

THE IRONIC GOOD

The Aesthetic Politics of the Sublime in Verdi's Otello

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In the same way that Shakespeare's *Othello* inspires both terror and horror in the hearts and minds of the audiences, *Otello* brings about a unity of these two elements that creates the basis for a *Sublime*.

This Sublime is one which builds upon political, theological, and racial questions to erect a vast edifice of aesthetic might.

This is not only due to the very nature of the sublime itself, but because by engaging with questions of symbolic efficacy, *Otello* goes far beyond the analogous work *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in Germany with working through the immense questions of aesthetics and nationhood.

By bringing these multiple strands together a paradigm shift occurs which marks the conquest of the sublime of not only every inch of the stage but every seat in the theater.

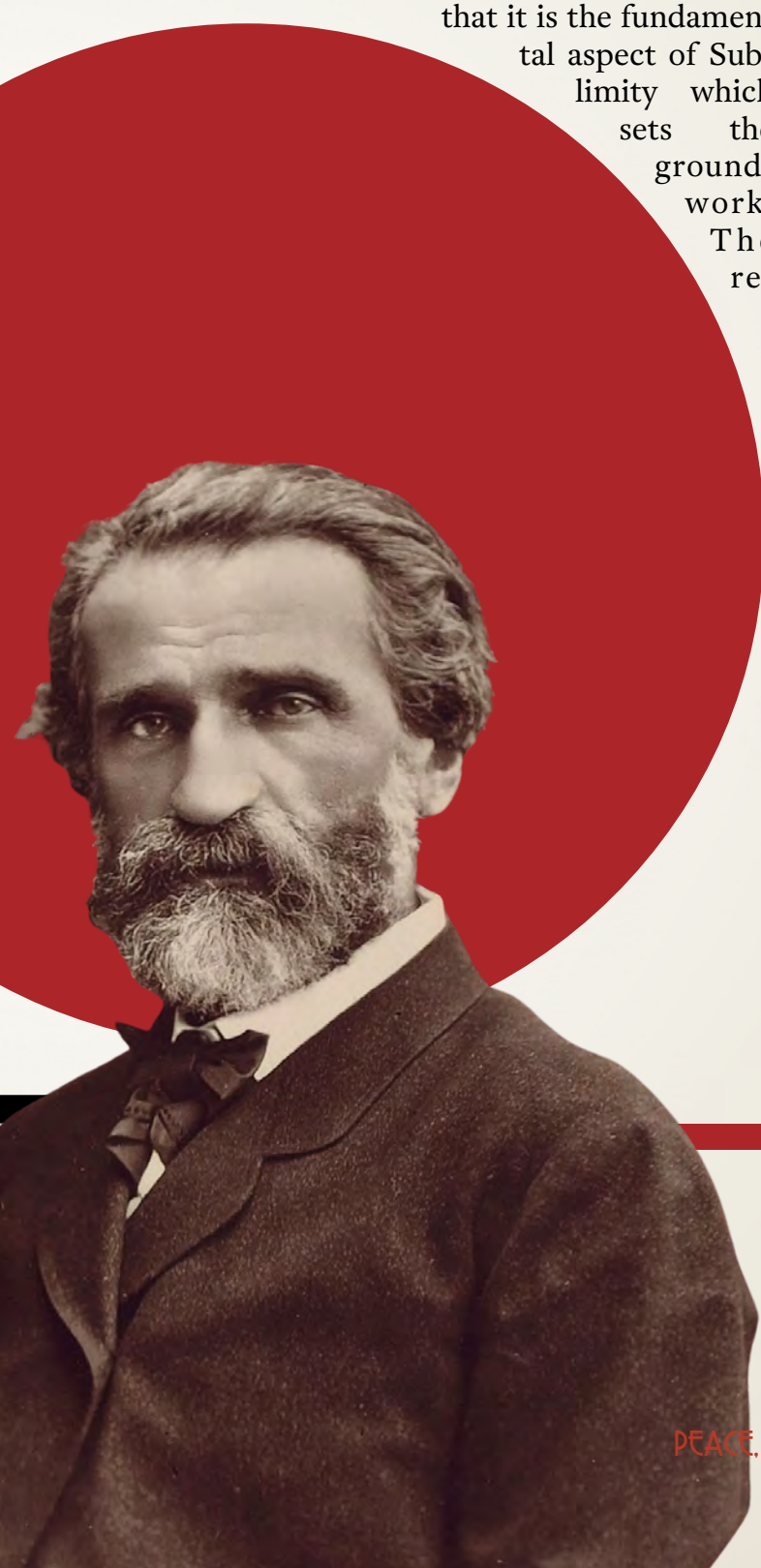
There is always a need to put the *oeuvres* of Verdi and Wagner in conversation with one another. In our case, it is necessary in order to elaborate the aesthetic considerations employed by Verdi. While comparing a single opera to an entire cycle of four music dramas would be impossible in any com-

plete sense, I do find it necessary to put them in conversation here precisely because *Otello* hands many of the heights and depths that occur in *The Ring Cycle*. From the commencement, *Otello* elevates the “self destructive moment,”¹ which is self destructive not just in the case of bringing the dramatic action to a point wherein the violence of the opera can begin but rather

that it is the fundamental aspect of Sublimity which sets the groundwork. The re-

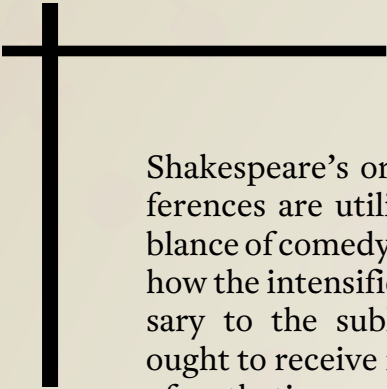
moval of the Venetian scenes places us squarely on a craggy island in the middle of the Eastern Mediterranean. The first lines of the opera are ones of roaring and clashing cries of “*una vela! Una vela!*”² signify that this opera is not just one of lightning and “swells [that] are sinking her”³ in reference to ship in the storm and the swelling of music during the murder of Desdemona, but how they are brought to pass by a mere piece of cloth. On one hand, you have the flag of Venice on the other Desdemona’s infamous handkerchief; *Otello* the conventional wisdom of the sublime which is limited by time and space by infusing every moment with a sense of it. As Cassio notes, the lightning providing the ability to “reveal it clearly”⁴ is not merely a reference to the literal cracking of the sky in twain, but as being a motif of the revelatory aesthetics of the Sublime.

To define the Sublime, one might conjure the verses of Longinus or the prose of Edmund Burke. However, here, I wish to demonstrate how, as Heidegger puts it, “the origin of something is the source of its nature,”⁵ when it comes to how Verdi goes beyond these two traditions. What is more, we can see how the sublimity which is evoked by an element which transports the experiencer is brought to the fore precisely because the conditions of opera allow for the expansion of textual and physical Sublimes into one which is more akin to Wagner’s gesamtkunstwerk. Verdi, in having so much occur in the opening of the opera doesn’t just speak to the changes made to



Giuseppe Verdi

1813 – 1901

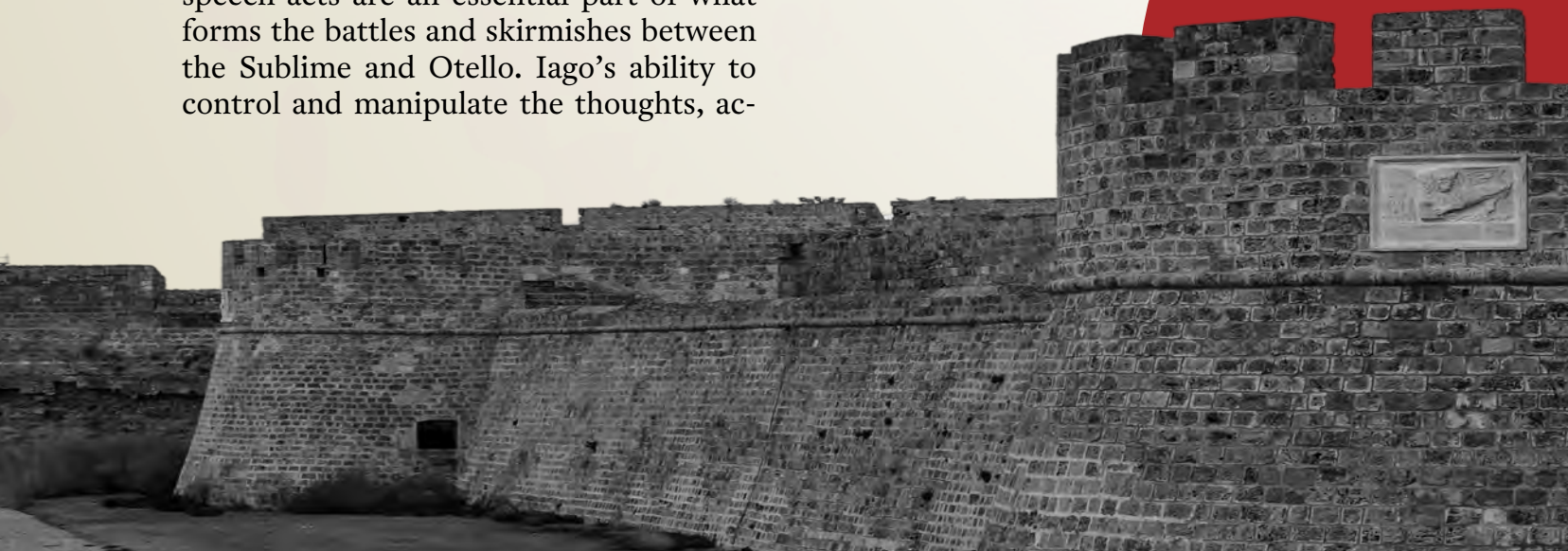


Shakespeare's original but how those differences are utilized to remove any semblance of comedy. It is necessary to think of how the intensification of tragedy is necessary to the sublime since "the sublime ought to receive new attention as a variety of aesthetic experience involving the negative emotions"⁶ in relation to drama. Drama and in our case, opera is particularly poised to unite the literary, physical, and atmospheric in one. Having "[t]he whirling of ghastly northern / clouds are like gigantic trumpet blasts / from heaven"⁷ and creating a scene that coupled with the fact that this scene "begins with the orchestra and chorus creating a storm of cosmic proportions,"⁸ removes all hope entirely, it goes beyond *La Divina Commedia* and enters us into a realm without hope.

The masses of the Cypriots rushing to the docks performs an instance where Otello is the master over the *sublime object a*, a moment where Otello triumphs over any affront to the order of the established ideological edifice. That Roderigo wishes "to drown [him]self"⁹ is a visceral reaction to the very sublimity that Otello masters over. In opposition to this, Iago's stating that he "remain[s] an ensign to the Moor"¹⁰ demonstrates how Iago and Otello will lock in an ideological battle through the aesthetics of the Sublime. Iago is then an encapsulation of the Sublime as it seeks to dominate the *Otello* and thus his very actions both physically on the stage and in the form of speech-acts are an essential part of what forms the battles and skirmishes between the Sublime and Otello. Iago's ability to control and manipulate the thoughts, ac-

tions, and feelings of those around whom he has within his grasp means that Iago holds the keys to the terror and distress which undoes the model of the Burkean sublime. Indeed, the chorus' paeans that "the wife and her faithful / husband sing of bold palms and sycamores"¹¹ would suggest that the sublime is one which is deeply psychological and ideological as Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* seeks to attend to in some capacity.

Iago's self-described title of being "just a critic"¹² undoes any hope that the aesthetics and atmospherics of *Otello* would include the necessary nobility granted to Brunnhilde and Hagen in Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Iago is constantly undoing every neatly tied bow which allows Verdi to create in Iago a figure that is far more sublime as compared to Hagen and Wotan¹³ due to the fact that Iago is uniquely totalizing. This is what I believe is the best example of a *sublime object a* which denotes a rhizomatic totality¹⁴ in-and-for itself whose totality is brought about by the very rhizomatic capabilities to create and remove connections constantly. Even in inebriation, the dynamics of terror and horror at Iago's disposal embodies the "ironic god and destiny"¹⁵ which is the Sublime manifest. In true Verdian fashion, the music accompanying the scene and



Iago's spoken parts are embedded into the opera in subtle ways which confirm the Iago being the totalizing object of sublimity.

Whereas Wagner has an accursed ring, Verdi has damnation incarnate. Iago is constantly tempting and attempting to seduce Cassio into "drink[ing] with [him]" every time that Cassio states "I don't fear truth ... / ... I don't fear the truth."¹⁶ This is not because alcohol in this scene would un-

apathetic response to Othello's conquest over the Sublime moment at the start of the opera speaks then to Iago's placement on the stage, his very essence, to his even being ideology itself. Being always present.

Some might wish to disagree with my assertion that Iago is both ideology and cognizant of it and view it as a paradox but as Brady writes:

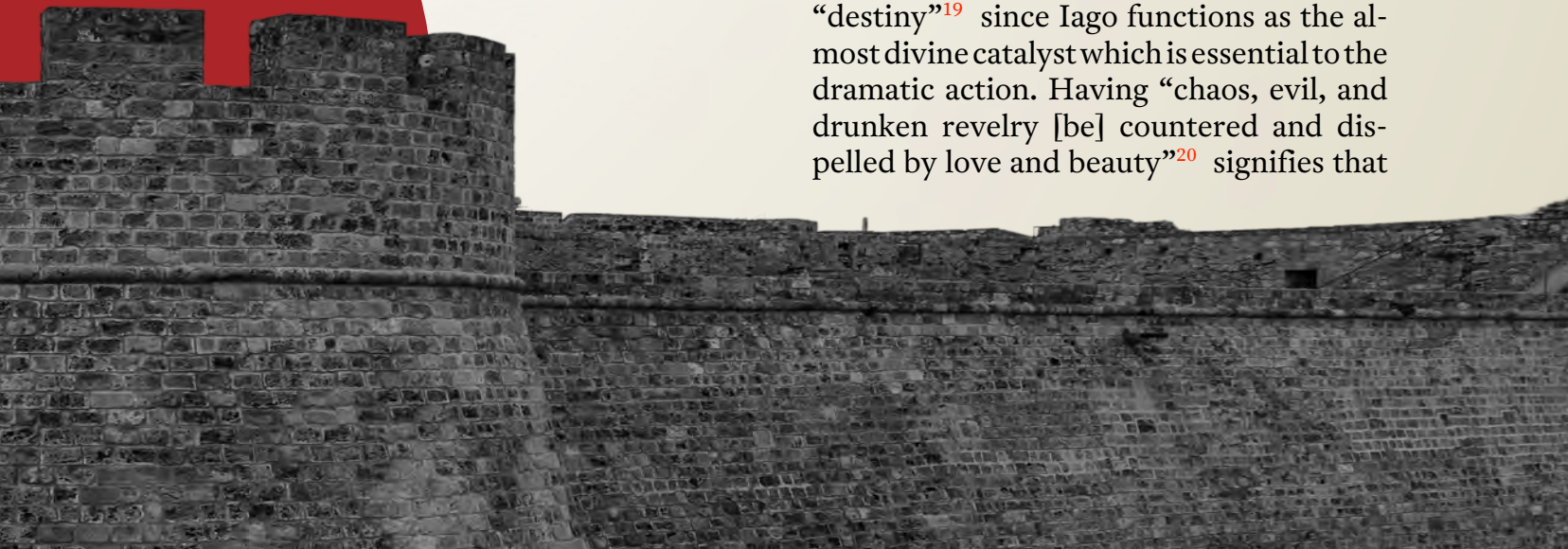
do the truth but rather that Iago functions as the arbiter of truth itself, thus his control of the situation goes into the realm of biopower.¹⁷ Iago's status as just a critic means that his critique is the logos of the ironic god. Iago's temptations are part of his critique and thus part of his biopowered control over the entire play.

Iago is quite clearly the denizen of evil and thus the scholarly conversation concerning Iago's motivations in Shakespeare's *Othello* is vast. Imagining Iago as ideology's champion I claim leads to the richest reading of his motivations insofar as it pertains to Verdi's adaptation. Iago is truth, truth

Iago, because that is the nature of ideology that is, to be seen as a truth and destiny. Iago's recognition of ideology and its implications is what makes him so utterly villainous. The

"the paradoxes are, after all, smoke and mirrors. They can be explained away, and in their explaining away we may gain a better understanding of the complexity of more negative aesthetic experiences and, importantly, the imaginative, emotional, cognitive, and communicative value they hold."¹⁸

This is due to the fact that this is a tragedy and therefore the Sublime is inextricably tied to ideology. Iago thus changes the scene in Act 1 by his critique, by his speech and like the Christian god creates something purely sublime because his words create the very world before us. Regardless, it would seem that what inhabits this moment is the "and" between the "ironic god" and "destiny"¹⁹ since Iago functions as the almost divine catalyst which is essential to the dramatic action. Having "chaos, evil, and drunken revelry [be] countered and dispelled by love and beauty"²⁰ signifies that



the incarnations of those respective aspects undo the initial rumblings of Iago's sublime machinations because they are still the dominant ideology. This means that once Desdemona (Beauty) is killed that leaves Otello (Love) adrift and sinking to the bottom of the sea below a sublime cloud of thunder and lightning. Unlike *Das Rhine-gold* which has the giving up of love for power, having these two ideological pillars be cut down before us on stage only magnifies the effects of the tragic Sublime.



"Then must you speak / Of one that loved not wisely but too well." (Otello 5.2)

It is no accident that Iago invokes the great adversary, Satan, who "possesses [Cassio]" as being "an evil star [which] overcame [his] good senses"²¹ since it speaks to the clash of immense proportions that Iago is the catalyst to. One might ask: does Iago inhabit the place of Satan? Only if he is also the evil start which shines upon the scene even when he isn't visible on stage. His discussions on nature and divinity are linked to aesthetic questions since "nature and art still exemplify the divide between the Sublime and the Beautiful"²² and thus his recognition that he is operating his schemes under a natural guise is essential to his Sublime nature. His opposite is Desdemona who is, in essence, the intercessory figure of the Virgin Mary who haunts the gilded chapels and statuary of European cathedrals. This is why Cassio's firing is only possible with Desdemona's entrance because her essence is that of an omen. Otello's

"Even so my bloody thoughts with violent pace / Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love." (Otello 3.3)

lo's proclamation that he "shall not leave until I see that peace / has been restored," is a desire to quell the aforementioned ideological sublime of violence as an affront to the symbolic order. Otello's role as a colonial administrator is then to ensure that this is the case, that the symbolic order is upheld.

Otello's position and *modus operandi* in how he on one hand conceives of the Sublime when he states "the sounds of discord sumble, and after / the rage, such a vast love overcomes it."²³ Otello recognizes his position as the defender against the Sublime but the discord he is sensitive like the crescendo that succeeds it is growing. It is not too much longer before Otello registers that it is preferable to "let death come!" since he "finds [him]self in the / ecstasy of this embrace, this supreme / moment"²⁴ in knowing that the representations of symbolic authority drive the ideological heights to call for a tribute. Otello's heavenward call draws the Sublime toward him as "[o]nly in

this state of Sublimity [*Erhabenheit*] does something deeper become possible, a kind of truth that is the enemy of the merely factual”²⁵ in that Otello is no longer the dominator over the Sublime he was before, it is no longer the fact. And while the sky eventually clears and the moon rises on this scene it would seem that Otello has seemingly won over the Sublime as in the beginning of Act 1, but he is never free from the Sublime’s new demand: *the taste of blood*.

The Symbolic Order which is upheld above all else by Otello rings false in a way which is dramatically ironic because even with his deep loving embraces with Desdemona, Iago is there disrupting it. The incessant need for Otello to keep buying into the Symbolic Order makes it so “the price we pay for [it] is that the order which thus survives is a mockery of itself, a blasphemous imitation of order”²⁶ and only empowers that is trying to subvert the order entirely. Due to Iago’s presence the Order is already out of place and this aforementioned containment of the Sublime is pyrrhic in nature. Since “Love is asserted and celebrated”²⁷ it begins to seem like a falsehood precisely for this reason; if love is to be Otello and Desdemona’s saving grace, it would only work in creating a false revelation as the Order is subverted even further.

With Desdemona we can find the incarnation of the Beautiful in aesthetic terms as Iago has allowed us to see her as the beatified beauty of the Venetian imaginary.

She is the one to whom you should “plead” to since “[her] genteel soul will intercede for you”²⁸ and yet her prayers will not counteract the powers of the ironic god, Iago, since her powers are of the decaying Symbolic Order. Desdemona is part of the rea-

O T E L L O

is an opera in four acts by Giuseppe Verdi to an Italian libretto by Arrigo Boito, based on Shakespeare’s play Othello. It was Verdi’s penultimate opera, and was first performed at the Teatro alla Scala, Milan, on 5 February 1887.



"Therefore be double damned / Swear thou art honest." (Otello 4.2)

son why "Love idealized becomes a kind of religion"²⁹ that is both embraced and questioned time and time again in the dramatic action. Although Desdemona isn't given the agency to go against it she becomes a Golden Calf³⁰ which adds a sacerdotal element to the duplicitous divinity of Iago as he is able to simultaneously undo the symbolic order and Desdemona. Iago having "unveiled the path to / [Cassio's] salvation"³¹ is the moment that Iago can begin to tip the balance in his favor by enabling the Sublime to be brought into the world under his false pretenses. His violent machinations are becoming violent in reality. When Iago says "I am a the demon"³², he embodies the concatenation of horror and terror that characterizes his control. Neither Desdemona nor Otello can operate any longer once Iago has made this admission as he becomes the vicious god of the Sublime that directs the couple to their doom as they believe are heading towards the Orphic light.

The dramatic action and the music come together to accomplish a Sublime atmospherics in the Great Hall soliloquy where Iago finalizes his end game. "[Iago] strongly believe[s] / [that] like / a young widow / before the altar, that the evil [he] think[s], / and the evil that flows through [him], is the / fulfillment of [his] destiny."³³ Thus, Iago's ideological underpinnings is succinctly understood in how "Death is nothingness"³⁴ and thus the only way to undo the Symbolic Order entirely for Iago is to bring about that nothingness. By negating the eternity of heaven with the eternities of nothingness, Iago removes anything but

the aesthetics of the Sublime. He can only negate the Christian god not with an adversarial Satan but a satan of satans, a nothingness that contains and simultaneously undoes all totalities: *The Sublime*.

Otello and Desdemona "ha[ve their] own supreme rules"³⁵ which Otello in particular will cause the affront of Symbolic Order to disappear. Desdemona however exists as Chastity and being thus symbolically castrates the god of Love, Otello. When "Otello's music is subdued by Desdemona's"³⁶ it creates an aesthetic barrier to the power Otello was able to subdue the Sublime with. Desdemona's "sainted veil" blinds Otello and his desire to continue to "adorn Desdemona / like a sacred image"³⁷ overlays her with more and more ideological baggage to the point where she begins to lack symbolic efficacy. The Beautiful thus becomes horrific once it flattens Love, and since Desdemona and Otello represent these aspects respectively their union begins to become overbearing for Otello and creates a smooth space. This smooth space gives way to Iago's striated space³⁸ as he produces the machinations that become overwhelming to this godly union.

Just as *Nabucco* is credited with being the birth of Italian national consciousness,

Otello is the next link in the chain which explores the fait accompli of nationhood. Otello, I claim, is in conversation with the twin sister of German national consciousness in the form of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. This does not mean however, that they are companion pieces or that one led to the other. Wagner's drama end with a key shift that is meant to create a sense of hope, Verdi ends *Otello* with the demand that Iago "exculpate [him]self."³⁹ However, Iago's refusal to do so is perhaps a more suitable shift because it denies the neatness of the end of

Die Gotterdammerung. Moreover, Otello's query of "does heaven have any lightning left?"⁴⁰ is his final stand to try to have dominion over the Sublime which only adds to the tragic atmosphere which only heightens the Sublime itself by creating a stark, bleak world on the stage. The unwavering notes of the scene highlight the impotence of Otello and thus his own loss of symbolic efficacy. When Otello states "No one fears me although they see me / with a weapon"⁴¹ is the intrinsic death of the Symbolic Order. Even when thinking about the Desdemona who was "a pious / creature born under an evil star," who is now "cold like [her] chaste life"⁴² designates the false consciousness that the ideology of Beauty and Beatitude that was lived out through her. With her actual death, there can be an "orgy of hate"⁴³ to take out Otello, having now lost his own symbolic efficacy as well.

Otello and Desdemona's deaths are central in that they constitute the necessary deaths needed to bring about the ideology shift for the unification of Italy. Desdemona, the white, blonde, patron saint of Venice succumbs to "the shadow"⁴⁴ of the Sublime which makes Otello kill her. What's more, this shadow makes it so the Sublime and the Beautiful "no longer constitute complementary but opposite—and unequal—pleasures"⁴⁵ for once they clash one the Sublime can remain since it has the preeminent aesthetic force over any saint or idol. The love of a city-state which Otello represents is only through coloniality and expansion beyond Italy which brings about a decomposition of the most emblematic city-state in all of European history. The emergent ideology which Iago is thus able to bring about creates the ideology of a state which is different from Wagner's because it recognizes the subsuming of ideology that will eventually occur.

Love. Beauty. Irony. Destiny. Like pillars

these words uphold the vast pediment of the Sublime in Verdi's pantheon of music in *Otello*. Verdi's reproduction is one which unites the musical and dramatic in a way which shows the clashes of ideology that will take place due to aesthetic questions with the predominance of the Sublime. By seeing how Verdi departs from Longinus, Burke, Kant, and even Wagner we can see how *Otello* is a work which answers many of the questions concerning the relationship between ideology and the Sublime. In doing so the interpersonal wars are played out in the larger political landscape and even further in the aesthetic universe this makes it so every action is magnified in such a way that leaves only Sublimity overflowing from the stage as the curtain falls.

ENDNOTES

1 Emily Bartels C. *Speaking of the Moor: From A Icazar to Othello* (Philadelphia: UPenn Press, 2008), 2.

2 Giuseppe Verdi. *Otello*. Ed. Burton D Fisher (New York: Opera Classics Library, 2011), 43.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 Martin Heidegger. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harpers Perennial, 2001), 17.

6 Emily Brady. *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 148.

7 Giuseppe Verdi. *Otello*. Ed. Burton D. Fisher. (New York: Opera Classics Library, 2011), 44.

8 Alexander Leggett. "Love and Faith in Othello and Otello" *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Volume 81, Number 4. Winter (2010), 840.

9 Giuseppe Verdi. *Otello*. Ed. Burton D. Fisher. (New York: Opera Classics Library, 2011), 45.

10 *Ibid.* 46.

11 *Ibid.* 47.

12 *Ibid.* 48.

13 See *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Richard Wagner, trans. John Deathridge. (New York: Penguin, 2018). *Wotan* is

ty of Minnesota Press, 2005), 7.

15 Giuseppe Verdi. *Otello*. Ed. Burton D. Fisher. (New York: Opera Classics Library, 2011), 49.

16 *Ibid.* 50.

17 Michel Foucault. "Society Must Be Defended." *Lectures at the College de France 1975-1976*. (New York: Picador, 2003), 243.

18 Emily Brady. *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 150.

19 Giuseppe Verdi. *Otello*. Ed. Burton D. Fisher. (New York: Opera Classics Library, 2011), 49.

20 Alexander Leggett. "Love and Faith in Othello and Otello," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Volume 81, Number 4. Winter (2010), 841.

21 Giuseppe Verdi. *Otello*. Ed. Burton D. Fisher. (New York: Opera Classics Library, 2011), 54.

22 Todd Gilman. "Arne, Handel, the Beautiful, and the Sublime." *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Volume 42, Number 4, Summer (2009), 534.

23 Giuseppe Verdi. *Otello*. Ed. Burton D. Fisher. (New York: Opera Classics Library, 2011), 55.

24 *Ibid.* 57.

25 Werner Herzog. "On the Absolute, the Sublime, and the Ecstatic Truth," trans. Moira Weigel. *Arion*. Volume 81, Number 4, Fall (2012), 1.

26 Slavoj Zizek. *In Defense of Lost Causes*. (London: Verso, 2008), 29.

27 Alexander Leggett. "Love and Faith in Othello and Otello" *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Volume 81, Number 4. Winter (2010), 840.

28 Giuseppe Verdi. *Otello*. Ed. Burton D. Fisher. (New York: Opera Classics Library, 2011), 59.

29 Alexander Leggett. "Love and Faith in Othello and Otello," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Volume 81, Number 4. Winter (2010), 836.

30 Exodus 32:2-7 (New International Version)

31 Giuseppe Verdi. *Otello*. Ed. Burton D. Fisher. (New York: Opera Classics Library, 2011), 59.

32 *Ibid.*

33 *Ibid.* 60.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.* 63.

36 Alexander Leggett. "Love and Faith in Othello and Otello," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Volume 81, Number 4. Winter (2010), 840.

37 Giuseppe Verdi. *Otello*. Ed. Burton D. Fisher. (New York: Opera Classics Library, 2011), 64-65.

38 Flora Lysen and Patricia Pisters. "Introduction: The Smooth and the Striated," *Deleuze Studies*. (2012), 1.

39 Giuseppe Verdi. *Otello*. Ed. Burton D. Fisher. (New

York: Opera Classics Library, 2011), 106.

40 *Ibid.* 107.

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*

43 Werner Herzog. "On the Absolute, the Sublime, and the Ecstatic Truth," trans. Moira Weigel. *Arion*. Volume 81, Number 4, Fall (2012), 2.

44 Giuseppe Verdi. *Otello*. Ed. Burton D. Fisher. (New York: Opera Classics Library, 2011), 107.

45 Todd Gilman "Arne, Handel, the Beautiful, and the Sublime." *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Volume 42, Number 4, Summer (2009), 534.

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