Robert Romano

THE BRAVO, ALIAS ABAELLINO, DER GROSSE BANDIT

One of the works which testify the strong influence that German literature had on the American literary production throughout the nineteenth century is certainly James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Bravo* (1831), the first novel of the so-called European trilogy. *The Bravo* was written during the novelist’s sojourn in Europe and precisely after his visit to Venice in April 1830.

The novel is set in the early eighteenth century in Venice, that is in the period of the decline of the Republic. The main plot deals with the story of a Venetian young man, Jacopo Frontoni, the bravo of the title, who is the hired assassin of the State of Venice. Jacopo is actually a good son who has been obliged by the government to take up the reputation of a bravo in order to obtain the liberation of his father from the jails of Venice.

Most critics have seen behind this story of the double identity of the Venetian bandit the old story of *Abaellino, der Grosse Bandit*, a novel which was written in 1794 by the German writer Heinrich Daniel Zschokke. The novel was turned into a play by the author himself the following year and it became very popular as soon as it came out; it was translated into many languages and it was performed in most of the European stages.

Heinrich Daniel Zschokke (1771-1848) can certainly be considered as a minor figure in German literature, but he was an eclectic man and, as J.P. Hoskins pointed out, he “enjoyed a popularity at home which had never been equaled by any previous German author”.

He joined an itinerant group of actors very early in his life, but he later

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1 For a deep analysis of this aspect see Henry A. Pochmann, *German Culture in America: Philosophical and Literary Influences, 1600-1900*, Univ. of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1956.

2 An Italian translation of the play was published in 1834: H.D. Zschokke, *Abaellino o il Bandito in Venezia*, tragedia in cinque atti voltata in italiano da Carlo Ercole Colla, Milano, Ant. Fort. Stella e Figli, 1834. The Italian translation is written in prose, while the German original is written in verse.

devoted himself to the study of theology in Frankfurt am Oder. Zschokke’s
career began with a series of plays, such as Graf Monaldeschi (1790) and
Charlotte Corday (1794), and with “Räuberromane” among which Abaellino, der Grosse Bandit (1793-94). He later became a minister, but he
continued to be interested in philosophy, history, law and in aesthetics and
published many writings. He travelled through Germany but then he set-
tled in Switzerland where he spent the rest of his life publishing didactic
writings and occupying many administrative posts.

Abaellino, der Grosse Bandit is a story of brigandage that is set in
Venice at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The play is divided intoive acts and it is written in verse. Abaellino is a bandit who joins a group
of Venetian bravos and he starts working for them as a killer. The bravos
are hired assassins at the disposal of a group of senators who conspire
against the doge, Andreas Gritti.

The bandits try to kill Rosamunde, the doge’s niece, and Flodoardo, a
noble Venetian who is in love with the girl, is determined on capturing
them in order to win Rosamunde’s hand. He organizes an expedition to the
haunt of the bravos and he arrests them all, except for Abaellino. The
conspirators now can only apply to him for their shady affairs, and they
order him to kill some of the doge’s friends. Meanwhile, in order to save
Venice from the terrible bravo the doge comes to an agreement with
Flodoardo; he may marry Rosamunde, provided that he succeeds in arresting
Abaellino. In the end Flodoardo succeeds in capturing the bravo, but
we discover that Flodoardo and Abaellino are actually the same person.
The Venetian nobleman had disguised himself from the beginning as a
bravo in order to discover the conspiracy, but he has committed no crimes.
He has saved the city and the doge from the bandits and he can now marry
Rosamunde.

No doubt there are some elements of the plot of the play that can be
found also in The Bravo. The theme of the bravo’s mistaken identity and of
his final unmasking, for example, is the most striking common element in
the two texts. In fact, although Jacopo does not disguise himself, he
assumes, however, the double identity of bravo and of pious son.

It is especially concerning the characters of his novel that Cooper seems
to have drawn from the German play. The figure of Jacopo, for instance,
can almost entirely be traced back to that of Abaellino.

The latter’s physical aspect is ugly and deformed whereas Jacopo’s is
more pleasant, but both characters are described as inspiring terror, according
to the Gothic tradition. Abellino is described in act one by the bandit
Matteo:

Wer sah zwischen Erd’ und Himmel
Je ein Belials-Gesichtchen,
Ganz erkoren und geboren
Für das Galgenarm, wie dies?
Diese Stirn, ein Mauerbrecher,
Ist der Freiheit Eisenschied,
aus den hämischen, scharfen Winkeln,
Hier um das verzogene Maul,
Spottet schneide Gottesläufer
Aus dem eignen, finstern Auge.
Gliiht der ew‘gen Hölle Inbrust 4.

Cooper confined himself to describing Jacopo as a pale and grave man
with quick and glowing dark eyes, however, he and Abaellino are both
presented as Gothic villains. This is the first physical description of Jacopo:

His years were under thirty, though the calm gravity of his countenance imparted to
it a character of more mature age. The cheeks were bloodless, but they betrayed
rather the pallid hue of mental than bodily disease... the face was melancholy rather
than sombre, and its perfect repose accorded well with the striking calmness of the
body... Out of this striking array of features gleamed an eye that was full of
brilliancy, meaning, and passion 5.

Other characters of The Bravo that can be considered as drawn from
the German play are the feminine characters: Donna Violetta, the Venetian
heiress, and her mentor Florinda recall Rosamunde and her friend Iduelda.
The figure of Don Camillo, too, has some similarities with Flodoardo. Just
as Don Camillo rescues Violetta who had fallen into a canal, so does
Flodoardo rescue Rosamunde who was a prisoner of the Sultan, and both
characters end by marrying the woman they love.

Another figure that is present both in Abaellino and The Bravo is that
of the priest 6. In the former Abbate Tolomeo is one of the conspirators, in
the latter Father Anselmo, a Carmelite, is Violetta’s spiritual guide. He
serves the state in its shady affairs, but at the end he redeems himself by
helping Don Camillo and Violetta, therefore by going against the govern-
ment’s will.

Another common element between The Bravo and its source is the
atmosphere of secrecy and suspense which was typical of the Gothic tradi-
tion. In the play, as well as in the novel, many scenes are described in
darkness, at night, and the figure of the bravo wandering through the
streets of Venice is an awe-inspiring presence.

These similarities between the German play and the novel induced the

4 Heinrich Daniel Zschokke, “Abaellino, der Grosse Bandit”, in Gesammelte
Werke, 1795, p. 47. Who ever saw between earth and sky / such a Belial’s little face,
/ justborn and chosen / to the gallows’ arm, like this? / This ram-like forehead / is
the iron-shield of freedom. / From the mischievous, sharp angles / here, round the
twisted, beastly mouth / mocks the contemptible oath! / In the single dark eye /
glooms the ardour of the everlasting hell ./

5 James Fenimore Cooper, The Bravo, Twayne Publishers, New Haven, Conn.,

6 A strong anti-catholic element is to be found in Zschokke’s play. The Church
is represented as corrupt and Abbate Tolomeo as its representative. He joins the
conspiracy against the doge and he, too, is responsible for the crimes committed by
the bandits.
American press to accuse Cooper of plagiarism, as soon as The Bravo was published.

On June, 1832 The New York American published a review of The Bravo signed with the pseudonym “Cassio” that accused Cooper of having copied Zschokke’s play. “Cassio” wrote in a rather exaggerated tone: “In The Bravo, we have nothing but the old play of Abellino, swollen, by a fertility peculiar to weeds...” 1.

Cooper defended his work in A Letter to His Countrymen (1834) where he wrote: “There is as much resemblance in motive, in character, in incident, between the Lord Mortimer of an old-fashioned novel, and Tom Jones” 2.

Of course one wonders how Cooper could have read Abellino, considering that Zschokke was not such a famous writer. Actually, at the beginning of the nineteenth century William Dunlap translated the German play in English and adapted it for the American stage, “in the midst of annoyance from sources as adverse to literary exertion” 3 with the title Abellino the Great Bandit (1801).

Dunlap who was a playwright, besides being a painter, translated many popular French and German dramas in English. He was practically the first dramatist who introduced German drama to the American audience without the mediation of British translations.

He translated above all the works of Schiller and Kotzebue; these plays usually dealt with motifs of banditry and violence 4.

It is probably by chance that Dunlap happened to read Abellino, since he did not know the author. In fact, as he stated in his History of the American Theatre: “At the time it was brought out in its new dress, the name of the German author was unknown to the translator, and remained so for some years. His name is Zschokke” 5.

The play was performed for the first time in English in New York, on the 11th of February, 1801 and its success was great. As Pochmann reports, Abellino, the Great Bandit was played nine times in 1801 and it reappeared every season until 1823-24. It had 59 performances in New York and 39 in Philadelphia up to 1829 6.

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2 Ibidem.
4 H.A. Pochmann, op. cit., p. 328. According to Pochmann, these plays were stageworthy and “they satisfied the tastes of the moment, mixing sentiment and heroics with shallow rationalism and exotic allure”.
5 William Dunlap, History cit., p. 142.
6 H.A. Pochmann, Op. cit., p. 332. If we compare the number of performances
Cooper never mentioned the American play as the source of his novel and there is no proof that he read the text or that he saw the piece performed. But since Dunlap was Cooper’s close friend and since the play was so successful in New York, one is induced to think that some way or other the novelist knew the text.

Another English translation of Abaellino appeared a few years after the American one was published, by the famous writer of Gothic novels, “Monk” Lewis, with the title The Bravo of Venice (1804-05). Lewis’s text, however, is not the translation of the dramatic version of Abaellino, but of the novel that Zschokke had written in 1793-94.

Since the book was successful Lewis later turned it into a play, Rugantino; or the Bravo of Venice which was performed at the Covent Garden Theatre in 1805.

Cooper knew about Monk Lewis’s romance but he never quoted it as the source of his novel. In a letter to W.B. Shubrick, written from Paris on May 1st 1831, he wrote a propos of The Bravo: “It is in press, and will appear in July. I have not yet decided on the name, but believe it will be ‘Bravo’. I find Monk Lewis had a story called ‘The Bravo of Venice’, which may induce me to choose another title” 11.

In conclusion, although it is improbable that Cooper read Zschokke’s Abaellino, he could, however, have read Dunlap’s or Lewis’s adaptations, or he could have seen some performance of the play: in this case Zschokke’s work would lie at the back of The Bravo 14.

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