

IN AND OUT OF OPERA: TECHNOLOGIES OF *JOUISSANCE* IN *LA TRAVIATA*

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I.

FOR SOME time now I have been interested in what I call "technologies of desire": socially constructed sites for both *evoking* and *controlling jouissance* in a recreational way. Some examples are horror movies and pornography, though soap opera and action film would do as well. In all these cases the aim of the technology is to induce a state in which the play of intense ecstatic affect may be invoked—called into being—in the spectator. From this point of view these forms are machines for generating whatever the affect is called—the scare, the turn-on, the good cry, the roller-coaster ride—every x minutes. In this essay, my focus is on another such machine, opera, and in particular *La traviata*, an opera which seems to take a self-conscious and analytical view of its own procedures and those of the form by representing them

explicitly in the motives and actions of its characters, who might be said to want to live their lives as if they were in an opera.

If Italian does not quite compress into one verb the two central and potentially paradoxical meanings of the French *jouissance*—first “to experience bliss,” to feel in ecstasy something that seizes you willy-nilly, whatever it is that comes when it comes, and, second “to enjoy” in the sense of to enjoy and control the use of something, to possess its usufruct—I note that the libretto juxtaposes the two verbs Italian does have for these things within two lines of each other in the opera’s first exchange. When Violetta graciously remarks that the arrival of a new contingent of guests at her party will make it shine with “altre gioie,” new and fresh joys, Flora and the Marquis, concerned for her health, inquire if she is well enough to enjoy them, “E goder voi potrete?” The French *jouir*, then, if the reader will indulge an amateur in both languages, translates into Italian as “godere gioia,” to enjoy joy, to be the master of its use, to put within controlled boundaries that which by its nature stops other motions, interrupts narrative, transgresses proprieties, runs off the road. One articulation of this paradox I would like to suggest is that Violetta is farthest out when, in her virtuous repentance and self-sacrificing death, she is most on the straight and narrow.

The sort of technologies I am interested in all have the paradoxical structure implied by the deliberate and controlled evocation of something that is by definition *un*-controllable and transgressive. They all occupy, or aspire to occupy, a place on the line

between conscious and unconscious, symbolic and imaginary. It is the place of the pre-conscious and the middle voice, of displacement and *Verneinung* and the production of what might be called virtual symptoms. They are all characterized by a structure of simultaneous "in and out." For *Traviata* the specific inflection of the structure is "in and out of opera" and its medium is music. As I have come to conceive it, that phrase describes the relation of the characters in *Traviata* to its music, and to opera itself, to the conventions, structures, and emotional expectations both we and they associate with the medium—I am coming to think of it, since I started fooling with the languages, as a French use of Italian opera, something Verdi's own later career could easily be said to be concerned with. Indeed, he had been in Paris for the opening of *La dame aux camélias*, in February 1852, and he was in France working on *Les vêpres siciliennes* when the Venice revival of *Traviata* in 1854, just over a year after the fiasco of its first performance, moved it into the canonical place it still occupies. No doubt he had ample opportunity to observe the patrons of the Théâtre des Italiens and the salon entertainments of the *demimonde*. At any rate it isn't hard to demonstrate that the modern Parisian characters of the opera are makers and users of music, and even that they give a French tint to their deployments of it, social and otherwise.

Violetta's party, with which the opera opens, is a musical one. Shortly after his arrival, Alfredo is pressed for an entertainment and sings in duet with Violetta the opera's first immortal toe-tapper, the *brindisi*, "Libiamo, ne' lieti calici." Immediately there-

after the guests are invited to dance to the *banda*, and the onstage musicians heard in the next room continue to play until everyone leaves at the end of the act. Both of these instances, as it happens, are in triple meter (3/8 and 3/4 respectively). The Act 2 finale at Flora's party begins with a ballet of singing and dancing gypsies and strutting matadors, just about where such a ballet would come in a French opera. All of these are examples, to borrow a convenient term from film studies, of diegetic music, music that is made by the characters for their own entertainment and their own purposes in the fictional world of the opera, music they can hear. It is worth noting that the characters can use this music for multiple ends, conscious or unconscious, as Alfredo and Violetta clearly use the *brindisi* to initiate a flirtation they will later develop extensively.

The counterpart, non-diegetic music, covers an apparently much larger range of possible uses of music. The central case is plainly the defining condition of opera itself: that most of the time the characters do not hear the music and sing without knowing it. The range of non-diegetic music might run from *secco* through *arioso* recitative to the full arias, duets, and choruses that register, as we conventionally understand it in number-opera, exceptionally intense, passionate, and/or deeply-felt speech. This music is commonly understood to represent the non-verbal, non-discursive aspects of speaking, which might range from a fully conscious or even rhetorical communication of feeling ("look at it this way"), like many of Germont's arias in Act 2, to music that reveals something of which the singer/speaker is unaware, perhaps

even an unconscious desire. At the extreme end of this spectrum would be what might be called commentary music, music the composer assigns to the orchestra as a way of highlighting a dramatic moment, like the sinister tritone that announces Germont's entrance in Act 2. Such music may also set a general mood, like the party music that runs throughout Act 1, alternating with the *banda* and distinguished from it as non-diegetic by always being in cut or common time.

Though I touch here on an ongoing debate about whether the characters in opera can "hear" the music, something that seems to me easier to decide in particular operas than in Opera at large, I want to bypass that debate by putting it rather that the emotional range of what the music *represents* in opera, or at any rate in *La traviata*, can run the full spectrum from the unconscious, *whatever* that word is taken to mean, through the preconscious or habitual—what we do not notice that is not repressed—to the fully conscious and controlled, even the intentionally deceptive, and the *agency* of this representation can range quite complexly between characters and composer. Obviously there will be cases where the precise placing of a given piece of music along this spectrum will be difficult or uncertain, and it is these less decidable moments my reading wants to keep an eye on.

I have already suggested that Act 1 uses the large-scale musical difference between duple and triple meters to mark the apparently firm distinction between non-diegetic and diegetic music. The basic "background" of the act is the party music, in four, while the *brindisi* and the *banda* firmly establish the move from musical representation to represented

music early on. When, at last alone together, Alfredo and Violetta ratchet up the emotional register, the fact that they do it in triple meters—their duet to Alfredo's key aria, "Di quell' amor," is in 3/8—indicates no doubt that there is something "musical," extra-verbally intense, added to their speech here. But the fact that they begin their scene to the accompaniment of the *banda*'s waltz tune, which ceases as Alfredo declares his love and resumes when their duet is over, does something more. Julian Budden remarks of the *banda*'s re-entry that it "serves to remind us that it has been playing all the time and that the cantabile has been, in television terms, a cutaway shot. The intensity of the preceding scene has made it vanish from our consciousness."¹ Whatever it does to us, something like this must affect the characters, but it also creates a slight staging problem: either 1) we naturalistically find someone to close the door rather awkwardly on the *banda* just at the moment Alfredo reveals himself—it would be more than just awkward to have him do it himself—and then have the Marquis naturalistically re-open it when he and the *banda* re-enter, or 2) we leave the door open, and assume not only that the characters lose track of everything about the *banda* except its beat, but that they somehow erase it for us as well. In either case the sequence creates a hovering undecidability between the diegetic and non-diegetic registers that raises questions about either the sincerity of the characters (the extent to which their emotions have their undivided, ecstatic attention) or

1. Julian Budden: *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. 2, *From Il Trovatore to La Forza del Destino* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 133.

To stay with Act 1 a bit longer: the undecidability I have just mentioned is a minor prefiguration of a more famous example, Violetta's *scena* finale to the act, which alternates between common time in the recitative and the *tempo di mezzo* and triple meter in the *adagio* and the *cabaletta*. Here we are faced with the problem of Alfredo's offstage interpolation of a reprise of "Di quell'amor" into Violetta's cabaletta "Sempre libera," which renounces the folly of love. That Alfredo may well be lurking outside the window further rehearsing some version of his passion only goes a certain distance in explaining how he manages to time the entrance of that tune into Violetta's presumably internal debate at so dramatically appropriate a moment, and to do it not once but twice. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Violetta herself has already appropriated that tune *and* its words—also twice—in the *adagio cantabile* section of her aria, "Ah, fors' è lui," as the accompaniment and culmination of her meditation on her loss of innocence and her memories of youth. The *jouissance* of the moment is famously represented by the shift from F minor to the parallel major just at the point when she begins to cite Alfredo's tune and words about the love that beats ethereally at the heart of the universe. I might note in passing that the model commentators habitually propose for this harmonic scheme is French: Isabelle's "Robert, toi que j'aime" from Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable*, which was famous enough to be alluded to parodically by Donizetti in *La fille du régiment*. I take Violetta's semi-citation of Meyerbeer as an indication of the kind of *grand opéra* role she has in her head at this moment, but even if

that is going too far, the fact of her appropriation and reframing of Alfredo and his song remains.

I have mentioned that the tune is sung twice by both voices, which is to say that the entire *scena ed aria* is scored with the conventional repeats, often cut in performance. I think such cuts are a mistake in this opera, though an instructive one. They are generally made on the grounds that they are an outdated formal convention that mars dramatic intensity, or, to put it another way, that they detract from the characters' single-minded expression of emotion by requiring them to stop and repeat feelings they have already had. But here, as I have tried to suggest, we are dealing with a scene where citations and repetitions of all sorts already cluster, and where the dramatic meaning of such repetitions is clear: what Violetta's appropriation stresses in the first place are her *negotiations with her own desire*, her discovery, signaled by the shift of mode, of the *jouissance* that song evokes for her, followed by her framing and reframing of it from two different points of view, represented by the *adagio* and *cabaletta* respectively. The other formal features of those negotiations, in particular the repetitions, tend to stress not only her continuing indecision about acting on a love that she here reveals she has felt since before the party ("Lui, che modesto e vigile / All'egre soglie ascese, / E nuova febbre accese"), but her relatively deliberate, paced and controlled evocation, her *calling forth* for inspection of the desire itself.

To read the scene in this way is to bring out how Verdi's handling of music and musical form works to hand over to the character a good measure of the agency ordinarily thought to reside in the com-

poser, specifically by making Violetta a user and disposer of formal musical conventions for her own ends. Repetition and citation here are techniques or tools for the evocation and deployment of desire, not just its manifestation, and so in fact is *scena ed aria* structure itself. This fundamental building block of *bel canto* opera from Rossini on is among other things a technique for stripping down and stepping up a story into a succession of dramatic moments suitable for singing, by requiring that every *cantabile* be followed by a change of mood suitable for a *cabaletta*. In skeletal paraphrase it might run: “If only my brother were here” (*tempo d’attaca* and *adagio cantabile*); “But I am your long-lost brother!” (*tempo di mezzo*); “What! Il mio frate! Ah...!” (*cabaletta*)—and so on to the next, a machine for producing occasions of *jouissance* every fifteen minutes for three hours. The first act of *La traviata* does not observe this cell-like structure, unlike the other two, which do so religiously. It is through-composed out of the party music, the *banda* and the two duets, one public and one private, between Violetta and Alfredo, which flow continuously into one another. It is only in her strange, solitary coda to the act, beginning “È strano,” that Violetta at last arrives at that structure, abstracting it from the flirtatiously adversarial duets she has sung with Alfredo and deploying it so that she can sing both parts.

The undecidabilities of diegetic and non-diegetic music I have pointed to so far have as their most likely explanation that Violetta and Alfredo appropriate the waltz from the objective world of the *banda* as a structural support for their emotional use,

and that Violetta's finale represents the quilting on to the "real" physical Alfredo of the fantasy and its accompanying libido that Violetta constructs in her singing. It is the simultaneous presence of the fantasy and the object, inseparable yet separate, that explains the strange absent presence of his voice in the scene. One could say that Verdi uses these formal musical features as the technology (a Lacanian might call it the particular Symbolic) he uses to represent such processes of investment, but one might also say that they are the technology the characters use to live those processes.

2.

PERHAPS the simplest formula for what I have been arguing is that in *La traviata* the music represents the desire of the characters, with the proviso that the *staging* of the music represents the way the characters deploy their desire. Once it is accepted that the music is not the hidden medium but the actual furniture of the diegetic world—libido made audible, as it were—it is easier to see how much of what the characters express with it is what I will call "operatic desire," that is, both operatically enhanced and intensified desire, and a hankering for that *kind* of desire, for life lived in an operatic register. The clearest examples are moments when a character's attempted staging fails, when we are shown too much of what goes on behind the scenes. I have noted that the cell-structure of *scena ed aria* plot construction is a technique for getting quickly past the boring intrigues whereby

the big dramatic moments are brought about in order to concentrate on the latter. From its opening, when Alfredo discovers that Violetta has been financially supporting their country idyll, through Violetta and Germont's plotting to save bourgeois proprieties by deceiving Alfredo about the reasons for her departure, and the subsequent enacting of the beginning of that deception, Act 2, scene 1 focuses on nothing but the boring intrigues, but treats them musically like dramatic moments. Thus, the duet of achieved mutual passion between Alfredo and Violetta that we might well expect from a romantic opera is wholly absent from this one, and is displaced instead by Germont and Violetta's weirdly passionate plotting. I will say no more about these parts of Act 2, except to say that, as Act 1 is structured by differences of meter, Act 2, scene 1 is built around the shifts between major and minor that first emerge as a signifying difference in Violetta's Act 1 finale and which are used to register the often awkward play of desire across the negotiations that make up most of the act. Instead I will sketch my main point using brief examples from Act 2's beginning and end before concentrating on the crucial case of Violetta in Act 3.

Alfredo's *cabaletta* in the opening scene, "O, mio remorso," which follows his discovery of Violetta's clandestine financing, is often cut in its entirety. This is one of the most common of the standard cuts so well described in Gabriele Baldini's *Story of Giuseppe Verdi*,² and it might be taken as a model for the probable motivation and certain effect of many of those cuts. The heroic posturing of "O grido dell'onore; / M'avrai securò vindice...Ah si, quest'on-

2. Gabriele Baldini: *The Story of Giuseppe Verdi*, trans. Roger Parker (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

ta laverò!" (Oh cry of honor, I'll be your certain avenger...Yes, I'll wash away this shame!) is abetted by an accompaniment that, as Budden puts it, "whips up a mood of galloping excitement" which carries him martially offstage to Paris.³ The effect can only be bathetic upon the reflection that Alfredo is going to seek his vengeance at the bank, and it is made far more so when he has to stop his rush and sing it again. What the music as written indicates is the gap between the image Alfredo would like to have of himself—a heroic tenor—and his actual situation. The cut tries to suppress his desire and make his passion more singular by making it more measured, misrecognizing the music as a blemish on the opera by not acknowledging that it belongs to the character. As in Violetta's Act 1 finale, and as very often elsewhere in the opera, repetitions bring out the element of tacit uncertainty and the need for self-persuasion in what the characters sing by opening, as here, a revealing distance between the singer and the role in which he is trying to cast himself.

Act 2, scene 2, which the score designates in its entirety as a finale, enacts a different version of operatic desire. In brief outline, it begins with diegetic or represented music, the ballet of the gypsies and the torereads put on at Flora's party in Paris, and ends with non-diegetic musical representation of the reactions of all the characters to Alfredo's public humiliation of Violetta when he throws his gambling winnings at her feet. The opening section shows us the kinds of roles the characters like to make-believe when

3. Budden, *Operas of Verdi*, 137. they are at leisure—romantic gypsy women and hero-

ic matadors—as well as, threaded through the whole ballet, the jokes about infidelity, the mockery and malicious gossip, by no means limited to the exciting breakup of Violetta and Alfredo, with which they further enliven the performance from the wings. Because their lives are lacking in bite, drama and excitement, they amuse themselves with exotic, staged, “operatic” performances. But the corollary of this practice is that when something better than gossip (like Alfredo’s gesture) does come along, they abet its drama by shaping it into operatic patterns and they turn it into a finale in which everyone’s part is so well understood that it can be played perfectly *ensemble*. What the music demonstrates about the continuity between the beginning and end of the scene is that both are forms of entertainment, controlled and ordered occasions for the *jouissance* of extreme emotion. The end of the act is as fully a performance and a game as the beginning. Emotional mayhem is what these people do to keep themselves amused. Baldini has a point when he comments that Alfredo is “at his best” in this scene, if by “best” is meant “most effectively operatic” in the roles he plays. He gets to be a strutting matador with the Count, then a lover mad with jealousy, and finally consumed with remorse, and all without the missed cues and awkward moments of the preceding scene. His performances are managed with real economy of musical organization because everyone else is abetting him. One might put it finally that in this scene he is least upstaged by Violetta—one can see why he, or his desire, prefers it to being supported by her.

3.

VIOLETTA's first aria in Act 3, "Addio del passato," is the site of a rich convergence of citations and repetitions, especially if it is taken together with her reading aloud—the only instance of ordinary, non-*arioso* speech ("senza suono") in the opera—of portions of Germont's letter telling what has happened to Alfredo. Once she finds a pretext to send Annina from the room, she takes it from her bosom and begins to speak. Her reading is accompanied by the strains of "Di quell'amor" in the strings, a piece of non-diegetic music so thoroughly her own by now that she will soon die to it. After a brief, *arioso* complaint that Alfredo and Germont have not come, she looks at herself in a mirror and gives up hope. At this point, a solo oboe outlines the first phrase of the aria (itself a reminiscence of earlier music) and recurs between the two strains. The text of her singing bids farewell to the happy smiling dreams of the past in the minor. Then, after a pause bridged by the oboe, her aria echoes the effect first used in the finale to Act 1 by releasing into the parallel major, stressing the intensity of her prayer to God to forgive and receive *la traviata*, the lost one gone astray. Because she and the oboe echo and answer one another, the effect can be read as a relation between Violetta's desire and her body, a relation that registers her failing health: she is too weak to sing without pausing the tune that continues to sound in her head. (Example 1, mm. 145-150)

A number of other details support this reading, the most interesting being James Hepokoski's convincing interpretation of the aria's formal qualities

127 **Andante mosso** ($\text{d} = 50$) dolente e pianissimo **legate e dolci**

Vio. Ob.

Andante mosso ($\text{d} = 50$) Ad - di - o del pas -

pp

131

Vio. sa - to bei so - gni ri - den - - - ti, le

134

Vio. ro - se del vol - to già so - no pal - len - - - ti; l'a -

138 **con espressione**

Vio. mo - re d'Al - fre - do per - fi - no mi man - ca, con

pp dolcissimo

Example 1. "Addio del passato," opening.

142

Vio. for - to, so - ste - gno del - l'a - ni - ma stan - ca... Ob.

146

Vio. con for - to,

149

Vio. so - ste - gno...Ah, del-la Tra via- ta sor -

pp leggero

con forza

153

Vio. ri - di al de - si o, a

Example I, continued.

160

Vio. Ah! — tut - to, — tut - to — fi - ni, or tut - to, tut - to fi -

allargando e morendo

{

164 un filo di voce

Vio. ni.

Ob. pp

{

167

Vio. Le gio - ie, — i do - io - ri — tra

{

170

Vio. po - co — a - vran fi - ne; la

{

Example 2. "Addio del passato," opening of second strophe.

in national and class terms. As he sees it, the placing of a French “*romance-couplets*” aria in the position of “the final-act, *in extremis* solo piece for the *prima donna*” transforms “a genre appropriate for lighter music...or naïve discourse of (or to) characters of lesser or common blood” into a poignant rendering of Violetta’s inability to escape the masquerade of her relation to either glittering demimondaine or respectable bourgeois society, and it thus represents a kind of social realism in Verdi’s ground-breaking operatic depiction of modern life.⁴ At the same time, he reads the placing of the song in isolation—it looks as if it ought to be the *adagio cantabile* of a full-scale *scena ed aria*, but has no answering *cabaletta*—as an equally poignant representation of her “inability to attain the normative aria-genre,” which also registers as “a rejection of artifice, a deathbed revelation of something more direct, elemental and naively honest”.⁵

Hepokoski’s invaluable account of this aria wavers a little in its assignment of agency to the various effects he describes so well—as I said before, how do we decide who chooses form?—but when it comes to the aria’s repetition, he remains firmly in the arena of the composer’s relation to the form and to the

4. James A. Hepokoski, “Genre and content in mid-century Verdi: ‘Addio, del passato’ (*La traviata*, Act 3)” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1 (1998): 249–76.

5. The quotations are from Hepokoski, “Genre and content in mid-century Verdi: ‘Addio, del passato’ (*La traviata*, Act 3)” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1 (1998): 249–76. The quotations are from Hepokoski, “Genre and content in mid-century Verdi: ‘Addio, del passato’ (*La traviata*, Act 3)” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1 (1998): 249–76.

266–67.

To put it as directly as possible, if you sing a

5. *Ibid.*, 267. touching farewell to the past that ends “Ah, tutto” or

6. *Ibid.*, 273–75. “Tutto fini,” and then turn around and sing it *again*,

it is not, simply, over. I suspect this dramatic impropriety is behind the Schirmer score's note without comment that "the second strophe of Violetta's aria, *Addio del passato*...is customarily omitted."⁷ (Example 2.) But this moment also allows a number of counter-readings to the portrait of tragic victimization and dwindling resources just painted. First of all, it suggests that Violetta's relation to her failing breath (a fact that is not in question) is more active, that she has more control over it than the pose the song's words and the relation of the voice to the oboe first project. One might ask, for instance, whether the oboe fills in where the voice cannot sing, or whether Violetta pauses to call up the oboe so as to give energy to her singing. Once this possibility is admitted, other consequences follow. The reminiscences of "Di quell' amor" over Violetta's reading of the letter become the summoning of previously invested affects whose evocation may perhaps be counted on to produce the familiar lift of *jouissance* in the shift from parallel minor to major. The letter itself confirms this summoning and testing effect. It is clearly one Violetta has had for some time, and her reading aloud is an edited version of something she has already read often enough to be able to repeat only the "good parts," defined as the parts that go with, that summon up, that tune. Once it is granted that the aria is a *product* of the reading, that the letter is a piece of technology for calling up the emotional and physical energy to sing it, then the whole sequence can be viewed as a Frenchwoman's covert appropriation of an Italian form as such a technology. The reading of the letter is—not musically but *formally*, structurally—the *ada-*

7. *La Traviata* [vocal score in Italian and English] (New York, Schirmer: 1946), viii–ix.

gio cantabile whose answering *cabaletta* is “Addio del passato,” linked by the *tempo di mezzo* in which Violetta takes up a mirror to check the effect so far of her performance. What in conventional terms, for Hepokoski, is a pathetic failure to attain grand aria status is on this reading a successful act of tragic self-representation sustained by the instrumental use of the very form at which it purports to fail.

Act 3 is structured by a fundamental set of musical differences, as Act 1 is by meter and Act 2 by harmonic mode. In this act the differences center in the area of dynamics, particularly *forte/piano, crescendo/diminuendo*, and perhaps even *staccato/legato* as these affect the progress of the vocal line, conceived throughout as *the controlled expenditure of breath*. As Arthur Groos and others have shown, Violetta would have had access to a fair amount of information about the symptoms and progress of her disease, including the exalted mood often attendant on its terminal stages.⁸ Though the Doctor sets the clock in this act in a line Violetta is not supposed to hear, “La tisi non le accorda che poche ore” (“Her consumption grants her only a few hours more”), Violetta herself, who has known about her eventual fate since before the opera began, sets that clock just as surely a few moments later when she sends Annina out to give half their remaining money to the poor: she won’t last more than ten louis’ worth. To measure her singing against this consciousness of time is to see that every *forte*, every *crescendo*, is being counted. Though Violetta

8. Arthur Groos, “TB Sheets’: Love and Disease in *La traviata*,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 7 (1995): 233–260.

anti-operatic disenchantment, her performance courts that disenchantment with a force perhaps unrivaled in the tradition. Her singing with Alfredo in "Parigi o cara," and her *forte* initiation of its duet-cabaletta, "Gran dio! Morir sì giovane" (a dynamic that contradicts her earlier message of exhaustion, "Non posso!"), is not, or not only, a gallant attempt to keep up appearances by singing louder than she should to prove that she still can, that her joy at reunion with Alfredo has cured her. Rather and also, it is a controlled expenditure of breath in order to pace and to dramatize the process of dying. Repetition and reminiscence are the techniques that allow Violetta to draw on her resources of prior investment and the access to loss of self-consciousness, to *jouissance*, those resources can grant. That *jouissance* impasses her singing indeed, but singing the right songs can also bring it forth. The proximate aim of this performance, which organizes retrospectively much of her action in the opera as a whole ("È strano," she says as she starts to die), is to defend against the terror of death. The point, as I have said elsewhere about *Carmen*, is to control both the timing and the affect of the moment of her death; not just to die, but to die *feeling like that* at the very instant she sings "Oh Gioia!" accompanied by the strains of "Di quell' amor."⁹

Our sympathy with Violetta's plight and our willingness to give ourselves over to the power of her self-portrayal cannot altogether occlude a disenchanted awareness that we, who do not die, may have of what she leaves behind. Once one becomes aware of the self-staging aspects of her performance, it is easier

9. See my "Discourse and the Film Text: Four Readings of *Carmen*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 6 (1994): 278-79.

to notice the devastating effects her absorption of all the moral capital in the opera seems calculated to have on Germont and above all on Alfredo, who will walk into the rest of his life carrying the weight of that miniature that Violetta kept in her bedside drawer to give him as she died. Though bad enough, no doubt, Violetta's willingness and ability to administer her own poetic justice *has* a certain justice, but unfortunately it is worse than that. Violetta's slightly tart response, “È tardi,” when she finishes reading the fatal letter with its promise that Germont and Alfredo will return to ask her forgiveness, opens up a further vista on the characters' management of desire in this opera. It carries the implication that she is not the only one playing the timing game, that Alfredo and Germont may be putting off their return until they can be sure that it will involve them only in this tragic scene, where the unpleasant machinery and onerous detail of dying, like that of living in Act 2, will be handled by the servants. Does not everything happen as if the characters collude in producing this death and no other for Violetta, a death more sublime—too terrible to be beautiful, too wonderful to be horrifying—and yes, more operatic, than anything any of them could have produced alone?

To say that the characters are *conscious* of all this is more than I would want to maintain, though I think they are more aware of it at some times than at others. Indeed, the effectiveness of the process depends on their ability to divest themselves of, to ignore, the know-how that enables them to do it, to keep their habits of emotion-management at least pre-conscious, that is, habitual, since full awareness of

their motives would defeat them. But I do think that we, as readers of the opera, have the opportunity to focus, as Verdi does, on what it is in the interest of the characters to conceal from themselves, the extent to which they are the producers and directors of operatic lives for themselves. That in large measure they succeed in these efforts cannot entirely obliterate the traces of them without the help of other producers and directors, including ourselves. The opera opens itself to two polarized readings: a fully enchanted one that attends only to the emotions represented, and a fully disenchanted one that looks only at the manipulations of those emotions and their darker motivations. It is as if there were two operas, one that the standard cuts are made to enable, and one that would result if—impossibly of course—only the cuts were played. The opera before us, however, continually dances between these two, situating itself on the shifting and undecidable line between them, the line I will call at once In and Out of Opera.