

The Historiography and Melodrama of the Risorgimento: the Dark Legend of *I due Foscari*

The “Roman” constancy on the part of the aged Doge: inner drama and dreadful patriotism

BY GERARDO TOCCHINI

In returning to the fifteenth-century story of Francesco and Jacopo Foscari, the men of letters and artists of nineteenth-century Europe sided without hesitation with the glorious, aged Doge, betrayed by a conspiracy after having contributed so much to the grandeur of the Serenissima, and with his son who, having undergone torture and been tried three times, finally died in exile (1445-57). The story provided the historical “proof” of the dark legend of the Republic: the Renaissance Venice of poisonings and conspiracies, a city heaving with spies, at the mercy of factions in a permanent state of feud and so powerful as to be able to counter the will of the Doge and cripple his ability to make political decisions – able even to depose him, if the need arose.

I

The vicissitudes of the Foscari family, amongst others, exemplify the Romantic image of the way in which Italy’s former republican states operated. Father and son appear in the story as the innocent victims of a plot hatched by a single, implacable political adversary, Giacomo Loredan, whose diabolical cunning gives him a hold over not only the most tenebrous but also the most powerful judicial

body of the Serenissima, the cornerstone of the Republic: the Council of Ten. Loredan attacked the father through his son, forcing the ageing Doge to witness the torture inflicted on his progeny, to pronounce his own son’s sentence, and finally to resign himself to abdicating. The tragic stature of Francesco Foscari was already encompassed in his reply to the plea of his son, first recorded by Marin Sanudo (1516-33), but then dramatised relentlessly, again and again, in various forms: “Jacomo va et obedisci a quello vol la Terra, e non zerchar più oltre” (“Jacomo, go and obey the dictates of the State, and do not seek anything beyond that”). In this “Roman” constancy on the part of the aged Doge we see played out again the inner drama and the dreadful patriotism of the first Brutus, who sacrificed his own male progeny out of loyalty not only to the Republic but, even before that, to himself.

Even in the mid-seventeenth century the innate instability of the factions of the old republican regimes and the absence of any adequate guarantees to defend the safety of aristocratic families was a common theme of apologists for the monarchy. The first proponents of the European myth of “tenebrous” Venice were, in fact, Nicolas Amelot de La Houssaye and Alexandre ↻



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Feast Days in the Lagoon

For centuries, however, Venice had been anything but dark and gloomy. The historian and man of letters Cesare Cantù, who frequented the same Milanese salons as Verdi, in 1845 expressed his irritation at the picture of the Serenissima that had been spread by “certain foreign historians” which rendered the city “a place of fear, a kind of immense prison in which the terrible sword of the Ten hung over the heads of everyone”. On the contrary, Cantù pointed to the tradition among the narrow streets of the city on the lagoon where “life was so joyful and the carnivals famous all over the world”, to the extent that “the mask was invented in order to facilitate freedom of action by concealing people’s adventures and even their sins”. One wonders whether the Venetian Piave and the young Verdi, with his own experiences fresh in his mind from the months spent in the city for *Ernani*, shared the same feelings when they chose to enrich *I due Foscari* with at least one scene evoking

de Saint Didier, both subjects of an absolute monarch, and both with a past in the Venetian lagoon as diplomats in the service of Louis XIV. In their two works on Venice and its institutions (1676 and 1680), they sought in fact to resolve the problematic issue of the survival of the republican model in the old European regime of principalities and kingdoms. Their fundamental argument was simple: the Republic was based on – and continued to be based on – the persistence of a regime of legal terror, administered with implacable rigour by the Council of Ten, who from century to century watched over the “preservation of the common liberty”, acting as the cornerstone of “the edifice of this great

Aristocracy”. For this reason the Ten had immense powers, comparable only to those conferred in the ancient world on the Ephors of Sparta (who used also to condemn “citizens on the basis of suspicion alone”), or on the Decemviri or the dictators of republican Rome.

For both these Frenchmen the problem was always the same: this type of rule failed to guarantee any immunity to those privileged by birth, so that the republican model was dangerous for everyone, but most of all for the oligarchs themselves, the families of the aristocracy. This myth survived the old regime and the fall of the Serenissima to reappear intact in Count Piere-Antoine Daru’s very




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merriment: that set on the waters of San Marco at the beginning of Act III with the people celebrating on their boats, which provides a clear dramatic foil to the tragic events which follow. Masks and boats, indeed, continue to provide inspiration to contemporary directors and stage designers, however much or little they choose to bring the story up to date in visual terms. Very effective their use both in Werner Herzog’s last production for the Opera di Roma in 2013 (with the intentional effect of a populace extraneous to the affairs of the powerful, to whom they turn their backs, Fig. 9), and in Alden’s production of the same year for Hamburg (Fig. 10), with a clearly defined effect of spatial separation between the high balcony wall and the stage floor with its stylised gondolas – a spectacle which, according to the reviews, “deserved the applause of the audience as a superb fruit of scenic creativity”.

successful *Histoire de la République de Venise* (1819), which remained the most important source regarding the history of Venice for poets and artists throughout the nineteenth century. A diplomat, former minister and senior officer in the Napoleonic army, Daru added to the impenetrable darkness which already surrounded the legend of the Council of Ten a further layer of mystery which greatly appealed to the Romantics – first to Byron, and then to Piave; a mystery surrounding the procedures and intentions of the Ten that the Count believed to be essential to maintaining the prestige of the Venetian institutions, and which led people to believe that the Republic was always privy to everything that was going

on, even when it was far from clear how this could actually be the case.

II

It was Daru who exhumed the tragedy of the Foscari, transforming it in the process into an exemplary case. He strongly maintained the thesis of a conspiracy, and hence the innocence of Jacopo, whom he saw as the victim of false – or, at the very least, of unfounded, inconsistent – accusations; he even resurrected the story of an alleged deathbed confession by the “real” perpetrator of a murder attributed to the Doge’s son – though no trace of such a confession survives. It was Daru, in fact, 

In Byron's Two Foscari, a single blooded thread links Sparta, Rome, Venice and the Terror of the Grande Nation

who provided the apparently reliable historical background that corroborated, at a human level, the cruellest, most gruesome aspects of the whole story. He provided precisely those aspects destined to fuel the drama: the father who witnesses his son being tortured without batting an eyelid, and who himself pronounces the sentence of exile. Building on Sanudo's account, Daru dramatised the farewell scene in masterly fashion, thereby establishing the narrative model that everyone, including Byron, would subsequently draw on. And it was Daru who introduced the essential detail, the striking annotation in Loredan's business accounts where he enters the phrase "il me l'a payée" – "he has paid me". Loredan's slow, tortuous plan, brought to fruition by his persistence alone, was the only cause of the misfortune of the Foscari, father and son, and is in stark contrast to the dignity, almost Christlike, of the aged Doge, who "having returned home, urges his family to forget the injustices of his enemies".

With his *Histoire*, Daru thus formulated a damning indictment that condemned not only the oligarchies who in turn, over the centuries, had made up the magistracy of the Council of Ten, but also those institutions which the Napoleonic armies had definitively ousted, to the benefit of all. Except at the hands of the great soul of the defeated Doge, in that Venice in the grip of feuding factions there was mercy for no-one, just as there was no political stability and no guarantee of the correct administration of the law. It was not until the protestant Swiss republican, Léonard Simonde de Sismondi, in his *Histoire des Républiques italiennes* (1807-18), that someone finally put forward the hypothesis – initially scandalous – that in political bodies the stability generally attributed to monarchies was not necessarily an absolute, universal value, at least in terms of the prospects for wealth, civilised behaviour and "liberty". But even Sigismondo, in dealing with the Foscari, endorsed the story of the vile machinations plotted against the Doge.

It was at this point, and on these foundations, that Lord George Gordon Byron appeared on the scene. He worked on his

verse play, *The Two Foscars*, intermittently throughout his time in Italy, between the years 1816 and 1819. The first edition of his tragedy (1821) included an appendix containing substantial supporting references to the stories of Daru and Sismondi. Byron, too, emphasised several times the "Roman fortitude" of the aged Doge, the "state's servant", and his horrifying, senseless defence of the political system that ruled the "Ocean-Rome" (i.e. the "Rome of the Ocean"). On the stage, the Doge's obstinate determination finds a powerful counterpart in the desperation of Jacopo's wife, Marina, the daughter-in-law of the Doge. In her eyes the senseless cult with which the Doge chooses to sacrifice his own son in the name of "honour, the decrees, | The health, the pride, and welfare of the state" no longer had anything of the nobility of ancient Rome or Sparta. There at least, claims Marina, men died in battle; in Venice, on the other hand, one perished little by little, a victim of internecine conflicts, plots and conspiracies.

Though *The Two Foscari* is a drama, through Marina's lines Byron, the sceptical liberal, conveys his horror for another, more recent dictatorship, that of the Jacobin period of the French Revolution – or, indeed, for any form of state-inspired despotism. In Byron's tragedy, a single blooded thread links Sparta, Rome, Venice and the Terror of the *Grande Nation*: was it not the latter, after all, that claimed a historical and moral continuity with the ancient republics of Greece and Rome, in the name of Virtue and of the Nation in peril? This particular political slant of Byron's play was not taken up – perhaps in many cases, indeed, not even perceived – by those Italian authors who, in the following years, re-worked the legend of the Foscari for the stage and in print. Moreover, in retelling the gloomy story of the dark days of Venice, the poets and dramatists of the Risorgimento disregarded equally the copious Venetian apologetics for all that was positive in the writings of the Enlightenment thinkers and the echoes of the facts of the Revolution, preferring to go back, via Daru, to the enduring legend of La Houssaye, Saint-Didier and the like – and even to the touristic version of the

A Tightly-knit Drama

It was possibly Massimo Mila who first drew attention to both the particularly intimate scope and the dramatic continuity of *I due Foscari*, characteristics that distinguish the opera from the works of Verdi which immediately preceded and followed it. Most of the events, in fact, revolve around the gloomy events involving the triangle of the Doge Francesco, his son Jacopo, and the daughter-in-law and wife Lucrezia Contarini; in the second act, in particular, the two contrasting scenes comprise a sequence consisting of aria, duet, trio, quartet and grand finale within which the whole family tragedy unfolds and is played out. Moreover, the final scene, in which Francesco Foscari is first forced to relinquish power and then dies, is set in a private, domestic environment in which the widow Lucrezia seeks to comfort the ageing Francesco (a fact which, by the way, in our opinion fails to justify the white nightshirts and four-poster beds too often seen in this scene in recent productions). The effect of this extreme concentration on the three protagonists, which in the first two acts generates the sense of a slow, solemn unfolding of the action, was remarked upon by one of the very first reviewers. After the opera's first performance in Milan in 1845, Alberto Mazzucato, himself an opera composer, objected explicitly to Piave's choice – probably owing to the limits of the original available cast – "to neglect the part of Loredano, who, as the source of so many misfortunes ... should have had a leading role", and criticised the fact that his "libretto, after remaining static for two whole acts, [in the third] takes such a fateful course that it is difficult to keep up with it". Mazzucato had no doubts, however, as to the dramatic force of Verdi's music in igniting the situations involving two and three characters in the second act: "Everything here is truly noble, great, almost sacred, and the sung roles are distributed and treated ... in masterly fashion". With suitable voices, in fact, Verdi's music can hardly fail to create its effect, whatever the scenic solutions chosen for performances today, whether timeless and traditional, with the three main characters brightly

story in vogue among eighteenth-century travellers on the Grand Tour.

III

With the Serenissima now dead and buried, Italian writers and the patriots of the Risorgimento, whether moderate or democratically inclined, accepted the old legend at face value, lending it credence again



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spotlighted (London 2014, Fig. 11), or set in a 1930s fascist atmosphere (Santiago de Chile 2015, Fig. 12), or in the cold, modern setting of an interview room of a prison in the late twentieth century (Theater Bonn 2018, Fig. 13).

and again while at the same time adding to it a new, more urgent significance. In their writings, for instance, the patriots of democratic stamp interpreted the history of Venice from the point of view of the steady annihilation of the "will of the people", the plundering of the Doge's power to the exclusive advantage of the Council of Ten, and thus of the patrician families. The belief in the conspiracy thus remained at the centre of the Italian theatre's fascination



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The “Unjust Reward” of Power

The terrible conflict between the public duties of government and private affections has been the driving force of tragedy in the lives of rulers since the dawn of western civilisation; in opera it has often been at the dramatic heart of works since the time of Zeno and Metastasio. The extra element in *I due Foscari* is the degree of power exerted by the Council of Ten over the Doge himself. The censors, concerned about the threat of rebellion, demanded that Francesco Foscari’s angry outburst “my every word and gesture, | even my thoughts are spied upon!.. | As a slave I am here crowned!..” be toned down. But this was not the case everywhere: these lines were softened for Rome in the version printed in the first Ricordi score, which circulated widely (see Giger, p. xx;) but at La Scala the following year it seems, from the libretto sold there, that Piave’s original lines were sung.

Power, the obligations of state and the personal sacrifice these involve, the cruelty of authority that can turn into sudden fragility: these are the elements at the heart of the opera. It is thus logical that Lucrezia, wife and mother, plays a major role

with the legend of the Foscari even after Byron. Carlo Marconi’s tragedy *La famiglia Foscari* (1834) highlighted, in particular, the theme of on-going institutional conflict: assuming that, because of the corruption of the Serenissima’s system of governance, sovereignty no longer lay with the Doge, who, then, was actually in charge in Venice? Certainly not the people; and nor was it the “Maggior Consiglio” (Great Council) which, like the people, no longer dared to pronounce on anything, preferring rather to remain on the sidelines of political life for fear of incurring the wrath of the Ten. The political argument was clear: for centuries the Ten had usurped the “general will [of the people]”, a concept already revived by Byron;

this “general will” was understood now – in the context of the Italian Risorgimento – as a kind of plebiscite, the will of the People and of the Nation, from which – in principal, at least – the power of the Doge was supposed to derive.

The so-called historical Romanticism of Byron, and subsequently that of Risorgimento writers such as Marconi, demonstrate how the age of Revolutions had passed beyond the old, dark legend of La Houssaye and Saint-Didier and others, presenting to the governments of the Restoration old scores to settle and new questions with which to grapple, in terms wholly unthinkable before the collapse of the old regime. For the patriotic canon of the theatre, however, the dark legend continued



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in the work, determined from the outset to work vehemently – though ultimately without success – against the relentless mechanisms of state. Equally essential, if the drama is to work, is that the inexorable power of the Ten over the older Foscari is never for a moment in doubt. It is thus no surprise that in Bonn in 2018 Philipp Kochheim’s transposition of the action to a kind of political *film noir* dominated by visible signs of intense surveillance (spy cameras, hidden microphones, tape recorders, etc.) works well. In this atmosphere reminiscent of a modern German version of *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*) the strong stage presence and vocal qualities of Anna Princeva as Lucrezia and Lucio Gallo as Foscari made a major contribution to the overall effect, especially in their first duet (Fig. 14) and the final catastrophe (Fig. 15). Here too the satisfaction of Loredano (Leonard Barnad, dressed in a buttoned blue jacket, regimental tie and glasses, to be seen on the right in Fig. 15) is rendered palpable, his disturbing presence on the stage amounting here to far more than his vocal role as a supporting character would merit.

to inspire writers’ interpretations of the government and history of the Serenissima, projecting itself by a simple extension to all the despotic governments of the time. This is true no less of Piave’s libretto of *I Due Foscari* for Verdi: this is the drama which, in its final version, is linked most directly to Byron, primarily through the anti-Venetian tirades of Jacopo’s wife, Byron’s Marina who, in Piave, becomes Lucrezia Contarini. With her energetic, at times vehement, disposition, Marina/Lucrezia is so unlike the canonical female character of Italian opera that she provoked a fair deal of perplexity, and even a certain amount of irony. Nevertheless, this served to place Verdi’s opera firmly in the

tradition of the dark legend, and thus in a patriotic canon which, however incredibly, continued to stage a story so unedifying for the dignity of the country.

IV

It was a strange contradiction. If, until that time, the anti-Venetian myth had been opposed primarily by the Austrian censors, reconsidering the awful legend of the Foscari after 1848 did not reflect at all well on the history of Italy. It was too late to undo the effects of such masochism, and this was the fault of many: of foreign historians like Daru and the others, but also – admitted the

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conservative Italian historian Cesare Cantù – the fault “of our own negligence”. For the Italian republics of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance the reason for all this appeared to fall on the old argument of Italy’s “particularity”. Cantù knew well that other Italian historians of moderate persuasion, such as Carlo Botta and Cesare Balbo, also accepted the interpretation that laid the blame for the end of Italy’s freedom and the failure of the unification process before the foreign invasions and the Italian wars on the internecine feuding inside the old states and on the perpetual conflict between the powers of the peninsula.

This was one of the unshakeable beliefs of the patriotic conception of Italian history that was promulgated in the literature, poetry and theatre of the so-called “canon” of the Risorgimento. For the Catholic, liberal-conservative Carlo Botta (1826), the enmity between the republics perfectly illustrated the character of a regime that was physiologically weak because it was quarrelsome and divided; in the throes of perpetual dispute, it was destined, sooner or later, to fall under the yoke of some foreign power. For the republican Sismondi, on the other hand, the peninsula’s freedom was lost with the victory of the Signoria, not least because the republics had ceased to be such, except in name, a long time since. He had no doubt that there was a precise causal relationship between the decadence of Venice and the totalitarian degeneration of the institutions of the Republic, locked one to the other in free fall as if in a downward spiral. According to Botta – who, unlike Sismondi, declared his admiration for the preservation of the efficiency of the Venetian government even during the final centuries of the Serenissima – it was, on the contrary, the much deprecated severity of the Council of Ten that had miraculously staved off its end.

Among the elements of the nineteenth-century saga of the Foscari that more obviously related to the Risorgimento was the type of punishment inflicted – not once, but three times – on Jacopo: exile. The persistence of the theme of “the sigh of the exile” in the

output of the canon is noteworthy; no less so is the weight of the psychological impact this had on the audiences of the time. With books and theatre productions both subject to strict censorship, eulogising and martyring the patriot was far easier and more effective than direct criticism of the institutional models. Through this continual “melodramaticisation” and sentimentalisation of political themes, the authors of the canon were able to establish a stronger, more immediate connection with their readers and with their audiences. Bearing in mind the aims of this “patriotic Romanticism”, it was therefore essential to transform the reckless historical figure of Jacopo Foscari into a blameless hero, and Venice into a death-dispensing machine driven by the arbitrary secrets of its plots and machinations. Once again it was that great exhumers of the story, Daru, who first put forward the theory of Jacopo’s innocence – historically speaking, the least plausible theory. In fact, in the middle of the century various authorities on Italian history, including the historical societies of Venice, challenged these “enormous lies”, but to no avail.

For these latter historians it was first and foremost a question of historical truth as much as of the patriotic dignity of Venice. “This is how they strive for effect, for great feelings and emotions”, wrote one of them, Francesco Berlan, “often at the expense of the truth and by insulting our dead!” (1852). They had much to be indignant about, and claimed that in Venice “like everywhere, there was severity, but there was also humanity, not, perhaps, like everywhere”. With documentary evidence to hand, they managed to demonstrate the guilt of Jacopo and the improper collusion of his father: but it was an unequal struggle, and they were on the losing side; it was a war between the professional historians, delving deep into the archives, and the rest of the world – the world of poetry, theatre, fashion, the art industry, entertainment and tourism. One has only to think that in the old Ca’ Foscari – today the seat of the Università Ca’ Foscari di Venezia – there was even a tourist trail – fictitious, and

In the old Ca’ Foscari there was even a tourist trail – fictitious, and clearly literary in origin – as early as the mid-nineteenth century

clearly literary in origin – as early as the mid-nineteenth century. By tipping a member of the staff it was possible for a visitor to see the room where the Doge was supposed to have died, to view there the very alcove where he died – that, too, probably a fake – and finally to enter a room described – spuriously – to tourists as Jacopo’s nuptial bedroom. The two rooms thus ended up as part of a single tourist trail that included both the Ca’ Foscari on the Canal Grande and the building that was, then as now, the most visited tourist landmark in Venice: the

Palazzo Ducale and its prisons.

In view of this it is pointless to trawl through the sources, to try to bring some order to the relevant documents, often cryptic and difficult to interpret, to persist in following trails that are already dead, to unravel this factional conflict. It is sad to say, but at the level of mainstream culture, myth and legend almost always win over historical truth. For this reason, in fact, neither the dark legend of Venice nor the story of the two Foscari will ever be undermined. ●

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