

C H I L D O F
P A R A D I S E



M A T T H E W S P E L L B E R G

A distinct scene unfolds on the front steps of the great European opera houses on the day of a performance. On the front lip of the façade, dangling from the steps, a congregation of the faithful begins to assemble. In Paris, at the Opéra Bastille, they are firmly encamped in a semi-protected area to the right of the grand staircase. They hold numbered slips of torn paper in their hands to mark the order in which they've arrived. They sit reading on a curved bench of concrete or on top of a broad railing or, farther down, on the floor, with their backs against the great glass windows of the foyer. Every now and then an anemic man or, on some days, a cabal of prim middle-aged women comes by to inspect the size of the assembly, making certain that the numbered slips of paper correspond to the order in which the people are standing. Across the city, at the Opéra Garnier, the line, usually administered without numbers, begins inside and winds its way around the gift shop and out onto the front steps. Everyone sits on the cold marble floor; the lucky ones can lean their backs against the base of a column; the stragglers outside are regularly accosted by scalpers and the bleating megaphones of Japanese tour guides. In Munich there is no line, but rather a loose haze of persons hanging over the great

portico of the Staatsoper, a penumbra which gradually thickens into a fog as the hour approaches, ninety minutes before the curtain, when the box office opens. The loiterers eye one another nervously and engage in furtive exchanges of businesslike conversation; one or two scalpers in leather jackets who are there every night lean against the columns, knowing that anyone in need of their services already knows to ask. At the summer festival at Aix-en-Provence, a chatty knot of tourists gathers around the little ticket kiosk set up in the place de l'Archevêché, directly in front of the doors to the open-air theater, a ship of fools at anchor in a tidal rush of tony festivalgoers in white linen and silver lamé. And at Bayreuth, that Jerusalem of operagoing, a weary short line of pilgrims, many of whom have spent the night on the lawn in deck-chairs or sleeping bags, watch the second-tier peacocks of German high society parade up and down the flower-strewn gardens that spill away down the hill from the theater.

These are what the French call *mélomanes*, the suffering devotees of opera, with an appropriately dionysian etymology from the Greek *melos*, "lyric poem," and *mania*, "madness," "possession." They assemble at opera houses across the European continent in the hours before a performance, wearing a patchwork of faded sports coats, leather chaps, neon-colored windbreakers, and white shirts stained with sweat, to purchase or fight for tickets. At Bastille, they wait for the seventy-two standing-room tickets available starting ninety minutes before the curtain for five euros apiece from two automated machines which take credit cards or coins but no bills. There is a strict limit of two tickets per person, enforced by the thin, fastidious usher in a rumpled tuxedo and rimless glasses who keeps order in the lobby. Line cutters are punished by immediate banishment – an old homeless man who claims to be a *mutilé de guerre* sometimes throws himself into the fray, demanding priority. At least once a scuffle with him has made the straitlaced usher bleed.

At other houses, the hopeful wait for a greater but less certain prize: the limited number of returned tickets, some outrageously expensive, others dirt cheap, that are sold to first takers in the five minutes before the lights go down. These customers have, more often than not, already seen the production, either in its current run or previously, or perhaps even in another city. They know

who's singing and who's directing and conducting; they bristle with opinions about every facet of the anticipated performance. However tiresome it might be, it seems worth waiting a few hours in line to buy a ticket (not that waiting means much to a *mélomane*, who might travel across the continent on an overnight bus to see an especially vaunted production).

Sometimes they don't even need a ticket, or want one. They also come to gossip, or to gloat over their comrades who didn't manage to secure a ticket months in advance, or simply to fill the time before a performance. This last task is the most daunting in the life of every *mélomane*, the existential struggle (and this should not be taken as an exaggeration) to find meaning in the many hours of the day during which the opera houses of the world are dark.

To the *mélomane*, the sun is a pale substitute for the astral beam of the spotlight. For the sun rises on the same world each morning; stage lights bless a new world every night. The darkness that covers the face of the stage is torn asunder by the rising curtain, and the light holds sway over the great surfaces of a miniature earth, while, below and around, the damask darkness settles into place, veiling an immense sound that is invisible precisely as a precondition of its total presence. For what seems to the *mélomane* like the briefest of moments – three, or four, or five hours – the world is only marginally larger than a grain of sand, and the *mélomane*, high up in the highest balcony of the theater, leaning against the railing as if on a painted cloud, can look down with the complicit gaze of an angel on the birth of a new planet, suspended in a gilded frame no bigger than an outstretched hand, privileged spectator of creation and, more often than not, deeply versed already in the divine order behind its blooming fields and teeming seas.

In Marcel Carné's great film of the same name, these other professionals of the theater are called *les enfants du paradis*, the children of heaven. The *paradis* is the highest and farthest balcony from the stage in a French theater – and it is traditionally from this cheapest and most regal place in the house that these demi-gods give and withhold their blessing on the performance below (in England, the same balcony is called quite simply *the gods*). They make up the infamous *clagues* who have booed singers off

the stage at La Scala in Milan for making inappropriate marriages or for not being Renata Tebaldi or for simply being Roberto Alagna. In the taxonomy of clichés they fall under the tomato-thrower, the nose-bleeder, the rapturous amateur literally swinging from the rafters (as in the famous shots from Carné's film) with admiration and excitement. They know all the ushers by name, bribing the ones they like and playing pranks on those they don't. They travel in packs, but turn on their own whenever the ticket count drops to only one or two. They are the rock upon which an opera is built, and yet they are largely reviled by the opera companies themselves. They go to the opera nearly every night but try as hard as they can to get in for free or, if that fails, to pay as little as possible. They are rarely rich; they are quite often poor.

Some of them are forcibly escorted out of the houses for illegal or rowdy behavior. Occasionally it makes the rounds that one has been blacklisted. But the evicted one always reappears in a large hat or some other phony disguise, and the ushers (at least those who fall into the allied camp) look relieved to see him back. At the Bastille the *mélomanes* are most often to be found arrayed two by two along the staircases at the far sides of the first balcony. The management has tacitly agreed that once the lights go down these staircases will be left unmolested by ushers – an agreement which, apart from the occasional mid-performance raid, is usually kept. But woe to the novice who tries to secure a seat for herself before darkness has settled completely on the house. Or who tries to take one of the many free seats still left in the orchestra without knowing one of the ushers guarding the lower-level doors. Or who thinks she can get by the ushers using only a ticket from one of last year's performances (it must be used in combination with at least one ticket from that night's performance, held strategically on top and handed to the awaiting usher in a single pile).

The devotee has been for at least two centuries an essential figure in the history of opera. He worships divas and denounces them, when need be, as false idols; he is the symbol of the unspeakable passion of and for opera, of its true status as an art form of ritualized emotional extremity. He is the great antidote to opera's other, more unsavory reputation as little more than a convenient setting for the self-involved pageantry of the upper classes.

The devotee is the cousin of the birdwatcher, the model-train builder, the *cinéphile* (who, the story goes, typically ruins his marriage in the voyeuristic pursuit of the hundreds of classic films showing every day at every hour in Paris's one thousand movie theaters) – that is, he belongs to that remarkable species of human being whose mind has been poured almost entirely into a mold that is shaped neither by external necessity (for example, the pressures of money, work, social status, achievement) nor by internal necessity (the romantic artist who gives himself entirely over to his work, or the depressive who recasts his entire being along the cold lines of despair or trauma), but by something between the two. By something that one might term a pleasure or a hobby or even a passion – but which, as we will see, is a phenomenon far more sophisticated and melancholic than these terms are capable of describing. For the monastic rigors of a *mélomane's* fealty to opera are immensely unfulfilled. This devotion aspires to admiration, the cultivation of taste, and the accumulation of knowledge, but only rarely (and always insufficiently) does it lead to the production of anything. Its ostensible object is the highest aesthetic pleasure, but its daily bread consists of cynicism, ennui, and weariness. It is predicated on the belief that culture is a great unifying force in human experience, an emotional communion in which all are invited to take part, and yet it is also one of the paragon experiences of loneliness, for its ideal relation creates a sacral distance between the thing admired and the admirer. It is emphatically unpretentious – all *mélomanes*, even the wealthy ones, are sworn enemies of wealth, snobbism, box seats, corporate sponsorships, and the wearing of elegant clothes (which, in a place like Salzburg, they will tell you with a sneer, make everyone literally *stink of money*) – and yet they are painfully conventional and stratified. The *mélomanes* are the self-proclaimed plebeians of high culture, and yet they are the most elitist, cautious, rigidly habitual flock amid the manifold overlapping species of odd birds in the teeming social ecosystem of a major European city.

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As is perhaps fitting for an essay concerned with the problems of loneliness and the interaction of individual and institution, the following was largely born from a single friendship which sus-

tained me during several years in Europe, a friendship by which I was ushered into the inner chambers of this great temple of the selfless worship of art and given a lesson in its generosity, its selfishness, and its ludicrous hubris. Although this essay has philosophical ambitions, the only honest record of its inception will have to be narrative, as it was nursed in three years of dialogue with and observation of a person I felt at once intimate with and deeply estranged from, whose mute dedication to a certain kind of striving and whose utter indifference to the principles of the world beyond it were such that I found myself in this friendship constantly confronted by what seemed like the most natural-seeming gestures possible until I paused long enough to examine them, at which point I found them utterly incomprehensible – indeed, in some cases, even when in the service of the most noble things, obtusely laughable. Like the hobbling of Baudelaire’s albatross, these were actions meant to serve the grace of flight that instead became hindrances to walking; the notes I have kept on this existence so precariously led between land and sky constitute a case study in the interactions, as often ridiculous as sublime, between a single individual and that numinous entity we call culture. I am going to try to give a spiritual account of these actions – in spite of the fact that, as with all things more natural and graceful than our abstract minds are capable of understanding, the behaviors of this friend are in some ways the last thing I would ever want to subject to the coldness of writing. Only a consuming curiosity about what, in their deepest forms, those things might have been has led me to lay out in as best a fashion as I can the little that I know of them. For me, such curiosity is always haunted by the specter, real or imagined, of betrayal.

I met Antoine B. at around noon on a Thursday in July 2007 at the door of the Grand Théâtre de Provence in Aix-en-Provence. I had begun waiting in line for tickets to the premiere of *Die Walküre* with the Berlin Philharmonic and Simon Rattle a full six hours before the beginning of the performance. I had come to Aix especially for the opera festival and had gone earlier that day to the box office, located in an air-conditioned boutique in the old city next to Hermès and Zara, where I asked the strangely youthful staff, dressed in the festival’s uniquely ridiculous uniform – black V-neck T-shirt and billowing black linen bell-bottom pants

tied at the waist with a shiny velvet ribbon – about the remaining tickets. Only on sale at the opera house, I learned, after ten minutes of fruitless interrogation.

I carried myself and my things across the searing squares of Aix, through the immense shopping mall which stands on the edge of the city. In a Ping-Pong-ball irony of globalization, this enormity, with its chlorinated fountains and mass-produced flagstones, was inspired by those American shopping malls, with their chlorinated fountains and mass-produced flagstones, which are themselves inspired by Provençal cities, much like the genuine article perched next door. Beyond the mall was where I had been told to find the theater, itself an extension of the shopping mall complex. It had not been quite finished in time for the performance, and the site was still occupied by construction workers and small cranes for installing ornamental light fixtures. The theater itself resembled a digitized version of an Olmec pyramid, a vaguely sacrificial and strangely airbrushed tower of staggered slabs of sandstone.

In these depressing settings I waited out the five hours before the doors would open – not that I was even certain where the doors were, as the entire theater complex was closed off by an enormous pair of still-unpainted gates, outside whose forbidding maw I placed myself along a ledge. An hour passed before another person came to join me: I looked up from my book to see a youngish-looking man of middle height with a shiny balding pate and close-cropped dark hair above the ears. He was dressed in a billowing white silk shirt, and a tasseled white scarf was tied around his neck; his entire head was round, especially along an axis running from top to bottom; his eyes were beads of dark agate mounted in soft wide folds of flesh, and his cheeks were polished to a state of rosy pearlescence. His whole appearance had been somewhat tarnished by the heat and grit of the Mediterranean summer, and this, in conjunction with the blushing sphere of his face, made him resemble a Pierrot who had lost the teardrop from his left eye and had gone looking for it in the dust.

This was Antoine B., who began our acquaintance by asking polite questions about how the ticket purchasing worked, when the doors opened, and whether I knew the layout of the new theater. To his visible disappointment I answered that I knew nothing, and he settled down to wait – no book, newspaper, or

other distraction except a water bottle and a packet of supermarket biscuits – leaning against the wall next to me. Slowly more people began to materialize and wait in line, and occasionally Antoine would interrupt me with a question. Where I was from, what I was doing in Aix, how long I had been there? His own answers were evasive. No, he was not from Aix, but from Paris. He came down here occasionally for the opera. He was curious to see the new house.

When the great gates to the house were finally opened, a free-for-all ensued; the line we had been nursing for hours collapsed in seconds, and the aficionados who had been so politely standing in single file made an unseemly rush for the box office, where the tickets were sold to hands waving thirty-five euros in the air with great violence. Lacking the killer instinct, I found myself quickly pushed to the back. It was Antoine, however, with the frown of Pierrot finally confronted with one injustice too many, who grabbed my wrist and pushed me to the front of the crowd, making certain that I bought a ticket before buying one for himself. That was not fair, he said with a disapproving look as we left the ticket office.

We went our ways to our seats, on opposite sides of the house, but at the intermission, he materialized by my side. He engaged me in idle chatter about the performance, and the state of the foyer, in which society women and corporate sponsors made their way gingerly over exposed electrical wiring and plastic tarps covering stacks of paint cans and brushes. The intentness of his stare – which though never directed at me nevertheless seemed to be somehow watching me at a refracted angle, as if through a distant and unseen mirror – gave me a distinct feeling of discomfort. I left him after the performance that night, refusing his offer of a drink with the legitimate excuse that the hostel where I was staying closed its doors at midnight and I had only just enough time before curfew for the half-hour walk back.

It was two nights later that I saw Antoine again, this time chatting up the bell-bottomed vendors at the ticket kiosk in the place de l'Archevêché, smoothly negotiating the reduced-price purchase of a last-minute ticket for a production of Monteverdi's *Orfeo*. It was after the performance that he accosted me again, to ask what my plans were. I explained that I had missed the curfew

for the hostel that night, and it was my intention to spend the night on a bench, or at least kill the time (with my many bags and coats) until the sun rose. To my surprise, he announced that he was in the same situation, as he was staying with a friend in Marseille and the first bus out was at five in the morning. He seemed unsurprised by the coincidence, and invited me out for a drink at a café on the square with two elderly gentlemen who had the air of a wealthy gay couple and whom he seemed vaguely to know. A long discussion about the singers and the set and the choreography followed, the sublimity of it all locked in a slow weary struggle against the cynicism and ennui of the two gentlemen, who made as much of an effort as possible to love what they seemed incapable of further appreciating. With a yawn they explained that this was their fifth opera of the week at Aix, that in two weeks they would be in Bayreuth, then a three-week stint at Salzburg would follow, and a stopover in Munich for *Der Fliegende Holländer*. The conversation turned to the pronunciation of the name of the city of Metz, and a long disquisition of equal weariness followed on the differences between French and German and the middle ground occupied between the two by Alsatian, a conversation propelled forward not so much by curiosity as by the onrush of boredom, as if the entirety of human mental exertion were a little Japanese boat in a Hokusai print, desperately, wildly (though in that way peculiar to Japanese art, also serenely) riding the crest of a tidal wave of ennui, just barely managing not to capsize.

This was typical of many of my interactions with Antoine's friends. As I would come to know in the ensuing years, the inhabitants of his realm contained a particular subset, to which this was my first introduction, of well-dressed older men, often paired in de-sexualized gay couples, whom Antoine always approached deferentially, extending his hand with a modest open palm, at which point he would be acknowledged as an acquaintance, if a distinctly casual one, rarely by name. A disinterested conversation would follow, at least until the older gentlemen in question found some reason to ask Antoine for something – say, the program for a concert they had once seen together, or the pirated recording of a performance at Bastille from the season before (such recordings, as I would discover, Antoine had in abundance). But more than anything they looked at him with a profound boredom, as if some-

thing about him reminded them of precisely what it was that they found uninteresting, or were unwilling to admit they found passionately engaging. And here, in Aix, as always, we all paid for our own drinks, except for me – Antoine covered my espresso.

It was at this point, I suppose, as the acquaintances disappeared in the direction of their hotel and the cafés in the squares of Aix began to close, that my friendship with Antoine B. began in earnest. We sat ourselves down on a park bench in the great fountain square of Aix and talked. The conversation, as was to be expected, centered mostly on opera, the long litany of comparisons of what we had heard and where, and what productions, and what opera was like in the United States (a dark continent to Antoine, although he admitted he had signed up for the Met's e-mail list, along with those of all the other major opera houses of the world). And indeed, what life was like in general in the United States, a subject about which he had an inordinate and generous curiosity. He was surprised – even hurt, you might say – when I gave him a mocking description of a French comic book I had seen the day before in a bookstore called *IRS*, about an intrepid James Bond-like tax-collection agent who swung from rafters and drove flashy cars. *Is it really not like that*, he asked sheepishly, sincerely. And he began to describe, in a cascade of unbending sequential thoughts, other comic books (*Bande Dessinée*, the French and Belgian variety is called, in distinction to *les comics*, pronounced “komeeks,” the classic American variety, and *le manga*, the salacious Japanese version, which also finds plenty of readers in the Francophone world) that gave various more or less vicious and brutal depictions of American life, and at least one of which sounded to be a rather plaintive and limpid account of a family's life in rural Quebec during the Great Depression – the Francophone tribute to the miseries of a certain rural North American gothic.

That alongside Antoine's consummate knowledge of opera existed immense reserves of erudition about the most unlikely subjects would be an important realization in the apprenticeship that leads to every true friendship. The *BD* was one of the first, and one of the ones that marked me most strongly – along with the corresponding realization, equally surprising and somehow linked in my mind, that he knew nothing about books. When I hazarded to

talk about novels or quite simply the activity of reading, that night or in the weeks that followed when I occasionally met him in Paris, he would stare at me blankly, or more often laugh. Once, still early in our friendship, he had mentioned that he was reading a book about the *Mayflower*, but when I asked about it several weeks later he gave me a blank, quizzical stare and said that it didn't sound much like him to be reading a book about the *Mayflowerrrr* – saying the word slowly, his French accent rolling the syllables like ungainly pearls along the tongue, as if he needed an extra few seconds to recall, dimly, what the *Mayflower* even was.

But not so with the *BD*. These he knew by heart and seemed able to navigate with an ease that eluded me. When, several years later, I first came to his apartment, I saw shelves packed with the long spines of those comic books, containing noir mysteries set during World War I, philosophical dialogues between rabbis and their cats, and accounts of dystopic future worlds being slowly navigated by cynical Private Eyes, emotionally conflicted androids, and children born in the shadow of a devastating future holocaust. These he could call forth from his mind with the same dexterity that made discussing opera with him so spectacular: for he could, with a studied slowness of speech – unlike many obsessives, whose passions trip over their tongues with ugly eagerness – lay out long lists of the daily facts of opera. His knowledge was only barely theoretical or historical; it rather consisted of a great baroque catalogue of the names of opera singers, composers, works, the set designs of past productions and the shape of their programs (this one's a dissertation, he'd say with a glimmer in his eye, and indeed, many of the volumes that accompanied operas in Europe seem the life's work of an academic standing on the hungry threshold of intellectual pseudo-employment). Historical chronology was unimportant to him except insofar as it was pertinent to style: he would never confuse a baroque work for a Romantic, of course (nor for that matter early Romantic with late Romantic or post-Romantic), and could offer a quite precise estimate of the moment in a composer's career when a given opera was written, but he would often turn to me in the midst of a conversation and ask a question like, *Traviata* was written in the nineteenth century, right? The dates of composers' births and deaths

he knew only from his eidetic recall of the many anniversary years he had endured in his decades of concertgoing: he was already talking wearily in 2008 about the over-enthusiasm that would doubtless sweep the opera houses of the world in 2013, the bicentennial of both Verdi's and Wagner's births, the two composers whose work dominates the international repertoire. (It will be Kierkegaard's bicentennial too, I might have added, over-eagerly; *Who?* he would have asked.)

But this came to be in time unsurprising: the prodigiousness of his memory only displayed itself when pegged to something in the external world – usually something concrete, like a program, or the square of a day on his calendar, or one of the many ingenious devices he himself used to recall what would otherwise slip through his mind like a sieve. When he would forget something we had discussed only an hour before and I would not be able to restrain my surprise with the leash of politeness, he would look at me ruefully and say, *You know me, I'm a goldfish*, a favorite expression of the French – mostly used by malicious teachers on their pupils – to indicate a person with a poor memory. But he did once explain that when he became aware of what he called his abysmal memory in grammar school, he developed the only method he could conceive of to overcome his deficiency: if he could not remember what he had to remember, he could at least ensure that he knew at all times where it was and how to recall it. And so he made countless notes, and filled his cramped studio with great cupboards in which every scrap of paper, every program and cast list, maps of the world and of Paris and blueprints of important public buildings could be stored and immediately accessed when necessary. He had files and toy figurines and sometimes the flags of provinces and countries he had visited all laid out in the thousand ingenious configurations of an externalized mind, so that, like one of the ancient memory orators who Quintillian says built in their brains great imaginary buildings filled with strange and distinctive objects to stand for the ideas and phrases they would use in their speeches, Antoine lived life within the walls of a magnificent memory palace, a dilating space in which every cupboard and bookshelf swelled out into the record of long voyages to Tunisia and countless evenings spent in the great illusionistic opera houses of Europe, until suddenly it would deflate, fold itself away into some forgotten drawer and snap shut

with the blank face of forgetfulness, no evenings recalled, Tunisia as if blotted off the map.

Even when he traveled, a mobile version of the palace came with him, a Great Khan's field tent's worth of recollective materials. An elaborate spreadsheet in a dozen colors listed all the performances for the week in all the houses in Paris along with the major continental venues and, when something was worth listening to on the radio, the Metropolitan Opera as well. Several notebooks and a folder bearing slips of paper relating all pertinent information for the day's adventures went into a small backpack, along with an indispensable camera, whose all-remembering eye could record the events of the day while Antoine himself was busy deploying his mnemotechnic defenses within the radius of his movement. When visiting a new city he averaged a thousand photos a day of signs, shop windows, and the arrangement of seats in theaters he visited. He regularly requested catalogues from stores. When the detailed German bus schedules posted on the street proved too perplexing during a visit to Berlin, he took a sequence of high-resolution photographs and showed them to my roommate (for he was staying with me then), inquiring what each column and band on the orderly grid meant, and when on a Saturday morning he should be at the stop in order to catch the bus back to the airport.

At dawn in Aix I walked Antoine to the bus stop, turned down his repeated invitations to come to Marseille, and left to sleep the remaining cool hours in a park. As much as I was struck by the strange inklings of Antoine's personality, what delighted Antoine most of all was the fact that we had been able to go the entire night without growing bored with each other. An entire night spent talking, he exclaimed; not something easily done. It became apparent that in spite of the great edifice of intellectual activity with which he sustained himself – the dedicated gathering of information, the digestion, the dissemination, the discrimination and triage which he carried out as his god-given daily work, cultivating a garden of the mind that he had managed to plant onto the reality around him – he was terrified of boredom, which hung over him like a nimbus cloud at all hours of the day. The full consequences of this boredom I would not come to understand until much later, just as I would not understand the full meaning

of his laughter at any mention of books until I had left Europe to return to school, when I received the first of many postcards from him: on the back was scrawled a brief note, sent from the Jura mountains, written in exceptionally misspelled French, every word replaced by another – either made up, completely unrelated, or spelled with the wrong subject agreement – which was in every case a rough phonetic approximation of the right one. To the fact that Antoine seemed never to read in spite of his exceptional erudition had to be added an addendum: that this thirty-five-year-old man who reigned in an aesthetic empire of his own making could barely write.

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The eccentricity of Antoine's own private domain is matched only by the resplendent bizarreness of opera in the twilight phase of its history in Europe. Here an aggressive vision of the creative imagination is invited to ambush, enliven, redeem, and wreak havoc upon the repertoire that has been standardized in opera houses since at least the early twentieth century. I once happened upon a performance of *Rigoletto* at the Munich State Opera directed by Dorris Dörrie whose concept (the term is very broadly applied in the field of opera directing) was an attempt to cross *Star Wars* with *Planet of the Apes*. The wicked Duke and his licentious court were a great cabal of humanoid monkeys cavorting about a stage littered with the bombed-out ruins of human civilization – this time, however, represented not by the Statue of Liberty, as in Charlton Heston's iconic moment of epiphany, but rather by models of the destroyed opera houses of the world. The remains of La Scala, the Palais Garnier, the Sydney Opera House, and of course the very opera house in which we were sitting lay on a rotating wheel, spinning madly as triumphant Italianate monkey-men danced atop a wasted world. Rigoletto was the only human in this orangutan cage, and his alienation was marked by the fact that he was obliged to wear a spacesuit at all times, for fear of asphyxiating in the simian air. His daughter lived in an *Apollo* mission-era space capsule surmounted by a neon crucifix and wore her hair in Princess Leia's signature buns. An unanticipated scene change in the second act revealed the Duke's court to have been transposed into the interior of a gigantic Louis Vuitton bag – visible to the audience

in a cutaway cross-section – exhibiting various human-sized perfume bottles and a Fragonard swing hanging from the towering leather handle.

It is worth examining in some detail the heavy-handed artistic logic behind this altogether typical example of European opera in the early twenty-first century (granted, it is a particularly bad example, but it belongs within a spectrum of opera productions which, while ranging from the deadly to the brilliant, are nevertheless all made from much the same conceptual material). First and foremost, there is the open hostility toward opera itself: that is, the opera houses have been destroyed as a *precondition* of the story and setting. Furthermore, if I can permit myself to make a further inference from *Planet of the Apes* (which I think is encouraged), the opera houses have been destroyed in a nuclear holocaust by the civilization which had itself built them (that is, European). They are a testament to its hubris. The monkeys, meanwhile, are a symbol of the crassness of the civilization that has replaced them: they are materialistic, licentious, vulgar, ugly; they have bad taste, leaning toward the flashy, and they have cash to burn. In a word, they are Americans. And it should therefore come as no surprise that the entire conceit is lifted directly from the crassest realm of American globalization: blockbuster science fiction movies, the things which had threatened to sweep away European high culture and which enriched the ugly Americans, who then came to flaunt their Vuitton bags and dispense their much-resented but much-needed cash in the streets of impoverished postwar Europe. To sum up: Opera, and by metonymic association the entirety of European culture, had destroyed itself in its own fiery arrogance, and its remains were now inhabited by the wasteful apes of global capitalism whose debased cultural vocabulary had seeped into the sacred realm of art. The addition of Vuitton is perhaps also not meaningless, for it is the epitome of a prestigious old European firm prostituted by the new world order, catering to the basest status anxieties of the nouveaux riches. So runs the mini-lesson in world history since 1945 proffered by the Munich *Rigoletto*.

In all fairness, watching this performance is a much more enjoyable experience than my interpretation might suggest. It is truly ludic, absurdist in the grand tradition insofar as such a phrase is not an oxymoron – and this not least because the actual

drama of the opera is played out sincerely. Amid its proliferation of *LV* monograms and monkey suits, Gilda does fall in love with the faithless Duke and the anguished court jester does see only too late the error of his ways. The music is performed just as it was in the nineteenth century (no *Star Wars*-era Moog synths), and the night I saw it Gilda was sung by a stunning young Romanian soprano named Elena Mosuc, whose performance of the aria “Caro nome” was a thing of beauty.

This incongruity is in part due to the constraints of the German repertory system: German opera companies cycle through the entire season’s repertoire in the span of one or two months, often offering only two or three performances of a given work. This means that the cast for these productions is in a state of constant rotation and often has only two rehearsals, conducted largely by watching videos of previous performances of the production, before opening. German houses thus have a pragmatic reason for commissioning concept-heavy stagings: the more the drama relies on the concept, the less pressure to carry the performance is put on the singers, who tend to sing in any production as they would in the oldest, simplest production of all – with vocal passion, stock sincerity, and a relatively limited range of physical motion.

And yet, there is a more clever tension here between the execution of the opera’s plot and the forest fire of its new setting. Amid utter silliness and outrageous conceits, the sincerity of melodrama endures as only melodrama can. Melodrama is in its deepest essence an art form which maintains a claim of sincerity in the face of utter silliness and outrageous conceits. It is for this reason one of the fertile grounds for the cultivation and exploitation of irony; it is one of the few soils in which such a noxious plant can grow without being poisoned by it. But still more: it finds in this endurance the source of a heroism more meaningful than that of any of its characters. To convey a message doggedly in the face of the withering absurdity and the infelicity of its accessories has perhaps always been the source of opera’s great strength, and it has been exploited (sometimes with surprising cunning and sensitivity) by the purveyors of this school of directing, known in Germany as *Regietheater*, “director’s theater.” If they are in the business of dismembering opera, then opera endures the ordeal with the impervious gaze of a martyr. Even as Dörrie’s *Rigoletto* seems

to be destroyed by the forces of history (however cheaply understood), it manages to soldier on, to reach its end – the musical and dramatic climax that is more or less the same as it has always been.

Notwithstanding, changing the endings of operas is one of the favorite tricks of Regietheater. Peter Konwitschny's well-known staging of *Der Fliegende Holländer* features an ending in which the heroine, Senta, instead of committing suicide by throwing herself into the sea, overturns a gunpowder barrel and sets a mock torch to it, thereby blowing up the entire stage and with it the orchestra pit. This occurs perhaps ten bars before the end of the opera, and the final chords are played on a recording from tinny speakers while the theater, including the musicians' stand lights, goes dark. Once again a reflective and melancholic hostility toward opera itself is at the center of Konwitschny's intentions: he literally destroys the entire piece, and indeed destroys even the one emphatically natural aspect of opera – that it is always performed live and without amplification – presumably to convey a disdain for the redemption which Wagner's ending so tritely promises in the form of Senta's ascent to heaven in the company of the Flying Dutchman, whose soul she has saved through her love.

But the preservation of the work's original qualities as a foil to the staging is, if anything, even stronger in productions that alter the libretto, as the changes always presume an audience which knows how the opera is "supposed" to be performed. Konwitschny's production requires that the audience see the original ending concurrently, like a ghost standing invisibly beside the altered version. The result is much like the Fata Morgana illusion that probably inspired the myth of the Flying Dutchman, in which the angle of the light reflecting against the ocean waves casts a simulacrum of a ship into the clouds so that it seems to hover in the air alongside its water-bound original.

Two violent motions within the art form have led grand opera onto the pyre of ironic self-martyrdom, and precipitated a larger revolution in postwar European theater. The first of these was an attempt to break the stranglehold of history on art. It began in 1951 when Wieland Wagner, the grandson of Richard Wagner and sometime administrator of a satellite facility of Flössenburg concentration camp, took over the directorship of the Bayreuth festival, where Richard Wagner's works are performed in near-sacred

cycles every summer. Wieland inherited the title from his extravagantly national socialist mother, and although sharing administrative duties with his brother Wolfgang, he largely assumed creative control of the festival's aesthetic. In his stagings, Wieland stripped his grandfather's operas of the varnish of ornamental kitsch the composer himself had envisioned for them, and left instead the barest of symbolic expanses. His stage settings were vast and empty, unencumbered by the heavy demands of Romanticist verisimilitude or the pomposity of German nationalism. The decor, largely influenced by a forgotten late-nineteenth-century designer named Adolphe Appia, featured, in place of Richard Wagner's original medieval pile-ups, a single semi-circle of linked columns (*Parsifal*) or an immense undecorated staircase rising up into a blackness relieved only by murky washes of purple and green lighting (*Siegfried*) or a blank stage with a great ball of leaves and flowers suspended from the fly (*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*).

With Wieland Wagner's stagings, Europe turned its back on the manic aesthetic of its imperial phase, when it had been awash in the ornamental veneer of unchecked material production. The opera spectacles of the nineteenth century had been as overfull as a Biedemeyer salon, hung with countless drops and crowded with choruses of hunters or nobles or soldiers in full regalia. The stages buckled under the weight of banners, props, and immense divas swaddled in crippling dresses. In its self-conscious extravagance, opera was a Potemkin village allegory for the belching economy of the continent, which produced goods of every kind – weapons, wallpaper, china, locomotive engines, railroad ties, silver cutlery, fireplace screens, floral-patterned fans – with heedless speed and in superfluous volume, sustained by the seemingly bottomless mines and continent-sized plantations exploited by European colonialism. Bayreuth did away with this self-satisfied extravagance in a single dramatic stroke; the housecleaning left nothing but the floors and ceiling.

In this motion, opera turned its back not only on the violence of recent history but also on the aesthetic of history itself. Until then, opera – and indeed, much of official European art – had been deeply in love with the siren song of history. It was a disguising mechanism for the present; it hid the terrifying speed and careen-

ing productivity of the Industrial Revolution behind an elegant stasis, much like the great screen of icons shielding the altar in an Orthodox church. Walter Benjamin noticed that in the 1930s, the buildings built in Paris with the intention of conveying permanence – banks, assembly halls, libraries, opera houses – were still constructed in pompous imitation of the styles of earlier centuries, in marble or sandstone, even though their inner structures were supported by great cast-iron pillars and other modern industrial materials. The only buildings in Paris that were visibly modern in their use of glass and steel were those designed for transient purposes: train stations, exhibition halls, and shopping arcades. This need to clothe the present in the ornamental vocabulary of history translated to the great operas as well, which all traded in the fantasy of a chivalric past – for Europe was terrified precisely of the unwieldy industrial and material might of the present. In its romantic devotion to history, opera disguised its relation to the making of history: to the inexorable waste and exploitation of which it was a symptom and which would in the end lead to two brutal world wars, just as extravagant court spectacles in previous centuries had been at once symptomatic of the ills that had led to the French Revolution and, in their quaint pastoral settings and providential celebrations of monarchic authority, a way of disguising them.

Wieland Wagner's empty, highly symbolic stagings thus cleared out all that was hiding behind the heavy drapes and period furniture in nineteenth-century state art. They severed European theater's connection to the fantasy of its own history as a noble, glorious affair of kings and knights and heroes, and also more directly to the great mass of material objects (in many cases beautiful when contemplated individually, horrifying when seen in aggregate) of that history, objects which were thrown off the stage, much as in reality they had been purged in great quantities by the flames of total war. (Wieland's 1956 production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* was derided by critics as "Die Meistersinger ohne Nürnberg" – The Mastersingers *Without* Nuremberg – for its sparseness. But this criticism was clearly made in willful ignorance of the fact that the medieval city which earlier stage designers had so painstakingly re-created for Wagner's opera in fact

no longer existed – it had been bombed flat, and Wieland’s empty stage was probably the most accurate possible scenic rendering of the contemporary state of Germany’s ancient cultural capital.)

In place of glossy, culturally specific settings, Wieland offered the muted landscape of myth, in something like Carl Jung’s sense of the word: universal and mysterious, an archetypal form echoing the shape of human consciousness. But this, too, did not constitute a perfectly pitched mirror for postwar European society. For although myth had the power to overthrow the tyrannical clutter of history, it could do so by eliminating history’s presence entirely from the stage. History’s chokehold may have been broken, but this was because history itself was swept away (or under the rug). It would take a second major move for European theater to reach the stage at which it could communicate precisely what it aspired to communicate about the postwar era on the continent.

And this second major motion was the irruption of *irony* into the landscape of mythology. Mythology has always lent itself to irony; Northrop Frye makes the beautiful assertion in *The Anatomy of Criticism* that irony pushes through the floor of the most prosaic kinds of realism and suddenly makes them resemble the highest planes of myth. Irony carries the debris of historical fact into the domain of fable; thus irony allows history to become the subject of *aesthetic* as well as moral judgment. Irony, in its ideal form, permits the world to be judged on the plane of art without being trivialized.

Irony became the great instrument by which the past could be criticized by our own awareness of it – that is, irony is the tool of a *self-conscious* history, which is precisely what European culture has attempted to cultivate since the war. The great proliferation of monuments and memorials and testaments to the Holocaust and World War II, the immense attempts across the continent (and especially in Germany) to lay out the guilt of the past, have helped produce an art predicated upon an awareness of this very process. European opera is the self-consciousness of Europe’s own exaggerated labors at self-consciousness: a distanced, critical awareness of the complicated acts of awareness being carried out by the society as a whole.

Another watershed Bayreuth production makes perhaps most clear this great fusing of history and myth through the medium of

irony: Patrice Chéreau's 1976 centennial staging of the *Ring*. Chéreau's production, which has become a touchstone for all students of contemporary opera, takes the mythic setting of Wagner's opera and maroons it in the Industrial Revolution. The illusion that Wagner demanded for his operas could be achieved only through the exploitation of electricity, oil, and great steel cables; it was with them that an insular floating world could emerge out of the nothing of a darkened auditorium. Chéreau's staging inverted this work, laid it on its head, so that the sources of the power of illusion were woven into the thread of Wagner's world. The Rhine became a hydroelectric dam, the king of the gods a robber baron. The world was populated with whores and the wealthy men they preyed upon; the stage of gods and men became a theater of capital exploitation. That which the nineteenth century had used to produce its disguises became their source – and indeed did a great justice to the angry wisdom of Wagner's own sublime variation on the mythical theme in nineteenth-century culture.

It is not by accident that Wagner's operas became the worktable for the revolution in European theater. Wagner was the great prophet of *attention* in art. He is often credited with inventing the director as a figure in the theater and for giving birth to the notion that a work of theater should be conceptually consistent and rigorous. He was the first to demand opera houses designed for watching the stage. Before then, men and women had gone to the theater to gossip and flirt on a set that eclipsed the one on the stage. In 1765, J.-J. de Lalande reported that in the great houses of Venice and Milan, blinds had been installed on the boxes, so that spectators who found the performance too distracting could shut it out. (This is not unlike the luxury boxes at football games in our own society, equipped with cable television and blinds, for which one pays preposterous sums of money so as to have the privilege of *not* having to watch the game.) In contrast, Wagner's temple-auditorium in Bayreuth was stripped of ornament and boxes, its long rows of seats were designed to focus upon the stage itself. He was the first artist of the industrial era to insist on the full mobilization of technology in the service of aesthetic experience, harnessing steam, electricity, light, and political power for the sake of a unitary work of art to be performed in the brief span of four or five hours. Wagner wanted to yoke the world to the demands of aesthetic attention.

For the twentieth-century revolution in European theater was precisely about *drawing attention* as it rarely had been done before in art, even in Wagner's – drawing it as one draws water, in great heavy bucketsful from wells that had once been dug deep for the purpose of forgetting and disinterest. The attention that the new directors sought to channel was sometimes meant to bring to light political injustice or hypocrisy, but more often than not it was simply to give the work of art itself a presence within a spectator's field of vision that it had perhaps never before enjoyed in human history. The revolutionaries in European theater from Brecht to the present day have been great exploiters of attention – or, perhaps more accurately, increasingly outnumbered combatants on the front lines of the battle for attention, ruthless desperadoes riding bareback in pursuit of a stampede of distraction. If the advance of the art of theater has become synonymous with provocation, it is because its practitioners have become a remote and isolated battalion of irregulars waging an undying battle on the field of communal perception, fighting for a public which has so many reasons for consenting to so many distractions that it can no longer spare any justification for investing itself in anything; it can only be drawn to that which most pulls at the erratic orbit of the dark planet at the center of the human eye. It is for this reason that the political and social aspects of European art tend to attract the most notice; but these are only the most visible guises taken by the drawing-in of attention toward art.

European theater, with opera in the vanguard, has made use of three strategies – two superficial and one fundamental – to counter the dominance and power of other media, especially its most powerful rival, film. The first strategy has been to adopt the technology of film for its own use (something which began in the avant-garde but has also since become an important part of spectacle theater around the world): to make use of video projections, pre-recorded sound, increasingly complicated lighting effects, ever stronger amplification. To try to beat cinema at its own game, in other words.

The second of these strategies, in contradistinction, has been to exaggerate and exploit with great violence precisely that one aspect of the art of theater which cannot be mimed by cinema: namely, the actual physical in-the-flesh presence of human beings

before an audience. Thus the human body has been placed over and over again in a position of great vulnerability. It is placed naked and scarred before the viewer; it is shown in acts of gross sloth; it is fat, lazy, sunken to the floor, a mullet stapled to its neck and a cancerous stomach bursting from a pair of ill-fitting hot pants. It is subjected to bouts of putrid gluttony, greedily devouring immense quantities of food, bathing in onstage pools of ketchup and mustard, or that truly foul thing Germans call *Salat Mayonnaise*. It is forced to make gestures of anxious self-destruction, to cut itself, crucify itself, jump on fake barbed wire, and sweat profuse quantities of fake blood. The body is made to use pernicious and stilted vocabularies of movement, or, as in the case of Frank Castorf's notorious stage adaptation of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* at the Volksbühne in Berlin, the actor's body vomits into a toilet – a gruesome enough spectacle seen once, at the normal distance between stage and spectator, but truly nauseating when seen twice at once, for it is filmed live and projected simultaneously onto a huge overhanging screen.

As violent as they are, I call both these strategies superficial because they are, in the end, outwardly directed. Both are a call-and-response to other media and therefore they alter the medium of theater only insofar as the invention of new media always alters the media that have come before. But they do not alter the fundamental nature of the experience of theater – they only change its methods of execution. In contrast, a third strategy has fundamentally changed the nature of the art form. This strategy, harder to pin down, might be called critical self-consciousness: it is the act of generating a new way of producing theater by taking theater's extensive repertoire and using it to re-shape the nature of performance itself. Instead of plays standing ostensibly alone as new works of art or new stagings, they become iterations of the repertoire recast in different layers of commentary. Seeing an opera or a play in this world becomes an act of seeing which contains within it the many earlier versions of the same work of theater, and thus seeing them anew. All art forms work within conventions and traditions, but rarely in as self-aware and open a fashion as European theater. It is fitting that the director originated in opera, for opera, leading other performance genres by the hand, has become the most directorial of art forms, one in which new works are

hardly ever written, and in which the greatest goal is no longer creation but re-interpretation.

(And this shift is of equal importance for older, more traditional stagings of works of theater and opera. For example, a much-beloved production at the Staatsoper in Berlin is Mozart's *Zauberflöte*, reprised almost every year, using copies of the historic sets designed by the great neoclassical architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel. Schinkel's designs have furnished the most recognizable visual images of Mozart's work: the Queen of the Night suspended upon a crescent moon underneath a dome of stars; the elaborate flats of Egyptian temples painted in virtuoso perspective to give depth to even the shallowest parts of the structure. Recognizable from textbooks, posters, and postcards, their appearance on the stage is contingent upon the wonder of recognition and the thrill of watching anachronistic stage trickery – that is, seeing special effects whose effects are wondrous for being ancient, for feeling now, in comparison, somehow innocent.)

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This is where the *mélomane* enters, for an attention to art that both envelops the present moment and leaps back toward all past moments is precisely what defines him. The *mélomane* is the repository of knowledge about productions past and present, about what ought to be performed, what would have been performed, what should have been performed, and the contentious relationship that those past and present potentials bear to what is being performed. It is for the *mélomane* that these stagings are created, for only the *mélomane* has the institutional memory by which to judge them.

Opera has become an art form of careful comparison, selection, and readjustment. Two wildly different productions of the same opera are routinely compared at the level of individual episodes: this one handled that scene better, this one cleverly reinvented this prop or this character's emotions. In one production of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* a live donkey appears onstage; in another, a soccer ball – discuss. The open borders and state support enabled by the Marshall Plan opened the routes for musical pilgrims to pass from city to city, theater to theater, carrying out the sacred duty of lateral

viewing – watching always with one eye on something performed elsewhere, or earlier.

It was not until several years after Antoine and I had first met, when I lived in Paris on a student stipend, that I was granted admittance to the real heart of this self-archiving art form. That fall I ran into Antoine on my first visit to the theater. The performance was of two short Brecht operas, and I knew he would be there because it was at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, where, as he put it, *on est chez nous*. It was here that he knew the ushers by name and brought them chocolates and cookies.

I surprised him in the lobby. He was wearing a blue shirt, had gained some weight, and sported heavier stubble than usual. He explained that he and his friend Étienne were on their way to the Opéra Garnier in order to boo the curtain call for the première of Gounod's *Mireille* – a deeply reactionary production directed by the incoming director of the opera house, Nicolas Joel, who had replaced the brash Gérard Mortier, much loved among the mélomanes. Étienne, whom I had met once before, was a wiry sound engineer for Radio France whose French was so quick I found it impossible to understand. I learned later that his boyfriend was a Russian violinist in the opera orchestra, but by then they were half broken up, and he stayed away from the milieu. As I said good-bye to Antoine and Étienne on the subway, Antoine explained that he had a great deal of free time to see me, since he was now unemployed and certainly not looking for another job.

Antoine had been born, I learned, in the 12th Arrondissement of Paris, near place de la Nation, which had been in his childhood a working-class neighborhood and remained as close to such a thing as still existed within the city's center. His parents lived in an apartment on the boulevard Diderot; his father had been an in-house bookbinder for a bank in the same quarter; Antoine now lived around the corner at the rue de Picpus. His apartment was crowded and cluttered, not only with his memory devices, but with a vegetable garden and a full company of orchids. Once when I came to visit him for lunch, I found him drenching them in water at the kitchen sink. He looked at me with manic eyes and said, *Ils vont tous à la piscine!*

In contrast to these crowded domestic splendors and apparent

familial closeness, Antoine was on all other stages barely a shadow in the world. He had done poorly in school and had never finished university. His uncle had taken him to his first opera, but he claimed that it made no impression on him. Indeed, the life he had come to live – attending operas nearly every night, dreaming about them every day – was in his account without origin. It simply was his life, almost undifferentiated temporally, estranged from work and family, the endless whirl of the season of concerts and performances, a tiresome parade like a debutante’s ball schedule a century ago.

Antoine’s friends, too, seemed to rest upon the surface of the earth like figments of a monomaniacal imagination, fixated on the twilight world of the opera house. There was Clémence, a diminutive, pinched-cheek usher at the Champs-Élysées as well as ticket agent at a movie theater, and her husband, Thierry, the projectionist at Le Rex, an immense old cinema which screens dubbed Disney movies. Thierry walked with a profound limp and introduced himself as a great lover of accents; he always greeted me with a “Hello, Matthew!” pronounced in a fairly good approximation of British English. There was Dorothée, an actress; Lila, a schoolteacher; Bernard, her boyfriend – but about their lives beyond the theater I knew next to nothing, and that only from what Antoine whispered conspiratorially in my ear, as if the possibility of a life beyond the gilded ribcage of boxes was an unseemly thing to mention in public.

Beyond this inner circle were a great number of solitary aesthetes with no tribal affiliation. There was, for example, a German in his early sixties named Peter Peters. He cut a wiry, skeletal figure with desiccated skin and frayed strings of white hair. He wore pants and a vest of black leather with low-cut T-shirts and chains of biker-gang silver. He had wire-rimmed glasses whose perfectly round lenses, circumscribed in silver, resembled deep sockets and completed decisively the likeness he bore to a death’s-head marionette.

Peter Peters was no one’s friend exactly, although he often came up to us, for Antoine was much more generous to these lone wolves of the operatic forest than many of the others, who turned a cold eye on anyone whose friendliness had not been decisively tested (as indeed was the case for me for nearly the entire time I was in

France). Peter loved the cinematic melodrama *Die Tote Stadt* (The Dead City) by Erich Wolfgang von Korngold. *Some say that it's kitsch*, he said to me once, *but I love it. You know, degenerate art*, he said, with a toothy grin.

A still more brilliant specimen – the bird of paradise in the jungle – approached Antoine and me at a table one night at Aux Associés, the café frequented by artists at the Bastille. She was dressed head to toe in layer upon layer of mismatched shades of red: bright red hose, velveteen trousers, a burgundy skirt, a scarlet blouse under a maroon jacket with sequins and billowing Renaissance sleeves, a flapper turban in a shade of ruby, a matching handbag, and a narrow wrinkled face swollen with crimson lipstick. Her eyes were surmounted by thin glasses in silver and swaddled in eyeliner, eye shadow, and two hemispheres of glitter. Her name was Olga, and she was perhaps sixty-five. I would later learn that she had several such costumes, one in blue, another in black and gold, and that whenever she could she discreetly made her way (I asked myself, *How can a fire truck be discreet?*) at intermission to the first row of the orchestra, and from then on I would often see her leaning out of her seat directly behind the conductor, staring up at the stage like a child with its face pressed up against a television screen. When she entered the Associés after a performance, as she did every night, the regulars would shout *Brava*, and she would modestly respond, *I'm crazy, I am, I am crazy for opera, but I simply can't help it*. She would make the rounds of every table, lavishing praise on the performance and flirting helplessly with the young men within range of her myopic vision, until gradually the café cleared out, for a visit to your table from Olga set an invisible hourglass running on the evening. Management appreciated her because she made certain everyone was gone by closing time at two. *Un monument*, Antoine called her, not without a certain admiration.

But the most unassuming mélomanes – Antoine included – made the greatest impression on me. Their devotion seemed the most self-contained, the most hermetic. Another such person was David. I sat next to him at dinner at a steak restaurant for Dorothee's birthday, to which I had been swept along by Antoine, although it seemed clear to me that I was not in fact invited; David

seems to have similarly insinuated himself into the company. He seemed lonely and looked ignored; he was not young and far from beautiful.

He showed me the digital camera he had which allowed him to take flashless and soundless photographs of performances. On the little digital screen he pulled up crystalline photographs of the soprano Waltraud Meier in a brilliant yellow dress, standing before an orchestra, her mouth frozen open in an unknown burst of song from the second act of *Tristan und Isolde*. He explained that he used the photographs for his blog, on which he published accounts of his three great passions: opera past and present, the life and works of Giuseppe Verdi, and astronomical phenomena. The blog, he told me, was named after a star in the constellation Pisces. He had seen four total eclipses of the sun, in Mongolia, Zambia, France, and Shanghai (although this last one, he explained with resignation, had been partially obscured by clouds), another partial eclipse in Paris, and a starry kaleidoscope of lunar eclipses and meteor showers.

I felt a twisting in my gut as I sat next to him, not because I disliked him but because in that lonely beef restaurant, surrounded by great plasma television screens broadcasting the results of a recent cattle competition in Auvergne, he struck me as someone worthy of pity, and I was ashamed to pity someone of such dignity. I was horrified at the thought that I should condescend to this amateur in the deepest sense of that word.

What I realized in this moment was that David was in fact only an extreme example of Antoine's entire world. Antoine himself was forty years old. He had worked as a foreman in an optics factory (where all the workers he supervised were women. *Why?* I asked. *Because women have supple hands*, he replied as if it were obvious) but was fired because he disliked the policies of the factory's new owner – and because he always had to leave at four to make the line for last-minute tickets.

What Antoine had cultivated instead of a career was impossible to reward because it was utterly immaterial. And not merely in that it was not lucrative, but in that it produced nearly nothing: no artifact resulted from his work, not even a blog like David's. And yet what he did was doubtless work: he scoured opera programs and brochures, stood many hours in lines buying tickets, carefully

cultivated relationships with ushers and potential hosts in major European music capitals; he photographed and noted and collected pirated DVDs. And what he did was not merely in the service of personal pleasure, as he also devoted himself with fanatical loyalty to helping others in his world in their equally obsessive quest for spare programs or extra tickets or pirated versions of recent performances. He had been adopted by a village in Normandy; he was the official photographer of their annual medieval pageant and fireworks show. I, in turn, was adopted by him, for he found me tickets and lent me DVDs and CDs and invited me to join quasi-legal music-sharing groups on Yahoo! and pushed me through many a narrow fire escape into a sold-out auditorium. He had a copy of the ushers' secret key to the boxes at the Opéra Garnier, and with a furtive gesture he would run down the hall, opening the loge doors a crack one after another, pushing one or two of his acquaintances into the velvet darkness beyond (not forgetting to offer a word of advice: stay away from the round porthole window in each door, for the ushers peek in one last time as the lights go down).

Antoine was a person who took things for nothing in return. A seemingly paradoxical statement, but of deep practical importance. For we take in order to be given something in return as often as we give. We borrow time, resources, space, so that we might produce something and so that, in return, something might be bestowed upon us. The language usually used to describe this series of transactions is *earning*, and its fulfillment is the object of much jealousy and desire, and its nonfulfillment is the subject of much jealousy and desire. But in the world of the mélomane, a great deal is consumed, undertaken, belabored, little is produced, and next to nothing is, at least in the conventional sense, rewarded. There is not even a social cachet to obsessive operagoing. Antoine admitted that he lied to his parents about how often he went to the opera – *You know*, he explained sheepishly, *they think I should be looking for a job instead.*

Although Antoine devoted himself completely to opera, he didn't actually do anything for it. At least not in the normal sense of the word *do*. Never directed an opera, or sang in one, or worked as an administrator. He rarely even paid for his seats and was usually too busy taking pictures with his digital camera to applaud

the artists. What he did do was take: free tickets, empty seats, unauthorized trips backstage, pirated recordings. And he did the taking in the spirit of the deepest humility, generosity, and compassion. He was a saint of taking, who surrendered his whole being to others in what might seem from the outside like the selfish pursuit of aesthetic pleasure.

Everything taken, nothing given – and as a result, everything given away. This is the formula of the *mélomane*'s relation to art. And it is his fundamental predicament: to carry out an act of refinement and striving with no reward except the momentary relief of loneliness – and loneliness meant in more than merely the sense of being alone, but rather the aching need to reach a moment at which the elaborate apparatus of civilization, of interactions between humans in the web of society, is gathered up to its highest point, to its utter maximum, and is then surpassed. Sublime loneliness is a longing for the moment when the impossible tangled globe becomes a point, not less complicated but beyond complication.

The *mélomane* is a figure who eschews easy pleasure for the possibility of a transcendence that he must borrow, that he is incapable of inducing, like the artist alone at the piano, in himself. So he embarks upon the excruciating labor of acquiring and pulling all the full experiences of art from the unfolding archive of performance and mostly pays for it with boredom, ennui, and isolation. Every now and then he sees the face of his redemption, and it is beyond his control, produced by the huge complicated cooperation of opera, which rarely succeeds even on its own terms. It is as if to be made to smile, the *mélomane*'s lips must be simultaneously lifted from the corners by seven hundred strings, each pulled by a cantankerous puppet master (and what person is not but a less epic cast of this poor torn marionette?)

I looked at David's blog the next day. Lengthy essays on the history of the management of European opera houses and on the life and works of Verdi were mixed with brief reviews, high-resolution photographs included, of recent performances. His writing was capable of great transports of verbose ecstasy, as when he reviewed the aging soprano Edita Gruberova: "What we heard this evening was a magnificently luminous radiance of high notes sculpted into discrete spires of steel, free of any sign of human weakness, and dissipated into the entirety of space by playing with

the energy released by sudden convulsions of the body. The variations of intensity are at their most spectacular when the sounds are sharpened to the point of inaudibility, before fluctuations bring back to life a thread of voice supported by a breath that had continued though uninterrupted.”

But the most wondrous page in this lonely archive of one man’s life was the entry on the Mongolian eclipse. Here, interspersed with careful digital maps showing the passage of the moon’s shadow over the surface of the earth and a lucid explanation of the equations needed to predict the conditions for total eclipse, three photos of the event were hung aloft in the digital sky: first a shot of the final brilliantine gasp of sunlight, called the diamond, which flashes as the lunar disc closes over the sun; then a close-up of the total eclipse and solar corona encircling the limb; and finally a photo of the entire horizon at the moment of most complete darkness. In this last photograph, a thin film of golden dust shed by the remaining sunlight lay suspended over the mountains of Mongolia; above this gilded layer the sky was drowned in blue-black, and at the top of the heavens the sun and moon watched over the theater of life like a ferocious eye, the sunlight a blinding iris and the moon a pitch-black pupil.

A few days later, on the suburban train with Antoine on the way out of Paris, I asked whether he knew that David was an eclipse enthusiast. *Of course*, he replied, *eclipses are wonderful* – as if he had misunderstood the question. He didn’t have the money to travel to Zambia and Mongolia (it was clear he knew everything about David’s interest in astronomy, even though it seemed that they barely talked), but he had traveled to the Breton countryside to watch the last solar eclipse on French soil. A cloud had appeared in the sky and threatened to block out the sun, but it cleared just moments before the eclipse, leaving him in full view of the blinding darkness, which he watched through a pinwheel. He had also once built his own telescope, by the way, and had been a regular visitor to the observatory at the Sorbonne before it was closed to the public. He was distressed that I did not know the difference between two kinds of telescope, the *lunette* and the *longue-vue*. I didn’t even know their English names. Not too long afterward he sent me an e-mail (he loved to send e-mails) with a single line: *Voici de quoi étancher ta soif de curiosité* (“Here’s something to

quench the thirst of your curiosity), and a link to a website, not unlike David's, called *Notions optiques pour les astronomes amateurs*, with essays on the different varieties of telescope, complete with elegant charts showing the patterns of light refraction in each, before which I was completely dumbfounded.

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Paris is the epicenter of frenetic operagoing, but the network of mélomanes is pan-European. I have stumbled across acquaintances from Paris at the opera in Brussels, Salzburg, Munich, Aix, Warsaw, London, Berlin. I have come to know, from afar, ancient, decrepit women dressed like flappers, and men who wear wing collars hung with jewels instead of bowties; I have seen them smoke spiral-rolled cigarillos under the cover of fur coats at intermission. I have met the scion of the richest family in the Chinese city of Xixiang, who has nine recordings of Mahler's complete symphonies on his iPod, including several with accompanying video. I have met a gilder and art historian who became a best friend; I met an aspiring Russian set designer whom I never saw again. I met a former stagehand named Sabine who had been a sailor and, while reading Brecht on long voyages, decided to become a theater technician. The work was about the same, she explained, tying knots and moving heavy things, but that was about all I learned from her before we lost touch, two weeks after she snuck me into the lighting booth to watch a ballet performance at the Haus der Berliner Festspiele.

Mélomania is also in an oblique way an erotic pursuit – at least for gay men, who prowl the standing rooms and nose-bleed seats like an indoor park. This is no exaggeration: I have slept with men I met on the steps of opera houses (or brought them there), and I have been propositioned many more times than that. Operagoing is not exclusively a gay world, but it's a pretty gay one, full of old queers and young ones too, sizing one another up or watching the highly charged but desexualized performance itself. There is a substantial literature written on the allure of opera to gays – on its campiness, melodrama, susceptibility to irony. But there is a more profound phenomenon taking place, which is perhaps the exaggerated artifice of opera and the need it expresses to find true passion in artifice. Opera claims: *This is unreal, and yet I defy you*

to approach it with disinterest. In response to Hamlet's angry question "What's Hecuba to him?" about the actor who can so naturally summon tears, opera emphatically replies, *Nothing – and it is for this nothing that he weeps.* In its great preference for musical and emotional content over plausibility, opera preaches, in allegorical fashion, the gospel of the necessary exercise of emotional experience in even the most potentially sterile and confining space. For its entire history, opera has been a symbol for the height of urban civilization: its forbidding extravagance has made it the great mirror of power, social order, the uneven distribution of wealth and authority that are the benchmarks (however much we may wish to deny it) of an advanced society. But it has also drawn to it a crowd of marginals within that civilization, and this is perhaps because it calls for emotional reaction even within the parameters of great fakeness. It invites crying, sighing, transports of ecstasy in a way beyond simple empathy but almost as a rehearsal, pure and untouched by the demands of the believable. Hence the exaggerations of diva worship: the goddesses of the stage are loved in a rehearsal of passion, a fine-tuned performance of sighs and autographs – taking without giving, passing through the gateway of emotion without any need to open the door to the heart. For those who have lived on society's edges, it means living fully and meaningfully within the confines of a world whose premises, if taken at face value, exclude them entirely from existence.

For this reason, the gay relationship to opera is actually quite asexual. The attraction to opera itself is not erotic; it is about generating emotions in a space insulated from the demands and connections that the world normally requires for connection. It goes without saying that the complement of emotion divorced from real life is real-life interaction devoid of emotion: and so the strange flirtatious cruising, the fleeting gestures of contact born from loneliness in the dark. The opera house is sometimes a site for sexual encounter, perhaps; but it is not the domain of born seducers, who can incite the passions they see produced onstage. It is rather for awkward encounters and fumbling hookups.

The erotic is a side interest of opera lovers; often it is rather crudely developed in them. More often than not they are the people who frequent gay hookup websites; alternatively, they are men and women who are still dating their high school sweethearts

years later, passively and resignedly (I have met models for both kinds of person at the opera).

Yet simply because the erotic is divorced from this experience does not mean that passion is too. But it is another kind of passion, more monastic, almost religious. And this is the passion of sustained attention. Everything in the sphere of operagoing requires and celebrates the labor required to maintain focus. Not to fall asleep (and opera fans, like opera haters, fall asleep during operas), not to miss an entrance or a light cue, to catch a perfect figure in the clarinet or a flub in the French horn – and, equally important, to call up, in a reverie of association, the countless points of comparison each moment refracts like light over the face of a crystal. And if something is missed, no fear! There is the divine grace of the next performance, the possibility of redemption the following week, or in another city if the show is leaving on tour. Every moment at the opera – that most collaborative of art forms – is the result of the superhuman collusion of competing and contradictory forces: humans, unions, electricity, machines, historical tradition, and pop culture. To look at any perfect moment in an operatic performance with the eye of the *mélomane* is to see how the countless intertwining threads of a civilization come together into an invisible knot and then melt away into synthesis. To see how the divine arises from the human, and to appreciate how this rising up might make itself manifest in the many spheres of life where you are but a viewer, grateful for its miraculous existence and striving – on what might be one minor road, or forgotten footpath, to Damascus – to think it nevertheless your own. Whether it *is* your own, in any sense moral or aesthetic, must remain unanswered.

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On another spring day, I was to see the full force required of the operagoing instinct in Antoine's capable hands. I was invited to a dress rehearsal of the ballet at the old Opéra Garnier, the Empire-style extravagance on the *avenue de l'Opéra*. When I entered the foyer of the opera house, Antoine and his friend Arnaud were there, bearing ID cards labeled "retired employee of the opera," for only these people have the right to attend dress rehearsals without invitations. How Antoine and Arnaud got the cards they

refused to say, but it was clear they had already been there awhile. They sat on the stairs, packed in along with a hundred other bodies: the twisted forms of aging ballerinas, the gnarled faces of former stagehands, the plump unhealthy expanses of emerita chorus girls. They and many pseudo-retraités, having borrowed or cribbed passes like Antoine, bristled with anticipation and ill humor, sticking to the marble like a hardy colony of birds nesting among the ruins of an abandoned palace, their oiled feathers silently drifting over the grounds like a cloud of ash.

As the hour of opening approached, a palpable unrest flickered in the crowd. Accusations and imprecations flew across the room – *You look rather young to have worked at the opera; My mother was the prima ballerina from 1960 to 1967!* The crutches and canes of the oldest men and women bristled. The people began to rise in waves and push up against the velvet rope which served as a starting gate. Antoine looked at me tenderly and said, *Now is not the time to think highly of humanity.* The impassive ushers looked like ugly little penguins in their disheveled, cheap tuxedos, the synthetic fabric making a spectacular show of attracting snowflakes and sea fans of dust.

Suddenly, the most officious among them came down and unhooked the rope, and the contestants burst from their starting gates. They were off, pressing their cards dismissively in the ushers' faces before scrambling up the grand staircase in a race of mythological grotesques – the graceful hobble of the aging dancers, the gryphon-like advance of the once-massive stagehands, loose flesh flapping in the wind like wings, a score of many-legged beasts lumbering forward on their extra appendages of titanium and wood – all pushing for the velvet finish line of the auditorium.

The goal was to reach the boxes and capture as many seats as needed. The contestants were loaded with scarves, sweaters, and coats – as many accessories as they needed to drape across chairs. Antoine and I were on a mad dash through the opened doors of the boxes, looking for the occasional chair not yet occupied by polyester or a knitted cap. Men limped about sweating in undershirts, having given the shirts off their backs to save an extra chair, *just in case* someone else they knew might later turn up.

Antoine had steadfastly held me by the arm and protected me as we made our way through this torrent of people. The current

having died down, he led me on another parade. We descended to the basement of the foyer and entered the subscribers' rotunda, where in the nineteenth century carriages deposited their riders, and where counts and countesses would leave their coats and hats before preparing to ascend the stairs. And in their footsteps, we too ascended the grand staircase, past the fountain of the Pythian oracle (which, Antoine explained, has never run with water) up both levels, past the great theater-in-reverse of the foyer, with balconies spilling into the stairwell like branches of honeysuckle. We crossed into the great reception hall in the front of the house. It was, he explained, lavishly decorated everywhere except here – and he pointed to a strip of plain plaster about as tall as a person running along the base of the wall – because it was here that the ladies of society lined up to be received by a foreign dignitary or the president of the Republic, and their dresses could not be eclipsed by the décor behind them.

We made the rounds of the ornamental statues, greeting each pair of cold eyes in turn. Antoine was especially taken with four bronze women perched in the four corners of the reception hall, which he asked me to examine closely. Only gradually did I make out a collar of looping wire hanging around the neck of one, with a transistor perched in her Roman hair like a bird's nest above. Another figure wore an oil-lamp crown. A third had four candles stuck in her head and a collar of roses around her neck. Slowly, dimly, the allegory became clear: each figure was a personification of a technology of light. The last and most eccentric wore a heavy pendant of gas tubes and, nestled in her braids, two miniature petroleum wells.

Antoine looked at others in the world (mostly men, but also women) with a tenderness that made my heart break. But he was incapable of confessing anything to anyone except in the passionately disfigured French of a late-night e-mail, when he most openly gave voice to his bottled-up voyeuristic love for others and the world. *How quickly a small thing can change everything else*, he once mused to me; *electrical wire is introduced into the old buildings of Paris and even though the façades and walls all look the same, their bones have been switched out. Much like the oysters in Normandy*, he continued, for he knew Normandy well. *The ships bringing American GIs on D-Day carried with them a second,*

secret army of shellfish, stowed away on their keels. These oysters outcompeted their native counterparts and now dominate the landscape. And so it is that while we sleep, the things we see and eat and fall in love with travel hidden under ships, crossing the seas in the night on errands of an importance beyond our feeble capacity to understand.