

III

Fuoco e sangue

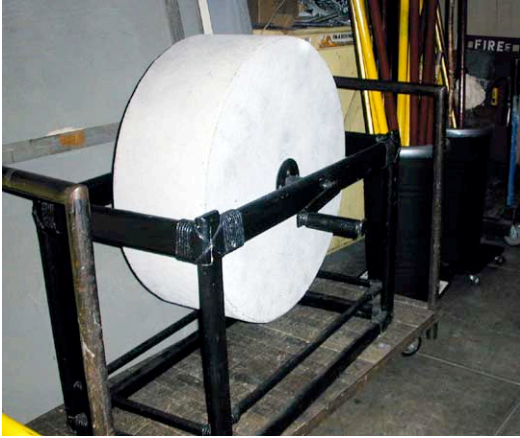
Feuer und Blut

Fire and blood

*We, too, vainly conceal the hearts in our breasts, vainly
Keep back our courage, we masters and youths.
For who might hinder it, and who would deny us that joy?
Divine fire pushes to break out, whether by day or night.
Come, then! Let us see the open realm, let us seek
What is our own, however far it be.
One thing stays solid: whether it is noon
Or goes into midnight, there remains a measure and mean,
Common to all – and yet to each is allotted its own, and
each
Finds there, wherever it can, its source and destination.
So do it! And let jubilant madness defy scorn
When it suddenly grabs the singers in holy night.
So do it! Come to the Isthmus, where the broad sea roars
At the foot of Parnassus and the snow shines round Delphic
cliffs,
There to the land of Olympus, onto the heights of Cithäron,
Under the spruce trees, beneath the grapes, from where
Thebes, down there, and Ismenos roars in the land of
Cadmos,
The God who comes comes from there and shows us the
way back.*

“Brod und Wein,” II-III

MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*



Grindstone (foam plastic) for sharpening Pu-Tin-Pao's ax



Skulls of the unsuccessful suitors, on sticks carried by the *Turandot* children's chorus



Prop for the Prince of Persia's severed head (466 lo0 qual)

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Men are required to be clean-shaven for this production to suit the period of the opera.

Portland Opera director of production, 11 August
2003

In mid-October, our conductor flew in from somewhere for a first long evening rehearsal. I didn't learn his name until the final performances, when I saw it on his stage door. That first evening he told us choristers that our purpose as the oppressed masses was to amplify the emotions of the principal characters and to move the action along with our "repression and bloodlust." Like the scholarly musicologists whose studies of Turandot I was reading, he did interpret parts of the text in detail. But he always related the words and music to the specifics of staging. He wanted us to see and convey the seriousness behind the musical beauty – in our case the roots of our behavior in the arbitrary autocracy and pervasive violence of Turandot's Peking. I thought he was overdoing the socio-political dimension, and suspected that my fellow choristers felt the same way. But we were willing to indulge him. He treated us humanely. In the world of opera, the tyrants who oppress the musical masses do not always appear on-stage in costume and makeup. Some wear tails and flourish batons, like the guy who conducted my second Aida. After the run his long-term contract was cut short.

Our Turandot conductor applied his social or ideological interpretation even to the children's chorus, who were rehearsing their sweet lines about moonlight while gleefully practicing how they were to brandish, in the face of the condemned Prince of Persia, the sticks they had been

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issued, which were topped by phony skulls. These well-schooled children of prosperous, cultured families had to become, our maestro said, "kids from the wrong side of the tracks in Peking." Two of the kids were from my church, and certainly not from the wrong side of the tracks, in either the location of their home or their everyday behavior.

By this time, when the music was pretty secure and the staging becoming the major focus, more than a few of us were getting a kick out of "scaffold humor." We mock-morbidly joshed the ill-fated on-stage Prince of Persia (a non-singer and in real life the domestic partner of the man who played Pu-Tin-Pao, his executioner), and Nick, the chorus tenor who had been selected to sing the Prince of Persia's only line right before the opera-pretend blade descended on his neck off-stage: "Turandot!" For these three syllables – three notes on two pitches, two of the notes just sixteenths, at most two seconds of voice work – Nick was paid \$27 extra for each of the four performances, as was specified in the guild contract the chorus has with the opera management. But that terminal "Turandot" had to be done right: agonized, yet still enamored.

We were also having our first rehearsals with the soloists, and in my thoughts bloodlust, class, and violence were joined by the cultural specter of race. Italian Grand Opera frequently raises the issue – Otello most overtly but also, of course, both the Egyptians and the black Africans in Aïda, including myself in dark body makeup as an Ethiopian POW in our 1999 production. Topping that, the Egyptian king in that Aïda was played by an Afro-British singer who tactfully declined invitations to so-

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cialize with the nearly reverential and really very nice African-Americans in the chorus. All of us Ethiopian POWs, though, whether phony black or really so, got along very well together. After the production we held a veterans of (Ethiopian) Foreign Wars reunion in an Ethiopian restaurant and sang old Verdi war songs in Italian. The Ethiopian waiters, puzzled, indulged us.

Asian themes and characters in stage performances, most notoriously in Miss Saigon, have also aroused controversy. I wondered whether that sensitive issue had influenced our company's engagement of the Taiwanese tenor to sing the role of Calaf, though Calaf is not Chinese – nor, some say, are Taiwanese. But our Calaf showed up only later, as did our Turandot, who was sung by a very American white woman whose accent off-stage turned out to be Southern. First we rehearsed with the soloists for the parts of Timur, the barbarian king and father of the aforesaid Calaf, and Liu, Timur's faithful slave girl and secretly in love with Calaf. Our Timur and Liu were both black, and both were American.

Our cast of principals, then, scarcely lacked diversity – except that none of the soloists was European, much less Italian. The Mandarin and the Emperor – small parts, really – were local white men, the latter possibly at least Italian-American. Whatever. Several months later he was ••among the first gays to obtain a marriage license in my county, which was in turn one of the first to issue such, though only briefly. White men, too, sang the roles of the Chinese courtiers Ping, Pang and Pong. I learned nothing of their sexual preferences, nor cared to.

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In the chorus for our Chinese-theme Italian-language opera we did have, at the start, one Asian-American. She got sick or found a job, and so withdrew. But among the eighty or so of us there were three black singers. Thus, in terms of local demography and common hiring policies, blacks were slightly over-represented in the chorus. That ran contrary to the frequent complaint about the under-representation of blacks in classical music and the defensive (and probably valid) counter-explanations about self-selection. Lutherans, and particularly my church with its three of us in the chorus, were numerous in the cast; as is usual for us, though, we were not prominent, and we certainly made no show of being special.

Some of the principals began wearing parts of their costumes early during staging rehearsals. In his coarse robe Timur – probably 6'6", no visible body-fat, angularly sculpted facial features, and thick, close-trimmed black hair – looked wholly the deposed, desperate but dignified barbarian king. He maintained that look even during rehearsal breaks, which he mostly spent talking on his cell phone in a voice too soft to understand, and still wearing his rags. The art-world of opera rehearsals was mimicking the real-world Third World, where high-tech toys are wielded, sometimes to detonate bombs, sometimes just to conduct business and carry on life, amidst the destitution.

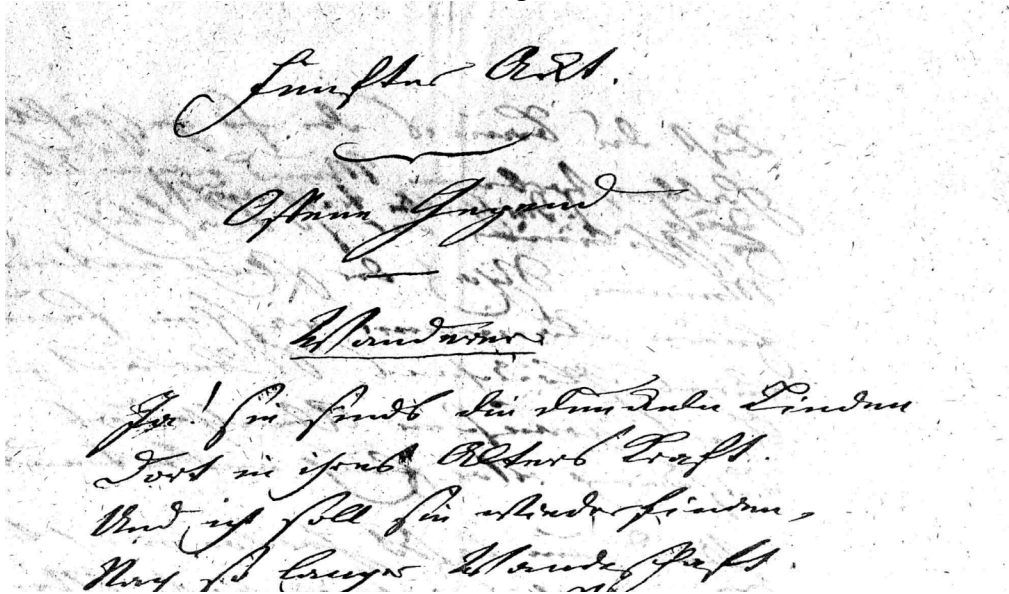
About this time the media reported the death (25 September 2003) of George Plimpton, who for me here is "il miglior fabbro." ♪

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Goethe's own sketch for a theater setting



Opening of Act V of *Faust*, part II, in Goethe's own hand

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Puccini's pessimistic intention [is] to show how the fate of the masses is tightly bound to the fate of those who rule them. It was a theme of great relevance during that period.

Girardi, 463

The Athenians who commissioned the Acropolis would have been puzzled, and the Medicis alternately amused and enraged, by today's engagé intellectuals and artists. Though they themselves are now, at least in my academic world, the dominant paradigm that desperately needs subverting, they still tell us that the purpose of art is to question authority or even undermine and ultimately bring down the establishment.

Germans have long been raised with a similar but much more constructive concept, though it too hindered my initial appreciation of Turandot. In Schiller's words, which defined the German theater in its crucially formative period, drama is a "moral institution," in the sense of a public, collective cultural activity which, as the common word root suggests (these days, rather plaintively), should cultivate the ethics of the individual, the citizen, and the polis. The scholars, correspondingly, have long nervously reassured themselves that comedy is therefore a rarity in classical German literature, and that the stage historically has been where Germans, largely lacking in a democratic tradition and a concept of freedom of speech, went to encounter serious political themes, rather than to be entertained. It was, or maybe still is, undeniably a noble concept of cultural purpose, though the plebeian veteran of a Turandot production may be forgiven for echoing here Ping, Pang and Pong: "Che noia! Che lavoro!" - "What a bore! What unpleasant work!" Goethe did not help out much either when, as supervisor of the theater in Weimar, he shushed an audience which could not help giggling at an inferior performance: "There shall be no laughing." (To be fair,

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though: Goethe knew how to party in private and how to stage a theatrical revel for his pal and lord the duke.)

But never mind. The earnest tradition of German drama went on from Schiller through and beyond Brecht, whose “alienation effect,” which was intended to force audiences to step back from the drama and consider the questions of their society, probably alienated most viewers in another way. Peter Handke’s 1966 play, Publikumsbeschimpfung / Cussing Out the Audience, gleefully summed up the “moral institution”-plus-alienation tradition by having the actors verbally abuse the audience to its face. They explained that they were not going to offer up mere fun and entertainment, since German theater-goers expected, paid for, and even enjoyed their very serious institution, the theater. I am reminded of language students who, after being abused by the grammar lectures and drills offered up by teachers who have not been taught how to teach, simply cannot be “happy” if they do not suffer the same when they come to me.

But, as those master standup comedians Ping, Pang and Pong would say, who wants to live in an institution, moral or otherwise? Our culture has had its revenge on Brecht twice over. Outside the academe and the most serious of theaters, his only claim to fame is that he wrote the lyrics to “Mack the Knife,” with the setting by his musical partner Kurt Weill. Better put, Weill wrote the songs, with lyrics by Brecht. Though himself no mean intellectual and ideologue, Weill sure knew what entertainment-art meant, and that certainly was not alienation. Brecht’s other comeuppance, not that he could know it now, unless he was also wrong about there being no God, is that his cherished Marxism, which was supposed to explain history and then bring the end of history, is now itself history, as is the East Germany he served. If we want to relish the ironic allusion, both the

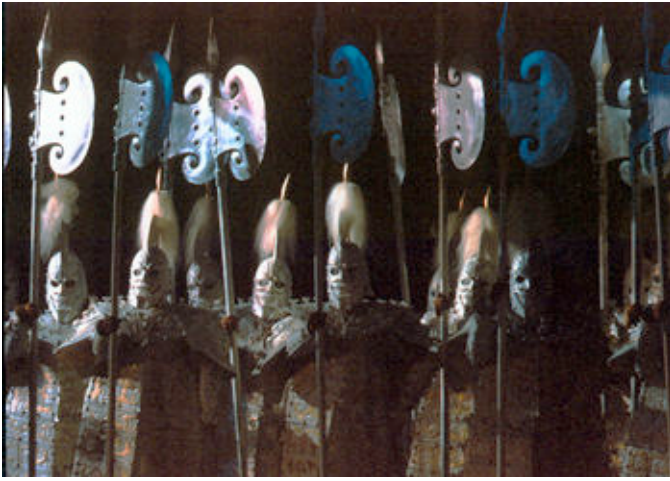
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phony ideology and the phony country have been consigned to the dustbin of history.

Like the German intelligentsia, and especially its Marx Brotherhood, which are often ridiculous but never funny, German literature still takes itself very seriously. In America, the attitude of the intelligentsia seems more to be that art, perhaps except when it is calling for revolution, has no meaning of its own, or at the very most has a meaning that refers only to itself. Music people, especially many of those who actually perform music, seem not to be so dour and puritan. And occasionally, in hushed conversations in university elevators, a few literary scholars talk of the meaning of texts and even the pleasure of reading them, though that is often but a wistful recollection of a time before graduate school, a remembrance of things past. }

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Execution scene during Chinese civil war, ca. ••1920



Turandot, Beijing production



Beijing Production

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I think the ending of modernism did not happen a moment too soon. For the art world of the seventies was filled with artists bent on agendas having nothing much to do with pressing the limits of art or extending the history of art, but with putting art at the service of this or that personal or political goal.

Danto, 15

FIRE AND BLOOD MADE UP THE SUBSTANCE AND EMOTIONS OF AMERICA IN 2003, my year of *Turandot*, even if the violence and destruction and death had shifted from the Homeland to abroad. The still larger context was one of deep ideological conflict, as well as disputes about implementation of those principles upon which there is general though not universal agreement. I know this business of disputation, at its most trivial levels, full well from the university where I work. But it's the same everywhere.

In what is now called our "Homeland" we had and have plenty of questionable intellectual approaches, flaming rhetoric, and downright ignorance at the top. Here I mean specifically though not solely the American Left, which is – admit it, my academic colleagues! – the Dominant Paradigm in almost all of academia, as it certainly is in my particular professional environment, and in the Ecotopia where I live. Plenty of others have taken the radical Right to task for its ignorance and arrogance. The academe and the intelligentsia have more than enough to do reining in their own loose cannons without worrying about others' shortcomings. Or, to cite Pang and Ping, "Qui bastano i pazzi indigeni! Non vogliam più pazzi forestieri!" / "We've enough madmen of our own! We don't want any more foreign ones!"

In my state of Oregon there are many *pazzi* of the *forestieri* persuasion, some of them tree-fellers and many of them tree-huggers. (Italian *forestiero* is indeed cognate with *forest* and *foreign*, and even with *forum*; all are derived from *foris*, 'outside.')

Barely a year after 9/11, and still before the start of the war in Iraq, I sat through

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a faculty senate meeting where that body first opined that logging, rather than the torching of logging trucks, was eco-terrorism. In his salad years my father was a logger for a time; later I grew up with loggers' kids. The august faculty senate then entertained the notion that we should teach our students that the environment could not be saved without breaking laws against terrorism. For an encore that day, it voted to advise the government in Washington about matters of foreign policy and domestic freedom. It – I do not say “we” – did all of that faster, and with a greater majority of votes, than it can handle even the minutest details about the university's parking policy, much less its academic distribution requirement. Our *Turandot* mob could not have done it so sweepingly better, though it would have sounded prettier sung in Italian or, for that matter, “in Sanskrit, in Chinese, or Mongolian,” as Ping, Pang and Pong, who lived in their own version of the academic world, would have added.

All kidding about Yale and the academe aside, the humanistic study of literature, history and philosophy is not a pointless pursuit within the “Aesthetic Education” of a human being, though it can keep at least some of us from aggressively entering the political fray. But sometimes the humanities work in mysterious ways. I knew I had left high school and was in college when I found that I could read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* at the rate of only five pages an hour, even in my native language. But from Kant I got three of my basic intellectual tools: first, the notion that it was an innate characteristic of the human mind that appearances could not be certified as realities; and, second, the concept of antinomies, which gives one a fighting chance to survive in a world of opposing concepts that have equal validity; last, the Categorical Imperative, the demand for generalizable ethical decisions.

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Where that may have helped me most is in my complacent acceptance of religion, and specifically and personally Christianity, along with science. As the philosopher-journalist M. Vos Savant once put it, is it any harder to accept the Trinity of God than the Duality of Matter as Particle and Wave, or the idea of Creation than that of the Big Bang? We might as well get used to it: whatever the actual Truth is, human beings ceaselessly search for meaning and almost always behave as though meaning and causation exist. Often we think that history, too, has a meaning. Sometimes we also regard history as process rather than just happenings. A hazard here is that we think that the process of history will thus have an end. Whether from boredom or *Schadenfreude* or outright egoism, we then – the Dantos no less than the evangelical Christians – like to imagine that we, or at least our art, are in the End Times and shall see the Promised Land or the Second Coming. Or maybe it's just the sadness, or pique, that It will all go on afterward in the Here and How without Me, who will be elsewhere and elsewhen, unless nowhere and nowhen.

One can take the business of antinomies only so far, though, before it becomes intellectual and cultural bad faith; and to me such bad faith is even worse than bad religion. In my own general academic area one school of literary scholarship has convinced itself that texts (and language itself) have no inherent meaning. Nevertheless, those folks continue to study literature, and then write about it, if not for fun then just for tenure and promotion.

The general public can probably regard that activity as relatively harmless and inexpensive. Not so when it takes place in the realms of history, politics and ideology. A notorious “pop” culture example is the “his story / her story” contention that objective history is impossible and, where a history claims to be so, it is a tool of oppression. The “his-story” play on words, being both a sophomoric

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rhetorical device and an insult to etymology, should not be suffered to carry any weight at all, but it undoubtedly does. Bad faith enters the picture when one espouses that extremely subjectivist view and yet seeks to argue from history in discussing politics.

Ignorance of history, when it does not involve methodological bad faith, is still shocking but possibly corrigible. The student who – this is a true story! – asks us which side Germany was on in the Second World War can be given a brief tutorial. I have my doubts, though, when I see bumper stickers that claim, with absolute disregard of the civil rights and peace movements, that “The last time we mixed religion and politics people were burned at the stake.” *Reverend King. Father Berrigan.*

In some instances, perhaps, the combination of extreme subjectivism and extensive historical knowledge can be dealt with by what a colorful philosophy professor I once slightly knew called his “Oh, come now!” approach. That is a reminder to exercise common sense, what German, with an echo of Schiller, calls *gemeiner Menschensinn* or *gesunder Menschenverstand*, the latter meaning literally “healthy human understanding.” In my field, similarly, there is the example of the relativistic literary scholar who claims that no canon of texts should be privileged, but who concedes that, if awakened by someone pointing a gun and demanding a canon, he (or perhaps even she) would be able to produce one. I have gained the impression also that, often enough, the same diversity-touting person, upon having children in school, will demand that they experience the traditional Canon of Western culture, if only for the sake of a better shot at an elite college.

In short, it appears that our age has painted itself into an unholy metaphysical corner, in which – at least where the “progressive” intellectuals hold sway – there can be no meaning, and “meaning” has no meaning, and... But we can still go on doing history and learning about history – if

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not so easily learning *from* history. It is similar with our dealings with language. We are told, by the professors of linguistics, that language has no reliable meaning, or at least that meaning is merely arbitrary, or that communication is impossible; their words tell us this, but we still act as though language worked, and we must do so.

In the everyday business of human communication and of its partial subset, political discussion, what is worse than bad intellectual faith are the consequences of either flat-out ignorance of history, or the refusal to apply knowledge of history according to minimal standards of common sense and language. Of limited damage, when all is said and done and the caravan passes on, are the patently ridiculous comparisons. If an American president is likened to Hitler, that, aside from being nonsense in and of itself, leaves no room between President and Führer for an Idi Amin or a Franco or a Castro or whatever other more forgettable dictators are in power at the moment. You don't need a Ph.D. in German to see how preposterous is the Hitler comparison. Maybe the German Ph.D. helps; but it also hurts, in more than one way: the idiotic comparison pains responsible intellectuals personally, and they can sense how it undermines the society by contaminating the middle ground in which reasonable political disagreements can be deliberated, openly and with civility. Of greater harm is the inability to compare even basic quantities and qualities competently, which is related to incapacity to tolerate difference of opinion in areas of greater complexity. The causes – and consequences – can be factual ignorance, thoughtless rhetorical exaggeration, or fundamental but false ideological conviction. The contention that America is a police state, heard over and over since 2001, at least by those of us in the academe, is proven wrong by the very survival and, often, the personal prosperity and professional advancement, of those who make that assertion; by the continued failure of anyone to

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punish those of us who, knowing the identity of the critics of the police state, fail to denounce them to the authorities; and by the very behavior of those authorities, who would laugh at us in disbelief if we were to attempt to do so.

Here I find it helpful – a sort of “aesthetic education,” I guess, or maybe therapy – to kow-tow to a Chinese emperor and sing “Gloria a te!” – “Glory to thee!” That phrase is translated as “Heil dir!” in the German *Turandot* libretto. The German rendition of our “Alte, alte le bandiere!” – “Hold high the banners!” – is “Hoch, hoch die Fahnen,” which is virtually identical with the first line of that old Nazi favorite, the Horst Wessels Song. Ping, Pang and Pong, with their “sharp irons,... the searing grip of the pincers,” can do their bit to help us get the point by reminding us of the Nazis’ meathooks and piano wire. *Turandot*’s executioner Pu-Tin-Pao is, of course, but a pale example of the Third Reich’s executioners; they used the guillotine to kill only their more fortunate victims.

It is undeniable that a path leads directly from the Schiller of the *Ästhetische Erziehung* and the philosophical poems to Marx, and through him to today’s intellectual Left. But Schiller knew a police state when he saw one, because he actually lived in one and then managed to escape from it. A near thing it was, though. Schiller and every other intellectual in southwestern Germany, including Hölderlin, who himself had a close and still mysterious brush with the local tyrant, had before them the horrifying example of Daniel Friedrich Schubart, a poet, composer, organist and libertarian journalist who spent years in the dungeons of their own Swabian enlightened despot. Schiller’s remains were later to suffer the indignity and insult of resting for forty years in the soil of the German Democratic Republic, which was also a genuine police state, one for which so many Western intellectuals, myself included, once strove mightily to make excuses. ☹