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Attila and Verdi's historical imagination

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Abstract: This is a study of the *primo ottocento* Italian literary and historical vogue for conquerors and conquered peoples, and in particular how the fifth-century Attila became a paradigmatic figure to those involved with the Risorgimento, including Verdi and Solera.

Right at the beginning of his analysis of *Attila*, Julian Budden wonders with genuine surprise why Verdi was so enthusiastic about Zacharias Werner's eponymous play, which he considers an 'incredible Teutonic mishmash'.[1] It is well known that the composer insisted in his letters to Piave that it was an excellent subject for musical treatment, full of 'magnificent things and replete with effects',[2] showing affection for an exceedingly long and intricate play that seems from our distant perspective to brim with the least convincing attributes of German Romanticism. And that is not all: as Budden lucidly notes, Verdi was not the only one inspired by the plot. The previous year had seen the production of Francesco Malipiero's *Ildegonda da Borgogna* – a more literal adaptation of Werner's play – in Venice.[3] This serves as confirmation that the exploits of the King of the Huns and his fifth-century descent into Italy must have constituted a much less dark and distant past for Italian audiences of Verdi's day than it seems to us today. What is the reason for this? The insistence with which the composer recommended that Piave seriously study the original drama – beyond Madame de Staël's reading of it in *De l'Allemagne* – and consider with attention the historicity of his characters, speaks to the fact that it was the historical dimension itself that fascinated Verdi and that his interest was piqued by readings centred around it. Recent scholarship has profitably seen the link between the construction of national identities and studies of the early Middle Ages in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the crucial moment when these historical materials were redefined.[4] This allows us to respond to Budden's legitimate question with a keener awareness of context that renders Verdi's decision not only comprehensible, but also reflects the cultural climate of the age, confirming the composer's readiness to gather and rework the great themes of his time for a large public.

(translated by Daniel Donnelly)

[1] Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi* (London, 1981), I, 246.

[2] *I Copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, ed. Gaetano Cesari and Alessandro Luzio (Milan, 1913), 432–41.

[3] *Attila in Aquileia*, also drawn from Werner's play, was composed by Giuseppe Persiani in 1827, while in the 1830s and 1840s a number of barbarian subjects (Alboini, Rosmunde, Ildegonde) were taken up as tragedies or melodramas on the Italian stage.

[4] I refer in particular to the recent work of Ian Wood, who has attempted to connect the two areas of study by proposing a very convincing picture of the use of the Migration Period (AD *c.* 300–800) in the political discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See Ian Wood, 'The Use and Abuse of the Early Middle Ages, 1750–2000', in *The Making of the Middle Ages*, ed. Marios Costambeys, Andrew Hamer and Martin Heale (Liverpool, 2007), 36–53.

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The conquerors and the conquered

The selection of a 'barbarian' subject was framed by the great attention accorded the theme of migrations and invasions in the High Middle Ages – a theme that had both excited and divided scholars as early as the previous century but had only become a subject of public debate and artistic and literary elaboration at the beginning of the *ottocento*. Let us not forget that another important theatrical work centred on barbarian domination and its impact on subsequent Italian history, Alessandro Manzoni's *Adelchi*, had regularly appeared in new editions over the preceding twenty years, while its choruses had begun to form a part of the common culture shared by the more cultivated strata of Italian society.

An historical drama that centred on the fall of Lombard domination in Italy, *Adelchi* was first published in 1822 along with a prefatory essay that defined the terms of the historical-political reading the author intended. Even though Verdi's composition is not about the Lombards, Manzoni is anything but a marginal character in our narrative. Returning from a trip to France in 1818–19, the writer brought to Italy a debate that had been making extensive rounds among European intellectuals, and that had given rise to a multifaceted body of literature: historical essays on the one hand, but also very successful fiction like Scott's *Ivanhoe* – published in 1819 and immediately translated into numerous languages – which related the opposition between Saxons and Norman conquerors.[5]

Here I am referring to a discursive formation the significance of which Michel Foucault pointed out in his *Lectures* at the Collège de France:[6] the idea, developed in the first half of the eighteenth century and then variously articulated in Romantic historiography, that the passage from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages was not characterised by a more-or-less peaceful transition to the post-Roman world and progressive interactions between populations, but rather by a true 'conquest' of territories on the part of external populations. These invaders held indigenous peoples in slavery and nullified both their laws and their customs. All subsequent national histories gleaned their basic premises from this conflict, and it constituted a historical-political discursive system of notable strength and efficacy. In the first decades of the century this system found different national realisations in response to the differing developments and concerns of the time; these different realisations, however, all shared the common delineation of a sort of 'origin narrative' for the history of the European nations, which centred on the opposition of two peoples – one native and one invader. The success of this type of reading was such that it soon slipped from historical scholarship into a fiction strongly connected in those years to a theatricalisation of the past, or rather in a multiplicity of theatrical

[5] On the interaction of the careers of Alessandro Manzoni, Augustin Thierry and Walter Scott with regard to the ethno-racial conflict between invading barbarians and autochthonous peoples, see A. M. Banti, 'Le invasioni barbariche e le origini delle nazioni', in *Immagini della nazione nell'Italia del Risorgimento*, ed. A. M. Banti and R. Bizzocchi (Rome, 2002), 21–44.

[6] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana (New York, 2003), 79.

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representations of European history that sets apart the first decades of the nineteenth century.[7]

A flood of texts had thus investigated and related the dynamics of the battles between Gallo-Romans and Franks on French soil, or among Anglo-Saxons, Normans and Gaelic peoples in England, or among Lombards, Huns, Goths and Italo-Roman populations. In the case of France, the Frankish conquest of the Gallo-Roman peoples would become, in the historical narrative fashioned by Augustin Thierry, the soil out of which grew the class conflict between the privileged nobility, descended from the Frankish invaders, and the Third Estate, sole possessor of liberal values originating in institutions (the Gallo-Roman *municipia*) that the Frankish armies had wiped out. Thus, some of the key issues of the age stood at the centre of this national reclamation of the Middle Ages: social conflict, the democratisation of the political system, and the degree to which the monarchy was to have a role in it.

In Italy, interests concentrated at first on the Lombard question, but with a nearly identical narrative outline. Beginning with Manzoni it became the instrument through which one could passionately denounce the servitude of the populations of the peninsula, and that could then be reinterpreted as the contemporary oppressive domination of the Austrian Empire. Indeed, Manzoni explicitly distanced himself from previous historical readings from Machiavelli to Ludovico Muratori that had emphasised the progressive infiltration and integration of northern peoples with the indigenous population.[8] Instead, he represented the Lombard in the fearsome guise of an invading people, destined for collapse due to its incapacity for integration into a pre-existing situation and its pretensions to domination over a 'scattered, nameless multitude': a people that would be victim in the course of history to a cycle of conquest and domination. It is impossible to relate here the diverse threads and articulations of this discourse, which remained ambiguous because it did not, for example, take into account the successive civic rebirths after the conquest of the barbarians. It is necessary, for this reason, that in Manzoni, as in Thierry, the narrative structure of this crucial part of national history was grounded in the conflict between two peoples, while its function was the direct and explicit projection of the medieval past onto the problems of the present. In effect, Manzoni's work served above all as an invitation: 'May profound and insistent intellects be exercised in the endeavour of uncovering our homeland's history during those centuries',[9] he wrote, a question to which a veritable army of scholars responded between the 1820s and 1850s.

In order to frame Verdi's choices in this wider climate, we should recognise that in Romantic historiography the central issues of the cultural and political

[7] Maurice Samuel, *The Spectacular Past: Popular History and the Novel in Nineteenth Century France* (Ithaca, 2004).

[8] For Machiavelli, the Lombards 'retained nothing foreign save their name'. G. Falco, 'La questione longobarda e la moderna storiografia italiana', in *Atti del I Congresso internazionale di studi longobardi* (Spoleto, 1952), 153–66.

[9] Alessandro Manzoni, *Discorso sopra alcuni punti della storia longobardica in Italia*, in *Tutte le opere* (Florence, 1973), II, 1998.

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imaginations of the European nations became the occasion for a real restructuring of the historical discourse inside an idealised frame that attributed a new centrality to the early Middle Ages, of which Romantics never tired of calling themselves the 'sons'.[10] Thus the great migrations of the fourth to the sixth centuries – a topic that was certainly difficult to research due to the scarcity and obscurity of available documentation – became interpreted in a way that persisted well into the twentieth century (the destructive violence of barbarian conquest) and that circulated beyond the specialists and became part of common knowledge. As Ian Wood recently wrote, 'debating late antique barbarians has not just been a matter for the academic historian'.[11]

Resonances

Verdi did not leave himself out of this passionate dialogue about the Middle Ages, coming in contact with the ongoing debate through many sources but most of all through two of its most famous participants: on the one hand, Madame de Staël, whose writings had an enormous influence on the development of European and even American Romantic culture,[12] and, on the other hand, Jean Charles Léonard Simondo Sismondi, the Genevan historian and economist who was himself the author of works that had an enormous impact on the European public of the Restoration.[13]

The 1813 publication in London of *De l'Allemagne*, the fruit of long trips beyond the Rhine undertaken by the volcanic intellectual from Coppet, immediately acquired the status of a pan-European event, prodding a range of translations and stimulating lively critical discussion among the first adherents of Romanticism as well as classicists, who were at that point more numerous. The literary event was further magnified by the specific circumstances of its publication, and a politicised reception that was probably independent of the original intentions of the author.[14] Napoleon's censorship prohibited the work not only in France but in all the territories annexed by his empire, and Madame de Staël recounted the story of this repression in the preface to the book. Even in Italy the volume ended up as required reading for the generation that had grown up in the years of the Restoration – for

[10] Simonetta Soldani, 'Il Medioevo del Risorgimento nello specchio della nazione', in *Arti e storia nel Medioevo*, ed. Enrico Castelnuovo and Giuseppe Sergi (Turin, 2004), IV, 149–86.

[11] Ian Wood, 'Barbarians, Historians and the Construction of National Identities', *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 1 (2008), 81.

[12] John Claiborne Isbell, *The Birth of European Romanticism: Truth and Propaganda in Staël's* De l'Allemagne (Cambridge, 1994).

[13] Sismondi's great resonance in Italy is particularly tied to his monumental work *Storia delle Repubbliche italiane nell'età di mezzo*, published in Zurich and Paris between 1807 and 1818 and promptly translated into Italian. Verdi's library at Sant'Agata preserves a complete edition of the work in sixteen volumes (specifically the 1843 Capolago reprint).

[14] According to Ian Allan Henning (*L'Allemagne de Madame De Staël et la polémique romantique. Première fortune en France et en Allemagne (1814–1830*) [Paris, 1929]) the book's success, signalled above all by the quantity of reprints and the ample range of translations, was demonstrated more by its sales and popularity than its criticism.

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Giacomo Leopardi as well as for Giuseppe Mazzini, who emphasised the work's importance in his own youthful education.[15]

But what was its role and meaning? Today we can read it as a sort of propaganda for European nationalism, where nations are described as complex organisms (from their geographic disposition to their metaphysical inclinations). But for the readers of the period it also represented a real laboratory for the construction of the first Romantic Olympus,[16] which had notable influence on choices for translation projects and the consecration of certain authors but not of others. It influenced, for example, the great diffusion of Schiller's theatrical works (much more than those of Goethe), of Jean Paul's poetry, and even of the works of that curious half-writer/half-prophet who was Werner. He had travelled to the Château de Coppet in 1808 to give a reading of some of his works, and he evidently fascinated his host with his unique mystical and spiritual character. Madame de Staël's sudden death in 1817 stimulated even more interest in her writing, while in the following decade all of Europe opened itself to the dense group of translations (the stars of which were Schiller, Byron, Shakespeare and Scott) to whose success de Staël had dedicated much of her work.[17] Thus, the first years of the 1840s would see further reprints of her works and ever larger repercussions, including an effect on Giuseppe Verdi. In his brief but precise directives to his librettists he took up the synopsis and judgements that de Staël had applied to Werner's *Attila* many years earlier: he spoke of the great effect created by the drama and by its choruses, of the potent energy that emanated from the 'giant' image of an Attila who was 'ferocious but also a generous barbarian'. He also suggested inclusion of the confrontation with Pope Leo, 'who inspires a religious terror in the barbarian', with reference to the 'painting' (*sic*) by Rafael.[18]

Without a doubt de Staël played a decisive role in the various literary works that Verdi mined for inspiration in the 1840s[19] – and probably also in the selection of which of Schiller's works he would set to music. But the cultural frame into which we can position Verdi's career as a medievalist (which is not limited to *Attila*) is certainly much larger than this. It must also be shaped by the intellectual and

[15] See Maria-Gaetana Salvatores, 'Madame De Staël e Leopardi', *Studi e testi*, 35 (1970), 43–71; in addition to de Staël's influence, Mazzini would feel an attraction to Zacharias Werner's 'dominating religious ideal', to which he dedicated a long essay in 1836. He also planned on beginning a new theatrical library – a collection of translated foreign dramas – in his 'Ventiquattro Febbraio', *Scritti editi e inediti* (Imola, 1915), VIII, 203–56.

[16] It has been noted that despite the success of her essays and books and the anticipatory character of her intuition, de Staël would never herself form a part of this Olympic pantheon. See Madelyn Gutwirth, *Madame de Staël, Novelist: The Emergence of the Artist as Woman* (Urbana, 1978).

[17] See the famous letter 'Sulla maniera e l'utilità delle traduzioni', in *Enciclopedia italiana*, January 1816, in Egidio Bellorini, *Discussioni e polemiche sul Romanticismo* (Bari, 1943), I, 3–9, which set off a great polemic between classicists and Romantics in Italy.

[18] These are the words used by Madame de Staël in *De l'Allemagne* (London, 1813), 297.

[19] On the richness of this volume, see the introduction by D. Goldin Folena to *Verdi und die deutsche Literatur*, ed. Daniela Folena and Wolfgang Osthoff (Laaber, 2002), in addition to Pierluigi Petrobelli's contribution, 'Verdi e Madame de Staël' (153–64) to the same collection.

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publishing vivacity of 1840s Milan, which was particularly receptive to new European works and to the ongoing historiographical debate. These were years of important editorial events for Italian culture as a whole, such as the translation of Shakespeare's works, the complete publication of Victor Hugo's plays, the translations of Byron and Schiller by, among others, Andrea Maffei, in whose salon Verdi was an active participant and with whom he communicated constantly, even during the genesis of *Attila*.[20] They were the same years during which historical and literary production on the Middle Ages was really begun *en masse*, and at times it was translated in other countries, a testament to the force of the pan-European circulation that had sprung up. Cesare Balbo's *Storia d'Italia sotto ai barbari*, published in 1830, was quickly followed by Carlo Troya's *Storia d'Italia del Medioevo*, which appeared in five volumes between 1839 and 1859, and Michele Amari's *Guerra del vespro* in 1842, to cite only the most famous works. In 1836, Cesare Cantù translated Sismondi's *Storia della caduta dell Ímpero romano*, which constituted a further contribution to the body of work that the Genevan had offered following the enormous success of his *Storia delle repubbliche italiane nell'evo di mezzo*.[21]

It is hard to deny the political nature of all these works, even if they differ in their outlook (from the neo-Guelfism of Balbo and Troya to Sismondi's republicanism). The authors themselves did not try to hide it. 'History is a social and political need', wrote Balbo, 'which I would almost compare to laws and military institutions'.[22] And in the first and cheaper abridged edition of his *Repubbliche*, which he published simultaneously in English, French and Italian in 1833, Sismondi wrote that he gladly accepted the editor's proposal to produce such an edition at 'a moment when the rights of nations were once again weighed on the scales of public opinion'.[23] Sismondi and his dual vision of medieval Italy – both barbaric as with Attila or civic as with the history of Legrano's battle – presents another point of reference for Verdi's historical imagination. Though Sismondi was the ultimate source for the material, we do not have hard proof that Verdi read his works. It is possible that he took them in by indirect means – through the many historians, poets, writers and politicians who had constructed in the 1840s their own famous situations, characters and images out of his works (from the battle of Legnano to the exploits of Francesco Ferruccio to the Sicilian Vespers). We do know that, as Simonetta Soldani writes, in those years the Genevan's works constituted a sort of 'prop kit' for anyone who wanted to talk about Italy's medieval past, and that even Verdi found himself participating in the flow of that discourse.[24]

[20] See Marta Marri Tonelli, 'Andrea Maffei e Giuseppe Verdi', *Il Sommolago*, 2 (1985), 5–38.
[21] J. C. L. Sismondo Sismondi, *Storia della caduta dell'Impero Romano e della decadenza della civiltà dall'anno 250 al 1000*, trans. Cesare Cantù (Capolago, 1836).
[22] Cesare Balbo, 'Dell'utilità presente di una storia generale d'Italia', in *Il Regno di Carlo Magno e scritti storici minori* (Florence, 1862), 225.
[23] The title of Sismondi's first Italian edition was, significantly, *Storia del Risorgimento, dè progressi, del decadimento e della rovina della libertà* (Lugano, 1833).
[24] Soldani, 'Il Medioevo del Risorgimento nello specchio della nazione', 179. On Sismondi's success, see Pierangelo Schiera's introduction to *Storie delle repubbliche italiane* (Turin, 1996).

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Verdi's Middle Ages

Cesare Balbo wrote in 1847 that there was still a need for a good and readable general history of ancient and modern Italy, and that the role of historical texts had been filled mostly by historical poetry, philosophy and novels.[25] Even if this is not exactly true, seeing as how in the preceding years the historiography on the Middle Ages had grown enormously, he grasped an important element: the active and quite suggestive role that literary works (as well as theatre, which we must add to this list) played in drawing the Romantic picture of the Middle Ages with implicit, but very clear, political agendas.

In Verdi and Solera's *Attila* it is national history, beyond even the original text, that is the real field of action. It is perhaps also for this reason – since it combined the traits of grand historical drama with current events in its narrative – that the composer thought the subject lent itself particularly well to becoming a *grand opéra*. This would, not coincidentally, become the case with *I Vespri*, Verdi's other historical scenario of Sismondian lineage. In the *Attila* libretto suggestions from de Staël and Sismondi are combined with a liberal reworking of Werner's drama, where the characters are charged with an energy that only great medieval sagas were able to offer to Verdi and many of his contemporaries. It is not only the choice of subject that is amply Verdian in style, but also his deep occupation with the fleshing-out of the text, which is already quite clear in his first recommendations to the librettist. Here Verdi speaks of raising the curtain on a burning Aquileia and two choruses of people: one praying (the Aquileians), and the other menacing (the invading Huns). He thus delineates yet again that classic articulation of two peoples in conflict that had so much appeal in the Romantic period.[26] The story developed by Temistocle Solera further accentuates the references to national history. The Burgundian princess Ildegonda became the Roman princess Odabella in the blink of an eye – but although she is a Roman princess she is also, after all, an *intrepida donna italica*, just as the populace in Manzoni's *Adelchi* is initially defined as 'Roman' but in the end as 'Italian'. Drawn to her side is the new character Foresto, a knight whose name recalls another story of resistance against the invader and who in the prologue speaks the lines most redolent of Risorgimento ideology.[27]

Here the opera provides an interpolation, absent in Werner, clearly motivated by political allusion: the founding of Venice by the refugees from the siege of Aquileia throws a bridge between the barbaric and civil cultures of medieval Italy. Here we find Sismondi once more, who in the chapter of his *Storia della caduta dell' Impero romano*, dedicated to the invasion of the Huns, had taken up the idea that the former inhabitants of Aquileia found in the deep ends of the lagoon a site well suited to stop their flight, deposit their riches, and lay the groundwork for a new city. This story constituted an important part of Sismondi's historical vision because it

[25] Balbo, 'Degli studi di storia italiana nel 1847', in *Il Regno di Carlo Magno*, 243–7.
[26] Balbo, 437.
[27] In 'L'Attila di Zacharias Werner ed il libretto per Verdi', in *Verdi und die deutsche Literatur / Verdi e la letteratura tedesca. Tagung im Centro tedesco di studi veneziani Venedig 20.–21. November 1997. Bericht*, ed. Daniella Goldin Folena and Wolfgang Osthoff (Laaber, 2002), 85, Rita Unfer Lukoschik argues that Foresto is a legendary hero from the house of Este.

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represented the prelude to the growth of those 'laboratories of liberty' that the medieval *comuni* would become for Italy and all of Europe. With this interpolation he closes the circle between the oppression of the Roman Italic people and the prospect of their resurgence – the same resurgence that happens, at least momentarily, in the final scene of the opera with the triumph of the oppressed and the death of the tyrant.

The end result of this web of references maintains few connections with the documentary evidence of fifth century events by which Werner, according to Ian Wood, was seemingly faithfully inspired.[28] It is clear, then, that when Verdi, with striking insistence, urged the librettist to attend to the accuracy of the historical research this did not at all mean a philological exercise of comparing texts in order to achieve a trustworthy history of the barbarian Middle Ages. Rather, as we have seen, a great part of the period's historiography was moving in its own direction, a narrative of the barbarian migrations that was projected onto the present, intended to confirm a destiny of cyclical invasions and dominations and to foreshadow a future of revolt and liberation.[29] That which interested him most was, rather, the most exact reconstruction possible of scenery, costumes, and action according to the visual realism that was forcefully imposed on the theatre of the period and was probably not unrelated to the revolutionary technical innovations that characterised the first decades of the century – optical devices, panoramas, dioramas, eventually even the daguerreotype and photograph – through which a new concept of representation emerged.[30] The composer, therefore, revealed his specific attention to the 'material conditions' of the evocation of the past, to the plausibility of an historical image in order to create a perfect illusion of reality. This would then be translated to the musical level (see Helen Greenwald's essay on the musical and visual effects for dawn over Aquileia).

To return to the initial question, what could Verdi have hoped to find in de Staël's suggestions for Werner's drama? Most likely the possibility of giving life to a powerful piece of national medieval history through a mixture of choruses and incisive characters – that interaction between chorus and the individual upon which Mazzini had so insisted – and the possibility of representing the past with the visual and sonorous accuracy that Romantic drama required. This was not so much a planned exercise in patriotism as participation in a common European discursive web surrounding the birth of nations, which Verdi's musical realisation helped to grow and popularise.

[28] See Ian Wood, '"Adelchi" and "Attila": The Barbarians and the Risorgimento', *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 76 (2008), 233–55.

[29] According to Alberto M. Banti, one can speak in this case of a 'figural' conception of history (along the lines of Auerbach) in which single historical episodes 'acquire the sense of anticipating events that have yet to occur, such as the establishment of a nation'. See *La nazione del Risorgimento. Parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell'Italia unita* (Turin, 2000), 76.

[30] Samuel, *The Spectacular Past*, 111, and Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1991).

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