old boyars are dead, the Khovanski protect them. A woman is leading them into death, just as long ago she had predicted she would.

Yes, long before, Marfa, the faithful peasant woman, had sung an inspired threnody describing this scene: a collective holocaust, a gigantic fire for the Redemption of the World. The Old-Believers are dying for a symbol: instead of making the sign of the cross with the whole hand, they use only three fingers. But they are dying also for the old, torn Russia, while the strong man who will unify it is coming. Before, when Marfa so sweetly sang the song of the future, the pope stopped her: "It is too soon, my dove." The sorceress is never there at the right time. And Marfa is a sorceress. She predicts the future in a cupful of water, she frightens men. Now is her time.

And Marfa, all in white, leads her terrifed lover to the pyre, with sweet words, while the cabin full of men burns and while Peter the Great's soldiers stand guard around a disintegrating world.

Throughout the eternity of a culture permanently covered with the dust of its own tombs, Aida falls asleep in the arms of her Egyptian lover. Underground in a huge temple, at the roots of the lotus-shaped columns, white now, bleached and colorless, the little Nubian slave sings. Her lover, a general, is to be buried alive because he loves the forbidden slave and refuses the pharoah's daughter. He betrays without even knowing it, he accepts his fate and the death to which the priests condemn him. In the open tomb, where Egypt knew only "shores to land on" and the subterranean soil where the sky played no part, the voices sing together of heaven and earth. A third voice sings as well, the voice of Amneris, violent, strong, and rebellious.

Mariette-Bey, an archaeologist adopted by an Egypt grateful for his revelations of its past, helped put together the libretto of *Aida*.[48] But scholarly restoration sometimes is less creative than myth when one is willing to let it act through stubborn, unconscious minds. And this dream Aida is more a Christian than a Nubian. Her chivalrous Radamès is Christian as well. The only Egyptian is the lofty Amneris, the pharoah's daughter. Her violence, her dignity and her anger are Egyptian. The mournful lamentations during which she has thrown herself on the floor of the temple are Egyptian. Animal-headed gods dwell in Amneris, and, while the lovers sing together about resignation and the virtue of taking leave of the earth, she retains the inflexibility of those standing queens with the graceful arms, those eternal girls whose smiles still light up the walls of tombs, columns of ruins, and capitals where the goddess Hathor, with her cow's ears, signifies desire, intoxication, and happiness.

Opposite the strong, savage Amneris is Aida, black, weak, and gentle, a slave. In the long history of ancient Egypt there were two very real conflicting women like the two, Amneris and Aida, in conflict in this single opera. The Egyptian queen Hatshepsut, the king's wife who went through two successive husbands,

calmly took the supreme power for herself, wearing the false beard and two crowns of Egypt. Nefertiti was the betrayed wife of Akhenaton, a resigned and passively exiled woman, who died deserted in the High Castle deep in an abandoned city. Her husband, Akhenaton, was the ancestor of monotheism, wishing to destroy the many gods who watched over Egyptian life. In his wish to impose a single sun God, western intellectuals of today delight in finding the future figure of a Moses (like Freud)[49] or a Christ. But he condemned his wife to banishment. Hatshepsut, on the other hand, leaned on polytheism to establish her power; like any good pharaoh she built temples so the gods would guarantee, as they did every year, the flooding of the river Nile and the fertility of the land. Notice: we are in an inner space now, populated with history, where gods and nature exist. Notice: these two heroines, created after a fashion by men of the opera to inaugurate the Suez canal amid imperial pomp, Aida and Amneris (thanks to the faithful memory of a passionate archaeologist), are somehow the heiresses to the two greatest figures of women that Egypt has left us. But one of these, Hatshepsut, ruled powerfully, in a world where gods lived and took care of both everyday life and the wonderfully prepared life on the other side of mortal shores. The other, Nefertiti, the beauty with the bent neck, paid the price of her royal husband's monotheistic madness with her freedom. From the confines of the desert, conveyed from memory to memory, surmounting the ridicule of sumptuous restorations with golden trumpets and paper palm trees, across the thousands of years separating us from it, this struggle between gods comes down to us. They are both locked up in the temple, both Amneris and Aida. The Egyptian is condemned to live, an authoritarian queen, defeated by the opera; and the Nubian woman is condemned to die. The first one finds herself back with the Egyptian gods, the second carries out her death, thanks to heaven:

On the banks of a river.[50] On a funeral pyre lies a dead man. It is Siegfried, the joy of the world. Before the silent, powerless onlookers, a woman is caressing the neck of his horse. A woman knows all about this story that is ending; she knows also what she still has to do. Then, while two crows fly off into the flaming heavens, Brunhilde lights the pyre and with a single leap jumps into the fire. The river overflows, a world ends.

Good Friday, in a clearing.[51] A young sacred hero has just won sainthood and the Grail. In a springtime mystery, Parsifal frees the woman clinging to his knees. This woman, who has long been a sorceress, and enslaved for centuries, committed the greatest of crimes: she laughed, one of those rash laughs witches can find to ridicule the gods, when Christ passed her. And when Parsifal has finally brought her the long-awaited Redemption, Kundry collapses, dead, returning to the Nature that she was deprived of by her crime.