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Journal

California Italian Studies, 4(1)

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Publication Date

2013

DOI

10.5070/C341016182

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Come un fulgore azzurro: Umberto Saba and the Verdian Sound of Italy

Mattia Acetoso

In a short essay entitled “Della biblioteca civica, ovvero della gloria” (1957), the Italian poet Umberto Saba tells his daughter about the poets that he loved in his youth. Saba describes the dusty rooms of the public library where he first read the works that most directly contributed to his literary formation. He mentions Leopardi’s songs, the lyrical poems of Parini, Foscolo, Petrarca, and Manzoni. Saba also briefly names the Italian translation of Shakespeare’s sonnets, as well as D’Annunzio’s *Poema paradisiaco* and, lastly, Giosuè Carducci. These names represent for Saba the “filo d’oro della tradizione italiana,” the golden thread of the Italian literary tradition, at the end of which he wished to place his own work.¹ Throughout his career, Saba was preoccupied with the ambitious goal of belonging to this pantheon of authors, a concern that stems from his biographical circumstances; he was born in Trieste at the end of the nineteenth century, when the city was still a peripheral territory of the decaying Austro-Hungarian Empire. Like other *triestini* writers, such as Italo Svevo (1861-1928) and Scipio Slataper (1888-1915), Saba wrote in Italian with the ultimate ambition of participating in the Italian literary tradition. To some extent, making poetry for Saba became a way to lay claim to a cultural background that he wanted to make his own.² However, Saba omits a key figure in this essay, an individual who profoundly shaped his literary ambition and whose presence lurks throughout most of his finest writings. This figure is the Italian opera composer Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), an artist who embodied for Saba a symbol of Italy itself.

Because of his ambition, Saba’s relationship with Italian culture was fraught with conflict. His poetry did not find an easy position in any of the intellectual trends of his time; unrecognized by contemporary scholarship, he felt compelled to become his own critic. Saba went so far as to publish a book entitled *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere* (1946), writing under the pseudonym of Giuseppe Carimandrei, in which he analyzed his own work in insightful detail. Throughout his *œuvre*, Saba’s poetic production is defined by a negotiation between a dire feeling of exclusion and a desperate need to belong, which translated into an enduring existential crisis. As a Triestine of Jewish descent, Saba’s relationship with such concepts as national and cultural identity was equally problematic. His place of birth exposed him to different, often colliding intellectual trends that amplified his sense of isolation, both intellectual and existential. In addition, Saba was torn between opposing religious legacies. His mother was Jewish, while his father and the wet nurse who raised him were both Catholic.

¹ In the preface to his 1921 *Canzoniere*, Saba writes about his early work: “Ero forse troppo giovane ancora per compiacermi, come me ne compiaccio adesso, dell’inoppugnabile derivazione petrarchesca e leopardiana di quei primi sonetti e canzoni [...] quasi che l’aver ritrovato da solo, nella mia stanzetta a Trieste, così beatamente remota da ogni influenza d’arte, e quando nessuno ancora aveva parlato a me di buoni e di cattivi autori, il filo d’oro della tradizione italiana, non sia il maggior titolo di nobiltà, la migliore testimonianza che uno possa avere di non essere un comune illuso verseggiatore.” Umberto Saba, “Ai miei lettori (*Canzoniere*, 1921),” in *Tutte le prose*, ed. Arrigo Stara (Milan: Mondadori, 2001), 1129.

² In this regard, Saba writes, speaking of himself in the third person: “Questo bisogno di ricollegarsi al passato [...] ha in lui origini profonde. [...] Ricordiamo anche, ma questo in sottordine, la sua “triestinità”; per un triestino i versi dei poeti italiani—la tradizione insomma—aveva un valore “sentimentale” maggiore che per gli altri italiani.” Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 193.

The force that drives Saba's poetry is opposition—open struggle between conflicting aspects of his self. In the poem “Mio padre,” for example, Saba describes his soul as “due razze in antica tenzone”: two dueling “races” locked in an ancient struggle. Saba's poetry finds its *raison d'être* in the effort to harmonize the two. In fact, rather than the single binary this image suggests, Saba's identity is diffracted into many paradoxical components that we find in his poems: his Catholic and Jewish ancestries, his Italian and Central European heritage, his love for his wife Lina and his homosexual tendencies. These inner conflicts often erupted into forms of neurosis. In 1929, after reporting numerous nervous collapses, Saba finally commenced psychoanalytic treatment with one of the pioneers of this discipline: Edoardo Weiss, an early apprentice of Sigmund Freud. For Saba, psychoanalysis and poetry became essential to one another: complementary tools for investigating the sources of his existential sorrow.

Yet Saba's passion for Verdi seems to contrast with the looming sense of crisis that characterizes the rest of his existence. What is striking about his identification with the composer is its apparent lack of ambiguity. In spite of his troubled and ambivalent soul, Saba chooses Verdi as an uncompromised symbol of national identity. In this essay, I discuss Verdi's role in shaping Saba's views on key issues such as nationalism and cultural identity. Verdi participates in Saba's larger interest in opera: operatic forms and textual quotes from Verdi's librettos punctuate Saba's poems. However, while in opera words and music are inextricable, my discussion is primarily textually oriented and aims to emphasize the political and symbolic contours of Verdi's influence. Though fascinated by music and musical forms, Saba had no documented familiarity with music theory, and was primarily interested in the literary aspect of opera, its libretto. Citations from librettos of Verdi's operas, although sporadic, are fundamental for tracing the precise contours of Saba's passion for Verdi. While Verdi never wrote his own librettos, he controlled every single aspect of their creation. Moreover, Saba never clearly distinguished between Verdi and his librettists.³ This approach reveals that Saba's identification with the composer is inherently psychological, one that involves a great degree of idealization. As I will show, Saba looked up to Verdi as a mythical figure and a model of intellectual integrity to which to aspire.

Saba identified with Verdi largely due to his friend Pierantonio Quarantotti Gambini, who wrote that like Verdi's music, the true scope of Saba's artistic relevance went beyond the understanding of his contemporaries. Such a comparison flattered Saba to such an extent that he included Gambini's article in the last chapter of *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*. Gambini's words best state the criteria of this comparison between Saba and Verdi:

³ Massimo Mila famously defined Verdi “il più temibile torturatore di librettisti che si sia mai conosciuto” (*Verdi*, 182). Gabriele Baldini specified that Verdi's librettists were nothing more than secretaries, who composed under Verdi's dictation. Baldini even went so far as to talk about the “stile letterario di Verdi,” in Gabriele Baldini, *Abitare la battaglia: La storia di Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan: Garzanti, 2001), 142. During the composition of *Rigoletto*, Verdi wrote to Francesco Maria Piave: “Vorrei che adoperassi un po' di lima in quella benedetta aria del Duca, e ciò per te: per me ho bisogno che alla fine del Recitativo dopo il verso «*Ella mi fu rapita!*» ve ne fosse un altro endecasillabo («*Chi fu l'iniquo? Ma ne troverò vendetta!*») poi un ultimo verso dolce, ma non vorrei che fosse quello che c'è perché «*Ah senza Lei languir sento la vita*» non vuol dire niente.” In Verdi, *Lettere*, 213-14. Verdi's instructions to Piave demonstrate the extent of his control over his own librettos. Of course many other variables factored in the final composition process, among which are censorship and the inevitable negotiation between score and metrical structures. In light of these considerations, Saba is not completely wrong in failing to make a clear distinction between Verdi's operas and their librettos.

Saba sfugge, in un certo senso, alle definizioni e alla stessa completa comprensione dei critici, come accadde, nel suo tempo e anche più in qua, alla musica di Verdi, cui la sua poesia, per certa natura immediata della sua vena, per il continuo carico di cose vive ch'essa regge, e per la sorprendente e ricchissima novità interiore, sotto un certo aspetto assomiglia.⁴

According to Gambini, what unites Saba and Verdi are the immediacy of their style, the relationship of their works with the “living things” of reality, and the novelty that their works represented in their times.⁵ Saba was flattered by Gambini’s Verdian reading of his poetry on many levels, but most of all he felt the critic recognized his musical ambitions. As a young boy he wished to become a musician, and in many instances he sought to reproduce musical forms with his poetry—the collection “Preludio e fughe” (1928-1929), for instance, was written in imitation of Johann Sebastian Bach’s fugues. Furthermore, Saba loved opera immensely: by his own admission, he was an avid reader of opera librettos, which he appreciated for the immediacy and universality of their language.⁶ The same universality he sought for his own poetry he found in opera and, more than anywhere else, in Verdi’s works.

Music and a passion for opera haunt Saba’s best pages, but scholars have vastly underestimated the scope of this crucial aspect of the poet’s work. Gambini’s insight into the Verdian undertones of Saba’s poetry spurred a short-lived intellectual debate on the relationship of the poet with melodrama, which deserves to be revived. The first to respond to Gambini was the musicologist Gianandrea Gavazzeni who concisely discussed Saba’s relationship to melodrama and invited a more complete assessment of textual comparisons between the two. In Gavazzeni’s opinion, Saba’s association with melodrama is to be sought in his relationship with the *opera verista*.⁷ A few years later, Giacomo Debenedetti wrote a poignant essay in which he suggested that Saba’s poems be read as musical dramas. According to Debenedetti, Saba’s poetic images function like characters on an operatic stage, thus highlighting the subtle dialectic of a narrative poetry sublimated by rigorous metrical forms.⁸ Debenedetti introduces a metaphorical approach to Saba’s writing in relation to opera: in another instance, he suggests that at times, upon reading the *Canzoniere*, the reader feels as if he or she is attending an operatic performance.⁹ Finally, Edoardo Sanguineti further discussed the issue of Saba’s relationship to melodrama, focusing on specific episodes in his poetry where the textual influence of librettos of Verdi’s operas is most evident—for instance, in the poem “Leonora,” from the collection “Cuor morituro,” which is inspired by *Il trovatore* and where Saba repeats a famous line from the same opera as a refrain.

⁴ Ibid., 335.

⁵ Pierantonio Quarantotti Gambini also mentions the comparison to Verdi in a letter written to Saba on May 15, 1946: “Mi è piaciuta molto anche la poesia “Raccontino”, che ho letta nella “Fiera letteraria”. Quante sono le *Mediterranee*? Torno a pensare che lei rassomiglia, sotto un altro aspetto, un po’ a Verdi. A una certa età i poeti italiani non scrivono più, o scrivono cose appesantite, piene di orpello, artificiali, pensate più che sentite. Questa è la regola generale; ma lei esce da questa regola. Questa dovrebbe essere una ragione, nel nostro mondo, di meraviglia e di gioia.” Umberto Saba and Pierantonio Quarantotti Gambini, *Il vecchio e il giovane: Carteggio 1930-1957*, ed. Linuccia Saba (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1965), 51.

⁶ “Saba è stato un avido lettore di libretti d’opera nei quali pretendeva di trovare una specie di “humus” formato dai detriti della grande poesia del passato.” Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 237.

⁷ Gianandrea Gavazzeni, “Fra poesia e musica,” *Nuova rivista musicale* 2 (1968): 1089-1091.

⁸ Giacomo Debenedetti, “Saba,” in *Poesia italiana del Novecento (quaderni inediti)* (Milan: Garzanti, 1980), 125-173. See also Giacomo Debenedetti, *Saggi critici* (serie I) (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1969), 109-179.

⁹ Giacomo Debenedetti, “Ultime cose su Saba,” *Nuovi argomenti* 30 (Jan.-Feb., 1958): 1-19.

Sanguineti recognizes a more general influence of melodramatic theater on Saba's poetry, focusing in particular on the poet's style and his lexicon. The critic rechristens Saba's poetic language as "melodrammatese," a neologism that evokes the linguistic patterns recognizable in many opera librettos.¹⁰

In more recent studies, two scholars have looked closer to the core of this delicate critical issue. These studies follow two different lines of inquiry: the first explores the textual influence of opera librettos on Saba's poems; the second discusses his broader intellectual and thematic affinity with the musical genre. Gilberto Lonardi stands out as the most effective commentator of Saba's textual love affair with opera, accepting Gavazzeni's invitation for a more thorough textual comparison and highlighting specific episodes in which Saba quotes verbatim from opera librettos. Lonardi detects frequent textual references to Verdi's operas, but confines his focus to stylistic analysis.¹¹ Conversely, Piero Cataldi understands to what extent Saba's identification with Verdi is primarily psychological and underscores their crucial aesthetic affinity. According to Cataldi, Saba praises Verdi as a harbinger of poetic honesty, the same quality the poet argued for in the poetic manifesto "Quello che resta da fare ai poeti" (1911).¹²

Despite their crucial insights, these scholars have failed to fully grasp the aesthetic, philosophical, and political implications of Saba's relationship with opera. Specifically, they fall short of articulating the intellectual contours of Saba's identification with Verdi that prompted the discussion of this issue in the first place. In the following pages I focus on one prominent facet of this discussion and demonstrate the extent to which Saba's operatic passion is entangled with his particular political views and his ardent desire to be part of the Italian cultural tradition. In order to understand the centrality of Verdi in Saba's imagery, however, one needs to understand the complexity and interconnectedness of the poet's literary and musical sources. While the relevance of an exact textual influence of Verdi's librettos is being debated by scholars,¹³ a close reading of the poem "Carmen"—from the collection "Trieste e una donna" (1910-1912)—underscores this pivotal dynamic in Saba's poetry.

The title of the poem reveals its operatic trajectory, since Carmen is the protagonist of the homonymous opera composed by the French composer Georges Bizet (1838-1875).¹⁴ Based on a novella by Prosper Mérimée, *Carmen* vividly portrays the themes of love, jealousy, and death, the same themes Saba explores in the collection "Trieste e una donna." The opera recounts the story of a young gypsy, a passionate and hot-tempered woman named Carmen, who falls in love with the young corporal Don José. The man protects her through many mishaps and averts her arrest. Eventually Carmen courts Don José and wins his love, but because of her, the corporal is forced into a duel with another officer, after which he leaves town and joins a gang of smugglers. When

¹⁰ Edoardo Sanguineti, "Saba e il melodramma," in *La missione del critico* (Genoa: Marietti, 1987). The article originally appeared in the proceedings of a 1984 conference on Saba's relationship with Central European culture. See Rosita Tordi, ed. *Umberto Saba, Trieste e la cultura mitteleuropea* (Milan: Fondazione Mondadori, 1986). The same article was later published in *L'ombra d'Argo* 5-6 (1985): 80-87.

¹¹ See Gilberto Lonardi, *Il fiore dell'addio: Leonora, Manrico e altri fantasmi del melodramma nella poesia di Montale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003), 20-33.

¹² Piero Cataldi, "Saba e Verdi," *L'ombra d'Argo* 5-6 (1985): 45-55.

¹³ For instance, Gavazzeni wrote: "Fuori strada tutti, dunque, i critici di Saba, circa il «verdismo». Fuorviati dalla radicale incomprensione musicale." In Gavazzeni, "Fra poesia e musica," 1089.

¹⁴ *Carmen* was first performed on March 3, 1875 at the Opéra-Comique in Paris, and met with little success, in spite of its 36 consecutive performances. The libretto, written by Henry Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, is based on the novel *Carmen* written by Prosper Mérimée in 1845.

Carmen later abandons Don José for the young *toreador* Escamillo, the officer's jealousy erupts, and the opera ends with Don José stabbing Carmen to death.

Throughout his *Canzoniere*, Saba adopts Carmen as a symbol for his wife.¹⁵ More broadly, the young gypsy embodies Saba's feminine ideal. The poem is rooted in the events that led to the composition of "Coi miei occhi," the original title of the collection that Saba includes in his *Canzoniere* as "Trieste e una donna." His wife Carolina Wölfler, nicknamed Lina, was Saba's lifetime companion. They married in 1909 and their relationship was only interrupted by Lina's death in 1956. However, when Saba composed this collection of poems, Lina had left him briefly for another man, thus provoking a reaction of jealousy and awakening an instinct that had been dormant in him for some time. Saba conceived of this collection as a short novel, through which he looked back on this period of his life and offered a vivid account of this awakening of the senses.¹⁶ The opening lines of the poem synthesize the episode:

Torna la mia disperazione a te.
Dopo aver tanto errato, oggi il mio amore
torna al tuo fiero mutevole ardore,
più nulla chiede che la tua onestà.¹⁷
("Carmen," 1-4)

Carmen is a symbol of vitality and ardor, but she also embodies an idea of volatility.¹⁸ With her "fiero mutevole ardore," Lina possesses both characteristics of the operatic character.

"Trieste e una donna" displays a powerful dramatic structure: Saba himself was aware of the narrative appeal of this section, and he welcomed Debenedetti's description of this collection as a short novel. However, every single poem, in spite of its story-like appeal, opens with a lyrical explosion of epigrammatic strength. In fact, "Trieste e una donna" functions as a laboratory for what the *Canzoniere* represents in its whole. Clear musical patterns support the narrative texture of Saba's poetic diction. For instance, Lina possesses distinct phonetic traits associated with her name, and her poetic persona is defined by the use of rhymes as well as rhythmical patterns. Syntactically, this approach achieves a refrain-like structure, giving the poem a distinctly musical pace. The poem "Carmen" is where Saba adopts this strategy most straightforwardly, relying heavily on the phonetic connotations of language and a careful use of rhymes:

¹⁵ "In Carmen, una poesia che si rivolge al personaggio descritto da Merimée e cantato da Bizet, il paragone Carmen-Lina (non sappiamo se obiettivamente esatto, ma caro al poeta) è evidente, sebbene sottaciuto. Dispiacciono di questa poesia i riferimenti troppo scoperti al melodramma di cui prende il nome. (Sui rapporti fra Saba e il melodramma avremo spesso occasione di discorrere, e non per farne, come questa volta un rimprovero al poeta)." Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 153.

¹⁶ Ibid., 145: "Alcuni hanno parlato di *Trieste e una donna* come di un 'romanzetto'. Non, si capisce, che Saba si sia proposto di scrivere qualcosa come ... un romanzo in versi. ... Il libro, nato dalla vita, dal "romanzo" della vita era esso stesso, approssimativamente, un piccolo romanzo. Bastava lasciare alle poesie il loro ordine cronologico; non disturbare, con importune trasposizioni, lo spontaneo fluire e trasfigurarsi in poesia della vita."

¹⁷ Saba, "Carmen," vv. 12-18, in Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, 96.

¹⁸ Saba first referred to this operatic character in "Durante una marcia": "O canta, Carmen, le bellezze tue, / le lodi in coro della tua persona. / Il cielo, senza mai piovere, tuona." Umberto Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, ed. Arrigo Stara (Milano: Mondadori, 1988), 43.

Incolpabile amica, austera *figlia*
d'amore, se la vita oggi t'esiglia,
con la musica ancora vieni a me.
Geloso sono non di don José,
non d'*Escamillo*; di chi prima un canto
sciolse alla tua purezza ed al tuo santo
coraggio incontro alla tua verità.¹⁹

Music is the instrument of the poet's memory ("con la musica ancora vieni a me"): Saba clearly indicates which musical references trigger his recollection. First of all, the memory of Lina is filtered through the character of Carmen, as the title of the poem implies. Secondly, the line "figlia/d'amore" is a clear reference to one of the most famous arias of Italian melodrama, in Verdi's *Rigoletto*:

Bella figlia dell'amore
schiavo son dei *vezzi* tuoi;
con un detto sol tu puoi
le mie pene consolar.
(*Rigoletto*, III.3)²⁰

The reference to this well-known operatic moment also implicitly evokes an equally famous passage of the same opera, the aria *La donna è mobile*, to some the epitome of Italian opera itself. In this aria, the philandering Duke of Mantua playfully elucidates his theory on the unpredictable nature of women.²¹ Implicitly, the duke's words apply to Lina's mutable ardor. Saba's ideas on women seem to match those of the Duke of Mantua: the soul of woman is mutable and thus unpredictable. Bizet meets Verdi in Saba's pages, although the main theme of their operas is re-contextualized and amplified in scope. This is not the only case in Saba's *Canzoniere* where Lina's character resonates with textual and thematic references to Verdi's operas. In "Intermezzo a Lina," Saba borrows Salvatore Cammarano's words and points out a further connection between Lina and Carmen.

Ora i tuoi occhi come dolci *dardi*
figgi in me m'accarezzi,
e di tutti *i tuoi vezzi* sorridente mi guardi.
Ed io penso che *il fuoco di cui ardi*
sì dolcemente penetra la vita
nostra, e una preda facile ne fa;
che a Carmen assomigli, a Carmencita
rosa di voluttà.

¹⁹ Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, 96. Italics mine.

²⁰ Francesco Maria Piave, *Rigoletto* (III.3), in Giuseppe Verdi, *Libretti* (Milan: Mondadori, 2000), 74. Italics mine.

²¹ "La donna è mobile / qual piuma al vento / muta d'accento / e di pensier," *Rigoletto* (III.1). *Ibid.*, 72.

(“Intermezzo a Lina,” 53-61)²²

Saba reconciles Bizet and Verdi in these verses, but the presence of Verdi's words Cammarano's words in this poem is undeniably central. Among the lines, one can easily detect two memorable moments from Verdi's *Il trovatore*, one of the composer's most popular operas in spite of its convoluted plot (which nonetheless omits crucial parts of its original source, set in early fifteenth century Spain).²³ The protagonist is the troubadour Manrico, who fights for the hand of Leonora against a jealous rival, the Count of Luna. Manrico is the son of a gypsy who is pursued and then killed by the count. Before dying, she reveals that the two men are actually brothers.

Saba's first and clearest textual reference to the libretto of *Il trovatore* comes from the last act of the opera: in a moment of jealousy Manrico turns to Leonora, and refuses the freedom that she could grant him, if only she gave herself to the Count of Luna: “Io la disprezzo [...] / Pur figgi, o donna, in me *gli sguardi!*” (*Il trovatore*, IV.4) More latently, in the line “il fuoco di cui ardi,” one can detect an echo of the second act of the same opera, when the Count of Luna lets his jealousy erupt in another celebrated aria, “Il balen del suo sorriso”:

Ah! l'amor, l'amor ond'ardo
le favelli in mio favor!
Sperda il sole d'un suo sguardo
la tempesta del mio cor.
(*Il trovatore*, II.3)²⁴

Once again, Saba traces a further subtle connection between Verdi and Bizet. The line from *Il trovatore* “l'amore ond'ardo” (the love that burns in me) is often mistakenly sung as “l'amore è un dardo” (love is a dart). This line hides a subtle connection that brings *Il trovatore* even closer to *Carmen* in Saba's pages. In the second scene of act one of *Carmen*, the gypsy woman throws a dart at Don José's chest, recalling the popular iconography of love as a heart pierced by a dart, or an arrow. Saba refers to two different stories of operatic jealousy to recount his own by finding a compromise between the two operas most dear to him.

As I have shown with these specific instances, textual references to operatic situations became part of Saba's style and contributed to the formulation of his poetic images, thus confirming Debenedetti's understanding of Saba's best poems as carefully crafted melodramas. The association with *Carmen* transforms the poet's wife into the character of a poetic novel. Saba's poetry ultimately becomes a stage on which his passions are performed and sublimated, but the importance of the Bizet-Verdi duo in Saba's pages is not limited to thematic or literary quotations. In fact, these textual references to *Carmen*'s plot connect this phase of Saba's poetry to the roots of his philosophical thought. *Carmen* is at the center of a famous diatribe between Friedrich Nietzsche and Richard Wagner, which took place at the end of the nineteenth century. The

²² Saba, “Intermezzo a Lina,” vv. 53-61, in Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, 84. Italics mine.

²³ *Il trovatore* was first performed on January 19, 1853 at the Teatro Apollo in Rome. The libretto, written by Salvatore Cammarano (1801-1852), is based on Antonio Garcia Gutierrez's play *El Trovador* (1863).

²⁴ Salvatore Cammarano, *Il trovatore* (II.3), in Giuseppe Verdi, *Libretti* (Milan: Mondadori, 2000), 108. Italics mine.

character of Carmen becomes a symbol of vitality that allows Nietzsche to surmount a general feeling of disappointment with Wagner, whom he previously praised. While in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) Nietzsche acknowledged Wagner as the artist who revived the spirit of Greek tragedy, in a later phase of his philosophical development, he retracted this argument. Nietzsche chose Carmen as a Mediterranean symbol of vitality to juxtapose to Wagner's decadentism, intending to mock Wagner's ideology.²⁵

When Saba wrote "Carmen" he had not yet read Nietzsche, but it is in light of the philosopher's diatribe against Wagner that the poet came to understand this poem when he wrote *Scorciatoie e raccontini* (1946) and *Storia e cronistoria* (1948). Wagner is a recurring reference in Saba's repertoire, and, for the most part, the poet attacks and openly rejects the nationalism that he finds implicit in the works of the German composer. Even so, Wagner plays a significant, although occasional, role in Saba's poetry. For instance, Saba admits that the poem "La brama," from the collection "Cuor morituro" (1925-1930), was inspired by a crucial moment in the last act of *Tristan und Isolde*, when the hero Tristan lies dying and awaits his fate:

[...] E fuor del suo letto,
già profanato, nel disgusto balza,
e nell'orrore di se stesso, il fiero
giovanetto, che in cuore una vergogna
preme poi, com'è lungo il dì, e un rimorso.
("La brama," 23-27)²⁶

In this poem, Saba evokes the theme of carnal desire around which the whole collection revolves. Lust is understood as a curse that "accompagna l'uomo dalla nascita alla morte, non gli dà pace né tregua" (it accompanies man from his birth, to his death, giving him no rest or respite)²⁷ The poet himself offers the best commentary on this poem, revealing the cultural references that inspired its creation: first, the poem "Il pensiero dominante" (1834) by Giacomo Leopardi, and second, the final act of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*.²⁸ In representing the theme of carnal love, musical and literary sources converge to shape the poet's vision.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, the sources of Saba's inspiration are well documented and generally correspond to his need to take part in the Italian tradition. Unlike his contemporaries, who were looking for more radical forms, Saba turned to the masters of Italian verse in his search for a renewal of Italian poetry, one based on "poetic honesty," rather than on the pursuit of originality at all costs. Part of this need for a tradition came from his being born in Trieste, a city that, at the time of the poet's birth, was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire

²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967). Friedrich Nietzsche, "Nietzsche Contra Wagner," trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 661-683.

²⁶ Saba, "La brama," vv 23-27, in Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, 320-21.

²⁷ Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 226.

²⁸ Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 225-26: "La brama deriva sensibilmente dal "Pensiero dominante" di Leopardi; ed anche, un poco, dal risveglio di Tristano all'ultimo atto. Vogliamo dire che Saba aveva, quando scrisse questa poesia, accolte ed assimilate dentro di sé quella lirica e quella musica." *Tristan und Isolde* was first performed in Munich on June 10, 1857. Wagner wrote both the music and the libretto, inspired by the poem *Tristan*, written by Gottfried von Straßburg, in turn inspired by the twelfth-century tale of Tristan and Isolde.

and was torn among conflicting cultural identities. Throughout the *Canzoniere*, Saba depicts his relationship with Trieste as ambiguous and tormented. In *Storia e cronistoria*, Saba complains about the cultural “backwardness” of the city, provocatively claiming that being born in Trieste in 1883 was like being born anywhere else in Europe in 1850.²⁹ However, one risks being misled by Saba’s words: while it is true that Trieste intellectually lagged behind other Italian cities, its borderline condition also made it a privileged crossroad of foreign influences, especially from Germanic countries.

Trieste in 1883 was not a culturally underdeveloped city: it was at the intersection of fervent intellectual currents from both Northern and Central Europe. Indeed, Saba himself was at the avant-garde of European intellectual advancement, fully embracing psychoanalytic theories as they were first elaborated and disseminated. Trieste perfectly embodies the same borderline condition as the poet, torn between conflicting intellectual influences and between two cultures, the Catholic and the Jewish. A focus on this central aspect of Saba’s personality casts the Germanic component of his education in a different light.³⁰ To provide a few examples, Saba was deeply influenced by the theories of the Austrian philosopher Otto Weininger; he later acknowledged an enormous debt toward Freud’s theory; and throughout his career he never concealed his passion for Nietzsche’s philosophy. Even his distaste for Wagner’s ideology speaks to the complexity of Saba’s cultural background. Roberto Deidier, in his introduction to a reprint of *Ammonizione e altre poesie* (1932), elaborates on this issue and underscores the coexistence of contrasting cultural elements within Saba’s identity. Deidier synthesizes these tendencies in Heinrich Heine, a poet whom Saba repeatedly praised, and who exemplifies Saba’s complicated relationship with Central European culture and his own Jewish heritage.³¹

Saba never denied the role played by German authors in his intellectual formation, but he underscored in many instances a personal approach to them. He adopted a sort of censorship towards those Germanic authors whom he read and admired, and who directly contributed to his literary formation. As usual, Saba himself wittily synthesizes this tendency in one of his *Scorciatoie*:

I grandi autori tedeschi—Goethe, Heine, Nietzsche; altri ancora—sono, più di quelli di qualunque altro popolo, pieni di invettive contro la loro patria. Certamente essi l’amavano; ma—a differenza degli italiani, dei francesi—non volevano assomigliarle.³²

With these words Saba identifies a group of authors that, in his opinion, represent not only the highest accomplishment of German culture, but also a source of influence for his own intellectual

²⁹ “Le origini triestine di Saba hanno avuto anche, come conseguenza, di farne, almeno agli inizi, un arretrato. (Dal punto di vista della cultura, nascere a Trieste nel 1883 era come nascere altrove nel 1850.) Quando il poeta era ancora giovanissimo, e già, in Italia come in tutto il resto del mondo, si preparavano o erano in atto esperienze stilistiche di ogni genere, la città di Saba era ancora, per quel poco che aveva di vita culturale, ai tempi del Risorgimento: una città romantica.” Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 115.

³⁰ Mario Lavagetto discusses the relationship of Triestine writers to Trieste in his article “Nascere a Trieste nel 1883” in *La gallina di Saba* (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), 211-238.

³¹ Roberto Deidier, introduction to Umberto Saba, *Ammonizione e altre poesie* (Genoa: San Marco dei Giustiniani, 2003), 7-27.

³² Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 38.

development. Saba's words reveal his ambivalent sentiments towards the German component of his cultural background. On the one hand, Saba is very subtle in censoring those elements he identifies, for example, with Wagner: the seeds of nationalism, and of anti-Semitism, which will make of the composer a hero of Nazi Germany. On the other hand, Saba's understanding of Nietzsche is highly personal, and is filtered by the poet's sensibility. In the apparent simplicity of one of his *Scorciatoie* Saba explains his fascination with this philosopher and pinpoints the exact elements that define the debate that I have described in the previous pages:

Nietzsche, il mio buon Nietzsche (non quello altro e di altri) è così affascinante perché parla all'anima e di cose dell'anima come Carmen parlava d'amore a Don José. «Non ci si annoiava con quella ragazza!» diceva questi a Mérimée, alla vigilia di morire per lei. E nemmeno noi ci annoiamo con Nietzsche. Nietzsche non fu un filosofo; fu il caso estremo di una quasi completa sublimazione di Eros. Fu anche altra cosa; lo so.³³

Saba opts for an intimate understanding of Nietzsche's philosophy: he chooses the "buon" Nietzsche, the one who speaks directly to the human soul. Saba focuses on the erotic component of Nietzsche's philosophy and remarks once again the continuity he sees between him and Carmen. However, Saba also traces a further connection between Verdi and Nietzsche. His words resonate profoundly with a *scorciatoia* in which he highlights the eroticism present in Verdi's operas, a theme that he identifies with the category of "genitalità":

VERDI È l'artista più *genitale* che conosca; tanto da non essere più quasi un artista. La maggiore delle sue beatitudini è possedere la donna amata; la peggiore sventura perdere un essere caro. Solo eccitante concesso: il vino. Tutti i suoi personaggi cantano divinamente con un alito vinoso.³⁴

In addition, Saba sees Nietzsche as a precursor to accomplishments in the field of psychoanalysis elaborated by Sigmund Freud, as he confirms in this other lapidary writing:

Povero e caro Nietzsche! Si può misurare la spiritualità di un uomo quasi solo dalla sua capacità d'amarlo. E non era un filosofo; era uno psicologo prima dell'analisi. Come l'avrebbe avuta cara! A meno che non avesse preso paura del Superuomo; di quello che il suo inconscio voleva significare con quel disgraziato Superuomo.³⁵

³³ Ibid., 31.

³⁴ Ibid., 854.

³⁵ Ibid., 863.

Nietzsche and Freud are the two intellectual forces that propel Saba's speculations within the dark realms of the self.³⁶ In the passage above, we see that the poet recognizes Nietzsche as a psychologist, anticipating the famous formula by which Gianfranco Contini recognized the psychoanalytical elements in Saba's poetry before he actually encountered Freud and his theories.³⁷ Saba's position on Nietzsche is resolutely idiosyncratic and, to some extent, biased. For instance, in expressing his intellectual debt towards the philosopher, he seems deliberately to ignore the "superomismo" that made Nietzsche known to a broad readership. In light of this distinction, it is possible to venture that Saba identifies an emanation of Nietzsche's alleged psychological teaching in the operatic character of Carmen. Carmen is an immediate link to the vitality of human beings, not just a symbol for his wife Lina in his early poems. Carmen thus becomes, for Saba, the very sublimation of Eros.

In the wake of the debate on Wagner, the character of Carmen haunted the European imagination for decades, exerting a varied influence on both intellectuals and artists.³⁸ Although Carmen represents an important symbol for Saba's poetry, she is not the only operatic character to inhabit his poetic imagery. In the poem "Intermezzo a Lina" I have detected clear references to important operas composed by Verdi. Saba was especially fond of the most popular phase of Verdi's repertoire, the so called "trilogia popolare," which comprises *Rigoletto* (1851), *Il trovatore* (1853) and *La traviata* (1853).³⁹ In the poem "Intermezzo," as well as in "Carmen," lines extrapolated from librettos written by Francesco Maria Piave and Salvatore Cammarano resonate alongside those referring to the character of Carmen, expanding the general scope of these operatic references. Carmen incarnates the turning point in Nietzsche's thoughts on Wagner, but she is also a symbol through which, with little effort, Saba both tames and distances himself from the Germanic elements of his own intellectual formation. Given his role within Italian tradition, Verdi thus represents a far less complicated and more powerful pole of attraction for Saba, one that stands as a symbol of Italian identity itself.

³⁶ While commenting on the poem "Chiaretta"—from the collection "Preludio e canzonette"—Saba remarks Nietzsche's role in the development of his poetry. Saba understands Nietzsche as a psychologist, and sees his work as a precursor of Freud's psychoanalytical theories. He writes: "quante più cose afferma / l'anima, e meno nega!" (In questi ultimi due versi, come in molti altri di Saba si avverte l'influenza indiretta di quello che fu uno dei suoi buoni "maestri di vita," in questo caso di Nietzsche; non del Nietzsche del Superuomo che affascinò il D'Annunzio e troppi altri, ma del Nietzsche psicologo che tante verità intuì dell'anima umana, per cui la sua opera può essere considerata anche come un immenso preludio alle scoperte del Freud." Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 197-98. In commenting on the poem "Il piccolo Berto," Saba notes the influences on his collection of aphorisms entitled *Scorciatoie e raccontini* (1946), and writes: "In queste prose [...] egli si appoggia, senza nascondere [...] a quelli che furono i suoi due buoni maestri: a Nietzsche cioè e a Freud." (Ibid., 262). In fact, in this regard, the last aphorism of the book is explicit in declaring the intellectual references for the whole collection: "165. GENEALOGIA DI SCORCIATOIE Nietzsche—Freud." Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 79.

³⁷ Gianfranco Contini writes: "Saba nasceva psicanalitico prima della psicanalisi, era un soggetto di *critique psychanalytique* allo stesso titolo che, in certe *Réflexions* di Thibaudet, Turgenev è preso come soggetto della critica psicologica bourgettiana," in *Un anno di letteratura* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1946), 92.

³⁸ Gennaro Savarese describes this phenomenon as the "complesso di Carmen," describing the contours of a tendency in *Belle Époque* Europe to conceive the operatic character Carmen as a symbol of feminine sexuality. "I colori di Carmen," in Tordi, *Umberto Saba, Trieste e la cultura mitteleuropea*, 301-14. For a psychoanalytic reading of Carmen's myth, see also Franco Fornari, *Carmen adorata. Psicanalisi della donna demoniaca* (Milan: Longanesi, 1985).

³⁹ In this regard, Nora Baldi writes: "«Sulla vetta non si può rimanere in eterno» mi diceva, «senza mentire». Amava paragonare la sua prosaicità al zum-pai-pai di Verdi. (Nella *Traviata*, opera che fra tutte prediligeva, molti sono infatti gli «intervalli» di prosa che alternano la poesia del «Amami Alfredo»)" (Nora Baldi, *Il paradiso di Saba* (Milan: Mondadori, 1958), 49).

For the reasons I pointed out at the beginning of this essay, Saba's origins made him especially sensitive to issues of national identity and sparked a desire to establish his poetry within the cultural boundaries of the Italian literary tradition. When Saba refuses Nietzsche's Superman, he implicitly rejects his nationalism, the distorted influence of which he identifies in Wagner. Saba repudiates Wagner's music through a series of comments and mockeries that demonstrate a superficial approach to the composer's intellectual value.⁴⁰ In Wagner, Saba reads the seeds of nationalism and racism, which he considers peculiar to the German race.⁴¹ However, while refusing Nietzsche's nationalism and mocking the idolatry that affects the followers of the cult of Wagner, Saba himself chooses Verdi as his own national idol.⁴²

Elsewhere, Saba expands on his views on national identification and his passion for Verdi. In a short prose piece, Saba commemorates Enrico Elia, a fellow citizen of Trieste, who volunteered for World War I and died on the front and whose writings Saba edited and helped publish.⁴³ The case of Enrico Elia becomes an opportunity for the poet to discuss the legitimacy of Italian interventionism in the Great War. On this very occasion, he dedicates a few comments to the political role of Verdi in questions of national identity, suggesting a lasting influence beyond the process of Italian unification alone: "L'interventismo italiano, come fu vissuto dalla migliore gioventù del tempo, ebbe qualcosa di irruente e di spontaneo. Scoppiò nei cuori come una melodia di Verdi. E, come una melodia di Verdi, non sopportò di essere condotto troppo in lungo."⁴⁴

Among scholars, music connoisseurs and the general public, Verdi is known as the "vate del Risorgimento." This formula simplifies and limits the intricate political position of the composer, who played an important part in the ultimate accomplishment of an idea of national unity (scoring the soundtrack for this season of turmoil for Italy), but whose cultural role goes beyond this important fact. The composer's biography mirrors the long period of transformations, political and social, that Italy underwent during the nineteenth century. As George Martin puts it, Verdi put a stamp on his era.⁴⁵ The "hagiography" of the composer records various facts that emphasize the reception of Verdi as a crucial inspiration for the events that took place during the Risorgimento, and ultimately as a symbol of them. During the Austrian occupation of Italy, it was common to find "Viva V.E.R.D.I." painted on the walls of Italian cities, where the name of the composer stood as the acronym of the political motto: "Viva Vittorio Emanuele Re D'Italia" (Long Live Vittorio Emanuele II King of Italy). Verdi participated in the meetings of the literary salon

⁴⁰ For instance, Saba jokes about Wagner while remembering his friend Dionisio Romanelli: "diceva non esser bello Wagner, ma quello che si trova, uscendo da teatro, dopo aver ascoltato per quattro ore Wagner." Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 286.

⁴¹ Saba understands the negative reactions to his poem "L'uomo" in psychoanalytical terms. In his analysis, he judges the seeds of racism and Nazism that he finds in the music of Wagner: "nell'opera negata o accettata tardi, c'era qualcosa che il lettore non poteva, in un dato momento, accogliere; e questo non per ragioni di estetica. Era di questa natura la resistenza opposta dal pubblico delle esposizioni agli impressionisti francesi, e la lunga difesa opposta dai tedeschi alla musica di Wagner (difesa per cui Nietzsche li lodava altamente, e che era, come si vide poi, una difesa contro il nazismo e il razzismo avanti lettera, che si fa sentire nella musica di Wagner, e per i quali i tedeschi non erano ancora maturi, vogliamo dire non abbastanza progrediti nel cammino della regressione)." *Tutte le prose*, 241.

⁴² Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 19: "I WAGNERIANI erano sospetti, non perché amavano Wagner; ma perché amavano *solo* Wagner."

⁴³ Enrico Elia, *Scritti di Enrico Elia* (Milan: Caddeo, 1922).

⁴⁴ "Di questo libro e di un altro mondo," 1946 found in Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 901.

⁴⁵ "Great men sometimes can put a personal stamp on an event or episode; besides articulating it, they can help to shape it [...] such stamping, of course, is reciprocal: the man affects the era, and the era, the man. With Verdi the era was the Risorgimento, a period in Italian political and social history that roughly spans the nineteenth century." George Martin, *Aspects of Verdi* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1988), 3.

of the Countess Clara Maffei, where men of letters, thinkers and patriots like Carlo Cattaneo, Tommaso Grossi, and others gathered to discuss the future of a republican, united Italy. Many operas composed by Verdi were understood or interpreted in patriotic terms.⁴⁶ The most explicit example is the chorus “Va pensiero” of the third act of the opera *Nabucco* (1842). The chorus recalls a biblical episode in which the Jews, exiled in Babylon, intone their desire to return to their motherland. “Va pensiero” acquired an almost mythic status for its patriotic impact on the cause of Italian unity, since the patriots saw in the exile of the Jewish people their own destiny under foreign occupation:

Va, pensiero, sull’ali dorate,
va, ti posa sui clivi, sui colli,
ove olezzano tepide e molli
l’aure dolci del suolo natal!
(*Nabucco*, III.4)⁴⁷

He was certainly a protagonist of the Risorgimento, but to label Verdi as a hero of this political movement is ultimately reductive, in that it ignores his reluctance to participate actively in the political struggle.⁴⁸ The direct association of Verdi with the process of Italian unification does not begin before the great turmoil of the 1840s, and it is still debated whether his operas were intentionally written with a political message or not. While his work undoubtedly boosted the participation of thousands of young people who died for the unification of the Italian peninsula, above all Verdi aimed for a drama of popular appeal. Indeed, Verdi seems to accomplish the need for a popular drama that Mazzini promotes in his *Filosofia della musica* (1836). As Massimo Mila observes, “Giuseppe Mazzini invoca l’avvento del «dramma musicale», ed auspica la nobilitazione del recitativo, lo sviluppo del coro e un maggiore «studio dell’istrumentazione», a sanare le piaghe del melodramma [...] Non bastava più, infatti, «perpetuare o rifare una *scuola italiana*»; occorreva esprimere «dall’Italia» le fondamenta di una scuola musicale europea.”⁴⁹ According to Mila, Verdi is the composer who met this need. Verdi succeeded in creating a popular art, and this accomplishment set a definitive standard for Saba, who desired for his poetry the same power to reach the heart of every man and woman.

⁴⁶ For a reflection on the vexed topic of Verdi’s ties to the Italian unification process see Mary Ann Smart, “Verdi, Italian Romanticism, and the Risorgimento,” in *Cambridge Companion to Verdi*, ed. Scott Balthazar (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29-45. For a discussion of the political content of Verdi’s operas see Mary Ann Smart, “Liberty On (and Off) the Barricades: Verdi’s Risorgimento Fantasies,” in *Making and Remaking Italy: The Formation of Cultural Identity around the Risorgimento*, eds. Albert Ascoli and Krystyna von Henneberg (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 103-18.

⁴⁷ Temistocle Solera, *Nabucco* (III.4), in Giuseppe Verdi, *Libretti* (Milan: Mondadori, 2000), 26.

⁴⁸ In 1859 Verdi wrote to Clara Maffei and confessed his reluctance to participate actively, as a soldier, in the war of independence: “Ciò dico a voi, e ben in segreto: non lo direi ad altri, ché non vorrei si credesse vana millanteria. Ma che potrei io fare, che non sono capace di fare una marcia di tre miglia, la testa non regge a cinque minuti di sole, e un po’ di vento od un po’ d’umidità mi produce dei mali di gola da cacciarmi in letto qualche volta per settimane? Meschina la natura mia! Buono a nulla!” June 23, 1859. Gaetano Cesari and Alessandro Luzio, eds., *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan: Tipografia Stucchi Ceretti & c., 1913), 577 and 443. See also Carlo Graziani, ed., *Giuseppe Verdi: Autobiografia dalle lettere* (Milan: Mondadori, 1941), 263-64.

⁴⁹ Massimo Mila, *Breve storia della musica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1963), 268. On this issue, see also Smart, “Liberty On (and Off) the Barricades,” 113-14.

Verdi has long been juxtaposed with Wagner, for his music as well as for his public persona.⁵⁰ Many scholars have identified important affinities with the German composer in *Aida* (1871) and other late operas composed by Verdi. Nevertheless, certain crucial artistic differences existed between the two, and these differences translated into an insurmountable cultural and political distance and a passionate rivalry. On Verdi's side, this enmity developed into a sort of diffidence towards what Wagner came to represent in Italian culture at the end of the nineteenth century, when the newly formed nation was flooded with foreign music and foreign cultural influences. Wagner was for Verdi a cause of alarm. In the 1860s, directly following the unification of Italy and the death of Camillo Benso, Count of Cavour, the architect of the unification, Verdi resolutely attacked the invasion of instrumental music from Germany. As Mila explains, Verdi's aversion to German music would later translate into a general repulsion towards German culture as a whole. A well-known letter that Verdi addressed to the Countess Maffei in 1870 summarizes this tendency:

Che i nostri letterati ed i nostri politici vantino pure il sapere, le scienze, e perfino (Dio glielo perdoni) le arti di questi vincitori [the German people]; ma se guardassero un po' in dentro vedrebbero che nelle loro vene scorre sempre l'antico sangue gotico, che sono d'uno smisurato orgoglio, duri, intolleranti, sprezzatori di tutto ciò che non è germanico, e d'una rapacità che non ha limiti. Uomini di testa, ma senza cuore; razza forte, ma non civile.⁵¹

Verdi's words express a highly prejudicial position, but they also reveal the perspective through which he understands German music and its cultural impact on the newly unified peninsula. In his need for national identification, Saba displays a similar take on German culture, thus revealing an affinity for Verdi's conservative conception of Italian cultural identity. One should consider Saba's fascination with the operas of Verdi in light of the dichotomy that for many years throughout Europe, but especially in Italy, opposed Wagner to the composer of *Rigoletto*. It is clear that Saba's criticism of the German composer is not merely political, but also cultural and intellectual.

Cataldi mentions a further aspect that brings Saba and Verdi even closer. According to Cataldi, it is likely that, in writing "Trieste e una donna," Saba was inspired by Verdi's realism, and, more specifically, by his faithful portraiture of the social dynamics of families in eighteenth-

⁵⁰ Throughout the last century, a direct comparison between Verdi and Wagner has been the object of a constant, although not always consistent, scholarly attention, since it was often influenced by swinging intellectual and cultural trends. One of the first monographs on the subject is Gino Monaldi, *Verdi e Wagner* (Rome: Civelli, 1887). See also, Antonio Grassi, *Bellini, Wagner, Verdi (1801-1901)* (Milan: Casa editrice "Erta," 1935). A seminal book is Friedrich Lippman, ed., *Colloquium "Verdi-Wagner," Rom, 1969*, (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1972). See also Hans Ehinger, *Meister der Oper Gluck, Wagner, Verdi, Strauss: ihr Leben und Werk in kurzen Biographien* (Basel: Amerbach, 1947). Hans Gál, *Brahms, Wagner, Verdi: drei Meister, drei Welten* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1975). Ernő Lendvai, *Verdi and Wagner* (Budapest: International House, 1988). See also Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker eds., *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). A more recent study is Peter Parker, *Verdi and/or Wagner: Two Men, Two Worlds, Two Centuries* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012).

⁵¹ Verdi, *I copialettere*, 604. In this letter from September 30, 1870, Verdi expresses his opinion on the Franco-Prussian war (July 19, 1870 – May 10, 1871), a conflict between the Second French Empire and the Kingdom of Prussia. See also Massimo Mila, *L'arte di Verdi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), 309.

century Italy.⁵² Cataldi notes briefly that this understanding of Verdi reiterates another influential interpretation of Verdi's dramas, formulated by the scholar Luigi Baldacci. Baldacci authored a landmark study of opera librettos as literary texts, providing fundamental insights into a previously unexplored literary genre. The critical accomplishments of this study are of the utmost importance, as they identify central issues in Verdi's dramaturgy. Baldacci asserts that most of Verdi's theater revolves around a central theme, which he synthesizes in the formula "contro il padre" (against the father). Most of the dramatic actions portrayed by Giuseppe Verdi imply a conflict between a leading character and an authority, in most cases identified with the figure of the father.⁵³

Saba seems to understand this aspect of Verdi's dramaturgy, making it a pivotal element of his identification with the composer. Throughout his *Canzoniere*, Saba depicts a conflict with his father, who abandoned him when he was only a teenager. His most explicit attack "against the father" takes place in the most famous poem of the section "Autobiografia," in which Saba unashamedly confesses his feelings: "Mio padre è stato per me 'l'assassino,' / Fino ai vent'anni che l'ho conosciuto."⁵⁴ This crucial aspect of Saba's poetry must be considered within the psychoanalytical awareness that drives his composition. Saba interprets his relationships with his parents in Oedipal terms, and the disdain that he feels for every fatherly figure may be considered a necessary aspect of his Oedipus complex, given the extent to which his poetic approach is rooted in Freudian thinking. However, Saba also understands the role of the father in a different way. In another *Scorciatoia*, Saba caustically describes the character of the Italians, explaining why they never engaged in a proper political revolution. He writes:

Gli italiani non sono parricidi; sono fraticidi. Romolo e Remo, Ferruccio e Maramaldo, Mussolini e i socialisti, Badoglio e Graziani ... Gli italiani sono l'unico popolo (credo) che abbiano, alla base della loro storia (o della loro leggenda) un fraticidio. Ed è solo col parricidio che si inizia una rivoluzione. Gli italiani vogliono darsi al padre, ed avere da lui, in cambio, il permesso di uccidere gli altri fratelli.⁵⁵

Saba recognizes the centrality of the erotic theme in Verdi's work, yet he was also aware of the psychological dynamics of his operas, as Baldacci explains them. Saba recognizes the importance of killing one's father in order to start a revolution, and it is not incidental that he decides to "kill" one of his intellectual progenitors with the help of Verdi. In fact, the composer becomes pivotal in

⁵² "All'arte di Verdi, infine, Saba dev'essersi avvicinato, come alla *Carmen* di Bizet, anche per una ragione di contenuto: il grande realismo della 'drammaturgia popolare-borghese' di Verdi, con la sua adesione alla 'realtà familiare dell'Ottocento,' non dev'essere passato inosservato all'autore del *Canzoniere*, con i suoi drammatici conflitti quasi archetipici." Cataldi, "Saba e Verdi," 54.

⁵³ Luigi Baldacci analyzes the dynamic underlying Verdi's librettos as a conflict between the fulfillment of erotic pleasure and fatherly authority. Baldacci understands Verdi's characters as representatives of an Old Testament religiosity, in a world dominated by a constant interchange between sky and earth. The fatherly figure is seen as God on an earth that applies the Biblical law. The mother is a figure from the New Testament, but is always kept out of sight. *Rigoletto* perfectly illustrates Baldacci's insight: there is no mother and the father is the obstacle to the fulfillment of the love between the daughter and the Duke of Mantua. The end is tragic: it is authority itself that takes the life of his daughter. Luigi Baldacci, *La musica in italiano: Libretti d'opera dell'Ottocento* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1997), 62-90.

⁵⁴ Saba, *Canzoniere*, 257.

⁵⁵ Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 8.

understanding a crucial episode in which Saba recalls the moment in which he overcame one of his intellectual fathers, the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938).

D'Annunzio exerted a powerful influence on Saba, as scholarship has demonstrated and as Saba himself repeatedly admitted.⁵⁶ Saba acknowledged D'Annunzio's importance for his early poems and the central role he played in the development of modern Italian poetry. Saba defined D'Annunzio as a "classic of Italian literature," expressing through this judgment a subtle nationalistic pitch.⁵⁷ He recognized D'Annunzio's primacy in nineteenth-century poetry, but profoundly despised his grandeur. In his writings, Saba repeatedly mocks the poet, labeling him "immaginifico," or, on one occasion, comparing his grandiose attitude to the "modesty" of the King of Italy, upon observing a ceremony in honor of the latter in 1918. In "Il bianco immacolato signore," Saba recalls his first encounter with D'Annunzio, encapsulating in this short story the interconnected fascination and repulsion that he felt towards his predecessor. Saba recalls when he, barely adolescent, worshipped the poet, and carefully cultivated a physical resemblance to the white-clad D'Annunzio, who hosted him in his summerhouse in the Tuscan region of Versilia. Saba portrays D'Annunzio on this occasion as a bored man, wrapped up in his own thoughts and aching to be left alone. His only apparent preoccupation was to have someone play Wagner on the piano for his own enjoyment: a single image, a flash that summarizes sharply the complexity of D'Annunzio's obsession with the German composer.⁵⁸

This short story marks the climax of Saba's fascination with D'Annunzio, while also signaling a point of departure from it. Saba is not disturbed by the poet's cult of personality, but by the insistence on self-celebration that his poetry embodies. Saba repeatedly attacks and mocks the self-referential aspects of D'Annunzio's poetry: not only is his poetry "di maniera," he also incarnates in Saba's mind the very essence of poetic dishonesty.⁵⁹ In "Quello che resta da fare ai poeti" Saba juxtaposes the true poetry of Manzoni with the pompous and hypocritical vitality of D'Annunzio's lyrics.⁶⁰ However, it is clear that these bitter comments reveal the profound

⁵⁶ In *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere* Saba recognizes his own ambivalent attitude towards the poetry of Gabriele D'Annunzio. See Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 128-29. In that later prose, mentioned above in this article, entitled "Della Biblioteca Civica ovvero della Gloria" (1957). Saba recalls the formative readings of his youth, and D'Annunzio's *Poema paradisiaco* (1893) is among them. See Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 1116-118. Furio Brugnolo ("Il *Canzoniere* di Umberto Saba" in *Letteratura italiana. Le opere, IV. Il Novecento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1995), 465-538) argues that the influence of D'Annunzio's poetry on Saba's *Canzoniere* is first of all metrical (529) and elaborates further on this influence, contrasting the position held by Mario Lavagetto (*La gallina di Saba* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 23), who categorically denied D'Annunzio's influence. Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo (*Da D'Annunzio a Montale*, 62n) pointed out some crucial lexical influences of D'Annunzio's poetry on "Trieste e una donna." For other analyses of the relationship Saba-D'Annunzio, see also Ettore Caccia, "Saba e D'Annunzio," *Quaderni Dannunziani* XL-XLI (1972): 165-90; and Giordano Castellani, "Nascita e divenire della poesia di Saba: 'Soldato alla prigione' 1908-1948," *Otto-Novecento* VII (1983): xvii-xx.

⁵⁷ Saba recognizes in the triad of Carducci, Pascoli and D'Annunzio a crucial step in the advancement of modern Italian literature. In a famous *Scorciatoia* Saba comments: "D'Annunzio è stato il più poeta della Triade. Alcuni suoi accenti sono indimenticabili; pochi, nati da un narcisismo totalitario. Ma quei pochi danno un suono d'oro sul marmo. Il resto—tutto il resto—è di una falsità sorprendente [...] Mancandogli le cose, si rifaceva sull'ombra, ingigantita, delle cose. Che delizioso piccolo poeta sarebbe stato, solo che avesse avvertiti i suoi limiti! Ma questo, proprio questo non poteva. Rimangono di lui, almeno, un verso e mezzo, che valgono tutto Carducci e tutto Pascoli." Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 864-65.

⁵⁸ Saba recalls this episode also in "Autobiografia" 10 (8-10): "Gabriele d'Annunzio alla Versilia / vidi e conobbi; all'ospite fu assai / egli cortese, altro per me non fece." (X, 8-10). Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, 264.

⁵⁹ Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 224.

⁶⁰ "Il contrapposto è fra i due uomini nostri più compiutamente noti che meglio si prestano a dare un esempio pratico di quello che intendo per onestà e disonestà letteraria: è fra Alessandro Manzoni e Gabriele D'Annunzio: fra gli *Inni Sacri* e i cori dell'*Adelchi*, e il secondo libro delle *Laudi* e la *Nave*: fra versi mediocri ed immortali e magnifici versi

admiration of a betrayed lover. Saba is a sensitive reader and understands D'Annunzio's ambiguity and the complexity of his work. Saba's fascination with D'Annunzio is ambivalent: he wishes he could ignore what is false and exaggerated in his poetry while holding onto what makes it unique and awe-inspiring. Saba wants to replace D'Annunzio, but while he is able to emulate the elder poet in his youth, upon reaching stylistic maturity, Saba realizes that major intellectual differences separate them from one another. One major divergence is a differing interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophical thought, a theoretical fulcrum upon which their respective worldviews and aesthetics hinge. It is clear that when Saba wrote, "my Nietzsche (not others' Nietzsche)," the "others" he refers to stand primarily for D'Annunzio. However, another pivotal issue at stake in their dispute is their understanding of Verdi's music.

D'Annunzio was asked in 1911 to compose an ode to Verdi. The personal feelings of the poet for the composer are a matter of speculation, but the portrait that he offers in this ode is that of a superhuman figure, baptized at his birth by the spirits of Dante, Leonardo and Michelangelo—all four, including Verdi, elected by D'Annunzio as the greatest among the Italian geniuses:

Si chinaron su lui tre vaste frondi
terribili, col pondo
degli eterni pensieri e del dolore:
Dante Alighieri che sorresse il mondo
in suo pugno ed i fonti
dell'universa vita ebbe in suo cuore;
Leonardo, signore
di verità, re dei dominii oscuri,
fissa pupilla a' rai de' Soli ignoti;
il ferreo Buonarroti
che animò del suo gran disdegno in duri
massi gli imperituri
figli, i ribelli eroi
silenziosi onde il Destino è vinto.
("Per la morte di Giuseppe Verdi," 1-14)⁶¹

In D'Annunzio's celebratory words, Verdi is described as a son of the Italian "Patria" (33-37) and the "gloria dei Latini" (83). In the aforementioned short story Saba jokes about this poem, saying that over time he disliked it more and more, even while his passion for Verdi's music grew

per la più parte caduchi. L'onestà dell'uno e la nessuna onestà dell'altro, così verso loro stessi come verso il lettore [...] sono i due termini cui può benissimo ridursi la differenza dei due valori." Saba, "Quello che resta da fare ai poeti," *ibid.*, 674.

⁶¹ Gabriele D'Annunzio, "Per la morte di Giuseppe Verdi," in *Versi d'amore e di gloria*, II (Milan: Mondadori, 1984), 435. Guarnieri Corazzol, commenting on this poem, gives a pertinent account of the motivations behind its composition and his poetic value in D'Annunzio's oeuvre: "Omaggio di facile retorica, espresso nell'ovvia formula dell'ode celebrativa di gusto classicheggiante, la canzone è stata generalmente sentita, nel panorama della produzione poetica dannunziana come un accidente lirico, un intervento steso con indifferenza e controvoglia." Adriana Guarnieri-Corazzol, *Tristano, mio Tristano* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1988), 28. See also Eurialo De Michelis, "D'Annunzio e le arti," *D'Annunzio a contraggenio* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1963), 217.

stronger. But in a letter to his wife and daughter he mentions a line from this poem that was especially dear to him:

Ma quello che più mi ha commosso è stato un bigliettino anonimo, che ho ricevuto ieri e nel quale era scritto a macchina il verso che D'Annunzio scrisse in morte di Giuseppe Verdi: "Pianse ed amò per tutti." Questo lo considero il massimo dei miei successi letterari.⁶²

While Saba admits to detesting this poem and D'Annunzio's grandeur, he confesses his passion for this line, because it perfectly encapsulates the sense of universal feeling and participation, which he considered the key characteristic of Verdi's music. In Saba's conception, Verdi emerges as the poet of universal feelings, the same ambition Saba had for himself. In the poem "Tre poesie alla mia musa," from the collection "Mediterranee" (1945-46), Saba finally seizes on D'Annunzio's line and virtually "kills" this literary father: "3. / Non quello che di te scrivono sotto. / *Pianse e capì per tutti* era il tuo motto."⁶³ Not only does Saba make his own a line that was intended for Verdi—thus further emphasizing his identification with the composer—he also kills his poetic father and replaces him with an alternative fatherly figure, one that best defines his mission as poet and man. In changing the second verb of the line (*amò*→*capì*), Saba stretches even further his idea of Verdi as a symbol of universal compassion and a model of "poesia onesta."

In one of his most famous *Scorciatoie*, Saba points out what he believes to be the two most beautiful lines of Italian poetry. Saba indicates a verse from Dante's *Commedia* and a line written by Paolo Monelli,⁶⁴ but he also adds a third verse, which comes from Piave's libretto for Verdi's *Ernani* (1844): "Udite or tutti del mio cor gli affanni."⁶⁵ Here, as elsewhere, Saba understands Verdi as the poet of human soul, but in the opera *Ernani*, which recounts the adventures of a revolutionary bandit who attempts to overthrow the throne of King Charles of Aragon, in 1519 Spain, Saba also identifies the political underpinnings that made this opera one of the most popular during the Risorgimento. Saba describes the line "Udite or tutti del mio cor gli affanni" (from the aria "Mercé dilette amici," I.2) as an "italianissimo verso" and defines *Ernani* as a "partigiano tenore." When the hero first appears on stage, Saba sees the Italian flag, waving in the wind.⁶⁶

Saba thus shows himself to be sensitive to the political role played by Verdi throughout Italian history. If during the Risorgimento the composer became a symbol for the struggle of young revolutionaries, in post-unification Italy, Verdi met the need for the newly born Italian monarchy to find national monuments around which to build a sense of national identity. Later, during the

⁶² Umberto Saba, *Atroce paese che amo* (Milan: Bompiani, 1987), 5.

⁶³ Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, 532.

⁶⁴ "I due più bei versi della letteratura italiana sono per me in questo momento: 'La bocca mi baciò tutto tremante' e 'L'uno buggera l'altro'. Il primo lo conoscevo da un pezzo. Il secondo l'ho letto per la prima volta uno di questi giorni di fine guerra nel libro di Paolo Monelli ROMA 1943—bellissimo libro davvero, *vivo*; una sorpresa, una meraviglia!—che egli cita per dire che in quell'anno (1943) i romani, come al tempo del Belli, provavano qualche difficoltà a campare senza buggerarsi a vicenda." Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 51.

⁶⁵ "Ernani: Mercè, dilette amici;/ o tanto amor, mercè . . . / *Udite or tutti del mio cor gli affanni*;/ e se voi negherete il vostro aiuto,/ forse per sempre Ernani fia perduto." (*Ernani*, I.2) Francesco Maria Piave. Opera libretto for Giuseppe Verdi, *Ernani* (1844). Reference: <http://opera.stanford.edu/Verdi/Ernani/libretto.html>. Italics mine.

⁶⁶ "Promettevo di scrivere un giorno un RACCONTINO intorno a questo italianissimo verso, che canta il partigiano-tenore Ernani, appena compare sulla scena, e nel quale vedo come lo spiegarsi al sole della bandiera nazionale." Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 99.

years of the so-called “Verdi Renaissance”—an intellectual season in the 1920s when Verdi’s music was rediscovered internationally—Verdi was confirmed as a symbol of Italian national identity, while after World War II, his music was chosen to restore a long lost national cohesion. Saba himself demonstrates a similar personal and intellectual need to recognize a monument in Verdi as a political symbol, however, this need goes beyond mere political implications: Verdi’s opera allows Saba straightforward and unambiguous access to a literary tradition that he had yearned to become part of from his earliest compositions. This *Scorciatoia* better exemplifies this point:

Fu una sera, in caserma. Ero solo nella bianca immensa camerata, quando un altro consegnato (Gobbetta si chiamava; era lombardo, anzi milanese) entrò improvvisamente, cantando «Bella figlia dell’amore». Tutta l’Italia, con i suoi mari, i suoi monti, le sue città, mi entrò nel cuore come un fulgore azzurro.⁶⁷

This passage recalls the atmosphere of the “Versi militari,” a series of poems that Saba composed during his military service in which he celebrates the sense of communion he achieved with the rest of humanity. Saba openly mentions the aria *Bella figlia dell’amore*, a recurrent motif of his operatic repertoire, which I have demonstrated to be central in defining the poet’s affinity with Verdi’s conception of eroticism. This explicit reference to *Rigoletto* strengthens the contiguity between opera and Saba’s poetic imagery, even outside the pages of the *Canzoniere*. But this aria—sung by the Duke of Mantua as a mantra to seduce the beautiful sister of Sparafucile, the killer whom Rigoletto has hired to kill the duke—acquires a different meaning in the specific context of Saba’s recollection. The aria that the private Gobbetta sings activates a potent memory, triggering a moving, Proustian moment of reminiscence and revelation. Through this memory alone, Saba is able to reconnect with Italy and understand his most intimate need to participate in the destiny of the nation.

In poems like “Intermezzo” and “Carmen,” Saba mixes Verdi’s voice with that of Bizet, finding in this “marriage” the perfect expression for his deepest feelings. Here the psychological tone that he identifies in Nietzsche and the political aspects of Verdi’s operas converge. Nevertheless, Saba’s understanding of a concept such as nationalism was mostly intellectualized: it concerned his need to define himself as part of a cultural tradition. In fact, Saba refused to define himself as a nationalist, as he states in this short prose work entitled “Trieste”:

Non sono un nazionalista; non voglio buttare olio sul fuoco, e so che ci siamo messi, anche più del necessario, dalla cattiva parte. Ma se le cose alle quali ho accennato—poesie, quadri, romanzi—hanno ancora un peso, pesante—senza contropartita—sul *nostro* piatto della bilancia.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ibid., 25-26.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 47.

It becomes clear in reading these words that for Saba political and cultural identity coincide. Saba does not understand nationalism as a form of patriotism, but rather he affirms the importance of preserving and underscoring the cultural heritage of one's country. Saba makes the border condition of Trieste his own, as influences from Central Europe and Germany encounter in his pages the classics of Italian literature. Saba stands at the crossroads of many cultural influences, yet his poetry emphasizes his profound will to participate in the Italian tradition. In light of this fact, the nationalism implicit in "Della biblioteca civica, ovvero della gloria" becomes all the more meaningful. The adjective "civico" (civic) comes from the Latin *civis*, citizen. In this sense, the library of this essay is indeed truly civic, and so is Saba's poetry.

The political contours of Saba's identification with Verdi become clear only upon careful inspection. Saba understands the composer as a perfect and unadulterated expression of Italian culture. Explicit textual references to his operas and the subtle allusions to the composer's work and philosophy all become part of Saba's own peculiar nationalism. If D'Annunzio's poetry sounds like gold on marble, then Verdi, through the patriotic words of *Ernani*, or *Rigoletto*'s arias, resounds like Italy itself, its hills and its cities. This sound lingers at the threshold of the civic library where Saba first approached the classics of Italian literature. Through his identification with Verdi, Saba underscores his desire to fully become an Italian citizen. Verdi is a crucial gateway figure through which Saba can most deeply connect with the civic pantheon of Italian authors and define his own voice.

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