

The Kiss of Love and Death

Un bacio ... ancora un bacio

Giuseppe Verdi, *Otello*

Der Liebeskuß ist die erste Empfindung des Todes ...

Richard Wagner to Cosima, 15. August 1869

Dieter Borchmeyer

“**For love is strong as death**, jealousy is cruel as the grave,” the Bible’s *Song of Solomon* says (8:6). Death and love, Eros and Hades (in the bible: Sheol) are equally powerful adversaries. They fight each other – just as Don Giovanni resists the Commendatore returning from the other world and the hell that threatens to devour him: a tremendous *agon* between Eros and Thanatos in the last moments of the “dissoluto punito”.

On the other hand, love and death may be joined in mystical sympathy, as they are for Tristan and Isolde – as delimitation experiences, they are secretly one and the same. Thus, in Hofmannsthal’s early short drama *Der Tor und der Tod* (The Fool and Death), death explains to Claudio, who is loath to die, that he is a heathen death, not a Christian one: not a “skeleton”, as he appears in Hofmannsthal’s later adaptation of the medieval morality play *Jedermann* (Everyman), but “kin of Dionysus and Venus”: a “great god of the soul” who lets the ego become one with the world in the delimitation experience of death and love.

Lessing wrote an archaeological study entitled *Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet* (How the Ancients Shaped Death), the main thesis of which is that during Antiquity, death was not depicted as a fearsome skeleton, as it was in the Christian tradition, but rather as a spirit with an overturned torch, as the brother of sleep. “What can depict the end of life more clearly than an extinguished, overturned torch.” And in his naenia *Die Götter Griechenlands* (The Gods of Greece), Schiller writes “Then, no ugly skeleton / approached the dying man’s bed” – this is the same image Death itself rejects in Hofmannsthal’s drama – but rather: “Quietly and sadly, a spirit / lowers his torch”. The torch of death: in Wagner’s *Tristan*, the image of the dying torch becomes the ultimate emphatic expression of the lovers’ death wish.

Love does not fear death – at least not in myths, in poetry and music, as demonstrated by the innumerable martyrs for love, ready to expire and never afraid of “Martern aller Arten”, any kind of torture, who populate especially the operatic stage.

In fact, it is more likely that death shuns love, as the founding myth of all love tragedies shows: through his singing and playing the lyre, Orpheus is able to convince the powers of the netherworld to return his beloved to him, to allow a dead person to return to life just once. Nevertheless, the power of the netherworld turns out to be stronger than the power of love, and it pulls Eurydice back into the realm of shadows.

The Orpheus myth is the founding myth of music. The first complete opera (by Rinuccini and Peri) that has come down to us is entitled *Euridice* (1600), and with *Favola d’Orfeo* Monteverdi began his career in musical drama 400 years ago. Even where it did not make a stage appearance outright, this myth makes itself heard throughout the entire history of opera – for example in Mozart’s *Zauberflöte* (Magic Flute). Tamino soothes and appeases nature, be it animals or the elements, with his music – no longer with song accompanied by a string instrument, as in Antiquity, but with the “absolute” music of modernity: the playing of the flute, which makes singing impossible. And like Orpheus, he has to brave the challenges of death and the underworld in his mystery trials, culminating in the trial by fire and water.

Resounding love vanquishes the power of death. “Death, where is thy sting?” the modern redeeming power of love and music united asks in triumph. In Tamino, however, the Orpheus myth is almost reversed at one crucial point of the opera. As Orpheus may not turn around to look at Eurydice until he returns to earth, so Tamino must turn away from Pamina – until the end of the rite of initiation which he has consented to. Going even further than the antique myth, he must be able to appear as if he does not love her anymore, to torment her soul, if he wants to win her. Even the deepest sorrow of his beloved, the announcement that she will die – a consequence of her unbending love, if it cannot be fulfilled on earth – cannot move him to break the vow of silence he has sworn to the priests. Pamina does not understand this commandment. Abjuration is foreign to her, love is the only law she knows. And when it appears to her that her unconditional love has been betrayed by Tamino, she can only think of giving herself over to another unconditional power: death, which will now be her “bridegroom” in the shape of the dagger – Thanatos as Eros.

As enemies, but also in their secret sympathy, death and love are almost dialectically related to one another. This is evident in the Bible, evident in the myths of Antiquity. The French language has a special ability to express the eternal relation between love and death through the proximity of its terms:

l'amour – *la mort*. Romain Rolland turned this similarity in sound and meaning into the title of his 1925 drama *Le jeu de l'amour et de la mort* (The Play of Love and Death). Every great love drama is such a play of love and death. Every great love carries death in its heart. Love can even be a “deadly illness”, as in Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther* or his *Elective Affinities*.

Why, however, is the affinity between love and death so often the topic of opera – so often that one can even call it one of the favorite subjects of this genre? It is futile to argue about a ranking of the arts, but in one aspect, music reigns supreme over the other arts: only in music – only in opera – do the two most powerful forces of life, Eros and Thanatos, find their supreme expression. This is because of its singular structure, its ability to turn successive and transitory moments of drama into simultaneous events. Events that must happen successively in drama can take place in opera next to each other, together, within each other, as a *nunc stans*.

Only music is able to bring the moment of love’s bliss and the moment of death to a “standstill”, to perpetuate it. These are the scenic moments which opera-ignorant Philistines declare to be ridiculous: that a character who has been shot – as Gustav III in *Ballo in maschera* or Posa in Verdi’s *Don Carlo* – or even Gilda, delivered to her father Rigoletto as a corpse in a sack, still find the breath to sing long dying arias. This contradicts “dramatic” probability; accordingly, the love duet hardly has a counterpart in spoken drama. There, lovers’ dialogues are usually motivated by some kind of outer or inner disturbance of the lovers, at least a distance that provides motivation for a discourse, a developing speech. For example, Schiller’s *Don Carlos* only begins when the love between Carlos and Elisabeth is already doomed; in Verdi’s opera, there is the love duet between Elisabeth and Carlos in the Fountainbleau act, which (significantly) precedes Schiller’s drama, and there is no disturbance or distance here. On the contrary, the lovers are in total unison: even their duet is *unisono* throughout several measures. There is no development; time stands still.

Even the two great love dialogues in the second and third acts of the quintessential love drama, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, are excellent examples for the development of dialogue due to unfortunate outer circumstances. Shakespeare does not depict the presence of undisturbed love and bliss, but rather the situations before and after: fear and hope in the scene of the marriage promise – the refusal to realize that their happiness is fading (“It was the nightingale and not the lark”) and the pain of parting in the day song of the third act. How much less shadowed is the lovers’ bliss presented in the *Romeo and Juliet* operas by Bellini and Gounod! But over and over, the moment of the greatest bliss and the moment of death are one and the same. How many deaths are died for love in opera, especially during

the 19th century!

Not just the antagonism between love and death, but also the idea of their mystical unity, the delimitation experience melding Eros and Thanatos – linked with Romanticism and its successors via Wagner's eroticism of death to the fin de siècle – harken back to the humanism of the Renaissance and the mystic religions of Antiquity. As Schopenhauer already remarked, Hellenistic and Roman sarcophagi are frequently decorated with erotic motifs – for example Leda and the swan. The topic is always the love of a god for a mortal: Dionysus loving Ariadne, Zeus loving Semele or Artemis loving Endymion. This antique constellation returns in the legends and fairy-tales of love between humans and nature's sprites or demonic spirits: whether they are female figures, such as the mermaids Undine and Melusine – and finally Rusalka in Dvořák's opera, or the Little Mermaid in Andersen's fairy-tale – or heroes who descend from a superhuman sphere to the humans like Lohengrin. Wagner explicitly interpreted the tragedy of Lohengrin and Elsa as a Christian-medieval variety of the myth of Zeus and Semele.

"Dying meant to be loved by a god and to partake of eternal happiness through him," Edgar Wind wrote in his famous book *Heidnische Mysterien in der Renaissance* (Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance). Humanist Pierio Valeriano remarks that those "who long for god and to be one with god are carried towards heaven and freed of their bodies by a death which is the deepest sleep. This form of death was called 'the kiss' by the symbolist theologians." The Renaissance philosophers devoted innumerable works to the death kiss (*mors osculi*, *morte di bacio*). And more than any other music of the Renaissance, Gesualdo's art of the madrigal bears the marks of this death kiss, with its extreme harmonic experimentation that foreshadows much of music's future development and that appears to spring from a semantics of death's eroticism.

Verdi's *Otello* ends with a "*morte di bacio*", stripped of its metaphysical symbolism; what is originally a kiss of love ultimately becomes a kiss of death: "Un bacio ... ancora un bacio." An *imitatio perversa* of the "*mors osculi*" is the kiss that Oscar Wilde's and Richard Strauss' Salome plants on the lips of the severed head of Jochanaan, who has refused to love her. Richard Wagner was closest to the concept of a kiss of death, reminiscent of the *Eros funebre*, the secret of the erotic decorations on the tombs of Antiquity, when he remarked in conversation with Cosima on August 15, 1869: "The kiss of love is the first intimation of death, the boundary of individuality, and that is why one is scared so much by it." A similar thought is expressed in a poem by Friedrich Rückert (*After Dshelaleddin Rumi*):

Thus, a heart trembles before love,
As if threatened with doom.

For where love awakens,
Ego, the dark despot, dies.

The unity of Eros and Thanatos as a mystical delimitation experience found its most powerful poetic expression in the German pre-Romantic literature in 1773, in the final scene of Goethe's drama fragment *Prometheus*.

Prometheus, whose titanic pathos is so much apparent in Goethe's famous hymn ("*Bedecke deinen Himmel, Zeus*" – Cover your skies, Zeus) and who also resoundingly opens the dramatic fragment, this defiant, egocentric Titan matures throughout this work to become a selfless mystic.

Shaken, Pandora tells her father Prometheus how she observed a mysterious incident – a love scene that her childish innocence cannot comprehend. The lovers' swooning, their kisses, their tears are unknown to her and deeply disturbing. "Tell me, / What is all that, which shakes them / And me?" she asks her father. His lapidary answer: "Death!"

PROMETHEUS

There is a moment that fulfills everything.
Everything we have longed for, dreamed of, hoped for,
And feared, my dearest. That is death.

PANDORA

Death?

PROMETHEUS

When, from your innermost depth
You feel everything, deeply shaken,
Everything joy and sorrow ever brought you,
When your heart swells as in a storm,
Wants to cry for relief and only deepens its flame,
And everything in you resounds and trembles and shakes,
And all your senses falter
And you swoon, and everything around you
Sinks into night, and in your innermost feeling
You grasp a world,
Then, a human being dies.

PANDORA (embracing him)

Oh father, let us die!

Who could overlook the foreshadowing of Novalis' *Hymns to the Night* and Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* in these outrageous verses by the 24-year-old Goethe! The further the instruction in becoming themselves that Prometheus gives to the human beings progresses, the greater is their longing for a delimitation of the ego in which death and love are one.

In *Tristan* it is not the love potion, this drug from the magical kitchen of Isolde's mother, that awakens Tristan and Isolde's love, but rather: because both of them believe they are drinking death – the poison that Isolde asked Brangäne for, but which has secretly been exchanged for the love potion – they confess their repressed love; the partition between them, made up of illusionary moral concepts and sullen self-preservation, is removed. This is Wagner's reinterpretation of the medieval material that was restituted in its original meaning by Frank Martin in his oratorio *Le vin herbé*, based on the philological novel by Joseph Bédier. (In the medieval novel that both Bédier and Martin use as their point of departure, it is only the potion that awakens Tristan and Isolde's love; this love does by no means exist before.) In Wagner's opera, only the putative poison makes their wholehearted declaration of love possible. There is no magic at work here, but instead, to use the title of Calderón's drama, *Love, the Greatest Enchantment* – a love, however, born of an enchantment with death, an eroticism of death which supersedes the former theological background. Instead of the love between gods and mortals, here is the delimitation experience of an exclusively human love, onto which the old religious ideas of Eros and Thanatos are projected symbolically.

In the most important philosophical source for *Tristan*, Schopenhauer's essay *Über den Tod und sein Verhältnis zur Unzerstörbarkeit unsers Wesens an sich* (On Death and its Relation with the Indestructibility of Our Being Per Se), death is called "the great opportunity to no longer be oneself." But it is not just death that presents this opportunity – love does too, death in love, love in death. That is the message of *Tristan*.

Its deepest continuation, returning the *unio mystica* of death and love to its (mysterious) sources in Antiquity, may be found in the final scene of Hofmannsthal's and Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Having been abandoned by Theseus because the gods have decided that Dionysus should be her husband, Ariadne expects only death.

Here, as always where love reigns absolute, death is the only force that one may trade love in for. And this trade-off, this deception takes place in the encounter with Bacchus-Dionysus. Ariadne thinks that Death is coming for her on his boat – the boat of Charon. She confuses death and love, just as Goethe's Prometheus and Pandora identify both, and truly takes Dionysus as Thanatos and thus a "great god of the soul" who really "is kin to Dionysus, to Venus" – as Death identifies himself in Hofmannsthal's early drama. She confides in Bacchus "as one confides only in Death", as Hofmannsthal writes in his great Ariadne letter to Richard Strauss in mid-July 1911. "She gives herself over to him, as she thinks he is Death; he is death and life at the same time." That is the secret of the Dionysian element as the experience of the

ego's delimitation. Death and the highest form of life, as it is revealed in the "enormity of the erotic experience" (Hofmannsthal), become one. That is also the theme of Hofmannsthal's fragment *Semiramis* of 1909: "Semiramis and death: only when she knows she is dying is she able to feel love ... only now does she live." Only now does she realize that "only he lives who has absorbed death". And only he who has absorbed death is capable of truly loving.

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