

The Miracle of San Baudolino

Barbarians

Dante does not treat my native Alessandria with great tenderness in his *De vulgari eloquentia*, where, in recording the dialects of the Italian peninsula, he declares that the "hirsute" sounds emitted by our people are surely not an Italian dialect and implies they are barely acceptable as a language. All right, so we're barbarians. But this, too, is a vocation.

We are not Italians (Latins), nor are we Celts. We are the descendants of Ligurian tribes, tough and hairy, and in 1856 Carlo Avalle, beginning his history of Piedmont, recalled what Virgil said of those pre-Roman Italic peoples in Book IX of the *Aeneid*:

*And what sort of people did you think to find here?
Those perfumed Atridae or the double-talking
Ulysses?
You have come upon a people harsh from birth.
Our children, barely-born; are cast into the icy rivers,
whose waves toughen them first,*

*then through mountain and forests
the youth go day and night . . .*

Et cetera. Avalle says further that these barbarians "were thin and undistinguished of person, having soft skin, small eyes, sparse hair, gaze filled with pride, harsh and loud voice: thus, at first sight, they did not give an accurate indication of their exceptional strength. . . ."

One woman, it is said, was "seized by the pangs of birth while she was at work. Giving no sign, she went and hid behind a thorn bush. Having given birth there, she covered the infant with leaves, and returned to her tasks, and so no one noticed. But when the babe began to cry, the mother's secret was revealed. Yet, deaf to the urgings of friends and companions, she did not cease working until the master obliged her to, after giving her her wage. This episode inspired the saying, often repeated by historians, that among the Ligurians the women had the strength of men, and the men, the strength of wild beasts." This was written by Diodorus Siculus.

On the Field of Marengo

The hero of Alessandria is named Gagliaudo. In the year 1168, Alessandria exists and yet it doesn't; that is to say, it doesn't exist under that name. It is a collection of hamlets, perhaps, a fortified settlement or castle. In the area live some peasants and perhaps some of those *mercantanti* (merchants) who, as Carducci was to say later, will appear to the German

feudal lords as unacceptable adversaries, who “only yesterday girded their paunches with knightly steel.” The Italian communes join forces against Barbarossa, forming the Lombard League; and they decide to build a new city at the confluence of the Tanaro and the Bormida, to block the advance of the invader.

The people of those scattered hamlets accept the proposal, probably because they can see a number of advantages. They seem only to be concerned with their private interests, but when Barbarossa arrives, they stand fast, and Barbarossa is stopped. It is 1174, Barbarossa is pressing at the gates, Alessandria is starving, and then (the legend goes) the wily Gagliaudo appears, a peasant who might be a relative of Schwejk. He makes the richest men in the city give him what little wheat they can manage to collect, he gorges his cow Rosina on it, and leads her outside the walls to graze. Naturally, Barbarossa’s men capture her, disembowel her, and are stunned to find her so stuffed with grain. And Gagliaudo, an expert in playing dumb, tells Barbarossa that in the city there is so much wheat that they have to use it to feed the livestock. Let’s go back for a moment to Carducci: picture his army of romantics who weep at night, the bishop of Spires who dreams of the beautiful towers of his cathedral, the paladin Count of the blond locks who now despairs of ever seeing his Thecla again, all of them depressed and oppressed by the thought of having “to die at the hand of *mercantanti*. . . .” Then the German army strikes its tents and goes off.

This is how the legend goes. In reality, the siege was bloodier. It seems that the communal militia of

my city performed well on the battlefield, but the city prefers to celebrate as its hero this sly and unbloody peasant, a bit short on military talent, but guided by one radiant certitude: that everyone else was a bit more stupid than he.

Po Valley Epiphanies

I know I am beginning these memoirs in a very Alessandrian spirit, but I would be unable to think up a presentation more—how shall I put it?—monumental. Actually, in describing a “flat” city like Alessandria, I believe the monumental approach is mistaken; I prefer to proceed along more subdued lines. I will tell about some epiphanies. The epiphany (I quote Joyce) is like a “sudden spiritual manifestation . . .” either in “the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phrase of the mind itself.” A dialogue, a city clock emerging from the evening fog, a whiff of rotting cabbage, something insignificant that suddenly becomes important: these were the epiphanies Joyce recorded in his foggy Dublin. And Alessandria resembles Dublin more than it does Constantinople.

It was a spring morning in 1943. The decision had been made: we were definitely going to abandon the city. Moreover, the splendid plan was to take refuge at Nizza Monferrato, where we would surely avoid the air raids. (A few months later, however, caught in crossfire between Fascists and partisans, I would learn to jump into ditches to duck the Sten guns’ fire.) Now it was early morning, and we were heading for the station, the whole family, in a hired carriage. At

the point where Corso Cento Cannoni opens towards the Valfré barracks, the broad space deserted at this early hour, I thought I glimpsed, in the distance, Rossini, my elementary school classmate, and I called to him in a loud voice. It was someone else. My father was irritated. He said that, as usual, I never stopped to think, and one doesn't go around shouting "Verdini" like a lunatic. I corrected him, saying the name was Rossini, and he said that, Verdini or Bianchini, it was all the same. A few months later, when Alessandria was subjected to its first bombing, I learned that Rossini had died beneath the rubble with his mother.

Epiphanies should not be explained, but in the above recollection there are at least three of them. First, I was scolded for having succumbed to excessive enthusiasm. Second, I had thoughtlessly uttered a name. In Alessandria, every year they put on *Gelindo*, a pastoral Christmas story. The story takes place in Bethlehem, but the shepherds speak and debate in Alessandrian dialect. Only the Roman centurions, St. Joseph, and the Magi speak standard Italian (and in so doing seem highly comical). Now Medoro, one of Gelindo's servants, encounters the Magi and imprudently tells them the name of his master. When Gelindo finds out, he flies into a rage and scolds Medoro roundly. You don't tell your own name to just anyone and you don't thoughtlessly call somebody else by name, out in the open, where everyone can hear. An Alessandrian may talk with you for a whole day without once calling you by name, not even when he greets

you. You say "Ciao" or, on separating, "Arrivederci," never "Arrivederci, Giuseppe."

The third epiphany is more ambiguous. In my memory I can still see that urban space, too broad, like a jacket handed down from father to son, where that little human form stood out, too distant from our carriage: an ambiguous meeting with a friend I was never to see again. In the flat and excessive spaces of Alessandria you become lost. When the city is really deserted, early in the morning, at night, or on the Ferragosto holiday (or even any Sunday at around 1:30 P.M.), the way from one place to another, in this tiny city, is always too long, and all of it is in the open, where anyone in ambush behind a corner, or in a passing carriage, might see you, invade your privacy, shout your name, ruin you forever. Alessandria is more vast than the Sahara, with faded Morgan le Fays crossing it in every direction.

This is why the people talk very little, merely exchanging rapid signals; they lose you (and themselves). This conditions relationships, hatreds as much as loves. Alessandria, as an urban entity, has no gathering points (or perhaps just one, Piazzetta della Lega), but it has *dispersion points* almost everywhere. For this reason you never know who's there and who isn't.

I am reminded of a story that isn't Alessandrian, but could be. At the age of twenty Salvatore leaves his native town and emigrates to Australia, where he lives as an exile for forty years. Then, at sixty, having saved his money, he comes home. And as the train

approaches the station, Salvatore daydreams: Will he find his old friends, the comrades of the past, in the café of his youth? Will they recognize him? Will they make a fuss over him, ask him with eager curiosity to tell them his adventures among the kangaroos and the aboriginals? And that girl who once . . . ? And the shopkeeper on the corner . . . ? And so on.

The train pulls into the deserted station, Salvatore steps onto the platform under the blazing noonday sun. In the distance there is a hunched little man, a railway worker. Salvatore takes a better look; he recognizes that man, despite the bent shoulders, the face lined with forty years of wrinkles: why, of course, it's Giovanni, his friend, his schoolmate! He waves to him, anxiously approaches, and with trembling hand points to his own face, as if to say: it's me. Giovanni looks at him, shows no sign of recognition, then thrusts out his chin in a greeting: "Hey there, Salvatore, where are you off to?"

In the great Alessandrian desert adolescence can be fevered. 1942, I am on my bike, between two and five on a July afternoon. I am looking for something: from the Citadel to the Track, then from the Track to the Gardens, and from the Gardens towards the station. I cut across Piazza Garibaldi, circumnavigate the Penitentiary, and head off again towards the Tanaro, but this time going through the city center. Nobody to be seen. I have a firm destination, the station magazine stand where I have seen a cheap paperback edition, no longer new, of a story, translated from the French, that looks fascinating. It costs one lira, and I have

exactly one lira in my pocket. Shall I buy it, or not? The other shops are closed, or seem to be. My friends are on vacation. Alessandria is only space, sun, a track for my bike with its pocked tires; the little book at the station is the only hope of narrative, and hence of reality. (Many years later I would have a kind of *intermittence du coeur*, a short circuit between memory and present image, landing in a wobbling plane in the center of Brazil, at São Jesus da Lapa. The plane couldn't land because two sleepy dogs were stretched out in the middle of the cement runway, and they wouldn't move. What is the connection? None. This is how epiphanies work.)

But that day, that day of long foreplay between me and the little book, the duel between my desire and the sultry resistance of the Alessandrian space (and who knows if the book wasn't only the screen, the mask of other desires that were already unnerving a body and an imagination that were neither flesh nor fowl?), that long amorous pedaling in the summer void, that circling flight, remain for all their awfulness a memory heartrending in its sweetness and, I would say, in its ethnic pride. This is how we are, like the city. To end the story, if you want me to, I finally made up my mind and bought the little book. As I recall, it was an imitation of the *Atlantide* of Pierre Benoît, but with an extra dash of Verne. As the sun set, I was shut up in the house, but I had already left Alessandria, I was navigating on the bed of silent seas, I was witnessing other sunsets and other horizons. My father, coming home, remarked that I read too

much and said to my mother that I should spend more time outdoors. But, on the contrary, I was curing myself of the excess of space.

Never Exaggerate

I had a shock when, a bit older, I entered the university in Turin. The Turinese are French, or in any case Celts, not Ligurian barbarians like us. My new companions arrived in the halls of Palazzo Campana in the morning, wearing a proper shirt and a proper tie, they smiled at me and approached with hand extended: "Ciao, how are you?" Nothing like this had ever happened to me before. In Alessandria, when I ran into companions busy holding up a wall, they would look at me through half-closed eyelids and say, with shy cordiality, "Hey there, stupid!" Ninety kilometers away, and here was a different civilization. I am still so steeped in it that I persist in considering it superior. In our parts, you don't lie.

When somebody shot at Togliatti there was great unrest: the Alessandrins do get excited, on occasion. They filled Piazza della Libertà, the former Piazza Rattazzi. But then the radio was heard from the loudspeakers, spreading the news of Gino Bartali's victory in the Tour de France. This superb mass-media operation, we learned afterwards, worked throughout Italy. In Alessandria it didn't work quite well enough: we are too smart, you can't make us forget about Togliatti by broadcasting news of a bicycle race. But then, suddenly, an airplane appeared over city hall. This may have been the first time a plane flew over

Alessandria with an advertising banner (I don't remember what it was advertising); this was no diabolical stratagem: it was chance. The Alessandrian distrusts diabolical stratagems, but he is very indulgent towards chance. The crowd watched the plane: here's something a bit unusual, why, what will they think up next, they come up with a new one every minute. With detachment everyone expressed his opinion, his personal, profound conviction that, in any case, the matter would have no influence on the general curve of entropy or on the heat death of the universe—these aren't their exact words, but this idea is always implicit in every word spoken in our Alessandrian dialect. Then everybody went home, because the day had no more surprises in store. Togliatti would have to fend for himself.

I imagine that these stories, told to others (I mean, to non-Alessandrins), can be appalling. I find them sublime. I find them the equal of other sublime epiphanies offered us by the history of a city that manages to get itself built with the help of the pope and the Lombard League, resists Barbarossa out of pigheadedness, but then doesn't take part in the Battle of Legnano. A city of which one legend tells how a queen called Pedoca comes from Germany to besiege; on her arrival, she plants some vineyards, saying she won't leave before she has drunk the wine made from their grapes. The siege lasts for seven years, but a sequel to the legend says that Pedoca, defeated by the Alessandrins, pours onto the barren earth the wine from her casks in a furious ritual of rage and destruction, as if offering up a great and barbaric blood

sacrifice. Pedoca, imaginative and poetic queen, punishes herself, renouncing her own pleasure in order to get drunk on massacre, even if it is only symbolic. . . . The Alessandrians look on, take note, and derive, as their only conclusion, a way of indicating a person's stupidity, the expression "Furb c'm' Pedoca" (clever like Pedoca).

Alessandria, where St. Francis passes by and converts a wolf, as he did in Gubbio; but while Gubbio makes a big fuss over the event, Alessandria forgets. What is a saint supposed to do, if not convert wolves? And besides, how could they, the Alessandrians, understand this Umbrian visitor, a bit histrionic and a bit hysterical, who talks to birds instead of going out and working?

Interested in their trade, the Alessandrians get into quarrels and wage wars. In 1282 they steal the chains from a bridge in Pavia and display them in the Duomo as a trophy; but after a while, the sacristan uses them to fix the fireplace in his kitchen, and nobody notices. They sack Casale, steal the angel from the spire of the cathedral, but, somehow or other, they end up losing it.

If you leaf through the opening pages of the *Guide to the Italy of Legend and Fantasy*, where a series of charts illustrates the distribution of fantastic beings in the provinces of northern Italy, you will see that the province of Alessandria stands out thanks to its virginity. It has no witches, devils, fairies, sprites, mages, monsters, ghosts, caves, labyrinths, or buried treasure, saving its reputation thanks only to one "bi-

zarre construction." You have to admit that's pretty slim pickings.

Distrust of mystery. Distrust of the noumenon. A city without ideals and without passions. In a period when nepotism is a virtue, Pius V, the Alessandria-born pope, drives his relations out of Rome and tells them to look out for themselves. Inhabited for centuries by a rich Jewish community, Alessandria can't even work up enough energy to become anti-Semitic, and ignores the injunction of the Inquisition. The Alessandrians have never worked up any enthusiasm for a heroic cause, not even one preaching the necessity of exterminating those who are different. Alessandria has never felt the need to impose a Verbum by force of arms; it has given us no linguistic models for radio announcers, it has created no miracles of art that could inspire subscriptions to save them, it has never had anything to teach other nations, it has nothing for its sons to be proud of, nothing it has ever bothered to be proud of itself.

But how proud people can feel, discovering themselves to be children of a city without bombast and without myths, without missions and without truths.

Understanding Fog

Alessandria is made up of great spaces. It is empty. And sleepy. But all of a sudden, on certain evenings in autumn or winter, when the city is submerged in fog, the voids vanish, and from the milky grayness, in the beams of headlights, corners, edges, unexpected

facades, dark perspectives emerge from nothingness, in a new play of nuanced forms, and Alessandria becomes “beautiful.” A city made to be seen in half-light, as you grope along, sticking to the walls. You must look for its identity not in sunshine but in haze. In the fog you walk slowly; you have to know the way if you don’t want to get lost; but you always, somehow, arrive somewhere.

Fog is good and loyally rewards those who know it and love it. Walking in fog is better than walking in snow, tramping it down with hobnailed boots, because the fog comforts you not only from below but also from above, you don’t soil it, you don’t destroy it, it enfolds you affectionately and resumes its form after you have passed. It fills your lungs like a good tobacco; it has a strong and healthy aroma; it strokes your cheeks and slips between your lapels and your chin, tickling your neck, it allows you to glimpse from the distance ghosts that dissolve as you move closer, or it lets you suddenly discern in front of you forms, perhaps real, that dodge you and disappear into the emptiness. (Unfortunately, what you really need is a permanent war, with a blackout; it is only in such times that the fog is at its best, but you can’t always have everything.) In the fog you are sheltered against the outside world, face to face with your inner self. *Nebulat ergo cogito.*

Luckily, when there is no fog on the Alessandrian plain, especially in the early morning, *scarnebbia*, as we say; it “unfogs.” A kind of nebulous dew, instead of illuminating the fields, rises to confuse sky and earth, lightly moistening your face. Now—in contrast

to the foggy days—visibility is excessive, but the landscape remains sufficiently monochrome; everything is washed in delicate hues of gray and nothing offends the eye. You have to go outside the city, along the secondary roads or, better, along the paths flanking a straight canal, on a bicycle, without a scarf, a newspaper stuffed under your jacket to protect your chest. On the fields of Marengo, open to the moon and where, dark between the Bormida and the Tanaro, a forest stirs and lows, two battles were won long ago (1174 and 1800), the climate is invigorating.

San Baudolino

The patron saint of Alessandria is Baudolino (“O San Baudolino—from heaven protect—our diocese and its faithful elect”). This is his story, as told by Paulus Diaconus:

In Liutprand’s times, in a place that was called Foro, near the Tanaro, there shone a man of wondrous sanctity, who with the help of Christ’s grace worked many miracles, and he often predicted the future and spoke of distant things as if they were present. Once, when the king had come to hunt in the forest of Orba, it so happened that one of his men, having taken aim at a stag, with his arrow wounded the nephew of the same king, the little son of his sister, by the name of Anphuso. Seeing this Liutprand, who greatly loved the boy, began to weep over his misfortune and immediately sent one of his knights to the man of God,

Baudolino, begging him to implore Christ to spare the life of the unhappy boy.

Here I will interrupt the quotation for a moment, to allow the reader to make his own predictions. What would a normal saint—not an Alessandrian, in other words—have done in this situation? Now we will resume the story, again giving Paulus the floor:

As the knight set off, the boy died. Whereupon the prophet, seeing the man arrive, spoke to him thus: "I know the reason why you have come, but what you ask is impossible, because the boy is already dead." On hearing these words, the king, distressed though he was at not having had his prayer answered, still openly recognizd that Baudolino, the man of the Lord, was gifted with the spirit of prophecy.

I would say that Liutprand behaves well and understands the lesson of a great saint. Which is that, in real life, you can't perform too many miracles. And the wise man is he who bears necessity in mind. Baudolino performs another miracle: convincing a credulous Langobard that miracles are rare merchandise.

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