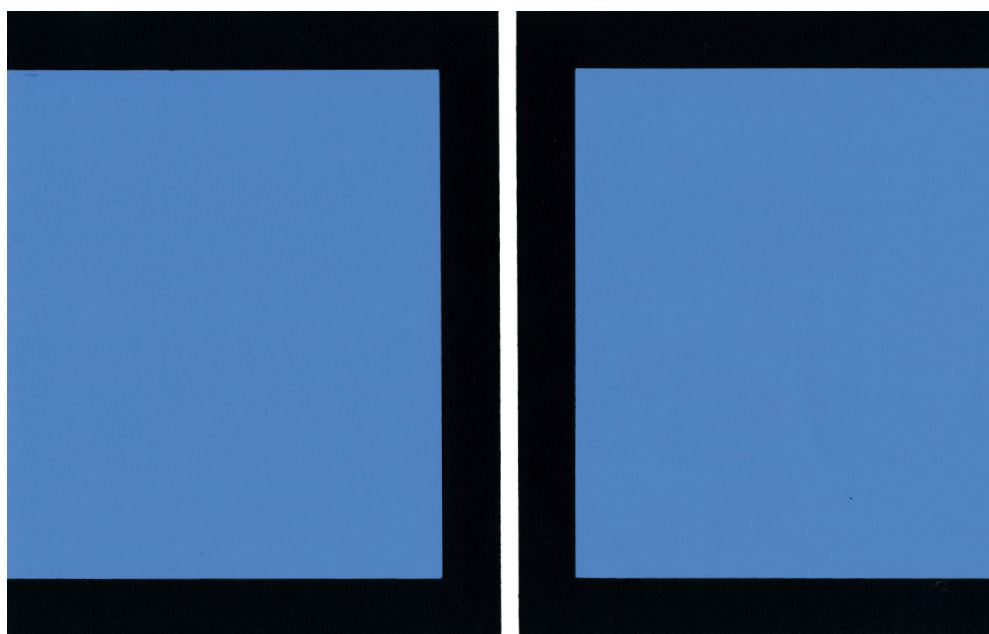


TRANSLATING SCANDINAVIA

Scandinavian Literature
in Italian and German Translation, 1918-1945

EDITED BY

BRUNO BERNI & ANNA WEGENER



Edizioni Quasar

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EDIZIONI QUASAR
ROMA MMXVIII

Analecta Romana Instituti Danici – Supplementum L
Accademia di Danimarca, via Omero, 18, I – 00197 Rome

© 2018 Edizioni Quasar di Severino Tognon srl, Roma
ISBN 978-88-7140-921-4

This publication was supported by the Carlsberg Foundation

CARLSBERG FOUNDATION

Cover: Untitled screen print by Erik Winckler (1940-2010), Accademia di Danimarca, 1968.



Printed in Italy by Logo s.r.l., Borgoricco (PD)

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Nordic Soundscapes and Italian Fantasies: Riccardo Zandonai and Arturo Rossato Rewrite Selma Lagerlöf

by ANGELA IULIANO

Abstract

The Italian translations of Selma Lagerlöf's novels date back to the 1910s, after Lagerlöf had been awarded the Nobel Prize. Critics and scholars praised her work but focused almost exclusively on the atmosphere they evoked. Indeed, for a long time Lagerlöf's opus was described by Italian scholars according to critical paradigms resembling the Orientalism later theorised by Edward Said. In contrast, the social aspects of Lagerlöf's works were often underestimated by Italian critics. This article sets off from the translation and reception of Lagerlöf's works in Italy in the 1920s and 1930s and focuses on Riccardo Zandonai and Arturo Rossato's *I cavalieri di Ekebù*, a rewriting loosely based on *Gösta Berling's Saga*. Staged for the first time in 1925, *I cavalieri di Ekebù* met with great success among audiences in Milan and Rome. This article focuses on Nordic exoticism as an essential trait in Zandonai's rewriting process. Although the plot is set in the 1820s, the atmosphere evoked in the opera is reminiscent of a mythicised and romanticised medieval Nordic past. The music is also noteworthy thanks to Zandonai's use of Nordic folk songs. This article demonstrates that Zandonai's opera features a process of cultural adaptation while resorting to stereotypes usually found in Swedish and Scandinavian culture. It also investigates why Northern Europe was still romanticised at the time the opera was composed.

Introduction

On 7 March 1925, *I cavalieri di Ekebù*, an opera by Riccardo Zandonai, with the libretto by Arturo Rossato, went on stage for the first time at the famous opera theatre La Scala in Milan with Arturo Toscanini as its conductor. It was greeted with enthusiastic approval and soon considered a great success. The opera was based on *Gösta Berlings saga*, Selma Lagerlöf's debut novel published in 1891.

Selma Lagerlöf became famous in Italy after winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1909 and, shortly afterwards, translations of her works started being published. The first translation of *Gösta Berlings saga* was published by Fratelli Treves in 1910.¹ The name of the translator was not mentioned in the book.² Though anonymous, this translation was authorised by the author³ and, as Anna Smedberg Bondesson remarks, it was entirely based on the French one, edited by André Bellessort and Thekla Hammars, which was in turn an abridged and adapted version of the original.⁴ Arturo Rossato based his libretto for *I cavalieri di Ekebù* on this translation, which made Lagerlöf's novel popular in Italy.⁵ Selma Lagerlöf herself followed Zandonai and Rossato's work, praising and en-

1. Lagerlöf 1910.

2. It was probably Elena Vecchi (Giordano Lokrantz 1990, 12).

3. The label "1ª edizione italiana autorizzata dall'autrice" is on the title page of Treves edition. See Lagerlöf 1910.

4. Bondesson 2011b, 125-130.

5. Rossato had already worked with Zandonai for the li-

brretto of *Romeo e Giulietta*, published by the music publishing company Casa Ricordi. It was the journalist Nicola d'Atri who suggested the collaboration with Rossato. Initially, the playwright Giuseppe Adami, who had written librettos for Giacomo Puccini, was asked to write the scripts for both *Romeo e Giulietta* and *I cavalieri di Ekebù*. Since Adami was too busy, Rossato

couraging them repeatedly.⁶ The opera was also presented in Stockholm, at the Royal Theatre on 20 November 1928, to celebrate the 70th birthday of the Swedish writer.⁷

Other noteworthy studies have analysed the Italian melodrama. In 1990, Margherita Giordano Lokrantz focused on the differences between Lagerlöf's text and the Italian opera, and on the latter's reception by Italian audiences and critics.⁸ In recent times, Anna Smedberg Bondesson has highlighted exoticism and foreignisation in both the Italian melodrama and in the Swedish adaptation *Kavaljererna på Ekeby*.⁹

The aim of this article is to analyse Zandonai and Rossato's work by focusing on the process of rewriting so as to identify Nordic exoticism as one of the essential traits of *I cavalieri di Ekebù* in both stylistic and ideological terms. The term rewriting is used here according to André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett's theory to refer to a process in which an original text is reinterpreted, altered or manipulated. In fact, any form of translation and/or textual transposition is not a simple transformation from a language into another, but a process closely related to extra-textual factors, such as politics, economics, culture, ideology, etc. Every rewriting is thus a manipulation governed by three main constraints: ideology, poetics and patronage:

All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and, as such, manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way.¹⁰

In Zandonai and Rossato's rewriting, the atmosphere evoked in the opera is reminiscent of a mythicised and romanticised medieval Nordic past, though the plot is, in actual fact, set in the 1820s. The music is also noteworthy thanks to Zandonai's use of Nordic folk songs.

What I would like to show, first and foremost, is how Zandonai's opera features a process of cultural adaptation by making use of stereotypes commonly (and often superficially) associated with Swedish and Scandinavian culture in an attempt to meet the expectations of an Italian audience. I thus hope to elucidate the reasons why, more broadly speaking, Northern Europe was perceived at the time as still being surrounded by an aura of conventional romanticism. I will mainly focus on the text of the libretto, not only by pointing out its major differences from Lagerlöf's novel, but also by focusing on its portrayal of the Nordic world. The latter becomes, in the libretto, an object that met the aesthetic canons of the time and that did not reflect the North described by Lagerlöf's magic realism, let alone the real Scandinavia. I will not concentrate on the musical elements of Zandonai's opera, except a few that are relevant to the understanding of the spirit of the time. Similarly, I will not analyse the dramatic aspects of the *mise-en-scène* either, but mostly focus on Rossato's libretto and on the reception of the opera by Italian audiences and critics.

The libretto and the opera also show a strong connection with the Italian melodramatic tradition. Romance was the typical theme of the Italian melodrama, even when it was set in a bourgeois context, as was the case with many of Giacomo Puccini's operas. As a consequence, the neoromantic and sentimental character of Zandonai's opera¹¹ generally overshadows all other elements in Lagerlöf's novel (friendship bonds, human decay and *joie de vivre*).

As a matter of fact, there is a curious and variegated mix of influences in Zandonai's work: Richard Wagner's foray into the Nordic world and traditions, and some of his recitative solutions; Edvard Grieg's music and especially his use of folk tunes; many late 19th (early 20th)-century movements in Italian art and literature, such as *verismo* and *scapigliatura* (as testified by Zandonai's attention to the wretched aspects of daily life, e.g. alcoholism, which are, however, not explicitly addressed as social issues but merely observed and described); finally, petit-bourgeois dramas, even if in exotic

completed *Romeo e Giulietta* and wrote entirely *I cavalieri di Ekebù*. Claudio Clausetti, who worked for Casa Ricordi, was the first to think of an opera based on Lagerlöf's novel in 1918. See Dryden 1999, 196.

6. Cagnoli 2004, 85.

7. Lagerlöf 1928, f. 12.

8. Giordano Lokrantz 1990.

9. Bondesson 2011a; Bondesson 2011b.

10. Lefevere 1992, vii.

11. Melotti 1964, 117.

contexts, as in Puccini's operas, such as *Madama Butterfly* or *La fanciulla del West*. Another tendency that was pervasive in the second *verismo* group, which Zandonai belonged to, was the predilection for dramatic subjects, mainly borrowed from literary or theatrical works.¹²

Zandonai's adherence to the Italian tradition is not very surprising if we consider that later on, in 1932, he signed, along with many other composers (among whom Ottorino Respighi and Ildebrando Pizzetti), a conservative and anti-Modernist manifesto, published in three national Italian newspapers (*Il Popolo d'Italia*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Stampa*) on 17 December 1932.

According to the manifesto, Italian music was still in a state of chaos and experimentation; the Italian audience was intimidated by the mass of reform programmes, not knowing 'which voice and which direction it should follow'. Music should again have human content instead of being a mechanical game and a cerebral sophistry. The manifesto proclaimed the validity of the Italian musical tradition and lamented the loss of music that had an emotional impact on the audiences.¹³

Besides the strong link to the melodramatic tradition and the attention to new forms of drama, as those introduced by Wagner, the Romantic atmosphere in Zandonai and Rossato's work is noteworthy as displayed in its predictably mysterious Nordic setting. The latter, an unsurprisingly distorted image of Sweden and of the Scandinavian world, also derives from the Romantic fascination with exoticism.

The opera

In the first act, all the main characters are introduced. The scene is set in the cold outside an inn; the main character, Giosta,¹⁴ a former priest, is visibly drunk and in deep pain. The villainous Sintram appears: a swindler with Mephistophelean features, whose intention is to buy Giosta's lost soul. Then a group of young girls enter the scene, and Anna, one of the main characters and Giosta's beloved, is one of them. Finally, the Majorskan, La Comandante (the Commander), enters, and picks up Giosta from the snow where he has been lying, and goes on to tell him about her past pains and the sad drama of her life while also trying to comfort him. A small band of cavaliers – parasites redeemed by La Comandante – bold and joyous, close the act in a cheerful atmosphere, singing loudly their song "Vecchia terra d'Ekebù" (Old Land of Ekeby).

In the second act, the scene is set in a large room within the Ekebù castle. A group of singing girls is disturbed by the unexpected arrival of Sintram, Anna's father, who wants to take his daughter with him and come between her and Giosta, but is thrown out by the girls. Giosta is introduced to the other cavaliers and receives his investiture as a member of the group. A banquet is taking place at the castle, and Giosta and Anna have to play a love scene, but the girl is disgusted by Giosta's vile condition. The representation begins with the orchestra of the cavaliers, led by the fanciful swirls of Liecrona's violin. Giosta breaks into an inspired and refined love song, ardent and sincere, which sharply contrasts with the rudimentary harmony in the background. Anna, wooed and won over, falls into the arms of the young man. Sintram reappears, screaming and cursing, but is driven out. La Comandante, worried by his threats, orders Giosta to take Anna to his house, and to love and respect her. Giosta wants to show the force and purity of his love, and thrusts his hand into the fire, but Anna takes his hand away, holding and kissing it.

The first scene of the third act presents the cavaliers gathered around the pot already drunk with toddy (*brännvin* in Lagerlöf's novel), celebrating Christmas. Liecrona cries and plays his violin while the others sing Christmas carols. Sintram, disguised as a devil, suddenly appears and terrorises the

12. Raphael 1970, 32.

13. Walter 2004, 290.

14. Rossato Italianises the Swedish Gösta into Giosta. Here-

inafter, I will use the first to refer to Lagerlöf's character and the latter to refer to the opera's protagonist.

cavaliers, and attacks La Comandante, who is also accused by the cavalier Cristiano of having built her wealth on her infidelity. Finally she walks away offended and distraught, leaving her ironworks to the cavaliers, and cursing them and predicting drought and famine. The act ends with a love scene between Giosta and Anna.

The fourth act begins with the cries and reproaches of the people exhausted by the famine caused by the negligence and the dissipation of the cavaliers who, without their Comandante, have abandoned their work and have taken to drinking and carousing. Giosta swears that he will get La Comandante back. The cavaliers set off in search of her, while Giosta, following Cristiano's orders, stays with Anna. La Comandante's return is announced: the once strong woman, now sick and dying, has come to terms with her own past and comes back to Ekebù, whereupon she blesses Giosta and Anna and then dies peacefully, while the sound of anvils and mallets is heard in the background: work and life have come back to Ekebù together with its Comandante. The mallet falls again, in the silence, in honour of La Comandante. The curtain falls.

Gösta Berlings saga and I cavalieri di Ekebù: a comparison

In 1925, the year the opera was composed, its subject was well known to the Italian public and critics: not only had Lagerlöf's work already been translated and published, but, in 1924, AB Svensk Filmindustri released the Swedish romantic drama film *Gösta Berlings saga*, directed by Mauritz Stiller, starring Lars Hanson, Gerda Lundequist and the future Hollywood star Greta Garbo. It is likely that Stiller's film, released in Italy under the title of *I cavalieri di Ekebù*, now recognised as a silent film masterpiece, contributed to the success of the first performances of Zandonai's eponymous opera.

Just like in the film, the complex plot of Lagerlöf's novel was simplified and abridged in the libretto. Rossato cut out many significant elements from Lagerlöf's work. For instance, he limited Gösta's many romances to the one love story with Anna. In Lagerlöf's novel, Gösta has three main love affairs, with Anna Stjärnhök, who appears in the chapter "Gösta Berling, poeten" (Gösta Berling, Poet); with Marianne Sinclair, in the chapter "Balen på Ekeby" (The Ball at Ekeby), and with Elisabet Dohna, in the chapter "Margareta Celsing". In the drama, Anna and her story encapsulate the features of the three women in the novel.

The antagonist Sintram represents not only Sintram himself, but Melchior Sinclair too, Marianne's father. In the novel, the cavaliers play important roles and are the protagonists in several episodes; in the opera, the whole company is represented as an indistinct group and, other than Giosta, only one cavalier stands out in the group: Cristiano, the good and boastful chief of the cavaliers, to represent them all. Sometimes the violinist Liecrona, too, finds some space.¹⁵

Three points in Rossato's libretto were criticised by, among others, Lagerlöf herself, and were therefore later changed: Sintram's entrance through the fireplace, wolves running after a sledge, and Giosta thrusting his hand into the fire. Sintram comes down the fireplace when all cavaliers are playing their theatrical performance again in Ekebù (while in the original they are at the ironworks on Christmas Eve). In Rossato's text, wolves hunt Sintram just before he locks his house, preventing his daughter Anna from coming in (in Lagerlöf's text, Giosta and Anna are chased by wolves while they are going to Borg from the ball, at night). Finally, Giosta sticks his hand in the fire to show that he does not deserve Anna, thus winning her heart (the same daring action is performed by Gösta to win Elisabet Dohna's love).

15. It might sound strange, considering the title of the opera, which refers to a group of people, while the novel's title refers to a single character. However, choosing to mention the cavaliers in the title could depend on the need to catch the attention of the Italian audience. The

reference to the cavaliers, in fact, is more alluring than the name of Giosta, probably unknown to most Italians. Moreover, Stiller's film had been released earlier in Italy as *I cavalieri di Ekebù*, and it was therefore well known to the general public.

As pointed out by Margherita Giordano Lokrantz, Giosta's character is less powerful than Gösta's because he lacks that impulsiveness, generosity and magnetism that in the novel make him something more than a mere Don Juan.¹⁶ In Rossato and Zandonai's opera Cristiano is presented as a strong leading figure, making critical decisions (such as allowing all cavaliers to leave Ekebù, with the exception of Giosta) and performing key actions such as accusing La Comandante.

Proper nouns are Italianised, which was quite common at that time, so Gösta becomes Giosta, the village of Ekeby becomes Ekebù. The Majorskan, who is so named after the title of her husband Major Samzelius, according to the Swedish usage, here assumes the comical title of La Comandante. Not all these translation choices should be ascribed to Rossato, many of them being in fact present in the previously mentioned translation published by Treves, i.e. Ekebù and La Comandante.¹⁷

Despite the important differences between *I cavalieri di Ekebù* and *Gösta Berlings saga*, both works share a common emphasis on redemption. The emphasis on redemption expresses the conviction of the authors that there is always a second chance for everyone. Human mistakes are often caused by misery and mediocrity. Miserable people are unable to see a way out of their condition until someone or something shake them up and compel them to face reality and their responsibilities. From then on, they go through a change until they are rehabilitated. Gösta/Giosta finds his way thanks to his love for Elisabet/Anna, and the gratitude for the Majorskan/Comandante who gave him the opportunity for redemption. La Comandante herself has a second chance, after having reconciled with her mother, who once had cursed her. The whole band of Ekebù, made of loafers and slackers, eventually finds its purpose as a community and seeks redemption through hard work. The final scene of *I cavalieri di Ekebù* features a rebirth: La Comandante's death is the starting point for a new life.

Reception: success and criticism

Zandonai considered his melodrama as the highest point in his production, as he himself claimed in 1937:

I have such a deep faith in the future of my *Cavaliers*. When I fell in love with the strange and harsh yet deeply human story of this famous legend, I set about composing the work with the intention of probing its most intimate pathos. And by discarding what appeared to be superfluous to me through a strict and strenuous selection process, I wanted the characters of the drama, some of whom have symbolic force and value, to re-experience their bare soul, with their torment and their tragedy. And so I wanted them to blend into the background, which is their field of action, and whose voice I tried to grasp, so that both the souls and the environment could merge into that harmonic coherence, without which the work, in my opinion, would have failed its aim. And I have the presumption of having reached this goal.¹⁸

As stated earlier, the opera achieved great public success following its premiere in Milan under the baton of Arturo Toscanini.¹⁹ Five encore performances followed, thus showing the great appreciation of the audience for this work and the interest among Italians in this "exotic" subject.²⁰ On 28 March, Edoardo Vitale conducted the first performance in Rome at the Costanzi theatre. It was

16. Giordano Lokrantz 1990, 88.

17. In the Treves edition, the name Major Samzelius is translated as "Comandante", so his wife's title does not sound weird or funny, but this element is not so obvious in the melodrama.

18. Cagnoli 2004, 87-88: "Io ho la fede più viva nell'avvenire dei miei *Cavalieri*. Innamoratommi della strana e aspra, ma anche così profondamente umana vicenda della celebre leggenda, mi sono accinto alla composizione dell'opera col proposito di compenetrare il più intimo "pathos". E sgombrando la strade di tutto ciò che poteva apparirmi superfluo, con un severo e affaticante lavoro di selezione volli che i personaggi del dramma, alcuni

dei quali hanno forza e valore di simbolo, rivivessero la loro anima nuda e cruda, col loro tormento, con la loro fatalità. E così volli che s'inserissero nello sfondo che è il loro campo d'azione e del quale ho cercato di intuire la voce, sì che anime e ambiente si fondessero e avessero quell'armonica compattezza senza cui l'opera, secondo me, sarebbe mancata. E ho pretesa d'aver raggiunto l'intento" (All translations, unless specified, are mine).

19. Giordano Lokrantz 1990, 85.

20. However, in the following decades *I cavalieri di Ekebù* has not been frequently staged in Italy, probably because of its markedly Nordic character, as Raphael highlights (1970, 33).

staged before the Crown Prince Umberto of Savoy who, after the second act, invited Zandonai and Rossato to join him in his royal box to personally congratulate them and to show his appreciation. On 9 February 1926 a new premiere was performed in Naples, after some changes were made by Zandonai. The new changes derived from both the suggestions and the criticisms Zandonai's opera received, especially Selma Lagerlöf's.

As Lagerlöf writes in a letter to her publisher Bonnier, the Italian opera was the best theatrical version of her work, despite some details that, though justifiable for an Italian audience, were considered inappropriate for a Swedish one.

After the opera was performed in Milan, it was our intention to stage it in Stockholm, too. Yet, when we read the libretto, it seemed to us that the libretto was quite incomprehensible and should be improved. Not to mention that it contained a lot of things that could never take place here. It is not bad at all, however. It is the best dramatization that I have seen of *Gösta Berling*, and I dared to suggest some changes that should make it more understandable and playable, and that were also appreciated by the opera director, and by a few other people who heard them.²¹

Later, both Lagerlöf and Zandonai worked together on an updated Swedish version. They met in November 1928 for the premiere of *Kavaljererna på Ekeby* that went on stage in Stockholm and it was a big success. Between 1928 and 1935 it was performed not less than thirty times.²²

As a demonstration of the Italian popularity of his work, Zandonai was awarded the Premio Mussolini for his merits as an innovator of the Italian melodrama in 1935.

While the public heartily appreciated Zandonai's work, not all critics shared the same enthusiasm. Zandonai's composition was widely praised, but was sometimes accused of being fragmentary and lacking strong leading passages, easy to memorise.²³ He was credited with being able to create very impressive scenes on the stage, blending modernity and tradition with poise. Zandonai showed courage in experimenting new instruments as a means of expression, such as the mallet at the end of the opera. At the same time, *I cavalieri di Ekeby* was applauded as an outstanding example of the traditional Italian melodrama, with its melodies and passionate spirit. Zandonai had succeeded in representing the Nordic world with an aura of conventional romanticism as was perceived at the time.

Whereas Zandonai's work was generally praised, Lagerlöf's novel was sometimes criticised by Italian critics and scholars. In fact, they considered the atmosphere it evoked too imaginative, abounding in fantastic and exotic details. Under attack was, thus, Selma Lagerlöf's magic realism. Italian critics did not like the fairy-tale environment of the story, which was distant not only from any "Latin" real past, but also from southern European imaginary and sensibility.²⁴

The clash between Nordic and Latin worlds was, as a consequence, one of the causes of such severe criticism. A love story about a priest was not a suitable theme for the Italian Catholic bourgeoisie, despite it being aware of the Protestant background of the drama.

The main female figure, La Comandante, strong and commonsensical, was perceived as too masculine (she appears on the scene smoking a pipe and handling a whip!) by Italian standards: a woman in charge of the ironworks, leading a group of twelve men, appeared, moreover, quite implausible and thus ridiculously absurd.²⁵ The social plague of alcoholism, so crucial in Lagerlöf's narrative works, was not particularly felt in Italy, as its prevalence was not as serious as in Sweden. Zandonai and Rossato did not want to underline any social aspects; they privileged the romantic elements of

21. Letter in Bonniers förlagsarkiv (no. 000739), quoted from Giordano Lokrantz 1990, 98: "Då operan hade uppförts i Milano, var det ju meningen, att den skulle komma upp även i Stockholm, men då vi här hemma läste libretton, föreföll det oss alla, att libretton var mycket obegriplig och borde kunna göras mycket bättre. För att nu inte tala om att den innehöll en mängd saker, som aldrig skulle kunna försiggå hos oss. Men den är inte heller dålig långt därifrån. Det är den bästa

dramatisering, som jag ännu har sett av Gösta Berling, och jag tillät mig att föreslå några ändringar, som borde göra den mer begriplig och spelbar, och som även gillades av operachefen, och av några andra personer, som fingo höra dem".

22. Bondesson 2011b, 137.

23. Rubbiani 1925, 3.1.6/30; Sommi 1925, 3.1.6/7.

24. Mecheri 1938, 3.1.6/56.

25. Belli 1925, 3.1.6/16.

the novel, downplaying the social overtones of Lagerlöf's works.²⁶ Thus, the social criticism was not easily understood, nor was Lagerlöf's representation of the cavaliers as a celebration of happiness and enjoyment: Giosta and his companions' taking pleasure in drinking alcohol was seen as providing an anti-heroic representation of the opera's protagonists and of men in general.²⁷

Moreover, the saga as a literary genre was attacked too. Selma Lagerlöf wrote a novel calling it "saga" after the Nordic tradition, collecting the adventures of several characters in a coral novel. Gösta Berling is one of many characters, and his romances are just some of the narrative's threads. This is the reason why the subject was considered desultorily boring, unsuitable for traditional opera, despite Rossato's attempt to unify plots and characters.²⁸ On the other hand, a number of critics maintained that Rossato's simplifications ruined the whole drama and his attempt to turn a legend into an episode of real life only trivialised the poetic texture of the novel and ridiculed its characters.²⁹

The musician and conductor Adriano Lualdi pointed out that Zandonai was not able to go beyond the teachings of Pietro Mascagni, his master, whom he followed too closely.³⁰ This is why he sacrificed many of the themes in Lagerlöf's work to merely stage a love story, following the tradition of the Italian opera. According to Lualdi, a faithful reproduction of the legendary aura of the novel and of the sense of family, which binds Lagerlöf's characters together, would not have met the expectations of Zandonai's audiences. For this reason, he simply never dared.³¹

Italian perceptions of the North

So far, I have referred to Zandonai and Rossato's representation of Scandinavia as distorted and conventionally romantic in an effort to meet the taste of the time. Following is an extract from an article about Scandinavia, published in the arts and culture section of the *Corriere della Sera* in the 1920s.

There are words we imbue with a sudden mystical meaning. Fjords ... a confused romantic impression of travel readings in our early youth, a distraught and distant vision of land and sea, with steep cliffs and large sailboats. Fjords ... an amazed and even more vague impression, evoked by the colourless sentences in Ibsen's dreary plays, the fantastic backdrop to Andersen's beautiful fairy tales, some pages from a novel by Selma Lagerlöf... a word that oscillates between heaven and earth, over an inlet. And now here, at your fingertips.³²

This passage provides an illuminating example of the common representation of Northern Europe in Italy: not a realistic description, but the construction of a stereotype resulting from a mixture of literature and imagination. Scholars in imagology have provided in-depth analyses of how stereotypes about countries come into being and find their way in cultural artefacts. As for the Nordic world, it is quite noteworthy what Lutz Rübling writes in the article about the Swedes included in Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen's 2007 anthology *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters*:

26. Alcoholism is often discussed in Lagerlöf's narrative because it played a crucial role in her life, since her father was an alcoholic. In *Gösta Berlings saga*, Gösta voices the author's reflection on her self-sacrificing love for her father. Gustaf Lagerlöf's death caused strong feelings of guilt in Selma who, according to the Swedish novelist Per Olof Enquist, had developed a dysfunctional relationship of co-dependency with him. Children often refuse reality and seek refuge in an imaginary world, where a magical solution is still possible, and, according to Enquist, this is how Lagerlöf started to create her fictional worlds, in which reality is not described as it actually appears but as it is dreamt. See Enquist 1998, 95.

27. Barini 1925, 3.1.6/3.

28. Marchetti Ferrante 1925, 3.1.6/32-33.

29. Vice 1925, 3.1.6/43.

30. Lualdi 1928, 172.

31. Lualdi 1938, 3.1.6/48.

32. Fraccaroli 1922, 3: "Ci sono parole alle quali noi diamo una fisionomia improvvisa e mistica. Fiordi... Confusa impressione romantica delle letture di viaggi nella prima giovinezza, visione sconvolta e lontana di terra di mare, con irti scogli e grandi barche a vela. Fiordi... Immagine stupida e sempre meno chiara evocata da pallide frasi in grigi drammi di Ibsen, fantastico scenario a deliziose fiabe di Andersen, qualche pagina di romanzo di Selma Lagerlöf... Parola oscillante fra cielo e terra, sopra un braccio di mare. E adesso qui, a portata di mano".

Ossian-style notions of a “natural” pre-historic and pre-civilization North were grafted onto contemporary Sweden and Norway. Travellers hoped to find a situation that would conform to preconceived, Rousseauesque and Ossianic ideals, as can be seen from the reports of Ernst Moritz Arndt on his Swedish travels [...]. This image of Sweden has been operative ever since; even today, thousands of backpackers still hope to find in Sweden an unspoiled nature, people living in harmony with nature, and a relief from the constraints of civilization.³³

Zandonai wanted to meet the particular taste of the time, looking for the elements that could evoke a fantasised “Northern spirit” (or maybe he himself shared this idea about the North). As Margherita Giordano Lokrantz argues, the Italian interest in the exotic North made Lagerlöf’s work so attractive at the time, which accounts for the popularity of *Gösta Berlings saga* and *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige*, and for the Italian translations of both works.³⁴ As Smedberg Bondesson, too, remarks:

Sweden and Italy, two distinct countries and cultures, are placed at opposite ends of the European vertical axis both geographically and imaginatively. Within this perspective, Sweden represents the cold, controlled north, while Italy is associated with the warm, spontaneous south. Due to these differences a fascination has always existed – a simultaneous attraction and repulsion – with regard to such European opposites. This fascination has led to a mutual exoticising practice throughout history that has emphasised and enlarged the distance and differences rather than bringing the cultures closer together.³⁵

In Translation Studies, exoticization generally means retaining in the translation “certain culture-specific lexical items” in order to “maintain the local colour” of the original text.³⁶ This process incorporates and naturalises what is radically other, which is thus used according to one’s own culture and cultural references.³⁷ In particular, Zandonai’s romantic fantasising of Sweden resurfaces in the unreal and eerie features of *I cavalieri di Ekebù*, and in its mysterious atmospheres. Despite La Comandante being the actual protagonist of the opera, the central and most fascinating character is Sintram, a mean, uncannily demonic figure. His stage entrance is accompanied by a jarring and diabolic jingling of bells at sunset. The libretto describes the setting of the scene in detail: “Il crepuscolo s’inazzurra. Le sonagliere si avvicinano garrule e diaboliche” (Dusk turns bright blue. A jarring and diabolical sound of bells approaches).³⁸ Sintram’s image is strongly characterised: “Un uomo magro, adunco, sale per il sentiero, si guarda intorno inquieto” (A thin, hunched man walks up the path, looking around restlessly).³⁹ Giosta is drunk and says “Ti credevo Belzebù” (I thought you were Beelzebub). Sintram replies introducing himself “Tutti credono che lo sia. Anche tu” (Everybody believes that, including you).⁴⁰ Sintram goes on playing the devilish figure ordering Giosta to stay away from his daughter, otherwise he will buy his soul. In the third act, while the drunken cavaliers are at the ironworks celebrating Christmas, Cristiano starts narrating a gothic story, according to which, every year, the devil in person takes the soul of one of the Ekebù cavaliers. So Sintram’s voice is heard and then he appears, as described below:

A sound of chains. Between the furnace and the fire, lit up by the flames, a devil appears (Sintram), holding a parchment scroll under his arm. Sharp little horns, black spotted face, large scarlet mouth, red cloak. The cavaliers stare at him for a moment. Sintram, standing still, counts them one by one pointing at each one of them with his finger. When he finishes, he bows evilly.⁴¹

Then this astute character makes the cavaliers believe that he is the devil and that he has made a pact with La Comandante for taking their souls. Cristiano, shocked and drunk, accuses La Comandante

33. Rübbling 2007, 249.

34. Giordano Lokrantz 1990, 7.

35. Bondesson 2011c, 233.

36. Munday 2001, 82, 148.

37. Bondesson 2011a, 9.

38. Rossato 2011, 6.

39. *Ibid.*, 6.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*, 36: “Rumor di catene. Tra la caldaia e il fornello, illuminato dalle vampe, appare un diavolo (Sintram) che tiene sotto il braccio un rotolo di pergamena. Cornetti aguzzi, viso chiazzato di nero, bocca larga scarlatta, mantello rosso. I Cavalieri fissano un istante l’apparizione. Sintram, immobile, li numera ad uno ad uno indicandoli col dito. Quando ha terminato, s’inchina malignamente”.

of having made her fortune thanks to her lover. Sintram has achieved his purpose: he has discredited La Comandante. His satisfaction is thus described: “Tra il fumo della caldaia Sintram appare ghignando di gioia diabolica” (Sintram appears in the smoke of the furnace with a sneer of diabolic joy).⁴²

The cavaliers are represented as naïve and infantile, always drunk. Stereotypically depicted as a gang of rascals, they are always together, singing and playing violins and horns.

But on the path the torches shine cheerfully and the troop of cavaliers, led by Cristiano, followed by the crowd, bursts out singing, playing horns. The song bursts out loudly. [...] / The crowd shakes their torches on the square, the cavaliers sing and dance merrily. [...] / The cavaliers and the crowd happily surround Giosta and La Comandante. They bring their horns to their lips and grab their violins. And the cheerful and noisy band quickly sets off for the castle.⁴³

In other captions of the libretto, the cavaliers are defined *fanciulloni*, that is, “big boys”.⁴⁴ They seemingly change only at the end of the drama, when they realise that they need La Comandante to come back, after repenting of their actions and going back to work at the ironworks.

Giosta’s character is different from the other cavaliers as his mood is not joyful. His tormented soul repeatedly voices his inner conflicts and self-destructive tendencies, like in one of his first lines: “Voglio morire e bere” (I want to die and drink).⁴⁵

The scenography, as we can glean from Rossato’s indications, contributed to the creation of a gothic environment, an almost unreal view of the North. The exteriors are presented as a melancholic and rarefied landscape: snow, trees and an evocative play of light (and shade). The interiors are decorated with rudimentary and basic furnishings. As we read in the following passages, the descriptions do not identify an exact point in time and space, but just the idea of an old and remote location.

The first scene is strongly evocative: a dying fire in an inn and the sunset outside create a melancholic sense of frailty.

A dying fire glows in the fireplace. [...] Leaving from the door on the left, you go down to the large and snowy square, which forms the second part of the scene. A group of fir trees, laden with snow, stands out; under them, a wide path is clearly visible and goes gradually down towards the valley. Beyond the square, the path starts again leading towards the factories and the massive Ekebù Castle, which dominates the small hill from a distance. It is the last hour of twilight. / The inn is deserted [...] The lamp burns dimly. Outside, the last melancholic sun illuminates the firs and the chimneys of Ekebù, emitting smoke against a grey sky.⁴⁶

The dying sun underlines several scenes: while Sintram is approaching the inn where Giosta is drinking, “il crepuscolo s’inazzurra” (dusk turns bright blue);⁴⁷ when Giosta remains all alone with his torment, “il crepuscolo s’infosca” (dusk turns sombre);⁴⁸ after meeting Anna with the other young girls, Giosta’s tormented soul is reflected in the landscape: “L’ombra scende più folta. Le finestre del Castello e delle officine lontane tremolano di lumi. Rintoccano le melancoliche campane della sera. Sempre silenzio”⁴⁹ (The shadow falls thicker. The windows of the castle and of the factories tremble with lights. The mournful evening bells are ringing. The silence persists).

42. *Ibid.*, 40.

43. *Ibid.*, 15-17: “Ma pel sentiero brillano allegramente le fiaccole e la frotta di Cavalieri guidata la [sic] Cristiano, seguita dalla folla, irrompe cantando, suonando nei corni. La canzone prorompe alta. [...] Sullo spiazzo, la folla agita le fiaccole, i Cavalieri cantano e ballano allegramente. [...] I Cavalieri e la folla circondano allegramente Giosta e la Comandante. Imboccano i corni, impugnano i violini. E la baraonda allegra si avvia rapida e confusa al castello”.

44. *Ibid.*, 21, 54.

45. *Ibid.*, 5.

46. *Ibid.*, 5: “Sul focolare rosseggia un fuoco moribondo. [...]”

Uscendo dalla porta di sinistra, si scende nello spiazzo, ampio e nevoso, che forma la seconda parte della scena. Spicca un gruppo di abeti, carichi di neve, sotto ai quali si vede un sentiero largo, che scende gradatamente verso la vallata. Oltre lo spiazzo, il sentiero riprende, risalendo invece verso le officine ed il massiccio Castello di Ekebù, che dominano, lontani, la piccola altura. È l’ultima ora del crepuscolo. / L’osteria è deserta. [...] La lampada arde velata. Fuori, l’ultimo melancolico sole illumina gli abeti e i comignoli di Ekebù fumanti contro un cielo grigio”.

47. *Ibid.*, 6.

48. *Ibid.*, 8.

49. *Ibid.*, 10.

As for the interiors, there is a description of a hall in the castle of Ekebù at the beginning of the second act.

On the right, nearby the proscenium, an arch, closed by a velvet curtain and a stained-glass window; in the background, a large entrance door. On the left, a large hooded fireplace and another door. A big chain hangs from the fireplace and almost touches the recently lighted logs. Chairs, stools, storage chests. Lighted candelabra on the shelves; a big candelabra hanging from the ceiling. A mirror on the wall.⁵⁰

In the description of the ironworks, third act, a “magic realistic” atmosphere is evoked affectively.

The low and wide-vaulted forge at Ekebù Castle. The cavaliers have eased down the bottom of a cart on the stanchions of an old overturned sledge, creating an impromptu dinner table, around which they are sitting, restless and drunk. A ramshackle coach missing a wheel leans on the left next to the table; and on the right, virtually in the background, a bellows-operated stove is glowing: the smoky flames surround a big copper cauldron that, from time to time, lights up to the blue flames of the toddy. A big mallet is hanging over the table and it looks like a menacing fist hovering over the cavaliers; two or three anvils, stuck in smoked logs, stand out here and there; stuck into the ground, some long tongs, with lighted candle stubs in their jaws, throw weird shadows and bizarre lights onto the absurdly fantastic setting.⁵¹

In order to represent the Scandinavian world in a way that could meet the expectations of the Italian audience, Zandonai made use of Nordic folk songs (see, for instance, the coral songs), through the mediation of Edvard Grieg’s music.⁵² The cavaliers’ song is a ballad, full of nostalgia, coloured by the violin’s interludes. Liecrona plays the violin and the other cavaliers softly sing a sadly nostalgic yet highly evocative tune.

Scandinavian Orientalism

In what follows, I will try to investigate the reasons of exoticism in the Italian view of the North. My analysis is indebted to Edward Said and his theory of Orientalism as presented in his pioneering book published in 1978.⁵³ Through a Foucauldian approach, Said shows how Middle Eastern civilizations were described in European cultures. The Eastern world, according to his analysis, was perceived as a passive and inert object onto which Western knowledge was projected; as something fixed in space and time, non-critically related to history and almost invariably presented according to the principles of the colonisers’ cultures, which, in Said’s studies, were Britain, France and the United States. The image of Eastern civilizations provided by the “orientalist” view is the vision of a stereotyped world, created by and for the Western eye, detached from history, and frozen in a few conventional images.

50. *Ibid.*, 18: “A destra, quasi vicino al proscenio, un’arcatà, chiusa da una tenda di velluto e una finestra a vetri colorati; nel fondo, una gran porta d’entrata. A sinistra, un largo focolare a cappa ed un’altra porta. Dal focolare pende una grossa catena che sfiora i ciocchi appena accesi. Sedie, sgabelli, cassepanche. Candelabri accesi sopra le mensole; uno, grande, pendente dal soffitto. Alla parete, uno specchio”.

51. *Ibid.*, 33: “La fucina a volte basse ad ampie nel Castello di Ekebù. Sui pilastri d’una vecchia slitta rovesciata, i Cavalieri ànno adagiato il fondo di un carretto, improvvisando così un desco, al quale ora siedono intorno irrequieti ed ubbriachi. Una carrozza sgangherata e senza una ruota pencola a sinistra di fianco alla mensa; e a destra, quasi vicino al fondo, rosseggia un fornello acceso,

a mantice: le fiamme fumose avvolgono una gran caldaia di rame che s’illumina di tanto in tanto alle vampe azzurre del ponce. Quasi sopra la mensa, pende un grosso maglio a corda che sembrerà un minaccioso pugno sospeso sopra i Cavalieri; due o tre incudini, infisse nei ceppi affumicati, spiccano qua e là; conficcate a terra, alcune lunghe tenaglie reggono nelle branche dei mozziconi di candela accesa che gittano strane ombre e bizzarre luci nell’ambiente grottesco e fantastico”.

52. Scandinavian folk songs resembled, in Zandonai’s opinion, German *lieder* and were not original at all. It was necessary to elaborate them as Edward Grieg had done, by reworking and re-creating a Scandinavian folk tradition. See Gasco 1924, 3.2.5/13.

53. Said 1978.

As to the Nordic world, scholars often refer to this tendency with the labels “Scandinavian Orientalism” or “borealism”, thus mixing Saidian Orientalism with “Nord” or “borealis”.⁵⁴ These labels define an approach to the Scandinavian world that does not derive from an actual analysis of Scandinavian history and culture, but is, by contrast, built upon stereotypes, not unlike the ones that produced the Orientalism theorised by Said.

According to Said’s theory, the actual differences between the colonised East and the colonising European countries have resulted, over the centuries, in the construction of two imaginary cultural entities, the West and the East, the latter being ideologically subordinated to the former and reduced to a set of oversimplified descriptions and stereotypes. Likewise, in his reflection on Nordic countries, Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson has pointed out that the stereotypes that originated a conventional image of Scandinavia were to be meant as “‘artificial formations’ of a culture and of a society” that “affect the way we understand the world”.⁵⁵ Yet this process of “Othering”, whose ultimate aim was that of creating an image of the Other in opposition to the image of the self, did not result, as Said argues for Asian (and especially Arabic) peoples, in the creation of negative models. Over time, the construction of Scandinavia as Europe’s internal “Other” has produced an image of the North as a mysterious and fascinating reality, or of a cultural and social model to emulate.

As shown in the passages from Rossato’s libretto, in *I Cavalieri di Ekebù* the Nordic world has apparently no time, and its only possible temporal frame has to be located in a mythical past, of which the present time is a mere degeneration. Whereas in the past, in fact, the ironworks were productive, Giosta was a priest and La Comandante an honourable woman, now the ironworks are stuck, Giosta is an alcoholic and La Comandante is cursed and sent away by her own mother (in the third act she is exiled by the cavaliers too). The representation of the North is thus the result of a process of fantasising the past in order to set the standards for the supposedly degenerate present. In this process of exoticisation, signs and objects are removed from their original context and fancifully rearranged. Thus, Zandonai and Rossato emphasise environmental aspects, the cold and snowy Sweden enveloped in darkness, and behavioural aspects, such as the cavaliers’ taste for alcohol and their tendency to loiter.⁵⁶ In this reinvention of the North, normality and plausibility are not essential, and ideas about Scandinavia are highly standardised.

Zandonai scrupulously collected information about Sweden, as Robert Raphael remarks, but his main intention was that of performing the “idea” of the North:

Assiduously he also sought out contacts with Swedish natives from whom he informed himself of characteristic attitudes, traditions, and national customs. Zandonai’s aim, of course, was to perceive with clarity the ‘indomitable spirit of Värmland’s cavaliers’.⁵⁷

As to the music score, it may be argued that Zandonai reached his goal since *I cavalieri di Ekebù* “sounds Northern rather than Southern [...]. For an Italian opera, it is strikingly in tune with its Scandinavian ambience”.⁵⁸

Despite Raphael’s opinion, some parts in *I cavalieri di Ekebù* did not sound so “Nordic” to Selma Lagerlöf, who wrote, in a letter to her publisher, that Zandonai and Rossato, at first reluctant to make any changes, finally admitted that the opera could not be performed on foreign stages without a “betydande omarbetning” (significant reworking). Lagerlöf also added that she would collaborate with Rossato on the text and that Zandonai would write “ny musik till de ställen, som blivit ändrade” (new music for those places, which had been changed).⁵⁹

54. There are even more labels, e.g. “norealism” and, as pointed out by Graham Huggan: “‘Arcticism’ is one of the more functional of a series of neologisms – others include ‘Arcticity’ (Pålsson 2002), ‘borealism’ (Schram 2011), and ‘Scandinavian orientalism’ (Jóhannsson 2000) – which attempt to account for either the particular inflection of colonial discourse in the Arctic, or one form or another of Nordic exceptionalism, or both”. See Huggan 2016, 11.

55. Ísleifsson 2011, 5.

56. According to Ísleifsson (*ibid.*, 7) the stereotype of Northerners as drunkards is found in Tacito’s *Germania* and it is still alive and well.

57. Raphael 1970, 33.

58. *Ibid.*

59. Letter in Bonniers förlagsarkiv (no. 000739), from Giordano Lokrantz 1990, 98.

The exotic elements in the Italian opera, intended for the Italian audience, did not seem familiar to the Swedish spectators. This was particularly evident in the setting: Rossato and Zandonai's representation of the Swedish landscape results in an exoticised idea of the North that panders to the Italian taste.⁶⁰

The process of fantasising about Scandinavia was very common at that time and it also derived from a lack of knowledge about Nordic countries in the Italian culture of the time. Indeed, it is important to consider that Italian academic research on Scandinavia was at its inception and mostly focused on Old Norse linguistics and literature.⁶¹

Studies in linguistics and literature shared the same attitude in searching for a unique origin of cultural identity inherited by Romanticism. In music, the main representative of this movement was Richard Wagner, who pursued the recovery of German cultural identity through the knowledge and dissemination of Germanic myths and mythology. The increasing interest in the Nordic world is thus linked to Wagner too, whose *recitativo continuo* also influenced Zandonai's music. Zandonai's world in *I cavalieri di Ekebù*, however, though set in a mythical, almost fantastical past, is not as heroic as Wagner's. In fact, his prosaic scenery is mostly due to the *verismo* movement of the time, which is noticeable in his choice of the ironworks as a setting and in the reference to miserable and forlorn people.

Conclusions

Zandonai and Rossato's *I cavalieri di Ekebù* is a commendable example of an Italian melodrama which had the merit of bringing further fame to Selma Lagerlöf and her novel in Italy. Undoubtedly, it has some limitations. Such limitations are due first of all to the genre itself: the drama is a shorter and simplified version of the novel, lacking many episodes and themes, and failing to express all psychological aspects of the latter. Additional limitations are due to the choice of both Rossato and Zandonai to primarily emphasise the sentimental component of Lagerlöf's novel, typical of the Italian melodramatic tradition, sacrificing, minimising or stereotyping other important motifs in Lagerlöf's novel, including, first and foremost, social issues, but also friendship and *joie de vivre*.

I cavalieri di Ekebù, nonetheless, becomes the linchpin in the perspective of cultural mediation. Italian readers became acquainted once more with Lagerlöf's novel, and the author and her works enjoyed renewed popularity in Italy. With *I cavalieri di Ekebù*, the Nordic world makes its appearance in the Italian opera, although filtered through the misleading lens of exoticism. Rossato's descriptions and Zandonai's atmospheres do not convey a realistic idea of the North, but still have the merit of making the Scandinavian world the protagonist of a successful melodrama.

60. Bondesson 2011b, 138-139.

61. Many translations appeared after the first studies of historical linguistics were published in the 1870s, when Neogrammarians' theories on scientific language comparison gained prominence and the studies on early Indo-European languages established phonetic and morphological analogies between ancient Indo-European languages. The

first Italian work about Old Nordic themes had appeared in 1811. In these years some noteworthy studies on mythology were carried out in Italy, thanks to which we had partial or total translations of some Eddaic poems, revealing a niche interest in Nordic culture. By the way, the attention was paid to ancient literature and mythological aspects, not to coeval culture (Meli 2010, 59).

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