Opera, or the Undoing of Women

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Prelude

Lasciatemi morir

A great house, a strange one, in the heart of the city. Nightfall, going to the opera. Changing worlds. Trading the working world for one of fantastic, fleeting leisure. Climbing giant staircases. Bronze women proffer fake torches, ceilings full of goddeses and gods watch with indifference; evening cloaks trail their velvet hems with old-fashioned grace on the marble floor; bit by bit a dull roar swells the festive house.

– By day it is a gigantic edifice, decorated with columns and statues, useless. Fauns dance with their nymphs in an eternity of well-worn stone; a half-naked Orpheus lifts a lyre; and Muses in procession, futile dancers, look down on the city. At night, it all comes to life. The house with its Greek pediment—the temple for music—begins to quiver. Coaches, carriages, cars, taxis, subways discharge a delighted populace. Sometimes official retinues led by helmeted motorcycle escorts arrive in pomp. The brilliance of all the chandeliers is visible through the tall windows.

Entering the opera. Passing one by one through the gates of ritual; buying tickets, presenting them, letting oneself be guided by a woman who opens the doors, penetrating the heart. The immense room, red and gold, white and gold, blue and gold: always the gold of the balconies, the garlanded gold. In this architecture can be read a whole, no longer existent, world. The ghosts of a society wander here in a dream. There the fragile young duchesses so beloved of Balzac in *Scènes de la vie parisienne* let themselves be seduced by dubious dandies;

there, Mme de Vandenesse, Mme de Rochefide, the Princess de Cadignan, the women with their blond curls, hardhearted heroines with their nervous fans plot against their friends. In this loge where there is sitting today one of those pale girls who still go out with their parents, Mathilde de La Mole felt her heart catch fire for Julien Sorel, feeling so sorry she treated him badly. . . . And there, feverishly, she repeated the lilting, Italian words that had just crystallized her pride: "*Devo punirmi, se troppo amai*" [If I loved too much, I should be punished]. There died the Duc de Berry, pierced in the heart by Louvel, dying in the wings, while, with great difficulty, they hauled Louis XVIII in his cripple's chair to come and close the Duke's dying eyes, because only he had the right to do so. . . . At the opera attempts are made on the lives of powerful men; there is burning and killing; passions are kindled and snuffed out.

Remember *Senso* and Visconti's somber brilliance. When the curtain goes up on a performance of *Il Trovatore*, bouquets are falling from high above, and their colors are those of the future Italy then in the midst of gestation. White, uniformed Austrian officers, defeated and undone by the opera, leave in retreat; but in one of the loges there is (like in an opera) a woman already in love with one of these enemy officers. *Se troppo amai . . . devo punirmi.* She will be punished. Remember something else, closer to us. A woman in black, her gaze burning with sadness, watches a newly engaged couple from afar. The man leaves his loge and meets the woman in a long corridor that is white, deserted. That was called *Prima Della Revoluzione*.[1] These are goodbyes: to a disappointed hope, to a revolution that never comes, to youth. In the theater, the show goes on, while the young fiancée, stiff as one must be on a velvet seat, a butterfly pinned to the performance, watches and listens. Opera is the place for intrigues, love affairs, glances that intersect and never meet again.

Theater house and stage are a match for each other, reflecting the same golden image: the long gowns, the pomp of festive bourgeois in search of a forgotten nobility, correspond to the brilliant spectacle and the stage costumes. All around, motionless statues extend their polished arms. Beneath the great staircase a nymph in the image of Castiglione's beautiful duchess dips a foot, rubbed gently so often that it glows, into an empty basin; she laughs, and all her teeth are bronze. Peristyles in the ancient manner have false mosaics to support their columns; above there are levels and more levels, until you come to the meeting-place known familiarly as the foyer.

But it is rumored that underneath lies a black, impenetrable lake, where sometimes the phantom of the Opera[2] comes by boat to carry off a golden-voiced singer with the name of a Greek goddess, Christine Daaé. There is a whole world of hideouts where stolen goods are received; a world of secret exchanges, petty trafficking, where stories of love and stories of death circulate before the very eyes of an audience whose attention is elsewhere.

The lights, slowly and imperceptibly, go down. The noises of the crowd are hushed. A few coughs surface; these are people, after all. The orchestra tunes up, improvising; for an instant, on the horn, a sad melody from the third act lingers. The curtain is going to rise: the heavy painted curtain whose gold-tasseled velvet always opens onto a light cloth. Trompe l'oeil: flying in the breezes there are two golden giantesses holding back the stage. Trompe l'oeil: there is a huge velvety conch with thousands of eyes looking out in fascination. Trompe l'oeil: the curtain goes up on a forest of gauze and wood, on a palace of cloth. Always it grows cooler when the curtain rises; a breath of air moves from the stage into the audience. And the voices begin their rise.

A great house, a strange one, in the heart of the Bororo village, in a tropical Indian forest, destroyed today by our roads and our germs. In the center, there is this great house covered with dried palms. They call it: the men's house. The women's huts radiate from it like a wheel. Families live in the huts: women and children. But in the central house, the men spend the day dressing and adorning themselves, making musical instruments and hunting implements, singing. If a woman, by chance, dares to enter the house, she is attacked—often mortally. There the great ritual ceremonies, in which women play no part, are prepared; there simmers the delicious dish of men's culture. This is all different from the world we live in; but . . . Yes, allocation of roles is different: women do the rough work; with no ornament except uniforms that scarcely vary. Men, on the contrary, are like great, painted birds, covered with feathers and shells; they are stylish. Social structures are different: women give the male children their family name, and, as part of their daily routine, the men spend a bit of time in their wives' huts. But despite the distances and societies, despite the upside-down codes, there is still this large, strange house in the central place, at the heart of the assembled group: a men's house, forbidden to women, where men's voices sing.

Opera is not forbidden to women. That is true. Women are its jewels, you say, the ornament indispensable for every festival. No prima donna, no opera. But the role of jewel, a decorative object, is not the deciding role; and on the opera stage women perpetually sing their eternal undoing. The emotion is never more poignant than at the moment when the voice is lifted to die. Look at these heroines. With their voices they flap their wings, their arms writhe, and then there they are, dead, on the ground. Look at these women who fill the theater, accompanied by penguins in uniforms that scarcely vary: they are present, they are decorative. They are present for the dispatch of women like themselves. And when the curtain closes to let the singers take the last bow, there are the women kneeling in a curtsey, their arms filled with flowers; and there, beside them, the producer, the conductor, the set designer. Occasionally, a . . . But you wouldn't know how to say it: a produceress? A conductress? Not many women have access

to the great masculine scheme surrounding this spectacle thought up to adore, and also to kill, the feminine character.

In the eighteenth century, during the period when harmonious worlds were being constructed in thought, while the monarchic power and the idea of divinity were being shaken, there were architects who passionately devoted themselves to dreaming of operas to correspond to this world in gestation. They were not wrong; opera, in its origins in the sixteenth century, was born from the meeting between court processions, accompanying the solemn entrances of kings into cities, and the mystery plays in front of cathedrals: two social perfomances to sustain two powers linked to God. This grand performance, born in the courts, represented also the hierarchy of a world in which the king alone had the position of sovereign eye. They were not wrong, Boullée, Ledoux, the utopian architects of the eighteenth century, to want this place built as a calculated reflection of their hopes. The eye carved by Ledoux for the project of the theater at Besançon—all that remains of this building—symbolizes this new gaze: society, within opera space, is to be able to look at itself. And the whole will be imagined as a circle. "Seeing a spectacle provided free for the people stimulates my imagination and enlarges my thoughts; I am going to unroll for you all the treasures of the human race; peoples of the earth, hasten to my voice, obey the universal law. Everything in nature is a circle . . . Inexhaustible source of the great impressions that are visually interesting, nothing can survive without your solemn splendor. There, yes, there, in the circle a man returned to his original state recovers the equality that he never should have lost. It is in this vast theater, balanced in the clouds, in circle after circle, that he unites with the secret of the gods." This is Ledoux's comment on the carved stage where an opera audience watches us through a giant, piercing eye. Prefiguring the great revolutionary festivals and the solemn arrangements surrounding the goddess Reason, the utopians' opera where stage and audience watch each other is a microcosm, it is the "immense circle of human affections."[3]

Yes. Where are the women in the structure of this edifice? In their place, of course. "Women make the front rows beautiful, with all the inherent graces of their sex; those who are strongest protect the weak; children cling to their father's body; others, sitting on their mothers' knees, give the effect of progressive tiers. All the tones are varied, it is all pyramidal. What sublime solemnity!" Tears form under the emotional lashes of the dreamer, and Greuze grabs his brushes. Women "make opera beautiful"; in the meantime, Boullée for his part exclaims: "By bringing together and assembling the fair sex, placed so that they take the place of bas-reliefs in my architecture, I believe I am certain to have stamped my tableau with the features of grace." Nothing comes along to disturb the social pyramid that makes the audience itself an ornament of the opera. Nothing will come later, in the nineteenth century when romantic opera flourished, to disturb the order reflected from audience to stage. In this order of human affections, women

struggle, and from the moment these women leave their familiar and ornamental function, they are to end up punished—fallen, abandoned, or dead. The "fair sex" indeed.

This place of delights, where all the pleasures for ear and eye are gathered, this place where in the beginning Orpheuses lost their Eurydices with a single glance, gives rise to some very strange fantasies in which opera reveals its underside. Leibniz, the philosophical genius behind both infinitesimal calculus and Theodicy, outdoes all the rest with his. Is it coincidental or intentional? This text has come down to us with the following fiendish title: *A Funny Idea Relating to a New Kind of Representation*. Funny all right, this idea that popped up in Liebniz's overheated mind after a night of fireworks and fantastic contraptions on the Seine.[4] There was to be a great house where everything that could be presented in performance would be brought together. Everything demonstrating the glory of the divine architect; who calculates from his corner all the coincidences of this world, would be there—the best of course. All that would be necessary to begin is that "a few important people" be in agreement. You would see magic lanterns—eye, reflections, illusions—optical marvels; you would see the fortifications for war with a master of fortification who would explain everything. You would see a naval battle and concerts immediately afterward. You would see rope dancers, an anatomical theater, a garden of medicinal plants, Father Kircher's room, the fire-eater (who would come from England), the moon through a telescope, a game of chess, a mirror that sets things on fire, comedies of different sorts for every country, *carillons*, a menagerie. . . . What would not be there to see? The philosopher, in a fever of inspiration, reels off a rough draft that is a prodigious inventory of all the curiosities of his time.

But he thinks back. What did he leave out? An Academy of Games, also baptized the Academy of Pleasures. That would be essential: gambling, *lansquenet*, *trente et quarante*, cards. The dice. And the idea—the sublime idea.

"These houses or rooms will be built so the master of the house will be able to hear and see everything that is said and done, without his being noticed, by means of mirrors and pipes." Surprise! Now we have police and surveillance. And that ingenuous philosopher goes on: "That would be a very important thing for the State, and a sort of political confessional." And if someone asks, Where's the opera? here it is, next sentence: "And the opera, or the Academy of Music will be attached to it." Opera, to make the trick work, to add a powerful distraction. Opera, to seduce ears while hands toss money on the table, and while the "masters of the house," hidden in an invisible room, note everything well, hearing and seeing it all, the faithful who reflect the king first and then God. In Giacomo Puccini's opera *Tosca*, the chief of the Roman police sees all and hears all, in a room high in the Farnese palace, while the queen dances and while, in the next room, the secret revolutionaries are being tortured.

Yes, Leibniz, that philosopher, certainly had a funny idea. But it is a very coherent idea, one that transforms the opera, the men's house, into a place of artifice, a container of illusions and sciences of illusion—optics, war, theater, society—where police surveillance is in effect. It is a thought putting optics and acoustics to good use, deriving political advantage from the illusions themselves. Was that the danger Rousseau sensed? He detested opera and theaters; he hated the French royal celebrations and preferred simple ones, celebrations that spoke to the heart. He would banish harmony (still too close to a symbolic architecture of the unequal divisions of society) and have men and women sing melodies in unison, and more melodies. . . . And, in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Julie's enclosed world, a utopian space itself, peasants, servants, and masters join in singing the old songs beside a lake, at the foot of mountains, in the heart of nature, far from scenery of gauze and painted wood. Densely foliaged trees replace portals, unembellished voices replace arias, carefree clothing takes the place of feathers and embroidery. . . . How beautiful that would be. How beautiful that can be sometimes, a marvelous, unpretentious moment of celebration, an unexpected meeting, music with no harmony, unorchestrated!

But Julie dies of pneumonia, her face decomposes under its enveloping veil; she smells. The world is evil, the city perverse, and nature elusive. And Julie's garden, this natural paradise, is just a gardener's artifice. Can one dream within society? Not possible. The wonders of opera do not leave even Rousseau cold: "this strange theater." "All jumbled together we see gods and goblins, monsters, kings, shepherds, fairies, rage and joy, a fire, a jig, a battle and a ball." The inventory once again—the collection of pleasures and marvels. A whole, crowded world is talking to itself; a whole society watches its own dreams, its own struggles, and gazes at its gods descending in magnificent, heavy machines. And, if there is no king making his entrance into the city to receive the homage of the subjects he has finally conquered, it is because there is no need for it. The Nation is in existence. In the eighteenth century opera begins to trace the republican figure, still veiled in divine figures and machinery.

VERDI. A century later the letters forming the name of opera's most famous composer serve as a magic symbol for the incipient Italy, a nation, finally centered on a new-look king, Vittorio Emmanuele Re De Italia. And in Venice thousands of bouquets, thrown by thousands of hands in the white theater of La Fenice land on the white uniforms of Austrian officers. Visconti knew his history. But this historical overture is the introduction to the story of a woman. When the stage is set, what remains is the scene and the show that one has come to see. What remains are stories unwinding amid flat scenery and footlights. The operas remain.

I have seen these operas at work; if I am touched by them it is because they speak of women and their misfortune.