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Politics and Sentiments in *Risorgimento* Italy

Melodrama and the Nation

Carlotta Sorba

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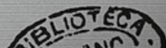

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Cover illustration: *Mode d'Italia* [Italian Fashion] in "Il Corriere delle Dame", 27 march 1848

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To Silvio Lanaro,
master and teacher of dangerous circumnavigations

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Emotions, Politics, Entertainment—A Nineteenth-Century Transnational Plot

On a Rai Radio channel, a radio host is confronted with a visual spectacle that is difficult to put into words: the formidable acrobatics of the *Frecce Tricolori*, the aerobatic demonstration team of the Italian Air Force, are underway. How is he to convey most effectively the strong emotions of such a show to radio listeners? He has an idea, apparently just occurred to him, which he immediately communicates, excitedly, to his audience: at the next opportunity, he will host the broadcast from one of the planes, in order to capture and convey his emotions to the public at the precise moment in which they are felt, live and without any mediation.

It is not the absurdity of the idea that forces me to stop the car, nor the generic reference to the emotionality of the witness and his audience, an obsessive constant of current radio and television communication and its alleged "authenticity". What strikes me is the precise and extraordinary, as well as rather unsettling, correlation with the eighteenth-century texts I am reading. Whilst studying the theatres of the *Risorgimento* and the not so obvious and linear links between the stage and the political events of the period, I find myself on a somewhat tortuous path, reading Diderot, Mercier, Rousseau and their writings on theatre, which for the first time focused on the "effects" of theatre on its audience. When Jean-Jacques Rousseau—as is well known not at all convinced of the pedagogic potential of the stage—wrote *Pygmalion*, which would be considered the first *mélodrame* and would soon spread throughout Europe thanks to its many

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C. Sorba, *Politics and Sentiments in* Risorgimento *Italy*, Italian and Italian American Studies,
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translations, he wanted to do exactly what the unsuspecting radio host is proposing: identify a form of theatrical communication capable of expressing and transmitting emotions precisely when they are felt, in their original and purest form, free from mediation or interference.[1] His goal was to overcome the artificial language of theatre to achieve a direct connection from heart to heart, from the actor to the spectator, convinced as he was that the truth can always be found in "feeling".

The words of the radio host show us how a claim such as this—to communicate our emotions exactly as they arise—and the fact that this represents an important approach to the profound essence of reality, has not been dismissed by contemporary common sense. In fact, it has found new and important prompts within the so-called audience democracy we find ourselves in. French political scientist Bernard Manin, who has effectively used this category, has shown how the profound crisis of mass political parties that characterises current political systems has also entailed a gradual replacement of their intermediary role with civil society by forms of direct communication with the citizen-spectator-actor.[2] The origins of this idea, as we shall see, actually lie at the dawn of democratic thought, in the folds of a culture of sensibility well represented by the eighteenth-century writings and reflections I am working on. They postulated a new, close connection between the political sphere and that of feelings; this makes me think that, however tortuous, my present circumnavigation of the relationship between politics and melodramatic imagination makes sense and that it is worth pursuing its first traces in post-revolutionary Europe and in one of its most effective developments during the Italian *Risorgimento*.

Emotionality During the *Risorgimento*

This book was prompted by a new focus on emotions and on the relationship between emotions and politics in a historical perspective; this was due not so much to methodological curiosity, however fascinating in its complexity it may be,[3] but to a very obvious observation to anyone familiar

[1] J.-J. Rousseau, *Pygmalion, Pimmalione, partiture del mélodrame e della scena lirica in facsimile*, with an introductory essay by E. Sala, Ricordi, Milan 1996.

[2] See B. Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 1997.

[3] On the difficulty of writing a history of emotions, many reflections have been published in recent years that have focused on the accessibility of the emotional dimension itself and on the possible relationships between emotional discourse and practices. I only point out two

with the documentary material about the *Risorgimento*. A very strong and totally unrestrained emotional charge fills many of the public and private writings of the Italian *Risorgimento*, the span of time between the French invasion in 1796 and national unification in 1861. This is particularly true for what has been called the "Long Italian 1848", that is to say the period between the appointment of Pius IX as Pope in 1846 and the fall of the democratic republics in 1849. This emotional charge was also clearly visible in men who could be described as moderate and/or pragmatic, by their nature and temperament even more than political persuasion. Well-known political figures such as Luigi Carlo Farini, Carlo Cattaneo, Marco Minghetti, even Cesare Balbo, who looked with horror at any expression of revolutionary disorder, all displayed, at least around 1848, forms of emotional excitement reflected in their language and narration of events. The political thought that accompanied the *Risorgimento* movement was also imbued with reflections on virtue, sensitivity and passion, in a resurgence project aiming to be both political and moral.[4] The emotional tone of the battles of the *Risorgimento*, up to that key date, is so intense as to arouse in modern readers a sense of immediate distance and almost unease. Of course, there are many accounts of the *Risorgimento* and the cultural, ideological and anthropological differences between the protagonists are remarkable; but they all seem to share the opinion that Austrian domination in Italy was nothing but barbarism, ferocity and unprecedented violence against the weak and defenceless.

The same excessive passion, expressive emphasis, even crudeness in the stories of the violence suffered reverberated later in post-unification accounts, when, with a strong pedagogical aim, the narration of the epic of the Italian *Risorgimento* was presented to new Italians, and its myth consolidated through the practice of museum exhibitions. It was, in fact,

Italian essays that take stock of the international debate: S. Ferente, *Storici ed emozioni*, in "Storica", XV, 2009, 43–45, pp. 371–392, and R. Petri, *Sentimenti, emozioni. Potenzialità e limiti della storia culturale*, in "Memoria e ricerca", 40, 2012, pp. 75–92. See also two reviews of studies: E. Sullivan, *The History of Emotions: Past, Present and Future*, in "Cultural History", 2, 2013, pp. 93–102, and B. Gammerl, *Transitory Feelings: On Challenges and Trends within the History of Emotions*, in "Contemporanea", 2, 2014, pp. 335–344. For a recent overview of this approach, see B.H. Rosenwein and R. Cristiani, *What Is the History of Emotions?*, Polity Press 2018.

[4] As skilfully and persuasively argued by R. Romani, *Sensibilities of the Risorgimento. Reasons and Passions in Political Thought*, Brill, Leiden 2018.

one instance when the vocabulary of feelings and emotions ran through political communication most widely.

Is it possible and appropriate to take this particular stylistic and narrative phenomenon of passionate excess seriously, trying to understand and explain it, searching for its likely origins by addressing the delicate terrain of emotional expression in its historical manifestations?[5] I would not have started doing it if a book had not opened up the way for me, taking me back, almost against my will, to the theatres from which I had started. This is the book that, many years ago, Peter Brooks devoted to melodramatic imagination, a narrative and expressive structure which developed in Europe immediately after the revolutionary storm of the late eighteenth century.[6] In this seminal volume, the scholar focused in particular on a genre of entertainment which he felt had given rise to the corresponding adjective (melodramatic), used much more frequently than the noun to indicate expressive forms characterised by extreme emotional amplification, a marked moral Manichaeism and the equation between victim and virtue, where suffering becomes the inevitable sign of moral rectitude. These origins are not linked, as any Italian speaker might think, to opera, with which the Italian term *melodramma* has always been synonymous,[7] but to a minor yet precisely codified theatrical genre, openly commercial, which had spread in Paris' theatres in the years between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries and from there throughout Europe, representing one of the most consolidated and transnational expressions of nineteenth-century popular theatre. According to Brooks, this particular form of short prose tragedy with musical accompaniment embodied a theatrical device in many ways new and "modern", but also and above all a real imaginative structure, a way of giving meaning to the reality that in that period had not only crossed

[5] It is no coincidence that the idea for this book came about when writing an essay for the Einaudi Annal devoted to the *Risorgimento* which paid new attention to the mental and emotional universe of the *Risorgimento*. See the discussion on the book edited by S. Soldani, *Le emozioni del Risorgimento*, in "Passato e presente", 75, 2008, pp. 17–32.

[6] Unlike in France, where the first edition is from 2010, in Italy, the book was translated in the 1980s, thanks to a careful scholar and a small but excellent publishing house: P. Brooks, *L'immaginazione melodrammatica*, Pratiche editrice, Parma 1985 (orig. ed. *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama end the Mode of Excess*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1976).

[7] On the confusion caused by the misunderstanding between the two terms, see, for example, E. Sala, *In che senso "El Dorado" di Marcel L'Herbier è un "mélodrame"*?, in E. Degrada (ed.), *Il melodramma*, Bulzoni, Rome 2007, pp. 111–144.

other genres and forms of art and entertainment, from novels to painting, but had largely gone beyond the world of fiction; and which, in a chronological span that can be limited to the first half of the nineteenth century, had fed social behaviour and the political sphere with its devices. Studies on the subject are now very advanced and it is much clearer that the French *mélodrame* originating in the boulevards at the turn of the century was not the exclusive place where that "modality" of expression and narration could be found. From the end of the eighteenth century, it ran right through fictional literature in its various forms. From the historical point of view, however, there is no doubt that this new form of entertainment, just as Brooks pointed out, represented, in that specific phase, the product most capable of concentrating in itself the melodramatic elements most suited, as we shall see in greater detail, to strike, move and involve a large audience.

Literary and film scholars above all welcomed Brooks' suggestions, developing, from the 1980s onwards, a robust line of investigation into the forms of the melodramatic. Although precisely located in post-revolutionary Europe, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such "imagination" had in fact also found expression in different ways and forms in later contexts, from silent cinema to late twentieth-century soap operas, lending itself to fruitful analysis in such areas.[8] In fact, in those years, these studies represented an important element in the newly developing attention to, and reappraisal of, forms of mass culture and their purely narrative and emotional aspects, so distant from the more canonical avant-garde production. In actual fact, however, the book highlighted an issue that was first of all historical, since the "mode" of the imagination it spoke of was considered the product of a very precise juncture, a proto-romantic phase when an attempt to give meaning to reality through fictional narrative had been particularly broad and widespread, as well as characterised by the gradual emergence of a public political sphere understood in modern terms. Brooks' had therefore been a rare and precious

[8] From an almost embarrassing genre, excluded from literary analysis and the object of irony, in the 1980s the *mélo* became a subject of great interest for analysing the trajectories of mass culture, a sort of paradigm of the circularity between high and low culture and of the continuous and consistent exchanges between the cultured and popular dimensions; for some of the most important output of that season of studies, see I. Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, Routledge, London 1985; J. Przybos, *L'entreprise mélodramatique*, José Corti, Paris 1987; J. Bratton, J. Cook, C. Gledhill (eds), *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, British Film Institute Publishing, London 1994.

attempt to investigate the social history of literary forms, the historical connections between literature and sensitivity, as Franco Moretti and Stefano Rosso wrote at the time, quoting an interview with Brooks himself. His attempt was based, the latter replied, on an "immoderate passion for storytelling and its way of organising our perceptions of the world".[9]

In the Anglo-Saxon world, historians certainly did not ignore the book, in the context of a new encounter with literary studies taking place in those years; but they developed its suggestions only in part, especially in their usefulness for stressing, at the peak of the linguistic turn, the central importance of narratives and their morphologies in structuring collective identities.[10] Now that the importance of narratives and the strong sense of social agency connected to them, is widely accepted in historical studies, new elements of interest emerge from this book and the themes it had helped to focus on, linked, on the one hand, to reconstructing the origin of the melodramatic in post-revolutionary European society, its various manifestations in different media and local contexts and its connections with the culture of sensibility; and, on the other, to exploring its narrative but also generally expressive implications, as a mode of experience which also influenced the politicisation practices of the early nineteenth century.[11]

For this reason, today, in the light of the extensive literature that has in the meantime investigated the pathways and repertoires of political mobilisation and democratisation processes as they also developed around the key theme of the nation in a post-revolutionary society, it is worth returning to this topic. The crucial role of the imagination as an agent of action in building nations has been widely recognised and investigated, from Benedict Anderson's flagship book to the most recent works promoted by

[9] The interview with Peter Brooks is transcribed in the appendix of B. Gallo (ed.), *Forme del melodrammatico: parole e musica* (*1700–1800*), Guerini e Associati, Milan 1988, pp. 343–356.

[10] For an early reaction to Peter Brooks' book, see L. James, *Taking Melodrama Seriously: Theatre and Nineteenth Century Studies*, in "History Workshop", III, 1977, 1, pp. 151–158. For an interesting critical review of the historical use of this category, see R. McWilliam, *Melodrama and Historians*, in "Radical History Review", 78, 2000, pp. 57–84.

[11] Such an aesthetic and imaginative category allows us to approach the complex relationships between discursive representations and social practices (which prompted me to work in this area). See the very useful reflections by J. Epstein, *In Practice: Studies in the Language and Culture of Popular Politics in Modern Britain*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003. Brooks himself maintained that he was particularly interested not in melodrama as a narrative device but as a mode of expression, within the framework of an anthropological approach to literature that would recover the sense of the human context.

the European Science Foundation, which have conducted a comprehensive reflection on the building and functioning of national narratives.[12] In this book, we shall discuss a specific form of imagination, to use Brooks' term, or, better still, a mode of narration and expression that can be defined as melodramatic. It seemed to me an interesting point of view, first of all because it can cause the interaction with each other, showing their connections, of three processes, on which historical studies have worked with growing interest but mostly disjointedly: (1) the establishment, during the second half of the eighteenth century, of a new culture of sensibility which imbued the public communication of the revolution; (2) the parallel development of an entertainment sphere aimed at an increasingly large and diverse audience; (3) the gradual process of transition towards political modernity, with its practices, its languages and its communicative devices.

Politics, Spectacle and Entertainment in Early Nineteenth-Century Europe

The *mélodrame* born in the Paris boulevards at the turn of the nineteenth century must be considered as the most complex and most successful product of what we could call the first "society of spectacle", if with this term, borrowed from Guy Debord's cult book,[13] we mean, less ideologically than its author, a society in which a spectacular entertainment activity with a decidedly commercial profile and aimed at a wide and not necessarily educated audience began to develop; and where this had wider repercussions on the structuring of the public sphere.

This activity took place in large theatres, where a sizeable audience flocked every night, looking for strong sensations, twists, real special

[12] On the Esf project entitled *Representations of the Past: The Writing of National Histories in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Europe* (Nhist), see S. Berger and A. Mycock (eds), *Europe and Its National Histories*, special issue of "Storia della storiografia", L, 2006, 4. See also, for its bibliography, S. Berger, L. Eriksonas, A. Mycock (eds), *Narrating the Nation: Representations in History, Media and the Arts*, Berghan Books, New York–Oxford 2008.

[13] In Guy Debord (*The society of Spectacle*, Detroit, Black § Red 1983, orig. ed. 1967), the term was synonymous with an excessive and boundless consumerist society, ultimately of commodification of the world. For a historical contextualisation of the book and its fortune, see the catalogue of the exhibition recently organised with the material from Debord's archive: E. Guy and L. Le Bras (eds), *Guy Debord. Un art de la guerre*, Éditions de la Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Gallimard, Paris 2013.

effects; its news, characters and intrigues filled the pages of newspapers, and not just those expressly devoted to information about "variety" shows; finally, it caused identification phenomena with the characters acting on the stage. And this society, taking up again Debord's analogies, was increasingly devoted to image. Processes of industrialisation and marketing of visual consumption developed in it rapidly, producing ever newer and inexpensive graphic and editorial objects.[14] Historiography has so far dealt relatively little with these phenomena of collective distraction, so that much remains to be investigated around the real societies of spectacle, historically understood, in their complex dimensions, as both social, cultural and, obviously, political.[15] In fact, it is increasingly clear that the political sphere had relations and activated more or less close and deliberate connections with the sphere of entertainment in the past, too, and not only in our contemporary times. Bringing these elements back into mainstream historical writing also clearly represents an important step forward towards more complex and sophisticated reconstructions of the imaginative structures and social experiences of the past.[16]

In addition to an expansion of the research agenda in this direction, a somewhat different periodisation of the phenomenon from the current one is also emerging. In fact, much research shows that the culture of entertainment—in the modern and commercial sense of the term—did not emerge suddenly in the second half of the nineteenth century, but had deep and largely transnational roots that in European cities lay between the Enlightenment and the Romantic ages.[17] We should also bear in mind that the beginning of the first entertainment industry lay at the core of a

[14] For important contributions on the visual aspects of nineteenth-century media developments, see V. Fiorino, G.L. Fruci, A. Petrizzo (eds), *Il lungo Ottocento e le sue immagini. Politica, media, spettacolo*, Ets, Pisa 2013.

[15] A significant step forward in this direction is C. Charle, *Théâtres en capitales. Naissance de la société du spectacle à Paris, Berlin, Londres et Viennes*, Albin Michel, Paris 2008; and also Ibid. (ed.), *Sociétés du spectacle*, monographic issue of "Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales", 186–187, 2011.

[16] On the development of *performance studies* and on the focus they place on the theme of spectacle and spectacularity, see the introduction to S. Goldhill and R. Osborne (eds), *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 1999; for a more recent overview of performance and historical studies, see S. Gunn, *Analysing Behaviour as Performance*, in S. Gunn and L. Faire (eds), *Research Methods for History*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2012, pp. 184–202.

[17] See *Leisure cultures in Urban Europe, c 1700–1870* (ed. by P. Borsay and J.H. Furnee), Manchester University Press, Manchester 2016.

broader process of change in which an epochal transformation of cultural production—at least on the supply level—foreshadowed what can be defined as "mass proto-culture". In this phase, in France, the development of a new "industrial literature", which even seemed to undermine the aesthetic dimension by commodifying it, was denounced with total bewilderment.[18]

This process would obviously only be completed in the late nineteenth century, when the development of literacy and political democratisation also allowed an actual growth in demand and made publishing, theatre and popular entertainment a consolidated reality. We are therefore talking about a preliminary, but no less important phase. This was the time of the enormous European success of Walter Scott's novels—read avidly by a diverse readership, in terms of gender and culture—followed immediately afterwards by those penned by Charles Dickens, Eugène Sue and Alexandre Dumas the elder; of the publication and spread of the first newspapers and illustrated books; of the development of popular and commercial forms of entertainment made to strike the eyes and hearts of not necessarily cultured spectators (e.g. optical shows, such as panoramas and dioramas; or the scenes *à grande spectacle* of prose melodramas, *vaudevilles* and *féeries*). All this produced, according to contemporary observers, an extraordinary expansion of the possibilities of imagination and narration of reality offered to individuals and communities. For example, the reaction of a refined intellectual such as François-René de Chateaubriand to the very strong impression of reality that seeing the Panoramas of Jerusalem and Athens on the Paris boulevards had made upon him is striking. "The illusion was complete—he wrote. At first glance I recognised the monuments and places I had indicated. Never was a traveller challenged to such an extent. Never could I have expected Jerusalem and Athens to be transported to Paris".[19] Changes of this kind in the conditions in which reality is perceived are a relevant aspect of nineteenth-century "modernity" and were reflected well beyond the specific sphere of leisure.[20] How and to what

[18] C.A. Sainte-Beuve, *De la littérature industrielle*, in "Revue des deux mondes", September 1839, now in Ibid., *Pour la critique*, edited by A. Prassoloff and J.L. Diaz, Gallimard, Paris 1992, pp. 197–222.

[19] F.-R. de Chateubriand, *Itinéraire de Paris à Jerusalem et de Jerusalem à Paris*, Impr. de Béthune et Plon, Paris 1839, pp. 1–2.

[20] Modernity is by definition an unstable and poorly definable concept. In historiography, we continue to think about it, but we tend to distinguish the specificities of nineteenth-century modernity (the one we will talk about here) from the twentieth-century one; for an

extent did these innovations affect the experiences of a public political sphere that in the meantime saw its target audience grow, new communication channels open up and its objectives diversified?

But let us return to the *Risorgimento*. In the first forty years of the nineteenth century, a political movement arose in Italy, internally articulated but aimed at the independence of the peninsula. With its narratives, its heroes and its symbols, it first came to light in the three years between 1846 and 1849. It is therefore legitimate to wonder—and this is what I will try to do—whether there were links between the two phenomena; whether there were exchanges, intersections, influences between a burgeoning consumer culture and rising nationalisms; between the initial foreshadowing of a society of entertainment and a political arena that in countries such as Italy was being built around the objective of nationhood. In other words, was the fact that Alexandre Dumas, one of the undisputed protagonists of those cultural developments, was so fascinated and personally involved in the Italian events of those years a mere coincidence?[21] Or the fact that images of Garibaldi in his various guises as leader circulated throughout Europe and invaded the illustrated press, proposing a very similar hero to those who had featured in Walter Scott's novels?[22]

A specific research interest in the "media" dimension of the *Risorgimento* and in the role that the spread of the national-patriotic discourse through new—visual and textual—media had in making the Italian *Risorgimento* a real global phenomenon has emerged only recently.[23] What we shall attempt to probe here is to what extent those media were simple vehicles for the dissemination of discourses elaborated elsewhere, or whether they

example of comparative analysis, see J. Seigel, *Modernity and Bourgeois Life: Society, Politics and Culture in England, France and Germany since 1750*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012.

[21] G. Pécout, *Una crociera nel Mediterraneo con Garibaldi*, in A. Dumas, *Viva Garibaldi*, Einaudi, Turin 2004, pp. VI–XXI; J.-Y. Mollier, *Alexandre Dumas et la littérature industrielle*, in *Dumas. Une lecture de l'histoire*, edited by M. Arrous, Maisonneuve et Larose, Paris 2003, pp. 135–152.

[22] An obligatory reference is L. Riall, *Garibaldi. Invention of a Hero*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2007, who has reconstructed the media dimension of the so-called Hero of the Two Worlds.

[23] J. Davis and M. Riva (eds), *Mediating the Risorgimento*, monographic issue of "Journal of Modern Italian Studies", XVIII, 2013, 2; C.A. Bayly and E.F. Biagini (eds), *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalisation of Democratic Nationalism 1830–1920*, British Academy, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008.

contributed to shaping them, in a circulation of narrative and expressive devices that crossed different contexts.

The Public Sphere During the *Risorgimento*: New Historical Readings

This book is part of an interpretative review of the *Risorgimento* phenomenon which in recent years has involved various aspects and themes. First of all, what do we mean when we talk about *Risorgimento*? French historiography has recently paid particular attention to the origin and development of *chrononymes*, that is to say, terms used to identify and define a span of time, both in common speech and in historical studies, and often to organise its memory.[24] The term *Risorgimento* is one of the most interesting, both because it was forged by contemporaries, and so arose in the same period it defines, and because it has a powerful narrative and even visual charge, which with obvious religious references recalls the "resurrection" of the country to a new life after centuries of decline and foreign occupation. It is a term that developed as a political slogan in the activism of the first decades of the nineteenth century and immediately took on the character of a mobilising word, almost a war cry to incite the population to strive for independence from the Austrian invaders. It became a real "period name" in the 1880s, when in the new unified state an effort of cultural nationalisation was started, which included a strong enhancement of the epic that had led the country to national unity and independence, that historical process which was definitively named the National *Risorgimento* and which the ruling class of the time went on to enhance and embellish. It is clear that historiography was immediately directly involved in the construction of this cult of the origins of the homeland. These objectives of civil pedagogy, aimed at promoting a solid national integration after centuries of fragmentation and municipalist struggles, at the beginning of the twentieth century presided over both the establishment of some great documentary works (e.g. the collection of the writings of the fathers of the homeland) and the organisation of research around this crucial period in Italian history.

It is therefore easy to imagine how the study of the Italian nineteenth century, especially in its political-cultural aspects, was for a long time

[24] D. Kalifa (ed.), *Les noms d'époque. De "Restauration" à "années de plomb"*, Gallimard, Paris 2020.

deeply influenced by these origins, which distanced it from the debates of international historiography and in general from the many innovations that in the meantime concerned historiographical practice. Perhaps the obvious anachronism of that line of research has favoured the profound renewal which in the last twenty years has made the so-called new History of the *Risorgimento* a rather significant collective laboratory of historiographic innovation, capable of producing new research based on questions, points of view and renewed approaches.[25] In this "*Risorgimento* revisited", as in the titles of a conference and a book from a few years ago, the Italian case emerged from its isolation and was finally included in the Euro-Atlantic framework of the age of revolutions and counter-revolutions. It also proved to be an interesting case both for the study of the origin, morphology and spread of a national-patriotic discourse, and for the study of political action and mobilisation in the early nineteenth century. The new studies have in fact disproved the exclusively elitist vision of participation in the *Risorgimento* that had prevailed until then. The *Risorgimento*, Alberto Mario Banti and Paul Ginsborg argued in their introduction to an important collection of new studies on the subject, was a "mass" movement, to the extent that this term may be used for the period considered. In other words, large sections of the urban popular classes had participated in it, experimenting with new languages and new practices that had animated the public sphere of the *Risorgimento*. In such a renewed research agenda, literary culture, theatres and music, emotions, love and family, women and masculinity have found ample space, as have, as we shall see, the national melodramatic style, its words, gestures and material signs.

This book does not only aim to reposition the *Risorgimento* in a transnational context of intellectual and political development of nationalisms, which is now well underway.[26] It aims to take a further step forward by

[25] For an overview of this research area, see S. Patriarca and L. Riall (eds), *Risorgimento Revisited: Nationalism and Culture in Nineteenth Century Italy*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2012; M. Isabella, *Rethinking Italy's Nation-Building 150 Years Afterwards: The New Risorgimento Historiography*, in "Past and present", 217, 2012, pp. 247–268; A.M. Banti, A. Chiavistelli, L. Mannori and M. Meriggi (eds), *Atlante culturale del Risorgimento. Lessico del linguaggio politico dal Settecento all'Unità*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 2011.

[26] See O. Janz and L. Riall (eds), *The Italian Risorgimento: Transnational Perspectives*, special issue of "Modern Italy", XIX, 2014, 1; G. Pécout, *Pour une lecture méditérranéenne et transnationale du Risorgimento*, in C. Brice and G. Pécout (eds), *L'Italie du Risorgimento. Relectures*, in "Revue d'histoire du XIX siècle", 44, 2012, pp. 29–47.

inserting the experience of the *Risorgimento* within the framework of a broader transmedia flow activated between different, and only apparently distant, fields of communication.[27] The intention is to make the political dimension interact more closely with other experiences of collective living. From this point of view, the viewing lens represented by melodramatic imagination is particularly significant because it crosses various contexts, configuring itself as an expressive mode well anchored to a precise historical moment and at the same time susceptible to many possible variations in space and time.

First and foremost, however, I would like to avoid any misunderstanding. The discourse on the interaction between the *Risorgimento* and media culture that this book will address does not intend to diminish the reality, the value as well as the drama of the *Risorgimento* battles, reducing them to stories suitable for wide consumption. Quite the opposite. It wants to accord greater importance and ability to act on reality to a cultural production conceived for the market, which generally does not appear in national literary histories or in the reconstructions of political history, but which with its narrative and expressive devices influenced the behaviour, sensitivities and imagination of the early nineteenth century, even in countries such as Italy, where the process of widening of audiences, in publishing and in the theatre as well as in politics, was certainly less advanced compared to what was happening beyond the Alps.

Structure of the Book

When following its path around the relationship between melodramatic and political imagination, this book therefore touches on different places and contexts, as indeed it must. It starts outside Italy, between Paris and London, to follow closely the development of new places and new forms of entertainment that at the end of the eighteenth century articulated the idea and experience of the citizen-spectator (Chap. 2—*Emotions for everyone: new entertainment spaces in Europe*). It continues by reconstructing the origin (both philosophical and commercial) of *mélodrame* as one of

[27] An attempt at investigations in this direction has been started by some historians of French literature such as M.-E. Thérenty and A. Vaillant, who have suggested a research agenda on the history of literary communication as part of a more general framework of history of the forms of communication and their interactions; see *Histoire littéraire et histoire culturelle*, in L. Martin e S. Venayre, *L'histoire culturelle du contemporain*, Actes du colloque de Cerisy, Nouveau monde éditions, Paris 2005, pp. 271–290.

the first shows conceived for mass consumption and able to speak to educated and uneducated spectators by tugging at the heartstrings. It also shows the first developments of a production that immediately became intense and almost serial, as well as widespread in theatres all over Europe (Chap. 3—*A theatrical genre for post-revolutionary society*). Starting from contemporary reflections, it considers the *mélo* as a "mover of the heart", an imaginative structure that pervaded the sensitivity of the period and affected the political dimension, its narratives and practices, in particular around the theme of the nation (Chap. 4—*Between* mélodrame *and melodramatic imagination*). The Italian case, where in the first decades of the nineteenth century one of the largest and most complex national movements in Europe took shape, is particularly significant in this sense. What connections were there between the first developments of a media culture, at least virtually conceived for wide consumption, and a political sphere struggling to take shape around the battles of the *Risorgimento*? To grasp the peculiarities of the Italian melodramatic style, Chap. 5 (*Melodrama Italian-style: in search of an audience between fiction and politics*) focuses on a theme considered crucial by many contemporaries: the search for and identification of an audience—for letters and for politics—to address and on which to gauge one's messages.

Chapter 6 (*The melodramatic narration of oppressed Italy*) is devoted to the melodramatic construction of the *Risorgimento* narrative—in a complex interweaving of fiction, political analysis and historiography—and to its dissemination. Here, in particular, the communicative specificities of the Long Italian 1848 are addressed, when the need to speak to many and mobilise their energies favoured the wide and almost literal use by patriotic activism of expressive methods that drew much from melodrama.

At this juncture, and within the framework of an unprecedented mobilisation, a form of sentimentalising of politics was put into action: it found in the melodramatic spectacularising of the national past a means not only effective and convincing, but also of strong performative significance (Chap. 7—*Not just words: melodramatic bodies in the 'Long 1848'*). For this reason, too, this melodrama of the nation ended up becoming, after the unification and the end of the battles, the expressive mode of the myth of the national *Risorgimento*, to be proposed in school curricula, in children's books and in the first films dedicated to the origins of the new Italy (Chap. 8—*The language of sentiment and politics*).

CHAPTER 2

Emotions for Everyone: New Entertainment Spaces in Europe

Two Beginnings

What do a trained monkey in a nightshirt and slippers and Denis Diderot's writings on theatre have in common? Nothing apparent, obviously. Yet they represent two possible and just as legitimate beginnings in this book's journey. In actual fact, they are two beginnings that must be kept strictly together, in order to fully grasp their overall meaning. In order to understand how, at the end of the eighteenth century, in France, the *mélodrame*, a theatrical genre that would have great success and circulation in early-nineteenth-century Europe originated, and how it would influence the imagination and political culture of the time, both contexts—street shows and a new theory on theatrical writing—are equally important and must be borne in mind.[1]

[1] A fine collection of essays that could not be used originally in this volume as it came out a few years after its Italian publication has closely analysed the emergence of early melodrama in a historical-literary and historical-musicological perspective, substantially confirming this reading (*The melodramatic moment. Music and theatrical culture, 1790–1820*, edited by K. Hambridge and J. Hicks, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2018, p. 6). In fact, the curators point out in their introduction that in order to understand the nature and first developments of melodrama, it is essential to consider the "contemporaneity, if not the codependency" of the two pathways which ultimately made up the complex aesthetic category of the "melodramatic": the experimental and philosophical one embodied by Rousseau and by

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The first leads us to a trained monkey impersonating a sick actor. It was 1759 and the animal was one of the major attractions in the shows that impresario Jean-Baptiste Nicolet had put on at the St-Germain Fair, in the centre of Paris, attracting a growing audience to see an irreverent impersonation of the actors of the *Comédie Française*. The monkey was making a scathing parody of the well-known conflict tearing the Parisian theatrical world apart: the struggle to win over the public fought between larger theatres, legitimised by royal licence, and minor ones, banned from staging long texts either in words or in music.[2] By virtue of some success and his fast-growing activity, Nicolet was one of the first to see that the field of popular entertainment seemed susceptible to very substantial developments and decided to consolidate his activities by making them permanent, rather than just seasonal, and by transferring them to the *Boulevard du Temple*, the avenue on the extreme Northern boundary of the city that within a few years would become the main entertainment location in Paris. First, he rented a small theatre there; then, in 1764, he built his own, only to have it demolished in 1808, to make room for a larger, more decorated building. The *Théâtre des Grands Danseurs du Roi*, named after a representation staged in the presence of the Countess Du Barry and which from 1792 was known as *Théâtre de la Gaité*, was the first to settle permanently on the *Boulevard*, following the Prévôt des Marchands's authorisation in 1759, during a stage of considerable development in public entertainment. This allowed the French capital's *amuseurs* to move to a new entertainment location that would rapidly develop over the following decades, filling up with theatre halls, cafés and meeting places of various kinds.[3]

Bohemian composer George Benda, and the commercial one which developed in the post-revolutionary Parisian boulevards and soon circulated widely throughout Europe.

[2] See *Les spectacles de la foire. Théâtres, acteurs, sauteurs et danseurs de corde, monstres, géants, nains, animaux curieux et savants, marionnettes, automates, figures de cire et jeux mécaniques des Foires Saint-Germain et Saint-Laurent, des Boulevards et du Palais Royal, dépuis 1595 jusqu'à 1791*. Documents inédits recueillis aux Archives Nationales par Émile Campardon, Berger-Levrault éditeurs, Paris 1877, vol. II, pp. 149–164. But the liveliest contemporary description of the situation is by N. Brazier, *Chroniques des petits théâtres de Paris dépuis leur création jusqu'à ce jour*, Allardin Libraire, Paris 1837, pp. 4–6.

[3] M. de Rougemont (*La vie théâtrale en France au XVIIIe siècle*, Champion, Paris 1988) noted how in Paris, from the 1760s onwards, the public authorities were particularly interested in promoting entertainment activities linked to amusement and to the law, as a possible answer to the growing urbanisation, an increasingly worrying phenomenon at the time.

In fact, *Boulevard du Temple* would later be remembered as the *Boulevard du Crime* for the large number of crime-themed plays staged there every evening. A writer who had lived through the spectacular first decades of the nineteenth century, Augustin Challamel, would write several years later: "The modern age begins at the *Gaité*, where melodramas *à grande spectacle* are staged, weaving together songs, dance, fights and pantomime".[4] Can these new performances, later named melodramas, be considered an expression of an advancing "modernity"? That the boulevards were a sort of melting pot of modernity had been pointed out by many of the writers and poets of the period, first of all Honoré de Balzac, who had devoted some incomparable descriptions to them in his novels and elsewhere.[5] We shall endeavour to get a better understanding of the reasons behind this assessment.

The second starting point of our journey is quite different and, at first sight, only shares its chronology with the previous one. Its protagonists were not small impresarios and puppeteers, but intellectuals and theatre writers such as Denis Diderot and Louis-Sébastien Mercier in France, and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Friedrich Schiller in Germany. Around their reflections on the need for profound reform in theatre practice, a theoretical debate took place half-way through the eighteenth century on the role of theatre and entertainment. It deeply affected the history of theatrical writing and theatre, but also ended up having important links with reflections on the construction of citizenship and of the space of political action itself.[6]

In the decades before the French Revolution which so intensely fostered innovation, theatre became, in fact, a sort of laboratory of political

[4] See A. Challamel, *L'ancien boulevard du Temple*, Librairie de la Société des gens de lettres, Paris 1873, pp. 50–51. On the boulevards as theatres of modernity, especially in its more spectacular features, see in particular the special issue of the journal "Romantisme" devoted to *Les Grands Boulevards*, edited by J. D. Goffette, 134, 2006.

[5] In addition to the many references in his novels, the *Lost Illusions* in particular, see also H. de Balzac, *Histoire et physiologie des boulevards de Paris—de la Madeleine à la Bastille* (1845), now in *Paris romantique. Panorama des Grands boulevards*, Hervas, Paris 1989. On the importance of the theatrical dimension in his production—entitled *Comédie humaine* by the author himself, see also *Le spectacle et la fête au temps de Balzac*, Presses artistiques, Paris 1978.

[6] On the specific features of the relationship between theatre and the construction of public opinion, see my essay *Teatro, politica e compassione. Audience teatrale, sfera pubblica ed emozionalità in Francia e in Italia tra XVIII e XIX secolo*, in "Contemporanea", 3, 2009, pp. 421–446, and its related bibliography.