A Conflict of Wills

Abstract: Agostino Carli Rubbi was most likely the archivist from whom Manzoni came into possession of the 17th trial records that inspired his novel. Carli Rubbi knew the Milanese cultural environment very well: in the 1760s had been the favourite student of Cesare Beccaria, illustrious expert on criminal law and Manzoni’s grandfather. Carli Rubbi first worked in the archive at San Teodoro and then in the Frari archive, where the documents of the former Venetian Republic had been transferred. Claiming a privileged position, under the sole direction of the Austrian governor of Venice, he soon came into conflict with the archive’s director, Jacopo Chiodo, who tried in vain to control his activities. It is significant that Carli Rubbi claimed the right to autonomy and personal initiative, above all between 1820 and 1821, the years in which Manzoni conceived and began to write the first chapters of his novel.

Keywords: Alessandro Manzoni; Carli Rubbi; Cesare Beccaria; Conflict; Venice Archives; Venice and Milan

A man of the old regime

Count Agostino Carli Rubbi often liked to say of himself, “I am not a ‘new man’.” As a self-definition, this is fairly accurate; not only does it reveal the contradictions inherent in his life and cultural background; but it also clearly demonstrates the intimate feelings and political sentiments he adopted during his final years, when he adopted this sobriquet in his contacts with the Austrian authorities.

In 1812, Count Carli Rubbi became a member of the small group working in the ex scuola of San Teodoro under the direction of Carlo Antonio Marin, which some years earlier had begun cataloguing and reordering of the part of the Venetian archives that had been classified as political and diplomatic. Although his title was only “unpaid assistant trainee”, with the task of reordering and eliminating papers from several different archives, he quickly took on a more important role under the new Austrian regime, where he found himself at the centre of the opposition to the project of transferring all the former Republic’s archives to the Frari.

It was, perhaps, Rubbi’s position that provided Manzoni with the opportunity to learn and inspect the trial of Paolo Orgiano, in a set of highly unusual historical circumstances. Reconstructing the biography of Agostino Carli Rubbi and the environment in which he operated from 1812 to 1825, the year of his death, will provide the last and perhaps most significant element of the hypothesis that has been developed thus far – the possibility that the count secretly allowed Manzoni to read the transcript of the trial.

The son of Gian Rinaldo Carli

Agostino Carli Rubbi was born in Venice in June 1748 to Gian Rinaldo Carli, scion of an aristocratic family from Capodistria, and Paolina Rubbi. After the untimely death of his wife, Gian Rinaldo settled in Milan, where he attained important administrative positions in the Austrian government and became known for his historical and literary writings.

After studying law in Vienna, Agostino returned to Milan, where he became a part of the enlightened intellectual milieu of the Societa’ del Caffè. He was introduced to men of letters such as Giuseppe Gorani,