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BERTOLOTTI, Davide (Turin, 1784 - Turin, 1860)

Davide Bertolotti was an intellectual of Piedmontese origin. He was interested in many different areas and is known primarily for the wide-ranging nature of his work. He also figures among those foreign historians and disseminators of information who, in the nineteenth century, devoted themselves to writing histories of Portugal. He was born in Turin in 1784, the son of a wealthy merchant. This enabled him to have access to schooling in various places and not only in the region where he was born (where social and economic traditionalism together with a solid Jesuit culture supported the administrative structure of the Savoy dynasty). In 1812 he moved to Milan and it was there that he began his work. In this intellectually effervescent environment that proved vital for his intellectual pursuits, he produced a number of wide-ranging and diversified written works, a common occurrence among the intellectuals of the time.

One of Bertolotti's academic interests was to disseminate information about history and geography. He wanted to make people know about the world at a time when the spread of reading was accompanied by a growing interest in travelling (this being right in the middle of the period of the *Grand Tour*). In the ambit of a new periodical publication he edited, *Il Ricoglitore*, he made use of his linguistic skills to collect and translate information taken from foreign publications. However, it is in his Italian translations of the compendiums of world history by the Counts of Ségur that the "Histories" of various countries (such as China, Switzerland and also Portugal) appear. His work on Portugal (*Storia di Portogallo dai primi tempi sino ai nostri giorni. Tratta dal Durdent, dal Balbi e da altri autori*, 1824, henceforth *SdP*), written in Italian and published in various editions, was a work of an informational nature that achieved a certain editorial and commercial success. This contrasted with the general evaluation of his work by contemporary and also later critics, who deemed it mediocre. What is certain though is that his work came to be considered the precursor to 19th century publications of the same genre, as well as the pioneer of 19th century romantic historiography about Portugal.

Other works followed such as the translation from French of Jean Ferdinand Denis' work *Portugal* (1850), or, to give another example, Cesare Balbo's book, *Studii sulla guerra di indipendenza di Spagna e Portogallo*, written in 1847 (a work that comes close to what could be considered military history). Bertolotti's work was the result of a tireless desire to spread knowledge with one of his objectives being to encourage the reader's interest in history and geography. Despite being weakly structured from the historiographical and methodological point of view, his idea of history reveals an interest in multiple areas of knowledge (history, geography and literature). In every case though, a bibliographical synthesis prevails over the

rigorous analysis of sources and, despite writing in clear language devoid of the Baroque flourishes that were so prolific in romantic writing, his work is contaminated by the historical novel with an excess of rhetoric that was not uncommon in 19th century informational works.

In his historiographical activity, Bertolotti enjoyed a particularly prolific period around the time of his return to Turin where he obtained the favour and protection of the Royal House of Savoy (in particular King Charles Albert), to which he had already dedicated a historical study, *Istoria della Real Casa di Savoia* (1830). According to some critics, the merit of this study was that it popularized a topic that was still little known and researched although in a tone that was deemed too flattering and aggrandizing. Another historical work, *Gli Arabi in Italia Esercitazione istorica*, followed in 1838. This was a critical history of the Moorish domination of the islands and the south of the peninsula and of the damage that, in the author's opinion, this had caused. In 1857, in collaboration with another writer who dedicated himself to producing works of an informative nature - Cesare Cantù, author of a world history translated into several languages – he published *Il regno Lombardo-veneto* and *Gli stati sardi*. The significance of the former work cannot be underrated as it appeared right at the time when the political and diplomatic strategy of the Kingdom of Sardinia (under the able leadership of the Count of Cavour) was based on a plan to annex the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia (an annexation carried out two years later) as a first step to their territorial expansion in the peninsula.

The justification for Bertolotti's interest in Portuguese culture is not immediately obvious, but there are several possible interpretations. For example, this interest could have been the result of the numerous works he read, especially in the 1820s. However, the hypothesis that the writer was simply interested in Portugal's current political affairs cannot be excluded either. We should remember that Portugal was of interest to Italian public opinion thanks once again to the events of the first twenty years of the century. In fact, at that time, Lisbon welcomed various Neapolitan, Milanese and Piedmontese political exiles. A certain plausibility can also be given to the hypothesis that the author had been stimulated by works of other writers: in fact, Bertolotti's work was preceded by Adriano Balbi's *Essai Statistique sur le Royaume de Portugal et d'Algarve* (1822), a work of great scientific significance and fervently *vintista*. However, despite Bertolotti's interest being sporadic, it is not of secondary importance in his collection of works; for instance, the Piedmontese writer also organized a critical Italian edition of Camões's masterpiece (*I Lusíadi di Luigi Camones*, 1821). Whatever the reason for it, the *SdP* is his most relevant publication. It is a compilation of various earlier contributions, such as those of French historians and scholars who at that time seemed to channel their interests towards the history of peoples and nations. In the *SdP*, Bertolotti works with sources, commenting on them by using other sources. But unlike other similar attempts, he does not steer away from adding his own comments and he provides his own analysis. The sources play a fundamental role, but he continues to examine and comment on concrete cases even though he contradicts himself at times. (The same thing happens with his studies on Switzerland (1823) and China (1825), both included in the compendium series mentioned above.)

Divided into three volumes, with an analytical index at the end of the third volume, the *SdP* was first published in 1824, a time when, in Portugal and in the Italian peninsula, absolutist power, shaken by *vintismo*

in the former and by the Neapolitan and Piedmontese revolutions in the latter, began a period of adjustment. This was a particularly lengthy period in the Italian states, being challenged only by the revolutionary wave of 1848 and slightly shaken by the 1830-31 revolutionary attempts in the territories controlled by the Habsburgs and the Papal territories of central Italy.

Bertolotti dedicated himself totally to publication of a structured study of the history of Portugal, a country regarded with “ignorance” and “much maligned” which had been studied with a lack of both accuracy and knowledge. He relied on Adriano Balbi, the first writer who had shown “qu’il n’y a peut être pas un seul pays en Europe qui compte un plus grand nombre de mauvaises descriptions” (*Essai Statistique*, t. I, p. VII). And inasmuch as he was aiming at “travellers”, we could say that his work is a historiographical work of a clearly informative nature, a tool for travellers and tourists, great numbers of whom, as we know, were to be found in Portugal at the time. In other words, Bertolotti tried to direct his historiographical efforts (in the case of national histories) in such a way that they achieved a style very similar to that of travel literature with its pedagogic and pragmatic function. It is in his fondness for such literature that his critics discovered his passion and purity, his pictorial taste and his interest in historical memories and aspects of national folklore.

So how did Bertolotti view some of the most significant moments in Portuguese history? As a first example, take his narration of one episode with mystical and religious implications: the Battle of Ourique (t. I, pp. 49-57). Bertolotti considers D. Afonso’s “visions” and “miracles” as the result of the Portuguese sovereign’s creativity and cunning, thus calling into question something that other historians who had studied the topic considered to be true. He also shows how he was in favour of interpreting these supposed events as a result of the “cunning” of D. Afonso Henriques, who wanted to spur on his nobles in the struggle against the Moors (“sembri molto più naturale considerare Alfonso come un destro condottiero, anziché come un visionario”, t. I, p. 54). On the other hand, he does recognise as authentic a historical event that is considered fundamental to the establishment of Portugal as a nation: the *Cortes* of Lamego. In relation to this though, it should be said that the author, having published the work in 1824, had formulated a view inspired by a mythical tradition held for true. As mentioned above, in Bertolotti’s analysis the veracity of the *Cortes* of Lamego is not called into question; on the contrary, they are considered a founding moment of the Portuguese nation, but he locates them chronologically in the year 1145 (when they are usually placed in 1143). This is a mythical view that, along with others in the historiography of Portugal, would later be devalued and lose credibility especially after publication of Alexandre Herculano’s *História de Portugal* (History of Portugal) (vol.I, 1846).

As far as his interpretation of the Discoveries is concerned, Bertolotti claims that the Portuguese set out on their maritime adventure not only because of the need they felt to perform great feats, but also due to the fact that the sea was the only space to which they could turn if the military pressure exerted by their Spanish neighbours is taken into account. These reasons, together with the need for King D. João I to control the “spirito turbolento dei suoi sudditi” (t. I, p. 186), open up the gateways of the seas to the kingdom. Bertolotti therefore sees the Discoveries as the moment for an unavoidable conquest of space at the same time as being an outlet valve for internal social pressures. In his critical description he gives no indication as to the



causes of the decline that occurs at various times, unlike the liberal Portuguese historiography of the nineteenth century. The “decadence” identified by Bertolotti coincides with the loss of national sovereignty in 1580 when Portugal came under the Spanish rule of Philip II; in other words the eclipse of a monarchy that had known how to identify with the nation itself (a brave and belligerent nation) through its representative institution – the *Cortes* – the bedrock of Portugal’s age of prosperity and military and commercial splendour, which was called into question by the disappearance of “um giovinetto re, tratto da un imprudente amor di combattere”, thus leaving the field wide open for domination by Spain, “funesta al Portogallo come alle Fiandre e all’Italia” (t. I, p. 7).

The final part of the work includes descriptions of national institutions, people, architecture, the Portuguese language and Portuguese literature, all of which are summarised in a chapter of some seventy pages. The style is the same as in the compendiums that marked the literary production of the time and the historical period in which the author lived. In this final part it becomes clear that Bertolotti resorted to works by other writers to produce his own work. What always stands out though is that he had his own special interests and that he was interested in a wide range of subjects. It is in fact this interdisciplinarity that, in a certain way, gives value to the whole work, showing the extent of the author’s ability to synthesize yet at the same time revealing his breadth of vision, neither of which should be underestimated. His analysis is always interesting to read: in his description of the Inquisition he points out how “non fu giammai così crudele nel Portogallo come in Goa e nella Spagna” (t. III, p. 114); he emphasizes the role played by the Marquis of Pombal in putting an end to the influence and power of the religious tribunal (reminding us of certain words uttered decades later by Antero de Quental in the *Conferências Democráticas* [Democratic Conferences]); and he classifies the distinction between old and new Christians (in the time of D. Manuel I) as “ridiculous”.

Bertolotti’s ethnographic analysis of the Kingdom of Portugal is also interesting to read (but there is a sense of strangeness that can only be felt by the contemporary reader). He makes use of the narratives of the Piedmontese scholar Giuseppe Barretti (*A journey from London to Genoa, through England, Portugal, Spain and France*, 1770), who revealed his deep aversion to the Portuguese lower classes and to Lusitanian society in general, which he considered to be backward. What also stands out are his descriptions relating to the presence on Portuguese soil of (large numbers of) “negroes”, true “monsters”, who form a contrast with the ordinary beauty of white Portuguese people, and who multiply their “despicable” presence through miscegenation, the cause of the bastardization and degeneration of the white race and of Portuguese families. (In his opinion, inter-racial unions made the Portuguese deviate from the European race.) (t. III, p. 115-116).

Bertolotti only takes his narrative up to 1811, the date when the French left Portugal. What is noticeable is that, contrary to what Alphonse Rabbe, for example, does in his work *Resume de l’Histoire de Portugal, depuis les premiers temps de la monarchie jusqu’en 1823* (and Adriano Balbi, an enthusiastic supporter of *vintismo*), Bertolotti refuses to analyze the *vintista* period. In a marginal note to Chapter XVII in the third volume, almost entirely inspired by Durdent’s work, Bertolotti makes a depreciative remark about the pro-Napoleonic narrative of this French writer, criticizing this type of commentary. He also warns that it is his

choice not to continue to write another part “più uniforme alla verità e più concorde al nostro sentire” (t. III, p. 101) because he considers it to be a “prudenza lodevole” not to offer opinions about contemporary events. This position of Bertolotti’s thus justifies the fact that he does not analyze the period that marks the apogee of the liberal revolution (whereas in the work of an author like Rabbe, the apologetic view of this period takes up a whole chapter with numerous references to Balbi’s reflections). However, Bertolotti’s position of political non-alignment was considered to be more opportunistic (a failing he was accused of several times) than conceptual as his attitude over the years would seem to confirm. In fact, he never showed any form of active political intervention. It is understandable therefore why he might not have hesitated to break off his friendship and unity with other writers and companions.

Bertolotti’s complex historiographical production reveals a problem with the authenticity of his sources and the depth of his research, a not insignificant problem with informational historical-cultural works published in the first half of the nineteenth century. It is in this development of traditional historiography (also in Portugal), which leads to “summaries of summaries”, where one point of obvious epistemological weakness can be found regarding the authenticity of the result – a methodological criticism which applies to almost the whole of the production in these years when the more rigorous form of research that had sprung from the German school was just starting to be propagated in the world of romantic culture.

Davide Bertolotti was a member, and correspondent member for the area of moral, historical and philological sciences, of the prestigious *Accademia delle Scienze di Torino* (1812), of which Alexandre Herculano became a member in 1849 also as a correspondent member. However, there is no reference to any correspondence between the two scholars despite their sharing a mutual passion: the historical novel.

Works by the author: *Milano e la Lombardia nel 1818*, Milano, Stella & C., 1818; *Il Ricoglitore [1818-1823]*, Milano, Soc. Tip. de’ Classici Italiani; *I Lusiadi di Luigi Camones*, Milano, Società Tipografica dei Classici Italiani, 1821; *Peregrinazioni*, 2 vols., Soc. Tip. de’ Classici Italiani, 1822; *Il Nuovo Ricoglitore [1823-1834]*, Milano, Stella e figli; *La Calata degli Ungheri in Italia nel ‘900*, Milano, Soc. Tip. de’ Classici Italiani, 1823; *Storia di Portogallo dai primi tempi sino ai nostri giorni. Tratta dal Durdent, dal Balbi e da altri autori*, III tt., Milano, Tipografia Ranieri Fanfani, 1824; *Storia della Cina*, Milano, Stella e figli, 1825; *Istoria della Real Casa di Savoia*, Milano, Fontana, 1830; *Gli arabi in Italia*, Torino, Baglione e Comp., 1838; (with Cesare Cantù), *Grande illustrazione del regno Lombardo-veneto*, Milano, 1857; *Stati Sardi*, Cremona [s. n.], 1857.

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APOIOS:

