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Psychiatry in literature

Manzoni and agoraphobia

Luca Cambioli and Michele Augusto Riva 

Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873) is acknowledged as one of the greatest Italian writers of all times, having contributed to the codification and stabilisation of the modern Italian language with the historical novel *The Betrothed* (*I Promessi Sposi*). Manzoni died at 88 on 22 May 1873, exactly 150 years ago, likely in consequence of a chronic subdural haematoma developed after a fall while exiting church.

During his long life, Manzoni had agoraphobia – the fear of being in situations where escape might be difficult or where help is not readily available. At least two agoraphobic attacks are well documented by Manzoni himself, playing a significant role in his life. On 2 April 1810, at 25 years of age, Manzoni had his first panic attack when his beloved wife, Henriette Blondel (1791–1833), fainted in his arms, following the banging of some firecrackers and a disturbance created in the crowd during the wedding parade of Napoleon and Marie Louise of Austria in Paris. The ensuing commotion resulted in the writer getting separated from his wife, a precipitous flight to a church and ultimately in his lifelong conversion to Catholicism. Five years later Manzoni reported having another panic attack in a bookseller's store owing to the news of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, which made him fear for the fate of his country. Despite living in the centre of Milan and taking frequent walks within the city walls, after 1810 Manzoni's anxiety, and avoidance of crowds, accompanied him until his death. His wife Henriette stated: 'the nervous anguish he experiences does not allow him to be alone for a moment'. According to the Italian philosopher Paolo D'Angelo, Manzoni's agoraphobia – his fear of being in a free space without a solid physical support – may explain his criticism against the free poetic imagination and the literature of invention and his fondness for the historical novel genre, introduced by Walter Scott (1771–1832) in Europe in those years.

Declaration of interest

None.

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