

Opera's

Second Death



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AND Mladen Dolar

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CONTENTS

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK AND MLADEN DOLAR

INTRODUCTION: FOR THE LOVE OF OPERA vii

MLADEN DOLAR / IF MUSIC BE THE FOOD OF LOVE 1

The Birth of Opera from the Spirit of Absolutism 5

Acheronta movebo 8

The Logic of Mercy 19

Opera buffa 24

Syntax 28

Die Entführung aus dem Serail 33

Figaro 38

Don Giovanni 45

The Opera in Philosophy: Mozart and Kierkegaard 50

La femme machine 58

Machine in Love 61

A Philosopher in the Opera 65

Machine and Enjoyment 69

The Rationalistic Myth of the Enlightenment 73

He Is a Man—Even More, He Is a Prince 80

Three Continuations 87

Intermission

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK / "I DO NOT ORDER MY DREAMS" 103

The Death Drive and the Wagnerian Sublime 105

The Forced Choice 110

The Disavowal 114

Chapter 1 / "Deeper Than the Day Could Read" 121

The What-Ifs 121

Tristan's Journey to the Bottom of the Night 127

Transgression? No, Thanks! 131

Wagner's Sexualized Politics 135

The Moebius Strip 139

Chapter 2 / "The Everlasting Irony of Community" 151

Wagner with Kierkegaard 151

Kundry's Laughter . . . 156

. . . and Her Kiss 162

The Feminine versus Woman 169

Interlude / The Feminine Excess 181

Chapter 3 / Run, Isolde, Run 197

The Cyberspace Tristan 197

The Morning After 206

"It quacks, hoots, pants, and gasps" 211

The Separated Flames 215

No More Running 219

Bibliography 227

Index 233

CONTENTS

Vorwort: For the Love of the Opera

Einleitung: "Meine traume schaff'ich nicht"

Death Drive and the Wagnerian Sublime - The Forced Choice - The Disavowal

1 "Deeper than the day could read"

The 'What-Ifs' - Tristan's Journey to the Bottom of the Night - Transgression? No, thanks! - Wagner's Sexualized Politics - The Moebius Band

2 "The Everlasting Irony of the Community"

Wagner with Kierkegaard - Kundry's Laughter ... - ... and her Kiss - The Feminine versus Woman

Interlude: The Feminine Excess

3 Run, Isolde, Run

The Cyberspace Tristan - The Morning After - "It quacks, hoots, pants, and gasps" - The Separated Flames - No More Running

Literature



VORWORT: FOR THE LOVE OF THE OPERA

In recent times, the psychoanalytic approach to opera deservedly enjoys a bad press: what we usually get is a "deconstructionist" reading of the libretto, or, perhaps even worse, a rather primitive "Freudian" denunciation of its (patriarchal, anti-Semitic and/or antifeminist...) bias. The contention of this book is that opera deserves something better. The very historical connection between opera and psychoanalysis is thought-provoking: the moment of the birth of psychoanalysis (the beginning of 20th century) is also generally perceived as the moment of opera's death - as if, after psychoanalysis, opera, at least in its traditional form, is no longer possible. No wonder, then, that Freudian resonances abound in most of the pretenders to the title of the "last opera" (say, Berg's Lulu).

However, the awareness of this historical connection does not equal the historicist contextualization permeating today's Cultural Studies. In a famous passage from the Introduction to his Grundrisse manuscript, Marx mentions how easy it is to explain Homer's poetry from its unique historical context - it is much more difficult to explain its universal appeal, i.e. why it continues to give us artistic pleasure long after its historical context disappeared. If we reduce a great work of art or science to its historical context, we miss its universal dimension: apropos of Freud, it is also easy to describe his roots in the fin de siècle Vienna - much more difficult is to demonstrate how this very specific situation enabled him to formulate universal theoretical insights. Such historicizing is especially problematic in the case of Wagner. It is easy to show how Parsifal grew out of the imperial anti-modernist anti-Semitism - to enumerate all the painful tasteless details of Wagner's ideological engagements in the last years of his life (his obsessions with the purity of the blood and vegetarianism, Gobineau and Houston Chamberlain...). However, in order to grasp the true greatness of Parsifal, one should precisely ABSTRACT from this particular circumstances: only in this way one can discern how and why Parsifal still exerts such a power today. So, paradoxically, the context OBFUSCATES Wagner's true achievement.

Why, then, opera's SECOND death? To put it somewhat bluntly: because, from its very beginning, opera was dead, a still-born child of the musical art. One of the standard complaints about the opera today is that it is obsolete, no longer really alive, and, furthermore (another aspect of the same reproach), that it is no longer a fully autonomous art - it always has to rely in a parasitic way on other arts (on "pure" music, on theater). Instead of denying the charge, one should

undermine it by, precisely, radicalizing it: opera NEVER was in accord with its time - from its very beginnings, it was perceived as something "outdated," as a retroactive solution of a certain inherent crisis in music, and as an "impure" art. To put it in Hegelese, opera is "outdated" in its very concept. How, then, can one not love it? One of the members of the Vienna Philharmonic reports on the strange incident which occurred while, in the early 50s, the orchestra was practicing under a mediocre conductor. All of a sudden, inexplicably, the orchestra started to play much better; surprised, the member looked around and noticed that Wilhelm Furtwaengler (THE conductor of the 20th century) entered the hall at a side entrance - when players registered his presence, they spontaneously put a much greater effort in their playing not to disappoint HIM. The two authors entertain an immodest hope that a similar effect will be discernible in the present book: that the love of its subject did leave at least some traces in its writing.

INTRODUCTION: "I DO NOT ORDER MY DREAMS"

In the accompanying text to one of the recordings of Mozart's *Così*, the partnership of Mozart and da Ponte is proclaimed "as memorable as those of Verdi and Boito, Gilbert and Sullivan, Strauss and Hofmannsthal, or Wagner with himself." The surprising thing is how one is allowed to enumerate Wagner's incestuous self-relationship in a series with other, "normal," relationships, implying that Wagner was lucky to encounter the right librettist, i.e. himself - a formulation which fits perfectly Wagner's unabashedly self-centered reading of the previous history of the opera and music in general: the features he emphasizes as most progressive in previous composers (say, the great finale of the Act II of Mozart's *Le nozze*) are the features he is able to read as pointing forward towards himself, toward his own notion and practice of the "music drama." However, what if Wagner was right? What if his work effectively marks a unique achievement, a turning point which enables us to interpret properly retroactively the ambiguities and breaks of the previous composers, as well as to conceive of what follows as the disintegration of the unique Wagnerian equilibrium? Borges once remarked, apropos of Kafka, that some writers have the power to create their own precursors - this is the logic of retroactive restructuring of the past through the intervention of a new point-de-capiton: a truly creative act not only restructures the field of future possibilities, it restructures the past, resignifying the past contingent traces as pointing towards the present. The underlying wager of the present essay is to endorse the notion that such is the position of Wagner - to put it in a naive and direct way: what if Tristan

and Parsifal simply and effectively ARE (from a certain standpoint, at least) the two single "greatest," absolute, works of art in the history of humankind?

The proper approach would thus have been to start with *The Flying Dutchman*, which occupies in Wagner's opus the same structural role as *The Abduction from the Seraglio* in Mozart: it directly renders its elementary matrix. That is to say, while Mozart's operas present a series of variations on the same basic motif (the Master's gesture of Mercy which reunites the amorous couple), *The Abduction From the Seraglio*, with its uniquely naive assertion of the all-conquering force of Love, clearly stands out as - in no way "the best," and precisely for that reason - directly embodying this basic motif (the finale of its Act II with its triumphant "Es lebe die Liebe!" quartet is unique in its naivety, in its lack of later famous Mozartean irony). When, after the low point of *Così fan tutte*, with its uncanny "mechanistic" Pascalean conclusion that love is mechanically generated by following the external ritual, Mozart endeavors to reestablish the pure naivety of the power of love in *The Magic Flute*, this return to origins is already faked, tainted with artificiality, like the parents who, in telling stories to the children, just pretend to be naive and really to believe it.

And it is similar with Wagner: with regard to the purity of *The Flying Dutchman*, one is even tempted to claim that *Tannhaeuser* and *Lohengrin*, although (in Wagner's lifetime) his most popular operas, are not truly "Wagnerian" works (see Tanner 1997): they lack a proper Wagnerian hero. *Tannhaeuser* is "too common," simply split between pure spiritual love (for Elizabeth) and the excess of earthly erotic enjoyment (provided by Venus), unable to renounce earthly pleasures while longing to get rid of them; *Lohengrin* is, on the contrary, "too celestial," a divine creature (artist) longing to live like a common mortal with a faithful woman who would trust him absolutely. Neither of the two is in the position of a proper Wagnerian hero, condemned to the "undead" existence of eternal suffering (the closest we come to it is, towards the end of *Tannhaeuser*, the hero's long "Rome narrative," the first full example of the Wagnerian hero's protracted suffering which prevents him to die). And is it not that, again, in a similar way, *Meistersinger* is "too common" with its acceptance of social reality, and *Parsifal* "too celestial" in its rejection of sexual love, so that the triad of *Tristan*, *Meistersinger* and *Parsifal* repeats at a higher potency/power the triad of *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhaeuser* and *Lohengrin*?

However, since I already made an attempt in such a reading, I would prefer to accomplish here a similar move in the opposite direction: to read Wagner's *Tristan* as the zero-level work, as the perfect, ultimate, formulation of a certain philosophico-musical vision, and then to read the later works (of Wagner himself as well as of other composers) as

the variations on this theme, as posts on the path of the disintegration of Tristan's unique synthesis which culminates in the much-celebrated Liebestod towards which the entire opera tends as towards its final resolution.

Death Drive and the Wagnerian Sublime

We sing for different reasons: at the very beginning of his Eugene Onegin, Pushkin presents the scene of women singing while picking strawberries on a field - with the acerbic explanation that they are ordered to sing by their mistress, so that they cannot eat strawberries while picking them... So why does Isolde sing? The first thing to note is the performative, self-reflective, dimension of Isolde's final song. When, in the finale of Prokofjev's ballet Romeo and Juliet, Romeo finds Juliet dead, his dance renders his desperate effort to resuscitate her - however, here, the action in a sense takes place at two levels, not only at the level of what the dance renders, but also at the level of the dance itself. The fact that the dancing Romeo is dragging around the dead corpse of Juliet which is suspended like a dead squid out of water, can also be read as his desperate effort to return this inert body to the state of dance itself, to restore its capacity to magically sublimate the gravity and freely float in the air, so that his dance is in a way a reflexive dance, a dance aimed at the very (dis)ability to dance of the dead partner. The designated content (Romeo's lament of the dead Juliet) is sustained by the self-reference to the form itself. And it is homologous with Isolde's singing: in the "sublime" moment of Liebestod, Isolde's singing as such is at stake. Here singing does not simply "represent" her inner state, her longing to unite herself with Tristan in her death - she dies OF singing, OF immersing into the song, i.e., the culminating identification with the voice is the very medium of her death.

In what, then, does this Liebestod consist? The answer seems to be clear: Wagner's eclectic combination of Buddhist nirvana (mediated through Schopenhauer) and metaphysical eroticism. The structuring opposition is the one between Day and Night: the daily universe of symbolic obligations, honors, etc., versus its nightly abrogation in the "hoechste Lust" of erotic self-obliteration. No wonder that this sinking into the oblivious Night is associated with Ireland - as Heinrich Boell reports in his marvelous Irish Diary from the 50s (see Boell 1957), there were in Irish pubs small booths, seats isolated with a leather curtain, with straps by means of which a drunkard can attach himself to the seat, to immerse himself alone into the "night of the world," to get away from the daily world of family, honor, profession, obligations, and to swim in the darkness till he runs out of money and is thus

reluctantly compelled to return to the daily universe of obligations. So everything seems clear: the eroticized death drive, the suspension of the symbolic order... here, however, the first complication arises. Yes, Tristan is the story of a lethal passion which finds its resolution in the ecstatic self-obliteration; but the very mode of this self-obliteration is as far as possible from the passionate violation of all rules - the immersion into the Night is rendered as a cold, declamatory, distanced procedure. No wonder that perhaps the ultimate staging of Tristan in the last decades, the one by Heiner Mueller, Brecht's unofficial heir, emphasized precisely this aspect of an almost mechanically enacted ritual.

A look at the other Wagnerian heroes can be of some help here: from their first paradigmatic case, the Flying Dutchman, they are possessed by the unconditional passion for dying, for finding ultimate peace and redemption in death. Their predicament is that, some time in the past, they have committed some unspeakable evil deed, so that they are condemned to pay the price for it not by death, but by being condemned to a life of eternal suffering, of helplessly wandering around, unable to fulfill their symbolic function. This gives us a clue to the exemplary Wagnerian song, which, precisely, is the complaint (Klage) of the hero, displaying his horror at being condemned to a life of eternal suffering, to err around or dwell as the "undead" monster, longing for peace in death (from its first example, Dutchman's great introductory monologue, to the lament of the dying Tristan and the two great complaints of the suffering Amfortas). Although there is no great complaint by Wotan, Bruenhilde's final farewell to him - "Ruhe, ruhe, du Gott!" - points in the same direction: when the gold is returned to Rhine, Wotan is finally allowed to die peacefully.

Wagner's solution to Freud's antagonism of Eros and Thanatos is thus the identity of the two poles: love itself culminates in death, its true object is death, the longing for the beloved is the longing for death. Is, then, this urge which haunts the Wagnerian hero what Freud called the "death drive /Todestrieb/"? It is precisely the reference to Wagner which enables us to see how the Freudian death drive has nothing whatsoever to do with the craving for self-annihilation, for the return to the inorganic absence of any life-tension. Death drive does NOT reside in Wagner's heroes' longing to die, to find peace in death: it is, on the contrary, the very opposite of dying - a name for the "undead" eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain. The final passing-away of the Wagnerian hero (the death of the Dutchman, Wotan, Tristan, Amfortas) is therefore the moment of their liberation from the clutches of the death drive. Tristan in Act III is not desperate because of his fear of dying: what makes him desperate is that,

without Isolde, he cannot die and is condemned to eternal longing - he anxiously awaits her arrival so as to be able to die. The prospect he dreads is not that of dying without Isolde (the standard complaint of a lover), but rather that of the endless life without her... The paradox of the Freudian "death drive" is therefore that it is Freud's name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis, for an uncanny EXCESS of life, for an "undead" urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption. The ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that human life is never "just life": humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things. Such a striving to experience life at its excessive fullest is what Wagner's operas are about. This excess inscribes itself into the human body in the guise of a wound which makes the subject "undead," depriving him of the capacity to die (apart from Tristan's and Amfortas' wound, there is, of course, THE wound, the one from Kafka's "A Country Doctor"): when this wound is healed, the hero can die in peace. On the other hand, as Jonathan Lear is right to emphasize (see Lear 2000), the figure of the balanced Ideal Life delivered of the disturbing excesses (say, the Aristotelian contemplation) is also an implicit stand-in for death. Wagner's insight was to combine these two opposite aspects of the same paradox: getting rid of the wound, healing it, is ultimately the same as fully and directly identifying with it. Does this insight not concern the very core of Christianity? Is Christ not the One who healed the wound of humanity by fully taking it upon himself? It is here that the originality of Wagner appears: he gave to the figure of Christ an uncanny twist. While Christ was the Pure One who took upon himself the Wound (the highest suffering), Parsifal (the Wagnerian Christ) does NOT heal the wound of Amfortas by taking it upon himself: in clear contrast to Christ, he brings redemption by fully retaining his purity, by resisting the temptation of the Excess of Life (the temptation which brought the devastation to the Kingdom of the Grail, when Amfortas' father Titurel also succumbed to it by excessively enjoying in the Grail), NOT by assuming himself the burden of the Sin. For this reason, Parsifal does NOT have to die, but can directly impose himself as a new Ruler - Robert Gutman is right to claim that Parsifal's "temple scenes are, in a sense, Black Masses, perverting the symbols of the Eucharist and dedicating them to a sinister god." (Gutman 1990, p. 432)

In the history of opera, this excess of life is discernible in two main versions, Italian and German, Rossini and Wagner - so, maybe, although they are the great opposites, Wagner's well-known private sympathy for Rossini, as well as their meeting in Paris, do bear witness

to a deeper affinity. In contrast to Wagner, Rossini's universe is decidedly pre-Romantic - a universe in which, as well as in later melodramas, the evil characters feel the need to DECLARE their evil to their victims - even Pizarro in Beethoven's *Fidelio*, in the great confrontation in Act II, declares who he is to Florestan before proceeding to kill him, i.e. he wants Florestan to KNOW who will kill him. The darker undertone of such self-display can be discerned in de Laclos's *Les liaisons dangereuses*, in which Valmont, the hero, wants to seduce Madame de Tourvel not in a reckless moment of passion, but in her full consciousness - he wants her to SEE HERSELF being humiliated and unable to resist it - to experience her splitting: "Let her believe in virtue, but let her sacrifice it for my sake; let her be afraid of her sins, but let them not check her." Valmont's plan is thus "to make her perfectly aware of the value and extent of each one of her sacrifices she makes; not to proceed so fast with her that the remorse is unable to catch up; it is to show her virtue breathing its last in long-protracted agonies; to keep that sombre spectacle ceaselessly before her eyes." (Laclos 1961, p. 150) What we have here is the opposite of the standard seduction (as exemplified by don Giovanni), where the seducer is trying to persuade the woman to surrender herself in a moment of passion which blinds her judgement, so that it is only "the morning after" that the awareness of her act catches up with her: Valmont wants her fully aware of what is happening to her, he wants her in a position of "I know VERY WELL what is happening to me, I am fully aware of the irretrievable consequences of my act, but nonetheless I cannot help it, I want it and I will do it..." The position is here anti-tragic: in a tragedy proper, the subject accomplishes the fateful act unaware of its consequences which, afterwards, catch up with him, so that he gets the message of his act with a delay; here, however, there is no temporal gap opening up the space for the tragic experience, since the act itself coincides with the full awareness of its consequences. This is the sadist's position of transposing onto the Other the subjective split at its purest.

In a homologous way, the two men in Mozart's *Così fan tutte* want to have their fiancées SEE THEMSELVES HUMILIATED: the point is not just to test their fidelity, but to embarrass them by way of compelling them to confront publicly their infidelity (recall the finale, when, after the marriage contract with the two "Albanians," the two men return in their proper dresses and then let the fiancées know that they were the "Albanians"). The desire that is enigmatic here is not the feminine one (is it stable or are women's emotions fleeting?), but MAN'S desire: what kind of the "imp of perversity" propels the two young gentlemen to submit their fiancées to such a cruel ordeal? What is pushing them to throw in disarray the harmonious idyll of their love relationship?

Obviously, they want their fiancées back, but properly humiliated, confronted with the vanity of their feminine desire. As such, their position is strictly that of the Sadean pervert: their aim is to displace to the Other (victim) the division of the desiring subject, i.e. the unfortunate fiancées must assume the pain of finding repulsive their desire itself.

With the typical late Romantic villain (say, Scarpia in Puccini's *Tosca*), we get a thoroughly different constellation, discernible not only in the supremely obscene Finale of Act I, but throughout the whole Act II: Scarpia not only wants to possess *Tosca* sexually - he wants to witness her pain and her impotent fury provoked by his acts: "How do you hate me! ... This is how I desire you!" Scarpia wants to generate in his object a hatred which arises from the fury at being reduced to impotence; he doesn't want her love - he wants her to give herself to him as the act of utter humiliation, on behalf of her love for Mario - on behalf of her desire for ANOTHER man, not for him. His is the HATRED of the feminine object: Scarpia's true partner is the man desired/loved by the woman, which is why his supreme triumph is when Mario sees *Tosca* to surrender herself to Scarpia out of love for him and CURSES/REJECTS her violently for that. Therein resides the difference between Scarpia and Valmont: while Valmont wants the woman to hate HERSELF while surrendering herself, Scarpia wants her to hate HIM, the seducer. (See Braunstein 1986, p. 91-92.)

Rossini belongs to this same series of the self-display - however, with a twist. His great male portraits, the three from *Barbiere* (*Figaro's "Largo il factotum,"* *Basilio's "Calumnia,"* and *Bartolo's "Un dottor della mia sorte"*), plus father's wishful self-portrait of corruption in *Cenerentola*, enact a mocked self-complaint, where one imagines oneself in a desired position, the one bombarded by demands for a favor or service: the subject assumes the roles of those who address him, and then feigns a reaction to it. Let us take the father in *Cenerentola*: when his daughter will be married to the Prince, people will address him for services at the court, offering him bribes, and he will furiously react, overwhelmed by it... The culminating moment of the archetypal Rossini aria is this unique moment of happiness, of the full assertion of the excess of Life, or, even, the Rossinian Sublime, which arises when the subject is overwhelmed by demands, no longer being able to deal with them. At the highpoint of his "factotum" aria, *Figaro* es: "What a crowd /of the people bombarding me with their demands/ - have mercy, one after the other /uno per volta, per carita/!", referring therewith to the Kantian experience of the Sublime, in which the subject is bombarded with an excess of the data that he is unable to comprehend. The basic economy is here obsessional: the object of desire is the other's demand. This excess is the proper

counterpoint to the Wagnerian Sublime, to the "hoechste Lust" of the immersion into the Void that concludes Tristan. There is, of course, something pre-Romantic, pre-psychological, caricatural, in this total self-display, which is why, with the onset of the Romantic psychology, Rossini was right to stop composing and to adopt the satisfied stance of a bon vivant - this was the only properly ETHICAL thing to do (his long silence is comparable to that of Sibelius and, in literature, to those of Rimbaud and Hammett). - This opposition of the Rossinian and of the Wagnerian Sublime perfectly fits the Kantian opposition between the mathematical and the dynamic Sublime : as we have just seen, the Rossinian Sublime is mathematical, it enacts the inability of the subject to comprehend the pure quantity of the demands that overflow him, while the Wagnerian Sublime is dynamic, it enacts the overpowering force of the ONE demand, the unconditional demand of love.

The Forced Choice

The reference to this excess of life enables us to account for one of the alleged "contradictions" in the plot of the Ring: in their downfall, gods are supposed to pay the price for disturbing the cosmic balance (appropriating the gold which should have been left to rest at the bottom of Rhine); however, since the gold - the ring - is finally returned to Rhine, why do gods nonetheless perish? The only way to answer this enigma is to introduce the difference of two deaths: the biologically necessary demise AND the "second death", the fact that the subject died in peace, with his accounts settled, with no symbolic debt haunting his memory. Wagner himself changed the text of the Ring with regard to this crucial point: in the first version of Erda's warning in the final scene of Rheingold, gods will perish if gold is not returned to Rhine, whereas in the final version, they will perish anyway, the point is merely that prior to their demise, the gold should be returned to Rhine, so that they will die properly and avoid the "irretrievable dark perdition." The unpaid debt, the "original sin" of disturbing the natural equilibrium, is that which prevents Wotan from dying - he can only die and find peace after he settles his debt. What we encounter in this uncanny space between the two deaths is the palpitation of a life-substance which cannot ever perish, like Amfortas' wound in Parsifal. Suffice it to recall Leni Riefenstahl who, in her unending search for the ultimate life substance, focused her attention first on the Nazis, then on an African tribe whose male members allegedly display true masculine vitality, and finally on deep-sea animals - as if it was only here, in this fascinating crawling of primitive life forms, that she finally encountered her true object. This

underwater life seems indestructible like Leni herself: what we fear when we are following reports on how, almost 100 years old, she is engaged in diving in order to make a documentary on deep-sea life, is that she will never die - our unconscious fantasy is definitely that she is immortal... It is crucial to conceive the notion of death drive against the background of this "second death", as the will to abolish the indestructible palpitation of life beyond death (of the Dutchman, of Kundry and Amfortas), not as the will to negate the immediate biological life cycle. After Parsifal succeeds in annihilating the "pathological" sexual urge in himself, this precisely opens up his eyes for the innocent charm of the immediate natural life cycle (the Magic of the Good Friday). - So, back to Wotan, he wants to shed his guilt in order to die properly, in peace, and thus to avoid the fate of an undead monster who, unable to find peace even in death, haunts the common mortals - this is what Bruenhilde has in mind when, at the very end of *The Twilight of Gods*, after returning the ring to the Rhinemaidens, she says: "Rest now, rest now, you god! /Ruhe, ruhe, du Gott!/" Consequently, there is a dimension of life which death drive wills to annihilate; however, this life is not the simple biological life, but the very "undead" life of the eternal longing "between the two deaths."

This notion of the "second death" enables us to locate properly Wagner's claim that Wotan raises to the tragic height of willing his own downfall: "This is everything we have to learn from the history of mankind: to will the inevitable and to carry it out oneself." (Quoted from Cord 1983, p. 125) Wagner's precise formulation is to be taken literally, in all its paradoxicality - if something is already in itself inevitable, why should we then actively will it and work towards its occurrence, one might ask? This paradox, central to the symbolic order, is the obverse of the paradox of prohibiting something impossible (incest, for example) which can be discerned up to Wittgenstein's famous "What one cannot speak about, thereof one should be silent" - if it is in any case impossible to say anything about it, why add the superfluous prohibition? The fear that one would nevertheless say something about it is strictly homologous to the fear that what is necessary will not occur without our active assistance. The ultimate proof that we are not dealing here with futile logical games is the existential predicament of predestination: the ideological reference which sustained the extraordinary explosion of activity in early capitalism was the Protestant notion of Predestination. That is to say, contrary to the common notion according to which, if everything is decided in advance, why bother at all, it was the very awareness that their fate is already sealed up which propelled the subjects into frantic activity. The same goes for Stalinism: the most intense mobilization of

the society's productive effort was sustained by the awareness that they are merely realizing the inexorable historical necessity... At a different level, Brecht gave a poignant expression to this predicament in his "learning plays", exemplarily in *Jasager* in which the young boy is asked to accord freely with what will in any case be his fate (to be thrown into the valley). As his teacher explains to him, it is customary to ask the victim if he agrees with his fate, but it is also customary for the victim to say yes... All these examples are far from exceptional: every belonging to a society involves a paradoxical point at which the subject is ordered to embrace freely, as the result of his choice, what is anyway imposed on him (we all must love our country, our parents...), i.e. at a certain point, everyone of us was ordered to choose freely what was imposed on her or him. - Our point, however, is that all these paradoxes can only occur within the space of symbolization: the gap on account of which the demand to embrace freely the inevitable is not a meaningless tautology can only be the gap that forever separates an event in the immediacy of its raw reality from its inscription into the symbolic network - to embrace freely an imposed state of things simply means to integrate this state of things into one's symbolic universe. In this precise sense, the gesture of willing freely one's own death signals the readiness to come to terms with one's death also on the symbolic level, to abandon the mirage of symbolic immortality.

This paradox of "willing (choosing freely) what is necessary", of pretending (maintaining the appearance) that there is a free choice although effectively there isn't one, is closely connected to the splitting of the law into Ego-Ideal (the public-written law) and superego (the obscene-unwritten-secret law). Since, at the level of Ego-Ideal, the subject wants the semblance of a free choice, the superego injunction has to be delivered "between the lines". Superego articulates the paradoxical injunction of what the subject, its addressee, has to choose freely; as such, this injunction has to remain invisible to the public eye if the Power is to remain operative. In short, what the subject effectively wants is a command in the guise of freedom, of a free choice: he wants to obey, but simultaneously to maintain the semblance of freedom and thus to save his face. If the command is delivered directly, by-passing the semblance of freedom, the public humiliation hurts the subject and can induce him to rebel; if there is no order discernible in the Master's discourse, this lack of a command is experienced as suffocating and gives rise to the demand for a new Master capable of providing a clear injunction.

We can see, now, how the notion of freely choosing what is anyway inevitable is strictly codependent with the notion of an empty symbolic gesture, a gesture - an offer - which is meant to be rejected: the one

is the obverse of the other, i.e. what the empty gesture offers is the possibility to choose the impossible, that which inevitably will not happen (in Brecht's case, the expedition turning around with the sick boy instead of getting rid of him by way of throwing him into the valley). Another exemplary case of such an empty gesture is found in John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*: after the little boy Owen accidentally kills John's - his best friend's, the narrator's - mother, he is, of course, terribly upset, so, to show how sorry he is, he discretely delivers to John a gift of the complete collection of color photos of baseball stars, his most precious possession; however, Dan, John's delicate stepfather, tells him that the proper thing to do is to return the gift. What we have here is symbolic exchange at its purest: a gesture made to be rejected; the point, the "magic" of symbolic exchange, is that, although at the end we are where we were at the beginning, the overall result of the operation is not zero but a distinct gain for both parties, the pact of solidarity. And is not something similar part of our everyday mores? When, after being engaged in a fierce competition for a job promotion with my closest friend, I win, the proper thing to do is to offer him to retract, so that he will get the promotion, and the proper thing for him to do is to reject my offer - this way, perhaps, our friendship can be saved... In short, far from standing for an empty Romantic hyperbole, Wagner's notion of freely embracing the inevitable points towards a feature constitutive of the symbolic order.

However, Wotan's gesture of willing his own destruction in order to shed his guilt, and Tristan and Isolde embracing their disappearance into the abyss of Nothingness as the climactic fulfillment of their love, these two exemplary cases of the Wagnerian death drive, are to be supplemented by a third one, that of Bruenhilde, this "suffering, self-sacrificing woman" who "becomes at last the true, conscious redeemer" (quoted in Cooke 1979, p. 16-17). She also wills her annihilation, but not as a desperate means to compensate for her guilt - she wills it as an act of love destined to redeem the beloved man, or, as Wagner himself put it in a letter to Liszt: "The love of a tender woman has made me happy; she dared to throw herself into a sea of suffering and agony so that she should be able to say to me 'I love you!' No one who does not know all her tenderness can judge how much she had to suffer. We were spared nothing - but as a consequence I am redeemed and she is blessedly happy because she is aware of it." (Quoted from Donington 1990, p. 265.) Once again, we should descend here from the mythic heights into the everyday bourgeois reality: woman is aware of the fact that, by means of her suffering which remains invisible to the public eye, of her renunciation for the beloved man and/or her renunciation to him (the two are

always dialectically interconnected, since, in the fantasmatic logic of the Western ideology of love, it is for the sake of her man that the woman must renounce him), she rendered possible man's redemption, his public social triumph - like Traviata who abandons her lover and thus enables his reintegration into the social order; like the young wife in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* who knows of her husband's secret adulterous passion, but feigns ignorance in order to save their marriage... Examples are here innumerable, and one is tempted to claim that - like Euridice who, by sacrificing herself, i.e. by intentionally provoking Orpheus into turning his gaze towards her and thus sending her back to Hades, delivers his creativity and sets him free to pursue his poetic mission - Elsa also intentionally asks the fateful question and thereby delivers Lohengrin whose true desire, of course, is to remain the lone artist sublimating his suffering into his creativity... We can see here the link between death drive and creative sublimation which provides the coordinates for the gesture of feminine self-sacrifice, this constant object of Wagner's dreams: by way of giving up her partner, the woman effectively redeems him, i.e. compels him to take the path of creative sublimation and perlaborate the raw stuff of the failed real sexual encounter into the myth of absolute love. What one should do is, therefore, read Wagner's *Tristan* the way Goethe explained his *Werther*: by way of writing the book, the young Goethe symbolically acted out his infatuation and brought it to its logical conclusion (suicide); this way, he relieved himself of the unbearable tension and was able to return to his everyday existence. The work of art acts here as the fantasmatic supplement: its enactment of the fully consummated sexual relationship supports the compromise in our actual social life - in *Tristan*, Wagner erected a monument to Mathilde Wesendonck and to his immortal love for her, so that, in reality, he was able to get over his infatuation and return to normal bourgeois life.

The Disavowal

Tristan is not just an opera: Michael Tanner was right to point out that, if one is to make sense of *Tristan*, one has to approach it not simply as a work of art, but as an "ontological" statement about the last things, about the "meaning of life." (See Tanner 1997.) The problem here is not the standard postmodern quip about who, in our cynical post-ideological era, can still take seriously big metaphysical solutions like the Wagnerian *Liebesheld*, but, rather, the opposite one, i.e. today's ambiguous relationship towards belief (or firm convictions as such). Suffice it to mention two thoroughly different examples. Isn't it deeply symptomatic how - in some European countries, at least - priests and

Rightist populist politicians are among the most popular guests in round table TV debates? What makes them so fascinating is their very "naive" sticking to firm conditions: it is the fact that they dare to stick publicly and firmly to their convictions that makes them such an easy target. The second example: why do fans insist on watching a soccer match LIVE, even if it is in front of the TV? Why is this never the same as watching it later? The only honest answer is: to help their club, i.e. to magically influence the game (which is why, even if they are only in front of the TV screen, they hiss and shout in support of their side). Is this not confirmed by the opposite experience: 30 years ago, when the public was still thrilled by the heart transplants, the plans for their live TV transmission were rejected on ethical grounds - why? Because of the possibility that the operation can fail and the patient die - as if the public would somehow be co-responsible for it... The logic at work here is, of course, that of the fetishist disavowal, of "I know very well, but nonetheless..." operative everywhere in our daily lives (see Mannoni 1969). When we observe a magician in the circus or in a night club, we know very well that there is no real magic, that he is just performing a clever sleigh-of-hand, but we are nonetheless deeply disappointed if we are able to see through it and discern how it was done - we want it to be perfect. And does something similar not hold for the movie aficionados dedicated to the art of discovering gaffes (small inconsistencies or mistakes which seem to ruin the perfect illusion). The identification of gaffes brings immeasurable pleasure, especially when they are found in the beloved works of great classics; recall the most famous case from Hitchcock: in his *North by Northwest*, the kid in the restaurant covers his ears with his hand seconds BEFORE Eva-Marie Saint shoots at Cary Grant - obviously, he knew when the bang will occur from the previous endless repetitions of the same take, so he covered his ears in advance to avoid the unpleasant impact of the sound... The magic of such discoveries is that, far from disturbing our pleasure and ruining our "suspension of disbelief," they even strengthen our transferential relationship to the Master (in exactly the same way that learning some common weakness about a public person - i.e., the fact that he is, after all, human like all the rest of us - only strengthens our admiration for him, that is to say, his extra-ordinary status. - There are, however, two opposite versions of the "I know very well, but nonetheless..." logic with regard to the distinction between belief (croyance) and faith (foi): - "I don't believe it (i.e., I know very well it is not true), but, nonetheless, I have faith in it!" Is this not the concise formula of Judaism, in which the question is not that of "believing in God," but of having faith (belief) IN him, of the symbolic engagement/commitment. Due to this precise feature, Judaism comes closest to the paradox of

the atheistic religion: what really matters are not your intimate beliefs in God's existence or His goodness, but the fact of honoring the pact with Him, of keeping your word and following the divine commandments. The supreme examples is here the well-known passage from the diaries of Anne Frank, in which she naively-pathetically asserts her faith in the goodness of mankind: "having to witness the Nazi bestial crimes, I don't really believe people are essentially good, I am well aware how evil they can be, but I nonetheless have faith in the essential goodness of the mankind." And is this not also the most elementary strategy of a figure of authority to put pressure on a weak person: "I know you are wavering, you are not up to the task, you yourself do not believe you can do it, but I have faith in you!"

- "I don't have faith in it, but I nonetheless believe in it!" According to Lacan, this, again, is the attitude of the Ancient Jews towards the pagan gods and spirits: they didn't have faith in them (their faith was reserved for the jealous One God), yet they nonetheless feared them, since they believed in their existence and evil powers.

And is the Wagnerian metaphysics not caught in the same predicament? The key feature of Wagner's famous formula about the relationship between art and religion ("where religion becomes artificial, art has the privilege to redeem the kernel of religion" - Wagner 1972, Vol. 6, p. 211.) is that it turns around the standard Hegelian notion of the sublation (Aufhebung) of art in religion as the higher form of the expression of the Idea: in Wagner, it is the art which saves the kernel of the authentic religious experience when this experience is ossified in the lifeless institutional rituals. The problem with this solution, of course, is that it suspends religious BELIEF proper, turning the religious experience into an aesthetic spectacle which seduces us without obliging us to engage ourselves seriously in it. In short, the question "How seriously are we to take Wagner's solution today?" is to be turned around: did Wagner himself take it seriously? Did it not function in the mode of the fetishist disavowal? Perhaps, the deadlock which underpins the Wagnerian aestheticization of religion transpires most succinctly in the following dilemma: if art is a speech which "doesn't know what it says," does it mean that it says what it doesn't know? And does the opposite also hold: if I "do not say what I know," does this mean that I know what I do not say?



1 DEEPER THAN THE DAY COULD READ

The 'What-Ifs'

The myth of Tristan and Isolde was the first to give full expression to the axiom of courtly love: love is an act of radical transgression which suspends all socio-symbolic links and, as such, has to culminate in the ecstatic self-obliteration of death. (The corollary to this axiom is that love and marriage are incompatible: within the universe of socio-symbolic obligations, true love can only occur in the guise of adultery.) It is, however, all too simple to reduce Wagner's Tristan to the fullest realization of this transgressive notion of love: its greatness resides in the very tension between its "official" ideological project and the distance towards it inscribed into its texture - in old Althusserian terms, Wagner's writing undermines its own explicit ideological project. The opera seems to celebrate this self-obliterating immersion into the Night - but what does it effectively render? The first attempt at this self-obliteration (the duet in Act II) is brutally cut short by what is arguably the most violent coitus interruptus in the entire history of art, Brangaene's scream. The second attempt succeeds, but in a displaced way: the two lovers don't die together, but one after the other, their death being separated by - again - the intrusion of external common reality. First, Tristan dies when, in an act of hysterical precipitation, he "hears the light" of Isolde's arrival; then, Isolde alone dies - or does she? This entire chapter can also be read as a sustained argument in favor of Jean-Pierre Ponelle's Bayreuth staging from 1983 in which it is only Tristan who really dies - Isolde's coming and death is just the vision of the dying Tristan, while Isolde

opportunistically remained with her husband... There is thus no full reunion: what we actually get is, first (in Act II), a failed, interrupted, reunion, followed (in Act III) by the self-obliteration and release as a lone male fantasy.

The way Tristan tears up his bandage in a gesture of suicidal hysterical precipitation is more ambiguous than it may appear - it can also mean that, being aware of Isolde's imminent arrival into which he invested so much, he cannot endure the prospect of actually encountering her and prefers to erase himself out of the picture. (Or is it, perhaps, an act of aggressivity aimed at Isolde, the source of his suffering: better to die before she arrives so that she will have to die alone, deprived of the shared lovers' death - we should not forget that, in his long monologue, Tristan curses the drink which made him fall in love with Isolde!) Therein resides another asymmetry between Tristan and Isolde: it is Isolde, not Tristan, who, long before the events directly staged in the opera, did the act which sealed up their fatal love link. In her great narrative to Brangaene, the focal point of Act 1, Isolde tells how, after killing her betrothed Morold in a duel, the wounded Tristan took refuge with her, pretending that he is someone else ("Tantris"); out of compassion, Isolde, well-known for her magical healing capacities, took care of him, but then learned from the incision in the blade of his sword (which perfectly fitted the shrapnel piece she recovered from Morold's body) that she is taking care of the murderer of her betrothed. When, following the mores, she raised the sword to stab him, their gazes met, and the suffering helpless surrender discernible in his gaze aroused not only her compassion, but also her love, so she interrupted her movement and let him go. This act of hers was an act of love in the Paulinian sense of suspending the reign of Law: by way of helping Tristan, Isolde violated the rules of the ethical substance to which she belonged and which imposed the duty of revenge. In contrast to Isolde whose love resulted from a free act of compassion which suspended the predominant moral law, Tristan's love for her is rooted in the disturbances of his family past condensed in the old tune /die alte Weise/ which haunts him - basically, Isolde is for Tristan a means to work through his traumatic past.

Wagner's explicit ideological project in Tristan is radical in its very superficial simplicity: it brings together what his mentor, Schopenhauer, opposed. For Schopenhauer, the only salvation consists in the total self-obliteration of the Will to life whose ultimate expression is sexual craving, while Wagner simply COMBINES these two opposites: our very exhaustive surrender to the sexual love brings about the redemptive self-obliteration. One should thus never forget that (in contrast to, say, Romeo and Juliet) Wagner's Tristan is NOT a tragedy, but a sacred, aesthetico-religious musical play with a "happy"

outcome of attaining the looked-for bliss. However, as we have already emphasized, crucial for Tristan is the gap between this opera's "official ideology" and its subversion through the work's texture itself. This subversion in a way turns around the famous Mozartean irony, where, while the person's words display the stance of cynical frivolity or manipulation, the music renders their authentic feelings: in Tristan, the ultimate truth does not reside in the musical message of passionate self-obliterating love-fulfillment, but in the dramatic stage action itself which subverts the passionate immersion into the musical texture. The final shared death of the two lovers abounds in Romantic operas - suffice it to recall the triumphant "Moriám' insieme" from Bellini's Norma; against this background, one should emphasize how in Wagner's Tristan, the very opera which elevates this shared death into its explicit ideological goal, this, precisely, is NOT what effectively happens - in music, it is as if the two lovers die together, while in reality, they die one AFTER the other, each immersed in his/her own solipsistic dream. - Along the same lines, one should just imagine how easy it would be for Tristan to end three times (at least) before its official ending:

- what if, towards the end of Act I, when Tristan and Isolde discover their love for each other and simultaneously acknowledge the hopelessness of their situation, they would drink the cup of poison and die embraced, so that the ship would bring to Cornwall two corpses?
- what if, towards the end of Act II, the two lovers were left to consummate their lethal passion in the orgasmic culmination and to "die undivided," as they announce in their song? Or, what if Tristan's suicidal gesture of dropping his sword were to succeed, so that, instead of just wounding him, Melot would effectively kill him?
- what if, towards the end of Act III itself, Isolde were to arrive just on time, so that the two lovers would be able to resume their orgasmic dialogue from Act II and die together? Or, the last subtle variation, what if the second ship were NOT to arrive, so that Isolde would be allowed to finish her final song and die when she first takes that road, immediately after Tristan's death - in short, what if we were to have a kind of "Romeo and Juliet" scenario in which one lover dies after the other? Many a commentator has noticed that at this point, just prior to Brangaene's arrival, the music could have moved straight into the final Transfiguration.

The most interesting is this last interruption, i.e. the arrival of the second ship which accelerates the slow pace of the action in an almost comic way - in five minutes, more events happen than in the entire previous opera (the fight in which Melot and Kurwenal die, etc.) - similar to Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, where in the last 2 minutes a whole package of things happen. Is this simply Wagner's dramatic weakness?

What one should bear in mind here is that this sudden hectic action does NOT just serve as a temporary postponement to the slow, but unstoppable drift towards the orgasmic self-extinction - if we read Isolde's death as Tristan's apparition, this hectic action HAD to occur as a brief "intrusion of reality," permitting Tristan to stage the final self-obliterating act of Isolde. Without this unexpected intrusion of reality, Tristan's agony of the IMPOSSIBILITY to die would drag on indefinitely.

If, then, each of the three Acts of Tristan culminates in an attempt to die (the drinking of the potion in Act I, the love duet and then Tristan's suicidal exposure to Melot in Act II, Isolde's immersion into the trance interrupted by Brangaene's arrival), and if, each time, this attempt is thwarted by the intrusion of daily reality (the substitution of the potion and the Sailors' Chorus announcing the ship's arrival to Cornwall; the arrival of the King Mark which cuts short the lovers' immersion; again, the arrival of Brangaene and King in Act III), where, then, is the Lacanian Real here? Is it the Night into which the couple wants to disappear, or the unexpected intrusion that thwarts the trance of this self-obliteration? Paradoxically, the Real is not the abyss of the Night in which reality disintegrates, but the very contingent obstacle which again and again pops up, preventing the smooth run of the ecstatic immersion into the Night: this obstacle materializes the inherent impossibility that undermines from within the fantasmatic immersion into the Night.

What Tristan and Isolde are striving for is the shared specular immersion into the Thing in which their very difference is cancelled - this is what the long duet in Act II is about, with its (precocious) conclusion: "thou (I) Isolde, Tristan (I) (thou), no more Tristan, no more Isolde! Ever nameless, never parting, newly learning, newly burning; endless ever joined in joy /ein-bewusst/, ever-glowing love, highest love pleasure /hoechste Liebeslust/." The articulate language itself seems to disintegrate in this process, more and more resembling a child-like mirror inversion with less and less syntax... Does the linguistic "regression" which articulates this fusion, this blurring of individual identities, not function as a kind of inversion of the famous lines from Tarzan - "Me not Tarzan, you not Jane"? Poizat is justified in calling this suspension of syntax and meaning echolaly: Tristan and Isolde are more and more just echoing each other's words, regardless of their meaning, which is why the text is here untranslatable (see Poizat 1998, p. 209). This irrepressible elevation towards the supreme bliss of self-obliteration is all of a sudden brutally interrupted by Brangaene (who already before gently reminded the lovers that the night will soon be over) in what is the strongest operatic rendering of coitus interruptus - here is Wagner's stage direction: "Brangaene

utters a piercing shriek. Tristan and Isolde remain entranced." The reality of the day intervenes: the King Mark has surprised the two lovers. Two features are crucial here: first, that the ecstatic rise of the melody is cut short by the inarticulate SCREAM; secondly, that this scream, although it intervenes in a totally unexpected way, as a violent sudden intrusion, is nonetheless necessary for strictly structural reasons, giving body to the obstacle which inherently prevents the full actualization of the fantasy of self-obliteration. In other words, as, again, Poizat is right to emphasize, this shriek, although a shocking unexpected intrusion, appears at the place which is prepared, hollowed out, for it by the entire preceding musical intensification: it could have emerged at no other place but this, i.e. at the very threshold at which the couple approached the abyss of the "highest love pleasure," designating the sudden inevitable reversal of the excessively intense pleasure into horror. (See Poizat 1998, p. 210.) Which is why, if we were to listen to the music without knowing who is singing what, we would spontaneously tend to attribute Brangaene's scream to Isolde herself, as if, getting too close to the excessive jouissance, bliss has to turn into horror. The true trauma is thus NOT the intervention of external reality which interrupts the blissful immersion, but the inversion of this bliss itself into unbearable horror - external reality intervenes in order to externalize the inherent impediment, in order to sustain the illusion that, without its intervention, the blissful immersion would have gone on to its ecstatic climax.

The attentive reading of the text of the long duet in Act II can easily discern the almost imperceptible, but crucial, features that distinguish Tristan's position from Isolde's. Say, just before the shift from the long reflexive exchange to the final declamatory ecstasy which begins with the famous "So stuerben wir, um ungetrennt," after Tristan babbles about how even if he were to find the death he longs for, the love within him could not perish ("If love will not die in Tristan, then how can Tristan die in loving?"), Isolde gently, but firmly, reminds him that he is not alone in the affair: "But our sweet loving, is it not Tristan and - Isolde?" When Tristan repeats his claim that death could not destroy their love, Isolde provides the concise formula of their death: "But this little word 'and' - if it were to be destroyed, how but through the loss of Isolde's own life could Tristan be taken by death?" - in short, it is only in and through her death that he will be able to die. Does then Wagner's Tristan not offer THE case of the interpassivity of death itself, of the "subject supposed to die"? Tristan can die only by way of transposing/displacing his death onto Isolde, i.e. insofar as she experiences the full bliss of the lethal self-obliteration for him, at his place. In other words, what "really happens" in Act III of Tristan is ONLY Tristan's long "voyage to the bottom of the night" with regard to

which Isolde's death is Tristan's own fantasmatic supplement, the delirious construction that enables him to die in peace. In his famous analysis of the Being-towards-Death in *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger emphasizes that I cannot die by a proxy - death is radically mine, another can die FOR me, but he cannot take away from me my death (Heidegger 1977, p. 240). Is, then, this what takes place at the end of Tristan? Not quite - what we see there is the split between the Real of death and the fantasy at its most radical: while Tristan is dying himself, he is experiencing his own (horrible) death as the (blissful) death of another person, of his beloved. (The logic, well-known from dreams, of incorporating an external stimulus into the dream narrative - say, when a sound threatens to awaken me, I prolong my sleep by quickly inventing a scene which includes this sound - is here brought to extreme.) What, however, about Lacan's point that we awaken into reality in order to escape the trauma encountered in the dream? In other words, why does Tristan not awaken when he is being swallowed by Isolde's Liebestod? Because, in awakening, he would have to confront the truly unbearable trauma (Isolde did NOT arrive, he is alone), i.e., he would have to abandon the ultimate fantasy of the Feminine and open himself to the Real of the woman's desire. - So, again, there is "no sexual relationship" - no simultaneous orgasmic self-obliteration of a couple (like the triumphant "Moriame" *insieme* at the end of *Norma*), but the lone man lulled into a false bliss through delirium. As such, Act III of Tristan is effectively almost unbearable in its intensity - Wagner was in no way exaggerating when, in April 1859, he wrote these half-joking half-serious lines to Mathilde Wesendonck:

"This Tristan is turning into something terrible! This final act! ... I fear the opera will be banned - unless the whole thing is parodied in a bad performance -: only mediocre performances can save me! Perfectly good ones will be bound to drive people mad, - I cannot imagine it otherwise. This is how far I have gone!!" (Quoted from Vetter 1992, p. 153.)

Tristan's dying seems to be the epitome of the tragic dimension reversing into the comic one: dying as a process of well over an hour of exhausting singing - no wonder that the first Tristan, Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, effectively died of exhaustion after the first performances in Munich in 1865? Is it not significant to what extent Tristan's long monologue in Act III is about HIM only, not about Isolde? "Act III is centrally concerned with him. Isolde does not enter until he is ready to die, and her Liebestod /is/ an amplifying reflection of his more active conversion" (Kerman 1988, p. 162). The "old tune /alte Weise/" which haunts Tristan from the very beginning of Act II,

and is played by the shepherd who is watching for the arrival of Isolde's ship, is a kind of cypher of Tristan's destiny, condensing his relationship to his parental couple and thus staking the coordinates of his desire. In short, this tune stands for the primordial lack that Isolde, endowed with extraordinary healing powers, is expected to remedy. (A feature that unites Tristan and Parsifal is that both their mothers were marked by immense pain - Parsifal also learns that his mother's name is Herzeleide, two one with the suffering heart.)

Tristan's Journey to the Bottom of the Night

The wounded Tristan's "inner journey" in Act III occurs in two cycles, each of them structured as the succession of recollection-curse-relapse-anticipation (see Kerman 1988, p. 162-168). In Act III, Tristan is already a living dead, dwelling between the two deaths, no longer at home in reality, pulled back into the daily life from the blissful domain of the Night and longing to return there; in the first cycle, Tristan blames his love for Isolde to drag him from the "boundless realm of endless night" back into the common reality of the Day: "Love came to grieve me, love it was that drove me forth and made me seek the daylight." Because of his love for her, it is now only in the unification with her that Tristan can find peace again: "I must seek her, I must see her, I must find her, for with her alone united can Tristan find release." This recollection culminates in the curse of the Day which disturbed his peace: "Accursed day, you shine again!" After sinking back exhausted, he gets alive again by precipitously hallucinating her arrival: "It nears! It nears so bravely and fast. It waves! It waves, the flag on the mast. The ship! The ship! It's rounding the reef! Do you not see? Kurwenal, do you not see?" Disappointed when he learns that there is no ship, Tristan goes into a deeper recollection: after providing an apt description of his "undead" predicament ("Though I am yearning to die, this very yearning prevents me to die!"), he identifies his cause in the love potion: "I hoped the draught would wholly cure me, instead a mighty enchantment came over me: that death would never find me, that grief would ever bind me." However, far from simply blaming the drink, he admits that he himself brewed it (i.e. concocted his sad fate) from the line of events which started with his parent's early death: "By me, by me, that potion was brewed. From father's grief and mother's woe, from lover's tears of long ago /.../ I have distilled the poison of madness." Consequently, this proto-Freudian wild self-analysis can only end in Tristan assuming full responsibility for his fate, i.e. cursing himself: "I curse you, dark fatal drink! And curse him by whom it was brewed!" This fact of REPETITION is crucial: one cannot directly acquire the authentic

position; the first attempt necessarily ends up in the "reifying" mystification ("It's the Fate, not me!"), it is only through REPEATING the cycle of recollection that one can effectively assume one's past. Apropos of Beethoven's The Great Fugue Op. 133, one is almost tempted to quote the Pravda attack on Shostakovich's Lady Macbeth: "the music quacks, hoots, pants, and gasps." The mystery: is it really mystical depth? What about two different approaches: (1) the testimony of a heroic, ultimately failed, struggle to master the musical material. Proof: somehow like the beginning of the 4th movement of the 9th symphony, we get, at the beginning, four utterly incongruous themes made out of the same note-set, something "like a mnemonic sheet out of a sketchbook, a random series of jottings"(Kerman 1966, p. 277-278), in contrast to the 9th, where Beethoven just recapitulates the previously already heard themes of the first three movements. After two failed attempts to organize the material, we fall back to the same series of jottings - the synthesis disintegrates. (2) A comical exercise, not tragic-metaphysical, a kind of joke in musical technique. Whatever the outcome, the fact remains that The Fugue is "a controlled violence without parallel in music before the twentieth century and anticipated only by Mozart in the from C minor fugue for two pianos (K.426)"(Lam 1986, p. 109). More precisely, the uniqueness of The Fugue is that it is not simply an expressionist outburst in the "Dionysiaque" style, but a much more unsettling outburst of violent madness WITHIN THE CONFINES OF REASON, which thus renders palpable the madness and violence inherent to reason itself: "The power of this climax comes from its underlying harmonic structure, which is of Bach-like symmetry. Any expressionist can produce an effect of chaotic violence, but Beethoven never lost touch with the Age of Reason. There is a background of perfectly normal harmonic progression supporting the ceaseless thrills of the first violin, the weird figure of the counter-theme in the second, and the relentless canon of the two lower parts."(Lam 1986, p. 113) - The interest for us resides in the structural parallel between The Fugue and the Act III of Tristan: they both share the same repetitive structure of the double failed attempt to elevate oneself, as well as the similar chromaticism.

It is as if Isolde is allowed to arrive only after Tristan has clarified his subjective position: Tristan's second collapse after the curse is followed by the new anticipatory enthusiasm, which this time proves justified - instead of the sad old tune, the shepherd starts to play a merry song, signalling that Isolde's ship is actually landing. The reaction of Tristan to this news is significant: in an outburst of violent hallucinatory madness, he stands up and tears the bandage from his wound, letting his blood freely flow, since he knows that now he can

finally die ("Heia my blood! Joyfully you flow now! Dissolve o world, as I hasten to her."), and then, in the final unique precipitating vision which mixes the senses ("What, hear I the light?"), he dies in Isolde's arms. - Is this "I hear the light!" not the encounter of the impossible Real at its purest? That is to say, insofar as the Object-Voice is that which cannot ever be heard (with our ears), the only way to perceive it is with our eyes, and vice versa, the only way to perceive the visual object (the gaze) is with our ears, it is to hear it. Maybe this passage is effectively the birthplace of the true modernism (as August Everding once claimed): modernism begins with this criss-cross between different modes of perception, when we "hear with our eyes" and "see with our ears."

The final Liebestod - or, rather, ascension, as it was called by Wagner: in a curious displacement, Wagner's designation of the Prelude as Liebestod is now commonly applied to the finale - signals the plunging into the eternal bliss of self-obliteration which was hitherto repeatedly interrupted. Crucial is here the difference between Tristan and Isolde: Tristan is, up to his death, hysterically over-nervous, precipitating himself, even his death is a jumping-forward, not a calm self-obliteration and "letting go" - only Isolde can finally achieve this, and she is, as such, TRISTAN'S fantasy. Isolde's death is thus effectively just the culmination of Tristan's long process of dying: through her self-obliterating immersion in the "highest enjoyment," it is HE who finally finds peace. In the final Liebestod, Isolde is thoroughly the symptom of man (Tristan) - for this reason, one should listen to Isolde's final "aria" as the conclusion of the entire Act III (or even opera), not to fetishize it into a separate seven minutes piece. Isolated, it is meaningless, since it lacks the background of the tension which it finally resolves: the usual performance of Isolde's Liebestod as a separated seven minutes "aria" is totally misleading. What gets lost in this isolation is its topological aspect, i.e. the fact that Isolde's final song is the culminating point of Tristan's long process of dying - Tristan only finds final release when he identifies to a pure gaze observing the specter of Isolde. The structural parallel with Syberberg's version of Parsifal is here crucial: in the same way that, in Syberberg's film, after Parsifal's transferential experience of Amfortas' suffering ("The wound! The wound!") and the ensuing rejection of Kundry's advances, Parsifal I (a young boy) is replaced by Parsifal II (a cold young woman), in Tristan, after Tristan's completed "inner journey" of his painful self-analysis, a woman has to replace him in order to perform the final act of Transfiguration. What this means is that, paradoxically, in the opposition between Tristan and Parsifal, it is the latter opera which, in spite (or, rather, because) of its apparent and misleading misogyny, harbors secret feminist potentials (after his

rejection of the feminine advances, Parsifal himself assumes a feminine subjective position, extracting himself from the phallic logic), while Tristan's very clinging to the appearance of Isolde as his final redeemer bears witness to the fact that Isolde herself is reduced to a male fantasy.

Furthermore, far from being the case of the simple self-obliteration into the Night of the World in which all symbolic links to others are suspended, this Tristan's final delirium involves the reference to the big Other as the THIRD element, present in the guise of the Gaze at which the specter of Isolde is addressing her plea: in her final song, Isolde starts with echoing Tristan's earlier appeal to Kurwenal ("Do you not see? Kurwenal, do you not see?"): "Can't you see how he /Tristan/ is smiling," etc. The dying Tristan is not fascinated directly by the vision of Isolde, but by the gaze which perceives this vision: the proper object of fantasy is the fantasized gaze, not the fantasmatic scene itself. More precisely, Isolde's Liebestod is clearly divided into two parts: the first one, the more calm narrative in which the tension is just building up, is addressing the Other ("See you not? /.../ See him, friends!"), while the second one begins when Isolde assumes her solitude, conceding that she alone sees Tristan alive and smiling: "Feel and see you not? Can it be that I alone hear this wondrous, glorious tone?" (One should note here how Isolde here repeats Tristan's confusion of senses: she also HEARS what others cannot SEE.)

It is this assumption of her solitude, this withdrawal from the symbolic community, that allows Isolde to lose herself into the deadly-orgasmic trance. What this means is that, in this second part, Isolde fully assumes the Weiningerian position of being nothing but the figure in Tristan's dream: in the hallucination of her orgasmic self-obliteration, Tristan fantasizes HIS OWN real death. (Ponelle's staging can be further justified by the fact that, earlier in his narrative, Tristan already had a hallucination of Isolde's ship arriving - Ponelle merely repeats the hallucination.) In this self-obliterating climax the orgasmic "small death" coincides with the real "big death"; that is to say, we all know the common designation of orgasm as "the small death" - so what takes place in the Wagnerian Liebestod is precisely the conflation of the two deaths, the small one (orgasm) and the big one (death itself, full self-obliteration). In Lacanian terms, we are dealing with the catastrophic conflation of the impossible Thing-jouissance with its remainder, the objet petit a, the conflation which found its ultimate expression in "Once more," Nietzsche's poem, from Zarathustra, about the depth of the night which eternally wills jouissance.

Transgression? No, thanks!

Our result is thus that, apropos of the empirical obstacles which pop

up in Tristan again and again, preventing the final lethal fusion, it is not enough to point out that they are "structurally necessary." Wagner is well aware that true love is impossible to realize in social reality, so that the external (contingent, empirical) obstacles are here to mask an inherent impossibility; it is this very myth of inherent impossibility that has to be abandoned. As Tristan itself demonstrates, the truth of such unconditional love is the double Narcissistic fusion, a self-immersion which disavows the Other - the place for the post-Wagnerian operatic variations on the Tristan-motif is opened up already by these cracks in Tristan's edifice. In what, precisely, does this crack consist? Why is the notion of the adulterous ecstatic self-obliteration which transgresses the bounds of marriage insufficient? There is something in marriage which gets lost when we locate marriage in the opposition between, on the one hand, its legal-economic role (guaranteeing inheritance, etc.), and its emotional psychic role: the symbolic act of publicly declaring the mutual unconditional attachment on the two persons involved. This act should NOT be reduced to the expression of one's emotions: it in a way declares "We are committed to each other, whatever the fluctuations of our sentiments!" So when, say, Judith Butler insists, against the demand for the recognition of gay marriages, on the need to dissociate the form of marriage from the actual entitlements that are legally bestowed on the married subjects (healthcare, childcare, inheritance...), the problem is still what remains of this form itself, of the formal symbolic act of marriage which publicly proclaims the most intimate commitment. What if, in our postmodern world of ordained transgression, in which the marital commitment is perceived as ridiculously out of time, those who cling to it are the true subversives? One should recall again G.K.Chesterton's old perspicuous remark, in his "A Defense of Detective Stories," about how the detective story

"keeps in some sense before the mind the fact that civilization itself is the most sensational of departures and the most romantic of rebellions. When the detective in a police romance stands alone, and somewhat fatuously fearless amid the knives and fists of a thief's kitchen, it does certainly serve to make us remember that it is the agent of social justice who is the original and poetic figure, while the burglars and footpads are merely placid old cosmic conservatives, happy in the immemorial respectability of apes and wolves. /The police romance/ is based on the fact that morality is the most dark and daring of conspiracies." (Chesterton 1946, p. 6)

What, then, if the same goes for marriage? What if, today, marriage is "the most dark and daring of all transgressions"? When, in 1916, Lenin's (at that point ex-)mistress Inessa Armand wrote him that even a fleeting passion was more poetic and cleaner than kisses without

love between man and woman, he replied:

"Kisses without love between vulgar spouses are filthy. I agree. These need to be contrasted ... with what? ... It would seem: kisses with love. But you contrast 'a fleeting (why a fleeting) passion (why not love?)' - and it comes out logically as if kisses without love (fleeting) are contrasted to marital kisses without love ... This is odd." (Quoted from Service 2000, p. 232.)

Lenin's reply is usually dismissed as a proof of his personal small-bourgeois sexual constraint, sustained by his bitter memory of the past affair; however, there is more to it: the insight that the marital "kisses without love" and the extramarital "fleeting affair" are the two sides of the same coin - they both shirk from COMBINING the Real of an unconditional passionate attachment with the form of symbolic proclamation. The implicit presupposition (or, rather, injunction) of the standard ideology of marriage is that, precisely, there should be no love in it: one gets married in order to cure oneself of the excessive passionate attachment, to replace it with the boring daily custom (and if one cannot resist the passion's temptation, there are extra-marital affairs...). Consequently, the ultimate subversion is to NOMINATE the love union, to proclaim it publicly instead of concealing it. Alyosha's Love, a Soviet film from the early sixties (the time of the so-called "Khrushchev's thaw"), takes place in a group of geologists camping near a small town in the middle of the Siberian wilderness. The young Alyosha falls in love with a girl from the town; notwithstanding all the troubles that accompany his love (the girl is at first indifferent towards him; her ex-boyfriend's companions give him a brutal beating; his own elder colleagues deride him cruelly; etc.), Alyosha saves all his free time for long walks to the town, so that he can cast a quick and distant glance at the girl. At the end of the film, the girl gives way to the force of his love: she changes from the beloved to the loving one, takes the long walk herself and joins him in the camp. Alyosha's colleagues who work on the hill above the camp suspend their digging, stand up and silently follow the girl who approaches Alyosha's tent: it is over with the cynical distance and derision, the big Other itself is compelled to recognize its defeat, its fascination with the force of love - the sublime reversal occurs when the hero's passionate love is finally publicly acknowledged by his seemingly ignorant and cynical peers. No matter how manipulative such scenes can be in commercial films (recall, also, the final scene at the subway station of Crocodile Dundee, and the restroom reconciliation between Cameron Diaz and Julia Roberts in My Best Friend's Wedding), there always remains a minimal utopian emancipatory potential in them. This public proclamation is what marriage is ultimately about: a symbolic COMMITMENT, not just an expression of our (fluctuating) emotions - in the marriage ceremony,

one makes a vow, one gives one's word. Which is why Romeo and Juliet are the very opposite of Tristan and Isolde: their aim is not to conduct a secret affair (they could have done this without disturbing the war between their respective families), but to get married, to proclaim immediately to the public their mutual commitment. So, although one should, of course, defend the right to divorce, one should nonetheless insist that, in its concept, marriage should be conceived of as valid forever and undissolvable: if there is a divorce, it does not mean that a marriage is simply over, it means, more radically, the retroactive constatation that this marriage NEVER REALLY WAS ONE. In his *Me-Ti*, Bertolt Brecht referred to Communism as the "great Order," resisting the fascination with the negative power of revolt, of undermining and transgressing the existing Order, as the ultimate horizon of the revolutionary practice. Following Brecht, one should - today more than ever - reject the seductive celebration of the ecstatic transgressive experience, the experience of going to (and beyond) the limits, as the ultimate authentic human experience. If the fate of subjectivity in late capitalism has anything to teach us, it is how such ecstatic transgressive gestures (from Bataille to Foucault, and, perhaps, inclusive of Lacan himself in his fascination with the figure of Antigone) are in advance "part of the game," not only tolerated, but even directly elicited, by the capitalist system.

It was already Flaubert who made a crucial step in undermining the coordinates of the transgressive notion of love. That is to say, why was Madame Bovary dragged to court? Not, as it is usually claimed, because it portrays the irresistible charm of adultery and thus undermines the fundamentals of bourgeois sexual morality. Madame Bovary rather inverts the standard formula of the popular novel in which the adulterous lovers are at the end punished for their transgressive enjoyment: in this kind of novel, of course, the final punishment (mortal illness, exclusion from society) only enhances the fatal attraction of the adulterous affair, at the same time allowing the reader to indulge in this attraction without penalty. What is so profoundly disturbing and depressing about Madame Bovary is that it takes away from us even this last refuge - it depicts adultery in all its misery, as a false escape, an inherent moment of the dull and grey bourgeois universe. This is the reason why Madame Bovary had to be brought to trial: it deprives the bourgeois individual of the last hope that an escape is possible from the constraints of the meaningless everyday life. A passionate extramarital liaison not only does not pose a threat to the conjugal love, it rather functions as a kind of inherent transgression which provides the direct fantasmatic support to conjugal link and thus participates in what it purports to subvert. It is this very belief that, outside the constraints of marriage, in the

adulterous transgression, we can really obtain "that", the full satisfaction, which is questioned by the hysterical attitude: hysteria involves the apprehension that the "real thing" behind the mask of the social etiquette is itself void, a mere mirage. If there is a feature which serves as the clear index of modernism - from Strindberg to Kafka, from Munch to Schoenberg's *Erwartung* -, it is the emergence of the figure of the hysterical woman which stands for the radical disharmony in the relationship between the two sexes. Wagner doesn't yet venture this step into hysteria: the problem with him is not his hysteria (as Nietzsche thought), but, rather, that he is not hysterical enough. Although his dramas provide all possible variations of how "love can go wrong", all this takes place against the fantasmatic background of the redemptive power of full sexual relationship - the very catastrophic outcome of the stage action seems to assert per negationem the belief in the redemptive power of sexual love. This Wagnerian fantasm of sexual relationship offers the framework to interpret also the political dimension of his work.

Wagner's Sexualized Politics

The debate on "Wagner and politics" usually centers on the change in the ending of *The Twilight of Gods*: from Feuerbach to Schopenhauer, from the revolutionary assertion of new humanity delivered from the oppressive rule of gods and finally free to enjoy love to the reactionary resignation and disavowal of the very will to life - in a paradigmatic case of ideological mystification, Wagner inflates the defeat of the revolution and his betrayal of the revolutionary ideals into the end of the world itself... However, on a closer look, it soon becomes clear that the true state of things rather resembles the good, old Soviet joke on Rabinovitch: Did he really win a car in the lottery? In principle, yes, only it wasn't a car but a bicycle; besides, he didn't win it, it was stolen from him... So the standard story of the changed ending of the *Twilight of Gods* is also in principle true, only that the ending we actually have is closer to the original one (people, common mortals, do survive and just stare as mute witnesses at the cosmic catastrophe of gods); furthermore, the early revolutionary Wagner is definitely more proto-Fascist than the late one - his "revolution" looks rather like the restitution of the organic unity of the people who, led by the Prince, have swept away the rule of money embodied in Jews...

It is interesting to note that we find a similar ambiguity in the young Marx, when he claims that the full emancipation of Jews (their integration into our Western societies) can only occur as the result of emancipation of our societies themselves from the Jewishness, the problem here is the interrelationship of these two mentions of "Jews":

when we speak of Jews not being integrated, we mean the way the Jewish people maintained their identity; when we speak of the "emancipation of our societies from the Jewishness," we mean the IDEOLOGICAL (ultimately anti-Semitic) notion of "Jewishness" (exploitation, obsession with money, etc.). What is problematic in Marx's formula is the implied IDENTITY of these two mentions. Furthermore, does not therein reside the ultimate paradox of the State of Israel? In it, Jews themselves are effectively emancipating themselves of their Jewishness: in its first, ascetic-revolutionary kibbutzin period, in which farmers had on their night table Marx's Capital and the Old Testament, the basic goal was precisely to change the very Jewish identity from the unproductive focusing on the circulation (money and trade) to the hard labor, to production. However, the true problem lies elsewhere. In his Ring, Wagner addresses the fundamental ethico-political question of German Idealism: how is it possible to unite love and Law? In contrast to German Idealists whose political vision involved the hope of a reconciliation between the assertion of an authentic intersubjective bond of love and the demands of the objective social order of contracts and laws, Wagner is no longer prone to accept this solution. His apprehension articulates itself in the opposition between Wotan and Alberich, between contractual symbolic authority and spectral invisible Master: Wotan is a figure of symbolic authority, he is the "God of contracts", his will is bound by the Word, by the symbolic pact (the giant Fasolt tells him: "What you are, / you are through contracts only" (Wagner 1977, p. 24), whereas Alberich is an all-powerful because invisible agent not bound by any law:

"Nibelungs all, / bow down to Alberich! / He is everywhere, / watching you! / ... You must work for him, / though you cannot see him! / When you don't think he's there, / You'd better expect him! / You're subject to him for ever!" (Wagner 1977, p. 40)

Wagner's crucial insight is, of course, that this opposition is inherent to Wotan himself: the very gesture of establishing the rule of Law contains the seeds of its ruin - why? Wagner is here guided by a perception which was given different theoretical articulations by Marx, Lacan and Derrida: equivalent exchange is a deceptive mirage - what it conceals is the very excess on which it is grounded. The domain of contracts, of giving and receiving something in return, is sustained by a paradoxical gesture which provides in its very capacity of withholding - a kind of generative lack, a withdrawal which opens up space, a lack which acts as a surplus. This gesture can be conceptualized as the Derridean gift, the primordial Yes! of our openness to dissemination, or

as the primordial loss, the Lacanian "symbolic castration". (In Wagner's mythical space, this violent gesture of grounding the domain of legal exchange is depicted as Wotan's tearing out of the World Ash-Tree, from which he then cuts out his spear and inscribes on it the runes containing laws; this act is followed by a whole series of similar gestures: Alberich's snatching the gold, Siegmund's pulling out the sword...) Wagner is thus well aware that the very balance of exchange is grounded on the disturbance of the primordial balance, on a traumatic loss, "out-of-joint", which opens up the space of social exchange. However, at this crucial point, the critique of exchange becomes ambivalent: it either endeavors to assert the primordial Yes!, the irreducible excess of the openness towards the Otherness which cannot be constrained to the field of balanced exchange, of its "closed economy"; or it aims at restoring the primordial balance prior to this excessive gesture. Wagner's rejection of (the society of) exchange, which provides the basis of his anti-Semitism, amounts to an attempt to regain the prelapsarian balance. Nowhere is this more obvious than in his sexual politics which asserts the incestuous link against the exogamic exchange of women: Sieglinde and Siegmund, the "good" incestuous couple, against Sieglinde and Hunding, the "bad" couple based on exchange; Bruenhilde and Siegfried against two further couples based on exchange (Bruenhilde and Guenther, Guttrune and Siegfried)...

In dealing with Wagner's anti-Semitism, we should always bear in mind that the opposition of German true spirit versus the Jewish principle is not the original one: there is a third term, modernity, the reign of exchange, of the dissolution of organic links, of modern industry and individuality - the theme of exchange and contracts is the central theme of the Ring. Wagner's attitude towards modernity is not simply negative but much more ambiguous: he wants to enjoy its fruits, while avoiding its disintegrative effects - in short, Wagner wants to have his cake and eat it. For that reason, he needs a Jew: so that, first, modernity - this abstract, impersonal process - is given a human face, is identified with a concrete, palpable feature; then, in a second move, by rejecting the Jew which gives body to all that is disintegrated in modernity, we can retain its fruits. In short, anti-Semitism does not stand for anti-modernism as such, but for an attempt of combining modernity with social corporatism which is characteristic of conservative revolutionaries. - So, since the rule of Law, the society of "contracts", is founded on an act of illegitimate violence, Law not only has to betray love but also has to violate its own highest principles:

"The purpose of their /the gods'/ higher world order is moral consciousness: but they are tainted by the very injustice they hunt

down; from the depths of Nibelheim /where Alberich dwells/ the consciousness of their guilt echoes back threateningly."(Quoted from Dahlhaus 1979, p. 97.)

Aware of this impasse, Wotan concocts the figure of the hero not bound by any symbolic bond and thereby free to deliver the fallen universe of contracts. - This aspect of Wagner is to be located within the great ideologico-political crisis of the late 19th century which turns around the malfunctioning of "investiture", of assuming and performing the paternal mandate of symbolic authority. This crisis found its most aggravated expression in the fate of Daniel Paul Schreber whose memoirs were analyzed by Freud: Schreber fell into psychotic delirium at the very moment when he was to assume the position of a judge, i.e. a function of public symbolic authority: he was not able to come to terms with this stain of obscenity as the integral part of the functioning of symbolic authority. The crisis thus breaks out when the obscene, joyful underside of the paternal authority becomes visible - and is not Alberich the paradigmatic case of the obscene ludic father on account of which Schreber failed in his investiture? The most disturbing scene of the entire Ring, the "mother of all Wagnerian scenes", Wagner at his best, is probably the dialogue between Alberich and Hagen at the beginning of the Act II of The Twilight of Gods: Wagner put a tremendous amount of work in it and considered it one of his greatest achievements. According to Wagner's own stage indications, throughout this scene, Hagen must act as if asleep: Alberich is not effectively there, as a part of everyday reality, he is rather an "undead" who appears as Hagen's Alptraum, nightmare or, literally, "elf-dream" (another occasion which would fully justify the procedure of staging part of the action as the delirious delusion of one of the stage persons). We all know the classical Freudian dream in which the dead son appears to his father, addressing him with a horrifying reproach "Father, can't you see I'm burning?" - what we have in this scene from The Twilight of Gods is a father appearing to his son, addressing him with "My son, can't you see I'm burning?" - burning with obscene enjoyment underlying his overwhelming passion to take revenge. When confronted with such a figure of a humiliated, ludic, tragi-comical dwarf of a father, what can the subject do but assume an attitude of shuddering coldness which contrasts clearly with father's overexcited agitation - it is here, in the figure of Hagen, that we have to look for the genesis of the so-called "totalitarian subject." That is to say, far from involving a "repressive" symbolic authority, the "totalitarian" subject rather emerges as a reaction to the paternal authority gone awry, run amok: a humiliated father, a father transformed into the obscene figure of ludic enjoyment, is the

symptom of the "totalitarian" subject. - How, then, are we to resolve this deadlock of legal power which participates at what it officially prohibits, i.e. at illegitimate violence? The deadlock of property which is in itself, in its very notion, a theft, of contract which is in itself a fraud? It is the reference to sexual relationship that serves as the ultimate support for Wagner's political project:

"The mediator between power and freedom, the redeemer without which power remains violence and freedom caprice, is therefore - love" (quoted from Cooke 1979, p. 17). / "Love in its fullest reality is only possible between the sexes: only as man and woman can we human beings truly love. Every other love is merely derived from this, arisen from it, connected with it, or artificially modelled on it" (quoted from Cooke 1979, p. 18).

In order to grasp how Wagner is able to use sexual relationship as the paradigm for authentic political order, one has only to bear in mind the way, according to him, man and woman complement each other: Woman is the all-embracing unity, the Ground which bears man, yet precisely as such she has, in her positive, empirical existence, to be subordinated to the "formative power" of man. For that reason, the elevation of and subordination to the essential Woman goes hand in hand with the exploitation of and the domination over actual flesh-and-blood women. Suffice it to recall here Schelling's notion of the highest freedom as the state in which activity and passivity, being-active and being-acted-upon, harmoniously overlap. Schelling gives here a specific twist to the distinction between Vernunft and Verstand, Reason and Understanding, which plays a crucial role in German Idealism: "Vernunft is nothing else than Verstand in its subordination to the highest, the soul." (Schelling 1856-1861, Vol. VII, p. 472) Verstand is man's intellect as active, as the power of active seizing and deciding by means of which man asserts himself as a fully autonomous Subject; however, man reaches his acme when he turns his very subjectivity into the Predicate of an ever higher Power (in the mathematical sense of the term), i.e. when he, as it were, yields to the Other, "depersonalizes" his most intense activity and performs it as if some other, higher Power is acting through him, using him as its medium - like an artist who, in the highest frenzy of creativity, experiences himself as a medium through which the impersonal Spirit expresses itself. What is crucial is the explicit sexual connotation of this highest form of freedom: the feminization (the adoption of a passive attitude towards the transcendent Absolute) serves as the inherent support of masculine assertion. It is therefore clearly wrong to interpret the Wagnerian elevation of the Feminine as a protest

against the male universe of contracts and brutal exercise of power, as the utopian vision of a new life beyond aggressive modern subjectivity: the reference to the eternal Feminine towards which the male subject adopts a passive attitude is the ultimate metaphysical support of the worldly aggressive attitude - and, incidentally, the same goes for the contemporary New Age assertion of the feminine Goddess.

The Moebius Band

What, then, is inherently wrong with Isolde's Liebestod? In the first of his Duin Elegies, Rainer Maria Rilke makes his famous claim that "das Schoene ist nichts als des Schrecklichen Anfang /the Beautiful is nothing but the beginning of the Horrible/" - and, in his Seminar on the Ethics of Psychoanalysis, Lacan points in the same direction when he determines the Beautiful as the last veil which covers the Real. This step from the Beautiful to the Real Horrible is, in musical terms, the step from the singing voice to the Scream - as Lacan pointed out in Chapter II of his Ethics of Psychoanalysis, the existence of the hostile Object (what Freud called "das feindliche Object," the ex-timate foreign body (the "Thing from the inner space") in the very heart of the subject) is the subject's scream, i.e. in the scream, the veil of beauty dissolves and the subject directly confronts the Real. The ultimate fantasy of Tristan is that it is possible to arrive at peace with the Thing, to peacefully immerse oneself into it - which is why Wagner has, at any price, to PREVENT this reversal of the Beautiful into the Horrible. As Michel Poizat puts it succinctly, the scream signals that Woman doesn't exist, that the Grail is a void, a place in which one can encounter only an excremental object of horror (Poizat 1986, p. 274). At the opera's end, Isolde's culminating voice NEEDS the orchestral supplement: this supplement is here to fill in the Void of the silent Scream, which would have been the direct embodiment of the horrifying Real.

Which, then, is the dimension of the voice Wagner is desperately trying to avoid? Let us recall the expression "the voice of conscience" - why does the ethical agency use a VOICE to address us? Is this just a(nother) metaphor? One should turn here to Lacan's notion of voice as objet petit a: when we "effectively" talk, our words are ultimately always a babble - whenever we talk, we "talk too much," we talk in order to escape the unbearable SILENCE, and this silence is the voice as object. Consequently, it is only when our words fail that we confront the Voice reminding us of our fundamental responsibility. The "voice of conscience" is the pressure exerted on us by silence itself, its reverberation. Imagine a situation in which one enumerates

arguments in order to rid oneself of the responsibility for some deplorable act: one talks and talks, and when, finally, one runs out of words, the silence that follows is the "voice of conscience." Far from being exceptional, such a situation is the basic situation of human speech. The ultimate image of this silent voice is, of course, Munch's *Scream*: it renders the utter anxiety of the voice en puissance, stuck in throat, unable to externalize itself. The moment this voice is vocalized, the anxiety is released. And is not all of Wagner an attempt to arrive at this release, to get rid of this anxiety?

One of the best-known anecdotes about Kant concerns his relationship with his faithful servant Lampe. In his old age, Kant was deeply disturbed by the news about Lampe's severe illness; the doctor advised Kant not to think too much about Lampe, since this may be bad for Kant's own health. However, Kant couldn't help worrying about the poor Lampe; so he wrote a reminder on a piece of paper: "Der Name Lampe muss unbedingt vergessen werden! /The name Lampe should be unconditionally forgotten!/" Is not something of the same order at work in Isolde's *Liebeshod* - the same paradox of the conscious intention to forget everything and sink into the unconscious Absolute/Void? Furthermore, is this paradox not discernible in the Kantian categorical imperative itself? Is it not in a way its concealed "truth," expressly articulated later in Fichte and Schelling, who make it clear that the unconditional/absolute act of Self-Consciousness itself has to be unconscious? Or, closely to the ethical domain, is it not that every conscious ethical injunction is already minimally "pathological," tainted by some particular interests, so that the only actual existence of the purely ethical imperative should be unconscious - we really act ethically only if we follow an injunction which has to be forgotten as an injunction, and only such a forgotten injunction can be truly unconditional?

This crack in the Kantian edifice opens the way for Sade as the "truth" of Kant. In a first approach, it may seem that Sade is the very opposite of Kant: while Kant demand that we make the effort to discard our "pathological" considerations of pleasure and act out of the universal duty alone, Sade enjoin us to follow to the end the propensity to ruthlessly exploit all our neighbors, to give way to all our "pathological" caprices, in order to obtain the maximum imaginable of pleasure. However, in his very radicality, Sade unexpectedly comes close to Kant; in his first move, Sade denounces all ethical considerations as unwarranted limitations of the true natural order: "God" or "Morality" are parasitical entities which impede the full realization of our natural urges. In a second move, he then turns against nature itself: the order of Nature, this complex network of the eternal circular movement of generation and corruption, is also a

constraint on our freedom, outlining in advance the scope of our desires and acts. In order to be truly free, the subject has thus to commit an absolute crime, a radical act of destruction which will undermine the very natural order, interrupting the eternal movement of generation and corruption. The paradox, of course, is that such an excessive act of freedom fits the formal conditions of the Kantian ethical act: insofar as its caprice is absolute, it is not motivated by any pathological motive like pleasure - in it, a noumenal dimension transpires which introduces a gap in the phenomenal order. It is this Kant read through Sade which provides the coordinates of the "highest pleasure" of the Liebestod.

Perhaps, today's equivalent to Sade is Peter Singer, the Australian whose books sell in hundreds of thousands of copies, and who needs a bodyguard to protect him from attacks at Harvard where he now teaches. Singer is not controversial because he adopts some extravagant axioms, but because he simply draws the ultimate consequences from the commonly accepted axioms, ignoring hidden qualifications which enable us to avoid these unpleasant conclusions. (See Singer 2000.) Although Singer is today's utilitarian anti-Kant, he shares this attitude of fearlessly drawing the consequences of one's premises with Kant. Recall not only Kant's definition of marriage, in *Metaphysical Elements of Justice*, which scandalized Hegel ("the binding together of two persons of different sexes for the lifelong reciprocal possession of their sexual attributes" (Kant 1999, p. 88), i.e., the legitimization of "the reciprocal use that one person makes of the sexual organs and faculties of another person" - Kant 1999, p. 87). Later in the same work, Kant even considers legitimizing the infanticide of illegitimate children:

"A child born into the world outside marriage is outside the law (for this is /implied by the concept of/ marriage), and consequently it is also outside the protection of the law. The child has crept surreptitiously into the commonwealth (much like prohibited commodities), so that its existence as well as its destruction can be ignored (because by right it ought not to have come into existence in this way)." (Kant 1999, p. 143)

Like Kant, Singer - usually designated as a "social Darwinist with a collectivist socialist face" - is also ready to tolerate infanticide in certain specific situation, although his argumentation is the very opposite of that of Kant. Singer starts innocently enough, arguing that people will be happier if they lead lives committed to ethics: a life spent trying to help others and reduce suffering is really the most moral and fulfilling one. He radicalizes and actualizes Jeremy Bentham,

the father of utilitarianism: the ultimate ethical criterion is not the dignity (rationality, soul) of man, but the ability to SUFFER, to experience pain, which man shares with animals. With inexorable radicality, Singer levels the animal/human divide: better kill an old suffering woman than healthy animals... Look an orangutan straight in the eye and what do you see? A none-too-distant cousin - a creature worthy of all the legal rights and privileges that humans enjoy. One should thus extend aspects of equality - the right to life, the protection of individual liberties, the prohibition of torture - at least to the nonhuman great apes (chimpanzees, orangutans, gorillas).

Singer argues that "speciesism" (privileging the human species) is no different from racism: our perception of a difference between humans and (other) animals is no less illogical and unethical than our one-time perception of an ethical difference between, say, men and women, or blacks and whites. Intelligence is no basis for determining ethical stature: the lives of humans are not worth more than the lives of animals simply because they display more intelligence (if intelligence were a standard of judgment, Singer points out, we could perform medical experiments on the mentally retarded with moral impunity). Ultimately, all things being equal, an animal has as much interest in living as a human. Therefore, all things being equal, medical experimentation on animals is immoral: those who advocate such experiments claim that sacrificing the lives of 20 animals will save millions of human lives - however, what about sacrificing 20 humans to save millions of animals? As Singer's critics like to point out, the horrifying extension of this principle is that the interests of 20 people outweighs the interests of one, which gives the green light to all sorts of human rights abuses. Consequently, Singer argues that we can no longer rely on traditional ethics for answers to the dilemmas which our constellation imposes on ourselves; he proposes a new ethics meant to protect the quality, not the sanctity, of human life. As sharp boundaries disappear between life and death, between humans and animals, this new ethics casts doubt on the morality of animal research, while offering a sympathetic assessment of infanticide. When a baby is born with severe defects of the sort that always used to kill babies, are doctors and parents now morally obligated to use the latest technologies, regardless of cost? NO. When a pregnant woman loses all brain function, should doctors use new procedures to keep her body living until the baby can be born? NO. Can a doctor ethically help terminally ill patients to kill themselves? YES.

One cannot dismiss Singer as a monstrous exaggeration - what Adorno said about psychoanalysis (that its truth resides in its very exaggerations) fully holds for Singer: he is so traumatic and intolerable because his scandalous "exaggerations" directly renders

visible the truth of the so-called postmodern ethics. Is effectively not the ultimate horizon of the postmodern "identity politics" Darwinian - defending the right of some particular species of the humankind within the panoply of their proliferating multitude (gays with AIDS, black single mothers...)? The very opposition between "conservative" and "progressive" politics can be conceived of in the terms of Darwinism: ultimately, conservatives defend the right of those with might (their very success proves that they won in the struggle for survival), while progressives advocate the protection of endangered human species, i.e., of those losing the struggle for survival.

One of the divisions in the chapter on Vernunft in Hegel's *Phaenomenologie des Geistes* speaks about "das geistige Tierreich": the social world which lacks any spiritual substance, so that, in it, individuals effectively interact as "intelligent animals." They use reason, but only in order to assert their individual interests, to manipulate others into serving their own pleasures. Is not a world in which the highest rights are human rights precisely such a "spiritual animal kingdom," a universe? There is, however, a price to be paid for such liberation - in such a universe, human rights ultimately function as ANIMAL rights. This, then, is the ultimate truth of Singer: our universe of human right is the universe of animal rights. The obvious counter-argument to this is: so what? Why should we not reduce humankind to its proper place, that of one of the animal species? What gets lost in this reduction? The Thing, something to which we are unconditionally attached irrespective of its positive qualities. In Singer's universe, there is a place for mad cows, but no place for an Indian sacred cow. Singer's universe is the positive universe of qualities in which there is no place for what Kant would have called the eruption of the noumenal dimension in the order of phenomenal reality, no place for the dimension of "beyond the pleasure-principle," no place for love in the radical sense of the term: when the lover who fears to be rejected by his/her partner retorts "You will not find anyone better than me!", we can be sure that the game is over - the moment one argues in the terms of (comparative) qualities, there is no love. What already Kant himself tries to elude is that there are three elements in play in his ethical edifice, not just the opposition between pleasures and moral duty: on the top of these two, there is the excessive enjoyment which not only violates the moral law, but also threatens our well-being and self-preservation, leading to self-destruction (excessive sexual pleasures, gluttony, drinking, exercise of violence). The true tension is not the one between my egotistic-utilitarian concerns and the call of moral duty (as it may still appear in *Tannhaeuser*), but the one, inherent to pleasure itself, between the moderate pleasure which serves the subject's self-preservation and

the excessive self-destructive pleasure (jouissance). Paradoxically, the egotistic-utilitarian "calculation of pleasures" and the moral duty which obliges me to forgo my striving for pleasures, thus find themselves on the same side, both of them a form of defense against the excess of jouissance - or is it so? Is it not also that this excessive jouissance and the moral duty are brought so close that, at some point, they can no longer be clearly separated: they both suspend the reign of the utilitarian-egotist self-preservation stance. When I put everything, inclusive of my life, at risk in order to attain some jouissance, jouissance itself starts to function as a kind of "duty." The paradoxical result is thus that, sometimes, the only way to sustain the reign of the pleasure principle is to sacrifice (some excessive) pleasure, and vice versa, the only way to undermine the rule of the pleasure principle is to follow the pleasure to its horrifying unbearable excess.

Perhaps, DISGUST is here a more appropriate term than horror or anxiety. In psychoanalysis, the proper opposite of pleasure is not pain, but DISGUST, the most elementary psychic operation, the repulsing of the libidinal object which opens up the space for subjectivity. Disgust occurs when we get TOO CLOSE to the object of desire - see the well-known courtly love motif of the beautiful Lady who, when we get too close to her, turns into an abhorrent creature, her face full of worms... Pleasure and disgust are therefore related as the two sides of the Moebius band: if we proceed far enough on the side of pleasure, we all of a sudden find ourselves in disgust. As such, disgust cannot be explained away as the secondary effect of repression (we turn away in disgust from libidinal objects which are prohibited by the symbolic norms): it is, on the contrary, prohibition itself which should be accounted for as a means to avoid the paradox of disgust, i.e. the fact that we turn away with disgust when the very object of desire comes too close. Prohibition transposes this inherent self-blockade into the effect of the external obstacle: if it were not for the prohibition which prevents the access to it, the object would give full satisfaction.

This structure of the Moebius band, then, is what Wagner is obfuscating in his ecstatic staging of the Liebestod: the fact that when we reach "the highest pleasure /die hoechste Lust/" in which Isolde's deadly trance culminates, we find ourselves on the other side, pleasure necessarily turns into disgust. One is tempted to make the same point even in the poignant terms of a real life experience. In the "After Words" to Ruth Picardie's *Before I say Goodbye*, which collects the writings (newspaper columns, emails) from the last year in the life of the British journalist who, in 1997, died of the metastasized breast cancer, her husband Matt Seaton admits how "the fantasy of terminal tendresse fell far short of the mark": "The dying person has to break her bonds with the world, to separate herself off: it is the process of

alienation I still bitterly regret, but it is also a necessary part of letting go." (Picardie 2000, p. 128-129) This cruel self-withdrawal of the dying person into absolute loneliness impedes any authentic contact, any empathic shared experience:

"At times I became haunted by something in Ruth's blank expression and uncomprehending, frightened eyes that I had seen somewhere before: they reminded me of nothing so much as some footage of a cow in the final stages of BSE, lurching and stumbling, knowing nothing but its incomprehension and fear. That sounds a terrible way to speak of someone you love, but there is nothing more terrible than to find that person spirited away and a brain-damaged, zombie-like doppelgaenger usurping her place." (Picardie 2000, p. 121)

This dimension of dying is utterly obfuscated by the Wagnerian fantasy of the Liebestod. What, then, comes - what CAN come - after Tristan? Let us try the obvious empirical answer: Die Meistersinger von Nuernberg.



2 THE EVERLASTING IRONY OF THE COMMUNITY

Wagner with Kierkegaard

Nietzsche was right in conceiving Meistersinger as complementary to Tristan: if we are to survive in the everyday world of social reality, one has to renounce the absolute claim of love, which is precisely what Hans Sachs does, thereby enabling the only semblance of a happy end

in Wagner. By adding to this list Parsifal, one obtains three versions of the redemption which follow the logic of the Kierkegaardian triad of the Aesthetic, the Ethical and the Religious. In all these three Kierkegaardian "stages", the same sacrificial gesture is at work, each time in a different "power/potential" (in Schelling's sense of the term). The religious sacrifice is a matter of course (suffice it to recall Abraham's readiness to sacrifice Isaac, Kierkegaard's supreme example), so we should concentrate on the renunciation that pertains to the "ethical" and the "aesthetic":

- The ethical stage is defined by the sacrifice of the immediate consumption of life, of our yielding to the fleeting moment, in the name of some higher universal norm. In the domain of erotics, one of the most refined examples of this renunciation is provided by Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. If his *Don Giovanni* embodies the Aesthetic (as was developed by Kierkegaard himself in his detailed analysis of the opera in *Either/Or*), the lesson of *Così fan tutte* is ethical - why? The point of *Così* is that the love that unites the two couples at the beginning of the opera is no less "artificial", mechanically brought about, than the second falling in love of the sisters with the exchanged partners dressed up as Albanian officers that results from the manipulations of the philosopher Alfonso - in both cases, we are dealing with a mechanism that the subjects follow in a blind, puppet-like way. Therein consists the Hegelian "negation of negation": first, we perceive the "artificial" love, the product of Alfonso's manipulations, as opposed to the initial "authentic" love; then, all of a sudden, we become aware that there is actually no difference between the two - the original love is no less "artificial" than the second. So, since one love counts as much as the other, the couples can return to their initial marital arrangement. This is what Hegel has in mind when he claims that, in the course of a dialectical process, the immediate starting point proves itself to be something already-mediated, i.e. its own self-negation: in the end, we ascertain that we always-already were what we wanted to become, the only difference being that this "always-already" changes its modality from In-itself into For-itself. Ethical is in this sense the domain of repetition qua symbolic: if, in the Aesthetic, one endeavors to capture the moment in its uniqueness, in the Ethical a thing only becomes what it is through its repetition.

- In the aesthetic stage, the seducer works on an innocent girl whom he considers worthy of his efforts, but at a crucial moment, just prior to his triumph, i.e. when for all practical purposes her surrender is already won and the fruits of his labor have only to be reaped, he has not only to renounce the realization of the sexual act but, over and above, to induce her to drop him (by putting on the mask of a

despicable person and thus arousing her disgust). Why this renunciation? The realization of the process of seduction in the sexual act renders visible the goal the seducer was striving at in all its transiency and vulgarity, so the only way to avoid this horror of radical "desublimation" is to stop short of it, thereby keeping awake the dream of what might have happened - by losing his love in time, the seducer gains her for eternity. One must be careful here not to miss the point: the "desublimation" one tries to avoid by renouncing the act does not reside in the experience of how realization always falls short of the Ideal we were striving for, i.e. of the gap that forever separates the Ideal from its realization; in it, it is rather the Ideal itself that loses its power, that changes into repugnant slime - the Ideal is, as it were, undermined "from within", when we approach it too closely, it changes into its opposite.

In all three "stages", the same gesture of sacrifice is thus at work in a different "power/potential": what shifts from the one to the other is the locus of impossibility. That is to say, one is tempted to claim that the triad Aesthetic-Ethical-Religious provides the matrix for the three versions of the impossibility of sexual relationship. What one would expect here is that, with the "progression" (or rather leap) from one to the next stage, the pressure of prohibition and/or impossibility gets stronger: in the Aesthetic, one is free to "seize the day", to yield to enjoyment without any restraints; in the Ethical, enjoyment is admitted, but on condition that it remains within the confines of the Law (marriage), i.e. in an aseptic, "gentrified" form that suspends its fatal charm; in the Religious, finally, there is no enjoyment, just the most radical, "irrational" renunciation for which we get nothing in return (Abraham's readiness to sacrifice Isaac). However, this clear picture of progressive renunciation immediately gets blurred by the uncanny resemblance, noticed by many a sagacious commentator, between Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (which, of course, belongs to the Religious) and Kierkegaard's own renunciation to Regina (which belongs to the aesthetic dialectics of seduction). On a closer look, one can thus ascertain that, contrary to our expectations, the prohibition (or rather inhibition) loosens with the leap from one to the next stage: in the Aesthetic, the object is completely lost, beyond our reach, due to the inherent instability of this level (in the very gesture of our trying to lay our hands on the fleeting moment of pleasure, it slips between our fingers; in the Ethical, enjoyment is already rendered possible in a stable, regular form via the mediation of the Law; and, finally, in the Religious... what is the religious mode of erotic, if its aesthetical mode is seduction and its ethical mode marriage? Is it at all meaningful to speak of a religious mode of erotics in the precise Kierkegaardian sense of the term? The point of Lacan is that this, precisely, is the role

of courtly love: the Lady in courtly love suspends the ethical level of universal symbolic obligations and bombards us with totally arbitrary ordeals in a way which is homologous to the religious suspension of the Ethical; her ordeals are on a par with God's ordering Abraham to slaughter his son Isaac. And, contrary to the first appearance that sacrifice reaches here its apogee, it is only here that, finally, we confront the Other qua Thing that gives body to the excess of enjoyment over mere pleasure. If the aesthetical endeavors to seize the full moment end in fiasco and utter loss, paradoxically, the religious renunciation, the elevation of the Lady into an untouchable and unattainable object, leads to the trance of enjoyment that transgresses the limits of Law.

And is not this extreme point at which radical ascetic renunciation paradoxically coincides with the most intense erotic fulfillment, the very topic of Wagner's *Tristan*? One can also see why Nietzsche was right in claiming that *Parsifal* is Wagner's most decadent work and the antithesis to *Tristan*. In *Parsifal*, the normal, everyday life totally disappears as a point of reference - what remains is the opposition between the hysterically overexcited chromatics and the asexual purity, the ultimate denial of passion. *Parsifal* thus offers a kind of spectral decomposition of *Tristan*: in it, the immortal longing of the two lovers, sexualized and simultaneously spiritualized to extremes, is decomposed into its two constituents, sexual chromatic excitation and the spiritual purity beyond the cycle of life. Amfortas and *Parsifal*, the suffering king who cannot die and the innocent "pure fool" beyond desire, are the two ingredients which, when brought together, give us *Tristan*.

We can see, now, in what precise sense *Tristan* embodies the aesthetic solution: refusing to compromise one's desire, one goes to the end and willingly embraces death. *Meistersinger* counters it with the ethical solution: the true redemption resides not in following the immortal passion to its self-destructive conclusion; one should rather learn to overcome it via creative sublimation and to return, in a mood of wise resignation, to the "daily" life of symbolic obligations. In *Parsifal*, finally, the passion can no longer be overcome via its reintegration to society in which it survives in a gentrified form: one has to deny it thoroughly in the ecstatic assertion of the religious *jouissance*. The triad of *Tristan*, *Meistersinger* and *Parsifal* thus follows a precise logic: *Meistersinger* and *Tristan* render the two opposite versions of the Oedipal matrix, within which *Meistersinger* inverts *Tristan* (the son steals the woman from the paternal figure; the passion breaks out between the paternal figure and the young woman destined to become the partner of the young man), while *Parsifal* gives the coordinates themselves an anti-Oedipal twist - the lamenting wounded subject is

here the paternal figure (Amfortas), not the young transgressor (Tristan). (The closest one comes to lament in Meistersinger is Sachs's "Wahn, wahn!" song from Act III.) Wagner planned to have in the first half of Act III of Tristan Parsifal to visit the wounded Tristan, but he wisely renounced it: not only would the scene ruin the perfect overall structure of Act III, it would also stage the IMPOSSIBLE encounter on a character with (the different, alternate reality, version of) ITSELF, as in the time travel science fiction narratives where I encounter MYSELF. One can even bring things to the ridicule here by imagining the THIRD hero joining the two - Hans Sachs (in his earlier embodiment, as King Mark who arrives with a ship prior to Isolde), so that the three of them (Tristan, Mark, Parsifal), standing for the three attitudes, debate their differences in a Habermasian undistorted communicational exchange... This triad of Tristan, Meistersinger and Parsifal presupposes the notion of woman as the object of exchange between men, whose logic was elaborated by Levi-Strauss in his *Structures elementaires de la parente* (1949). Already the first truly Wagnerian opera, *The Flying Dutchman*, is about the exchange of Senta between her father and the Dutchman - a false exchange, for sure, since, instead of the young hunter Erik, her "normal" partner, Senta gets the incestuous Dutchman about whom she was dreaming, and who is more her father's colleague. The final catastrophe occurs because the dream that haunted her is realized: it is as if Eva in Meistersinger were to marry Hans instead of Walter. And the three operas on which we focused not stage the three versions of how the "normal" exchange can be disturbed:

- In *Tristan*, the exchange fails, the mediator takes over the bride. Responsible for this failure is the fact that the exchange itself was a wrong one: Isolde is given to a wrong man (to the paternal figure), i.e. Tristan SHOULD have been Isolde's partner in a "normal" exchange.

What, however, would have happened in that case? The answer is simple: if their love were to be left free to realize itself in a marital link, deprived of its transgressive dimension, Tristan and Isolde would have been an ordinary couple, with Isolde engaged in transgressive dreams about whom? About King Mark, of course, which brings us to the next opera:

- In *Meistersinger*, the exchange is "normal," the winner of the song contest gets Eva; however, in her incestuous outburst in Act III, Eva makes it clear that her true love is the paternal Hans Sachs himself (who, in his answer to her outburst, compares himself explicitly to the unfortunate Marx!).

- And, finally, in *Parsifal*, Kundry is the object of exchange, manipulated by Klingsor. Is Klingsor not a kind of false father who offers Kundry to men not to redeem them, but to destroy them? In a kind of mocking synthesis of *Tristan* and *Meistersinger*, Kundry is

offered first to the older Amfortas (i.e. Mark-Hans), and then to the younger Parsifal (Tristan-Walter). Klingsor, who wins the first time, is vanquished when no exchange takes place, since Kundry's advances are rejected by Parsifal.

This, then, is how we are to interpret Wagner: the "meaning" of Tristan becomes visible when we establish the connection between it and the two other music dramas (in short, when we apply to it the structural interpretation of myths elaborated by Claude Levi-Strauss, himself a great Wagnerian). What really matters is not the pseudo-problem of which of the three solutions reflects Wagner's "true" position (did he really believe in the redemptive power of the orgasmic Liebestod? did he resign himself to the necessity of returning to the everyday world of symbolic obligations?), but the formal matrix which generates these three versions of redemption. What defines Wagner's position is not any of the three determinate solutions, but the underlying deadlock to which these three operas (Tristan, Meistersinger, Parsifal) provide each its own solution, the unstable relationship between the "ethical" universe of social-symbolic obligations ("contracts"), the overwhelming sexual passion which threatens to dissolve social links (the "Aesthetical") and the spiritualized self-denial of the Will (the "Religious"). Each of the three operas is an attempt to compress this triangle into the opposition between two elements: between the spiritualized sexual passion and the socio-symbolic universe in Tristan, between sexual passion and the spiritual sublimation of socialized art in Meistersinger, between sexualized life and pure ascetic spiritualism in Parsifal. Each of these three solutions relies on a specific musical mode which predominates in it: the chromaticism of Tristan, the choral aspect of Meistersinger, the contrast between chromaticism and static diatonics of Parsifal.

Kundry's Laughter ...

Why, then, is Parsifal's ascetic renunciation false? The reference to Nietzsche is crucial here: Nietzsche was not against ascetism as such, but against ascetism secretly grounded in envy. That is to say, what Nietzsche and Freud share is the idea that justice as equality is founded on envy - on the envy of the Other who has what we do not have, and who enjoys it; the demand for justice is thus ultimately the demand that the excessive enjoyment of the Other should be curtailed, so that everyone's access to jouissance should be equal. The necessary outcome of this demand, of course, is ascetism: since it is not possible to impose equal jouissance, what one CAN impose is only the equally shared PROHIBITION. However, one should not forget that

today, in our allegedly permissive society, this ascetism assumes precisely the form of its opposite, of the GENERALIZED superego injunction "Enjoy!". We are all under the spell of this injunction, with the outcome that our enjoyment is more hindered than ever - recall the yuppie who combines Narcissistic "Self-Fulfillment" with utter ascetic discipline of jogging, eating health food, etc. This, perhaps, is what Nietzsche had in mind with his notion of the Last Man - it is only today that we can really discern the contours of the Last Man, in the guise of the hedonistic ascetism of yuppies. Nietzsche thus does not simply urge life-assertion against ascetism: he is well aware how a certain ascetism is the obverse of the decadent excessive sensuality - therein resides his criticism of Wagner's Parsifal, and, more generally, of the late Romantic decadence oscillating between damp sensuality and obscure spiritualism.

So what IS envy? From the most elementary case of a sibling envying his brother who is sucking the mother's breast (evoked by Saint Augustin at the beginning of his Confessions), the subject does not envy the Other's possession of the prized object as such, but rather the way the Other is able to ENJOY this object - which is why it is not enough for him simply to steal and thus gain possession of the object: his true aim is to destroy the Other's ability/capacity to enjoy the object. As such, envy is to be located into the triad of envy, thrift and melancholy, the three forms of not being able to enjoy the object (and, of course, reflexively enjoying this very impossibility). In contrast to the subject of envy, who envies the other's possession and/or jouissance of the object, the miser possesses the object, but cannot enjoy/consume it - his satisfaction derives from just possessing it, elevating it into a sacred, untouchable/prohibited, entity which should under no conditions be consumed (recall the proverbial figure of the lone miser who, upon returning home, safely locks the doors, opens up his chest and then takes the secret peek at his prized object, observing it in awe); this very hindrance that prevents the consummation of the object guarantees its status of the object of desire. The melancholic subject, like the miser, possesses the object, but loses the cause that made him desire it: this figure, most tragic of them all, has free access to all he wants, but finds no satisfaction in it.

The common topic of the Leftist (psycho)analysis of Fascism is how the people's submission, their renunciation to pleasure, is bought by the "perverse" pleasure generated by this submission itself: beneath the totalitarian call "Enough of pleasure! Sacrifice yourself!", one should discern the hidden superego injunction "Enjoy!". Is the ultimate proof of it not Joseph Goebbels' infamous "Total War" speech in Sportpalast, Berlin, on 18 February 1943, culminating in a series of rhetorical

questions, to which the gathered crowd answered with a frenzied, stomping "YES!". All his questions (Do you want theaters and restaurants to be closed, etc.etc. in order to achieve total mobilization?) ultimately asked for the same thing - MORE RENUNCIATIONS: "Do you want a total war - more total and radical than we can even imagine today?" However, one should also take into account its opposite, i.e. the paradox which emerges in our allegedly permissive hedonist liberal societies in which the subjects are directly called to enjoy (to organize their life around the "use of pleasures," to realize the inner potentials of their Self): far from spontaneous rule of pleasures, the result is a globalized ascetism: in order to really enjoy yourself, you have to submit to a strict diet, to avoid smoking and drinking, to jog regularly, plus to avoid sexual and other harassments in order not to frustrate others in their enjoyment...

The opposition we are dealing with here is, of course, none other than Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (society). Since the obvious ideological aim of Parsifal is to reinstate community against the alienated society, one should be careful not to accept this opposition as self-evident: what IS Gemeinschaft as opposed to Gesellschaft? When does one belong to a community? The difference concerns the netherworld of unwritten obscene rules which regulate the "inherent transgression" of the community, the way we are allowed/expected to violate its explicit rules. This is why the subject who closely follows the explicit rules of a community will never be accepted by its members as "one of us": he does not participate in the transgressive rituals which effectively keep this community together. And society /Gesellschaft/ as opposed to community is a collective which can dispense with this set of unwritten rules - since this is impossible, there is no society without community. This is where the theories which advocate the subversive character of mimicry get it wrong; according to these theories, the properly subversive attitude of the Other - say, of a colonized subject who lives under the domination of the colonizing culture - is to mimic the dominant discourse, but with a distance, so that what he does and says is like what the colonizers themselves do... almost like it, with an unfathomable difference which makes his Otherness all the more palpable. One is tempted to turn this thesis around: it is the foreigner emulating faithfully the rules of the dominant culture he wants to penetrate and identify with, who is condemned forever to remain an outsider, because he fails to practice, to participate in, the self-distance of the dominant culture, the unwritten rules which tell us how and when to violate the explicit rules of this culture. We are "in," integrated in a culture, perceived by their members as "one of us," only when we succeed in practicing this unfathomable DISTANCE from the symbolic rules - it is ultimately only

this distance which exhibits our identity, our belonging to the culture in question. This, then, is how one should perceive the Grail community at Montsalvat: as a closed circle engaged in the obscene ceremony of disclosing their shared secret, a ceremony closer to a Satanist "Black Mass" than to a Christian ritual - an uncanny opera "midway between Mass and orgy," in which the consecration of a theater turns into the desecration of a church (see Conrad 1989, p. 183).

On the other hand, one should be careful not to succumb to the liberal temptation of condemning all collective artistic performances as inherently "totalitarian." Both the Thingspiel in the early Nazi years and Bertolt Brecht's "learning plays /Lehrstuecke/" involved a mass ideologico-aesthetic experience (of songs, speeches and acts) in which spectators themselves served as actors - does this mean that the Left in the 30s participated in the same "proto-Fascist" totalitarian experience of the "regressive" immersion into pre-individual community as Nazism (the thesis of, among others, Siegfried Kracauer)? If not, does the difference reside in the fact that the Nazi Thingspiel staged a pathetic-emotional immersion, while Brecht aimed at a distanced, self-observing, reflected process of learning? However, is this standard Brechtian opposition of emotional immersion and reflexive distance sufficient? Let us recall the staged performance of "Storming the Winter Palace" in Petrograd, on the third anniversary of the October Revolution, on 7 November 1920. Tens of thousands of workers, soldiers, students and artists worked round the clock, living on kasha (the tasteless wheat porridge), tea and frozen apples, and preparing the performance at the very place where the event "really took place" three years earlier; their work was coordinated by the Army officers, as well as by the avant-garde artists, musicians and directors, from Malevich to Meyerhold. Although this was acting and not "reality," the soldiers and sailors were playing themselves - many of them not only actually participated in the event of 1917, but were also simultaneously involved in the real battles of the Civil War that were raging in the near vicinity of Petrograd, a city under siege and suffering from severe shortages of food. A contemporary commented on the performance: "The future historian will record how, throughout one of the bloodiest and most brutal revolutions, all of Russia was acting"(quoted from Buck-Morss 2000, p. 144); and the formalist theoretician Viktor Shklovski noted that "some kind of elemental process is taking place where the living fabric of life is being transformed into the theatrical"(quoted from Buck-Morss 2000, p. 144). We all remember the infamous self-celebratory First of May parades that were one of the supreme signs of recognition of the Stalinist regimes - if one needs a proof of how Leninism functioned in

an entirely different way, are such performances not the supreme proof that the October Revolution was definitely NOT a simple coup d'etat by the small group of Bolsheviks, but an event which unleashed a tremendous emancipatory potential?

So, back to Parsifal: what is wrong with it is not the collective ritual as such, but its flavor of the obscene secret ceremony. Like every compulsive ritual, this ceremony is a defense formation - a defense against the Real of the feminine desire. In his perspicuous Lacanian interpretation, Michel Poizat reads Parsifal as telling the story of the closed incestuous community, immobilized by the jouissance of the privileged Object-Thing (Grail), which is derailed when Amfortas, its leader, succumbs to the feminine seduction; the function of Parsifal himself is then to heal the wound and thus reestablish the close circle of the Grail community. Parsifal and Klingsor, Kundry's master, stand for the two opposed ways to avoid the encounter of the desiring woman and its castrative effect: Parsifal renounces desire, rejects the woman, closes himself to the encounter, while Klingsor avoids this encounter by castrating himself IN THE REAL (he actually castrated himself in order to be able to resist Kundry's advances and thus to be able to function as her Master, indifferent to her charms). Wagner's admiration of The Oresteia is well-known - is it then too daring to suggest that THE model of Parsifal's rejection of Kundry is Orestes' murder of Clitaimnestra, his mother? Here is how Aeschylus renders his words:

*"Quickly! Listen to me! One last time!
It carries me away!
I sit in a chariot,
but I do not drive.
It is the horses
who hold the reins.
I have no more power over them,
I ... can ... not ... think.
Think? No! Someone else
Is thinking for me!
And deep in the heart sits fear
and sings and begins to dance.
Therefore, so long as I am in my right senses
- am I still in my right senses? -
I will say to you quickly:
It was just that I killed my mother,
the woman abhorred by the god -
a horror hated by the earth!"*

(Quoted from Christa Wolf 1988, p. 222-223)

Is this not the most concise description of an autonomous free act? Of the Real of an act which the subject cannot ever assume/subjectivize, which is necessarily experience as a foreign body, as something "in me more than myself" which acts through me? Do, then, these lines not point towards what Kierkegaard called the madness of an actually free decision? In his *Adieu a Emmanuel Levinas*, Derrida tries to dissociate the decision from its usual metaphysical predicates (autonomy, consciousness, activity, sovereignty...) and think of it as the "other's decision in me": "The passive decision, condition of the event, is always, structurally, an other decision in me, a rending decision as the decision of the other. Of the absolutely other in me, of the other as the absolute who decides of me in me." (Derrida 1997, p. 87) The difference between Orestes and Parsifal, of course, is that their respective acts are clearly opposed with regard to their scope: although, in both cases, the feminine is rejected, Orestes' murder marks the rupture with the Maternal-Feminine, the installment of the paternal Law, while Parsifal cast off the woman's desire on behalf of the Maternal-Feminine. For this reason, Orestes has effectively to kill a woman (his mother), while in the case of Parsifal, we are dealing with a negative gesture of shirking. For this reason also, it is only Orestes who commits a true act: Parsifal's gesture is ultimately a non-act, a withdrawal from the Real of the Other's desire. What, then, is so threatening in Kundry?

In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel introduces his notorious notion of womankind as "the everlasting irony of the community": womankind "changes by intrigue the universal end of the government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into a work of some particular individual, and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the family." (Hegel 1977, p. 288) These lines fit perfectly the figure of Ortrud in Wagner's *Lohengrin*: for Wagner, there is nothing more horrible and disgusting than a woman who intervenes into the political life, driven by the desire for power. In contrast to the male ambition, a woman wants power in order to promote her own narrow family interests or, even worse, her personal caprice, incapable as she is of perceiving the universal dimension of state politics. How are we not to recall F.W.J. Schelling's claim that "the same principle carries and holds us in its ineffectiveness which would consume and destroy us in its effectiveness" (Schelling 1946, p. 13; translation quoted from Bowie 1993, p. 105)? A power which, when it is kept at its proper place, can be benign and pacifying, turns into its radical opposite, into the most destructive fury, the moment it intervenes at a higher level, the level which is not its own: THE SAME

femininity which, within the close circle of family life, is the very power of protective love, turns into obscene frenzy when displayed at the level of public and state affairs... In short, it is OK for a woman to protest the public state power on behalf of the rights of family and kinship; but woe to a society in which women endeavour directly to influence decisions concerning the affairs of state, manipulating their weak male partners, effectively emasculating them (as Ortrud does in Lohengrin). And are Isolde and Kundry not the two further versions of this "everlasting irony" which leads to the dissolution of the social link? Isolde is the opposite of Ortrud: instead of operating WITHIN the social structure, intervening in the power struggle by way of manipulating the (male) hero, she entices Tristan to step out of this realm of the Day into the abyss of the Night. Kundry, however, occupies a third position: neither intervening in the power edifice nor simply longing to step out of it and obliterate herself, but, literally, functioning as its "everlasting irony," mockingly undermining its authority.

The main sign and weapon of Kundry's subversive irony is her laughter, so it is crucial to probe into its origins: the primordial scene of laughter is the Way of the Cross where Kundry was observing the suffering Christ and laughing at him. This laughter then repeats itself again and again apropos of every master Kundry served (Klingsor, Gurnemanz, Amfortas, Parsifal): she undermines the position of each of them by means of the surplus-knowledge contained in her hysterical obscene laughter which reveals the fact that the master is impotent, a semblance of himself. This laughter is thus profoundly ambiguous: it does not stand only for making a mockery of the other, but also for despair at herself, i.e. for her repeated failure to find a reliable support in the Master. The question that one should raise here is that of the parallel between Amfortas' and Christ's wound: what do the two have in common? In what sense is Amfortas (who was wounded when he succumbed to Kundry's temptation) occupying the same position as Christ? The only consistent answer, of course, is that Christ himself was not pure in his suffering: when Kundry observed him on the Way of the Cross, she detected his obscene jouissance, i.e. the way he was "turned on" by his suffering. What Kundry is desperately searching for in men is, on the contrary, somebody who would be able to resist the temptation of converting his pain into a perverse enjoyment.

... and her Kiss

The unique achievement of Parsifal is to unite, in the figure of Kundry, the two traditionally opposite figures (which, in his early Tannhaeuser, are kept apart): the devastating seductress and the angelic redemptrix

- or, as Wagner put it in his famous letter to Mathilde Wesendonck from August 1860: "Have I already told you that the fabulous, savage messenger of the Grail has to be one and the same as the seductress in the second act? Since that dawned upon me almost everything to do with it has become clear to me" (quoted from Dahlhaus 1979, p. 152-153) - the motto from the finale of Parsifal "the wound is healed only by the spear that smote you" holds also and especially for Kundry. This fact that the identity of Kundry has popped up as a solution is to be taken literally: the "secret" of Kundry is that she does stand for the psychological unity of a "real person," but for an artificial composite invented in order to resolve a certain (narrative and, simultaneously, ideological) deadlock. The first to describe this logic in detail was Claude Levi-Strauss, in his famous analysis of the facial decorations of the Caduveo Indians; he begins by identifying, in purely visual terms, the antagonistic tension of a "complicated situation based upon two contradictory forms of duality, and resulting in a compromise brought about by a secondary opposition between the ideal axis of the object itself /the human face/ and the ideal axis of the figure which it represents." (Levi-Strauss 1971, p. 176) He then goes on to interpret this visual dynamics as the imaginary solution for the unresolved antagonism/imbalance of their social structure: an attempt to supplant the imbalance of the emerging hierarchical distinctions, insurmountable in their own terms, by displacing them onto "horizontal" division of the tribe into groups - at this level, the imaginary compromise can at least be staged.

And was it not the same with Heidegger in 1933? The primary opposition there was also the class distinction, and the secondary opposition the one between Heidegger's attachment to the traditional local folk community and his commitment to Nazism as a modern mass political movement. How, then, did Heidegger try to resolve this double tension? In his attire itself - Karl Loewith reports that, in 1933, Heidegger attracted the attention of bypassers with the "queerness of his clothes: a kind of Schwarzwald peasant jacket with wide lapels and a half-military collar, accompanied by knickerbockers, both made from a dark-brown cloth /.../ a unique compromise between the ordinary local attire and the S.A. uniform." (Loewith 1986, p. 43) Is this not the exact equivalent to the facial decorations of the Caduveo Indians? Did Heidegger not first displace the class antagonism onto the antagonism between folk roots and modern mass movement, and then try to resolve their tension by, literally, enacting on his body itself their utopian reconciliation in his clownish attire which combines the two dimensions? And the figure of Kundry follows the same logic: she HAD to be invented to provide an imaginary solution which allowed Wagner to bring Parsifal to conclusion.

So, when, after receiving Kundry's kiss, Parsifal pushes her away with the cry "Amfortas! The wound!", signalling his compassionate identification with the suffering Amfortas (a scene which, incidentally, cannot but provoke laughter in today's public), Poizat is fully justified in conceiving this identification of Parsifal with Amfortas in the moment of Kundry's kiss along the lines of the science-fiction stories in which, to paraphrase Hamlet, the time is out of joint, and the hero sets it right by travelling back to the moment when things took the wrong turn (recall numerous alternate history novels in which the hero goes back in time in order to change the detail which set in motion a later catastrophe, like preventing the birth of Hitler). (Poizat 1998, p. 121) We are thus here as far from Hegel as possible, even if Wagner's "the wound is healed only by the spear that smote you" may sound vaguely "Hegelian." When Hegel says that "knowledge heals the wound it itself is /Erkennen heilt die Wunde, die es selber ist/," his idea is that the split introduced by knowledge into our being (the loss of innocence, of the immersion into immediate life, i.e. the rise of the reflexive distance of consciousness, of the gap between subject and object, between thought and act) is ITSELF its own self-sublation: we overcome the limitation of our knowledge when we become aware of how the wealth of the pseudo-concrete sensual content that we lose in the passage from direct experience to notional knowledge, is in itself null, worth losing. Hegel's point is thus not to regain what was lost, but to accept the loss itself as liberating. In contrast to Hegel, Wagner's Parsifal does not "sublate" the Fall in a later Reconciliation-through-synthesis; he, rather, travels back in time in order to retroactively UNDO the Fall. In short, for Wagner, "the wound is healed only by the spear that smote you" means: the only way to undo the Fall (the wrong turn of the events) is to return back to the moment of the wrong decision and to REPEAT the choice, this time making the right decision. What, however, Wagner does not take fully into account is the very NECESSITY of this repetition: Parsifal's right decision can only take place as a repetition, after Amfortas, in his first choice, made the wrong one. And, perhaps, therein resides the core of the Wagnerian fantasy, Wagner's ultimate retreat from the Real: instead of endorsing the wound, reconciling himself with it, he sticks to the dream of fully undoing it - here is his famous rendering of Tristan and Isolde's predicament:

"Thanks to the potion their passion suddenly flares up and they have to confess mutually that they belong only to each other. And now there were no bounds to the longing, the desire, the bliss and the anguish of love: the world, power, fame, glory, honor, chivalry, loyalty, friendship, all swept away like chaff, an empty dream; only

one thing is left alive: yearning, yearning, insatiable desire, ever reborn - languishing and thirsting; the sole release - death, dying, extinction, never more to wake!" (Quoted from Dahlhaus 1979, p. 150.)

It is clear what is the trouble with this confused Buddhist-vision: in it, the three levels (the daily world of symbolic obligations; the insatiable desire; the eternal peace) are squeezed into two. The principal tension is not between the Day and the Night, it is the tension, inherent to the Night itself, between the longing and the peace: it is the very longing for peace which forever DISTURBS our daily routine, preventing us from finding peace in our lives. So, in a Hegelian way, one should claim that the Day HAD to be invented in order for us to sustain the INHERENT DEADLOCK of the longing for peace. Or, to put it in a slightly different way, the obstacle of the Day, of socio-symbolic conventions, is necessary for the metaphysical longing to flare up - THIS is how "the wound is healed only by the spear that smote you": in the reconciliation, "the negative force recognizes in what it fights its own force"(Hegel 1969, p. 174), that is to say, the Night has to recognize in the obstacles posed by the obligations of the Day its own condition of possibility.

One should distinguish TWO phases of Kundry's advance in the great Act II duet: first, Kundry tries to seduce him from the position of the abyssal incestuous Thing, playing the evil femme fatale who intends to devour her victim. At the end of this first phase, Parsifal resists Kundry's advances by means of his identification with Amfortas' wound: at the very moment of Kundry's kiss, he retreats from her embrace, shouts "Amfortas! The wound! The wound!", and seizes his thighs (the site of Amfortas' wound) - this comically-pathetic gesture is a clear case of hysterical identification, a step into the hysterical theater. (See Bronfen 1996.) The true hysteric of the opera, of course, is Kundry herself, and it is as if Parsifal's very rejection of her contaminates him with hysteria. - After the kiss and Parsifal's rejection of it, Kundry's SECOND approach is therefore totally different - here, we no longer have the deadly femme fatale playing cruel games, but a real desiring woman desperately in love with Parsifal. Instead of flirting with the incestuous identification with Parsifal's mother, she now opens up to him the very core of her trauma, the original sin which turned her into an undead specter desperately looking for the savior. Which is why Kundry's outburst of rage at the end of the duet is in a way justified: it is the reaction of a loving woman deeply hurt by the cruel and cold rejection of her sincere offer... The parallel with *The Magic Flute* is here crucial: if Parsifal were to be a "normal" Oedipal opera, one rejection would have been enough, i.e. Parsifal would have

been allowed to accept Kundry the second time, after rejecting her, since he is now dealing with a woman who accepted the symbolic Law (in the same way Tamino is allowed to accept Pamina after she sustains the ordeal of his silence/rejection). Parsifal is thus unable to accomplish the "normalizing" gesture of renouncing the fantasmatic Feminine in order to gain access to the real woman's love: instead, he immerses himself into the bliss of the fantasmatic Feminine by way of rejecting the real of the woman's desire.

The opposition between actual woman and the Feminine is brought to extreme here: the actual desiring woman drops dead (Kundry is silenced already at the end of Act II, reduced in the entire act III to a half-catatonic mute presence whose only words are "To serve! To serve!", and whose only act is to wash with her own hair Parsifal's feet at the ceremony of his anointment), while the Eternal-Feminine triumphs. What is crucial here is the thorough ambiguity of the feminine reference: on the one hand, woman is the external intruder which disturbs the closed circle of male community - the encounter of a woman stands for the encounter of the real of the other's desire in all its traumatic opacity; on the other hand, however, breaking the circle, introducing division, is a male act par excellence, while the Feminine is identified with the harmonious Whole of the substantial Ground prior to its disturbance by means of the subjective Act - when the circle is closed again, when we return to the harmonious balance, is this not equal to the return to the safe protective haven of the Feminine?

Wagner's ambiguous relationship towards the Feminine - woman as the notorious spear which can only heal the wound it itself dealt (as Wagner puts it in Parsifal), i.e. at the same time the cause of man's Fall and his Redemptrix -, is, of course, to be located into the long German tradition, which found its supreme expression in the notion of the "Eternal-Feminine" from the very last lines of Goethe's Faust: "Das Unbeschreibliche / Hier ist's getan; / Das Ewig-Weibliche / Zieht uns hinan." (A paraphrase: "What cannot be described / Is here accomplished; / The Eternal-Feminine / Draws us up towards itself.") In Goethe, this "Eternal-Feminine" appears in the guise of saintly feminine figures withdrawn from active life, whose very immobility moves men to act, from Iphigenia to Ottilie in *The Selective Affinities*; what is still missing here, what is only implied, not yet explicitly posited, is the lethal-destructive dimension of this Eternal-Feminine. And is this dimension, this excess of life in its connection with death, not the very stuff, the minimal definition, of Romanticism? Novalis already wrote "Hymns to the Night," the idea that ultimate fulfillment can be found only in the self-obliterating immersion into the Night. This "transgressive" matrix of love which found its first clear

expression in the notion of courtly love: the idea that a love relationship inherently tends towards the self-obliteration immersion into the Night that suspends the universe of symbolic obligations. This Romantic notion of love involves the claim that marriage is contrary to the truly passionate love, its worst enemy, an institution violently imposed on love through state and church institution for reasons which concern ideological control and transference of private property. The interesting point here is that this celebration of extra-marital love, far from involving anti-religious hedonism, can experience and present itself as a quasi-religious "suspension" of the moral link of marriage. The first to provide the highest philosophical expression to this disturbance in the status of femininity was Schelling, in his distinction between (logical) Existence and the impenetrable Ground of Existence, the Real of pre-logical drives: this proto-ontological domain of drives is not simply "nature," but the spectral domain of the not-yet fully constituted reality. (See Schelling 1987.) Schelling's opposition of the proto-ontological Real of drives (the Ground of being) and the ontologically fully constituted Being itself (which, of course, is "sexed" as the opposition of the Feminine and the Masculine) thus radically displaces the standard philosophical couples of Nature and Spirit, the Real and the Idea, Existence and Essence, etc. This notion is crucial not only with regard to the history of ideas, but even with regard to art and our daily experience of reality. Recall the protracted stains which "are" the yellow sky in late van Gogh or the water or grass in Munch: this uncanny "massiveness" pertains neither to the direct materiality of the color stains nor to the materiality of the depicted objects - it dwells in a kind of intermediate spectral domain of what Schelling called *geistige Koerperlichkeit*, the spiritual corporeality. No wonder, then, that Schelling was also the first and only to elevate art into the highest expression of the Absolute, higher than philosophy which remains within the confines of the opposition between Subject and Object. One is tempted to claim that this obsession with the Eternal feminine as the dark background of the male Reason provides the key to German art. From Goethe onwards, something gets perturbed in the German attitude towards women, something stronger than the standard discord that constitutes the impasse of sexual relationship. The "Eternal Feminine" enters the stage as the placebo, the abyssal background of male identity, the ambiguous threatening-protective foundation, which then provokes a multitude of reactions, from the trusting reliance on it to its paranoiac refusal (in, say, Otto Weininger). Is this "Eternal Feminine" not also the support of the specific German notion of the self-destructive artistic genius? Does it not sustain the German notion of sexual life (or, rather, life itself) as something rotten, sick, which finds its culmination in death or outright

self-destruction (see Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*)? Even Bertolt Brecht, the very opposite of this damp Romantic obsession with lethal sexuality, in a way reacts to it - see, in his posthumously published erotic poems, two features of his attitude towards the sexual act: his opposition to the simultaneous orgasm as too close to the mystical self-immersion, i.e. his preference for "first I do it to you, then you do it to me"; his obsession that, AFTER (not before) the sexual commerce, one should take a bath, as if to wash off the filth... And does this reference to the Eternal Feminine also not sustain Wagner's scenario of the culmination of love in *Liebestod*, in a climactic self-obliteration in which all distinctions disappear?

The link between Wagner and Heinrich von Kleist (see Maar 2000) is indicative here, insofar as Kleist brought to its extreme the Romantic notion of unconditional love to death: not only is there a direct connection (Wagner's uncle, the crucial influence in his formative years, was a literary critic who was the only public figure in Germany to defend Kleist after his suicide, and introduced the young Richard to Kleist); not only are there lines in the libretto of *Tristan* which repeat verbatim Kleist's suicide note; moreover, the *Liebestod* in Wagner's *Tristan* could be read as a kind of repetition which tries to pacify the truly traumatic dimension of the ultimate Kleistian *Liebestod* in *Penthesilea*, arguably Kleist's most unsettling play, even today often avoided and dismissed as disgusting - the line that separates the Beautiful from the Disgusting is here definitely violated. The *Liebestod* in *Penthesilea* gives a literal twist to the pathetic words of the two lovers about becoming one, immersing themselves into each other: Penthesilea literally cuts Achilles, her love, to pieces, reducing him to a corps morcele, devours the pieces, and then kills herself. Not only do we thereby make a shift from the Wagnerian ecstatically-hypnotic Sublime to the domain of Disgust, not only is Achilles, the object of love, openly asserted as *das feindliche Objekt*; Kleist also clearly renders the ultimate FAILURE of this "Dionysiaque" reunion: "Even though she chews him up, she fails, as she must. Penthesilea can never strike Achilles where she intends to, for to do so would pull the rug out from under her own feet." (Chaouli 1996, p. 138) This precise formulation cannot but recall Lacan's description of Hamlet's predicament whose problem apropos of his obligation to kill the King is how to do it so that his strike will hit also the *objet a* in the King, the "Thing" that is in the King. The *objet a*, although the remainder of the Real external to the Symbolic, can only emerge as the inherent excess within the symbolic field itself, so that when we strike at the Real of the body, we by definition always miss the Thing which eludes us (the same was with Jews in the Nazi universe: the more their biological bodies were destroyed, the more powerful remained the specter of the

Jew). In short, Penthesilea is the victim of a kind of Kantian transcendental illusion, confusion the reality of the biological body with the Real of the Thing. THIS horror, disgust even, and this failure are the truth from which Wagner retreated in his fantasy of the blissful immersion into the Night.

The Feminine versus Woman

The fantasmatic Feminine, the destructive abyss which threatens to swallow the male subject who succumbs to its sirene's voice, is THE SAME as the sublime bliss of the spiritual Feminine promising peace eternal - THIS is what Wagner meant when he asserted the identity of Kundry the Seductress with Kundry the Redemptrix, THIS is how "the wound is healed only by the spear that smote you": while the destructive lethal Woman-Thing wounds the (male) subject, it is only its own obverse, the pacifying Eternal-Feminine, which can heal the wound. The difference between Tristan and Parsifal is that, in Tristan, the "real" woman also sustains the immersion into the Eternal Feminine, while in Parsifal, the Eternal Feminine is reached through the rejection of the "real" woman. It is significant that the text on which Wagner was working in the days prior to his death in Venice, was "On the Feminine in the Human" - it was while writing it that he was taken by a heart seizure and died (at midday on 13 February 1883). The essay's main thesis is a rather conventional one: the oppression of the woman is a symptom of the history of mankind's degeneration; woman is the victim of power structures determined according to masculine principles and reproduction, she is a victim of the system of ownership, in whose interests marriages are arranged and families founded; female emancipation thus forms part of the regeneration of mankind... What then follows, however, is the specifically Wagnerian twist: first, Wagner refers to Buddha who, in his late years, revoked his exclusion of women from the possibility of sainthood; then, he qualifies this opening towards the feminine with the very last words he wrote, while already feeling the seizure coming: "However, the process of the emancipation of women only proceeds in ecstatic convulsions. Love - Tragedy." (Wagner 1972, Vol. 8, p. 398) What took place at this moment, when the pain of the seizure made itself felt, was it not the identification of Wagner with Kundry herself, with her "ecstatic convulsions"?

It is here, at this crucial juncture, that Poizat falls short by way of relying on the opposition between the access to the libidinal object mediated by the symbolic Law, and the direct confrontation to the Real, which is that of the jouissance of the incestuous deadly Thing: he reduces the passage from fantasy to the Real of feminine desire to the

passage from the fascination with the fantasized spectre (which occludes the real woman) to opening up to the desire of a real flesh-and-blood woman - ultimately, a simple replacement of the delusive fantasy with the real person accessible through the paternal Law. This replacement accounts for the motif of the "lady who vanishes," the motif which, perhaps, found its clearest expression in Veit Harlan's *Die verwehte Spuren* (1938). What makes Harlan's film so interesting is its difference from the standard "lady vanishes" story which also served as a model for Hitchcock's *Lady Vanishes* (from 1939), as well as for Cornell Woolrich's *The Phantom Lady* (filmed by Robert Siodmak in 1942) - interestingly, all of them made in the late same period. The model of all these stories is an event which allegedly occurred during the Paris world exhibition in 1867, when a Canadian daughter and her mother visited Paris. Feeling tired, mother went to the hotel room, while the daughter stayed out. When she returned to the hotel, not only her mother disappeared, but everyone even denied her existence: what had been the mother's room was now an empty room in which workers were repairing the walls; the hotel personal remembered only the daughter; the ship and hotel registers showed only her name... After a desperate search, authorities disclosed the truth to the daughter: the mother died of plague, and in order to avoid mass panic, they had to deny her existence...

While in all other versions (inclusive of the original story itself), our - the spectator's or reader's - perspective is limited to that of the young girl, Harlan strangely opted for disclosing the secret of the mother's disappearance (plague) immediately, so that the spectator knows the truth all the time and there is no enigma - the question is only when and how will the daughter learn the truth. Why did he do it? Perhaps, in order to accentuate the obvious Oedipal background of the story: the imposition of the paternal Law erases out of the picture the obscene sick excessive Mother, it cuts the daughter's link with her, her "passionate attachment" to her mother, and thus renders her able to enter the "normal" heterosexual relationship. After the mother, this Mozartean "Queen of the Night," returns to her hotel, the daughter goes out and engages in a heavily charged flirt with Dr. Moreau, whom they met earlier on a street parade. Then, in one of the film's most effective scenes, the shots of the couple-to-be making a date across the hotel balcony and then going together to a wild partying on the crowded street, interchange with the shots of the dying mother, her distorted face full of sweat, desperately shouting her daughter's name ("Serafine!") - as if the access to the male partner is to be paid by mother's death. And, effectively, when Serafine accepts the doctor's invitation to go out with him, we get a cut to mother's cry "Josefine!", as if admonishing her daughter for her transgression, for abandoning

her; then, in a nice detail, mother's last words in this shot - "Mein Gott!" - are literally repeated by the doctor when we cut to the couple in a coach.

The second difference concerns the ending: when Serafine learns the truth, the prefect of the Paris police asks her to do the ultimate citizen's sacrifice - since rumors about her mother have already started to circulate, he implores her to sign the document confirming the lie, stating freely that she came to Paris alone, without her mother. After she does this, the couple of her and Dr. Moreau stays alone in the hospital room, confessing their love to each other now that mother is also officially erased out of the picture. (This excessive sticking to the lie for the benefit of society points towards the authoritarian Nazi credentials of Harlan.) The path is thus clear: in order to be fully integrated into the symbolic space of mature relations, the girl has to endorse publicly the lie on which social order is based, erasing the maternal threat out of the picture - the film is almost subversive in this admission of how the public order has to rely on a lie.

However, the alternative which underlies this narrative - either the deadly fascination with the fantasmatic lawless Feminine, or the access to a real woman mediated by the paternal symbolic Law - does not cover the entire field of options: far from presenting a choice, the two poles depend on each other, i.e. the paternal Law SUSTAINS itself by the specter of the unbridled-devouring Woman-Thing which would swallow us without its protective barrier. In other words, far from enabling us to really confront and accept the Real of the woman as the desiring Other, i.e. the traumatic impact of encountering the Other's desire, the mediation of the symbolic Law functions as a protective shield/filter which domesticates/gentrifies its traumatic impact. Poizat is right to emphasize that the abyssal fantasmatic Real of the Feminine which threatens to devour the male subject, is, in its very horror, a DEFENSE, an escape from the Real of the Other's (woman's) desire: when, in this terrifying image, the Real is posited as impossible (as something that can be achieved only in the lethal self-obliteration, as something whose encounter is forever postponed), what is thereby occluded is the way in which, in our common daily lives, the "impossible" CAN happen - in the magic moments of love, we CAN encounter the real Other's desire.

The real of the woman's desire is thus encountered neither in the fantasy of the Eternal Feminine nor in the woman reduced to the object of exchange among men regulated by the symbolic Law. When Poizat claims that the only access to the Real of the (desiring) woman is through the paternal Law, through the acceptance of the wound of symbolic castration, this mistake of his leaves its trace in an interesting conceptual confusion: he directly equals the imposition of

the paternal Law as regulating the access to women, the acceptance of "symbolic castration," with "traversing the fantasy" - this is how he reads Mozart's *The Magic Flute*: in the course of the opera, Tamino "confronts this fantasy /of the Woman-Thing/, taking the risk of a symbolic death, and of the suffering which originates in it, but which he must assume in order to gain access to desire. He can thus 'traverse' the fantasy and encounter the real woman and her desire." (Poizat 1998, p. 124) In the course of the opera, Tamino thus passes from the fascination with the mere image of the woman given to him by the Queen of the Night, this figure of the unbridled, lawless, lethal jouissance of the fantasmatic Mother, to the subordination to the PATERNAL Law which enables him the access to a real woman. However, one should not forget that this access to the woman is mediated with the subordination to the paternal Law: in order to regain Pamina, Tamino has to abandon her, refusing to answer her desperate entreaties (during the trial of silence), and thus pushing her to the very border of suicide! In other words, he gets Pamina after he demonstrates that he is ready to abandon her...

Of course, Poizat would have pointed out that he is here far from confusing the fantasy and the Real - is he not making precisely the point that "the function of this fantasmatic elaboration /of the Feminine as the destructive abyss of excessive and unbridled jouissance/ is precisely to protect the man from encountering the real, desiring, woman" (Poizat 1998, p. 119). Or, as he puts it even more concisely a couple of pages later: "Parsifal puts together an entire fantasmatic organization of the feminine, whose permanent aim, behind the appearance of the search for the feminine, is to carefully spare us the trouble of 'getting to know' the feminine" (Poizat 1998, p. 121) - the verb "to know," of course, is to be read here in its biblical double meaning: having sex with the woman AND effectively acquainting oneself with her. Is, however, this encounter of the feminine really possible only through the mediation of the paternal symbolic Law? Significantly, Poizat oscillates between two notions of the Real: there is the pre-symbolic Real of the excessive impossible jouissance, embodies in the lethal incestuous Woman-Thing; and there is the Real of the woman as the desiring other. Does, however, this very opposition - either the monstrous devouring Woman-Thing or the woman subordinated to the symbolic Law - not stand for the two ways to avoid the encounter of the Real of the Other's (woman's) desire? Here, Poizat's misreading is fatal: Amfortas' wound does NOT stand for the symbolic castration (as Poizat claims - Poizat 1998, p. 120), but, **QUITE ON THE CONTRARY**, for the remainder which **RESISTS** castration-symbolization, for what Lacan called "lamella," for the Real of an "undead" partial object, of the embodiment of the excessive

jouissance (objet petit a as plus-de-jouir) that insists, resisting its integration into the symbolic reality.

Furthermore, this misperception also prevents Poizat from locating the true source of the disturbance in the Grail community: contrary to the misleading appearances, it is NOT Amfortas' succumbing to Kundry's advances which sets in motion the catastrophe, but TITUREL's (Amfortas' horrifying superego father's) excessive attachment to, his fixation on, the Grail: Titurel turns into a monstrous "undead" specter who lives off the rays of the Grail. In short, what goes wrong is not the EXTERNAL intrusion of the desiring Other which introduces a gap into the circle, but the INTERNAL excess of drive, of its excessive and suffocating fixation on the Thing-jouissance. Because of this, there is effectively a change at the end of the opera: against Poizat, who reads the finale as a simple reestablishment of the balance which was disturbed by the intrusion of the desiring Other, one should take note of how Parsifal, when he takes over the Grail community, changes its rules, announcing that from now on, the Grail will remain forever disclosed. And it is also because of this that Poizat's rejection of those stagings which discern in the finale a kind of reassertion of - or, rather, opening towards - the Feminine, falls short: prior to Parsifal's reign, the Grail community effectively was a self-enclosed male circle, while Parsifal opens it towards the Feminine. Consequently, what one should focus on is rather the relationship between woman and the wound.

Rilke's quote about the Beautiful being the beginning of the Horrible goes on "... since, with indifference, it /the beautiful/ delivers us to decay" - a concise characterization of what goes on in Mann's *Death in Venice*, in which the blissfully indifferent specter of the beautiful Tadzio drags the narrator towards moral and physical disintegration. What an abyss separates this late Romantic decadent ideology of pleasure-in-decay from, say, the "undead" wound in "A Country Doctor," Kafka's key story and, for that very reason, definitely not among his best ones: it is all too directly delirious, lacking the cold, austere precision of his great texts, their strange "realism" which makes his universe all the more uncanny. "A Country Doctor" reads straightaway as a nightmarish dream, which is why it can allow itself to render directly the fantasies underlying Kafka's universe. In deep cold winter, a country doctor and his young maid Rosa are desperately looking for a horse carriage which would take the doctor to a patient at a lone farm. All of a sudden, the doctor senses a warmth and smell of horses in the abandoned pigpen at his backyard - and, for sure, there is a young strong groom there, ready with two fresh horses. "People don't know what they've got available in their own house," says Rosa with laughter; however, the groom immediately embraces her and shoves

his face against hers; after the terrified Rosa withdraws to the doctor, two rows of teeth have left their red marks on her cheek. Against his will, the doctor is dragged by the horses away to his patient, impotently observing how the groom is proceeding to rape Rosa. There, at the lone farm, the family shows him a young boy who at first seems perfectly healthy. "Then, with no fever, not cold, not warm, with expressionless eyes, without a shirt, the boy raises himself up under the feather bed, embraces my neck and whispers in my ear: 'Doctor, let me die.' I look around; no one has heard; his parents are standing in silence"(Kafka 1996, p. 77). All of a sudden, we thus enter the Wagnerian territory: the horror of being condemned to the life of eternal suffering, and the longing to find release in death. In what does this suffering consist? Taking a second look, the doctor all of a sudden becomes aware of a terrible wound on the boy's right hip (the very place of Amfortas' wound):

"On his right side, around the hip, a wound as large as the palm of one's hand has opened up. Pink /in German Rosa - the very name of the raped maid!/, in many shades, dark as it gets deeper, becoming light at the edges, softly granular, with irregular accumulations of blood, wide open as the surface entrance to a mine. That's how it looks from some distance. But, close up, a complication can be seen, as well. Who can look at it without giving a low whistle? Worms as long and thick as my little finger, naturally rose-colored and in addition spattered with blood, firmly attached to the inside of the wound, with white heads and many legs, are writhing upward into the light. Poor boy, there's no hope for you. I have discovered your great wound; you will be destroyed by this flower on your side. The family is happy..."(Kafka 1996, p. 79) -

- why are they happy? Because, as it is clear from a series of details, they cannot see the wound or hear the boy's complaint! They are here only for the doctor's eyes and ears (in exactly the same way we learn at the end of the parable about "The Door of the Law" in The Trial that the door was there only for the man from the country), which means that the status of the wound is thoroughly fantasmatic. The wound (whose literary model is, of course, Philoktet's stinking wound from the Ancient Greek tragedies) is the Lacanian objet petit a, the "undead" partial object - which is why Syberberg was fully justified when, in a true stroke of a genius, he filmed Amfortas' wound as a separate object, a round piece of flesh with a vagina-like cut out of which blood is slowly, but continuously, dribbling. No wonder that the doctor brings a relief to the boy by pointing out that the wound is a privilege he enjoys, something other people are striving for, but cannot get it:

"your wound isn't that bad. Brought on by two hatchet blows at an acute angle. Many people offer their sides and scarcely hear the hatchet in the forest, let alone having it come closer to them."(Kafka 1996, p. 89) And, effectively, who would not like to become infected with the disease of immortality? The boy thus cannot but remain "completely dazzled by the life in his wound"(Kafka 1996, p. 79): what he sees there is the "non-castrated" life-substance itself, a little piece of the Noumenal, of the Thing-in-itself, which tears apart the texture of our phenomenal reality. It is nonetheless difficult and painful to sustain this excess of life, which is why the boy whispers to the doctor with a sob "Will you save me?"(Kafka 1996, p. 79) - how? By enabling him to die, of course.

It is, however, crucial to locate this climactic moment in its context: let us not forget that "A Country Doctor" tells the catastrophic consequences of having the luck of magically finding what one is desperately looking for (the carriage with horses); furthermore, one should follow Kafka's wordplay with "Rosa" and focus on the link between the wound and the raped maid. The wound is not a simple stand-in for the absent maid: it is not that the "true" focal point of the story is the doctor's impotence, his inability to "pass to the act" in his relationship with his young maid, with his aggressivity towards the obscene and brutal groom, as well as his protective concern about the maid's security, just masking its opposite (the fact that the maid may enjoy the advances of the groom). Although there are signs which appear to point in this direction (after the doctor discovers the wound, the boy's relatives forcefully undress him and place him in the bed alongside the boy - he thus in a way repeats the groom's sexual experience, since he also finds himself naked in bed with "Rosa"), the boy's disgusting wound is not a mere displacement, a lure destined to obfuscate its true nerve center: it is rather something "primordially repressed" which returns in the gaps of sexual relationship. In Freudian terms, we are dealing here with the irreducible tension between sexual relationship and the jouissance of partial objects, in which none of the two terms can be derived from the other's failure: on the one hand, the persistence of the partial objects, these islands of non-castrated jouissance, renders sexual relationship "impossible," condemning it to the ultimate failure; on the other hand, the specter of sexual relationship sustains a gap which forever prevents the subject to attain full satisfaction in the imbecile jouissance of partial objects.

One should recall how, in "A Country Doctor," sexual act and the wound are related along the axis of absence and presence: the rape (sexual act) occurs in absentia, the doctor dragged away from it, so that he can only fantasize about what went on between Rosa and the

groom, while the wound is intrusive in its exuberant over-presence. What if, then, the doctor secretly prefers the excessive enjoyment of the partial object to the woman? What if his being dragged away from his home conceals the fact of his escape from the "scene of the crime"? And, mutatis mutandis, the same goes for Parsifal: the wound is not a displaced trace of Kundry, but something "primordially repressed" which returns when Kundry withdraws, the partial object which renders sexual relationship impossible. What, then, if this is the ultimate secret obfuscated by Wagner, Parsifal's ultimate "speculative identity": the Grail IS the wound (the undead partial object), revealing the Grail equals revealing and displaying the disgusting obscene wound?

Consequently, the problem with Parsifal is not its disavowal of the symbolic Law in the fantasy of the self-enclosed Grail community: Wagner is aware that the ultimate source of disturbance is this self-enclosure. Wagner also cannot be simply accused of ignoring the illusory nature of his metaphysical solution - he KNEW it, he KNEW that Reconciliation is impossible, that it equals death. The key unanswered question is: is the only approach to the Real effectively the lethal transgressive experience of going beyond the (symbolic) limit, or is there another approach to the Real? In order to find an answer to this question, one should look beyond Wagner.

INTERLUDE: THE FEMININE EXCESS

Everyone knows by heart the famous chorus from Antigone celebrating the unique uncanny and excessive, out-of-joint, position of man in the midst of beings, constrained only by the ultimate limit of mortality ("There exists much that is strange, yet nothing / Is more strange than mankind: / For this being crosses the gray sea of Winter / Against the wind, through the howling sea swell..."); in *The Oresteia*, written a couple of decades before, we find a parallel celebration which, however, directly passes from mankind in general to women as the site of the radical excess:

*"Marvels, the Earth breeds many marvels,
terrible marvels overwhelm us.
The heaving arms of the sea embrace and swarm
with savage life. And high in the no man's light of night
torches hang like swords. The hawk on the wing,
the beast astride the fields
can tell of the whirlwind's fury roaring strong.*

Oh but a man's high daring spirit,

*who can account for that? Or woman's
desperate passion daring past all bounds?
She couples with every form of ruin known to mortals,
Woman, frenzied, driven wild with lust,
twists the dark, warm harness
of wedded love - tortures man and beast!"*

(Aeschylus 1977, lines 572-585)

If one is to trust the German translation to which Christa Wolf refers in her *Cassandra*, the passage from man to woman at the beginning of the second strophe is to be read as the step from the general excess ("daring spirit") that characterizes mankind to its highest and worst expression, that of the feminine excess: "And then, / worst of all, / the inordinate desire, / the lust of the woman." (Quoted in Wolf 1988, p. 222.) Far from being gender-neutral, the uncanny excess of life which condenses the utmost characteristic of the humankind (and which, as we have already seen, is the ultimate topic of psychoanalysis) is therefore feminine: sexual difference is ultimately not the difference between the two species of the humankind, men and women, but between man ("human being") qua species and its (feminine) excess. Consequently, one should resist the temptation to historicize this disparaging of the feminine, reading it as the expression of the passage from the old matriarchal order (in which the ruling divinity itself was feminine) to the new patriarchal order, from which what was before elevated into the sublime feminine figure appears as the abyss of the feminine excess threatening to swallow the male subject: more than ever, one should insist that the two, the elevation and the condemnation of the Feminine, are two sides of the same strategy of coming to terms with the feminine excess. It is rather history itself which should be conceived as the series of attempts to come to terms, through temporal displacement, with the unbearable "eternal" antagonism of the Feminine: the history of literature (and of the "real life") from Antiquity onwards offers a series of figures which endeavor to "normalize" this excess.

In the universe of the Greek tragedy, there are two ways, for a woman, to break out of the private domain and penetrate the public space otherwise reserved for men. The first is the unconditional self-sacrifice for the husband or father. Iphigenia and Polyxena, they both insist on assuming freely the sacrificial slaughter that is imposed on them by the male warrior community - in this purely formal act of willing freely, of assuming as the result of one's free decision, what is in any way brutally imposed on the individual as an inevitable necessity, resides the elementary gesture of subjectivization. In both

cases, the woman accomplishes it for the gaze of the big Other - she readily sacrifices the pleasures of her young life for her posthumous fame, i.e. for the awareness that she will survive in the memory of Greece. The counterpoint to these two sacrificed virgins is the case of Alcestis who sacrifices herself for her husband Admestros: her act is effectively a free choice - she assumes his place, dies (goes to Hades) instead of him. Prior to her act, she extorts from her husband the promise that he will not remarry, but indulge in eternal mourning for her. Admestros accepts this condition, and even tells her that he will keep a stone statue of her in his bed, to remind him of her loss and to make it easier to endure (an ambiguous gesture, since this fetishistic substitute in a way makes it easier for him to survive her loss). The story then turns to comedy: Heracles brings Alcestis back from Hades, veiled as an unknown woman, and offers her to Admestros as a guest's gift. On behalf of his fidelity to his wife's memory, Admestros resists the guest's gift, although the woman uncannily reminds him of his dead wife; finally, after accepting the gift, he is glad to discover that the unknown woman is none other than his beloved Alcestis - to repeat the Marx brothers' joke, no wonder she looks like Alcestis, since she IS Alcestis. We enter her the domain of the Uncanny, of the undead and the double: the paradox is that the only way for Admestros to get back his beloved wife is to betray her memory and to break his pledge to her...

This domain of the double provides the answer to the question: what is so unsettling about the possibility that a computer might "really think"? It's not simply that the original (me) will become indistinguishable from the copy, but that my "mechanical" double will usurp my identity and become the "original" (a substantial object), while I will remain a subject. It is thus absolutely crucial to insist on the asymmetry in the relationship of the subject to his double: they are never interchangeable - my double is not my shadow, its very existence on the contrary reduces ME to a shadow. In short, a double deprives me of my being: me and my double are not two subjects, we are I as a (barred) subject plus myself as a (non-barred) object. For this reason, when literature deals the theme of the double, it is always from the subjective standpoint of the "original" subject persecuted by the double - the double itself is reduced to an evil entity which cannot ever be properly subjectivized.

This is what the fashionable critique of the "binary logic" gets wrong: it is only in the guise of the double that one encounters the Real - the moment indefinite multitude sets in, the moment we let ourselves go to the rhizomatic poetry of the "simulacra of simulacra endlessly mirroring themselves, with no original and no copy," the dimension of the Real gets lost. This Real is discernible only in the doubling, in the

unique experience of a subject encountering his double, which can be defined in precise Lacanian terms, as myself PLUS that "something in me more than myself" which I forever lack, the real kernel of my being. The point is thus not that, if we are only two, I can still maintain the "non-deconstructed" difference between the original and its simulacra/copy - in a way, this is true, but in the OBVERSE way: what is so terrifying in encountering my double is that its existence makes ME a copy and IT the "original." Is this lesson not best encapsulated in the famous scene from Duck Soup, in which one of the brothers (the house-breaker) tries to convince the other (Groucho, the President of Freedonia) that he is just his mirror-image, i.e. that the door frame into the next room is really a mirror: since they are both dressed in the same way (the same white nightgown with a night-cap), the intruder imitates in a mirror-like way Groucho's gestures, with the standard Marx brothers' radicalization of this logic ad absurdum (the two figures change sides through the mirror-frame; when the double forgets to follow closely one of Groucho's gestures, Groucho is for a brief moment perplexed, but when, after a delay, he repeats the gesture, as if to test the fidelity of the mirror-image, and, this time, the double copies it correctly, so Groucho is again convinced of the truth of his mirror image). The game is only ruined when the THIRD Marx brother arrives, dressed in exactly the same way...

Back to the Greek tragedy: the other series, opposite to this line of self-sacrificing women, is that of the excessively destructive women who engage in a horrifying act of revenge: Hekabe, Medea, Phaedra. Although they are first portrayed with sympathy and compassion, since their predicament is terrible (Hekabe sees her entire family destroyed and herself reduced to a slave; Medea, who sacrificed all - her country - for the love of Jason, a Greek foreigner, is informed by him that, due to dynastic reasons, he will marry another young princess; Phaedra is unable to resist her all-consuming passion for Hippolytus, her stepson), the terrible act of revenge these women concoct and execute (killing their enemies or their own children, etc.) is considered pathologically excessive and thus turns them into repulsive monsters. That is to say, in both series, we begin with the portrayal of a normal, sympathetic woman, caught in a difficult predicament and bemoaning her sad fate (Iphigenia begins with professing her love of life, etc.); however, the transformation which befalls them is thoroughly different: the women of the first series find themselves "interpellated into subjects," i.e. abandon their love of life and freely assume their death, thus fully identifying with the paternal Law which demanded this sacrifice, while the women of the second series turn into inhuman avenging monsters undermining the very foundations of the paternal Law. In short, they both transcend the

status of normal mortal suffering women, prone to human pleasures and weaknesses, and turn into something no-longer-human; however, in one case, it is the heroic free acceptance of one's own death in the service of community, while, in the other case, it is the excessive Evil of monstrous revenge.

There are, however, two significant exceptions to this series: Antigone and Electra. Antigone clearly belongs to the first series of the women who accept their sacrifice on behalf of their fidelity to the Law; however, the nature of her act is such that it doesn't fit the existing public Law and Order scheme, so her no-longer-human insistence does not change her into a hero to be worshipped in public memory. On the other side, Electra is a destructive avenger, compelling her brother Orestes to kill their mother and her new husband; however, she does this on behalf of her fidelity to her betrayed father's memory. The destructive fury is thus here in the service of the very paternal Law, while in the case of Antigone, the self-sacrificing sublime gesture is accomplished in resistance to the Law of the City. We thus get an uncanny confusion which disturbs the clear division: a repulsive avenger for the right Cause; a sublime self-sacrificial agent for the wrong Cause. - The further interesting point is the "psychological" opposition between Antigone's inner certainty and calm, and Electra's obvious hysterical theater: Electra indulges in exaggerated theatrical self-pity, and thereby confirms that this indulgence is her one luxury in life, the deepest source of her libidinal satisfaction. She displays here inner pain with neurotic affectation, offering herself as a public spectacle. After complaining all the time about Orestes' delay in returning and avenging their father's death, she is late in recognizing him when he does return, obviously fearing that his arrival will deprive her of the satisfaction of her grievance. Furthermore, after forcing Orestes to perform the avenging act, she breaks down and is unable to assist him.

In the case of Antigone and Medea, the "radical" act of the heroine is opposed to a feminine partner who "compromises her desire" and remains caught in the "ethics of the Good": Antigone is contrasted to gentle Ismene, a creature of human compassion unable to follow her sister in her obstinate pursuit (as Antigone herself puts it in her answer to Ismene: "life was your choice, when mine was death"); Medea is contrasted to Jason's young new bride (or even herself in the role of a mother). In the case of Iphigenia, her calm dignity, her willing acceptance of the forced choice of self-sacrifice on behalf of her father's desire, is contrasted to the furious outbursts of her sister Electra, hysterically calling for revenge, yet fully enjoying her grief as her symptom, fearing its end. - Why, in this triad of the "radical" heroines (Iphigenia, Antigone, Medea), do we tend to prefer Antigone,

elevating her to the sublime status of the ultimate ethical hero(ine)? Is it because she opposes the public Law not in the gesture of a simple criminal transgression, but on behalf of ANOTHER Law? Therein resides the gist of Judith Butler's reading of Antigone:

"the limit for which she stands, a limit for which no standing, no translatable representation is possible, is /.../ the trace of an alternate legality that haunts the conscious, public sphere as its scandalous future."(Butler 2000, p. 40)

Antigone formulates her claim on behalf of all those who, like the sans-papiers in today's France, are without a full and definite socio-ontological status: as Butler emphasizes through a passing reference to Giorgio Agamben (Butler 2000, p. 81), in our era of self-proclaimed globalization, they - the non-identified - stand for the true universality. Which is why one should pin down neither the position from which (on behalf of which) Antigone is speaking, neither the object of her claim: in spite of her emphasis of the unique position of the brother, this object is not as unambiguous as it may appear (is Oedipus himself also not her (half)brother?); her position is not simply feminine, because she enters the male domain of public affairs - in addressing Creon, the head of state, she speaks like him, appropriating his authority in a perverse/displaced way; and neither does she speak on behalf of kinship, as Hegel claimed, since her very family stands for the ultimate (incestuous) corruption of the proper order of kinship. Her claim thus displaces the fundamental contours of the Law, what the Law excludes and includes.

Butler develops her reading in contrast to two main opponents, not only Hegel but also Lacan. In Hegel, the conflict is conceived as internal to the socio-symbolic order, as the tragic split of the ethical substance: Creon and Antigone stand for its two components, state and family, Day and Night, the human legal order and the divine subterranean order. Lacan, on the contrary, emphasizes how Antigone, far from standing for kinship, assumes the limit-position of the very instituting gesture of the symbolic order, of the impossible zero-level of symbolization, which is why she stands for death drive: while still alive, she is already dead with regard to the symbolic order, excluded from the socio-symbolic coordinates. In what one is almost tempted to call a dialectical synthesis, Butler rejects both extremes (Hegel's location of the conflict WITHIN the socio-symbolic order; Lacan's notion of Antigone as standing for the going-to-the-limit, for reaching the OUTSIDE of this order): Antigone undermines the existing symbolic order not simply from its radical outside, but from a utopian standpoint of aiming at its radical rearticulation. Antigone is a "living

dead" not in the sense (which Butler attributes to Lacan) of entering the mysterious domain of *ate*, of going to the limit of the Law; she is a "living dead" in the sense of publicly assuming an uninhabitable position, a position for which there is no place in the public space - not a priori, but only with regard to the way this space is structured now, in the historically contingent and specific conditions.

This, then, is Butler's central point against Lacan: Lacan's very radicality (the notion that Antigone locates herself in the suicidal outside of the symbolic order), reasserts this order, the order of the established kinship relations, silently assuming that the ultimate alternative is the one between the symbolic Law of (fixed patriarchal) kinship relations and its suicidal ecstatic transgression. What about the third option: that of rearticulating these kinship relations themselves, i.e., of reconsidering the symbolic Law as the set of contingent social arrangements open to change? And does the same not hold also for Wagner: is the obliteration of the Law of the Day in Tristan not the obverse of the inability to envision its radical rearticulation? Is then Lacan - in his celebration of Antigone's suicidal choice of ecstatic death - the ultimate Wagnerian, the "last Wagnerite," if not the perfect one, as G.B.Shaw would have put it? It is here that we encounter the crucial dilemma: can that what Lacan calls *ate* really be historicized, as the shadowy spectral space of those to whom the contingent public discourse denies the right to full public speech, or is it the other way round, so that we can REARTICULATE the symbolic space precisely insofar as we can, in an authentic ACT, take the risk of passing through this liminal zone of *ate*, which only allows us to acquire the minimum of distance towards the symbolic order? Another way to formulate this dilemma is with regard to the question of purity: according to Butler, Antigone speaks for all the subversive "pathological" claims which crave to be admitted into the public space, while for Lacan, she is precisely the PURE one in the Kantian sense, bereft of any "pathological" motivations - it is only by entering the domain of *ate* that we can attend the pure desire. This is why Antigone is, for Lacan, the very antipode of Hegel's notorious notion of womankind as "the everlasting irony of the community" (Hegel, 1977, p. 288).

Butler was right to emphasize the strange passage from the (unique) individual to the universal which takes place at this point of Hegel's Phenomenology (Butler 2000, p. 38): after celebrating the sublime beauty of Antigone, her unique "naive" identification with the ethical substance, the way her ethical stance is part of her spontaneous nature itself, not something won through the hard struggle against the egotistic and other evil propensities (as is the case with the Kantian moral subject), Hegel all of a sudden passes into GENERAL

considerations about the role of "womankind" in society and history, and, with this passage, the pendulum swings into the opposite extreme: woman stands for the pathological, criminal even, perversion of the public law. We can see how, far from bearing witness to an inconsistency in Hegel's argumentation, this reversal obeys an inexorable logic: the very fact that a woman is formally excluded from the public affairs, allows her to embody the family ethics as opposed to the domain of public affairs, i.e., to serve as a reminder of the inherent limitation of the domain of "public affairs." (Today, when we are fully aware of how the very frontier that separates the public from the private hinges on political rapport of forces, one can easily perceive women as the privileged agents of the repoliticization of "private" domains: not only of discerning and articulating the traces of political relations of domination in what appears to be an "apolitical" domain, but also of denouncing the very "depoliticization" of this domain, its exclusion from the political, as a political gesture par excellence.)

Is this, however, the ultimate scope of the feminine political intervention? It is here that one should consider the break which separates modernity from Antiquity: already in the late Medieval time, with Joan of Arc, a new figure of the feminine political intervention appeared which was not taken into account by Hegel: on behalf of her very universal exclusion from the domain of politics, a woman can, exceptionally, assume the role of the direct embodiment of the political AS SUCH. Precisely as Woman, Joan stands for the political gesture at its purest, for the Community (universal Nation) as such against the particular interests of the warring factions. Her male attire, her assumption of male authority, is not to be misread as the sign of unstable sexual identity: it is crucial that she does it AS A WOMAN. Only as such, as a woman, can she stand for the Political Cause in its pure universality. In the very gesture of renouncing the determinate attributes of femininity (a virgin, no children, etc.), she stood for Woman as such. This, however, was simultaneously the reason she HAD to be betrayed and ONLY THEN canonized: such a pure position, standing directly for the national interest as such, cannot translate its universal request into a determinate social order. It is crucial not to confound this Joan's feminine excess (a woman who, by way of renouncing feminine attributes, directly stands for the universal political mission) with the reactionary figure of "Mother-Nation" or "Mother-Earth" figure, the patient and suffering mother who stands for the substance of her community, and who, far from renouncing feminine attributes, gives body to the worst male ideological fantasy of the noble woman.

The charge against Joan at her trial can be summed up in three points:

in order to regain mercy and be readmitted into the Catholic community, she should (1) disavow the authenticity of her voice, (2) renounce her male dress, and (3) fully submit herself to the authority of the Church (as the actual terrestrial institution). These three points, of course, are interconnected: Joan did not submit to the authority of the Church, because she gave priority to the divine voices through which God addressed her directly, bypassing the Church as institution, and this exceptional status of her as the warrior directly obeying God, bypassing the customs of ordinary people, was signalled by her cross-dressing. Do we not encounter here, yet again, the Lacanian triad of the Real-Imaginary-Symbolic: the Real of the hallucinated voices, the Imaginary of the dress, the Symbolic of the ecclesiastic institution? Therein resided the core of Joan's subversion, ultimately intolerable for the Church and State alike: although she firmly stood for hierarchy and order, she claimed for herself the right to decide who is the legitimate bearer of this order - her direct contact with the divine Voices allowed her to bypass the mediation of the social Institution. In short, her very position of enunciation was that of an EXCEPTION to the Order, contradicting her message of Order. This exceptional position grounded the massive effect of transference, of which Joan was fully aware and deftly manipulated it - when, in Orleans, a delegation of citizens told Joan that they want to fight, although the captain (official commander of the French army) was opposed to it, and formally requested her to lead them, Joan answered: "In God's name, I will do it, and he who loves me will follow me." (Quoted from Lucie-Smith 2000, p. 116.) The main insignia of this exceptional position was Joan's insistence on wearing man's dress. The judges at Rouen blackmailed Joan, who desperately wanted to make a confession and attend a mass: she will be allowed to do it only if she changes her man's attire for the woman's dress appropriate to a Christian lady - yet she rejected this condition, persisting in her choice to the very end. This very persistence in "cross-dressing" was also what triggered her downfall: her "relapse into heresy" after the brief abjuration and admission of guilt was signalled by her changing back into man's dress.

However, the very fact of Joan's short-lived abjuration demonstrates that Joan "had none of the masochism which has often marked the temperament of martyrs. She never embraced suffering for its own sake, and she seems, indeed, to have had unusual sensitivity to physical pain." (Quoted from Lucie-Smith 2000, p. 278.) This abjuration, when she publicly signed the document proposed to her and thus got her excommunication lifted, and her death sentence exchanged for perpetual imprisonment, was accomplished in a peculiar way: she spoke her words laughing, and one can interpret this eerie

laughter either as a case of *fou rire*, as the sign of her incoming psychic breakdown after such a prolonged suffering, or as the sign that she had not really committed herself, i.e. that, from her standpoint, her signature was void, "performatively invalid," as we would have put it today. What is even more interesting is the almost Pascalean/Althusserian nature of her "relapse" which followed a couple of days later: according to the most reliable sources, men's clothing was initially forced upon her by her guards (they stripped her naked and then left near her bed, to which she was chained, only men's clothing, thus compelling her to use them in order to avoid the sexually embarrassing situation of being exposed to her guards who taunt her all the time with obscene remarks and threats of rape), without doubt in accordance with the English authorities, who wanted her relapse to justify her public burning. However, as the next day's interrogation suggests, men's clothing was soon "internalized," turned into a matter of her deliberate choice. Her own account of this choice is ambiguous: on the one hand, it coincides with the return of her voices and her belief in her Mission; on the other hand, knowing that this meant her certain death, she opted for it to put an end as soon as possible to her miserable situation: "She said that she preferred to do her penitence once and for all, that is to say by dying, than to endure longer her pain in prison." (Quoted from Lucie-Smith 2000, p. 275.) What was first imposed from without, as an enforced social custom, thus paradoxically enabled Joan to regain the fortitude of her "inner" conviction.

As to the status of this conviction, one should reject as impertinent the boring psychiatric questioning of the nature of Joan's voices: of course they were not "real," of course she was not "really" mandated by Christ; however, although self-positing, i.e. authorized in no external authority but only in her own act of declaration, her "mission" was no less authentic. (One is tempted to repeat here Lacan's formula of the analyst: *Joan ne s'autoriserait que d'elle-meme.*) So was Joan a psychotic (hearing voices), a pervert (perceiving herself as the instrument of a divine mission)? What about hysteria (recalling Lacan's formula of the hysteric's desire in answer to Freud's notorious *Was will das Weib?*: the woman wants a Master, but a Master whom she could dominate)? Was Joan's troubled relationship with the proverbially irresolute Charles VII not that towards a Master whom she effectively wanted to dominate? It is this reference to hysteria which perfectly accounts for the curious ritual which Joan succeeded in imposing upon the King, the ritual which cannot but appear as unworthy of the royal dignity:

"One day, the Maid asked the king for a present. The prayer was

granted. She then asked for the kingdom of France itself. The king, astonished, gave it to her after some hesitation, and the young girl accepted. She even asked that the act be solemnly drawn up and read by the king's four secretaries. The charter having been written and recited, the king remained somewhat astonished when the girl said, showing him to those who were by: 'Here you see the poorest knight in his kingdom.'

And a little later, in the presence of the same notaries, acting as mistress of the kingdom of France, she put it into the hands of all-powerful God. Then, at the end of some moments more, acting in the name of God, she invested King Charles with the kingdom of France; and she wished a solemn act to be drawn up in writing of all this." (Quoted from Lucie-Smith 2000, p. 67.)

THIS is hysteria at its purest: I take it (the symbolic authority) from you only to give it back to you immediately, thus asserting myself as the one who rules over the ruler himself. Do we not encounter here again the structure of the offer made to be rejected? Joan did not really want to rule France; she wanted the king to give her the kingdom so that she could give it back to him (on behalf of God). This hysterical knot forms the very core of Joan's fantasy, to which she holds to the end. Asked to swear to tell the truth, she replied to her judges: "I do not know about what you wish to interrogate me, and perhaps you will ask me things that I will not tell you." The following dialogue then ensued:

"Swear to tell the truth concerning whatever will be asked you had to do with the Catholic faith and with anything else that you know.'
'About my father and mother, and everything that I have done since I took the road to come to France, I shall willingly swear; but never have I said or revealed anything about the revelations made to me by God except to Charles, my king. And even if you wish to cut my head off, I will not reveal them, because I know from my visions that I must keep them secret." (Quoted from Pernaud and Clin 2000, p. 109.)

Finally, she consented to take a limited oath: she will tell the truth and the entire truth about REALITY (her military-political activity, etc.) as well as matters concerning religious belief, maintaining her silence about the messages she claimed to receive from God, especially about the secret message that she revealed to the king. THIS is the true fidelity: not to the facts, but to one's innermost fantasmatic kernel which the subject refuses to share. One should recall here that, for Lacan, truth is non-all: one cannot "say it all," not because we cannot ever know it all, only approach it indefinitely, but because the field of truth is IN ITSELF non-all, inconsistent - and it is precisely these gaps

of inconsistency which are filled in by fantasy. So the point of Joan is not simply "I will not tell you everything I know," but: "I will tell you all I know, I will not keep from you any truth known to me - I just refuse to share with you what I DON'T know, the way I try to come to terms with the abyss of what I don't know..." - And is it not that, after Antigone and Joan, Wagner's Kundry stands for the third socio-political version of the feminine excess: neither the defiance to the male public sphere on behalf of the family and kinship (Antigone), nor the direct claim to the leading position in the political struggle itself (Joan), but the ironic undermining of the sphere of power, the denunciation of its fake, through hysterical laughter. It is in Kundry that the feminine excess arrives at its truth: that of the hysterical inconsistency, of not wanting what one claims to want. With Kundry, the woman is no longer a substantial force opposing itself to the male subject, but the pure non-substantial excess of subjectivity itself - or, as Lacan put it: "I ask you to refuse what I offer you because that's not it." (Lacan 1998, p. 111) The male dread of woman, which so deeply branded the zeitgeist at the turn of the century, from Edvard Munch and August Strindberg up to Franz Kafka, thus reveals itself as the dread of feminine inconsistency: feminine hysteria, which traumatized these men (and which also marked the birthplace of psychoanalysis), confronted them with an inconsistent multitude of masks (a hysterical woman immediately moves from desperate pleas to cruel, vulgar derision, etc.). What causes such uneasiness is the impossibility of discerning, behind the masks, a consistent subject manipulating them: behind the multiple layers of masks is nothing, or, at the most, nothing but the shapeless, mucous stuff of the life-substance. Suffice it to mention Edvard Munch's encounter with hysteria, which left such a deep mark upon him. In 1893 Munch was in love with the beautiful daughter of an Oslo wine-merchant. She clung to him but he was afraid of such a tie and anxious about his work, so he left her. One stormy night a sailing-boat came to fetch him: the report was that the young woman was on the point of death and wanted to speak to him for the last time. Munch was deeply moved and without question went to her place, where he found her lying on a bed between two lit candles. But when he approached her bed, she rose and started to laugh: the whole scene was nothing but a hoax. Munch turned and started to leave; at that point, she threatened to shoot herself if he left her; and drawing a revolver, she pointed it at her breast. When Munch bent to wrench the weapon away, convinced that this too was only part of the game, the gun went off and wounded him in the hand... (See Hodin 1972, p. 88-89.) Here we encounter hysterical theater at its purest: the subject is caught in a masquerade in which what appears to be deadly serious reveals itself as fraud (dying), and

what appears to be an empty gesture reveals itself as deadly serious (the threat of suicide). The panic that seizes the (male) subject confronting this theater expresses a dread that behind the many masks, which fall away from each other like the layers of an onion, there is nothing, no ultimate feminine Secret.

And insofar as this feminine excess is another name for subjectivity, we can also see in what precise sense subjectivity "as such," at its most radical, is feminine. The parallel with Marx is instructive here: in a first approach, one can, of course, claim that, in the class antagonism between capitalists and proletarians, capitalists are the subjects who dominate proletarians, the latter being reduced to objects manipulated, put to use, by the capitalists-subjects. However, as Marx repeatedly emphasizes, the point of pure (substanceless) subjectivity is here the proletarian whose productive efforts are continually frustrated, who is unable to attain a satisfied substantial Being, since he is compelled to sell his innermost, his productive capacity, as a commodity on the market: when I find myself totally "alienated," externalized, reduced to something which can be bought for a piece of money, deprived of all substantial content, at that point only I experience myself as subject. And, *mutatis mutandis*, a woman stands for the radical subjectivity insofar as she is reduced to an object of exchange between men. Or, to put it in a different way, women are subjects precisely insofar as their identity consists in layers of masks with no true substantial content beneath them. Therein resides the key feature of the properly Hegelian dialectic of the subject-object: the couple subject-object is never a simple duality, since one of its terms (subject) is structurally split into subject as opposed to object (the subject in the common sense, the agency which mediates, dominates, forms, the object), and subject insofar as it emerges in the domain of objectivity itself as the void of negativity, as the radical frustration of all endeavor to attain objective existence: I am effectively a subject when I fail to find any "objective correlative," any objective content in which I can fully recognize myself, apropos of which I can say "That's me!". Hysteria is the name for this frustration, for the question "Is that really ME?" which arises apropos of every identification.

So, in a strict homology to the identity between the sublime and the dreadful Feminine, the women's objectivization equals the birth of the feminine subjectivity: the historical narrative of how women were deprived of their voice by the victory of the patriarchal warrior society, and are then endeavoring to regain this stifled voice, is an attempt to escape the debilitating synchronicity of this antagonism. Therein resides the problematic nature of Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* which, according to Wolf, "plumbs to the depths of what it means to be

turned into an object exploited by others." (Wolf 1988, p. 264) She constructs the historical background of Cassandra's fate as the narrative in two movements: first, the downward movement of alienation ("The woman is deprived of her living memory, and an image which others make of her is foisted upon her in its place: the hideous process of petrification, objectification, performed on living flesh. Now she is classed among the objects, among the *res mancipi* /.../ The recipient /.../ has the right to *manu capere*, grasp her with the hand, lay his hand on her." (Wolf 1988, p. 298)), followed by the upward movement of the painful effort to regain one's voice ("Do people suspect, do we suspect, how difficult and in fact dangerous it can be when life is restored to an 'object'? When the idol begins to feel again? When 'it' finds speech again? When it has to say 'I,' as a woman?" (Wolf 1988, p. 298)). What gets lost in this narrative is the zero-level of overlapping between the two processes, the unbearable point at which being reduced to a helpless object ALREADY IS free subjectivity. In a way, Wolf was nonetheless aware of this paradox, namely of the fact that the first act of freedom is therefore the free acceptance of the inexorable fate - or, as she puts it at the very beginning of Cassandra: "Here I end my days, helpless, and nothing, nothing I could have done or not done, willed or thought, could have led me to a different goal." (Wolf 1988, p. 3)

This attitude of radical impassivity, of the helpless witness who can only observe the inexorable run of things, unable to affect its course with her intervention, IS the zero-level of subjectivity: I can only experience this inexorable fate as an unbearable dread insofar as I subtract from it my subjective position of enunciation, insofar as I am not fully immersed into it. So, paradoxically, when Wolf claims that "Cassandra is one of the first women figures handed down to us whose fate prefigures what was to be the fate of women for three thousand years: to be turned into an object" (Wolf 1988, p. 227), this statement is STRICTLY EQUIVALENT to the claim that "Cassandra is one of the first women figures handed down to us whose fate prefigures what is to be a subject." We only "find speech" by "finding it again," after being reduced to muteness: at the beginning, we are deprived of what we never possessed.



3 RUN, ISOLDE, RUN

The Cyberspace Tristan

As Walter Benjamin noted long ago, old artistic forms often push against their own boundaries and use procedures which, at least from our retroactive view, seem to point towards a new technology that will be able to serve as a more "natural" and appropriate "objective correlative" to the life-experience the old forms endeavored to render by means of their "excessive" experimentations:

"The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form. The extravagances and crudities of art which thus appear, particularly in the so-called decadent epochs, actually arise from the nucleus of its richest historical energies."(Benjamin 1969, p. 237)

While Benjamin himself evokes the case of Dadaism, one is tempted to go much further back: a whole series of narrative procedures in the 19th century novels announce not only the standard narrative cinema (the intricate use of "flashback" in Emily Bronte or of "cross-cutting" and "close-ups" in Charles Dickens), but sometimes even the modernist cinema (the use of "off-space" in Madame Bovary) - as if a new perception of life was already here, but was still struggling to find its proper means of articulation, until it finally found it in cinema. What we have here is thus the historicity of a kind of futur anterieur: it is

only when cinema was here and developed its standard procedures that we can really grasp the narrative logic of Dickens' great novels or of Madame Bovary.

And is it not that, today, we are approaching a homologous threshold: a new "life experience" hangs in the air, the perception of life that explodes the form of the linear centered narrative and renders life as a multiform flow - even and up to the domain of "hard" sciences (quantum physics and its Multiple Reality interpretation, or the utter contingency that provided the spin to the actual evolution of the life on Earth - as Stephen Jay Gould demonstrated in his Wonderful Life, the fossils of Burgess Shale bear witness to how evolution may have taken a wholly different turn) we seem to be haunted by the chanciness of life and the alternate versions of reality (see Gould 1989). Either life is experienced as a series of multiple parallel destinies that interact and are crucially affected by meaningless contingent encounters, the points at which one series intersects with and intervenes into another (see Altman's Shortcuts), or different versions/outcomes of the same plot are repeatedly enacted (the "parallel universes" or "alternative possible worlds" scenarios - see Krzysztof Kieslowski's Chance, Peter Howitt's Sliding Doors; even "serious" historians themselves recently produced a volume Virtual History, the reading of the crucial Modern Age century events, from Cromwell's victory over Stuarts and American independence war to the disintegration of Communism, as hinging on unpredictable and sometimes even improbable chances). This perception of our reality as one of the possible - often even not the most probable - outcomes of an "open" situation, this notion that other possible outcomes are not simply cancelled out but continue to haunt our "true" reality as a specter of what might have happened, conferring on our reality the status of extreme fragility and contingency, implicitly clashes with the predominant "linear" narrative forms of our literature and cinema - they seem to call for a new artistic medium in which they would not be an eccentric excess, but its "proper" mode of functioning. One can argue that the cyberspace hypertext is this new medium in which this life experience will find its "natural," more appropriate objective correlative, so that, again, it is only with the advent of cyberspace hypertext that we can effectively grasp what Altman and Kieslowski were effectively aiming at. Do Brecht's three versions of his first great "learning play," Der Jasager, also not point forward towards such a hypertext / alternate reality experience: in the first version, the boy "freely accepts the necessary," subjecting himself to the old custom of being thrown into the valley; in the second version, the boy refuses to die, rationally demonstrating the futility of the old custom; in the third version, the boy accepts his death, but on rational grounds, not out of the respect for mere

tradition. (There is an unexpected ideological link between Brecht and Wagner here: for both, the highest, true freedom is the freedom to freely assume/accept what is necessary imposed on us, i.e. the freedom to choose the inevitable.)

A more recent and better known example from popular culture is, of course, Tom Tykwer's *Run, Lola, Run* (*Lola rennt*, Germany 1998), which renders three versions, three outcomes of the tense situation where Lola, a Berlin punk girl, has to collect by any means 100.000 German Marks to save her boyfriend from certain death. (1) Her boyfriend gets killed; (2) she gets killed; (3) she succeeds, AND her boyfriend finds the lost money, so that they end up happy together with 100.000 DM profit. We are here in the world of alternative realities in which, as in a cyberspace game, when one choice leads to the catastrophic ending, we can return to the starting point and make another, better, choice - what was the first time a suicidal mistake, can be the second time done in a correct way, so that the opportunity is not missed. The interest of *Lola* resides precisely in its tonality: not only the fast rhythm, the rapid-fire montage, the use of stills (frozen images), the pulsating exuberance and vitality of the heroine, etc., but, above all, in the way this visual features are embedded in the soundtrack - the constant, uninterrupted, techno-music soundscape whose rhythm stands for (renders) Lola's - and, by extension, ours, the spectators' - heartbeat. One should always bear in mind that, notwithstanding all the dazzling visual brilliance of the film, its images are subordinates to the musical soundscape, to its frenetic compulsive rhythm which goes on forever and cannot be suspended even for a minute - it can only explode in an outburst of exuberant vitality, in the guise of Lola's uninhibited scream which occurs in each of the three versions of the story. Which is why a film like *Lola* can only appear against the background of the MTV, music-video, culture. One should accomplish here the same reversal Fred Jameson accomplished apropos of Hemingway's style: it is not that *Lola's* formal properties adequately render-express the narrative; it is rather that the film's narrative itself was invented in order to be able to practice its specific style. The first words of the film ("the game lasts 90 minutes, everything else is just theory" - the words of Sepp Herberger, Germany's legendary soccer coach) provide the proper coordinates of a video game: as in the usual survival video game, *Lola* is given three lives. "Real life" itself is thus rendered as a fictional video-game experience.

This, then, is what the title refers to: *Run, Isolde, Run...* to Tristan, with different possible results. She runs to Cornwall, arriving there just in time to catch the dying Tristan's last words, and then dies herself (the standard outcome); King Mark, who also runs after her to

Kornwall, forgives the two lovers their passion, so that they can live happily thereafter; upon arriving to Kornwall, Isolde turns into a Lady Macbeth creature, convincing Tristan that they should murder King Mark, what they actually do when, shortly thereafter, he arrives; after Isolde reaches Tristan, they discover with horror that they cannot find fulfillment in the shared death - they are condemned to live forever; and, finally, in what is arguably the most depressing option, Isolde simply doesn't run, but stays with her husband, so that Tristan dies alone... The point, of course, is not to play empty mental video-games: such variations often reveal hidden presuppositions of the "official" storyline and its repressed alternatives; as such, they can generate a powerful effect of truth.

Another, symmetrical, possibility would have been to take Wagner's Tristan, its metaphysical notion of the Liebestod, as the point of culmination of a long operatic tradition. Is the lovers' duet when they await Pasha Selim's verdict in Mozart's Seraglio not the premonition of the Wagnerian scene of the lovers willingly accepting death? The next stage here is Beethoven: not Fidelio, but Leonore, the 1805 first version of Fidelio, in which the "O namenlose Freude" duet of the reunited Florestan and Leonora plays an entirely different role than in Fidelio: the couple in the dungeon hears the angry threatening sounds of the crowd from above; however, unaware that the Minister is already here, they misperceive these shouts and cries as the calls of the wild mob which, instigated by Pizarro, is getting ready to lynch them - in this situation, they sing "O namenlose Freude," signalling their readiness to accept death, now that they are reunited. In short, what we get in Leonora is a kind of Liebestod *avant la lettre*, pointing towards "So stuerben wir ungetrennt..." from Tristan. It is only in the reworked Fidelio that this same duet loses this dimension of the Wagnerian Liebestod, of voluptuously embracing death, and, in an exemplary case of what Stephen Jay Gould calls *ex-aptation*, is transfunctionalized into an expression of the simple joy at being reunited in triumph over the forces of evil. - However, I think it is more interesting and productive to take Tristan as a starting point, and to elaborate the multiple ways this unique fantasmatic moment of full satisfaction is denounced as a fantasy and disintegrates into its incoherent ingredients. After dealing with the three later operas which can be read as the alternate versions of Tristan, I will return to Tristan and propose a fourth solution, a rewriting of Tristan itself. These three later operas stage the three outcomes of the disintegration of the impossible Wagnerian resolution enacted in Tristan: Richard Strauss' *Rosenkavalier*, Dmitri Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsentsk District*, and the least-known of them, Erwin Schulhoff's *Flammen*. *Rosenkavalier* restores the rights of the "day," the world of etiquette,

manners and obligations, against the fatal attraction of the Night in Tristan; Lady Macbeth renders the raw "unsublimated" sexuality, bereft of its cosmic-metaphysical baggage; and, in what is perhaps the most subversive move, *Flammen* assert the death drive at its purest, opposed to the nirvana-principle.

So why exactly THESE operas? Why not also, at least, Strauss' *Salome* and Berg's *Lulu*, the two other great post-Wagner "sex operas"? Is not *Salome* yet another version of the possible outcome of *Tristan*? What if, at the end of Act II, when the King Mark surprises the lovers, he were to explode in fury and order Tristan's head to be cut off; the desperate Isolde would then take her lover's head in her hands and start to kiss his lips in a Salomean *Liebestod*... There is nonetheless a precise reason to exclude *Salome* and *Lulu*: they are not "hypertext variations" on *Tristan*, but, clearly, on *Parsifal*. *Salome* is a Kundry gone wild, having *Parsifal* killed and fondling his head after he rejected her seduction; *Lulu*, on the other hand, is an uncanny perverted reincarnation of *Parsifal* himself (as direct ironic references to *Parsifal* in *Lulu*'s libretto amply indicate).

It was often noted that the closing scene of Richard Strauss' *Salome* is modelled on Isolde's *Liebestod*; however, what makes it a perverted version of the Wagnerian *Liebestod* is that what *Salome* demands, in an unconditional act of CAPRICE, is to kiss the lips of John the Baptist ("I want to kiss your lips!") - not the contact with a person, but with the partial object. *Salome* is first fascinated by another partial object, John's voice - throughout most of the opera, we just HEAR his voice singing "off," and her first comment is "Whose voice is that?", so that one can conceive of *Salome*'s fixation on John's head (more precisely: his lips which she wants to kiss) as the materialization, embodiment, of John's voice. This capricious fixation is emphasized when, after the famous "dance of the seven veils," Herod is horrified and dismisses *Salome*'s demand; he offers *Salome* in exchange all manners of riches and valuables, even the curtain of the Holy Sacrament, but she stubbornly rejects this substitution, insisting that her wish be fulfilled, repeating seven times "I demand the head of Jochanaan!", as a kind of perverted *Antigone* who cannot be talked out of burying properly her brother. This demand, although formulated only after her Dance of the Seven Veils, resonates in a simple orchestral motif made up of a third and a triton, first heard after Jochanaan brusquely rejects *Salome*'s advances and then frequently repeated, till, 34 minutes after it was first played by the orchestra, it finally acquires a text: "I demand the head of Jochanaan!" - the unconscious desire finally explodes into an open demand.

Which is why it is totally wrong to read her revengeful demand to Herod as the demand to kill John - what she demands is, precisely, his

head on a silver plate, the partial object which she then starts to kiss once she gets it. (One cannot but recall here the very first sentence of Patricia Highsmith's acerbic Kafkaesque short story "The Hand" from her *Little Tales of Misogyny*: "A young man asked a father for his daughter's hand, and received it in a box - her left hand." (Highsmith 1980, p. 7)) One should oppose the "dance of the seven veils" to Salome's final ecstatic immersion into *jouissance* of the partial object: the first is the spectacle staged for the male gaze, the slow revealing of the feminine mystery concealed beneath the veils, while the second is the *jouissance* of the woman herself, the "Richard the Second"'s perverted version of the "Richard the First"'s *Liebestod*. THIS is what horrifies Herod so that he orders the guards to kill Salome: her ecstatic enjoyment of the partial object (the head), with music fully rendering her sexual fervor; it is to this excess that he reacts with his order: "Man toete dieses Weib." / "This woman should be killed." (Significantly, this order is impersonal - the Heideggerian "Man" instead of "I order this woman to be killed!", so its proper translation is thus: "This woman is to be killed.") The ensuing slaughter of Salome is simultaneously the death of a woman and of music - in Salome, "Herod has a final word." (Leppert 1995, p. 150) What follows Herod's spoken words is no longer the melodic music, but something which is "more noise than music /.../, the traditional sonic inscription of male authority, the military sounds of brass and percussion, rhythmically punctuated at the loudest possible volume" (Leppert 1995, p. 150-151) - as if the male word is not enough to stifle the outburst of the woman's sexualized musical *jouissance*, but has to be sustained by the violent flare-up of the crashing noise.

The shift from Kundry to Salome is clearly discernible here: while Kundry still plays the standard game of corruptive seduction, all Salome wants is to enjoy her partial object. At the level of Salome, Kundry would have to kiss and embrace Amfortas' Wound itself (appropriately staged by Syberberg as a vagina-like partial object disposed on a pillow carried by the pages in front of the Fisher King). As such, Salome rather fits into a triad with Lulu and, perhaps, Schoenberg's Moses und Aaron: both Salome and Lulu are the unique extreme child-vamp figures in which utter corruption overlaps with childish innocence (Strauss himself emphasized that Salome is not a promiscuous nymphomaniac, but a chaste virgin). The obvious feature shared by Moses and Lulu is that they are the two UNFINISHED masterpieces, the two supreme candidates for the title of the "last (true) opera." On the other hand, both in Moses and in Salome, the male Word interrupts the orgy of images and music (the dance of the Golden Calf and of the Seven Veils).

What, then, about the third unfinished piece from the 20s, Puccini's

Turandot, which seems to fit perfectly our frame? The impoverished Tatar prince Calaf, accompanied by Timur, his blind father and deposed king, and the faithful servant maid Liu, enters Beijing in order to challenge Princess Turandot, the Emperor's daughter. Turandot is an ice-cold frigid femme fatale: her suitors have to answer her three questions - if their answers are correct, they get her hand, if not, they are beheaded (and there is a long row of heads displayed on the wall of her palace). After Calaf answers correctly, Turandot explodes in an impotent fury and wants to renege on her terms; in order to break this dramatic deadlock, Calaf then remembers Lohengrin and makes Turandot an additional offer: if, till next morning, she divines his name, she can behead him, otherwise she has to marry him. In despair, Turandot orders the faithful Liu (who was seen with Calaf) to be tortured so that she will betray the contestant's name; however, Liu loves Calaf so much that, rather than to tell his name, she stabs herself to death in order to avoid unbearable pains. While the observing crowd is shocked and experiences fearful guilt, Turandot remains cold; although Calaf is mad at her, the faithful Liu's death makes him desire her even more, so he simply grabs her and violently kisses her, and the male touch works wonders - Turandot suddenly melts down, discovers her feminine tenderness and agrees to marry Calaf...

This story of Turandot is, of course, rooted in old oriental tales - with the significant exception of the figure of Liu, which was invented by Puccini and his librettist. Perhaps, the only way to describe what happens in the last scene of Turandot is via the reference to the Freudian notion of isolation: it can happen that the traumatic experience "is not forgotten, but, instead, it is deprived of its affect, and its associative connections are suppressed or interrupted so that it remains as though isolated and is not reproduced in the ordinary process of thought"(Freud 1979, p. 276). Although Liu's suicide is not directly obliterated, it has to be "deprived of its affect" if we are to have the happy ending, i.e. if Calaf is to pursue Turandot as if nothing happened. The counterpoint to this isolation is the uncanny non-psychological character of Turandot herself: rarely do we encounter the fantasy of a Woman-Thing in such a pure form: Turandot is a pure fantasy, "less a character than a complex: a vagina dentata"(Conrad 1987, p. 200). No wonder her symbol is the moon, described as a bloodless, pale severed head in transit across the sky - the monstrous specter of a detached partial object freely floating around. The libretto itself suggests that she "exists only in the haunted minds of men," that "there is no such person, that she is only the void in which Calaf will be annihilated - or the vacancy in which he sexually spends himself"(Conrad 1987, p. 201) - is this not a succinct definition of the

Lady in courtly love, of this "feminine object /.../ emptied of all real substance"(Lacan 1992, p. 149)? This abstract character of the Lady has nothing to do with spiritual purification; it rather points towards the abstraction that pertains to a cold, distanced, inhuman partner - the Lady is in no way a warm, compassionate, understanding fellow-creature: "By means of a form of sublimation specific to art, poetic creation consists in positing an object I can only describe as terrifying, an inhuman partner. /.../ she is as arbitrary as possible in the tests she imposes on her servant."(Lacan 1992, p. 150) The relationship of the knight to the Lady is the relationship of the subject-bondsman, vassal, to his feudal Master-Sovereign who subjects him to frustratingly senseless capricious ordeals.

The Lady is thus as far as possible from any kind of purified spirituality: she functions as an inhuman partner in the sense of a radical Otherness which is wholly incommensurable with our needs and desires; as such, she is simultaneously a kind of automaton, a machine which at random utters meaningless demands. This coincidence of absolute, inscrutable Otherness and of pure machine is what confers on the Lady her uncanny, monstrous character: the Lady is the Other which is not our "fellow-creature," no relationship of empathy is possible with her - this traumatic Otherness is what Lacan designates by means of the Freudian term *das Ding*, the Real Thing. A further coincidence of the opposites characterizes the Lady: precisely as such a Real - as a cruel, inhuman, partner who obeys no rules, with whom no compromise is possible, who is totally oblivious of the suffering she causes, with whom no shared compassion is possible, who never shows any consideration, whose wishes are unconditional orders on which she all the more insists, the more they express her pure caprice... in short, as a monstrously perverted version of a Kantian ethical machine, whose message to us is "You can, because you must!" -, the Lady is purely fantasmatic, a spectral entity without substance, a mirror onto which the subject projects his narcissistic ideal. In other words -- those of Christina Rossetti whose sonnet "In an Artist's Studio" speaks of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's relationship to Elizabeth Siddal, his Lady -- the Lady appears "not as she is, but as she fills his dream."

The structural counterpart to Turandot the Woman-Thing is Liu, the woman of suffering flesh and blood, the faithful and compassionate servant, the "vanishing mediator" whose sacrifice renders possible the happy end. It is, however, precisely this ending which is problematic - what does it actually amount to? Let us imagine the same story in a contemporary noir setting, with the hero split between the icy femme fatale and the silent compassionate friend for whose profound unobtrusive love he is blind. The compassionate woman sacrifices

herself for the hero, tortured by the accomplices of the femme fatale on her command; after her death, the hero, although shocked by this act of utmost fidelity, simply goes on to seduce the frigid femme fatale (who is set on the revenge on all men because of a past trauma: her best friend was raped and killed in front of her eyes). He violently embraces her, half-raping her, and she is magically cured, turned into a warm loving woman - is Kerman not right when he defines Turandot as "depraved, and the adjective is carefully chosen" (Kerman 1988, p. 205)? The problem Puccini wasn't able to resolve is: how should the Thing subjectivize itself? His solution is a sordid one: beneath the icy appearance, there is an ordinary sentimental woman who surrenders herself before potent male advances: "The inescapable central message of the piece, then, is that the way to proceed with a frigid beauty is to get your hands on her." (Kerman 1988, p. 206)

It is thus easy to mock the stupidity of Turandot's ending, and the total lack of justification for the final "normalization" of Turandot; it is much more difficult to tackle the underlying deadlock. The surprising element is here the very fact of the happy end: what compelled Puccini to opt for such a ridiculous and unconvincing denouement, for the worst case of the *deus ex machina*? Since he was no stranger to tear-jerking pathetic finales (from *La bohème* to *Tosca*), why did he not choose one of the tragic options? The obvious one would have been that, as a consequence of Liu's suicide, the specter of Turandot disintegrates: when it is already too late, after Liu's death, the broken Calaf becomes aware of how he already HAD right in front of his eyes, in Liu, what he was looking for in the elusive Turandot... or: the shattering experience of Liu's death breaks Turandot down, compelling her to rediscover her humanity... or: after Liu's suicide, Calaf explodes in rage, killing Turandot AND himself, so that, at the opera's end, Timur remains alone on the stage, a blind and embittered Oedipus-at-Colonus figure... In short, the opera should have ended with Turandot herself singing Liu's pathetic "Tu che di gel sei cinta" which announces her suicide, assuming this designation of herself in the first person singular ("I who was made of ice...").

The musical-dramatic problem of Turandot is that the scene of Liu's suicide already is a climactic Puccini finale - what follows is a worthless stuff not even composed by Puccini himself. This failure of Turandot is dramatic ("Drama is entirely out of the question," as Kerman put it with his usual ruthlessness - see Kerman 1988, p. 207) as well as musical: in the ears of today's listener, the combination of a couple of overexploited "good melodies" with the uninventive, mechanically composed, material which fills in the space between the "hits" cannot but evoke the name of Andrew Lloyd Weber. However, the ultimate paradox is that Puccini was right to abandon the pathetic-tragic finale

which served him so well in his earlier works - let us not forget that Turandot was composed in the early 20s, when Puccini already heard the music of Schoenberg and Stravinsky, when Freud's discovery already exerted its impact. Within these coordinates (which do leave their trace in the very figure of Turandot - there is no place for such a ghastly femme fatale in the late Romantic universe), the standard Puccini pathetic finale is structurally impossible: the only way to avoid the happy ending would have been to accomplish the fateful passage into the properly modern post-tragic universe, a universe whose horror undermines the very possibility of tragic dignity, and in which monstrous figures like Lulu and Salome abound - a step Puccini was not ready to do.

"Character" is not something which goes by itself in the opera: it emerged with Mozart and disappeared with the modernist break. This is the reason why a figure like Turandot belongs to the space of modernism: it is already a post-psychological entity. The unfinished status of Turandot thus obeys a deeper necessary: Puccini's unexpected death was a godsend which enabled him to save his face, i.e. to avoid the acknowledgment of a humiliating defeat, by way of letting his pupil Franco Alfano to orchestrate the lackluster final scene. Turandot's happy ending is simultaneously a sign of Puccini's artistic failure AND integrity: the very obvious ridicule of the last scene signals that something else should have been there, something Puccini didn't dare to encroach upon, but whose absence he was nonetheless honest enough to render palpable.

The Morning After

Let us then begin with the proper variations on Tristan. The first crack in Tristan's edifice becomes visible if we simply read Tristan together with Meistersinger, its counterpoint (indicated already by the fact that, in the key moment of the entire opera, the violent outburst of the TRUE passion between Hans Sachs and Eva, Sachs himself refers to the sad fate of the King Mark in Tristan, implying that he wants to avoid this position). The opera which realized this scenario is Strauss' Rosenkavalier - there is a clear parallel between Meistersinger and Rosenkavalier: in both cases, we have the renunciation after the outburst of the incestuous passion (die Marschallin is usually referred to as "the female Sachs"). In an ultimate gesture of loving sacrifice, the older figure (Hans Sachs, die Marschallin) surrenders her younger partner to another; this gesture is then followed by the great musical ensemble of reconciliation (the quintet in Meistersinger, the trio in Rosenkavalier). And it is crucial to perceive how this gesture has the structure of the forced choice: at the end of Rosenkavalier, when the

Marschallin relinquishes her claim to Octavian, she commits the empty gesture of freely choosing the inevitable (the passage of time). These ensembles of reconciliation provide the only truly sublime moments in Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner, even Richard Strauss - the moments in which time seems to reach a kind of transient standstill: the course of action is suspended, the subjects enjoy the precious prolonged moment of a timeless stasis which provides a blissful inner peace. Here are (the most conspicuous of) these moments, best encapsulated by the words from Beethoven's *Fidelio*, "Welch' ein Augenblick": in Mozart, the Count's plea for forgiveness and the ensuing ensemble from the finale of *Le nozze*, just before the opera's joyous last notes ("Contessa, perdona"), the trio "Soave il vento" from *Così*; in *Fidelio* alone, there are three such moments: the canon-quartet in Act I, the sudden suspension of the frantic action in the underground cell when the trumpet announces the arrival of the minister, Leonora's unlocking of Florestan's chains in the opera's finale. In Wagner, such moments of stillness signal the hero's repose and gathering of strength before the decisive ordeal (the quintet in *Meistersinger* before the song contest; the "forest murmurs" in *Siegfried* before Siegfried's struggle with Fafner the dragon; the Good Friday music in *Parsifal* before Parsifal's redemption of Amfortas and unveiling of the Grail). Finally, there is, of course, the final trio in Strauss' *Rosenkavalier*. These moments of magic stillness, whose function is a kind of mirror-reversal of the strange necessity which regulates the sudden unexpected outbursts of precipitous stage action just before the end of Wagner's *Tristan* (the arrival of two ships, the multiple killings) or Verdi's *Trovatore* (after seeing that Leonora poisoned herself, thus betraying him, the Count orders Manrico's execution, just to learn immediately afterwards that Manrico is his half-brother), have nothing to do with the blissful peace towards which the Wagnerian heroes strive; one is almost tempted to claim that they stand for its exact opposite: the magic stillness renders the precious moments when the subject is able to withdraw from the crazy rotary movement of the drives which pulls him/her towards the final (self)annihilation - it stands for the escape from drive, while the Wagnerian ecstatic self-obliteration designates the willing surrender to the pull of the annihilating drive.

The action of *Rosenkavalier* begins "the morning after," with the onset of the daylight after the passionate night of love: a clear counter-movement with regard to *Tristan* whose end finally brings to completion the full immersion into the Night. No wonder, then, that, like Hans Sachs in *Meistersinger*, the Marschallin is the figure of Wisdom: wisdom about the inexorable effects of the passing of time, wisdom about how the common necessities and obligations of the daily

life finally win over the unconditional dark love passion. This anti- (or, rather, post-) Wagnerian thrust is nicely rendered in the opposition between Octavian and the Marschallin in the very first scene: while, in a mockingly Wagnerian mood, Octavian babbles about the dissolution of the frontier between Me and You in the love act, about his wish to remain immersed in the night and avoid the day ("What does 'you' mean? What 'you and I'? Does it make any sense? /.../ I am that desires you, but the 'I' is lost in 'you' ... /.../ Why must there be day? I want no day! What good is day? Then you belong to them all! Let it be dark!"), the Marschallin gently castigates him about his manners and tells him to hide behind the Chinese screen when they hear the commotion outside - from the Wagnerian self-oblivious passion, we are back in the universe of the rococo love confusions and hide-games à la Beaumarchais. So although Strauss claimed that, with *Rosenkavalier*, he wanted to compose "a Mozart opera," although the beginning of *Rosenkavalier* can be read as a version of the third installment of the Figaro trilogy, in which the Countess Rosina has an affair with Cherubino, it is a nostalgic Mozart that comes after Wagner - in the Mozartean universe, such a direct reference to the sexual act as hits us in the very first lines of the opera ("Wie du warst! Wie du bist! Das weiss niemand, das ahnt keiner!" - which simply means "How good you were in bed!", i.e., a direct reference to the exquisite love-making qualities of the Marschallin, musically rendered a minute before in the orchestral prelude) would have been thoroughly out of place. The feature which *Rosenkavalier* shares with Mozart, in clear contrast to Wagner, is the cross-dressing: does the charm of the final trio in *Rosenkavalier* not reside in the fact that, effectively, we have a trio of WOMEN singing? The secret libidinal message is therefore that of a feminine community, an extension of the famous duo "O rimembranza" from *Norma*. It is interesting to note how *Le nozze*, *Fidelio* and *Rosenkavalier* raise the cross-dressing to the second potency: in *Le nozze* and *Rosenkavalier*, the woman singing a man (Cherubino, Octavian) has, within the narrative content, to cross-dress again into a woman for the reasons of concealing her identity to the intruders, so that we encounter a woman singing a man dressed up into a woman. Even in *Fidelio*, where the situation is more straight (*Fidelio* "really is" Leonora, i.e. sexes of the singer and the narrative person coincide), we have a woman playing a woman who dresses up as a man. Perhaps, in this politics of sexual difference, it is worth noticing the shift in the title of Beethoven's opera from *Leonora* to *Fidelio* - is this shift not somehow related to the restructuring of the opera's content, best rendered by the changed status of the "O namenlose Freude" duet? Furthermore, one is tempted to speculate that, at a deeper libidinal level, Marzellina loves *Fidelio* because she is

secretly aware that "he" really is a woman. Typically, Beethoven rejects the frivolous idea of a woman singing a young attractive man - in his opera, cross-dressing is fully justified by the narrative necessity (Leonora has to dress as Fidelio in order to gain access to her imprisoned husband); however, the fact that Mozart - and others - were doing what Beethoven rejected is far from frivolous; it obeys a deep libidinal necessity: can one imagine a more vulgar gesture than the "logical realistic" staging that would have the role of Cherubino (or Octavian) sung by a young tenor?

The gap that nonetheless separates Strauss from Mozart concerns the status of the sexual act. It's not that people do not make love in Mozart - on the contrary, all his plots turn around it -; the point is, rather, that the reference to the sexual act itself is wholly abstract, lacking the earthly substance, somehow like the fade-in after the couple's embrace in the good old Hayes Production Code Hollywood. It is only with Wagner that the musical texture itself becomes directly sexualized: the point about the "orgasmic" structure of the ouvertures to Lohengrin and Tristan, although a commonplace, nonetheless hits the mark, so that one can effectively claim that Wagner "investigates the secrets of orgasm"(Conrad 1989, p. 181). However, one is tempted to argue here that, even in this rendering of the orgasmic acceleration, Wagner is male-oriented. As is well known, when a woman is approaching orgasm, the acceleration progresses in two steps (two jumps from quantity into a new quality, to put it in the terms of dialectical materialism): first, there is the "point of no return," the rhythmic movement of hips, which signals that the woman is no longer in control, that she is already sliding (being drawn) towards the climax; then, the arrival of the climax itself is announced by the breakdown of this regular rhythm, by the onset of irregular seizures. What is missing in the Wagnerian musical rendering of the orgasm is this last stage of chaotic, disordered, convulsions: in a typically male way, he (mis)perceives orgasm as a gradual linear movement of acceleration.

Perhaps, in spite of his proverbial aversion to coarse sexuality, the missing link between Mozart and Wagner is Beethoven himself: does the gap between the "O namenlose Freude" duet and the Finale of Fidelio, usually filled in by the Leonore 3 overture (with, again, its all too obvious double orgasmic structure), not mark the non-depicted passionate love-making of the finally reunited couple? The act is here for the first time inscribed, although (to use the old structuralist jargon) in the mode of absence, as a gap in the musical texture - in Mozart, its absence doesn't even cause a gap. - Shostakovich's Lady Macbeth makes a radical step further in this graphic musical depiction of the sexual act. With regard to this depiction, it would be interesting

to compare Lady Macbeth with Tristan and Rosenkavalier. What predominates in Wagner is the raising of the inner tension and its orgasmic resolution (the end of Act II has the most shocking coitus interruptus in the history of the opera, while the finale finally brings the orgasmic resolution); the most notorious feature of Shostakovich's Lady Macbeth is the graphic orchestral depiction of the first violently-passionate sexual exchange between Katarina and Sergei in Act III: the "external" mickeymousing of the gasps and thrusts of the act of copulation, inclusive of the explicit trombone slides providing the half-comic rendering of the post-orgasmic reprieve. The brief orchestral prelude to Der Rosenkavalier - which also renders a scene of exuberant love-making, complete with the imitation of the thrusting moves, the climax on whooping horns, and luxurious afterglow - is somewhere in-between, the outburst of the raw sexual passion muffled by the affected rococo manners, in accordance with the "half-imaginary, half-real" mode of the opera itself.

In what, then, does this opening love encounter in Rosenkavalier differ from the immersion into the Night of Tristan? It is not only that Rosenkavalier goes through Tristan's path as it were in the opposite direction, starting with the nightly bliss of the love encounter and then returning to the universe of the Day with its formal social obligations; it is not only this "morning after" effect that spoils the Wagnerian solution - the immersion into the bliss of the sexual act itself is already disturbed. While the Marschallin and Octavian chat drinking hot chocolate in the morning, she in passing informs the surprised Octavian that, while they were making love during the night, she thought of the Marshal, her absent husband who was at that time hunting wild boars in Croatia - the gap that separates the reality of the sexual act from its fantasmatic support is thereby confirmed (it is the whole point of Tristan that, at the highest ecstatic bliss, this gap is suspended, reality and fantasy coincide). To the angry Octavian who asks her: "How could you dream about HIM while we were...", she promptly replies: "I do not order my dreams." Usually, Freud's alleged "pansexualism" is taken to mean that "whatever we are doing and saying, we are ultimately always thinking about THAT" - the reference to the sexual act is the ultimate horizon of meaning. The Freudian notion of fantasy points in exactly this direction: the problem is not what we are thinking when we do other, ordinary things, but what we are thinking (fantasizing) when we effectively are "doing THAT" - the Lacanian notion that "there is no sexual relationship" ultimately means that, while we are "doing THAT," while we are engaged in the sexual act itself, we need some fantasmatic supplement, we have to think (fantasize) about something else. We cannot simply "fully immerse ourselves into the immediate pleasure of what we are doing" - if we do

that, the pleasurable tension gets lost. This point is made clear in *Rosenkavalier*: it is not that, while making love with her boring husband, the Marschallin dreams of the young virile Octavian, but the other way round - while making love to Octavian, the specter of her boring and pompous husband haunts her in her imagination.

"It quacks, hoots, pants, and gasps"

The passage from *Rosenkavalier* to Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth* is the passage from the refined aristocratic etiquette to the vulgar reality in which we are not only melancholically aware of how things pass, but in which people actually beat up and poison each other - and copulate. The spirit of this passage was nicely captured by Anthony Burgess who, in his retelling of *Rosenkavalier* as a novella, ended it up with: "Octavian lost a leg and an eye in the War of Austrian Succession. Sophia died bearing her second child. The widowed Marschallin entered a nunnery. Baron Ochs married the richest heiress of all Austria and died at ninety-one in his bed." (Burgess 1982, p. 68) In such a universe, of course, sex is neither a mystical reunion nor the scintillating affair. Listening to the orchestral depiction of the sexual act in *Lady Macbeth*, one is almost tempted to agree with Comrade Stalin who, after furiously leaving the Bolshoi theater after this very scene of the sexual encounter, in his infinite wisdom ordered the anonymous article "Muddle Instead of Music" to be published in the January 28, 1936, issue of *Pravda*, in which it says: "The music quacks, hoots, pants, and gasps in order to express the love scenes as naturally as possible" - Prokofjev himself ironically designated Shostakovich's *Macbeth* music as the next step in the progress from monophony to polyphony - "pornophony." However, the lesson of this mickeymousing is the Hegelian one: pure tautological repetition is the greatest contradiction. We (wrongly) think that the music merely follows visual movements, while it actually strongly colors, distorts even, our visual perception, giving an exaggerated comical twist to gestures on the stage (or screen). We all know of the comical effect which occurs when, while we watch an opera on TV, the sound is suddenly suspended: deprived of their vocal ground, the singer's dignified gestures change into ridiculous gesticulating. What we get in *Lady Macbeth*'s sexual scenes is the obverse effect: it is the very addition of music which, although it only slavishly echoes sexual gestures, "extraneates" the passionate quasi-animal coupling into a ridiculous performance, transforming the lovers into puppets who blindly follow the rhythm set by the music. Shostakovich's redemption of Katerina's two murders as the justified acts of the victim of patriarchal oppression is effectively more ominous

than it may appear: the price for this justification, the only way to make the murders palpable, is the derogation, dehumanization even, of the victims (her husband's father is portrayed as an old lecherous ruffian, while the son is an impotent weakling without any clear characterization, avoided since it may give rise to a sympathy for him in the murder scene). In a complementary way, Katerina herself is purified of any ethical ambiguity (there are no hints of an inner ethical struggle while she commits the murders, or of any pangs of conscience afterwards): she is portrayed not so much as a fighter for personal freedom and dignity against patriarchal oppression, but as a woman totally enslaved to her sexual passion, ready to crash ruthlessly everything that stands in the way to its gratification - in this sense, she is also dehumanized, so that, paradoxically, the only human element in the opera is a collective one: the convict's chorus with its two laments in the last act. Furthermore, Taruskin was right to emphasize the historical context of the opera: the years of the ruthless terror against the "kulaks" - are the murdered father and son not two exemplary "kulaks"? In the first two years of the opera's triumphant performance, before Stalin's ban, was it possible for the public not to perceive how its violent content echoes the violence of "dekulakization"? The opera's official condemnation should thus not blind us for the fact that it is a deeply disturbing Stalinist work which legitimizes the ongoing murderous anti-kulak campaign. Taruskin's conclusion is thus that *Lady Macbeth* is "a profoundly inhumane work of art": "if ever an opera deserved to be banned it was this one, and matters are not changed by the fact that its actual ban was for wrong and hateful reasons"(Taruskin 1997, p. 509).

And does the same not go for another prohibited (in this case literally destroyed) Soviet masterpiece from exactly the same period, Sergei Eisenstein's *Bezhin Meadow* from 1934-36, of which the negatives themselves were burned, the veritable missing link (or, rather, vanishing mediator) between Eisenstein I (of the "intellectual montage" and brilliant dialectical use of formal antagonisms) and Eisenstein II (of *Nevsky* and *Ivan*, of the pathetic rendering of large historical frescoes in an "organic" form), was partly based on the story of Pavlik Morozov, the young village hero who was killed by his relatives in the northern Urals in 1932 because he had denounced his father to the village soviet for speculating - after his death, Morozov was elevated to a cult figure all around the Soviet Union. In the film, Stepok, a young village boy, organizes the local Young Pioneers to guard the harvest of the farm collective each night, thereby frustrating his own father's plans to sabotage it. In the film's climax, the nightly confrontation between the father and the son, the father kills Stepok. Next morning, a typical Eisenstein scene celebrating the exuberant

orgy of revolutionary destructive violence (what Eisenstein himself called "a veritable bacchanalia of destruction") takes place, when the frustrated Pioneers force their way into the local church and desecrate it (recall the similar scene from *October*, in which the victorious revolutionaries, after penetrating the wine cellars of the Winter Palace, indulge there in the ecstatic orgy of smashing thousands of the expensive wine bottles):

"On one level, the audience is encouraged to sympathize with the peasants robbing the church of its relics, squabbling over an icon, sacrilegiously trying on vestments, heretically laughing at the statuary - while Eisenstein's profound admiration and knowledge of religious art creates a parallel revulsion at the vandalism. A young girl is framed in a mirror as if in a picture of the Virgin Mary, a young child is a cherub, a statue of the crucified Christ is held as in a *Pieta*." (Bergan 1997, p. 287)

When, on March 17 1937, Boris Shumyatsky, the official head of the Soviet film industry (till he was, only two years later, accused to be an English spy, arrested and shot), vetoed the film, he explained his reasons in an interesting article in *Pravda*. His main reproach was that, instead of locating the conflict in the concrete circumstances of the class struggle in the countryside (the "dekulakization"), he staged the conflict in an almost biblical, atemporal mythical space, as an abstract fight between "good" and "evil" as elementary cosmic forces. Stepok is presented in pale and luminous tones, a pale boy in his white shirt, as if wrapped up in a halo, as a kind of spectral innocent saint whose fate was already decided by a supernatural destiny. (In the self-criticism which, of course, followed, Eisenstein himself claimed that the father's killing of the son was "reminiscent of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac." (Bergan 1997, p. 283)) Connected with this reproach was the standard accusation of formalism, of indulging in eccentric framing, lightning and cuts, instead of deploying the story in a direct psychologically "realist" way which would allow an easy emotional identification of the viewer. From today's perspective, of course (and bearing in sight Eisenstein's fascination with and detailed knowledge of psychoanalysis), it is easy to identify this "eternal" mythic space as the scene in which the underlying libidinal economy of the father/son conflict (the inverted Oedipus in which the obscene corrupted father kills the innocent asexual son) is played out. Far from being simply too intellectual, prohibiting the viewer's empathy, *Bezhin Meadow* was so disturbing because its very "formalist excess" allowed the repressed libidinal tension to be directly articulated.

The reason the film had to be prohibited was thus that such a direct

rendering of the underlying libidinal tensions, such a direct celebration of the ecstatic and destructive sacrilegious revolutionary violence, was not admissible in the new conditions of "Socialist Realism" - why not? Because, precisely, the Stalinist ideology functioned only on condition that it did NOT directly display this underlying libidinal economy. (No wonder Eisenstein was enthusiastic about Alexander Medvedkin's Happiness from 1935, in which similar revolutionary obscenities abound: in an extraordinary moment, a priest imagines he sees the breasts of a nun through her habit.) And, back to Shostakovich, what if his Lady Macbeth was also prohibited for similar reasons: not because the openly depicted sexuality, but because this open depiction, AS WELL AS the open support of the killing of the kulak patriarchal "oppressors," had to be publicly disavowed. And this also enables us to see why Taruskin's accusation against Lady Macbeth as the legitimization of the mass murder of the kulaks, of their "liquidation as a class" (as Stalin put it), misses the point: the direct violent aspect of it HAD to be publicly disavowed, which is why its direct rendering was unacceptable. The direct depiction of sex and of violence were the two sides of the same coin (which openly coincide in the erotically charged, "orgasmic," character of the church desecration in Bezhin Meadow.)

It is at this precise point concerning political terror that one can locate the gap that separates Leninism from Stalinism : in Lenin's times, terror was openly admitted (Trotsky sometimes even boasted in an almost cocky way about the non-democratic nature of the Bolshevik regime and the terror it used), while in Stalin's times, the symbolic status of the terror thoroughly changed: terror turned into the publicly non-acknowledged obscene shadowy supplement of the public official discourse. It is significant that the climax of terror (1936/37) took place after the new constitution was accepted in 1935 - this constitution was supposed to end the state of emergency and to mark the return of the things to normal: the suspension of the civil rights of the whole strata of population (kulaks, ex-capitalists) was recalled, the right to vote was now universal, etc.etc. The key idea of this constitution was that now, after the stabilization of the Socialist order and the annihilation of the enemy classes, the Soviet Union is no longer a class society: the subject of the State is no longer the working class (workers and peasants), but the people. However, this does NOT mean that the Stalinist constitution was a simple hypocrisy concealing the social reality - the possibility of terror is inscribed into its very core: since the class war is now proclaimed over and the Soviet Union is conceived of as the classless country of the People, those who (are still presumed to) oppose the regime are no longer mere class enemies in a conflict that tears apart the social body, but

enemies of the People, insects, worthless scum, which is to be excluded from humanity itself.

Katarina Izmajlova is a kind of Madame Bovary going wild, reacting to her stuffed condition of the unsatisfying marriage with the wild explosion of murderous violence, in the long tradition that reaches from the naturalism of Zola's Theresa Raquin to the American film noir (not so much Double Indemnity, but rather The Postman Always Rings Twice). Within this tradition, misogyny is inextricably linked to the feminist potential (it is the desperate patriarchal condition that drives a wife to such outburst of violence).

The Separated Flames

The next and last joint is here Erwin Schulhoff's half-forgotten outstanding *Flammen* (Flames) from 1932, the modern reworking of the don Juan myth (now available in the London "Entartete Musik" series). (As a curiosity, one should remember that the other great work of this follower of Schoenberg is a large-scale oratorio on the text of the Communist Manifesto.) It is only with Schulhoff that we pass to radical atonal expressionism. What, exactly, does this mean? Here is Charles Rosen's perspicuous description of "the secret of the continuous and violent expressivity of Schoenberg's music":

"the expressive force, finding no outlet in a large 'homophonic' harmonic structure, pervades the melodic line of all the different instruments and voices. /.../ This radical expressivity, congenial to Schoenberg's temperament, and obviously closely related to the movements in other arts of his time, is therefore also a logical development of his extension of the musical language. Technically speaking, it may be described as a displacement of the harmonic tension to the melodic line."(Rosen 1976, p. 54)

Brecht's well-known sarcastic remark that Schoenberg's atonal music is "all too melodic," thus inadvertently hits the mark: the melodic line has to take upon itself the burden of harmony. One should put to Brecht's credit that he perceived the error of the usual reproach according to which atonal music lacks melody - it's the opposite which holds, in the atonal music, the excessively expressive melody pays the price for the prohibited harmony, and it is this lack of harmony which creates the unpleasant experience in the common listener. The further thing to do here is to introduce the rather obvious link between the couple harmony/melody and two other couples: space/time and synchrony/diachrony. In Schoenberg, the prohibited synchrony (harmony) returns in (is displaced on) the diachronic melody - or,

space returns in time (and is it necessary to add that the term "displacement /Verschiebung/" acquires here its whole Freudian weight?). What this means is that, in order to comprehend Schoenberg properly, one has to temporalize (translate into melodic line) space itself. Schoenberg is here anti-mythical: if, as Levi-Strauss claimed, the most concise definition of the myth is Wagner's designation of the Grail domain in Parsifal ("Zu Raum wird hier die Zeit - Here time becomes space"), in Schoenberg, it is space itself which becomes time. It is here that the term "expressionism" acquires its proper place: it is only when the "direct," "natural" (harmonious), expression of the subject is prohibited, that this "barred" subject can effectively "express" itself, in a gesture in which expression is forever linked to its inherent failure. In other words, the paradox of expressionism is that it emerges at the very point when the direct organic "expression" of the subject's inner essence is barred - no wonder that the ultimate icon of expressionism in painting is Munch's *Scream*, this paradigm of the alienated individual unable to connect with the world.

Although the immediate and obvious reference of *Flames* is Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, its hidden reference to Wagner's *Tristan* is more crucial. Schulhoff submits the don Juan myth to a series of displacements: his hero is not just confronted with the series of conquered women - central is his more fundamental attachment to "La Morte," a woman in the guise of death. The true attachment which cannot ever be consummated is between the two of them, which is why all the passionate pleasure-cries of the seduced women cannot satisfy him. When the statue of the Commendatore appears, it condemns don Juan not to death, but to eternal life - here is the crucial dialogue between don Juan and La Morte (and, incidentally, the libretto was co-written by Max Brod!):

"Don Juan (in a paroxysm): How beautiful, how enticing, to suck love out of your empty eye-sockets, lust from your arid lips and the balsamic scent of fleshless breasts!

La Morte (stretches her arms out): So you do not recoil, the only man to endure the test!

Don Juan: And no Commendatore from hell can deny me this happiness! Give yourself now, give yourself utterly! Now is the time! (Here the statue appears and raises his fist against Juan.)

La Morte (to Juan): Futile striving, you may not join the dance of death! Juan, don't you see how the stony fist pronounces judgement upon you, eternal judgement - you are Juan, who can never die.

(Juan presses a Browning to his temple and shoots himself, but he immediately reawakens in a cabaret with a jazz band playing.)

Don Juan: I have to be like this for ever, ever and ever!"

So, although we do have here the Oedipal constellation, inclusive of the fourth impossible-real partner, Death itself, the function of the paternal figure is to prohibit contact with Death itself, more precisely: the consummation of jouissance in death - here are the last lines of the opera:

"La Morte: Flames of love and death, when will they finally join together...

Shadows: Passionate breathing intensifying ... and red light from the window! ... Intoxicated moaning! ... The light dies down.

La Morte: The star so near, drowning in night, that which would bring us salvation /Erloesung/ is so distant again, so distant."

In short, what is prohibited here is precisely the climactic salvation of the Wagnerian Liebestod, the unity of the "flames of love and death": the two dimensions, that of the undead "flames" of drive which follow Juan like the fire which "walks with me" in David Lynch's films, and that of the final peace in death, remain forever separated. This separation can be put in very precise theoretical terms: it is the separation between the "death drive" proper (the Freudian name for immortality, for the "undead" passion that persists beyond the cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption) and the so-called nirvana, the extinguishing of the life-drive, the entry into the eternal peace - the separation of the two dimensions that were confused not only by Wagner, but also by Freud himself.

One is tempted to add here another version, a kind of subspecies of Schulhoff, the one enacted in Leos Janacek's *The Makropulos Case*: what if only Tristan dies, while Isolde survives and, in order to cope with the trauma of her love's death, turns into an undead monster, a cold cynical seductress destroying men's lives? *Makropulos* is a grotesque comedy about Emilia Marty, the extraordinarily beautiful opera diva and femme fatale who, at the end, turns out to be the 337 years old Elina Makropulos. The action takes place in Prague of the 1920s: surviving on the elixir-of-life, Emilia engages in a legal plot in order to get back the secret formula of this elixir which got lost among the papers of one of her deceased relatives - she needs a new measure of the elixir in order to stay alive. At the beginning of the last act, we see her together with Baron Prus with whom she spent the night in order to get from him the formula. Although he complains that her lovemaking was cold and passionless, the Baron fulfills the bargain and hands over the envelope with the formula. After obtaining the formula, Emilia at last tells her full story to the other protagonists. However, in telling her story to the gathered community (the "big

Other"), she realizes that she has lived all too long, since life is precious and meaningful only when it is finite. A cynical predator ruthlessly exploiting and destroying men, she is now overwhelmed by disgust at herself, and gradually slides into drunken despair and panic at the utter meaninglessness of her life. Finally, she gives the formula to her young colleague-singer Krista (who immediately burns it), and is really to calmly accept, welcome even, death as the release from the intolerable burden of life.

The last half an hour of the opera provides a kind of negative to Wagner's *Liebesheld* in which Isolde also finds release in death: it displays the painful process of the disintegration of the subjective stance of the ruthless cynical exploitress, going through self-disgust, hysterical despair and utter panic, up to the final acceptance of death. One is tempted to claim that THIS is the truth about Isolde's death repressed in Wagner. The opposition of *Flames* and *Makropulos* (both operas composed in the same decade in the Czech republic!) runs along the lines of sexual difference: don Juan is condemned to live eternally, while Emilia nonetheless finds peace in death.

No More Running

So, perhaps, in the digitalized future of the multiple versions of the narrative denouement, one can well imagine that one will be able to choose between different endings of *Tristan*, or to watch them consecutively: Wagner's standard ending (first Tristan dies, then Isolde dies); then *Tristan translated into Rosenkavalier* (Mark comes and forgives the lovers their betrayal, his forgiveness has a miraculous curing effect on Tristan's wound, so all three finish up with a resigned trio in which the old Mark, like Sachs or Marschallin, quotes the very words of Marschallin - "I chose to love her in the right way, so that I would love even her love for another!" - and cedes Isolde to Tristan, while they both sing a praise to Mark's benevolent forgiveness and then stay together, living happily thereafter); then the *Lady Macbeth* version (Tristan and Isolde plotting to kill king Mark after they are discovered at the end of Act II - this would have been the true *Tristan noir*); finally, the *Flames* version: unable to die, Tristan, like a new incarnation of the Flying Dutchman, is condemned to endlessly wandering around in search for his Isolde.

We have here four attitudes towards sexual love: the Wagnerian deadly immersion into the unremitting *jouissance* of the Night; the *Meistersinger-Rosenkavalier* resigned "wisdom," acceptance that time passes, rendered in a "half-imaginary, half-real" dreamy Mozartean mode; Shostakovich's brutal naturalism of the vulgar daily life - "just the story of an ordinary quiet Russian family whose members beat and

poison each other," as Shostakovich himself put it sarcastically; and, finally, Schulhoff's assertion of the "undead" spectral compulsion as the ultimate dimension of sexual love. However, there is effectively a kind of internal displacement at work within each of these four attitudes:

- in his endeavor to render the ecstatic deadly immersion, Wagner effectively resorts to etiquette, to a customized ritual - say, when the love-duet in Act II, after the long psychological self-ruminations, catches up for the coital finale, is it not as if the two singers all of a sudden drop their psychology, change into a declamatory mode, and get caught in a ritualized compulsion and sing/act like automatized puppets, their passion turning into a cold self-propelling mechanism?
- in his endeavor to render the gentle Mozartean world of etiquette, Strauss effectively brings forward the insipid daily life. Therein resides the fundamental tension and paradox of *Rosenkavalier*: the very attempt to render the "realistic" lesson of the daily life (getting old and dying) has to be done in the mode of the idealized lost world of the old aristocratic etiquette.
- while trying to render the oppressive vulgarity of the daily life, Shostakovich's depiction of Katarina's unconditional passion effectively generates the sublime effect.
- finally, Schulhoff, in his very modern, post-Wagnerian, turn to the banality of the night-clubs with jazz bands, distills the pure lethal eroticism. What changes from Shostakovich to Schulhoff is the nature of the unconditional sexual drive: no longer the earthly erotic drive constrained and thereby perverted by the boring provincial life, but the spectral undead passion.

We thus encounter here a quadruple tension: between the message of the lethal erotic drive to self-obliteration in the depth of the Night and its ritualized declamatory mode of expression; between the message of the realistic acceptance of the obligations of the common daily reality and its dreamy nostalgic mode of expression; between the message of the horror of boring frustration of the provincial daily life and the effect of the sublime its expression engenders; between the decadent undead spectral drive and its "objective correlative" in the cheap contemporary night life. - It is, however, clear that these four attitudes do not move at the same level: *Tristan* is the exception, the point of impossible fantasmatic unity, and the three other operas are the outcomes of the disintegration of this unity. One should thus raise here the reflexive question: how are we to rewrite Wagner's *Tristan* so that we could inscribe him into this series of the outcomes of its disintegration? In Hegelese: where and how, in this series, can *Tristan* encounter itself in its "oppositional determination"?

It is in Ponelle's staging, which we analyzed in the first chapter, that we get this Tristan in its "oppositional determination." Far from being guilty of the retroactive projection into Wagner of a contemporary sensibility, Ponelle's intervention hits the mark, because it brings forward a certain gap which is already there in the first great Wagnerian love dialogue, that of the Dutchman and Senta from *The Flying Dutchman*: the two lovers seem to ignore each other's physical presence, they do not even look each other face to face, they simply engage each in his/her intimate fantasmatic vision of the other - for both of them, the Other whom they finally found is simply the materialization of their dream image (when Senta first encounters the Dutchman, it is literally as if he steps out of his portrait that Senta is admiring). For this reason, the Third Gaze for whom the act is staged is needed - which gaze? Most of the James Bond films close with the same strangely utopian scene of the sexual act which is at the same time intimate and a shared collective experience: while Bond, finally alone and united with the woman, makes love to her, the couple's activity is observed (listened to or registered in some other - say, digital - way) for the big Other, who is here embodied by Bond's professional community (M, Miss Money Penny, Q, etc.); in the last Bond, *The World Is Not Enough* (1999), this act is nicely rendered as the warm blot on the satellite image - Q's replacement (John Cleese) discreetly turns off the computer screen, preventing others from satisfying their curiosity. This same Third Gaze, to which Isolde appeals in her death song, finds its vulgar culmination in the recent "Big Brother" reality soap.

Our thesis is thus that Ponelle's version is not just one in the series of variations that render the disintegration of Wagner's impossible fantasmatic resolution: it occupies the exceptional place of the repressed "truth" of Wagner's Tristan itself - to put it in all naivety, Ponelle stages what "effectively happens" in Wagner's Tristan, he unmasks the full fusion of reality and fantasy in the blissful love encounter as a male fantasy. The path that we covered is thus a kind of proto-Hegelian triad: first the "thesis," Wagner's Tristan; then the "antithesis," the subordinated triad of its variations/negations; then, finally, the return to Wagner's Tristan itself, reflexively transformed through its subsequent variations in such a way that the fantasmatic Third Gaze is directly rendered visible.

Is it possible to escape this gaze, to suspend the need for it? The history of modern music provides an answer. That is to say, why is Wagner not yet properly modern? To put it in dogmatic Lacanian terms: because for him, the big Other still exists - as we already pointed out, in her *Liebestod*, Isolde still refers to this Other in the guise of the ideal Witness supposed to REGISTER what is going on

("Can't you see that he /Tristan/ is smiling?"). It is not even Schoenberg who fully abandons this reference: the true break occurs between Schoenberg and Webern. While Schoenberg, although already totally resigned that there is no actual public which can directly respond to his work, still counted on the symbolic fiction of the One purely hypothetical, imagined, listener, needed for his composition to function properly, Webern renounced even this purely hypothetical supposition and fully accepted that there is no big Other, no ideal Listener at all for his compositions. Sibelius and Shostakovich were unable to accomplish this step - significantly, Shostakovich's attack on the Western musical modernism were more ambiguous than it may seem. Although they were often written under the pressure of the official cultural bureaucracy and as such simply expressed the Party line, they nonetheless at the same time undoubtedly give voice to Shostakovich's sincere conviction that today's music must remain accessible, must continue to aim at generating the public response. The need for a live communication with the "ordinary" public way a constant in Shostakovich's life.

One often hears the cliché that, even before the historical occurrence of the holocaust, Schoenberg's music already rendered its horror - perhaps, one should introduce a slight change in this cliché by replacing Schoenberg with Webern. That is to say, in his classic *If This Is a Man*, Primo Levi recalls how he discovered with amazement that most of the inmates at Auschwitz shared the same dream: after miraculously surviving the camp, they are at home, telling about their horrible experiences to their friends and family, when, all of a sudden, they notice that the listeners are completely indifferent, bored, that they speak among themselves as if the survivor is not there, or simply leave the table - does this "ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story" (Levi 1987, p. 60) not render the fact that "the big Other doesn't exist," that there is no ideal Witness ready to register our experience? - It is interesting to note that, in the very last paragraph of *The Truce*, Levi reports of a dream which haunted him long after the war and which, while it starts with the same scene as the Auschwitz dream (sitting at home, telling about his horrible experiences to friends and family), follows a different twist: what disturbs this scene of reconciliation is not the indifference of the listeners, but the emergence of a "dream within a dream": all of a sudden, everything starts to collapse and disintegrate around him, he is alone in the centre of a grey and turbid nothing - in the Lager once more, aware that the family scene was a mere deception, a dream, anxiously awaiting the well-known voice of the Kapo pronouncing the feared foreign word: "Wstawach!", "Get up!" (Levi 1987, p. 379-380). This is what Lacan meant when he claimed that, within a dream, the real

appears in the guise of the dream within a dream. The link between the two denouements is easy to discern, they ultimately amount to the two versions of the same outcome: the obscene superego voice is precisely the foreign intruder which causes the disintegration of the big Other.

Such a heroic acceptance of the non-existence of the big Other is, perhaps, the only thoroughly radical ethical stance today, in art as well as in "real life." Not only Wagner, but Nietzsche himself, his most bitter critic, was not able to persevere in this stance - witness Nietzsche's final madness, which is structurally strictly homologous to the suicidal passage a l'acte: in both cases, the subject offers himself as the object to fill in, in the Real, the constitutive gap of the symbolic order, i.e. the lack of the big Other. That is to say, the key enigma of Nietzsche's final madness is: why did Nietzsche have to take recourse to what cannot but appear to us as ridiculous self-aggrandizing ("Why I am so brilliant?", etc.)? This is an inherent PHILOSOPHICAL deadlock, which has nothing whatsoever to do with any private pathology: his inability to accept the non-existence of the big Other. (Within these coordinates, suicide occurs when the subject perceives that the megalomaniac solution doesn't work.) And it is only within this horizon that Isolde will no longer have to run.



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