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"La pluma es lengua del alma": Ensayos en Honor de E. Michael Gerli

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Atomic Trinity

Jesús Rodríguez-Velasco

Ecco l'artista!
Tosca

A group of scientists, members of the military, politicians, and other workers are somewhere in the middle of the desert building the atomic bomb. They are working for the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos, the site of the "Trinity" —the first controlled atomic explosion, which took place in nearby Alamogordo on July 16th, 1945. The director of the Manhattan Project, and its leading intellectual, is the physicist Robert Oppenheimer, the man who chose the codename of "Trinity" for this first nuclear test (Rhodes 1986: 617-78). The story of what happened in Los Alamos is so well known, its details so ingrained in the popular consciousness, that one could wonder why it is even worthwhile to retell it.[1]

Retelling makes things present. It is a movement that—as Nancy says—is not worried about "accretions of sense" (Nancy 1993: 5). Furthermore, making things present—something that is always starting over—is a way to summon up the mass of History and submit it to discourse and reason, to a set of metaphors and metonymies, to proper names, to dialogues and conversations, to a certain dynamics of time and space—all processes that make understandable what at first seems unthinkable. These processes, put history in front of our eyes as if it were the first time we see it. Theories and practices of presence pervade modern historical monuments and documents, as if an historical ac-

1 I wish to thank Amelia Josephson and Aurélie Vialette for their comments and suggestions.

count were a capsule of time, or a laboratory where creators, historians, and theorists alike could experience the combinatory alchemy of real facts and a language to talk about them. Opera is one of those laboratories of theory of history, of how to tell "another history of time" (Gavilán) by making present portions of the past. Opera, however, is also a complex laboratory, insofar as it entails theoretical thought not only by means of text; the "total work of art" or "the art-work of the future" (Wagner) explores as well the creation of audible, visual and dynamic concepts.

Let's take the prologue and epilogue scenes of Philip Glass' 2007 opera, *Appomattox*. They consist of a quintet of women (General Grant and General Lee's wives, Lincoln's wife, a maid, and a black slave) who perform a fugue on the following theme: if we keep retelling history and its horrors, we might be able to avoid that they will happen again. The fugue is an interplay between a subject (the war and its sorrows, the necessity to retell the history, the confluence of the five enemy women on stage), and countersubjects like the pervasive sensation that future history will be plagued with the same wars and fights of past history. Counterpoint is what marks the inner dialectics of the fugue: what at first might seem repetition is, in fact, a harmonic system of creating oppositions and discordances. The same happens within the relationships among the five enemy women on stage. Similar dialectics preside over the relationship between reality and languages. The language of retelling might look like mere repetition of actual facts, while it is in fact, counterpoint, an art of fugue, and the interpretation runs along dialectical lines.

The underlying idea of retelling is that, as events are repeated in linguistic and artistic performances, they become so horribly present that the actual events disappear. It is not impossible that such events could happen again, but it becomes very difficult for people to perceive the events as things that are in the world. Can the specter given birth to in the narrative of history mask the things that are in the world, and make them thinkable by means of languages and rhetorics?

This conception of retelling history and making it present in all aesthetic and intellectual senses is what drove John Adams, composer, Peter Sellars, librettist and director of scene for the San Francisco Opera, and Penny Woolcock, director of scene for the New York Metropolitan Opera, when they decided to delve, with *Doctor Atomic,* into the story about Trinity, the creation of the atomic bomb, and the overwhelming feelings that Trinity unleashed in the small community of people who unveiled the destructive power of their own creation in 1945.

Like many other historical operas, *Doctor Atomic* depends heavily on some kind of bibliographical or archival research. In the case of *Doctor Atomic*, much more than in the other so-called "docu-operas" or—more disdainfully—"CNN operas," the archival research is hypertrophic. So much so that parts of the libretto are direct transcriptions of the actual documents related to the Trinity test—the ones that have been unclassified. These words taken from archival sources are sung in a psalmodic, arrhythmic, atonal chord, dominated by an ever-present *ostinato*—the preferred modes of liturgy make present the original sources. There is something powerful in the musical transformation of the coldness of the document into the musical hieratism of liturgy.

John Adams has mentioned on different occasions that when he and Sellars thought of writing an opera, they had in mind the dimensions of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, or Proust's *Recherche*. In the end, Adams said, they only opened a small window, a twenty-four hour period of maximum intensity—that of the hours that preceded the test, and that, therefore, preceded as well the first atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

I will not try to give a full account and description of this opera—a temptation, however, given that there is still very little bibliography on the subject. But since most of this bibliography is mainly descriptive and reiterative, I would like to focus on some details about the writing and composing of the opera. Examining the construction of a narrative of contemporary history in contemporary opera reveals specific problems of opera audience and musical criticism, and the difficulties to engage in contemporary political issues by means of a genre like opera and classical music. I will emphasize the strange necessity for Adams and Sellars to get away from the creation of a text from the ground up, relegating all creativity and the symbolic communication

of the contemporariness to the composition of the music and to the gestural and spatial codification of the opera.

This reluctance to invent a text, and their insistence that they are using original sources, is probably related to another contemporary opera by John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, with a *libretto* by Alice Goodman, that raised specific criticism derived from the role played by the fictional in the narrative of the hijacking of the liner "Achille Lauro" in 1985, and to *Nixon in China* (1987), also with a *libretto* by Alice Goodman. These operas, like Doctor Atomic, explore events in contemporary history, or, rather—I would argue—they actually try to create events. The creation of an event is, to a certain degree a countersubject of history: the event of the atomic bomb does not lie in the actual bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but in those 24 hours, the Atomic Trinity hours, during which a small number of human beings discuss some of the personal, political and technical issues on the eve of the first atomic test.

But at the same time, the creation of these events preceding the creation of the light of destruction is star-crossed. The opera stages what can be called an Aristotelian curse—his reaching the end of physics and completing it with metaphysics, at least according to his Alexandrian editors. The events are based on the moment in which a group of individuals face, at the same time, the end of Physics, and the end of History. Once there, however, the creators of the opera face at their time the end of the operatic narrative they themselves have devised. Instead of analyzing how to understand those two liminal parts of knowledge and practice, the creators turn then to metaphysics, in order to place the possible analysis elsewhere, somewhere where neither knowledge nor practice can be located. As we will see, this metaphysical turn entails issues about contemporary political culture that are not—in my view—sufficiently developed to constitute a political statement about the role of the atomic bomb and its consequences in our societies.

Unlike in Zarzuela, in opera the music is written after the production of a libretto. This is an important characteristic of opera, insofar as music, tonalities, harmonies, the choice and participation of instruments, and the rest of the elements of musical language are in fact a

theoretical and practical interpretation of a given text. Pre-1900 opera has explored the most canonical literary traditions, inflicting a major transformation on them by means of music: it has introduced specific vocal weight, tessitura, timbre, and tone to characters and events; it has introduced codes for instruments and actions or feelings, and then it has broken those codes; it has introduced elements of analysis of thought with the development of musical themes; it has explored, like no other art, the power of synesthesia. Musicians have reinvented the language of music only to be able to question its rules—one need only think of the combinatory systems that define harmony before and after Bach's *Wohltemperierte Klavier*, and before and after Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre*. Many musicologists speak about the evocative power of music, but I think its power is much more than that: evocative means that something is summoned up from a distance, but music is exactly the contrary to distance—it resonates within the body, or, as Veit Erlmann has put it, resonance involves the conjunction of subject and object (2010: 10). Opera has explored all the limits of given texts, canon, and traditions; it has dwelt on them only to push them away from a single artistic expression to what Wagner considered to be the total work of art.

I remember having seen an interview with Claude Lévi-Strauss in which Bernard Pivot asked the anthropologist to define the myth. Lévi-Strauss answered that myth is a time: the time when animals and humans still could communicate. I would say that music is the most tremendous attempt to re-establish the communication between the human and the non-human—where accord is the meeting point.

The process of the composition of the *Doctor Atomic* libretto is, however, very different to the kind of collaboration between, say, Verdi and Boito, Mozart and Da Ponte, or Puccini and Illica & Giacosa, or even Wagner collaborating with himself. For Adams and Sellars, writing the libretto was an exercise in *assembling*—this is the word used by Sellars himself, who, in an interview for Jon Else's *Wonders are Many*, declares: "I do not write, I assemble," while he cuts photocopies sitting on his desktop and pastes sections into his working notebook (Else 2009: 15'09"-15'-21"). This is how Adams himself explains the process: "Peter made the libretto by photocopying several hundred fragments

of text, cutting them, and arranging them in a sequence that had real dramatic flow, especially in the scenes where the back and forth between scientists and military officials became dangerously heated." (Adams 2008: 277)

The verb used by Adams might be familiar to some medievalists, but it is certainly not the verb used by modern, post-1700 authors to refer to their creations. Here, the verb *to make* as in "Peter made the libretto," and the verb *to arrange*, imply a creative process that seems counterintuitive for an individual, authorial work. Adams himself considered it to be "a radical idea": "Instead of writing an original text from scratch, we would give the historical characters the very words they had said, either by quoting them verbatim...or by using recollections by and interviews with the scientists and military personnel who had participated in the project" (Adams 2008: 277).

Creators are here *artifices* or *hominès fabri*, rather than original inventors of new material. Or this is at least the parcel they would like to pass—musical pun intended.

For that matter—Sellars adds—he only changes the tenses, to put in the present what the memories, biographies, and other documentary material, including pieces of journalism, expressed in the past or in the future. The intense 24 hours of the narrative time make both past and future become present. Other transformations Sellars makes are, however, more important than that of changing the tenses, even if the grammatical change is the only one that attracts the author's attention. When Sellars shows the camera a page from his notebook, we can see that he has pasted those pieces of text, while adding accidentals (punctuation, for instance), changing tenses, and modifying articles and connectors. But he has not only collected, he has also excised some of the words actually said by the historical characters. Sellars reads aloud a text he has photocopied from Edward Teller's memoir: "We were determined to look the beast in the eye," only to add, "I don't think we are going to include that" (Else 2009: 13'54" ff). Excision, here, is not even theorized; only by the tone employed by Sellars, we understand that this is too "cliché" (a word he has used before to refer to the rhetoric surrounding the atomic bomb), and that it does not belong to the category of the things that: "we have seen but we have not seen yet" (Else 2009: 13'54" ff), the ones for which, according to Sellars, the artist is responsible.

Such a modality of *making* or *arranging* is based on the supposition that one can "give the historical characters the very words they have said," something that is just as counterintuitive a process as it is a radical idea. It is telling of the extreme anxiety of composition that pervades the creation of an opera about the contemporary world. Adams and Sellars seem to be trying to create without actually creating fiction, or, perhaps, by pushing fiction somewhere else, to work under the illusion that their textual creation is, in fact, the mere representation of "original documents" and "sources," and that it simply is what the historical characters said.

This mix of creative anxiety and illusion is connected, I think, to the poor reception that some of Adams' previous works received. Adams had composed two previous "docu-operas"[2], *Nixon in China* (1985-1987), the one that "made him famous," and *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1987), the one that made him "infamous" (Adams 2008: 270). Poet—and now chaplain at Trinity College—Alice Goodman was in charge of the libretti for both operas. Both are based on actual events, but both, too, are creations from scratch, and their poetic world is less dependent from literal reproduction of documents than Doctor Atomic. So much so that much of the criticism of these earlier works (Feuchtner 2006: 299-312) was based on the idea that some of the characters in the operas, and in particular in *The Death of Klinghoffer*, were too fictional.

Berkeley musicologist Richard Taruskin blamed Adams—among many other things—because he and Goodman had exploited fiction in the configuration of the characters for the Palestinian terrorists. The fact that the authors decided to exploit fiction rather than documents to create these characters seemed to give the impression that those terrorists had an actual inner life, that they were actual *personae*—and I use here this noun with its full etymological and theatrical connota-

2 The term comes from Tom (no more name details) on his review of Nixon in China and Appomattox, <http://www.operawarhorses.com/2010/03/21/richard-m-nixon-andmaozedong%C2%Aodance%C2%Aoat%C2%Aosmashing-long-beach-opera-nixon-in-china-march-20-2010/, October 5, 2010>.

tions—, with feelings and reasons. This revolted Taruskin, who then decided to make a quite surreal—and I hope his was not an *imitatio bonorum auctorum*—"case for control," or, in other words, to appeal to censorship. Taruskin tries to get away from censorship, however, and prefers to call the movement he is invoking "control" or "forbearance." According to him, *The Death of Klinghoffer* should disappear from the face of the earth, because—he dictates—there is "no need to torment people stunned by previously unimaginable horrors with offensive *challenges* like *The Death of Klinghoffer*" (Taruskin 2001: 4).

After *The Death of Klinghoffer* there is, I think, a major change in how Adams conceives the text for his musical work. It is particularly visible in the Pulitzer prize-winning composition *On the Transmigration of Souls*, a choral/orchestral work written after the 9/11 attacks. Asked about its genre in an interview for the New York Philarmonic, Adams answered:

> I want to avoid words like "requiem" or "memorial" when describing this piece because they too easily suggest conventions that this piece doesn't share. If pressed, I'd probably call the piece a "memory space." It's a place where you can go and be alone with your thoughts and emotions. The link to a particular historical event—in this case to 9/11—is there if you want to contemplate it. But I hope that the piece will summon human experience that goes beyond this particular event. (Adams 2002)

One year earlier, the Boston Symphony Orchestra had removed from one of its programs some of the choruses of *Klinghoffer*, because music should give "comfort and solace" to the audience, and those choruses failed to do so. *On the Transmigration of Souls*, as a "memory space" is conceived by Adams precisely as a space of comfort and solace, in the understanding that what happened in the attacks is not only a singular event that transforms the calendar—it resets historical time to before and after the event—, but also a universal one that is pervading constantly all possible calendars: universal or global contemporary history cannot be told without reference to this new and present fracture of historical time.

The denomination "memory space" is all too appropriate. In the score to *On the Transmigration of Souls*, conventional orchestral instruments—woodwind, brass, basso continuo and percussion, in particular—play along with a pre-recorded sound-track of city music—or to rearrange an expression from Pink Floyd, "music from the city body." This city music is dissonant, not harmonic, noisy, but permanent as an aesthetic element of our lives and thoughts. Along with all that, the text is sung by a chorus of a minimum of 90 children.

This musical space opens up and embraces a text formed by powerful microliteratures. By rejecting the *requiem* genre, Adams also rejected the *requiem* text and even its most transforming traditions, like Britten's *War Requiem*. The events of 9/11 were not understandable under the eschatological conditions of a *requiem* text. The texts chosen by Adams to create the piece underscore something that is precisely not eschatological: the individual persons whose names are pronounced by the chorus are not dead, they are missing. This is what the texts he is recovering for the musical space say, and what the title of the piece conveys, under the idea of transmigration.

Along with the names of those who are missing—randomly selected by Adams—, there is also a selection of messages, some left onsite by relatives and passersby, others published in the pages of the *New York Times* after the attacks. Here is the space, but also, as Eelco Runia would say, this is where the very construction of a spot of time takes place: unlike the *requiem*, an abstract, collective, theologically unidimensional universe, *On the Transmigration of Souls* is space for the individual, one that has been opened to the listener as a chapel where he or she can enter in contact with the name, with the missing, and recover it to store it in a spot of memory.

Opening up the space for the text to the "original source," retrieving the voice of the historical person to give it to the historical character, is a means to avoid, or at least to push back, the noise of fiction. It would be like covering the authorial task with a protective coat—the document, the original source—that would prevent the creator from interfering in the rhythm of interpretation of contemporary history—the events that are impossible to interpret because they still are painful, present, and all too ineffable.

Such a protective coat would only work properly in the level of semantics, where neither onomasiology nor semasiology is the respon-

sibility of the creators. Fiction and interpretation would be evacuated to the score, the instruments, the tempo and mood written on the surface of the musical sheet, the gestures and dynamics of the staging, and everything that is not words, everything that can be covered by the mist—cast by the technicians to create a microclimate on stage, to hydrate the singers' fatigued vocal cords and airways.

But documents, original sources are, at their turn, at the outskirts of music. They must become—Adams uses this expression in an interview for Else's movie—"faux poetry" (Else 2009: 8'2"). Original sources must be bent so that they are easier to organize and are readable from a musical perspective. The book *Atomic Energy for Military Purposes* (1945) gives up its prose, to become:

> A weapon has been developed
> that is potentially destructive
> beyond the wildest nightmares
> of the imagination;
> a weapon so ideally suited
> to sudden unannounced attack
> that a country's major cities
> might be destroyed overnight
> by an ostensibly friendly power.
> This weapon has been created
> not by the devilish inspiration
> of some warped genius
> but by the arduous labor
> of thousands of normal men and women
> working for the safety of their country.
> (Adams 2008: 278)

The entire intelligibility of the "original source" relies on its formal transformation, so that it can be grasped by rhythm and breath, interspersing pauses and silences capable of underscoring notions and periods that would be lost in the *continuum* of the prose. Original sources become operatic sources when the *continuum* is dissected into faux poetry, when information can only be understood as an essay

in *metaphorology*—the term corresponds to Hans Blumenberg 2010 (originally, 1960). In metaphorology, concepts are created when literality is transported somewhere else, away from the prison of primary meaning.

Doctor Atomic has much more than original sources beating at the rhythm of faux poetry. "There has never been an opera like this—says Adams—: a mixture of things that people really said and," and here he makes a pause, in order to pronounce emphatically "poetry" (Else 2009: 3'42").

There is a specific space of poetry. In such a space, there is still *document*, there is still *original source*: the authority and weight of the poets who wrote it, far away from a discourse created by Adams and Sellars. There is, however, little space for the wish to "give the historical characters what they really said." It is still a *gift*, one in which characters are given what they might have thought, or, at least, what they could have thought because it was in their culture. The authors could not limit to music, gestures, and staging the realm of theoretical thought. They needed also words—but ones that entailed, rather than pure action, tradition. These words had to be able to connect two worlds apart—that of the actual, and that of the "likely and the necessary," to use Aristotle's apt expression (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451b).

The *Bhagavad Gita* choir at the peak of act II ("At the sight of this, your shape stupendous") is one of those spaces of tradition and transmission. It is also the second anchor of the opera for the concept and metaphor of *Trinity*—the first one is the final aria of act I, that I will consider later in this paper. It certainly transmits feelings—or *pathos*, in the way a Greek tragedy chorus would do, perhaps one of the effects most sought for in opera, in particular since Wagner. The chorus also transmits the prophecy of war: the *Bhagavad Gita* is, in a nutshell, a conversation between Krishna, one of the avatars of Vishnu—one of the gods of the Hindu *Trimurti* (literally triple image, a trinity constituted by Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva)—and the bowman and hero Arjuna, before the definitive Battle of Kurukshetra and the beginning of the Kali Yuga, the last period of time, in which Kali, the male demon, reigns over the destruction of humankind.

With this chorus, Adams and Sellars establish yet another connec-

tion of a different nature, a different way of linking themselves within the tradition—a dialogue with Philip Glass' opera *Satyagraha* (1989), also based on the *Bhagavad Gita*. Glass' relationship with the *Bhagavad Gita* is quite different. For starters, Glass leaves the text in Sanskrit, whereas Adams and Sellars decide to opt for the English version of Isherwood and his guru, Swami Prabhavananda.

Like Adams and Sellars, who focus on the relationship between the sight of the atomic gadget, the beginning of the time of destruction, and Robert Oppenheimer, Philip Glass focuses on a historical character. For Glass, this character is Gandhi, whose life and whose concept of nonviolent resistance, or *satyagraha*, builds on the possibility of living again in the Satya yuga, or the period of peace and perfection. For that, Glass—in a very Rortyan movement for the creation of hope—divides his opera in three acts, devoted, each one, to the three princes of peace, Leo Tolstoy, Rabindranath Tagore, and Martin Luther King Jr.

In such a dialogue of characters, Oppenheimer constitutes a dissonance, the one that is in a complicated balance of three elements—the actual tragedy of the trinity—, creation (Brahma), preservation (Vishnu), and destruction (Shiva), not unlike the trinitarian interpretation of the very atomic bomb throughout the opera, and not unlike the oxymoronic relation between Oppenheimer and the Trinity that is also invoked at the end of act I, conveyed by the antithetic structure of the sonnet. For Sellars, who was also in charge of the San Francisco Opera and the Nederlandse Opera stage, this chorus foreshadows with gestures the actual bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and he directs the actors to "twist" as many joints of their body as possible, and to create a pathos of death and destruction, of burning and explosion (Adams 2007: 2, 27'25"). In the production for the Metropolitan Opera Stage, by Penny Woolcock, the approach is completely different, and I would argue that this production connects much more with an aesthetic of coldness that puts into use some of the elements of French artist Christian Boltanski—starting by the way in which the pictures of the actual scientists are exhibited as powerful mug shots, just like Boltanski exhibits the pictures of the victims of the Holocaust. Penny Woolcock's chorus is less involved in *pathos* or in the incarnation of future suffering, and instead exploits the cold presence of the workers at the Manhattan project in front of their creation, as if the workers are accepting the empirical fact that they have created the atomic bomb and it is going to be detonated.[3] While in Sellars staging the screaming of the chorus is of pain and anguish, in Woolcock's, it is of power and imminence; while in Sellars the chorus is prophetic, and, in this sense, much more related to the Greek tragedy chorus, in Woolcock the chorus is pure present and points to the bomb that we can actually see hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the stage house. The bomb, therefore, becomes Vishnu himself, whose sight announces the process of destruction.

Arguably, the most amazing moment of the opera is the end of act I, in which everything, including the music and the singing techniques, turn into baroque, by opening anew the space of poetry—of real poetry, not *faux*. The aria, sung by the character Robert Oppenheimer (and interpreted by a genius Gerald Finley), is based on the text of John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, number 14, the poem that, according to Oppenheimer, inspired him to codename Trinity the atomic gadget and the test. I quote it here in the version used for the libretto, with all the repetitions from the score, a representation that actually fractures the sonnet structure of the poem:

> Batter my heart, three person'd God; For, you
> As yet but knock, breathe, knock, breathe, knock, breathe
> Shine, and seek to mend;
> Batter my heart, three person'd God;
> That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
> Your force, to break, blow, break, blow, break, blow
> burn and make me new.
> Batter my heart, three person'd God; For, you
> As yet but knock, breathe, knock, breathe, knock, breathe
> Shine, and seek to mend;

3 The Metropolitan Opera version debut took place in October 2008. The November 2008 recording, makes part of the online archive of the Metropolitan Opera in HD (by subscription): <http://www.metoperafamily.com/met_player. Consulted on October 7th 2010>.

Batter my heart, three person'd God;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, break, blow, break, blow
burn and make me new.
I, like an usurpt town, to another due,
Labor to admit you, but Oh, to no end,
Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue,
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy,
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

The sonnet has disappeared in all senses. Its metrical structure is gone. The logical structure that underlies the sonnet composition—frequently considered as a metric syllogism—is no more either. The visual aspect of the sonnet—so important for the Early Modern creation of the book of poetry, and therefore for the history of reading—has also vanished. All those are effects of the full commotion created on the original sources—documental or not—, a commotion generated by the necessity to reinterpret the poem by dint of the music. The original referent—the Holy Trinity—, as we will see immediately, has disappeared as well.

I have not been able to consult the score—it does not seem to have been published yet—, but here is what Adams says about it:

After a whole act of music that teeters on the cusp of atonality, "Batter my heart" appears as an archaic trope, its D-minor chord sequences projecting a slow, stately gravitas that to me spoke for the poem's content as well as for what most surely have been Oppenheimer's wildly conflicting emotions. How could this supremely intelligent and sensitive man not have peered into the terrible future of what this bomb would bring? How could he not have suspected the horrific, lingering pain and slow agonizing death that its radiation would cause for tens of thousands of innocent civilians? (Adams 2008: 285).

The D-minor tonality has a sacrificial tradition in it. The Mozart-Süssmeyer *Requiem* and Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, among others, are written in this chord. This *archaic trope* is in fact an exploration of what *should have been* Oppenheimer's feelings, a research on his *pathos*. The idea that Oppenheimer did not have those feelings is unthinkable to Adams, for whom "enlightenment" and compassion and solidarity cannot be in an inverse dialectical relationship—a rejection of the dialectics of Enlightenment of Adorno and Horkheimer. Adams struggles to *think* Oppenheimer by giving the historical character what he might have thought based on what Adams knows about Oppenheimer's readings—that include, of course, the *Bhagavad Gita*, John Donne, and Baudelaire, but did not necessarily include the other poems of the libretto, one by Muriel Rukeyser, and another one being a traditional Tewa song, sung by the character of Pasqualita.

Most of the libretto is an act of deferral in which the voices of the characters speak about technicalities, political affairs that are current at the time of those critical 24 hours previous to the test, and other more -than-physical matters that seem too particular to the event taking place at Los Alamos. The event is pure expositive logos. *Trinity*, however, the presence of the bomb, the future, already known by the composers, the public, and even the characters on stage—namely that the bomb will kill thousands in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and will start a new historical era—, is an exploration of another dimension of humankind. This happens through poetry, and there are characters that only express themselves in poetry, like Kitty Oppenheimer or Pasqualita; and poetry invades, as well, the moments in which other characters are about to become human, instead of mere producers of technical and historical effects—Robert Oppenheimer, the chorus of scientists in act II. This would appear to be a humanistic exploration of the feelings of those who were conscious that they were creating the ultimate weapon of mass destruction.

But this is an illusion. As a matter of fact, all humanism disappears by dint of the poems the composers have chosen. They are elsewhere, instead of dwelling in the present feelings. They are metaphysical poems that look for explanations and answers beyond the boundaries of the human.

Physics becomes metaphysics. Reaches its end when the gadget is close to its mission to end a chapter of history and inaugurate the atomic era. Adams and Sellars have interpreted the turn of science as a theological turn. Theology and metaphysics are here, however, redefined. Trinity is not a divine device or a *mystery*—as the Holy Trinity is referred to in Catholicism—, but, instead, a gadget, an atomic explosion hanging on humankind like a Damocles sword. This Atomic Trinity redefines metaphysics because it locates both creation and destruction in a laboratory, as an experiment in science that leads to the end of physics. Such an end, once installed in society and war, exceeds the possibility of humankind to control it and even to understand it. The oxymoronic invocations to the Trinity acquire a terrible new Atomic referent, once lost the divine one created by John Donne.

In his article of 2009, "The Damnation of Dr. Atomic," Mitchell Cohen wonders whether the creation of a drama and work of art against war and about the atomic era can be reactionary. There would be grounds to support such idea. Aesthetically, the opera is—at least to my eyes and ears—exquisite. The political positioning of this opera is the direct product of the authors' efforts to hypertrophy of the original source, even when they intend to explore the pathos through fiction, because they resort to metaphysical poems that, no matter how beautiful they are, are locating the end of physics and the end of History beyond the grasp of the human: the redefinition of metaphysics by means of the creation of a superhuman kind of energy. This is almost a denial of an idea that is—I believe—the seed of all human freedom, and that Marx expressed in his third thesis on Feuerbach—that humans are capable of transforming their circumstances, and that this must be understood as a revolutionary practice.

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