

IV

Cento dolci petti

Hundert süsse Busen

A hundred sweet bosoms

Blessed Greece, thou home of all the gods.

Is it then true, what we heard in our youth?

Festive hall! The sea is your floor! mountains your tables,

They truly were made for that purpose ages ago!

But the thrones – where? the temples, and the vessels,

Filled with nectar, song for the sport of the gods, where?

Where, where do they shine now, the far-reaching oracles?

Delphi slumbers. And where does great destiny resound?

Where is that rapid one, where does it burst into our eyes,

Full of everpresent joy, in thunder from the clear sky?

Great Father! They shouted, sending it a thousand times

from tongue to tongue. None had to bear life alone.

Shared out, this bounty spreads joy; shared with strangers

It turns to rejoicing; the dormant power of the Word grows.

O Great Father! The sign of our forefathers resounds

All around, down to us, marking us and stirring us to create.

For this is how the gods comes to us, how their day

Finally comes down to humankind, out from the darkness.

“Brod und Wein,” IV

MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*



Costuming mannequins, *Turandot*, Portland Opera production

IV • CENTO DOLCI PETTI

The final and most ambitious work from Puccini, *Turandot* is the story of a beautiful princess with a heart of ice, and her three deadly riddles.

Portland Opera promotional literature

When I sang in Turandot, my sense of professional intimacy, of being a body among other musician bodies, ranged from the sublime to the absurd, and from the erotic to the scatological, in three of the four ways those pairs can be combined – theoretically, that is. Not even opera can make the scatological sublime, although our elephant in the 1999 *Aida* came close to it.

Anyone who would critique the world of classical music by delving into racial stereotyping or citing demographics, pro or contra, would have to work around a multicultural miracle of, yes, Western civilization in our production: the wondrously beautiful young woman with the Italian surname, the rich and sweetly-toned British accent, the knockout fashion sense – and the intensely dark skin. The speech was from London, the cultural world that of the art studio and Grand Opera, the color originally out of Africa, the woman herself sincerely welcoming to all, even to me, who certainly did not stand out among the many late-middle-aged white men in the chorus crowd.

I build furniture in my basement, and I have worked with mahogany, walnut and ebony, the stereotypical wood metaphors for black skin. Therefore I can testify – seldom has a word been so etymologically apt – that those woods and words do not even begin to suffice as similes or metaphors for her skin. Much less do they suffice to convey the

MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*

human being and woman and singer and visual artist herself. Art and life cannot always imitate each other, and when you join together to perform Puccini, differences of race, sex, and sexuality mean nothing – however large their role in the opera itself.

Staging rehearsals, which also began in mid-October, brought warnings about maintaining safety when a hundred performers are moving vigorously about on a modest-sized stage, with some of the principals up to thirty feet high on wheeled tower-platforms. We were issued kneepads and reminded that the chorus would spend about 95% of its time on its knees. A slight exaggeration, that, but from the time of my second *Aïda*, when I was an Ethiopian POW, my daughters had been asking why opera choruses spent so much time groveling and the rest of it menacing. The production people and the chorus union representative also made mention of good personal hygiene, for we would be spending a lot of time at close quarters. That demanded not just cleanliness, but also avoiding even the ordinarily pleasant fragrances that can trigger allergies and devastate a singing voice.

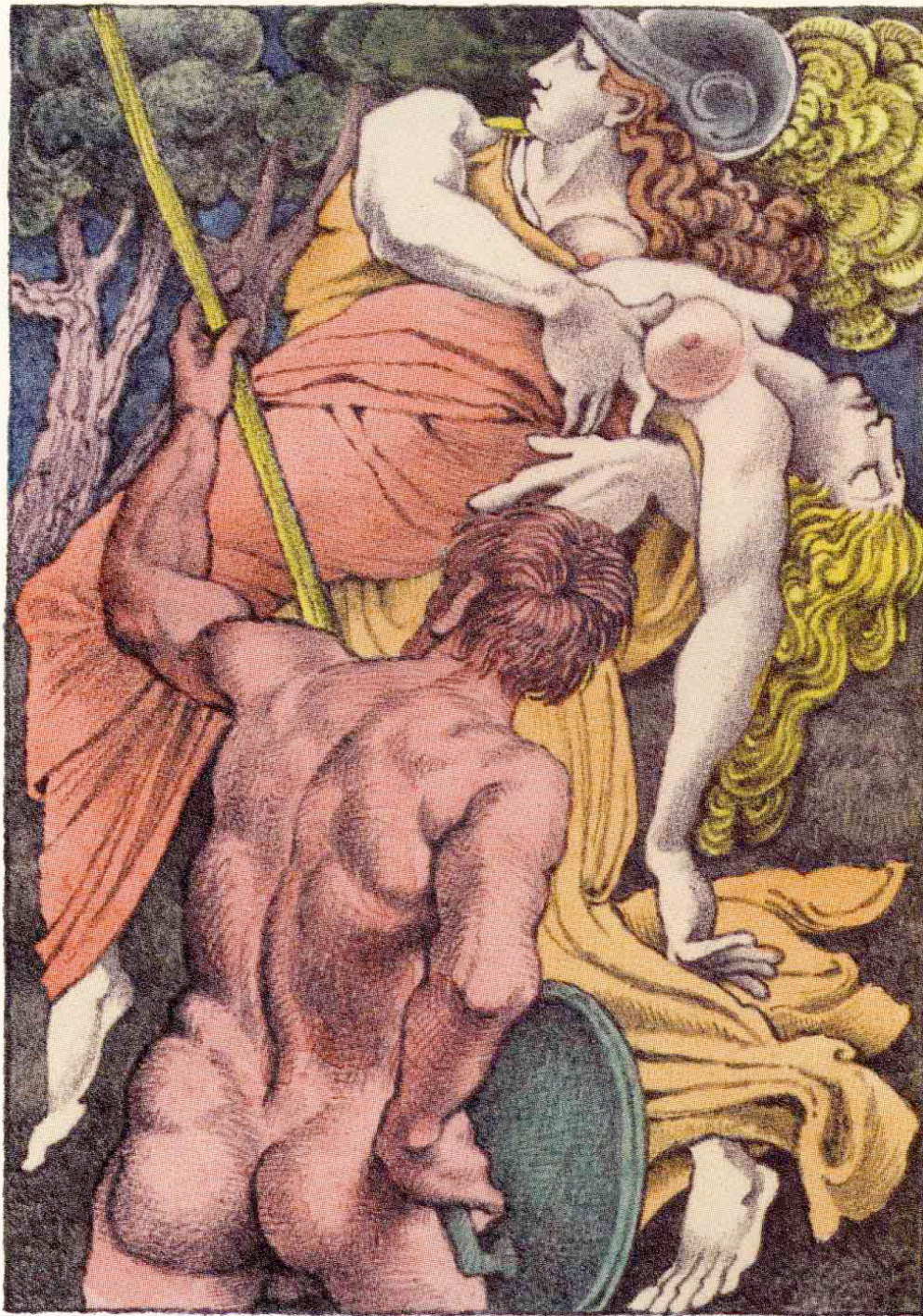
It was about this time they picked the three women who would be performing the seductive dance in Act III, backlit behind a tastefully translucent curtain. The choices – the stunning black woman from London and two others of lithe but not emaciated shape – were obvious, as were the reasons for the selection: the three were, by far, the sexiest shapes we could muster. No one raised feminist quibbles. An opera company has little time to discuss sexual stereotypes, body self-images, and the objectification of women.

IV • CENTO DOLCI PETTI

I was amused at how many of the chorus were of Wagnerian proportions, since we were portraying the oppressed, starving urban underclass of Peking. And yet, because of the musical tastes of top management, our company had not produced a German opera in years: truly a waste of the waists of some wannabe Rhine Maidens. The corpulence was not the obesity of poverty's unhealthy low-expense nutrition. The talk during rehearsal breaks proved that our chorus knew how to eat and drink.

A little proctological humor escaped in our crowded rehearsals. In the riddle scene we chorister-masses were to kowtow to the Emperor and Ice Princess, with one person's nose at forearm's length from the next person's butt. That was also when, sneaking a look up in mid-kowtow, I beheld a fantasy-world mix of East and West, ancient and modern: Pong was practicing wearing his bell-shaped, semi-rigid knee-length courtier's hoop-skirt. Very visible below its hem were two hairy legs and his sockless feet in running shoes bearing the swoosh brand of Portland's own Nike company. The shoes were probably made in the sweatshops of post-Mao China by the real-world descendants of us neverneverland-opera choristers, the downtrodden "popolo de Pekino" ♪

MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*



••Caption

IV • CENTO DOLCI PETTI

...the perversity of a love born from seeing a woman condemn a man to death.

Girardi, 466

People in my line of work, including those of us who write serious language textbooks that don't sell well, soon become familiar, perhaps enviously so, with such tawdry, shallowly humorous, money-grubbing commercial language resources as Wicked Spanish ("I think I'm going to throw up – may I borrow your sombrero?"). But here the libretti of Italian operas, and particularly the one Adami and Simoni created for Turandot, are not to be outdone for some juicy Italian that the ambitious or foolhardy novice can gird on for a death-defying leap, a salto mortale, into a phony fluency.

I know of nothing in the German highbrow musical or literary pantheon that is equivalent, at least in quantity, to Turandot's racy-lacy Italian barbs of enmity or arrows of Eros (or both at once). True, generations of more or less educated German males, and German professors, and professors of German as well, have mined Goethe for apt quotations, particularly from Faust. Among the thousands of its unsexed verses they seize upon the few key lines that can be mustered to convince a literate lover and his intended lass that they are replaying that old trope: the genius-rank intellectual who has a passionate core that waits only for the understanding attentions of a pure and by no means unintelligent maiden who can lovingly relieve him of his awkwardness (and has nice tits too, or at least long golden braids – and Goethe was not above such blunt language, at least in his youth). Not much different, actually, from the ice-woman Turandot and her boy-toys, one of whom will become her lasting love. All we have to do is reverse the genders, both grammatical and biological, and allow for

MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*

the essential (yes!) difference that does exist between the two sexes.

Now back to Turandot and Italian for tourists, whether lovers and fighters or just linguistic self-defense artists. Starting with the quick lines that can be marshaled to fend off annoying trinket vendors and self-appointed tour guides, we have:

“Indietro, cani!” (“Back, you dogs!”)

“O scappi, o il funeral per te s’appressa!” (“Either be off, or your funeral is imminent!”)

Calaf furnishes some lines, too, for the would-be Italian lover, who on occasion may have to seduce a Turandot-type:

“La mia vita è il tuo bacio!” (“My life is your kiss!”)

“Ti voglio tutta ardente d’amor!” (“I would have you aflame with love.” – My CD’s English libretto is prissy here, and elsewhere.)

“Tutto splenderà!” (“Everything will be beautiful!”)

Think of Woody Allen, the oceanside cottage love-nest – and the opera recording he lip-syncs to while he tries to get his escaped lobsters back into the kettle and the girl into the hay.

The seducer’s intended conquest is not left defenseless when she’s used up the famous “Nessun m’avrà!” (“No one shall have me!”).

“Per il cielo, Fermi!” (“For Heaven’s sake, stop!”)

“O ragazzo demente!” (“You crazy boy!” – although this one could backfire if scorn is mistaken for coyness)

No doubt the most devastating to the ardent Italian (or ardent faux-Italian) of the male persuasion is the riposte:

“Che noia!” (“What a bore!”)

But the seducer can nock another arrow from his Cupid’s quiver. In college we weakly countered a girl’s protestations of desiring only Platonic love by saying,

IV • CENTO DOLCI PETTI

“Plato’s been dead 2500 years.” Much more elegant and erotically overpowering is the libretto’s:

“La tua anima è in alto, ma il tuo corpo è vicino!”
 (“Your soul is up there but your body is close beside me!”)

Nothing beats a combination of flowery Italian and the luscious tones of Puccini when you want your language to put a next-to-nothing artistic nightie on Aphrodite:

“Gloria, Gloria al bel corpo discinto che il mistero ignorato ora sa!” (“Hail, hail to the beautiful unclad body now initiated into the mystery!”)

But perhaps I’m just seeking to rejuvenate myself with a phrase from an oldie sung by the Yale Whiffenpoofs of my youth.

Whatever the merits of Wicked German against its Italian counterpart, when it comes to the language of love and hate German librettos simply cannot compete against Italian libretti, not even the one Richard Strauss used for Salome, that opera of lust, disrobing and beheading, and of how words (whether riddles or promises) can have fatal consequences. And that is part of my larger point.

But first we need to get down from the ethereal “up there,” or back up from the gutter, to take up a linguistic point that has to do with body language. Here “body languages” does not mean gestures, the language of the body, but rather language about the body. The Unknown Prince is captivated by the beauty of the Princess he has just seen send a would-be lover to his death. “I suffer, I shall conquer,” the tenor wails and shouts (guys!: more good all-purpose Italian lines) – and suddenly the three Ministers of the Emperor, the terribly ridiculous and ridiculously named Ping, Pang and Pong, pop up from wherever and mock him with the certainty that he will suffer a horrible death for being so stupid (“stolto”) as to chase one particular woman. Far better, they sing, would

MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*

be either to “*lascia le donne!*” (“Leave off the women!”), or else “*prendi cento spose*” (“take a hundred wives”). Their musical-mathematical inventory of the totals of the various body parts thus available ends with “*cento dolci petti sparsi per cento letti*” (“a hundred sweet bosoms scattered over a hundred beds”). (“Scattered” is infelicitous, but I supposed “sprawled” is not much better, and “spread” does not go at all well with “bed” here; metonymy has its limits.) In its numbers and musicality Leporello’s tally of seductions in *Don Giovanni* still tops the Turandot trio, but Puccini has the voyeuristic edge.

As a linguist and one-time math whiz I simply must say something more about breasts, bosoms, and gender, the last initially in its older grammatical sense. I join the rear-guarders who grimace when an official form asks us to indicate “gender,” when the category should be labeled “sex.” No doubt the shift in terminology is due in part to a shift in meaning, since now the first meaning of “sex” is the bedroom (or, for all I know, back-alley) activity rather than the biological characteristic, the basic shape of the genitalia. (As that linguistic shift was occurring, word-wags like my mother could mark its coming by joking about writing “occasionally” in the blank labeled “sex” on this or that form.) Times have changed, and not for the better. Anyone who might go so far as to allude unkindly to how “gender” has been used to relativize the differences between the sexes runs the distinct risk of being condemned as an essentialist, even if that person should be my schoolteacher mother, my journalist wife, or any of my three very literate, multilingual and multicultural pre-professional but post-feminist daughters.

While we’re on that topic, Calaf’s life would have been much less dangerous and eventful, if not happier, had he been reared by my mother, although then he would not have had his Turandot nor we our Turandot. In her early adult years, during the Depression, she taught one-room

IV • CENTO DOLCI PETTI

school in Nebraska. She was better educated than my father, the car mechanic, though that does not mean that she was more intelligent. And she also outearned him, as my own wife outearns me. As a child I was filled with quotes from the great writers and speakers of English. It would be uncharitable to note that it was rather self-serving of my mother to teach me Lincoln's "All that I am or ever hope to be I owe to my mother." From the woman who managed the family finances (like mother, like wife) I also got Byron: "Man's love is of man's life a thing apart; 'Tis woman's whole existence." (What else could that be from but Don Juan? Yet with that slippery "'Tis" and the ambiguous "love" - is it to mean the one person, or the essential, even obsessive faculty of loving? - was Byron also describing his own alleycat, incestuous promiscuity? Certainly, though, I didn't learn about that part back then from Mom.)

But my mother (I don't remember if, as a child or even much later, I ever called her "Mom") could be pretty sentimental, at least when she gave it enough thought and then was of a mind to be so. Poor womanish Calaf, devoted to a woman who holds the record for keeping love "a thing apart" in her life! For "after all," as Tammy Wynette sings it in "Stand by Your Man," "he's just a man." It is a line which my wife (like mother, like wife) uses to teach her daughters their gender identities and proper place in the scheme of things. I worked out all these thoughts and theories in the untold hours I put in as the family cook and grocery-shopper.

I hope I have created a diverting distraction by mentioning the family "womenfolk," as the menfolk I grew up among used to call them, with cautious humor. Now I will beat an unmanly retreat from the controversies of our American day and age and get back to matters of the language of an opera. I will then proceed to a nasty and beautiful story of boys and girls who, with almost -

MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*

almost – gender-neutral equality, grow up playing with war toys before going on to the real thing.

In Italian, one of the words for “breast,” petto, is singular and (mirabile dictu!) masculine; it can mean either one such or, when taken together, two (and, possibly, more). The same is true of a synonym, seno, but petto can also mean “chest” or even, by extension, “heart,” as in the “Guerra! War!” chorus of Aida. The original language of our libretto proves that petti, despite the ambiguity, is erotic enough for the Italian listener, or viewer. Now for the translations. Between the math and the multiple meanings the translators had their hands full. Like petto in Italian, “breast” in English has a second, unisex meaning, of “chest” or “heart”. But that meaning is poetic and flat-out archaic; so translating “centi dolci petti” as “a hundred sweet breasts” leaves us a hundred breasts too few to go along with those “two hundred arms”.

“Two hundred sweet breasts” is somehow a bust or, rather, just too much separation when one attempts to visualize all two hundred along with the two hundred arms (though those, somehow, visualize properly). Christopher Moore has said the same but much more prettily in Lamb: The Gospel according to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal. Biff’s own people in Nazareth see breasts only when they are being employed, usually in the singular, to nurse infants. Relishing the open nudity of statues in a nearby Roman town, he remarks that breasts “just seem friendlier in pairs.”

The libretto’s English translators, perhaps thinking along similar lines, sought to make Ping, Pang and Pong’s mammarian meaning unambiguous by translating “cento dolci petti” as “a hundred sweet bosoms.” Most infelicitous, these “bosoms”. The word bestows a very unerotic matronliness, or else calls to mind the

IV • CENTO DOLCI PETTI

brawny, brassy titillations of Gypsy Rose Lee and the legendary “bazoom” school of robust striptease.

The French translation of the libretto (French, here, of all languages!) renders Puccini’s petti, or rather the libretto’s, as “cent poitrines,” which denotes only “chest,” with no direction connotation of “breasts” (“les seins”). Even the German translation is more lascivious than the French. Busen, though it is cognate to English “bosom,” lacks our word’s matronly linguistic corset, as can be seen from “Busenhälter,” the standard German word for the prissy English / French “brassiere,” a euphemism which is based on bras ‘arm’. The Italian term, reggipetto, uses the same foundation as Busenhälter, and the word has the same earthy literalness as the German term; both mean “breast holder.” The singular form of “breast” used in the German and Italian terms and their literal English equivalent, where clearly what is being held is plural, or more precisely dual, may reflect the constraints of word formation in those languages. But one does think of the old, unkind joke about how we know that the toothbrush was invented in Kentucky.

These points are not petty; they are neither frivolous nor trivial to a discussion of Turandot, for there is a German drama of similar theme and motif, though absolutely opposite outcome: the tragedy Penthesilea (1807), by Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811). In the German literary pantheon Kleist enjoys every bit of the stature that Puccini does in that of Italian opera, though he led a life that was in so many ways the direct opposite of Puccini’s.

In Penthesilea, a hundred bosoms would indeed be just a hundred breasts. Kleist builds on a variant of the Trojan War legend, where Achilles does not die at Troy, but rather goes off to conquer the Amazons, who are led by their young queen Penthesilea. The Amazons are not

MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*

truly “breastless,” as the word “a-mazon” means in Greek, but actually one-breasted, having sacrificed one to surgery, the better to draw the bow. The Law of their society commands them to conquer men in battle and take them home as captives to their Rose Festival, where the captives, so they are told, shall enjoy “ecstasy beyond constraint or measure.” (My city, too, has a Rose Festival, in June, but it is much tamer and usually gets rained on.) In *Penthesilea*, as in *Turandot*, the origin and purpose of the mysterious Law are explained only much later. Of course, the many who are killed through the Law never learn its cause. Nor, for that matter, do they receive any of the erotic benefits it confers on those who conduct their courtships according to its terms. But every society regulates sexuality, and violence as well, though sometimes we may be astonished at just what is forbidden (or tolerated, or excused, or legalized, or even mandated) and how the Law, whatever it is, is enforced. }

IV • CENTO DOLCI PETTI

MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*

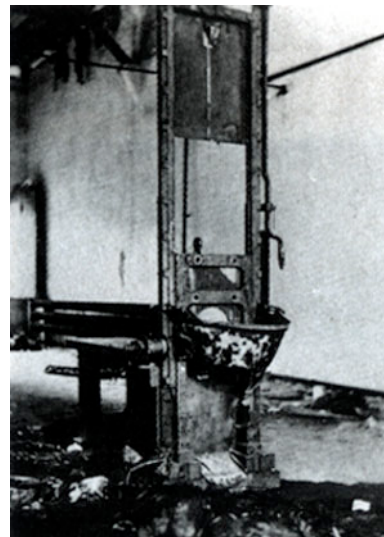
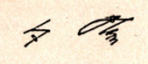
opposite IVc



Goya, Liberty Leading the People

↳ Geschäftsinhaberin Anna Krauss, Urteil vom 12.2.1943, wegen Zersetzung der Wehrkraft;
↳ Ehefrau Ingeborg Kummerow, Urteil vom 27.1.1943, wegen Beihilfe zur Spionage;
↳ Keramikerin Cato Bontjes van Beek, Urteil vom 18.1.1943, wegen Beihilfe zur Vorbereitung des Hochverrats und zur Feindbegünstigung;
↳ Schülerin Liane Berkowitz, Urteil vom 18.1.1943, wegen Beihilfe zur Vorbereitung des Hochverrats und zur Feindbegünstigung.

Ich lehne einen Gnadenerweis ab.



Hitler rejects appeals for clemency for German anti-Nazi activists sentenced to death. Of the 17 condemned in this document, 13 were women.

The guillotine at Plötzensee prison in Berlin, where almost 3000 anti-Nazi activists were executed.

IV • CENTO DOLCI PETTI

Recently I have been struck by some empirical work in psychology which strongly supports the thesis that there are perceptions of beauty which cut across cultural lines. A 1994 study in *Nature* reported that both British and Japanese men and women ranked women's faces in order of attractiveness when certain features were exaggerated.... Caucasians, moreover, ranked Japanese women's faces the same way Japanese themselves did... The term "essentialist" has become anathema in the postmodern world primarily in contexts of gender and secondarily in contexts of politics. Certain views of the essence of womanhood have been felt (rightly) to be oppressive to women at certain stages in the history of humankind; and the idea of participating in a single essence of Arabism has, in a celebrated polemic of Edward Said, obscured the differences among Arabs to Western eyes (let us overlook the essentialism of "Western"). So it has been viewed as morally and politically better to deny the existence of a female essence (for example) than to undertake the search for one.

Danto 96, 196

AT THE END OF JOHN STEINBECK'S *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*, the girl-woman Rosasharn, who has lost a baby in childbirth, saves a victim of the Great Depression, a grown man, from starvation. She suckles him. A critic of the time remarked that it was a touching scene, but could not be regarded as a serious suggestion for dealing with widespread hunger and the need for social reform.

Even so, Steinbeck and the other progressive writers I read in my youth as a parlor Fabian Socialist had serious political concerns and were not going to be satisfied with sentimental individual solutions. The Marxism which was feeding American leftist thought in those times believed very much that history had meaning. It was essentialist, as were the authors I was reading, if one can now even dare to utter aloud the term "essentialist" and then hope it means something, let alone the same thing to whoever is in the discussion.

MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*

The progressive and the radical Left of my boyhood wanted so very much to find the laws and levers of history, to discern how it would end and then maybe help it along a little. And so did I, as I read my Steinbeck, Dos Passos, Sandburg; and – continuing with another populist poet – Edgar Lee Masters, and also Sherwood Anderson and Edwin Arlington Robinson, those portraitists of the American small town. The local public library, an institution created by the robber-baron capitalism of Andrew Carnegie, was well stocked with the sort of intellectual rope from which some hoped to hang that capitalism. (I got some fellowship money from his foundation later on, and also from Chrysler.)

Had the library not been so supplied, my Mid-Western mother's stock of such subversive stuff at home would have sufficed (though neither I nor, I think she, knew it was subversive). Much later I discovered her original edition of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. She was by no means a subversive, but she was a Democrat, one of what was then still a very rare sub-species, the Nebraska Democrat. It was a time when Nebraskan transplants in southern Oregon still relished the old gallus-snapper about how there were millions of Democrats in Nebraska; "Democrat" also was a nickname for bedbug. The Southern Oregon of my youth was Goldwater country. It was also, unlike Goldwater, notoriously racist; until the late 1960s, an informal "sundown law" kept it strictly white.

And yet, and yet. Eugene V. 'Debbs' Potts, a very successful local politician and a consummate populist, carried the name of that great socialist Debs. The given names of the man in the Nebraska-transplant couple with whom my parents played cribbage were "William Jennings," and I first learned of Bryan as the great "Cross of Gold" populist, not as the moribund enemy of Darwinism and opponent of Clarence Darrow at the Scopes Trial. Still, I am certain that my mother was a lover of Midwestern litera-

IV • CENTO DOLCI PETTI

ture first and, in distant second, a political creature. (Any modern liberal tempted to pooh-pooh Bryan as kin to today's Christian Rightists should pause to consider this: Bryan and Darrow were fellow radical pacifists; but while Darrow compromised his pacifism to support the country's entry into WWI, Bryan resigned as Wilson's Secretary of State in protest of it. That Darrow, at the Scopes trial, cited as evidence for evolution the Piltdown Man, now a proven hoax, is something too wild to be explored even here.)

It was a glorious time to be a juvenile leftist in southern Oregon, to be the only LBJ supporter in my circle at high school, to attend John Birch Society meetings in order to spy on them. My father, a Republican, disapproved of my visits to those "radicals." My parents disapproved of radicalism of any kind, and besides, it was that time in American politics when the parties were approaching their great ideological flipflop. My father was not a Republican because he was conservative, although he was conservative. The Republican Party was still – still, but just barely still – the party associated with the Union, emancipation, abolition, civil rights. It was the party *not* associated with segregation. But I think that regional identity and culture mattered far more to Dad, who relinquished his racial biases only later, but indeed sincerely. His Republican allegiance came from his Midwestern background, and his dislike of – the spelling indicates the pronunciation – Franklin D. Roooosevelt. In any case, politics were not the commonest topic of conversation in our home. We had other things to talk about; and anyway, children had no business catechizing their elders about their politics, much less preaching their own views.

Every few years my jejune leftist ideology was boosted by a visit from Aunt Hattie, my father's much older sister and ideological antithesis. She had been christened "Hedwig," but no doubt was as quick as most German-

MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*

Americans to anglicize her name when 1917 made that seem prudent – and, to some German-Americans, earnestly desirable. As a young woman she had escaped – or just resolutely taken her leave from – the small-town bourgeoisie of northeastern Nebraska. She took with her the basic education that had been given her in the public schools maintained by a bourgeois capitalistic society, and almost certainly retained the primness of her background. She became a piano teacher and, in ideology if not personal behavior, God knows what else in the cultural circles of Chicago. Debs was but one of so many radicals in Chicago.

By remaining a spinster, though by no means antisocial (there were rumors of a gentleman “friend”), my aunt could preserve both her independence and her income. She donated heavily to liberal causes, served on the board of the Symphony, and traveled the world. I was fascinated by her anecdote about receiving some help from a courtly, congenial Russian-speaking Asian at a nearby table in a restaurant in Moscow. In Moscow. Sukarno and my eccentric spinster Aunt Hattie. In the Fifties.

So indeed I daydreamed of becoming a labor union lawyer, when I was not building rockets with my chemistry and Erector sets, or winning the state science fair with my home-built telescope. When our high-school band traveled to San Francisco to play in the half-time of a pro football game, I came upon a newspaper box that held the *Daily Worker*. I smuggled a copy home in my suitcase and hid it in the dead space under the bottom drawer of my bureau, where later I would secrete another great, rare find of those earlier days, a discarded *Playboy* centerfold I happened on under the bleachers at our high-school stadium. Shorter trips to the next-largest town allowed me to see and even ride on the one elevator of that town; it lofted majestically from the ground floor to the second floor of the emporium, and then back down, just as majestically.

IV • CENTO DOLCI PETTI

A half-day's drive allowed us to ride on escalators in Oregon's one and only metropolis, where I now reside and teach; the escalators had wooden treads. But in that city I had full run of the bookstores, and there I could buy Games theory / Riemann. (ordered from Dover?). Buy, yes; understand, not really. But I tried.

I reached Yale College by means of a National Merit Scholarship and a cross-country bus ride. It was my first travel to the East, aside from a family trip to Iowa (Iowa being part of the East, from the Oregon perspective). Yale entered my world because I had become bored with high school and had discovered that a few schools offered admission after junior year. I had earlier known of New Haven only as the home of the A. C. Gilbert Co., manufacturer of my electric train and my Erector set. Several times when I was of grade-school age I had ordered extras parts from Gilbert by typing letters on an ancient Royal typewriter, learning from my mother the proper language of business letters ("Dear Sir or Madam," "Thank you for your kind attention and assistance").

At Yale, while trying (though not too hard) to figure out who or what Hotchkiss and Andover and Phillips and Exeter were, I conducted a very brief flirtation with the Party of the Left. That was during those first few weeks of freshmen year when the various student agencies and organizations came visiting and people arranged their weekly laundry service and determined their new local political affiliations, sometimes during simultaneous conversations. I then approached the same subject – ideology, I mean of course, not laundry service – from another direction: the survey course in German literature. Instead of looking back to Steinbeck, the Wobblies, and the Haymarket Riot, and thence further back in time toward Marx and farther in space to the British Fabians, I was reading some authors located chronologically back beyond Marx, in the Age of Goethe. And I was reading them within

MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*

a culture that – to see this took me until well beyond my freshman year – differed wildly from my own American one. Later in the survey course we would get Brecht, with his aesthetics and ideology. Early on the purpose was to get through almost a thousand years of German literature, with a week or so for Luther and another for the intense religious poetry that grew out of (and helped bring about) the Thirty Years' War. So the first time I encountered major culture wars I simply didn't get it.

For we had to reach betimes the German Enlightenment, *Sturm und Drang*, Classicism, and Romanticism – terms once so familiar to the American intelligentsia, now so alien to it, so, well, “Eurocentric” and thus now suspect. In this Germanic canon we could acknowledge, with a particular sense of nobility, the Good German Lessing, that model of German anti-anti-Semitism, and also Schiller, the hero of freedom-lovers, who also was somehow to be linked to Kant. (I got the link to Freud and Marx a little later.) But of course Goethe and *Faust* were the chief destination. The intricacies and abstractions of Schiller's philosophical and historical thought would probably have been wasted on us then, and we lacked the maturity to make much of the rest of Goethe. It was only some years later that I really dug into Goethe's *Roman Elegies*, which have more than a handful of *dolci petti* in them, but along with that the German earnest insistence on finding deeper meaning in Art and Eros and everything else. *Utile et dulci*, as I picked up the phrase while absorbing Horace via Lessing.

But even then, being Yale undergraduates, we could so we thought – handle *Faust*, with its pathos of the world-class intellectual and Renaissance Man, so like our young selves, and its passion for a Meaningful Relationship that also includes some sex. Generalize and symbolize that into the Eternal Feminine, which can seem to be the cause and *telos* of everything, and you've got a very appealing essen-

IV • CENTO DOLCI PETTI

tialist view of humanity, women, history, and the development of culture and civilization. It was also a good topic to try to impress girls with when there were mixers on the weekends. Co-education came to Yale only the year after I graduated.

I think the survey included Schiller's "Der Spaziergang." If it didn't, there was Hölderlin's "Brod und Wein," of necessity only briefly considered, but from thereafter a fascination for me. But you can't do Hölderlin without Schiller, and without "Spaziergang", "Brod und Wein" could not have been written, and cannot be understood.

When it comes to the narrative, theory, and meaning of history, the final four verses of "Der Spaziergang," the last of them the most quoted of the poem, establish Schiller as an essentialist. They use that familiar trope and male adolescent fixation, the breast, here less as Italian *dolci petti* and more as Latin *utile et dulci*, to express the connection of humans, throughout time and space to Nature, who is a maternal "Du/thou":

Nährest an gleicher Brust die vielfach wechselnden Alter;

Unter demselben Blau, über dem nämlichen Grün

*Wandeln die nahen und wandeln vereint die fernen
Geschlechter,*

Und die Sonne Homers, siehe! sie lächelt auch uns!

[At the same breast thou feed'st ever-new generations.

*'neath the same sky, blue, on the same earth, green,
come and go, near and far, the tribes of Man.*

And yet look! Homer's Sun – it smiles on us, too!]

One may wonder here what the very youthful Marx thought when he read these lines, as he almost certainly did. But while still fairly young, in his title & check the fact (1844), he asserted the direct opposite. Or, rather, he confessed that he could not explain how Homer could have meaning for us, or how we could hope to appreciate

MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*

Homer, when we were alien to the world of Homer. Similarly, Danto (199) tells us that we cannot in any sufficient way “relate to [the life-forms of art] in the same way as those could whose forms they originally were.”

Schiller not only says that we indeed can make sense of Homer’s world, but that we can recreate its essence in our world – or that sometime, sometime, we eventually will. The same Nature, which is tantamount to the Deity as well, produced both the Ancients and the Moderns, or at least those of the latter who can attain the same spirit as the Ancients. Unlike Hegel and Marx, Schiller does not believe that history can end – or at least not yet, and not for a long time to come, because there is yet so much to do; he leaves unclear whether the next epic age will be the last. Unlike post-Moderns, he does not believe that history is always the same, or at least absolutely relative. His theory asserts values, rather than relativizing them to the point where they cease to exist.

Here there may be a key in two very different verses of “Der Spaziergang” that also are often quoted by literary scholars, but for quite another purpose. Schiller cites the pan-Hellenic victory over the Persians under their king Darius at Thermopylæ in 490 BC as a crucial event in the emergence of civilization. He offers his German rendition of Cicero’s Latin rendition of the Greek of Simonides’ epitaph for the heroes:

“Wanderer, kommst du nach Sparta, verkündige dorten, du habest

Uns hier liegen gesehn, wie das Gesetz es befahl.”

[*“Wanderer, if you come to Sparta, proclaim there:*

You saw us lying here, as the law did command.”]

The verse has long been cited as the quintessential example of emulating in German the classical Latin and Greek distich verse-form. In the past that same verse, along with Cicero’s “*Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori*” (“It is

IV • CENTO DOLCI PETTI

sweet and proper to die for one's country"), would also have been part of something more fateful for the world: the patriotic education of the German elite, both the military elite that turned the small political unit of Prussia into a world-class power, and the intellectual elite that provided the ideological and cultural foundation for the militarism.

In my American Germanist profession we add our own fillip to the "dulce et decorum" motif. An essay disputing Cicero's sentiment and changing the Latin to "...pro ••patria [••live]" got the juvenile Brecht expelled from his university preparatory school in 1915. During the Sixties and Seventies that essay reappeared in at least one commonly used German textbook in America, with the double goal of guiding the political thinking of American youth to the "correct" views of war, and of showing them that there had been some "good Germans" during the Nazi Era. We teachers of German to Americans also usually mentioned Brecht's "heroic" defiance or "amusing" nose-tweaking of the House Un-American Activities Committee. We did not point out that Brecht found in America a comfortable refuge both from Nazism and from Stalinism, in contrast to other German leftists who stayed to resist and die, or fled to the Soviet Union and often disappeared in purges. We largely failed to face what he contributed, whether before, during, or after WWII, to the monster of Stalinism, with its archipelago of gulags in the Soviet Union and its imposition of communism on, among other societies, East Germany, where it survived until 1989.

Hölderlin's "Der Archipelagus / "The Archipelago" is another poem about the emergence of the Greek Golden Age and its heroic defeat of Persian imperialism, this time that of Darius' son Xerxes at the Battle of Salamis in 480 BC. Although German scholars of the Age of Goethe and later were among the most erudite (and neurotic and obsessive) the intellectual world has seen, for the emerg-

MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*

ing German national ideology and creation myth ancient history, and particularly that of Greece, was ultimately a matter of blood and iron – and bronze and gold. Properly understood, with the heart as well as the mind, the record of a resource-poor land of bickering little subnations as they came together into a civilization – No! a *Kultur!* and with a classic language and literature! – could show the way into the future and the glorious emergence of a Germany from a loose collection of statelets.

The young intellectuals and poets of that still-hypothetical Germany, though-rich but achievement-starved (Hölderlin's terms, from his poem ••“To the Germans”), were ready to do the historical and philosophical spadework that helped other wanna-be Germans, of varying qualities of intellect and cultivation, to create the Reich. Or, rather, *a* Reich, since Hölderlin, had he maintained his sanity and lived just a few years longer, would doubtless have seen the liberal would-be Germany of the 1848 as the new Grecian Germany. If not, a magical look into the future at the Second Reich of the Hohenzollerns would have changed his mind in favor of 1848, just as a still further look into the Twentieth Century would have made him a philo-Wilhelmine – or a madman. Funny. In his later, quite insane years, Hölderlin would please the occasional visitor of literary inclination by dashing off a trivial verse or two and then autographing it with some sort of name and date. One such date is “1943”.

••Habent libri sui fatum, but rarely so horrible a one as Hölderlin's. During WWI the works of the then newly-rediscovered Hölderlin, ••George stuff here (including homoerotic allusion?), were issued in large “field” editions for German soldiers to carry in their knapsacks. As far as I know there was no strong-arm insistence that they do so, unlike the compulsion that helped keep *Mein Kampf* a best-seller during WWII. Unfortunate phrases from Hölderlin, selectively chosen, could turn the hero of an aristo-

IV • CENTO DOLCI PETTI

cratic literary cult into a modern German Nationalist. But posthumous political appropriation of innocent literature is nothing new, just as there are poets who, in their own lifetime (Shakespeare), are ready to reinforce the foundation myths of the dominant paradigm. And Hölderlin was not the only Romantic of the age to yearn to help establish a nation. Unlike Byron and Shelley, he did not yet have one of his own, from which he could depart to help save the Greeks of the 19th Century. Instead, he looked to the Greece of the ancient past for the secrets of re-establishing the unity and cultural greatness of a new Germany, but with no tinge of imperialism or, much less, genocide..

What Schiller and Hölderlin both express is a concept of history and human existence that is as different from post-modern history as classical Darwinism is from modern concepts of evolution. Here I don't mean the difference between Stephen Jay Gould's "punctuated equilibrium" and the more conventional steady gradualism of earlier systems of Darwinian evolution; that is a difference which is trivial to non-specialists. I mean rather a much greater difference, the one between explanations of phenomena which infer (or impose) meaning on them, and explanations which are not really explanations but rather descriptions, because they do not involve (or say they do not involve) assessments of value.

In biology, "ascent" and "descent" of species have long since lost their ethical or teleological meaning. Organisms adjust to fit changes in their environments, or stay the same when their environments stay the same, and that is that. ••Linnean taxonomies and biological family trees, a science of Either/Or, where either there is a branching or there is not a branching, yield to cladistics, the calculation of fine differences in percentages of shared DNA. We learn that we share the great majority of our genes with whatever species the biologist or ideological polemicist, while perhaps claiming to remain free of value-judgments,

MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*

chooses to insist that we see in it the likeness of ourselves: ••% shared with ••, (••couple more examples, in descending percentages). One ends up wondering how it is that human beings can conceive of and debate about the rights of animals, while the animals apparently show no such concern about our rights, or why we drive our cats to the veterinarian and pay for their health care, instead of them doing that for us.

Yet the difference between the old Dead White Males like Schiller and Hölderlin, and the still living White Males like Danto or almost any academic social scientists, whatever their race or sex, is really not that great, at least in their ultimate attitudes, if perhaps not in their sincerity. When push comes to shove, or even before, the post-modernists who deny that history has meaning, or claim that there are no absolute values, or protest the use of force in foreign policy, abandon their value-neutrality and step forth with their advocacies and agendas. Danto resorts to an argument about the validity of informed taste [••page#], and ••(idea repeated later – reconcile) apologists for, oh say, Castro will aver, with scarcely a crocodile tear, or none at all, that his victims were necessary casualties incurred in the course of attaining a desirable end. They discover in themselves the license to find a meaning in history, while insisting that all others concede its utter relativism. ☺