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## *The Decline of the Sovereign*

... resterà ben poco  
Dello spazio infinito,  
Che frapposer gli Dei fra Sesto e Tito.  
Metastasio

I

All expression in opera seria derives from the two gestures of menace and entreaty. Their alternate pleas fill its song with pain-kindled eloquence; moreover it was the very fervor and pathos of their strife that had first urged music into speech, speech into music, thus founding the genre. Menace and entreaty (Monteverdi's *Ira* and *Supplicatione*) are not mere episodes in the action of the serious genre, but the source of its form. That is why opera in its early history, still nervously unsure of its right to exist, clung to the story of Orpheus. The wrathful one will hear the prayer of his supplicant only when he is singing. In a world ruled by devastating supreme willfulness, opera, rapt in sorrow and obsessed with lament, is needed to advance a claim for mercy. - For the next hundred and eighty years, the fables in music, like their expressive modes, proceeded from a fateful curse or judgment through lamentation to gracious appeasement. From ancient tragedy, the composer learned that same lesson (unless he forgot it in Armida's magical gardens): to translate a relation of power into a duration of dialogue, and then to freeze the movement of dialogue in a tableau of mercy (*katharsis*). This is how Gluck was still using his Baroque-bowdlerized Aristotle. The overture to

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Iphigénie en Aulide moves within "a single contrast," between a motif that "strides onward relentlessly" and another that "suffers tenderly" (Wagner); it seizes "the grand idea of Greek tragedy by filling us with terror and pity in alternation," that is, cast in two parts. — The menacing, terrorizing one is called god or monarch; the entreating, suffering one, man as subordinate. Opera seria is the genre of absolutism. It knows autonomy only as sovereignty, the privilege of the One.

Two Mozart operas in the serious genre are being performed ever more frequently these days. *Idomeneo* and *La clemenza di Tito* have broken into the repertory with the help of a few directors and conductors of integrity, who loathed the exclusionary pact between cowardly management and lazy audiences at the big opera houses. Once upon a time restricting the repertory to masterpieces allowed the canon to shine forth (from behind heaps of historical treasures amassed by the bourgeoisie) as the chalice of innermost meaning in a high culture. Today, their stubborn repetition apes the listening habits of pop fans, who love anything as long as they've heard it often enough. — As to "masterpieces," the culture industry and the media have replaced the act of cognition with the reflex of mindless recognition. But they wash away even the chance for "unknown masterpieces" to reach our ears and brains by flooding us with merchandise of new-old titles. The sudden proliferation of *Idomeneo* and *La clemenza di Tito* in audio and video makes it no easier to discern whether they belong in, fall outside of, or explode a canon than did their long absence from the repertory. What may a canon of operas hold today, and what can it mean? The answer cannot be modeled on the current multiplicity of supply and simple-mindedness of consumption—nor can the question be warded off by mending the rotten fences of the old rep-

ertory. The criterion of what is to endure can be sought only in the genre's own law of change.

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An odor of absurdity has always clung to that artform in which "people must sing ariettas and dance around graves when a city is destroyed" (Voltaire). Nor could the popular success of its practice cover up the gap in plausibility of its theory, as long as the idea of imitation controlled European aesthetics. In such distress, opera acquired a singular power: each of its major works has the task and the gift of justifying the genre anew from the ground up. It is not only the tangible splendor of their details that irradiates *Le nozze di Figaro* or *Tristan*, but the evidence that a new site in the human soul has been found from which song soars of necessity. To have joined, through sheer sound, all emotion, speech, and action into a new kind of interdependence is what distinguishes, despite their structural weaknesses, *Barre Godunov* from *Die Meistersinger* and, forty years later, *Pelléas et Mélisande* from *Salome*. These works that went on writing the history of man as subject stand out from the unwieldy corpus of all operas as the better, nonhierarchical canon. — The paradox that opera recognizes only the inimitable as the exemplary drove scholars to a methodological divide: producing either sympathetic exegeses of masterworks or a dry, historicist listing of types. The idea of the canon as an assembly of unrepeatable models degenerated in the popular guides to the opera.

The seven operas from the last decade of Mozart's life, which succeeded in breathing subtly nuanced life into the human form, each in a different, unexemplar-exemplary way, demand the canonical view. Questioning the content and consistency of *Idomeneo* and *La clemenza di Tito*—the Mozartean seria—serves here to introduce another question. Is there a guiding idea in Mozart's operas that pierces

in which sense does he use the word "Canon"?

Answer →

6 the typology of seria, singspiel, buffa and illuminates each work in turn as a canonic creation—as an unrepeatable moment in the awakening of man as subject? Such an idea would have to circumscribe that place at which the sovereignty of the One is supplanted by the freedom of the individual. Mercy and autonomy separate, contend, suffuse each other there: two eras, two political doctrines, two ontologies.

2

*2 tenor characters in buffa*

If the action of the serious genre drives onward from the judgment to the final appeasement of a divine/princely wrath, then clemenza, mercy from above, must stand as reliably at the end of opera seria as marriage does at the end of opera buffa. This means that the serious genre always unfolds between two estates, the comic genre always within a single estate, mankind. Mozart's *Figaro* and *Tito* seem to disprove the tenet, each in a contrary way: the buffa this time is based on differences of estate, and the seria on the concept of mankind. In *Figaro*, the paradox is solved by a stroke of genius: it is precisely that thorn of genre-contrariness which spurs the genre to its purest triumph. When Mozart slipped an intrigue of inequality into his ensemble opera, whose sweetly interwoven voices never stop anticipating the last finale of equality among free men—then he was endowing each situation with an abundance of obstacles and dangers, but the whole with an unstoppable drive toward the telos of reconciliation. Only beyond all strife about station and privilege, amid the final recompense, are the *dramatis personae* permitted to come to a halt. They do not each clutch their own good fortunes, but celebrate reverently, a chorus beyond division, the beckoning fulfillment: "Ah, tutti contenti saremo cosi!" All happiness will be ours.

7

The paradox of *La clemenza di Tito* is different. Into the libretto for a pure recitative-and-aria opera that Metastasio wrote in 1734, Mozart (when he set it to music after almost sixty years and forty other composers) set eight ensembles; Tito sings in no fewer than three of them. The emperor takes a part among parts to justify himself, indeed to excuse himself, as a human among humans. By renouncing "divini onori" in his very first recitative, he surrenders the godlike essence of a prince. The space of the seria, its range of expression between the one who menaces and the one who entreats, is thus destroyed. How could fear or hope cry and struggle for mercy, when Tito, a tenorally stiff, pale plaster cast of Sarastro, keeps on declaring that he is no "monster and tyrant," but "a man"? Each incident is debilitated by the shriveling of conflict, and the whole by loss of aim when, from the opening measures, the emperor is praised as most kind and merciful—by the rebel who schemes to kill him. De Sanctis, the Risorgimento republican, mocked the prearranged barter of largesse at the end, which in the late seria, reducing all dangers to sham, invariably brings glory to the prince and promotion to the conspirators: "Tutti eroi e tutti contenti." All of them heroes, all of them happy.

If the buffa *Le nozze di Figaro* was urged forward by the presumption of inequality among the essentially equal, so the seria *La clemenza di Tito* could be motivated by the striving for equality among the essentially unequal: conspiracy. The republican complot against the monarchy provided the plot for one of the great political plays of post-antiquity, the model for Metastasio's libretto, apparently hardly altered: Corneille's *Cinna*. Its first edition in 1641 bore the subtitle *La clémence d'Auguste*. Augustus appears after his bloody conquest of the throne, that is, at the end of civil war. His sovereignty—any unlimited sovereignty—justifies itself precisely as the rule which puts an

end to "les fureurs d'une guerre civile": a rule legitimate until the people forget what they suffered, and did, in the war of everyone against everyone. *Cinna* was written soon after the religious massacres, amid the brawls of the high aristocracy, which Richelieu ruthlessly put down. Thus Corneille knew to what extent absolute dominion was evil and necessary.

This Metastasio and Mozart no longer knew. They let a conspiracy of apolitical people peter out in an act of mercy void of politics.

## 3

The conflict of *Cinna* is not political simply by virtue of the great disputation between the monarchy and the republic which towers at its center. In contrast to Metastasio's Vitellia, vacillating grotesquely in her private rancor, Corneille's Emilie, the daughter of a father slain by Auguste, firmly embodies and propels the conspiratorial action, because, for her, being republican means being an avenger. Retribution begets retribution in civil war; with each day and each deed, ever more inescapably, the web of vengeance becomes the web of the world. Princely mercy cuts through it as an analogue to divine miracle, achieving the inconceivable: one party of the civil war is abruptly transformed into the whole of a peaceful state. The pardoned conspirator kneels and herself undergoes a transformation, four tenses in two adamant lines: "Ma haine va mourir, que j'ai cru immortelle; / Elle est morte, et ce coeur devient sujet fidèle."\* — Mercy is a voluntary self-limitation, and hence the proof, of omnipotence. By repealing the lawful verdict of that omnipotence, mercy—amnesty—declares

\* My hatred, which I thought was immortal, shall die; / It has died, and this heart becomes a loyal subject.

an end to civil war. By the same feat, it separates the sovereign from the tyrant (or the revolutionary dictator), who remains chained to the unending labor of rooting out each of his opponents.

Just as the ghost of bloody civil war still lurks in every corridor, behind each arras of the imperial palace, so the tyrant keeps shadowing the sovereign. Seneca was the first to tell the tale of the generosity of Augustus, in his treatise *De clementia*—which he dedicated to Nero. The sovereign is nothing without power and inclination to tyranny; they constitute one of his godlike attributes. The man who does not fear God does not believe in him. The Dear God was first invented in the age of incipient atheism, the Dear Prince on the way to the French Revolution. Both, if they existed, would be characterized by renunciation. Surely in Corneille too, the emperor's mind is tempted to renounce the throne, while his soul is assailed by melancholy. Not even in his entrance tirade, boastful with heady supremacy, can the splendor of his dominion chase away the specter of old murders: *rang* is glued to its rhyme, *sang*. "Cet empire absolu sur la terre et sur l'onde, / Ce pouvoir souverain que j'ai sur tout le monde, / Cette grandeur sans borne et cet illustre rang, / Qui m'a jadis coûté tant de peine et de sang . . ."\* But such gloom remains a political complaint: its anamnesis is complicity in the suicide of a people; its cure, founding the new state.

Metastasio's flattering portrait of the sovereign, on the other hand, allows a ruler no choice but to abdicate into mere humanity. The court poet, a virtuoso of submissiveness, helped the absolute regime convince itself that it was legitimated by the personal kindness of the prince, not by

\* This absolute rule over land and sea, / This sovereign power I exert over the entire world, / This unlimited grandeur and illustrious rank / That have cost me so much suffering and blood . . .