

**studi  
germanici**



**6**  
**2014**  
**English**

# H.C. Andersen and A Poet's Bazaar

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“It is just as well I am leaving – my soul is ill”, states Hans Christian Andersen in a letter dated 1st November 1840 to Jonas Collin,<sup>1</sup> his greatest benefactor, he who had welcomed him into his home like a child and provided for his education. The letter is written from Kiel, the day after his departure for Italy, Greece and the East, and it shows how, for the Danish writer, travel – in general and this journey in particular – was not only an opportunity to gain new experiences, in the best tradition of the *Grand Tour*, but also a way of escape.

Born into a very poor family, Andersen had come to Copenhagen in 1819, penniless but heartily convinced that he should become a great man. Thanks to this very stubbornness, and the help of some influential persons in the capital – precisely such as Jonas Collin – who took his cause to heart and saw his potential, he was able to apply himself with some constancy and obtain a qualification. With a state grant, and the – oft-violated – prohibition to produce “literature” until he had completed his studies, from 1822 to 1827 Andersen lived away from the capital to learn at least the rudiments of Latin, Greek, foreign languages, and in general of a culture that thus far he had only regarded through the eyes of a voracious and disorganized reader. Times were hard, it was “the darkest, the most unhappy time in my life”,<sup>2</sup> as he defined it many years later. But despite the constant complaints sent to his benefactors about the conditions he was forced to live in, owing to economic hardship and his teachers’ lack of confidence in his abilities, he managed to carry on and complete his studies in Copenhagen.

Having returned to the capital in 1827, and passed his exams, he immediately composed a bizarre book, *A Walk from Holmen's Canal to the East Point of the Island of Amager in the Years 1828 and 1829*, pro-

<sup>1</sup> Edvard Collin, *H.C. Andersen og det Collinske Hus* [1882] (Copenhagen, 1929<sup>2</sup>), p. 175.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Christian Andersen, *The Fairy Tale of My Life: An Autobiography* [1855], introduction by Naomi Lewis (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), p. 58.



ving his literary talent: the *Walk* enjoyed reasonable success, even though it was a fantastical arabesque, filled with quotations from literature, showing his immense stylistic immaturity and lack of a real cultural perspective owing to a hurried school education. Encouraged to continue, in 1830 he published his first fairy tale in the volume *Digte: The Dead Man: A Folk Tale from Fyn*, the retelling of a folk tale, whose introduction included a short, but prophetic, note:

As a child it was my greatest pleasure to listen to tales; a great number of these are still alive in my memory, and some of them are not very well—or not at all—known. I have retold one here, and if I see it accepted with applause, I shall retell more in the same manner and publish a cycle of Danish folktales.<sup>3</sup>

*The Dead Man* is an isolated chapter in Andersen's fairy tales, of which it was just a first experiment: here too the style was cumbersome, immature, as can be seen by comparing it with the second draft, *The Travelling Companion*, written five years later, when the author began to publish his long series of fairy tales. Despite the continuing condescension of the critics, by now he was, and felt he was, a poet, and above all he felt that he could deal with the raw material drawn from reality in poetic form. Hence, he needed to expand this reality through new experiences. Upon the advice of Jonas Collin, in 1831 Andersen finally managed to break out of the confined Danish world and gain his first experience beyond his country's borders. A short trip to Germany opened truly unexpected horizons, so much so that he would produce his first mature work: *Shadow Pictures from a Journey to the Harz Mountains, Saxon Switzerland, etc. etc., in the Summer of 1831*. Andersen's compositional technique finally found expression in a collection of scenes, lyrical moments and short stories inspired by his journey, in a pictorial style. Among other things, it is in this work that, according to the author himself, the first harbingers can be seen of the fairy tales that would make him immor-

<sup>3</sup> Hans Christian Andersen, *Tales and Stories by Hans Christian Andersen* [1980], translated, with an introduction, by Patricia L. Conroy and Sven H. Rossel (University of Washington Press, 2002<sup>4</sup>), p. 249.



tal. It is Heine's technique that Andersen uses in *his* journey to the Harz. However, he uses it within a more intimate and less satirical atmosphere than the *Harzreise*, from 1826, which was nevertheless one of his direct sources of inspiration. In the *Shadow Pictures* the writer completes the right of passage to his discovery of nature and art, which would influence all his following journeys and a large part of his *oeuvre*.<sup>4</sup> It is a passage that surprises Andersen himself, who, surrounded by such a wealth of images, is driven to see the world through the eye of a painter, to be its enthralled spectator.

The trip to Germany was the first in a long series: the restless author was no longer able to stay put in Denmark for any length of time; he had discovered that, for him, to move around, to get out of the provincial world that was the Danish capital at the time, was to live. And from then on, all his efforts were directed towards visiting the south. But it was only two years later, thanks to a two-year study grant, that he was able to leave on his great formative journey to France and Italy, which lasted over a year and really was the turning point in his literary coming of age. Until then, his greatness as a writer was more presumed than actually acknowledged by the critics, but the Italian journey, as had often been the case for his contemporaries – poets, painters, sculptors and musicians from the north – opened up new, broad horizons for him. With a substantial difference, however: while the experiences gained during their *Grand Tour*, which truly marked their artistic coming of age, were enough for the other travellers to live off for the rest of their lives, Andersen's curiosity and thirst for experiences was hardly enough to survive on until the next journey, which he began to think about as soon as he got home.

Indeed, upon his return from Italy, or, to tell the truth, on his journey northwards, he put his hand to the novel *The Improvisatore*, which paved the way for his success. Set in Italy, the work is extensively autobiographical: it tells the story of a budding poet who manages to achieve success, and above all masterfully uses the great

<sup>4</sup> On this see: Bruno Berni, *Germania fantastica e Germania reale. Hans Christian Andersen dal Viaggio a piedi alle Silhouettes*, in «Studi Germanici» (2012), 1, pp. 61-67.



quantity of material – descriptions, genre sketches – collected by Andersen during his journey depicting the everyday life of this country. Not wrongly, it has been said that, thanks to its numerous translations, *The Improvisatore*, even more than *Corinne* by Madame de Staël, introduced 19th-century Europe to the outlook of the southern world. The novel was a success throughout Europe and gave the author the fame he so yearned for. It gave him entry to the noblest residences, and to the hearts of the great writers amongst whom he now felt he could rank.

One of the critics' objections to the novel – the one that most interests us because it is linked to the short form of the fairy tales and above all to the compositional structure of the *Bazaar* – is that, like in all of Andersen's wide range of works, the strength of *The Improvisatore* lies in the genre scenes and not in the value of the novel as a whole. So much so that, in an examination of the writer's activities in "long" genres – such as novels – compared to "short" genres – fairy tales – a scholar like Paul V. Rubow was able to affirm that "these genres, with their lavish technical layout, were too great for him. Only in the single scenes does his talent truly stand out",<sup>5</sup> and then that "had he not stopped in time and decided to retell folk tales, Andersen would have merely become a most pleasant painter of genre and scenes".<sup>6</sup>

Regardless, Andersen had reaped great benefit from his long journey, and it should come as no surprise that, shortly after his return, he would already be dreaming of setting off again for Europe, and this time be planning to get as far as Greece. He was perfectly aware of what artistic riches could be gained by seeing different worlds, getting out of the narrow-minded Danish capital, and escaping, especially when he began to be received by great European figures, while at home his foreign fame was derided. In a letter to his friend Edvard Collin – Jonas' son – dated 5th July 1835, when he was beginning to enjoy the success of *The Improvisatore*, Andersen was al-

<sup>5</sup> Paul V. Rubow, *H.C. Andersens Eventyr* (Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 1927), p. 126, own translation.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 127, own translation.



ready toying with the idea of a journey to Greece, a project that he would have seen through had the profits of his novel been greater: but his economic situation still depended on outside help.<sup>7</sup> On 24th June of the following year, Andersen wrote even more explicitly to Edvard Collin:

If before my journey you had said, “Allow me to go away, I will give you a book like *The Improvisatore*, etc. etc.!””, they would not have believed me. Now I say, Your Majesty! Allow me to travel, for only one year, to Sicily or to Greece! I will show even greater fruit. This path is the school for my education! With the help of God I will produce a work that, like the last time, will have all say, “The travel was worth it!”<sup>8</sup>

Edvard’s reply, written on 28th June, was not encouraging:

It is yet too early to tackle such a lavish matter as a journey to Greece, [...] it is not worth thinking so far in advance of something that may, if at all, only come to be in a year’s time.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, among readers, Andersen’s fame was continuing to grow. In 1835 he started to publish his fairy tales, first of all with little conviction, though he never underestimated the value of his works, then – thanks to his success with the public, albeit not with the critics – with ever greater consciousness. The fame led to an improvement in his economic conditions, which, thanks to a yearly writer’s pension granted to him in 1838, meant he did not have to constantly think about how he would get by. The plan to travel to Greece, while unrealized for the moment, was no longer unfeasible. His desire was strengthened by the fact that his clashes with the critics showed no sign of letting up. The criticism was triggered in par-

<sup>7</sup> Hans Christian Andersen, *Brevveksling med Edvard og Henriette Collin*, edited by C. Behrend and H. Topsøe-Jensen, I-VI (Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 1933-37), vol. I, p. 225.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 247, own translation.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 250, own translation.



ticular by his almost insane passion for the theatre, which led him to compose works for the Royal Theatre that were regularly turned down or only ran for a few days. In 1840, Johan Ludvig Heiberg, who had often criticized Andersen and was now director of the Royal Theatre, postponed the staging of his tragedy *The Moorish Maiden*, while his wife, the most famous actress of the time, for whom Andersen had written the part, refused to perform it. It was the straw that broke the camel's back: Andersen left.

The writer therefore had two reasons for travelling: out of experience he knew that seeing new worlds gave him inspiration, boosted his poetic vein; what is more, he had every reason to leave Denmark, a country where he felt targeted by the critics, while his fame in Europe grew. In his oversensitivity, Andersen often underlined this situation, and it provided the basis for numerous cases of moral revenge that he would seize upon in his autobiography.

Despite the great success enjoyed by *The Improvisatore*, the favour shown by the public for his next two novels, *Only a Fiddler* and *O.T.*, and the formation of an affectionate circle of readers for his fairy tales, the delusions, and above all the eagerness to see new things and to enrich his experiences, drove him to leave Denmark once more. On 31 October 1840, Andersen began the journey that would take him back to Italy, and then onto Greece and Constantinople for the first time, back up the Danube to Vienna and then home.

These experiences were described in *A Poet's Bazaar*, which, despite the criticism that continued right up to the last century as we will see, honestly declared its intent right from the title. What is considered one of the greatest faults of Andersen's novels – but on the other hand is one of the reasons for his fairy tales' success – is, as has been said, his ability to create genre sketches, scenes that, if linked to the plot of a novel, do not always manage to result in a unified work. When isolated in fairy tales, they instead manage to survive in time and, as the numerous revised versions show, they can even stand up to variations in form that could weaken their effect: some undertones may be lost, some details may be waylaid, but the overall effect remains.

The main characteristic of *A Poet's Bazaar* is precisely this fragmentary nature. It was not Andersen's intention to create a single



body, but to collect a series of pictorial sketches, demonstrating his remarkable skill for isolating topics, figures, even the smallest details. Putting them together in a “bazaar”, he would then reuse them again later on, when the subject gathered during the journey had matured sufficiently to take on a poetic value. That these subjects were then reused cannot be seen immediately. In other words, it is difficult to say which sketches then went on to be part of his *oeuvre*, apart perhaps from the three chapters that were included in one of his collections of *Fairy Tales and Stories* in 1862. These were *The Bronze Hog*,<sup>10</sup> *Friendship's Covenant*<sup>11</sup> and *A Rose from Homer's Grave*,<sup>12</sup> which, except for the first, should be placed in the stories category – this category Andersen added to his fairy tales when he realized he could create a series of short stories that did not exactly fit the bill as fairy tales. As for other sketches, it can only be presumed that some were used later to create similar atmospheres, or in such an altered form that they could no longer be recognized.<sup>13</sup>

What we are interested in is seeing the technique used by the “poet” to collect his experiences. Right from his first trip to Italy, Andersen had begun to draw, to sketch what he saw, like Goethe, but with much less honed skill. They were small drawings, done hurriedly on tiny pieces of paper, which were then completed with the odd additional stroke and a bit of colour when there was time, when the writer sat down to collect his impressions of the day in his diaries. The interesting thing about these sketches, most of which have been preserved, lies precisely in the technique that Andersen used to fix the details, which is the same he uses to collect the impressions in the *Bazaar*. And what he repeatedly renders of the scenes played out before his eyes are the colours, the visual impressions, while in his drawings he hardly ever portrays living creatures, which are instead often at the centre of his literary sketches. Therefore, it is an episodic

<sup>10</sup> Hans Christian Andersen, *The Poet's Bazaar* (New York: Hurd & Houghton; Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1871), pp. 49-59: *Italy*, III, *The Bronze Hog*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 198-206: *Greece*, XV, *Friendship's Covenant*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 215-216: *The East*, III, *A Rose from Homer's Grave*.

<sup>13</sup> Paul V. Rubow, *op. cit.*, p. 104-05, attempts to make a rapid list of the similarities between the *Bazaar* and his fairy tales.



technique, a collection of scenes and ideas that are fastened in the mind of the poet, and remain there until they are transformed into lyrical moments. Andersen had chosen to view the world through the eyes of a painter, to observe rather than to comment. In the *Shadow Pictures from a Journey to the Harz* he already makes this programmatic declaration, on the very last page, almost as if he were anticipating the criticism and nevertheless defending his choices. Indeed, it is here that he cites the painter's technique for the first time, "The artist goes out into God's nature, tracing that particular tree and every single leaf which by way of its beauty or unique character attracts his attention; thus he gathers such a lot of motifs which are subsequently placed in his compositions".<sup>14</sup> It is the technique used in the *Bazaar*, ten years earlier, and tellingly, also on occasion of another journey. The poet's reasons for using the technique are the same: "I am mentioning every detail the way I experienced it before it will all melt into one single piece of my life".<sup>15</sup> A singular revelation, especially if it is to be compared with the numerous times, as I have said, that Andersen asserts in the *Bazaar*: "If I were a painter", to then conclude shortly afterwards: "I am no painter".

This technique is linked to the definition of genre picture,<sup>16</sup> a genre of painting that came to be loved in Denmark around the year 1820. However, it was also adopted by writers, "above all [by] a person who used his eyes like H.C. Andersen, who relentlessly collected impressions, to then filter them and transform the essence of the experiences into words".<sup>17</sup> It did not permit – or, to put it better, it did not oblige – a rigid chronological structure to be followed, and indeed a large part of the journey contained in *The Poet's Bazaar* does not bow down to this order. The six sections of the book are divided into a series of pictures. For the countries that Andersen al-

<sup>14</sup> H.C. Andersen, *Shadow Pictures from a Journey to the Harz Mountains, Saxon Switzerland, etc. etc., in the Summer of 1831*, translated by Anna Halager, edited by Sven Hakon Rossel and Monica Wenush, Vienna: Praesens Verlag, 2011, p. 161.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 161.

<sup>16</sup> On this topic, please see Jørgen Bonde Jensen, *H.C. Andersen og genrebilledet* (Copenhagen: Babette, 1993), which, however, does not touch on *The Poet's Bazaar* at all.

<sup>17</sup> Klaus P. Mortensen, *Tilfældets poesi. H.C. Andersens forfatterskab* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2007), p. 83, own translation.



ready knew – like Italy –, they isolate the events, and, almost without exception, lend themselves to being used outside their context, like the railroad journey<sup>18</sup> and the journey with the *vetturino*.<sup>19</sup> Or they may be completely free-standing creations, like the famed *Bronze Hog* chapter,<sup>20</sup> which indeed later, as said, was included among the fairy tales. It should be noted that the relatively small amount of space devoted to Italy, compared to the rather long period that the writer spent there – over a third of the whole journey – is justified by Andersen's desire to avoid dwelling at length on a matter which, with *The Improvisatore*, the author felt he had dealt with sufficiently. Instead, the chronological composition is more marked, sketch structure notwithstanding, in the countries that Andersen visits for the first time, such as Greece, Turkey, and above all the Danube region. In this last section, the story follows the timeline of events experienced in the voyage and ports of call.

If we compare the *Bazaar* with his diaries, this shows that in general the chronological order of events is not always respected. An example is the visit to the tomb of Miaoulis, which in reality took place in the first days after his arrival in Athens. However, when drafting the book, it was placed almost to round off the Greek sojourn. This lack of framework allowed the author to compose the work, following his diaries, according to how it took him at the time. He would then only combine the various scenes when the work had been completed, adding or removing chapters depending on the internal structure. Furthermore, this also allowed him to take a free hand not only to the sequence of the episodes, but also to the actual reality of the facts. In the *Bazaar* – and in particular in the part devoted to Italy – Andersen introduced real events and characters, which had happened, however, during the previous journey. This is the case of the chapter *A Prospect from my Window*,<sup>21</sup> whose description of the funeral in Naples is an exact reflection of an event described in a drawing of his dated “Rome 28th December 1833” and

<sup>18</sup> H.C. Andersen, *The Poet's Bazaar*, cit., pp. 13-16: *Germany*, VI, *The Railroad*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 60-76: *Italy*, IV, *Travelling with the Vetturino*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 49-59: *Italy*, III, *The Bronze Hog*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 126-128: *Italy*, XX, *A Prospect from my Window in Naples*.



already used, like a great many experiences from his first sojourn in Italy, in *The Improvisatore* from 1835.<sup>22</sup> The tattered “nobile from Rome” who boards the diligence in Spoleto, during *Travelling with the Vetturino*, does not exist in the 1840-41 diaries, but appears on the date of 13th October 1833, in Florence,<sup>23</sup> and is described in *The Fairy Tale of my Life* in the chapter devoted to the first trip to Italy.<sup>24</sup> And in the final draft, the episode of falling down the stairs, involving Andersen himself on 16th December 1840,<sup>25</sup> becomes a sort of punishment for the annoying Englishman who deserved it over everyone else. They are variations that enable us to understand how the elements, the raw material, passed from reality to Andersen’s imagination and then, when needed, to the *Bazaar*, the ideal container for it.

“It seethes and ferments in me, and when I am once in the good city of Copenhagen, and get a bodily and spiritual cold fomentation, the flowers will shoot forth”,<sup>26</sup> is how, in the chapter on quarantine, Andersen describes his spiritual situation during the journey. In the end, it also describes his difficulty in placing the great muddle of experiences he had absorbed during that very long period in a structured work. All this can by no means respect fixed forms, except those dictated by the poet’s tastes, and his very own personal need to direct his gaze at a particular episode in a particular moment. And this is the main reason why the *Bazaar*, like all – and even more than other – travelogues, is an extremely subjective work that could not be to the liking of a Hegelian critique, such as that of the Danish critics of the time, who loved to recognize and be able to place works in their set frameworks.

<sup>22</sup> A hypothesis as to how the drawing may have come about can be found in: Bruno Berni, *H.C. Andersens romerske dagbøger*, “Anderseniana” (Odense 2011), pp. 23-35, in particular pp. 31-32.

<sup>23</sup> *H.C. Andersens Dagbøger 1825-1875*, edited by Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab under the guidance of Kåre Olsen and H. Topsøe-Jensen, vol. I, *1825-1834*, edited by Helga Vang Lauridsen (Copenhagen: Det danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab, 1971), p. 211.

<sup>24</sup> H.C. Andersen, *The Fairy Tale of My Life*, cit., p. 105.

<sup>25</sup> *H.C. Andersens Dagbøger 1825-1875*, cit., vol. II, *1836-1844*, edited by Helga Vang (Copenhagen: Lauridsen, 1973), p. 82.

<sup>26</sup> H.C. Andersen, *The Poet’s Bazaar*, cit., p. 295.



The composition technique Andersen used for the *Bazaar* was not comprehended by his contemporaries. He was well aware that it would not fully be to the Danish critics' tastes, writing that the "treatments may not be the most desirable"<sup>27</sup> in the aforementioned chapter on quarantine, and in other passages he lamented the lack of recognition accorded to him in his homeland. This certainly did not help him with the critics, indeed it almost seemed as if the writer were launching a challenge. Which was accepted. The Danish critics, who had often harshly attacked his works, did not spare him this time either. As well as arrogant notes on his spelling, which always accompanied the publication of his works, the fundamental point of the few reviews was his lack of precise descriptions of the political situation in Greece, Turkey, the Danube region, and the lack of interest shown towards the social conditions, thereby proving Andersen's substantial lack of talent as a writer. Which demonstrates, may I add, how the intention of the work had been misunderstood right from the start.

The author of the review in the daily paper "Dagen",<sup>28</sup> one of the first to accompany the book's publication, affirms that "in vain with the aid of that book shall one seek to form a clear idea of the strange inhabitants of Greece, in vain shall one seek a truthful political opinion on the Turks". The author of the review in the liberal weekly paper "Fædrelandet"<sup>29</sup> – one of the most influential of the time – remains of the same tone, and, despite distinguishing between the subjective and objective description of a journey, ends by wondering why the author of the *Bazaar* did not make the effort to investigate the social and political situation of those peoples. And all the critiques that complain of Andersen's lack of sensitivity towards the living conditions of the peoples he visited invariably transformed into an attack on the writer's cultural preparation, because Andersen "does not possess the necessary grounding for a study of this kind"

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*. Translator's note: This sentence follows directly from the previous quote, however it is not included in the 1871 translation of the *Bazaar*. This English version is taken from the as yet unpublished translation of *The Poet's Bazaar* by Anna Halager.

<sup>28</sup> «Dagen», 140 and 152, 23rd May and 5th June 1842, own translation.

<sup>29</sup> «Fædrelandet», no. 925, 3rd July 1842, own translation.



and he lacks “that union [...] of in-depth education and knowledge of human nature [...] without which this study can scarce be performed”. Apparently less fierce is the author of the review published in the weekly «Corsaren»,<sup>30</sup> who praises the picturesque descriptions: “Nothing is described, everything is painted, painted in colour”, but continues by stating that “from H.C. Andersen, who comes from the people [...] one would have expected a passion for the peoples, for their poverty, for their subjugated condition”. A week later, the reviewer returned to the attack, accusing Andersen of complaining, in the *Bazaar* itself, of the Danish critics. On the subject of politics, the “Kjøbenhavnsposten” maintained a neutral position, publishing, instead of a real review, the chapter on Liberation Day in Athens. In the introductory note, it states that “while on judging H.C. Andersen’s works in general, the speculative reviewers and biased critics only see his faults [...] among the cultured public his favour still continues to increase with every new work”.

All this reveals a great deal about the critics’ attitude towards Andersen, but it also reveals a lot about the attitude of the Danish critics in general, something which Andersen, who tended to refer every negative experience always and only to himself, never managed to grasp. “Fædrelandet” and “Corsaren” were the mouthpieces for new political feelings and led the fight against the absolutism that in Denmark was only given free voice in the 1830s. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the Danish critics expected a more profound reflection from a journey to the recently independent Greece and an Ottoman Empire grappling against outlying revolts. However, it does come as a surprise that Andersen was accused of lacking a political outlook, and even more so that these arguments have come down to modern critics almost unchanged. In one of the three essays devoted to the *Bazaar* in the twentieth century, albeit among the inevitably positive tones – inevitable because Andersen could no longer be called into question – the criticisms of a century earlier unexpectedly creep in and take up that very same argument of his absence of a political perspective. “At one point, H.C. Andersen has no sensitivity for

<sup>30</sup> «Corsaren», 85, 6th May 1842, own translation.



his age, in politics: in *The Poet's Bazaar* we note nothing of the restlessness simmering of the peoples which exploded in the 1848 revolutions".<sup>31</sup> These are the accusations of Knud Bøgh in his 1944 introduction to the *Bazaar*, accusations that still reveal a lack of ability to place the work and the author in their real dimension.

It cannot be stated in any way that Andersen, who only felt at ease when smothered in the flattery of the powerful, fought against absolutism or for social rights like many of his fellow countrymen. Quite the contrary, it should be underlined how on several occasions he declared that poetry and politics had nothing to do with each other. Among other things, he stated in his autobiography:

A political life had, in Denmark, at that time, arrived at higher development [...]. no call thereto, no necessity to mix myself up in such matters, for I then believed that the politics of our times were a great misfortune to many a poet. Madame Politics is like Venus: they whom she decoys into her castle perish. It fares with the writings of these poets as with the newspapers: they are seized upon, read, praised, and forgotten. [...] Politics are no affair of mine. God has imparted to me another mission: that I felt and that I feel still.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, this does not mean that he did not have any opinions on the matter, if nothing else dictated by his humble origins and his well-known spontaneity: indeed if we look closely, the accusations levelled at the *Bazaar* can be considered overblown. Already in 1829, in the *Walk*,<sup>33</sup> the author openly takes the side of Greece, fighting for freedom at that time, criticizing the Turks and imagining a future in which they could no longer even set foot in the places they had once possessed. It was, as Johan de Mylius quite rightly

<sup>31</sup> H.C. Andersen, *En Digters Bazar*, in *Romaner og Rejseuskildringer*, edited by H. Topsøe-Jensen and Det danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab, I-VII (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1941-44), vol. VI (1944), edited by Knud Bøgh, p. IX, own translation.

<sup>32</sup> H.C. Andersen, *The Fairy Tale of my Life*, cit., p. 177.

<sup>33</sup> H.C. Andersen, *Fodrejse fra Holmens Kanal til Østpynten af Amager i aarene 1828 og 1829*, edited by Johan de Mylius, (Copenhagen: Det danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab, 1986), pp. 24-25.



notes,<sup>34</sup> an elegant way used by the writers of the time to express their dissatisfaction with Danish absolutism. But it was also an act of courage, comparable with the defence of the Polish situation under Russian rule which Andersen expressed in the *Shadow Pictures* only two years later. Here, in extremely clear tones, he claims to think of “the unfortunate nation, which like a map is torn apart; of the poor Polish people, who have fought in the uprising”; adding, “[w]e are moving in strides towards a new and better era”, when “[a] sensible dependence coupled with natural enlightenment will then spread its gentle summer breeze over the nations”.<sup>35</sup> Hence, it is by no means due to an inability to partake of the European political situation that Andersen no longer describes the political fomentation in depth. Instead, it would seem to be a deliberate choice to devote himself to literature of a different nature.

And all this with the due exceptions. Several times, in the chapters on Greece, he describes the war for liberation, the Turks’ atrocities and vile acts – for example, the offence to the convent of Daphne – and expresses the hope that after gaining its freedom, Homer’s country may blossom once more. He reveals his feelings on several occasions, for example when he sides with the heroes of the Greek liberation, Miaoulis, whom he deeply praises, and Rigas, “the Greek Béranger”. However, he ends up betraying himself by almost unconsciously confessing his little sympathy for the Greek people and admiration for the Muslim culture, revealing a certain political naivety as he sides with King Otto. But his criticism of the Turks’ arrogance reappears on several occasions in other chapters too, such as in the well-concealed description of the revolts in the Balkans during the voyage on the Danube, in which case Bøgh, in his introduction, accuses him of only showing interest out of the fear for his own safety.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> H.C. Andersen, *Skyggebilleder af en Reise til Harzen, det sachsiske Schweitz etc. etc., i Sommeren 1831*, edition, postface and notes by Johan de Mylius (Copenhagen: Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab, 1986), p. 151.

<sup>35</sup> H.C. Andersen, *Shadow Pictures*, cit., p. 108.

<sup>36</sup> H.C. Andersen, *En Digters Bazar*, cit., p. IX.



Hence the criticisms from the first reviewers of the *Bazaar* and the modern critics are unjust, because on several occasions, in this work too, Andersen shows that he takes the fate of the subjugated peoples to heart. And above all because, in denying him the maturity of a political observation, they also deny him the maturity to choose, for *his* travelogue, a different slant from those of his contemporaries. And they deny him the ability to strive to achieve a new aesthetic in his work, an aesthetic that de Mylius reconsiders in the *Shadow Pictures*<sup>37</sup> and that applies even more to the *Bazaar*. Hence, it comes as no surprise that Andersen complains, with regard to those same reviews of the *Bazaar*, that “There is something so pitiful in such criticism, that one cannot be wounded by it; but even when we are the most peaceable of men, we feel a desire to flagellate such wet dogs, who come into our rooms and lay themselves down in the best places there.”<sup>38</sup>

It would be a tall order to want to make Andersen, so distant from critical theorization, the standard bearer of a new aesthetic. However, it is true that his ideas on literary creation, influenced and appreciated by a large part of the early Romantics – Oehlenschläger first of all –, had little in common with some of the others. One of them was Johann Ludvig Heiberg, who in the 1820s had begun to spread a new current of criticism in Denmark, first in the “Kjøbenhavns flyvende Post”, and then in other magazines. In the line of Hegel, it marked the detachment between early Romanticism – spontaneity – and a second period – aesthetic reflection – in contrast to the very same Oehlenschläger. Of course, Andersen’s spontaneity had little in common with Heiberg’s vision, who, for his part, over the years gradually became the judge of Danish critique. In addition to this, Andersen’s passion for the theatre – he insisted on writing dramas of little success for the Royal Theatre – regularly clashed with the interests of Heiberg, who had been appointed its director. The episode of *The Moorish Maiden*, the tragedy in which Heiberg’s wife, as said earlier, had refused to act, had not improved the situa-

<sup>37</sup> H.C. Andersen, *Skyggebilleder*, cit., p. 143-47.

<sup>38</sup> *The Fairy Tale of my Life*, cit., p. 171.



tion, since Andersen had been so imprudent as to publicly criticize her choice, attracting her husband's anger. Heiberg was quick to take his revenge: in his satirical comedy *A Soul after Death*, published in 1840 – while Andersen was travelling –, the leading character's soul was sent to hell where he found a theatre showing Andersen's two works. War had been declared, and the touchy Andersen sharpened his weapons. His response came in the *Bazaar*, with the chapter on quarantine, in which during his personal visit to the netherworld he discovers that his works have been replaced by a romantic play by Heiberg, which, however, triggers protests from the damned:

At that time, I knew by letters that Heiberg in his new satire had spoken of the performance of two of my greater dramatic works. It had not occurred to me, as long as I was in the free, open face of nature; but here, as I have said, in *this* hell, I dreamt that I was just shut down in *that* of Heiberg's: and there, just as he has related, they only performed my two pieces, and that was very agreeable to me; nay, as a Christian, particularly pleasant to learn, as he has also told us, that the condemned, after having seen my pieces, could lie down with a good conscience. Even there, at least, I had effected some good by my works. I heard, however, down there, that, beside my two pieces in one evening, they had also determined to give Heiberg's "Fata Morgana," as a concluding piece; but the lost spirits had protested against it; they also make their habitation too hot for one, and there must be reason in everything! The devil was then obliged to be content with my two pieces; but it is his determination that they shall be replaced by the newest, real, detestable comedies that Heiberg is to give us, with a prologue written by his intimate friends, which shall put the public in the way to understand and admire: after which the usual apotheosis, also by one of his intimate friends. See, this is how a man dreams in quarantine!<sup>39</sup>

All this gives a clear idea of the cultural atmosphere in Copenhagen in 1842, and above all explains, personal grudges aside, the

<sup>39</sup> H.C. Andersen, *The Poet's Bazaar*, cit., p. 298.



reasons underlying the opposition reserved for Andersen's works and the *Bazaar* in particular. But not all the critics were of this opinion, even though only one reviewer seems to realize that the work possessed theoretical value too; coincidentally, it was one of the few critics who, in the Denmark of the time, contrasted Heiberg's Hegelian criticism with the subjective value of the work of art, the individuality of the poetic creation that should follow the rules of the genre and system, but which alters them instead, in other words, re-proving the values of Oehlenschläger's early Romanticism. The reviewer in question was Peter Ludvig Møller: a great polemical intellectual, almost ten years younger than Andersen, whose importance has only recently been reassessed by the critics. In his review of the *Bazaar*,<sup>40</sup> the only unconditionally positive one – except for a brief but ironic comment on the spelling<sup>41</sup> – Møller starts off as follows:

When we fit out ships to sail around the world, usually we are very zealous to have a pair of naturalists on board who make sure that the journey is not just to the advantage of trade, but also bears fruit, as we say, for “science”. It is strange that it has never come to mind to take a poet on the journey who, by interpreting the exterior nature and human life in their greatness and rich variety, can bring back more important fruits for the nation's education and nobility than the dried and boxed objects that are generally the result of the naturalists' participation in the voyage. If one day this point of view were to gain ground with us, then in truth we know no other poet who is more recommended for this purpose than Mr H.C. Andersen.<sup>42</sup>

A point of view in total harmony with that of Andersen, so much so that Møller identifies the central core of the *Bazaar* as the ability

<sup>40</sup> P.L. Møller, *Kritiske Skizzer fra Aarene 1840-47* [1847], (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1971), p. 116-118.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 118: “It is a shame, because it offends a good number of educated readers, that A., who possesses many elements to make a beautiful, lively and often enchanting narrative, continues to treat grammar and syntax in quite a shabby manner.”

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 116.

– and the desire – to grasp, in every stage of the journey, “the picturesque side, and understand almost by instinct the poetical and characteristic side in the apparently most insignificant environments”.<sup>43</sup> This definitely more “modern” point of view goes way past the narrow-minded cultural atmosphere in Copenhagen at that time. What is more, as shown by the almost one-and-a-half-centuries’ unwavering success of Andersen’s greatest travelogue, it finally places the *Bazaar* in the right light. Indeed, along with the *Shadow Pictures* and the subsequent *Pictures of Sweden* and *In Spain*, the *Bazaar* is still a fundamental literary document from the writer’s workshop.

*Translation from the Italian: Karen Whittle*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 116-17.