famous pages of Italian literature to that calamity<sup>13</sup>.

To the fore is the description of that mass tragedy of death, depicted from the first traces of the disease to the outbreak of the health emergency. The lazaretto in which infected people were hosted may be considered the narrative prototype of a total institution, organised in the seventeenth century according to empiric and documentary parameters. Manzoni succeeds in representing the fall into hell that the sick undergo starting from the moment of infection with the frightening appearance of plague sores. That appearance automatically entailed the confinement in the lazaretto, whose huge dimension confirms the social and health emergency engendered by the plague.

Being sick implies the denial of any social role, since identity is ruined by the fear of death. As a matter of fact, "it seems possible for an individual to fail to live up to what we effectively demand of him, and yet be relatively untouched by this failure"<sup>14</sup>. Physical stigma may engender the loss of identity and personal privacy, especially when the fear of infection turns into a collective neurosis. This is what the so-called corpse bearers (*monatti*) had to avoid, since they were in charge of transferring the sick away from the city and, therefore, away from civilisation.

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<sup>11</sup> This is what happened to Charles Baudelaire, whose *Fleurs du mal* are the expression of existential spleen stemming from a deep sense of not being accepted. See Bourdieu, 1995:118-127.

<sup>12</sup> For a more specific reflection see Drake, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> For further investigation: Eco, 2007; Gaspari, 1990; BarberiSquarotti, 1988.

<sup>14</sup> Goffman, 1986:6.

Isolation is the only solution to avoid the propagation of fear, as narrated by Manzoni with outstanding empathy. The omniscient writer beholds the events with a sense of Christian piety, absolutely conscious of human mistakes and limits. It is not by chance that Lukács dwelt on Manzoni's dramas and novel as some of the most important literary products of the Romantic age, together with Goethe, Scott and, to a certain extent, Tolstoi<sup>15</sup>.

Furthermore, Sennett focused on Manzoni's vision of the world just to emphasise the transformation of the social role played by the *volk* (the poor people) in the first part of the nineteenth century: "This anthropological image of a *volk* is an epochal event in modern social imagery and rhetoric. Nineteenth-century nationalism established what we might call the modern ground-rule for having an identity. You have the strongest identity when you aren't aware you 'have it'; you just *are* it. That is, you are most yourself when you are least aware of yourself"<sup>16</sup>.

*The Betrothed* enables us to analyse the creative process which led the writer to interpret the *volk* as a narrative character, suspended between exaltation and desperation. People were compelled to cling together in the lazaretto without any distinction of social, cultural, economic or political status: Manzoni depicts the condition that plague victims had to live with due to deprivation of their identity, afflicted and wasted by the onslaught of the disease. This is what Manzoni can still communicate to the contemporary reader, by bringing together history, literature and pity.

## 2. The prototype of total institution: sociological notes

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault investigated the passage from the medieval law of retaliation to the modern forms of imprisonment in jails. The inception of the prison marks the advent of a different way to segregate guilty parties whose crimes were usually interpreted as a social stigma. Torture was the expression of a penal system founded on the need to compel prisoners to confess their alleged guilt. Sometimes tortured people were innocent,

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<sup>15</sup> On this issue see Lukács, 1983.

<sup>16</sup> Sennett, 2011:61.

as Manzoni cleverly points out in the *History of the Infamous Column*, dedicated to the furious, blind persecution against the so called “*untori*”, the plague spreaders created by the collective imaginary<sup>17</sup>.

In *The Betrothed* Manzoni highlights the harsh life conditions inside the lazaretto, which functioned as shelter for a countless number of people deprived of their social identity due to the spectre of contamination. In *The History of the Infamous Column*, the novelist sheds light on the bloody tortures inflicted on poor and innocent people, whose only fault was having been confused with disseminators of the plague. In both texts the writer focuses on the denial of identity engendered by being imprisoned or housed in total institutions, thus providing a modern representation of the past criminal system already denounced by Cesare Beccaria<sup>18</sup>.

Foucault clearly explained the social impact that the “spectacle of the scaffold” had in past times: “Written, secret, subjected, in order to construct its proofs, to rigorous rules, the penal investigation was a machine that might produce the truth in the absence of the accused. And by this very fact, though the law strictly speaking did not require it, this procedure was to tend necessarily to the confession”<sup>19</sup>.

Any physical and psychological strategy aimed at achieving the prisoner’s confession was legitimated in order to justify the goal of truth, despite the difficulties and mystifications hiding in the blind search for prompt solutions. Accusation and investigation may tend to alter the perception of reality as it takes form in daily life, especially when law is neglected. In this regard, any kind of confession provides full acknowledgment of responsibilities, which only the guilty party can admit to in front of those who have to judge him. The reliability of a confession depends on the properness of the inquiry, once supported by torture and violence<sup>20</sup>.

The search for truth can transform any office or jail into a total institution, in which the indicted can be seen as an individual with a

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<sup>17</sup> Spinazzola (1992) provided a faithful analysis of Manzoni’s civil and moral complexity.

<sup>18</sup> The reference is to Beccaria’s masterpiece, *Dei delitti e delle pene*, first published in 1764.

<sup>19</sup> Foucault, 2012: 37.

<sup>20</sup> The negative effects of torture and violence on the “*untori*” have been pointed out by Lombardinio, 2017.

ruined identity. Manzoni's description of torture in the *History of the Infamous Column* emphasises the recourse to violence as a total solution, pursued in the name of an alleged truth. In the case of plague spreaders, confession is the only way to ensure that the party under investigation is really guilty, so as to reassure public opinion and society about the feasibility of contrasting the spread of the plague.

This is a penal solution belonging to the past, effectively described by Foucault: "First, because the confession constituted so strong a proof that there was scarcely any need to add others, or to enter the difficult and dubious combinatorial of clues; [...] Secondly, the only way that this procedure might use all its unequivocal authority, and become a real victory over the accused, the only way in which the truth might exert all its power"<sup>21</sup>. When confession is spontaneously given, truth can really exert all its power, despite the need to recollect all the reasons that led the guilty to commit a crime. Otherwise, confession may be the result of compulsory actions, inspired by the strategy of promises and extortions. In the seventeenth century Milan described by Manzoni, confession was a total solution, pursued with total means and total pressure<sup>22</sup>.

This is a sociologically relevant process that Foucault introduces with an historic background: "At the end of the eighteenth century, torture was to be denounced as a survival of the barbarities of another age: the mark of a savagery that was denounced as 'Gothic'"<sup>23</sup>. The course of civilisation is marked by the removal of violence as a penal solution, as in the case of the death penalty and scaffold, which was supposed to demonstrate publicly the power of justice upon the arbitrariness of criminal behaviour.

In daily life, any kind of stigma entails the confinement of subjects in isolation, worsened by the collective risks connected to the perception of diversity. From this point of view, the relationship between the inner and outer worlds becomes fluctuating, according to the symbolic perception of self. This is what Goffman points out about the management of self within total institutions: "The barrier that total

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<sup>21</sup> Foucault, 2012:38.

<sup>22</sup> Manzoni's ethical sensitivity had been investigated by Scrivano, 1994.

<sup>23</sup> Foucault, 2012:39.

institutions place between the inmate and the wider world marks the first curtailment of self. In civil life, the sequential scheduling of the individual's roles, both in the life cycle and in the repeated daily round, ensures that no one role he plays will block his performance and ties in another"<sup>24</sup>. The life going on in total institutions, and in particular in hospitals, rest homes, sanatoriums, etc., is influenced by the acquirement of a new identity: the latter is bestowed by society in compliance with the stigmatised condition of the in-patient.

As we will see in the next paragraph, Manzoni outstandingly represented the social process that annihilates identity towards the outer world, especially when identity no longer satisfies the social expectations of the individual. Physical stigma is a real sign of identification for those who observe what is going on during a devastating epidemic causing thousands of deaths in very few months. In the presence of such a social disaster, it is quite hard to give a reliable performance and maintain the role which marked one's previous social role. Therefore, the confinement of plague sufferers in the lazaretto may be seen as a sanitary failure and a social suicide, despite the emergency imposed by the rapid diffusion of the illness itself<sup>25</sup>.

This is why Goffman's surveys on the asylums of that time allow a better understanding of the literary invention of the lazaretto as a prototype of total institution. The critic should be available to walk in the in-patient's shoes when he is about to leave his previous normal condition and enter the closed perimeter of the hospital: "The last step in the prepatient's career can involve his realisation – justified or not – that he has been deserted by society and turned out of relationship by those closest to him. [...] On entering the hospital, he may very strongly feel the desire not to be known to anyone as a person who could possibly be reduced to these present circumstances, or as a person who conducted himself in the way he did prior to commitment"<sup>26</sup>.

Soon after entry into the lazaretto, the plague victim feels the suffocating sensation of being deserted by the world to which he once belonged. This sensation is nurtured by suffering, pain, desperation,

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<sup>24</sup> Goffman, 1961:14.

<sup>25</sup> The harsh conditions of life in Milan's lazaretto were emphasised by Beltrami, 1899.

<sup>26</sup> Goffman, 1961:146.

lack of hope: it is the spectre of death that turns a circumscribed place into a total institution, to the extent that freedom is replaced by imposition and rigid rules. This is what happened in asylums and concentration camps as well, according to a death plan punctually described by Bauman in *Modernity and Holocaust*<sup>27</sup>. The lack of communication is the trademark of such a life dimension, in which suspicion and desperation are the consequences of segregation.

These sociological approaches to identity destruction confirm the opportunity to frame Manzoni's lazaretto as a prototype of total institution, long before Thomas Mann decided to set *The Magic Mountain* in the Berghotel Sanatorium Schatzalp in Davos. Once again, sociology can be studied through literature, as Coser originally showed<sup>28</sup>. Furthermore, the epistemological convergence between sociology and literature was highlighted by Bourdieu in reference to the process of daily automatisisation: "Only the social history of the process of automatisisation enables us to take proper account of the freedom with regard to 'social context' which is lost through a direct engagement with current social conditions and as a result of the very effort to explain"<sup>29</sup>.

The increasing complexity of social life has deeply influenced writers and poets, engaged in translating into words the symbolic and value innovations connected to urbanisation. The creation of bureaucratic institutions, first probed by Max Weber, marks the transition from the pre-modern organisation to complex society,

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<sup>27</sup> Bauman's work (1988) sheds light on the organisational development of the Nazi death strategy.

<sup>28</sup> Lukács' analysis of Manzoni's dramaturgic works, as well as Sennett's reflections on Manzoni's narrative engagement, can be framed within the wide debate concerning the authorial relevance of artists and the relationship among writers, audience and society. Coser (1972) had clearly probed this interdisciplinary relationship, especially focusing on the dialectics between creative innovation and social evolution. Barthes (1953) dealt with the "degree zero" of writing and the so called "death of the author", thus promoting the study of literary fragments as well, later investigated by Derrida (1986). In accordance with different heuristic perspectives and historical moments, both Adorno (1991, I ed. 1974) and Williams (2017, I ed. 1958) dwelt on the poetic production released in the first half of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, they analysed Romantic culture as the expression of a new civil mindset inspired by the myth of independence and the dialectics between culture, audience and individuality. On the complex convergence between literature and sociology see, above all: Parini, 2017; Longo, 2013; Turnaturi, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Bourdieu, 1995:248.

analysed by Hughes in his *Sociological Eye*<sup>30</sup> and, of course, by Goffman in *Asylums*: “In introducing the two concepts of ‘institution’ and ‘social establishment’ as being the same, Goffman begins with an uncertain statement that shows that he has not sufficiently benefited from the efforts made by Hughes to clarify the term ‘institution’”<sup>31</sup>.

The correlation between institution and social establishment gives some useful insights to delve into the development of the process of stigmatisation across the centuries, as Foucault had already done in his *Discipline and Punish*, with the purpose of highlighting the social dimension of ancient and modern punishment strategies<sup>32</sup>. Furthermore, Goffman focused on the historic development of total institutions, analysed in line with the type of institutionalisation, with the development of total institutions and the spreading of one main social process across history.

In the Middle Ages there were proto-total forms of confinement, embodied in the court, monastery, leprosarium, hospital, in which enclosure became a way of life. In the age of absolutism (first modernity), the advent of proto-total institutions was represented by the *hôpitaux généraux*. They determined the opening of society and the creation of social boundaries. Soon after, when bourgeois and industrial society appeared, society experimented the multiplication and specialisation of total institutions, such as madhouses, prisons, barracks, factories, schools, hospitals, etc., encouraging the totalisation of discipline as a specific kind of social process.

Finally, the post-industrial era fuelled the process of deinstitutionalisation, embodied by community (post-institutional) responses, and marked a post-disciplinary dimension of social aging. It is important to point out that the leprosarium can be considered as the modern legacy of the proto-total form of enclosure, inherited by the absolutist era as an alleged form of health care.

This is what *The Betrothed* reveals according to a thorough narrative strategy, which is inspired by the need to denounce human prevarications and existential condemnations. This narrative strategy

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<sup>30</sup> For further information, see Hughes, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Vienne, 1990:14.

<sup>32</sup> For further investigation, see Elden, 2017.

involves the poor, as Sennett points out in *The Foreigner*, emphasising the role played by Manzoni and Tolstoi in the construction of popular identity during the first half of the nineteenth century<sup>33</sup>. The deeds of both poor and rich people – compelled to live within the lazaretto – show the power of destiny and all human contradictions in the presence of death, confined within the monumental perimeter of the lazaretto.

Thus, contamination becomes the looming spectre of a ruined existence, undermined by the dangerous contact with the other. “The barrier that total institutions place between the inmate and the wider world marks the first curtailment of self”<sup>34</sup>. Contaminated people gathered into Milan’s lazaretto are no exception, in the light of Manzoni’s capability of turning historic narration into a social criticism, inspired by the insoluble contradictions of human experiences<sup>35</sup>.

### 3. The lazaretto as a total institution: “The Betrothed”, XXXI

Chapter XXXI of *The Betrothed* gives a thorough description of living conditions inside the lazaretto, where the peripheral situation indicates the physical and social separation of sick people from the civil community living in the city. As Manzoni precisely highlights, the “lazaretto” is an environment featuring isolation, both physical and psychic: it feeds the social and existential decay of individuals. This kind of isolation is engendered by collective stigmatisation bolstered by the infection. Entry within its perimeter, located on the outskirts of the city, implies the denial of identity and reputation, both from a symbolic and a medical perspective.

This phenomenon may appear even more true if we take into account the difficulties that operators (both medical and religious) had in “ensuring assistance and submission” and “keeping the obligatory separations”. Isolation is the prelude of physical death, preceded by a psychological and moral demise, even though “such a dictatorship was a strange makeshift”. In this regard, the acknowledgement of the

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<sup>33</sup> Sennett (2011:47-96) highlighted the process of identity construction in the first half of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, Eco (1978) pointed out the close connection between ideology and rhetoric in the popular novel.

<sup>34</sup> Goffman, 1961:14.

<sup>35</sup> On the great writer’s skill in foreseeing social and cultural development see Steiner, 2003.

existence of a plague epidemic inside and outside the city marks the development of a health emergency based on the lazaretto, whose organisation was entrusted by the city's Council of Ten to friars.

We may imagine the dilemma of the Council of Ten, on whom rested the weighty burden of providing for public needs and repairing what was reparable in such a disaster: they had to find replacements every day to add to the number of individuals charged with public services of all kinds. Of these individuals there were three remarkable classes. The first was that of the *monatti*; this appellation, of doubtful origin, was applied to those men who performed the most painful and dangerous employment in times of contagion: taking the dead bodies from the houses, from the streets, and from the lazaretto, carrying them to their graves, and burying them; also, taking the sick to the lazaretto, and burning and purifying suspected or infected objects. The second class was that of the *apparitori*, whose special function was to precede the funeral cars, ringing a bell, to warn passers-by to withdraw. The third was that of the commissaries, who presided over both the other classes, under the direct orders of the Tribunal of Health<sup>36</sup>.

*Monatti* (corpse bearers), *apparitori* (helpers) and commissaries are the three main actors of this deadly mechanism, depicted by the novelist as emphasising the emotional involvement caused by the spreading plague: the fear of contamination corresponds to the terror of being declared sick and thus being deprived of one's ordinary identity. The decision of the Tribunal of Health to rid urban spaces of any risk of contamination entails the social denial of the sick, compelled to gain another (ruined) identity inside the lazaretto, where friars and improvised nurses were committed to cohabiting with the looming presence of death. The appearance of sores was the visible symptom of the disease that no drugs had the power to counteract. Thus, the appearance of sores can be read not only as the manifestation of stigma, but also as the proof capable of turning the discreditable subject into a discredited actor<sup>37</sup>.

The term stigma and its synonyms conceal a double perspective: does the stigmatised individual assume his differentness is known about already or is evident on the spot, or does he assume it is neither known

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<sup>36</sup> Manzoni, 1834:380.

<sup>37</sup> This is a sociological process clearly explained by Goffman in *Stigma*.

about by those present nor immediately perceptible to them? In the first case one deals with the plight of the *discredited*, in the second with that of the *discreditable*. This is an important difference, even though a particular stigmatised individual is likely to experience both situations<sup>38</sup>.

In Manzoni's report of plague management, the dichotomy between sick and healthy people fades into a weak distinction: all people involved in the fight against the epidemic are merged into the social turmoil caused by the fear of contamination. Physical stigma becomes the source of real social exclusion, involving sick people and those who have the misfortune to care for them.

Furthermore, life inside the lazaretto was made harder by the horrible spectacle of children left by mothers who had passed away: "each day, for example, children, whose mothers had perished of the plague, died from neglect. The Tribunal of Health proposed to found an hospital for these innocent creatures, but could obtain no assistance for the purpose; all supplies were for the army, 'because', said the governor, 'it is a time of war, and we must treat the soldiers well'"<sup>39</sup>.

The battle against the plague involved physicians and nurses as well, all of them confronting a concealed enemy capable of destroying any possibility of cohabitation among human beings. This is why the entrance into the lazaretto, located in a peripheral area of the city, implies the denial of identity and reputation, from a social, psychic and health perspective: the shift from the condition of the discreditable into that of the discredited legitimates any attempt to hide from human sight and find shelter far from human organisations.

A solitary death is the best alternative to attempting to survive the process of ruined identity characterising life within the lazaretto. Being transferred far from the city implied the inevitable approach of death. Getting rid of cadavers was another emergency that friars and nurses had to cope with:

Meanwhile the immense ditch which had been dug near the lazaretto were filled with dead bodies; a number still remained without sepulchre, as hands were wanting for the

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<sup>38</sup> Goffman, 1986:4.

<sup>39</sup> Manzoni, 1834:381.

work. Without extraordinary aid this calamity must have remained unremedied. The president of the senate addressed himself in tears to the two intrepid friars who governed the lazaretto, and the Father Michele pledged himself to relieve the city of the unburied dead within four days, and in the course of a week, another ditch sufficient not only for the present want, but even for those which might be anticipated in future. Followed by another friar, and public officers chosen by the president, he went into the country to procure peasants, and partly by the authority of the tribunal, partly by that of his habit, he gathered 200, whom he employed to dig the earth. He then dispatched *monatti* from the lazaretto to collect the dead. At the appointed time his promise was fulfilled<sup>40</sup>.

The whole mass grave rapidly dug by the friars was the only solution to the decimation inflicted by the plague, the diffusion of which had to be impeded by constructing effective bulwarks against its spreading. Chapter XXXI of the novel portrays the desperate attempts to contain the plague inside the hospital and to rid the city streets of the sick and the dead. In this regard, the lazaretto can be considered as a prototype of a total institution only if we do not neglect its lack of good organisation. Of course, it was far from being that sophisticated death machine depicted by Bauman in *Modernity and Holocaust* referring to lagers. Unfortunately, both institutions were functional in managing death and its collateral effects, including the need to clear the cadavers away<sup>41</sup>.

The dichotomy between open and closed spaces stresses the distance between freedom and captivity, involving individuals subjected to compulsory behaviour. This is why Chapter XXXI of *The Betrothed* enables us to observe the “moral career” of the sick, which somehow anticipates “the moral career of the mental patient” probed by Goffman in *Asylums*, in which the sociologist “considers the initial effects of institutionalization on the social relationships the individual

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<sup>40</sup> Manzoni, 1834:381.

<sup>41</sup> Elden (1997) dwelt on the sociological dimension of the rise of power.

possessed before he became an inmate<sup>42</sup>. The case of Don Rodrigo, refusing to be transported into the lazaretto soon after being found sick by his faithful assistant, shows the unavoidable descent into the moral hell determined by the identity shift: life in hospitals, as well as in jails and monasteries, does away with the differences between the rich and the poor as they share the same horrific destiny<sup>43</sup>.

This is why the lazaretto can be considered a relevant sample of a total institution, based on a low degree of organisation but inspired by a high sentiment of heroism and generosity. Philanthropy fires the noblest instinct of social aid, which was fuelled in the lazaretto in line with Christian charity, especially when physicians and provisions started to be scarce, thus accentuating desperation and starvation.

In the midst of the general stupor or indifference to the miseries of others occasioned by personal apprehension, some were found whose hands and hearts had ever been open to the wretched, and others with whom the virtue of benevolence had commenced with the loss of all their earthly happiness. So also, amidst the chaos caused by the flight of so many men charged with watching over and providing for the public safety, others were seen, who, well in body and firm in mind, remained ever faithful at their post; and there were even those who with admirable self-devotion heroically undertook and sustained cares to which their duty did not call them<sup>44</sup>.

Public safety entails the recourse to social and moral mobilisation, so as to cope with personal interests, individual privileges and arrogant manifestations of superiority. The plague emergency portrayed by Manzoni is the metaphor of the state of emergency in which the human race may fall at the time of any natural calamity: floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, fires and epidemics have the power to wipe out social and family relationships. Natural and health calamities require the construction of structures and institutions capable of sheltering the survivors.

In this regard, Manzoni's lazaretto can be considered not only the prototype of a total institution, but also the paradigm of voluntary health

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<sup>42</sup> Goffman, 1961:XIV.

<sup>43</sup> Nigro (1996) highlighted the social and communicative modernity of Manzoni's novel.

<sup>44</sup> Manzoni, 1834:382.

work, fuelled by a strong sense of community belonging. Self-devotion and heroism counterbalanced folly, apprehension and terror, nurtured by the over-hanging spectre of death.

#### 4. Conclusions

Chapter XXXI of Manzoni's novel shows the close relationship between literature and social criticism connected to the narration of common disasters<sup>45</sup>. The process of identity removal going on within the lazaretto anticipates some forms of alienation experienced in contemporary institutions, built to manage individual and collective stigmatisation<sup>46</sup>. Considering that the lazaretto was built as a compulsory shelter for the plague victims, it might pose as an "ante litteram" total institution, concocted by Manzoni ahead of Goffman and Foucault's analyses.

Indeed, the leprosarium can be considered as the prototype of hospitalisation, founded in the Middle Ages to face infection risks. Thus, the lazaretto can be studied so as to probe the evolution of total institutions across the centuries, thanks to the sociological insights developed by Manzoni, whose purpose was to draw his readers' attention to the injustices and prevarications of one human being towards others<sup>47</sup>. This is why the lazaretto is more than a literary insight: it may be conceived as the narrative invention of the contemporary total institution, defined by Goffman "as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life. Prisons serve as a clear example"<sup>48</sup>.

The denial of freedom and organisational sophistication are two of the main hallmarks of contemporary asylums, so widespread during the

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<sup>45</sup> Macchia (1994), Matteo and Peer (1986) focused on Manzoni's narrative innovation, with particular reference to the Romantic age.

<sup>46</sup> Rusche and Kirchheimer (2009) probed the dialectics between punishment and social structure in the contemporary era.

<sup>47</sup> Anfert (2013) and Pierce (1998) investigated the historic and documentary premises of Manzoni's novel.

<sup>48</sup> Goffman, 1961:xiii.

twentieth century. The distance between the lazaretto and other contemporary institutions (such as lagers, asylums and jails) resides in its rudimentary organisation, essentially founded on the spontaneous effort of religious and lay volunteers. Nevertheless, entry into the lazaretto entailed the denial of any social identity, complicated by the need to prevent other individuals from being infected. Physical stigma automatically engendered social and moral isolation, increased by the emotional implications linked to the presence of death and the identity displacement.

Hence, we may see Milan's lazaretto as a paradigm of individual isolation, as the expression of identity removal and collective marginalisation. These tendencies were observed by the novelist in line with the adverse interaction among patients, *monatti* (corpse bearers) and *untori* (plague spreaders). They are the improvised actors of such a health machine, aimed at preventing infection much more than healing the sick.

The modernity of Milan's lazaretto also resides in its huge dimension, attested by the ancient engravings and documents recalled by the novelist. The fury of the plague is shown by the number of victims: "The violence of the contagion increased daily; in short, there was hardly a house that was not infected; the number of souls in the lazaretto amounted to 12,000, and sometimes to 16,000. The daily mortality, which had hitherto exceeded 500, soon increased to 1200 and 1500"<sup>49</sup>. These numbers express the huge death count engendered by the plague, described by Manzoni in line with that sense of pity and solidarity inspiring his social and cultural sensitivity<sup>50</sup>.

The lazaretto anticipates the contemporary construction of total institutions, despite the absence of a bureaucratic system and the improvisation of staff management. Milan's lazaretto is the result of a social emergency demanding the construction of a health structure functional to separate the sick from the healthy. This is why chapter XXXI of *The Betrothed* can still shed light on the human inclination to

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<sup>49</sup> Manzoni, 1834:380.

<sup>50</sup> As Morcellini (2016) cleverly assumes.

aggregation and solidarity, despite the irreparable harm inflicted by destiny to individual and collective identity<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> On the construction of modern identity fueled by Manzoni's artistic engagement see Lombardinio, 2018.

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