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LITERARY REALISM AND VERISMO OPERA

City University of New York

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LITERARY REALISM AND VERISMO OPERA

by

DONA DE SANCTIS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate faculty in
Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York.

1983

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1983

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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PREFACE

Verismo opera is a suspect genre, disparaged by music critics, but enthusiastically applauded by generations of opera audiences. My curiosity about the reasons for this paradox led to the present study, which is a selective rather than exhaustive exploration of the genre. I have concentrated on the "pioneers" of realistic opera in Italy and France, and specifically on certain qualities found in their libretti, which were shaped not by music theory but by the nineteenth century literary movement, realism.

I have chosen to isolate verismo libretti from their music because I believe that the superior literary properties of these works - their plots, characters, themes, and symbols - are largely responsible for the genre's enduring appeal. If the following pages help encourage a more generous critical reappraisal of verismo, opera, I shall consider these years of study well-spent.

Recognition must be given to those people who assisted me during the research and writing of this dissertation. I am deeply grateful to Professor Robert Adams Day for his thoughtful editing of these pages, and to Professors Fred Nichols and Rufus Hallmark, who also read these chapters carefully, offering many useful suggestions for their improvement.

The City University of New York Graduate Program in Comparative Literature, under the direction of Professor Burton Pike, and the C.U.N.Y. Center for European Studies provided aid in the form of grants

that supported a lengthy period of research and writing. I owe special thanks to Grace Cacioppo, the administrative assistant to the Comparative Literature doctoral faculty, for her able assistance in matters both academic and personal during my graduate work.

I was also fortunate to have been surrounded by affectionate friends and family. My parents, Leonard and Helen Di Sesa, and my sister, Nina Di Sesa, have long supported all my endeavors. Professor Sidney Lind offered me his valued friendship and wisdom throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies. Thomas Furcron and Irving Lehat each shared his considerable knowledge, resources, and love of the lyric stage with me. Their insights have deepened my own appreciation of opera. My friends, Armando Paone, Lillian Corti, and Joyce Ades cheered me through the dark moments that accompany extended research and writing. Vincent Ryan offered me not only his friendship, but the gift of time, freeing me from personal responsibilities on countless occasions so that I might have the opportunity to work on this study. My brother, Leonard Di Sesa, Jr., used his considerable professional skills and energy to shape the final form of this dissertation. Without his help, I would not have been able to complete my work within the stipulated deadlines.

I can only add that my warmest thanks must be reserved for the two people closest to my heart - my son, Leonardo, whose patience and understanding at all times is rare in one so young, and my husband, Enzo De Sanctis, who first introduced me to verismo opera. He enriched my life in many other ways as well, and it is to his memory that this dissertation is dedicated.

n.b. References to libretti in the text are to works listed in the bibliography. All translations of these libretti from French and Italian into English are my own.

In Memoriam

Enzo De Sanctis

1940 - 1973

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INTRODUCTION

Realism was a significant movement in European literature and the figurative arts from about 1840 to 1880. Its aim was to give a truthful, objective, and impartial representation of contemporary society, which had undergone profound change as a result of the Industrial Revolution and its aftermath.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, Realism received interpretation on the lyric stage. Verismo opera, as its name implies, attempted to portray the truth — il vero — about life without romanticism or idealization. Its source was literary Naturalism, itself a late development of the trend toward realism in fiction, which had used the "tools" of scientific inquiry to produce novels and short stories about life as it is really lived, especially among the poor.¹

Verismo opera was an immediate success, dominating the lyric stage during the closing years of the nineteenth century and influencing the direction opera was to take in the twentieth. Gian Carlo Menotti, possibly the only living opera composer whose name is familiar to the general public, wrote verismo operas well into this century (The Medium in 1946 and The Consul in 1951), and a strong case could be made for verismo's influence on Strauss, Berg, and Weill.

Contemporary music critics, however, dismiss verismo as a late nineteenth century fad. No other opera genre is surrounded by the same degree of controversy with regard to inherent artistic merit. Despite the number of verismo operas that have become permanent features of

international repertoires, the genre is given only cursory attention in opera studies. It is commonly described as a musical aberration of the late nineteenth century which, through its depiction of the violent emotions and intense passions of its predominantly lower-class protagonists, sought merely to shock the sensibilities of its audiences. Yet verismo has given opera much of its best-loved music and many of its most unforgettable characters. Why the disparity between its current disesteem among critics and its continued popularity among audiences?

A possible source of verismo opera's enduring appeal is found in its libretti. Far from being a slavish imitation of Naturalism, the most successful operas of the genre freely borrowed from other literary sources which, when adapted to realistic subjects, produced libretti of unusually high quality. Naturalism's influence on the plot, setting, characterization, and themes of verismo cannot escape even the most casual observer. Closer textual study of these libretti, however, reveals other sources that verismo composers and librettists tapped in order to produce "realistic" opera. Classical tragedy, historical fiction, comedy, symbolism, and melodrama have all been successfully incorporated into verismo plots. This feature of verismo opera is largely responsible for the vagueness that characterizes most definitions of the genre today.

One reason for verismo's poor reputation among music critics is that the genre is dramatic rather than primarily musical in its emphasis. Verismo opera is good theater, which explains its appeal to audiences otherwise separated from it (and from each other) by the considerable barriers of time, language, and culture.

Unfortunately, as Ulrich Weisstein notes in his article "The Libretto as Literature," the dramatic aspects of opera have become the domain of musicologists, with the result that the role of the composer is over-emphasized.² Joseph Kerman, for example, in his study, Opera as Drama, confidently asserts: "For the composer, I should like to believe that the essential problem (of writing contemporary opera) is to clarify the central dramatic idea, to refine the vision. This cannot be left to the librettist; the dramatist is the composer."³

Such a theory ignores the literary qualities of libretti. Music becomes the criterion for judging an opera's worth. Since verismo is not as musically sophisticated as Romantic opera or Wagnerian music-drama in that it gives less emphasis to orchestration or vocal embellishment, and almost entirely excludes huge ensembles, it has found less favor among the musical cognoscenti.

Recently, however, literary scholars have begun to take an interest in the field of opera criticism. Peter Conrad in his book Romantic Opera and Literary Form challenges Wagner's rule that opera is music-drama. He argues that other literary forms -- epic, romance, allegory, and especially the novel, are equally important in the development of opera.

Gary Schmidgall's study Literature as Opera takes as its premise that questions of literary history, milieu, and style are of crucial concern when approaching operas based on important literary works. He notes that "... a comparison of the source with its operatic 'edition' can illuminate the nature of opera as much as strict musical analysis or

biography. The strengths and limitations of a musical drama will frequently become apparent when we turn to its literary sources."⁴

Each of these new studies explores the process of creative transformation of imaginative material from one medium to another as short story, play, and novel are reworked into opera, but neither one deals with verismo to any serious extent. What study has been devoted to the genre has centered around individual composers. Except for a few valuable books such as Mario Morini's Mascagni and Mosco Carner's excellent and well-written Puccini, the genre has been ignored. The only comprehensive study devoted to verismo and its literary origins is Mario Rinaldi's frivolous and chatty Musica e verismo, published fifty years ago, which delivers neither the aesthetics nor the analysis of verismo promised in its sub-title "critica ed estetica d'una tendenza musicale."

Central to any serious discussion of realism's influence on opera lies a paradox. Given the artificiality of the medium, what sense does the expression "realistic opera" have? How did verismo librettists overcome the drawbacks to realistic opera imposed by fundamental lyric conventions such as dialogue in the form of arias and recitatives, the use of verse that twists syntax to fit the musical line, and the retarding effects of a large orchestra and chorus on dramatic action? And, conversely, what changes did they make in adapting the original literary work to the lyric stage? How did they make the stark drama of realism palatable to audiences whose preference for romantic subjects which emphasized man's potential nobility in the face of suffering had established the careers of Meyerbeer, Donizetti, Gounod, Bellini, and Verdi?

It is the purpose of this study to consider these aspects of verismo opera, which was a response to its age and reflects both the insecurities and the aspirations of its time.

Notes

1

It is impossible to say who first used "verismo" as a literary term and when, but it is certain that once used it quickly gained common currency. It appeared as early as 1879 in the Lessico of Arlia and Fanfani, thus antedating by twelve years the first equivalent recognition of "réalisme" in Littré's Dictionnaire.

2

Ulrich Weisstein, "The Libretto as Literature," Books Abroad (World Literature Today), 35 (1961), 16 - 22.

3

Joseph Kerman, Opera as Drama (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1956), p. 267.

4

Gary Schmidgall, Literature as Opera (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 22.

CHAPTER I: CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA AND NATURALISM

The audience that attended the Roman premiere of Pietro Mascagni's Cavalleria rusticana in the spring of 1890 was presented with an opera that had no precedent in the then nearly three hundred years of opera production. Adultery and its violent repercussions in a Sicilian village, which provide Cavalleria rusticana with its dramatic material, depart from well-established operatic tradition concerning the treatment of daily reality among the lower classes of society, a tradition which opera had inherited from long-standing literary practice.

Life in the country had been idealized by pastoral and later romantic literature. The pastoral, drawing on the myth of the purity humanity had found and lost in the Garden of Eden, offered an idyllic vision of the country and its inhabitants which borrowed from ancient myth and popular fairy tale. Later, as European urban life developed in complexity, a more serious treatment of pastoral themes was encouraged by the romantic poets. The simple life of the provinces was considered a more natural, untainted, and hence, a healthier alternative to the excesses of the metropolis.

In contrast to the idealization of rural life, comedy exaggerated the naturalness and naiveté of peasants for the purpose of parody and satire. The poor were given humorous treatment. They were shown in situations and given emotions similar to those of the upper classes, but the tragic implications of their poverty were ignored.

A parallel tradition exists in opera. The first operas composed,

Jacopo Peri's La Dafne (1597) and Euridice (1600), and Claudio Monteverdi's Orfeo (1607) are recognizably pastoral in their conventions and themes. Later, eighteenth century "opera buffa" exploited the comic potential in the lives of the lower classes.

Cavalleria rusticana, however, was neither comic nor idealistic in its treatment of rural life and customs. Nevertheless, it was an immediate success, raising its young composer from the position of poverty-stricken music teacher in the Italian provinces to an artist of wealth and international fame, and encouraging the development of a new school of opera: verismo.

Opera audiences are notoriously conservative. Their enthusiasm for Cavalleria rusticana is an indication of the profound changes in artistic taste that had taken place in European society during the last three decades of the nineteenth century, changes that had occurred largely under the influence of literary Naturalism and its crusade to extend the limits of convention in the arts.

The Naturalists had revolted against the prejudices of their age that restricted the artist in his choice of subject and vocabulary. At the same time, they rejected the sentimentality and subjectivity of earlier romantic writers, who had idealized man and his aspirations. Instead of describing what should be, the Naturalists described what was. They confined their vision to the present and drew their characters from the lower classes, the "human fodder" that was fueling the factories and crowding into the cities of Europe. Naturalism's novels and short stories presented a world in which neither free will nor spiritual values had any

place and human beings were governed instead by "scientific laws" of heredity and environment.

The leading exponents of the movement were Émile Zola and Giovanni Verga, whose differing interpretations of Naturalism influenced the direction the movement was to take when it received lyric interpretation in verismo. Impatience with the abuses of a newly-industrialized France gives Zola's novels a zealous and even polemical tone, while in Italy, a growing awareness of unification's failure to bring democratic and economic reform, especially to the peasants in the south, contributes to the mood of disillusionment and despair found in Verga's fiction. The considerable social problems that developed in France as a result of industrialization prompted Zola to seek order in his drastically changed society through science and a belief in the ultimate benefits of progress. Such optimism is absent from Verga's interpretation of Naturalism. His fiction is pervaded by a profound resignation to the idea that suffering is the basic norm of life.

Both authors, however, stressed the impersonality of the creative process. Avoiding moral judgment of what they portrayed, they attempted to be objective in describing their characters and milieu. Each employed dialect, corrupted grammar, and neglected syntax in his "truthful" representation of the thoughts and actions of his protagonists.

A milieu to which both were attracted was the country; however, it was the myths about rural life that each attempted to explode. (A later development of pastoral myths about the country was Naturalism's belief that peasants were "more natural" men and women, whose emotions were

closer to the surface and hence more intense than those of effete upper class city dwellers.) The manner in which Zola and Verga treated this material provides a good example of their differences.

Although Zola set six of the twenty novels in his Rougon-Macquart series in the country, La Terre, the eighteenth novel, deals exclusively with the quality of life found in the French provinces.¹ On March 24, 1887, two months before the novel was serialized in the Parisian daily, Le Gil Blas, Zola wrote the following analysis of his novel-in-progress to his English publisher, Henry Vizetelly.

La Terre will treat of the French peasant's passion for the soil, his long struggle to acquire possession of it, his crushing labor, his brief joys, and his great misery. He will be studied too in connection with religion and politics; his present condition being explained by his past history; even his future will be indicated, that is, the part he may possibly play in a Socialist revolution. All that, of course, will lie beneath the drama unfolding in the book, the drama of a father dividing his land among his children before his death whence slow and abominable martyrdom will ensue, a perfect tragedy setting some sixty characters, an entire village of La Beauce, in motion; without counting a secondary plot, the "passionnel" side of the story, a quarrel between two sisters, separated by the advent of a man, still and ever in connection with a question of land. To sum up, I wish to do for the peasant what I did for the Paris workman, that is recount his history, manners, passions, and suffering such as environment and circumstances have fatally made them.²

Environment and circumstances, "le milieu et le moment," determine the destiny of Zola's characters, who are thus stripped of the spiritual supports such as love or honor which had helped romantic protagonists survive or at least endure their misfortunes.

Fouan, the peasant landowner who divides his property among his three children and is mistreated by each in turn, is a peasant Lear without a tragic dimension. Shakespeare's Lear, confronted with his daughters' cruelty, asks what cause there is in Nature that makes for such hard hearts. Zola attempts to answer that question by marshalling the evidence which recent scientific discoveries such as Darwin's theory of evolution (and its "survival of the fittest" conclusion) had made available to him.

Clearly, however, Zola wished to do more in La Terre than strike a blow at one of the myths dearest to the French, that of the simple goodness of peasants. The novel is ambitious and strangely modern in its social concerns because it is above all a novel of reform. The horrifying extremes to which the peasants of La Beauce go for land is traced not only to a biological instinct for survival, but to specific events in French history and to current political and economic policies.

La Terre describes the drawbacks of the small-holdings system, in which production is limited by the soil; it examines the economic question of the importation of American wheat; the political implications of peasants being kept in ignorance by the government for the purpose of being led to the polls like sheep; it traces the march of revolutionary and socialist principles among peasants as Zola had done earlier in Germinal among coal miners, while making frequent allusion to the historic abuse of the rural class at the hands of "king, bishop, and landlord."

Concern about the abuse of power is found in all twenty novels of the Rougon-Macquart series, which Zola began in 1869 and which was to

occupy nearly twenty-five years of his life. As he traced the history of a fictitious French family under the Second Empire, Zola "documented" the imaginative situations of his narrative with references to contemporary economic, political, and social practices.

Zola used factual data in his fiction because he was fascinated by scientific methods. Significantly, he found his mentor in a physician, Dr. Claude Bernard, whose medical tract "Introduction à l'Étude de la Médecine Expérimentale" inspired Zola's manifesto of his "new" narrative technique, Le Roman Expérimental. Published in 1881, Zola's essay makes a curious analogy between the work of the scientist and that of the novelist, and the experimental method in literature, as in the sciences, is offered as the proper way to examine both individuals and society.

Verga, on the other hand, attributed the inspiration for his narrative style to the reading of a sea-captain's ungrammatical log.³ He was struck by its simplicity and directness of expression, qualities which characterize Verga's own narrative voice and which contrast with Zola's all-seeing (and all-knowing) narrator. Verga limits his vision to the same narrow perspective as that of his protagonists, whose cosmos is their village, their family, and their work. His narrator reveals no more than what the protagonist himself knows of life beyond the village.

Therefore, in his short stories and novels Verga is less inclined than Zola to offer contemporary external factual evidence to account for the conditions of his characters. His omission of documentation contributes to the "timeless" quality of his narrative, and indicates that he did not share Zola's zeal for using the novel as an instrument of social reform.

The specific social and economic injustices of his age are but further evidence, successive links in a chain of injuries that have been inflicted on the poor for centuries.

Zola's representation of contemporary abuses is replaced in Verga by a concern for honor and shame as abiding principles of social organization; by an awareness of the basic drives and desires which motivate men, namely women, wealth, and land; and by a pervasive fatalism regarding the relentless workings of destiny - features which bring Verga's Verismo closer than Zola's fiction to themes found in ancient tragedy.

He also planned to write a series of novels, I Vinti, which would cut across various social classes: the fishermen of a Sicilian village in I Malavoglia; the middle class in a Sicilian town in Mastro Don Gesualdo, and the urban upper classes in Palermo and Rome in La Duchessa de Leyra, L'Onorevole Scipione, and L'Uomo di lusso. Only the first two novels, however, were completed.

His intention, as stated in his preface to I Malavoglia, was to describe the frenzied, but ultimately futile search for financial gain and social advancement as well as the toll such a search exacted from "i vinti" - the losers - society's more vulnerable members. In their passion for progress, his protagonists gradually relinquish the spiritual supports and cultural traditions that have sustained them in the past. As a consequence, they are obsessed, misled, and finally defeated by artificial values: material well-being, political ambition, and aristocratic pretensions.

Verga's greatest critical success was one of his short stories. The transformations that this brief six-and-one-half page narrative underwent provide literary history with a most unusual page. Originally an episode in I Malavoglia, Cavalleria rusticana was re-written as a short story which appeared on March 14, 1880 in Il Fanfulla della domenica, the literary supplement to Il Fanfulla, a Roman newspaper.⁴ That same year it was included in Vita dei campi, Verga's first collection of veristic short stories.

The plot is that of the familiar love triangle: Santuzza loves Turiddu who loves Lola. The action takes place over a period of months - from the time Turiddu Macca returns to his village in Sicily after military service and discovers his former sweetheart, Lola, engaged to Alfio, an older, wealthier man. After her marriage, Turiddu begins to flirt with Santuzza to make Lola jealous. The ploy works. Lola and Turiddu become lovers, but Santuzza tells Alfio, who challenges Turiddu to a knife duel. Despite the younger man's superior strength, Alfio blinds Turiddu by throwing dust in his eyes, and slits his throat. Verga's peasant characters are realistic in their speech, manners, and mentality. Although their vices and passions are common to human nature, the manner in which they deal with them is uniquely Sicilian.

Four years later, in 1884, Verga dramatized Cavalleria rusticana for Eleonora Duse and dedicated it to Giuseppe Giacosa, a leading Italian playwright and Puccini's future librettist. He tightened the action by compressing the time (the entire play takes place on Easter Sunday); strengthened motivation (Santuzza's despair when she realizes that

Turiddu's sudden lack of interest is due to the fact that she is pregnant); and created four minor roles for villagers who embody familiar manners and attitudes of Sicilian provincial life; they are superstitious, gossipy, and preoccupied with appearances. He also developed a stage diction which was less literary and closer to daily speech than convention required, using vocabulary and proverbs from his native Sicilian dialect; and presented a world of diminished heroism, dominated by passion and obsession.

In the short story Turiddu is a relatively innocent victim of his poverty and good looks and Santuzza neither abused or defenseless, but a shrewd, rich man's daughter. Turiddu flirts with her, but never expects to marry her, given the differences in their status. Therefore, her betrayal is gratuitous and much more malicious than it is in the play. Turiddu loses sympathy in the dramatization of Cavalleria. His arrogance and Santuzza's seduction and pregnancy were added by Verga to make Santuzza into a larger and more dramatic role for Duse, Italy's (and perhaps even Europe's) most accomplished actress.

Cavalleria rusticana was a success, the only truly clamorous one Verga was ever to enjoy. Treves, his Milanese publisher, issued a new, illustrated edition of Vita dei campi under the title Cavalleria rusticana ed altre novelle. Zola sent a congratulatory telegram, and the play began a tour of the major Italian cities.

Pietro Mascagni saw a production of Cavalleria rusticana in Milan, where he shared a room with Giacomo Puccini when he was a student at the Conservatory in the early 1880's. Even at that date he

determined to set Verga's play as an opera and had composed music for certain scenes that had most affected him during the performance.⁵

In December, 1888, when he learned from a newspaper article that the Sonzogno Music Publishers, Ricordi's chief rivals, were sponsoring their third competition for a one-act opera, he decided to enter it, using Verga's veristic drama as his subject. Too poor to pay for a librettist, he urged his boyhood friend, Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti, to rework the play into a suitable libretto.⁶ Since time was at a premium - the deadline for entries was set for May 30, 1889 - Targioni-Tozzetti asked the assistance of Guido Menasci, a young poet and literary critic whom Mascagni did not know personally. (It is almost impossible to distinguish the contributions each made to the libretto. In general, it is believed that the more dramatic effects belong to Targioni-Tozzetti, while Menasci's verses are of a more subtle elegance.)

To this close collaboration Mascagni added his own voice; respectful, at times playful, but always insistent in the changes he suggested. Mascagni's sense of theater is revealed in the modifications he proposed. Guided by what he called his "sacrosanto ideale," that music "must be an expression of the word," Mascagni changed verses, abolished ensembles, and brought the diction of the recitatives closer to that of Verga's original dialogue, which reflected the patterns of ordinary speech.⁷

The following year, on March 8, 1890, Mascagni was informed that his opera had been chosen out of seventy-three entries to receive first prize. Cavalleria rusticana premiered on May 17, 1890 at Rome's principal opera house, the Costanzi, (now Il Teatro dell'Opera) and was an

immediate success.⁸ Mascagni was proclaimed Verdi's heir apparent, the regenerator of opera, and "the pioneer of a new school which should make unnecessary the hopeless task of trying to work along the lines set down by Wagner."⁹

The "new school" was, of course, verismo, a connection both audience and critic could not fail to make, given the source of Mascagni's libretto. Eduard Hanslick, the leading Viennese music critic of the time, wrote "Although Cavalleria rusticana is profoundly Italian, even Sicilian, its verismo is European and modern."¹⁰

Hanslick's praise suggests that Cavalleria was welcomed not merely because it was new and different, but because it adhered to an established artistic style - verismo. There was no need to alter Verga's naturalistic plot, setting, and characters to please Mascagni's turn of the century audience, already well-accustomed to realism in the arts. What did impress them was the manner in which the composer and his librettists had adapted opera conventions to the demands of their realistic material.

The score introduces "special effects" taken from ordinary life: church chimes, the cracking of a whip, the sound of shepherds playing on their pipes, and the jingle of cart bells. Melodies that recall southern Italian folk songs and dances, such as Turiddu's "Siciliana" and Lola's "Fior di gaggiolo" set the scene and fuse with the rest of the score which, in its minor keys, communicates a powerful fatalism.

Mascagni's principle, that music must be the expression of the word, realizes the dramatic potential of Cavalleria's dialogue without sacrificing it to the musical arrangement. Arias and recitatives obey the

natural inflections of speech. Santuzza's first aria, "Voi lo sapete, o mamma," and Turiddu's "Addio" both begin with a passage of an intense spoken quality that climaxes in a passionate but brief song. Her quarrel with him, in scenes five, six, and seven, is largely in rapid, speech-like recitative that works both dramatically and musically.

Mascagni uses many standard opera set-pieces, such as a drinking song, a love duet, a hymn, and ensembles, yet his audience was convinced that what it was seeing was strikingly modern. The novelty of his approach to these conventions develops from the manner in which he made them fit into the everyday situations of the drama. Hymns in Latin such as Cavalleria's "Regina coeli laetare" are a part of the Catholic Mass; the drinking song, "Viva il vino spumeggiante," sung after the villagers leave church, recreates the secular "rites" that follow religious celebrations (even today Italians go to cafés on Sunday mornings after church to see and be seen). Santuzza's and Turiddu's duet "Turiddu, rimani ancora" grows spontaneously from the dramatic situation of their quarrel.

Mascagni's new approach to established convention can best be illustrated by comparing how an earlier romantic composer handled similar dramatic material. Gaetano Donizetti's Lucia di Lammermoor, based on Scott's The Bride of Lammermoor, premiered in 1835, nearly sixty years before Cavalleria. Each opera contains a scene between two lovers in which one accuses the other of infidelity.

Donizetti's Lucia, secretly pledged to Edgardo, has been tricked by her brother, Enrico, into marrying another. Edgardo returns from a trip abroad in time to burst into the great hall of Lammermoor as Lucia

signs the wedding contract before an assembly of guests.

The remarkable timing of Edgardo's return strains the laws of probability while he, like a lyric Hamlet, abruptly pauses to consider his inability to act:

Chi mi frena in tal momento?
Chi troncò dell'ira il corso?
Il suo duolo, il suo spavento
Son la prova di un rimorso!
Ma, qual rosa inaridita,
Ella sta tra morte e vita! . . .
Io son vinto . . . son commosso!
T'amo ingrata, t'amo ancor!

(Act II, scene 2)

(Who impedes me in such a moment?
Who restrained my wrath?
Her grief, her fear
Are the proof of her remorse!
But like a withered rose
She hovers between life and death!
I am overcome . . . I am moved!
I love you, ungrateful woman, I still love you!)

His rhyming passage, with its rhetorical diction and archaic vocabulary ("ira" and "duolo" are poetic terms), and his moment of introspective meditation, make no effort to represent the way a man would really speak and act in such a crisis.

During the famous sextet which develops, the music ignores the characters' reactions to the situation before them. Edgardo feels compassion, Enrico, guilt, and Lucia is nearly mad with grief. Yet all three, together with the horrified chorus of wedding guests, sing the same lilting ballad. In other words, Donizetti chooses to subordinate the confusion of the dramatic events on stage to the controlled harmonies of his melody. (Puccini, speaking of the music in this famous ensemble, commented on "the peculiarly Italian fondness for treating tragic subjects

in a major key.")¹¹ In fact, the sextet "de-fuses" the drama of the situation, which is supplied instead by kettle drums crescendoing in the orchestra. Distance is placed between the audience and the conflicting emotions of the characters. The action stops and the tension is temporarily eased by the lovely music.

When Santuzza accuses Turiddu of preferring Lola to herself in Cavalleria, the music supports her rapid shifts of mood from suspicion to jealousy, from anger to despair. Plucked strings imitate her hurried steps which block Turiddu's way as he tries to evade her. Ominous cellos underscore her questions and oboes accompany her pleas.

Santuzza: Tu l'ami dunque?

Turiddu: No. . .

Santuzza: Assai più bellà è Lola.

Turiddu: Taci, non l'amo.

Santuzza: L'ami, l'ami. . . .Oh maladetta!

Turiddu: Santuzza!

Santuzza: Quella cattiva femmina ti tolse a me!

Turiddu: Bada, Santuzza, schiavo non sono di questa vana tua gelosia!

Santuzza: Battimi, insultami, t'amo e perdono, ma è troppo forte l'angoscia mia.

(Act I, scene 5)

(Santuzza: So you love her?

Turiddu: No. . .

Santuzza: Lola's a lot more beautiful.

Turiddu: Be quiet, I don't love her.

Santuzza: You love her! You love her!
Oh, Damn her!

Turiddu: Santuzza!

Santuzza: That slut stole you away from me!

Turiddu: Look, Santuzza, I'm not going to be a
slave to your stupid jealousy.

Santuzza: Hit me, insult me, I love you and I'll
forgive you. But my suffering is too
much.)

Although she sings in Tuscan, Santuzza's language reveals her humble origins. "Femmina" is southern Italian dialect for "woman," but it is also used colloquially instead of "donna" as a term of disparagement. The inversion of verb and subject in the phrases "schiavo non sono" and "è troppo forte l'angoscia mia" is a familiar pattern of Sicilian speech.

The recitatives in Lucia and Cavalleria also bear comparison. Edgardo's accusations, like Santuzza's, are made in recitative. He explains his presence ("Lucia la sua fede a me giurò"), his intentions ("Morirò, ma insieme col mio/Altro sangue scorrerà"), and, when he learns the truth, curses Lucia with the archaic "Ah! Vi disperda!" His eloquent recitatives provide information, but are hurriedly offered so that Lucia, Enrico and the chorus can get down to the real business of the scene, the ensemble "Va! T'invola" which ends the act.

The quarrel between Santuzza and Turiddu is much longer (three scenes), and occurs, as most arguments do, without a throng of spectators. The simple diction, disconnected phrases, and sudden shifts of mood bring its recitatives closer to spontaneous dramatic dialogue than the formal recitative passages that link the solos and ensembles in Donizetti's scene.

Santuzza's and Turiddu's recitatives "dissolve" into a duet abruptly ended by her spoken curse, "A te la mala Pasqua, spergiuro!" which also ends the scene.

Arias in romantic operas are really soliloquies, poetic asides sung to the audience, which comment on an action (and the character's reaction to it) rather than advance the plot. In Cavalleria all the arias but one are sung to another principal and further the story. Santuzza's aria to Mamma Lucia tells her (and the audience) about the main conflict ("Turiddu e Lola s'amano"); her duet with Alfio "Vendetta avrò" is, structurally, the opera's climax which leads to the catastrophe, and Turiddu's "Addio" to his mother adumbrates his death.

The only aria that does not conform to this pattern is Turiddu's serenade to Lola, an interesting dramatic device that interrupts the overture's presentation of the main musical themes.

In the short story version of Cavalleria Turiddu vents his anger at Lola by singing songs of disdain under her window when he learns of her engagement to Alfio. Turiddu's "Siciliana" aria alludes to this passage, but it also creates an effect of temporal simultaneity that only opera, of all the arts, can achieve. The aria is sung off-stage, where it floats disembodied and ambiguously placed. Does it reflect Turiddu's feelings for Lola before her marriage and thus supply background information? Did he sing it to her on the night they committed adultery, which immediately precedes the beginning of the opera on the dawn of Easter Sunday? Is his willingness to sacrifice Paradise for her a genuine sentiment which foreshadows his death, or mere hyperbole? That is, does

this aria reflect the past, present, or the future . . . or all three?¹²

A tenor also serenades his forbidden love at the beginning of Verdi's most famous opera. Set in the time of the Pharaohs, its libretto tells the story of Radames, who loves an enemy princess, now a slave of the Egyptians, and who is torn between his love for Aida and his patriotic duty. In his aria (sung not to her but directed across the footlights), Radames reveals his secret.

Celeste Aida, forma divina,
Mistico raggio di luce e fior.
Del mio pensiero tu sei regina,
Tu di mia vita sei lo splendore.

Il tuo bel cielo vorrei ridarti,
Le dolci brezze del patria suol,
Un regal serto sul crin posarti,
Ergerti un trono vicino al sol!

(Act I, scene 1)

(Heavenly Aida, divine beauty,
Mysterious blending of flowers and light.
You are the queen of my mind,
You are the splendor of my life.

To your beautiful sky I would restore you,
To the soft breezes of your native land,
Royal laurels I would place in your hair,
And raise a throne for you near the sun!

Radames' love for Aida is exalted and noble. The direction of his words (and the music) is upward, toward the celestial and divine (he would make her queen not only of his heart, but of her own land and heaven as well). The aria's imagery is romantic - sunlight, flowers, and love - which is fused to the theme of patriotism ("il tuo bel ciel vorrei ridarti") that will become the source of Radames' conflict. The language and sentiments are refined. They are perfect poetic reflections both of Radames'

noble character and of the story's elevated theme of love versus duty, which embodies the ideals of its time.

"Il Risorgimento," the Italian unification movement which took place early in Verdi's career (roughly from 1840 to 1860) produced romantic literature intimately connected to themes of heroism and patriotism. Aida, which premiered in 1871, as well as many of Verdi's earlier operas written during this period, Nabucco, I Vespri Siciliani, I Lombardi and Giovanna d'Arco, are lyric interpretations of this contemporary patriotic theme of Italian romanticism. (Nabucco's chorus of homesick Jews who sing of their oppressed land in "Va', pensiero" is, even today, Italy's unofficial national anthem and Verdi's own name, an acronym for Vittorio Emanuele Rè Di Italia, was written on the buildings and walls of Milan during the city's struggle to eject its Austrian masters.)

No such idealism is found in Cavalleria. The age of heroes had ended by the time of its composition. In his serenade, Turiddu's vision is earth-bound. He sings of Lola's red lips "rusa comu la cirasa," her white blouse "di latti . . . si bianca," and the blood that stains her doorstep, "Ntra la porta tua lu sangu è sparsu." Like Radames, he sings of heaven, but swears that if she were not there, he wouldn't even enter "si nun ce truovo a ttia, mancu ce trasu."

The most daring feature of this aria (and perhaps of the entire opera) is that it is sung entirely in Sicilian. Never before in a tragic Italian opera had a main character expressed himself in dialect, because it would have branded him with the triple stigma of ignorance, illiteracy, and low birth. Today, although Italians are "bi-lingual" in Tuscan and

their regional dialect, many will deny any knowledge of dialect. This is especially true among educated Southerners. Mascagni's use of Sicilian is in conscious imitation of Naturalistic convention. Verga and Zola, as was noted earlier, employed dialect and "argot" to lend authenticity to their characters' speech. Later verismo operas timidly followed Mascagni's lead. Wolf-Ferrari's I Gioielli della Madonna (1911), for example, is written partly in Neapolitan.

Cavalleria's scenery is as prosaic as its language. The set design for Verga's play consisted of a wine shop, a church, a house, a stable, the police station, and, in the background, three roads. The opera set retains only the wine shop and the church, with two roads that meet in the background. The wine shop and the village church, dividing the stage, are physical symbols of the conflict between desire and moral law that is the opera's main theme.

Wine is an especially important thematic and dramatic device in Cavalleria. It has a religious association with the Easter Mass in which wine represents Christ's blood, and a secular association with Mamma Lucia's wine shop. On the pretext of going to the next town for "quel vecchio vino", Turiddu is able to spend the night with Lola without arousing his mother's suspicions. After the mass, he, Lola, and the chorus drink a toast to wine and love. Alfio's refusal to drink with Turiddu is an insult which leads to their duel and Turiddu's death.

The relationship between Turiddu's "drunkenness" and his brief love affair with Lola is suggested during his final aria to Mamma Lucia. He tells her that he is going for a walk because the wine he has just drunk has

made him light-headed. The aria is metaphoric. "Il vino generoso" is his passion for Lola; the walk he takes to clear his head, the duel demanded by the rustic code of honor that gives the opera its title and theme.

Mascagni's Cavalleria is often described as a tasteless opera written merely to shock its middle class audience. Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, the Encyclopedia Britannica of musicology, describes it as "a vulgar work which set the fashion for one act 'shockers' . . . a fashion which flourished extravagantly for some years but which is now happily a thing of the past." Grout's respected history of opera notes: "The goal of the Italian realists was simply to present a vivid melodramatic plot, to arouse sensations by violent contrasts, to paint a cross-section of life without concerning themselves with any general significance the action might have."¹³

Such criticism ignores both Cavalleria's treatment of the conflict between desire and moral order, and the symbolism which clusters around Turiddu, who has defied the laws of God and man. This motif is established in the libretto by a plethora of religious imagery. The drama takes place on Easter, the holiest day on the Roman Catholic calendar, itself a Christian adaptation of ancient pagan festivals of human sacrifice associated with the rites of spring and fertility. It is this profane aspect of sacred ritual that Cavalleria's imagery exploits with a powerful irony.

Turiddu, who must expiate a shabby adulterous affair, is paralleled to Christ the Saviour, who dies for the sins of humanity. "Turiddu" is Sicilian for "Salvatorello," a diminutive of Salvatore - saviour.¹⁴ Turiddu's mother is called by a diminutive of "Annunziata" (Nunzia) in

Verga's play, a name that recalls the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, Christ's mother. The fallen Mary Magdalene loved Christ; Turiddu is engaged to Santuzza, another fallen woman also ostracized by her society. (The libretto is vague about the reason for her excommunication, but in Verga's play Santuzza tells Turiddu's mother that her brothers will kill her when they discover she is pregnant.)¹⁵ Mascagni's Santuzza, whose name is a diminutive for "Santa" or saint, has lost her good name alludes to herself as Mary Magdalene when she begs Mamma Lucia to tell her where Turiddu is at the beginning of the opera, "... fate come il Signore a Maddalena, ditemi per pietà dov'è Turiddu." Cavalleria's Magdalene, however, is the agent of her "saviour's" death. These ironic associations of Turiddu with Christ in the libretto point to the loss of spiritual values and the world of diminished heroism that are fundamental themes of Verga's veristic fiction.

In theme, as well as language, symbols and characters, Mascagni's opera is modern and veristic, but in its structure the opera belongs to a much older literary tradition: Greek tragedy. Verga's Verismo replaced Zola's "timeliness" with a timeless quality which brought it closer than Zola's Naturalism to ancient tragedy. The opera libretto further develops this aspect of Verga's fiction in its own structure.

Like ancient tragedies, the libretto alternates episodes of no more than three protagonists with choruses; the action begins at dawn on Easter morning and ends in the early afternoon of the same day. All events take place in the piazza and treat of one action: revenge. Acts of violence take place offstage and are reported. There is no mixing of modes, no

comic relief, no aria or recitative that does not further the action, and no episode that can be omitted without damaging the integrity of the plot. Thus the so-called Aristotelian unities of time, place and action as well as the decorum of Attic tragedy are part of Cavalleria's dramatic structure.

The role of Cavalleria's peasant chorus has more in common with that of the chorus in ancient tragedy than with the traditional opera chorus, whose main contribution is to add color and spectacle to the drama on stage. Verdi's La Forza del destino (1862), for example, has a chorus of villagers, led by a self-appointed army recruiter, the gypsy Preziosilla, who sing two ensembles, "Al suon del tamburo" and "Rataplan!", which have no bearing on the plot and serve only to lengthen an already long and improbable story. Ponchielli's La Gioconda (1876) has choruses of sailors, patricians, and commoners (as well as an extensive and extraneous ballet, "Il Ballo delle ore") which contribute to the lavish entertainment that the opera provides, but which have little bearing on the central love story of tyranny and intrigue.¹⁶

Cavalleria's chorus of peasants was suggested by Mascagni's librettists. They substituted it for the four minor roles of villagers in Verga's play who embody the conservative element of provincial life. Village events are their main topic of conversation and the affairs of others their favorite source of entertainment.

The peasant chorus in Cavalleria retains some features of Verga's characters; however, it also represents the idyllic potential of those rural traditions of "casa e chiesa." In providing a contrast to the actions of the main characters, the chorus sharpens the focus of the drama. The main

characters' passions are then seen as distortions of natural instincts which society (the chorus) channels into more productive conduct.

The chorus sings of conjugal love ("A casa . . . ci aspettano i nostri sposi . . . corriamo"); Turiddu sings of his passion for another man's wife ("La Siciliana"). The chorus praises work ("Oh che bel mestiere!"); Alfio complains of its hardships ("Il cavallo scalpita"). They sing an Easter hymn, in Latin, asking for divine blessing; Turiddu blasphemes in Sicilian as he serenades Lola. But the formal and poetic diction in the choruses "A casa, amici" and "Gli aranci olezzano" does not attempt to reproduce the speech of ignorant peasants. Instead, the ceremonious quality of these choruses introduces the theme of social order, the "sanctity" of home, marriage, and family, which adultery undermines.

The conflict that structures the plot of Cavalleria is also more Greek than veristic. At a very elementary level is the conflict of two rights that, as Hegel observed in The Philosophy of Fine Arts, is found in every Greek tragedy. Lola was pledged to Turiddu before he left town to do his military service (i.e., his patriotic duty). Santuzza has been ostracised by her society because she has lost her virtue to Turiddu. Alfio's right to revenge his honor is sanctioned by southern Italian custom and is even recognized by Italian law as "extenuating circumstances." (The concept that an outrage to the sexual honor of an individual must be paid for with the death of the offender is deeply rooted in Mediterranean society. Even today the Italian penal code punishes such a crime with the relatively light sentence of three to seven years.)¹⁷ There are no stereotyped villains in this drama, whose characters are driven by their

passion for revenge, and the conflict of so many rights generates considerable dramatic tension as the opera approaches its climax. In the conflict of an individual with the moral laws of his society, and in the "pollution" which can be cleansed only in blood, Cavalleria rusticana is profoundly Greek. And yet, it does not rise to tragedy.

Verga's vision resembles that of ancient tragedy in that it is essentially non-Christian. It allows destiny to replace a benign, Christian God whose sacred laws govern the universe; however, the consequences of suffering in Verga's fiction do not lead to the same conclusions found in Greek tragedy. The mysterious forces that control men's lives, and which caused the Greeks to ponder the nature of man, are reduced in Cavalleria to a peasant code of honor that is realistically portrayed, but never questioned. Alfio's insult in refusing Turiddu's wine is the first step of a ritual folk dance dedicated to honor which Turiddu joins when he ceremonially bites Alfio's ear. Their duel with hunting knives rushes this primitive dance to its violent climax: Turiddu's murder. Verga's characters, therefore, are prisoners of their milieu. Since they do not challenge its solemn rituals (Turiddu does not refuse to fight), they are ultimately destroyed by them.

The lack of heroic stature of Verga's characters is compensated for by their vulnerabilities, which the opera reproduces and which is one source of the power the work continues to wield over its audiences. Turiddu, Santuzza, and Alfio are realistically drawn characters who arouse the empathetic response necessary for good theater.

Cavalleria rusticana presented cruelty and violence as inevitable

consequences of poverty, just as Zola and Verga had in their fiction. It developed a psychological Naturalism in its characterization by concentrating on emotions that could be grasped immediately, and expressed them directly in a new musical language. Thus Cavalleria's composer and librettists approximated the "laboratory conditions" of naturalistic narrative's impersonal, objective style by portraying these raw passions without the embellishments that opera conventions generously provide and permit ("pretty" music, stylized ballet, intricate vocal ensembles). The success of their experiment was due in large part to qualities found in Cavalleria's literary source.

Mascagni's subject was well-chosen. Verga's play was rich in the same expressive potential for exploring exalted states of consciousness - the emotions of love, hate, anger, revenge, and remorse - that opera had long exploited in its libretti. His intimacy of perspective allowed "space" for musical elaboration. The many sudden shifts of mood in Cavalleria's plot compensated for the retarding factor that music introduces into dramatic action at the expense of plausibility and verisimilitude, qualities that by the end of the nineteenth century were appealing to theater and opera audiences as a result of Naturalism's influence on the arts.

Mascagni's interpretation of Naturalism inspired many composers to follow the new direction opera had taken and to attempt to portray contemporary life in their choice of realistic characters, plot, and themes. Verga's short drama alone was selected no less than three times for a libretto. (In a bittersweet, but rather harsh assessment of his own literary production, Verga wrote to a friend in 1912, "Of all the things I

have written Cavalleria rusticana alone has survived through no merit of my own, but thanks to Pietro Mascagni.")¹⁸

Cavalleria rusticana, however, was the undoing of Mascagni, who apparently was unable to assess the reasons for his sudden success, or at least did not attribute them to the proper source. After Cavalleria he experimented with other genres at a time when his public wanted more verismo. Other young Italian composers such as Leoncavallo, Puccini, Cilea, and Giordano (and forgotten ones such as Tasca, Spinelli, and Gastaldon) were better able to judge what it was in Cavalleria rusticana that had generated applause. Encouraged by Mascagni's success, they went on to explore the new genre of opera that closed the nineteenth century and opened the twentieth.

Notes

1

The others are: 1) La Fortune des Rougon - 1871
2) La Conquête de Plassans - 1874
3) La Faute de L'abbé Mouret - 1875
4) La Joie de vivre - 1884
5) Le Docteur Pascal - 1893

2

As quoted in Ernest A. Vizetelly, Emile Zola, (New York: John Lane, 1904), pp. 231 - 232. La Terre was serialized in Le Gil Blas from May 29, to September 16, 1887. Jean Macquart, a main character, is the brother of Gervaise (L'Assommoir) and hence uncle to Claude (L'Oeuvre), Étienne (Germinal), and Nana, among others.

3

Commented on by Verga in an interview he gave to Riccardo Artuffo in the Tribuna, an Italian newspaper, on February 2, 1911.

4

Fanfulla's aim was to direct the literary taste of its age. Luigi Capuana, a leading man of letters and literary Verismo's earliest Italian exponent, was one of its editors; Carducci, Croce, D'Annunzio, Giacosa, and Verga, among its contributors. The high quality of its literary material gave Fanfulla the reputation for being the most notable and entertaining weekly of the nineteenth century. For further information see Olga Majolo-Molinari, La Stampa periodica romana dell'ottocento, (Rome: Istituto studi romani, 1963), pp. 379 - 380.

5

In a letter to Targioni-Tozzetti, his librettist, dated December 14, 1888, Mascagni writes: "La Cavalleria rusticana era già nei miei progetti da quando si eseguì per la prima volta a Milano dalla Compagnia Pasta." See Giovanni Cenzato, Cinquantenario della Cavalleria rusticana, (Milan: Bestetti, 1940), p. 11.

6

Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti (1863 - 1934), poet, author, and journalist, was later professor of literature at the Naval Academy of Leghorn, mayor of that city, and an important figure in Livornese cultural and administrative life. He also collaborated with Mascagni on Amica, Silvano, Zanetto, I Rantzau, and Nerone as well as with other

composers, among them Giordano (Regina Diaz), and did the Italian translation of Massenet's Werther.

7

Mascagni at that time was living in Cerignola, a small town near Foggia in southern Italy, eking out a living as a conductor of the civic orchestra and private music teacher. The distance between the young composer and his librettists, living in Mascagni's native city of Leghorn in the north, forced them to resort to a collaboration-by-mail via postcards and letters. Although this means of communication was a source of anxiety for Mascagni, it has left behind an illuminating record of the genesis of Cavalleria rusticana. This correspondence is collected in Cenzato's little volume, Cinquantenario della Cavalleria rusticana, published in 1940 on the fiftieth anniversary of the opera's premiere. Unfortunately Cenzato's volume has never been translated into English.

8

Within months after Cavalleria's premiere 25,000 copies of sheet music for voice and piano had been sold. Within a year, performances of the opera had been given in most European capitals and four American cities. By 1925 it had been performed in Japan, South Africa, Finland, and Palestine, as well as all of Europe, South and North America, and Scandinavia. The libretto was translated into all the principal European languages, as well as into Hebrew, Polish, Serbo-Croatian, Slovenian, Hungarian, Czech, and Swedish.

9

Henry E. Krehbiel, A Book of Operas, (1909; rpt. 2 volumes in 1, New York: MacMillan, 1937), p. 106.

10

As quoted in Mario Morini, Pietro Mascagni, 2 vols. (Milan: Sonzogno, 1964), 91.

11

As quoted by Boris Goldovsky in his radio program "Opera News on the Air," broadcast on December 4, 1982.

12

The "Siciliana" was Mascagni's idea. While he was composing the opera, he met Giacomo De Zerbi, a young poet who wrote his verses in Sicilian dialect. Mascagni was particularly impressed by one of his poems, which he adapted as Turiddu's serenade to Lola. See Cenzato, op. cit., p. 15.

13

D. J. Grout, A Short History of Opera (1947; second edition, New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), p. 440.

14

Mascagni's librettists wanted to call their protagonist by the northern Italian nickname "Torello" which also means "little bull." Mascagni instinctively insisted on Verga's original Sicilian "Turiddu." (In Sicilian the double "l" is pronounced as a double "d").

15

"...ora che sono in questo stato... che i miei fratelli quando lo sapranno m'ammazzano colle sue mani stesse!"

16

Ponchielli was showered with honors after the 1876 premiere of La Gioconda. As a result of the reputation this opera established for him he was named to a professorship at the Milan Conservatory, where he taught, among others, Mascagni and Puccini.

17

"Il delitto d'onore" or crime of honor is referred to in Article 587 of the Italian penal code, which states:

Whosoever causes the death of a wife, daughter, or sister, on discovering an illicit carnal relationship and in the state of wrath due to the insult to his own honor or that of his family, is punished with imprisonment from three to seven years.

18

Stanislao Gastaldone's two-act Mala Pasqua! was written in 1888 and produced on April 9, 1890 - little over one month before Mascagni's opera premiered at the same opera house! In 1902, the promising young composer, Domenico Monleone asked Verga's permission to produce yet a third operatic version of his play. He too entered it in the Sonzogno competition for that year in the hope that, although the opera would not receive first prize, it might attract attention. He was right. His Cavalleria rusticana was produced at the Coronet Theater in London on May 17, 1907, seventeen years to the day of the premiere of Mascagni's work. Mascagni, who had not even bothered to ask Verga's permission when he set Cavalleria, was very protective of his own rights to the subject. He and his publisher Sonzogno initiated legal proceedings against Monleone; the court decided in Mascagni's favor, and Monleone's opera was withdrawn just as it was beginning to receive favorable critical attention. (For a detailed discussion of

Cavalleria's adventures among young verismo composers, see John Klein's article "Pietro Mascagni and Giovanni Verga" in Music and Letters, 45 (October, 1963), 350 - 357.

CHAPTER II: PAGLIACCI AND THE ITALIAN COMIC TRADITION

In 1891, one year after the premiere of Cavalleria rusticana, Giulio Ricordi, the head of the great Milanese firm of music publishers, commissioned Umberto Giordano to compose an opera set in the Neapolitan underworld of thieves and prostitutes.¹ Mala Vita which premiered the following year apparently owed its creation to an attempt on Ricordi's part to correct an earlier error in judgment. In 1889, before Mascagni submitted his opera to the Sonzogno competition, Puccini had shown the score to Ricordi, but he rejected it because, he said, he did not believe in the work - one of the few miscalculations ever made by this shrewd judge of opera.²

The unexpected success of Cavalleria prompted Ricordi to recognize verismo as both financially practical and artistically convincing. In addition to Giordano's opera, he published Mascagni's Iris (1898) which anticipated Madama Butterfly in its portrayal of an innocent young Japanese woman betrayed by an unfeeling lover, and he personally guided the career of verismo's most accomplished composer, Giacomo Puccini.

Neither Mala Vita nor Iris, however, was to enjoy the enduring popularity of another early verismo opera which, ironically, also slipped through Ricordi's hands when, in 1889, the famous French baritone Victor Maurel introduced Ruggiero Leoncavallo to him. At that time Leoncavallo dreamed of writing a trilogy of operas about the Italian Renaissance to be called Crepusculum - an Italian counterpart of Wagner's Ring.³ The first opera of the cycle, I Medici, was submitted to Ricordi,

who accepted it, but neglected to publish it for three years. Impatient for success, Leoncavallo brought his new opera, Pagliacci, to Ricordi's rival, Sonzogno, who was thus given the distinction of publishing the first two most successful verismo works in opera history.

Mascagni's opera was based on a play which, for its time, was considered daring and experimental, given its choice of subject, characters, and language. Leoncavallo's new opera instead relied upon conventions belonging to one of the oldest traditions of drama, commedia dell'arte, and did so with the help of several well-worn dramatic cliches.

Pagliacci's theme, the conflict of illusion and reality; its plot, the drama of a betrayed husband, and its play-within-a-play frame are hardly forays into the avant-garde. Leoncavallo's flirtation with naturalistic literary theory, however, gives Pagliacci's conventions an intriguing complexity.

This young composer (he was thirty-four at the time of Pagliacci's premiere) made no secret of the fact that he was inspired by Mascagni's success.⁴ Verismo was coming into vogue. A more interesting question would be why he chose to let the ancient genre of commedia dell'arte play a part in Pagliacci's libretto (which he himself wrote), because the manner in which he adapted these older conventions to the demands of "modern" opera is the source of Pagliacci's originality.

Leoncavallo's grafting of commedia dell'arte to opera is not as far-fetched as might initially appear. They are the two most characteristic forms of Italian theater, and constitute Italy's only important contributions to Western drama (pace Pirandello it must be admitted that

Italy never produced a Shakespeare or a Racine - in part because the grip that opera and commedia dell'arte had on the Italian public overshadowed every other form of drama.)

Opera and commedia dell'arte share the sixteenth century as their point of origin; both are hybrid art forms; that is, both are essentially forms of drama which mix instrumental interludes, song, and dialogue, and both are highly conventionalized.

Commedia dell'arte was based on two conventions: improvised plots and dialogues which gave performances a spontaneity approaching life-like realism, and stock characters whose personalities, mannerisms, and costumes were fixed by tradition. Therefore, like opera, commedia dell'arte was bound by rather strict conventions, but capitalized on the great degree of freedom possible within these limitations.

This form of popular improvised theater in the sixteenth century stands in direct contrast to the contemporary "commedie erudite" or literary comedies of Ariosto and Machiavelli, and the classical tragedies in verse of Trissino and Rucellai, which were being written for and performed by the privileged nobility of Renaissance courts and academies. Since the traveling commedia companies were composed of professionals (as opposed to the performances by aristocratic amateurs), they came to be known as "commedie dell'arte" or professional theater, "arte" meaning "trade" or "profession."

Commedia dell'arte soon spread from Italy to the rest of Europe, enjoying great popularity for two centuries (roughly from 1550 to 1750). In 1782, Antonio Sacchi disbanded his troupe, the last significant one in

Italy. Italians now preferred Goldoni's written comedies and the French, Marivaux's witty and analytical plays. However, commedia dell'arte's influence continued to be felt in plays and operas for another fifty years, while its popularity in southern Italy remained strong for much longer.

Earlier in the seventeenth century, before the opening of the first public opera house in Venice in 1637, cities such as Parma, Padua, and Bologna had already seen some opera performances by itinerant opera troupes, generally from Rome. These companies borrowed liberally from commedia dell'arte repertory, which by the beginning of the seventeenth century had come to include not only comedy but the whole range of dramatic expression, drawing from Italian and foreign sources material which it adapted to its own particular style.⁵

There were three main genres: comedy in a bourgeois or popular milieu, in dialect, with the traditional stock characters ("maschere") and their "lazzi" or extempore jokes and gestures springing from the imagination of the players; Senecan tragedy; and "opera regia" (noble drama) featuring aristocratic characters and tangled plots with happy endings. Opera seria repeated variations on this last genre for two centuries, while opera buffa's debt to commedia dell'arte's popular comedies is of particular relevance to the present discussion.

The stock characters of commedia dell'arte's popular comedies represented the two principal classes of contemporary urban society: the wealthy bourgeoisie and the humbler working class. The powerful were portrayed as old men: the stock character was a Venetian merchant, named Pantalone, who was well-to-do and avaricious, but also very

gullible in non-commercial matters. He was usually made to look ridiculous - often as the result of a foolish infatuation with a much younger woman. Another elderly type from Bologna, home of one of Europe's oldest universities, was called Graziano. He was often a lawyer, sometimes a physician, always a pedant and, like Pantalone, was made a fool of in the course of the performance. The third was a braggart captain, drawn after Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus*, who was familiar in Renaissance literary comedies and in contemporary Italian life as well, for he was invented at the time of the French and Spanish invasion of and eventual domination over large parts of Italy.

The lower classes were represented as the servants of the rich, and derived their nature and details from three sources: the clever slaves of Roman comedy, the traveling mountebanks whose slapstick humor had entertained Europeans since medieval times, and the contemporary burly porters from Bergamo who were doing the heavy outdoor work in northern Italian cities. The manservant had the stock name of "Zanni," northern Italian dialect for "Gianni," a nickname for Giovanni (John). The word was also used as a plural noun referring to a whole troupe of comedians. (Perhaps Leoncavallo had this locution in mind when he chose the title for his *verismo* opera.)

Later in the sixteenth century, around 1575, commedia dell'arte acquired two new stock characters, both of whom were variations on the manservant's role. The first was Arlecchino (Harlequin) who wore a mask and a multicolored costume, and was portrayed as cowardly, superstitious, and perpetually hungry. Although at first distinguished by his stupidity,

he was later given a generous portion of guile.

The second manservant, Brighella, came into existence at about the same time. Arlecchino's most frequent companion in mischief, his name probably derives from the Italian noun "briga," trouble or quarrel. He was cunning, resourceful, unscrupulous, and always ready to play a trick. He kept the commedia plot moving by bringing characters together, delivering messages, and weaving intrigues.⁶ A good man to have as a friend, and a dangerous enemy, he was also an excellent singer and musician, especially adept at the guitar. He spoke in "motti brighelleschi" or twisted proverbs ("When you tell lies, tell big ones. Lies like meatballs must be big or not at all.").

The female counterpart to these characters was a maidservant, Colombina. Quick-witted, gossipy and gay, she rivaled Arlecchino and Brighella in cleverness and resourcefulness.

Suspended between these two classes of rich masters and their clever servants were the Young Lovers who provided plots with their central conflict: their marriage was usually obstructed by one of the old men's passion for the Young Lady. They were of the upper class, but relatively powerless because of their youth and dependency on the old men who were their fathers or guardians. The Young Lovers did not differ greatly from those found in written comedies. The Young Man was usually a poor student, poetic and gentle, an expert on the rhetoric of love, its misery, the woes of separation, and the joy of prospective marriage, while his lady was given a larger but less dignified role than the one traditionally accorded her in written comedy.

Some of these characters spoke regional dialects and wore masks and stock costumes, while others dressed in the ordinary clothing of the period and spoke the standard Tuscan Italian of the educated and privileged.

The structure of commedia dell'arte's popular comedies was simple: a love story (with complications) that ended happily. A typical scenario for one scene is the following from the comedy La Vedova costante (The Faithful Widow), which presents the stock characters of the Young Lovers and two old men who resemble Pantalone and Graziano.

Isabella, dalla finestra, fa scena amorosa con
Orazio; viene a basso, si danno la mano di
sposi e partono.

(From her window, Isabella has a love scene
with Horace; she comes downstairs, they plight
their troth and leave.)

Isabella's father, a widower, has a friend, also a widower, who has a daughter. The two men meet in Scene Three, for which the scenario reads:

Fanno scena d'amicizia; dopo discorrono di
accasar la lor figliola; risolvono pigliarne
una per uno, si danno la parola e allegri partono.⁷

(They have a friendship scene; they talk about
marrying off their daughters; each decides to
marry the other's daughter; they make a pact,
and exit happily.)

Before each performance the manager of the troupe prepared such scenarios, which he read and explained to his company. Copies were then either distributed or posted where the actors could see and study them.

The improvised nature of these comedies made dialogue and

characterization of less importance than the gags, both verbal and physical, which ranged from witty remarks to the most inelegant slapstick. (One of the coarser jokes, for example, was for a character to forget he was on stage and to use a bucket to answer a call of nature, stepping out of his part and into "real life" until he was called back.)

The source of commedia dell'arte's vitality, however, lies not in its humor, but in its conflict of opposites - youth and old age; master and servant; money and love; adultery and fidelity - and in the foibles and inconsistencies of human nature which its stock characters display. These polarities made commedia dell'arte a good source of material for comic opera, which, in the eighteenth century, delighted in parodying the "timeless and eternal verities" of opera seria.

This last genre had dominated opera during the last twenty years of the seventeenth century and through most of the eighteenth. It celebrated an intimate moral relationship between gods and mortals, taking certain Greek ideas (the Aristotelian Unities) for its structure, and drawing upon French neo-classical tragedy for its aristocratic characters and ethical themes of honor, sacrifice, and duty.

One of the first opere serie, Carlo Francesco Pollarolo's La Forza del virtu (1693), as its title implies, gives great importance to moral rectitude, a theme that will characterize all the operas of the genre, whose plots were intended to educate and uplift the audience. Metastasio's influence on the development of this baroque expression of opera was felt all through the century. His Attilio Regio (1750), for example, presents in the title role a patriot who prefers life imprisonment by the

Carthaginians to freedom bought at the expense of Rome's safety. In 1770, when he was all of fourteen, Mozart wrote Mitridate, Re di Ponto, basing his opera seria on the play by Racine. (His Idomeneo, Re di Creta, written eleven years later, is today considered the most perfect example of the genre.)

In contrast to such remote historical or mythical figures bent on self-sacrifice, opera buffa presented characters who showed familiar human frailties in situations drawn from contemporary life.⁸ The first successful comic opera was Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's La Serva Padrona (1733). Its characters are inspired by commedia dell'arte's "masks": Serpina, a clever maidservant; Uberto, her rich, elderly master; and Vespone, the manservant who also impersonates a menacing military figure, Capitano Tempesta.

The story is simple: Uberto, a bachelor, has raised his maid, Serpina, in his home since her childhood. Impertinent and pretty, scheming yet endearing, she has decided to marry her master. He, outraged by her pretensions, announces that he will marry . . . anyone but Serpina. She coaxes and scolds him in vain, and finally decides to make him jealous. She has Vespone disguise himself as a captain and presents him to Uberto as her fiance. The exasperated master finally agrees to marry her (since he really loves her), and makes his maid the mistress of his home.

The class differences and personality clashes that are generated by this proposed inappropriate marriage (with a novel twist: it is a young woman who wants to marry a reluctant old man), the speed with which the

plot turns (the entire opera is under one hour in length), and the natural language of the recitatives and arias, which make liberal use of proverbs, idiomatic expressions, and insults still heard today in Italy, are the debts which Pergolesi and his librettist, Gennaro Federico, owe to commedia dell'arte.

Many later comic operas that are still popular such as Il Barbiere di Siviglia, Don Pasquale, and Così fan tutte, borrowed liberally from commedia dell'arte formulae to develop their characters and situations. The title role in Don Pasquale (1843), for example, is drawn from Pantalone's characterization. Garrulous, foolish, overly concerned with money and position, Donizetti's Don Pasquale falls in love with a young woman who is really Norina, his nephew's sweetheart, whom Don Pasquale has forbidden him to marry. The complicated plot calls for disguises, a false marriage contract, and a series of tricks at Don Pasquale's expense until finally the young lovers are happily united. Norina is based on Colombina, commedia dell'arte's resourceful maidservant, as are Susanna in Le Nozze di Figaro, Despina in Così fan tutte and La Serva Padrona's Serpina.

Perhaps the most perfect comic opera, Le Nozze di Figaro, which premiered in 1786, substitutes a seduction for the incongruous marriage of commedia dell'arte. Count Almaviva (whose name, "lively soul," suits him), bored with his marriage to Rosina, now wishes to seduce Susanna, his manservant Figaro's fiancée. Mozart's opera increases the pairs of lovers to four (Figaro and Susanna, the Count and Countess, Cherubino and Barberina, and Marcellina and Don Bartolo) thus presenting ample

opportunities for disguises, mistaken identities, and the cheerful confusion which comic opera shares with commedia dell'arte.

Figaro, a descendent of the manservant, Brighella, uses his considerable talents for intrigue to revenge himself on his master. The tricks that he plays, however, backfire, and Figaro is led to doubt Susanna's fidelity. Her "betrayal" gives him reason to express a favorite theme of comic opera: the fickleness of women. He calls them "maestre d'inganno.../che fingono, mentono,/Amore non sentono/Non senton pieta!" (Masters of deceit who trick and lie, feeling no love or pity). This misunderstanding is finally removed, allowing the opera to end happily. Woman's real or supposed inconstancy is also a source of amusement in Così fan tutte and L'Elisir d'amore. In fact, comic opera often finds its humor in situations that make light of jealousy, lust, and revenge, and which grow out of the hoary cuckold jokes of commedia dell'arte.

Leoncavallo, therefore, could safely assume that Pagliacci's first audience was familiar with commedia dell'arte plots and characters - if not through first-hand acquaintance, then most certainly through comic opera's clever exploitation of commedia conventions. The originality of Leoncavallo's approach to this familiar material lies in his discovery of its serious dramatic potential.

Pagliacci begins with a characteristically brief verismo overture which musically previews the most important scenes. The curtains then part, and an actor appears to inform the public of the composer's intention to revive the old conventions, such as a prologue, for a new purpose.

The custom of offering a prologue is as old as opera itself.⁹ Although the practice was abandoned in the eighteenth century, it was later used by Donizetti, Verdi, and Wagner. Therefore, Leoncavallo's claim that he is reviving an old convention is inaccurate. He is, however, the very first composer to use the prologue as a forum for his opinions on the purpose of art and the role of the artist. Richard Strauss (Ariadne auf Naxos), Francesco Malipiero (L'Orfeide), and Sergio Prokofiev (The Love for Three Oranges) later followed Leoncavallo's precedent and used the device to explore personal theories about art).

Pagliacci's prologue is offered by one of the opera's main characters, whose real identity, however, remains a mystery. It is never established whether this character is Tonio of the tragedy or Taddeo of the comedy, for although he speaks in prose like the former, he is wearing the costume and make-up of the latter, while offering opinions on art that clearly belong to the composer.

Speaking in loco autoris, he immediately informs the audience of the composer's intention to use "le antiche maschere" of stock characters of commedia dell'arte for a new purpose.

Si può. . . Signore! Signori! . . . Scusatemi se solo mi presento. Io sono il Prologo. Poichè in iscena ancor le antiche maschere mette l'autore, in parte ei vuol riprendere le vecchie usanze e a voi di nuovo inviarmi.

(With your permission, ladies and gentlemen, excuse me if I make my own introduction. I am the Prologue. Since the author is putting the ancient masks on stage again, he wishes, in part, to revive the old customs and sends me once again out here to you.)

Leoncavallo's adaptation of this peculiarly Italian form of theater

to tragic opera results in an interesting paradox: one of the oldest expressions of Italian dramatic art is used to explore one of the newest movements of European literature, for the opera's originality is found in its juxtaposing commedia conventions with themes in accordance with naturalistic literary theory. In fact this prologue serves as a manifesto of lyric verismo, just as Zola's essays and Verga's prefaces explained the aesthetic theories and narrative techniques of naturalistic fiction.

There can be little doubt that Leoncavallo was familiar with these writings, because he was one of the most literate composers of his day. After completing his musical education at the Conservatory in Naples when he was only sixteen years of age, he took a degree in literature under Giosuè Carducci, the great Italian poet, at the University of Bologna. Furthermore, he both quotes and paraphrases Zola's own naturalistic theories in the Prologue.

For example, Tonio alludes to the fact that the value of commedia dell'arte (and, by implication, opera itself) is no longer found in its capacity to entertain by presenting "false" or purely imaginary situations and characters. Art's purpose is to reveal certain truths about human nature through a faithful representation of human emotions.

Dunque vedrete amar sì come s'amano gli esseri
umani; vedrete de l'odio i tristi frutti. Del duolo
gli spasimi, urli di rabbia, udrete, e risa ciniche.

(Well then, you will see how human beings love;
you will see the sad fruits of hate. You will hear
cries of sorrow, screams of anger, and cynical
laughter.)

The lack of conventional decorum in what is soon to be presented is defended as an attempt to paint "a slice of life." ("L'autore ha

cercato. . .di pingervi uno squarcio di vita.") Leoncavallo's use of this arresting phrase is significant for two reasons. First, he affirms with it that life as it is lived by real people is now perceived as suitable material for tragic opera; and second, the phrase is not his own, but a translation of a well-known remark Zola had made about the modern novel.

Roughly a decade before the premiere of Pagliacci, during the years 1880 and 1881, Zola published several collections of newspaper articles and essays in which he had earlier developed his naturalistic theories. One of these, Du Roman, contains the following remark about the role of the naturalistic novel:

Faire mouvoir des personnages réels dans un milieu réel, donner au lecteur un lambeau de la vie humaine, tout le roman naturaliste est là.¹⁰

(To make real characters move in a real milieu; to give the reader a slice of human life; that is what the naturalistic novel is all about.)

Leoncavallo's use of the phrase "uno squarcio di vita" therefore leaves little question about the literary association he wished his audience to make when they heard it. The rising musical phrase which accompanies the phrase is slow and deliberate, with a marked crescendo that gives the line great emphasis. (It should be noted that the most commonly accepted English translation of the phrase is imprecise, since the word in Italian and French means respectively "rip" and "scrap.")

Leoncavallo's repudiation of fantasy as a legitimate source of artistic inspiration and the elevation of "truth" to the position of Sacred Writ are two more concepts he found among Zola's own naturalistic theories. In the same collection of essays, Du Roman, Zola notes that

when the novel was merely a mental recreation, a source of amusement, the greatest quality a novelist could possess was imagination. Modern times, however, demand that the author draw his inspiration from life, ". . .la première histoire venue, et que la vie quotidienne lui fournit toujours. La grande affaire est de mettre debout des créatures vivantes. . ."11 (. . .the first story that comes along, and that daily life always offers him. The main thing is to set up living human beings. . .)

In the mirror that Naturalism holds up to reality, the novel comes to resemble the newspaper article, reporting recent events, rather than the romance that idealized a distant past. Following the example of their spiritual father, Gustave Flaubert, whose Madame Bovary was inspired by the actual suicide of a country doctor's adulterous wife in a small community in Normandy, the new generation of naturalistic novelists preferred to fashion their literary fiction from biographical fact.

It would be difficult to understate the importance these writers gave to "truth." "La vérité a un son auquel j'estime au'on ne saurait se tromper. Les phrases, les alinéas, les pages, le livre tout entier doit sonner la vérité" states Zola with his characteristic intensity of expression.¹² (The truth has a sound which I think can never be mistaken. The sentences, the paragraphs, the pages, the whole book must ring with the truth.)

Naturalism's alliance of truth and art must have impressed Leoncavallo, because he claims it as his own five minutes into Pagliacci. Tonio, speaking of the composer, reveals: "Egli ha per massima sol che l'artista è un uom e che per gli uomini scriver ei deve - ed al vero

ispiravisi." (His only principle is that the artist is a man and that he must write for men and draw his inspiration from the truth.)

Like Flaubert, Zola, and Verga, Leoncavallo drew his subject from an event that had actually taken place. The case had been brought before his father, who was a judge in Cosenza. (It was fortunate for the composer that the events of Pagliacci were documented in court records, for shortly after the opera's premiere he was accused of plagiarism by Catulle Mendès, a minor French playwright who saw a resemblance between his play La Femme de Tabarin and Pagliacci.)¹³

The Prologue's promise to bring truth to the lyric stage by portraying the emotions and suffering of real (and not merely possible) people supports the naturalistic thesis that real art is inspired by real life. This feature, together with the composer's assertion that the old ways are inadequate for expressing the new understanding of what constitutes art, leaves little doubt that in writing Pagliacci Ruggiero Leoncavallo was offering his contribution to opera's newest genre: verismo.

This fact does not seem to have impressed Henry Krehbiel, writing about Pagliacci in 1909. His misreading of the Prologue results from a disregard for the literary allusions it contains. Krehbiel's distaste for verismo, which he characterized as bringing "the contemplation of adultery, seduction, and murder amid the reek and stench of the Italian barnyard" to the lyric stage perhaps prompted him to give little thought to what Leoncavallo was attempting. Apparently he thinks that the main message of the Prologue is that actors are human beings like ourselves, and complains: "Plainly then, from a didactic point of view, this prologue

is a gratuitous impertinence."¹⁴

The bond between commedia dell'arte, comic opera, and verismo is established immediately in Pagliacci's prologue when Tonio explains to his public that the old commedia customs are being revived "ma non per divi come pria: le lacrime che noi versiam sono false: degli spasimi e dei nostri martir non alarmatevi!" (But not to tell you as before that the tears we shed are false, that you are not to be alarmed by our suffering and pain!) He is alluding not only to commedia dell'arte as a metaphor for art and to the new "mission" naturalism had given art as an agent of truth, but also to the use to which composers such as Rossini and Mozart, Pergolesi and Donizetti, had put commedia stock characters and plots - that of comic opera. Pagliacci's audience is cautioned that the composer will deliberately break with lyric tradition in his use of conventions from a comic genre for tragic purposes.

The title Leoncavallo chose for his experiment in lyric drama recalls a comic figure long known to Europeans. He appeared in Paris for the first time in 1570 as "Paillasse," his name derived from his costume of blue and white checks, which resembled a paillasse, the coarse straw mattress ticking of the period. In time, his costume evolved into white, loosely-fitting shirt and trousers with large buttons and a close-fitting black cap, the costume found on most Pagliacci album covers today.

This commedia dell'arte "maschera," Pagliaccio, is a character notoriously lacking in good sense and decorum. Considered the lowest-ranking member of the troupe, he stood outside the tent theater and by his antics attracted the attention of the crowd, encouraging them to

attend the performance. Although Canio, the leader of Pagliacci's troupe, performs this function during his first appearance on stage, it is doubtful that Leoncavallo intended his title to refer merely to this specific character, or even to all the actors in Canio's company. Pagliacci (and not I Pagliacci as it frequently appears) is a plural noun in Italian, and the omission of the definite article, "i," makes the reference extremely vague. It would seem that Leoncavallo wished instead to emphasize the role-playing aspect of life which forces everyone, sooner or later, to give up his illusions and to become the "pagliaccio" of commedia dell'arte tradition.

Pagliacci's plot resembles that of commedia dell'arte's (and comic opera's) most popular scenario - the inappropriate marriage between an old man and a young woman - and includes the same stock characters: a wily servant, much more experienced and knowledgeable than his master, star-crossed lovers, and a powerful, tyrannical older man.

Leoncavallo set the opera in Calabria in 1870, just when the last troupes of such players might still be found; troupes led, as was his, by a husband-and-wife team with children and relatives in the company. The story is an old one: Canio's May-December marriage is breaking up because Nedda has fallen in love with a younger man. She has made an enemy of another actor in the troupe, Tonio, who gets his revenge by revealing her infidelity to her husband and by goading him into a murderous rage during the commedia performance. Canio stabs Nedda and her lover, Silvio, when he comes to her aid.

The opera has only three main characters: Canio, Nedda, and

Tonio, while the traditional commedia plot called for at least twice that number of actors: two young lovers, servants, and powerful old men who are to be satirized. Such a large cast, however, would have interfered with the swiftness that characterizes a good dramatic plot.

Leoncavallo achieves the needed economy of characters without disappointing the expectations of his audience by assigning each of his main characters multiple roles. Canio's double role as Pagliaccio, the clown, and Canio the betrayed husband, is established by the character himself in his two most important arias. In the first, "Vesti la giubba," which closes Act I, he bitterly describes himself as an object of ridicule: "Sei tu forse un uom? Tu sei Pagliaccio!" (Do you think you are a man? You're a clown!") In his second aria, during Act II, however, he rejects this role. "No! Pagliaccio non son; se il viso è pallido è di vergogno e smania di vendetta!" (No! I'm not a clown; if my face is pale it is because of my shame and my desire for revenge!)

Although Canio refers to himself as "Pagliaccio," the commedia character that he most resembles is Pulcinella, who later became the Punch of Punch and Judy, developing a malicious streak not found in his Neapolitan avatar. Originally hunch-backed (a deformity Leoncavallo passes on to Tonio), Pulcinella was boastful and cowardly, open-minded and superstitious, intelligent and naive. In other words, he represented all the contradictions of the Neapolitan character. Certain traits in Canio's personality indicate that the composer had Pulcinella in mind when he created his famous clown. For example, Beppe, the troupe's fourth actor, remarks on the contradictory nature of Canio's character: "Sapete, Canio

è violento, ma buono." (You know, Canio is violent, but good-hearted.) He is quick to laugh and just as quick to take offence, as his behavior in the first scene of Act I illustrates when he passes from joking with the villagers to striking Tonio for helping Nedda down from a cart. In fact, his character seems to encompass all the conflicting forces of the plot: love and hate, comedy and tragedy, strength and vulnerability. Furthermore, Pulcinella's sweetheart or wife was traditionally Colombina, Canio-Pagliaccio's wife in the second act of the opera.

Nedda is both an unfaithful wife and the Young Lover in the real-life tragedy, and the stock character of Colombina, the wily maid in the commedia dell'arte play frame. The fact that in her role as Colombina she is also an unfaithful wife gives her role a powerful irony which helps precipitate the catastrophe as well; for when Canio hears Tonio sarcastically protest Colombina's constancy during the performance, he is reminded of Nedda's adultery and stabs her.

Both in the theater and in "real life" Tonio plays a role subservient to Canio, and is in love with Nedda-Colombina. He manipulates the plot just as Brighella did in commedia dell'arte performances. It is he who brings Canio to witness Nedda's infidelity; he plays Iago to Canio's Othello by urging his master to trust him ("di me fidatevi"); and to feign normal behavior in order to trap the lovers again ("bisogna fingere per riuscire"). Later, during the performance, his ironic words goad Canio into murdering Nedda. His intrigues cause the tragedy and he should be the famous spoken closing line "La commedia è finita," which recalls the Prologue, but which the leading tenor usually (and wrongly) appropriates.

Pagliacci's set reproduces a rural neighborhood that could easily be the outskirts of Cavalleria's village. Once again two roads meet in the middle of the southern Italian countryside, but instead of Cavalleria's central piazza, Pagliacci's stage is dominated by the crossroads. Canio's acting troupe remains on the edge of town because they are outsiders whose temporary tents contrast with the villagers' stone cottages, off-stage. As in Cavalleria, Pagliacci's milieu represents the permanence and stability of rural life.

The characters' conflicting desires find their physical representation in the setting: a crossroads on the fringe of society. The meeting of two roads is a metaphor - the point at which the thematic opposites of the opera converge: the comic and tragic; the traditional and modern; the real and illusory, creating a proportionately high number of powerful conflicts and moods, given the opera's brevity.

A beating drum and blowing trumpet signal the arrival of Canio's commedia dell'arte troupe as the curtain rises. It is the afternoon of August 15th, the Feast of the Assumption, an important Roman Catholic holy day, celebrating the corporal elevation of the Virgin to heaven. Chaste yet maternal, her lack of carnal desire is rewarded by immediate physical as well as spiritual assumption to Paradise; while Nedda, who will die on the same day, is condemned by her passions.

Both Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci, therefore, take place in small towns on a holy day. The difference is that Leoncavallo uses the holiday principally as a pretext for the troupe's performance while Mascagni's opera, as was noted earlier, subtly explores its libretto's

religious motifs.

The villagers, in their holiday best, greet the traveling actors with a six-part chorus that includes children's voices. "Son qua!" hails Canio ironically as the prince of clowns who chases away problems with his good humor. ("Il principe/se' dei pagliacci/Tu i guai discacci/Co'l lieto umor.")

In his role as "Pagliaccio," Canio attracts the crowd with his arioso "Un grande spettacolo." This sung scenario is an interesting device. First, because it is really a summary of the play, resembling the one prepared and distributed by the manager of early commedia dell'arte troupes before the performance, and second, because it recalls the seemingly spontaneous discussion of art and reality offered by the Prologue as Pagliaccio begins.

Canio's "conchetto" re-presents the Prologue's scenario in formal artistic terms. It is powerfully ironic because he is not only describing the highlights of the evening's performance, but is also unintentionally telling about events that will take place in his own life. His arioso summarizes the action of the entire opera as he tells his audience that they will see him as Pagliaccio discover his wife's infidelity, become enraged, and plot his revenge, while Tonio-Taddeo weaves a tangled web of intrigue.

The arioso passage, therefore, contains the key to the structure of the opera, which consists of a play (the "real life" story of Act I) and its artistic representation (the commedia dell'arte performance of Act II) which, in turn, are two ways of telling an old story: the "true" way and the "false" or imaginative one, as Tonio had earlier explained in the

Prologue.

Significantly, Canio says that the play will be given at eleven o'clock at night - a curious hour for a performance, but one that proverbially stands for the calm before a misfortune. The words "a ventitrè ore" are repeated six times: twice gaily by the chorus and four times by Canio, who retards the musical phrase and drops it a full octave, underscoring its ominous foreboding.

There follows a seemingly minor incident which has serious repercussions. Tonio receives a box on the ear from Canio for attempting to help Nedda down from the cart; he promises revenge ("La pagherai! . . . brigante") as the villagers joke about his interest in Canio's wife.

Canio's response, "Un tal gioco," contains the first direct referent to the stage life/real life comparison theme of Pagliacci: the theater and life are not the same. Theatrical conventions govern Pagliaccio's reaction to his wife's adultery, he says, and the result is comic; but if he, Canio, were to discover that Nedda had really been unfaithful to him, the outcome would be tragic.

The aria thus serves both character and thematic development by providing an example of Canio's violent jealousy while emphasizing the difference between art and real life.

It is essentially an arioso passage (that opera convention which stands musically between recitative and the symmetry of the formal aria), although the repetition of the opening phrase at the end, "un tal gioco," makes it into a kind of faint sketch of the traditional "da capo" (A-B-A) aria. It is an early example of the informality with which verismo opera

treats fundamental opera conventions.

The threatening mood of Canio's words is lifted by a formal chorus, which serves to contrast the principal characters' violent emotions with the villagers' harmonious life. This chorus describes a peaceful rural scene ("Tutto irradiasi di luce, d'amor"). Young lovers steal glances at each other as the church bells call them to Mass, under the watchful eyes of the community: mothers and the village elders keep the younger generation under surveillance ("Le mamme ci adocchiano. . .i vecchi sorvegliano gli arditì amador."). Another pair of ardent lovers is also being watched; as the bells call the villagers to church, Tonio calls Canio to witness Nedda's infidelity.

This "Bell Chorus" is in rather shameless imitation of Cavalleria's "A Casa, amici," sung as Cavalleria's chorus comes home from early Mass. Pagliacci's chorus is sung on the way to church and again tells of love and courtship; its purpose to establish a pastoral mood rather than to present a realistic picture of a Calabrian village and its people.

The chorus in both these early veristic operas has the least convincing of all the "roles," although it is not without a certain dramatic function. Both operas use the chorus to present an idealized background of humble life against which the realistic passions of the main characters acquire depth and dimension. In both cases the chorus introduces an impression of time, place, and a particular social order. Leoncavallo, however, uses his chorus dramatically as well: the choristers are the audience in the opera's commedia performance, where they comment upon the action and finally participate in it.

The diminished role of the chorus in verismo opera is already evident in Pagliacci. Cavalleria has five choruses: "Gli Aranci olezzano," "O Che bel mestiere," "Regina Coeli laetare," "A Casa, amici," and "Viva il vino spumeggiante," while Pagliacci has only three. Significantly, the Bell Chorus is the only formal, free-standing choral "piece." The other two, "Son qua!" and "Presto! Affrettiamoci!" are choruses mixed with recitatives from the principals, and develop dramatic situations. In the first, Canio's troupe is presented, while the confusion that the villagers bring to the stage in the second, as they prepare to watch the performance, gives Nedda and Silvio an opportunity to exchange a few hurried words about their plans to elope.

The Bell Chorus is followed by Nedda's only aria, the Bird Song, which contributes to the action by giving insights into her present state of mind. Violins simulate the flight of the soaring birds that she sees, and she associates her life closely with theirs. The birds, like Nedda herself, are wanderers (she calls them "i boemi del ciel") who defy storms in order to follow their dreams ("seguono anch'essi (emphasis added) un sogno, una chimera. . ."). In her mind, apparently, their courage is analogous to hers, because she risks the terrible consequences of Canio's rage to pursue her dream of life with Silvio. As she later tells him in their romantic duet, she wishes to change her role in life: "Viver voglio a te avvinta, affascinata, una vita d'amor calma e tranquilla." (I want to live a calm and peaceful life of love, bound to you).

Nedda's aria, expressing her desire to be free, is followed by Tonio's attempted seduction and her love scene with Silvio. Three of

Pagliacci's six scenes are thus dedicated to love: Canio's jealous possessiveness, Tonio's lust, and the idealized, romantic sentiments of Silvio and Nedda which recall those of the Young Lovers of commedia tradition.

Canio's discovery of the lovers, his fury, his gradual return to some semblance of sanity are convincingly portrayed in realistic dialogue (more shouted than sung) in the closing scene of Act I. Beppe, the fourth actor, manages to restrain him from killing Nedda on the spot as Tonio promises to spy on her so that a trap can be set for her lover during the evening performance. ("Io la sorveglio. . . Chissa ch'egli non venga allo spettacolo e si tradisca!").

Somewhat subdued, Canio sings the most famous tenor arias ever written. "Vesti la giubba" recalls the premise of the prologue that real art is based on the truth by giving an example of the gulf that exists between Canio's artistic role and his real feelings. He tells himself that not only must he put on his costume and makeup, but also turn his tears and pain into jokes ("tramuta in lazzi lo spasimo ed il pianto"). The aria's climax, the phrase "Ridi, pagliaccio, sul tuo cuor infranto!" (laugh, clown, over your broken heart!) underscores the disparity between art and truth. Leoncavallo's idea of ending the first act with this lament was brilliant, for with it the promises made to the audience in the Prologue to present laughter and tears are kept, and the act comes full circle.

Pagliacci's second act is almost a mirror image of the first because it is a deliberate artistic representation of the same situation. Everything that has happened that afternoon in "real life" will happen

again on stage, disguised by convention, but life will intrude on art and give a twist to the expected ending.

The parallel between the events of the commedia performance and those of the first act are complete down to the smallest details of text and structure. Again Nedda, as Colombina, sings to herself while she waits for her lover ("Pagliaccio, mio marito, a tarda notte sol ritornerà"). Again she is interrupted by Tonio-Taddeo, who reveals his love ("Dei, com'è bella!"). Her rejection of him is followed by a love scene, as in Act I, in which she plans to run away with her lover. Pagliaccio surprises them as Nedda is saying goodbye to Arlecchino with precisely the same words (and music) that she had used with Silvio, which were overheard by Canio earlier that afternoon: "A stanotte e per sempre sarò tua." (Until tonight and then I'll be yours forever.)

The most striking difference between Pagliacci's two acts is the music. Act I contains music of great contrast and variety: a drum and fife parade ("Son qua!"), a ballad (Nedda's Bird Song), a pastoral hymn (the Bell Chorus), the violent half-spoken curse of Tonio's rejected love theme followed by Nedda and Silvio's sensuous duet and the poignant lament "Vesti la giubba" which closes the act.

The music that accompanies the commedia dell'arte performance, however, is a delightful pseudo-Mozart piece in which the pizzicato violins simulate mandolins and the cellos skip up and down the scale, creating the feeling of light-hearted good fun found in comic opera scores. Deliberately mechanical and repetitious, the music thus conveys the opera's aesthetic premise: that the traditional artistic expressions do

not deal realistically with serious human concerns because they fail to describe accurately the full range of human emotions.

Now convention, and the strict parallelism hitherto would dictate an end to the scene like the one predicted by Canio in his sung scenario. Pagliaccio will get his revenge by playing a trick on the lovers: he will give a funny speech and forget the event. Canio tries to improvise, but the irony of his lines makes this difficult, especially because Tonio never misses an opportunity to remind him of Nedda's infidelity.

During his ad-libbed staged declaration of love to Nedda-Colombina, Tonio says:

So che sei pura
E casta al par di neve!
E ben che dura
Ti dimonstri ad obliarti non riesco.

(Act II)

(I know that you're pure
And as chaste as the driven snow!
And although you're hard-hearted
I can't manage to forget you.)

Knowing that Canio is listening backstage, Tonio repeats these lines and the words "pura," "casta" and "dura" two and three times each. Further on in the same scene, he defends Nedda-Colombina to her angry husband by choosing his words with irony: "Credetela. Essa è pura. E abborre dal mentire quel labbro pio." (Believe her. She is pure. And those pious lips hate lying.)

The laughter that this line generates in the peasant audience on stage reminds Canio of the universal scorn with which the cuckold is treated. He steps out of character and completely loses control as the distinction between life and art blur for him. Goaded by Tonio, Canio

finally tears off his mask and fulfills the promise made in the prologue to present the real emotions of real people and their terrible consequences.

The effect of Leoncavallo's marrying of commedia dell'arte to Naturalism in Pagliacci is not forced, because these two artistic expressions bear a subtle resemblance to each other in their presentation of a world governed by forces that ignore ethical and moral imperatives. Moral considerations are discredited in commedia dell'arte's portrayal of human nature, and are replaced by resourcefulness and guile as the shaping force of its plots. Its implication that we are all assigned roles in life corresponds to the deterministic theories of heredity and environment that govern naturalistic plots and characters.

The naturalists were strongly influenced in this regard by Hippolyte Taine's philosophical doctrine that every event is the inevitable consequence of antecedents, and specifically those of "la race, le moment, et le milieu" which he developed in the preface to his well-known Histoire de la littérature anglaise, published in 1863-64. In this essay, Taine explains his intention to write a history of "a grand and complete literature" using the principles of scientific inquiry in order to discover "the psychology of its people." He attempts to show how the effects of "primary springs" (heredity, history, and environment) have transformed "the Saxon barbarian into the Englishman of today."¹⁵

Leoncavallo was part of a generation of Europeans that had grown to maturity under the influence of such "scientific" theories. The data of history, economics, and politics were examined for the purpose of making generalized statements about the "laws" that governed both individuals

and society. These laws were largely based on Darwin's theories of evolution regarding the "survival of the fittest" and the "law of the jungle," and humanity, like the animals, was divided into two classes: the weak and the strong.

Commedia dell'arte's characters are also of two types, fools ("i fessi") and foxes ("i furbi"), and its world is one in which wit and cynicism are essential for survival. Despite its harsh presentation of human weakness, however, the art form is not devoid of pathos. Because each of its characters is both a prisoner and a victim of his assigned role and fixed personality, at times its cruel caricatures lead to the suggestion of tears beneath the mask - a feature that Leoncavallo's "Vesti la giubba" translates perfectly in the operatic medium. Thus, commedia dell'arte's lack of idealism and its implication that we are all assigned roles in life made it suitable material for a young composer anxious to write a naturalistic opera of strong passion and stark action.

Leoncavallo was one of the first modern artists to return to commedia dell'arte for his inspiration. The turn of the century witnessed a revival of interest in this ancient form of improvised theater that began in opera with Pagliacci and later spread to the other arts. Picasso uses commedia themes in his painting ("Les Saltimbanques," "The Three Musicians," and "Paul as Pierrot"), as does Stravinsky in his ballet, Pulcinella. Mascagni's Le Maschere, Busoni's Arlecchino, and Prokofiev's The Love for Three Oranges are but three of the many operas in the twentieth century that borrow from the genre. Nearly forty years after Pagliacci's premiere, the Marx Brothers adapted the commedia idea of

stock characters and seemingly improvised dialogue for the newest artistic medium: the cinema.

The first performance of Pagliacci, conducted by a very young Arturo Toscanini, on May 21, 1892 at the Teatro dal Verme in Milan, was a great success. The work immediately began a tour of the world's opera houses and within two years of its premiere had been performed in cities as far-flung as Moscow, Mexico City, and Stockholm.

Comparisons with Mascagni's realistic opera were inevitable. The year after Pagliacci's premiere the two works were paired for the first time in Vienna during an International Exhibition at the Prater, and although each later shared a double bill with such unlikely operas as Humperdinck's Hansel und Gretel, Rimsky-Korsakov's Le Coq d'Or and Gluck's Orfeo ed Euridice, today they have become inseparably joined. No other mixed bill has achieved such a secure place in the modern repertory.¹⁶

Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci share many features of structure and plot. Each has five characters and two scenes divided by an orchestral intermezzo. Both operas have jealousy as the central motive; both close with the violent death of the "sinning" character, but not of the informer. Each gives prominence to a love triangle, but they view the same situation from different perspectives. In Pagliacci, the center of interest is Canio, the betrayed husband, while in Cavalleria the audience's sympathy is given to the betrayed informer, Santuzza. In this light, they are complementary, each extending the experience of the other; and for this reason, over the years, one has not supplanted the other.

Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci were tentative essays into realistic opera. They used the traditions of tragedy and comedy respectively to mediate between the conventional and the new, but neither composer was able to sustain his interest in this new genre of musical drama. Fortunately, there was another young composer whose temperament and talent were better suited for developing the nuances of verismo: Giacomo Puccini.

Notes

1

Mala Vita (libretto by Nicola Dasparo) premiered at Rome's Teatro Argentina on February 21, 1892. It was revived in a new version as Il Voto, which premiered on November 10, 1897 at Milan's Teatro Lirico, but subsequently disappeared into the abyss of opera history.

2

Mosco Carner, Puccini 2nd ed. rev. (1958; London: Duckworth, 1974), p. 36.

3

The trilogy would embrace the entire Renaissance and was to include such figures as Lorenzo il Magnifico, Savonarola, and Cesare Borgia to whom, said Leoncavallo, "Wagner's gods are the merest pygmies." Only the first opera, I Medici, was ever composed.

4

In an interview for the North American Review in 1902, Leoncavallo said, "After the success of Mascagni's Cavalleria rusticana. . . I shut myself up in my room in sheer desperation, resolved to make a last struggle. Five months later, Pagliacci was acquired by Sonzogno after he had read only the libretto." See "How I wrote Pagliacci" in George Marek, ed., A World Treasury of Grand Opera (New York: Harper Brothers, 1957), pp. 149 - 151 for the complete interview.

5

For an informative article on the relationship between the two art forms see Nino Pirrotta, "Commedia dell'arte and Opera," Musical Quarterly, 41 (July, 1955), 305 - 324.

6

Puccini's Scarpia is an interesting development of Brighella's menacing character. In his position as police chief, he is really a servant of the state and, in Sardou's original drama, was from a poor Sicilian family. Scarpia manipulates both Tosca and the plot through his talent for deception and intrigue. Mario Cavaradossi's "false" execution, which Scarpia arranges, is perhaps opera's most chilling practical joke.

7

Ernest Wilkins, A History of Italian Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), pp. 265 - 66.

8

The first opera buffa was either Francesco Antonio Tullio's Le finziune abbenotate in 1710, or Antonio Orefici's Patrò Calienno de la Costa, in 1709. See Ruggero Vené, "The Origins of Opera Buffa," Musical Quarterly, 21 (January, 1935), 33 - 38.

9

Initiated in drama by ancient tragedy and popularized by Renaissance pastoral plays, the prologue became part of operatic tradition with the first opera, Rinuccini's La Dafne, written nearly three hundred years before Pagliacci. Popular during the seventeenth century, the convention gradually disappeared from operas written the following century. In fact, Jean Philippe Rameau and Antonio Salieri are the only two composers to make prologues part of their operas during the entire eighteenth century.

10

Émile Zola, Le Roman Expérimental (Paris: 1881; rpt. Paris: Bernouard, 1928), p. 167. Du Roman was a collection of essays Zola had chosen from a larger number first published in Le Bien Public and Le Voltaire.

11

Ibid., p. 166.

12

Ibid., p. 169.

13

Pagliacci's portrayal of an actual murder on stage by a man playing a character stirred the controversy. Although the dramatic device is an old one, and Catulle Mendès himself had been accused of plagiarizing La Femme de Tabarin from Paul Ferrier's play, Tabarin, he nevertheless began legal proceedings to stop the performance of Pagliacci in Brussels. In a letter to his publisher, dated September 3, 1894, Leoncavallo revealed his true source. The protagonist of the real-life drama was still alive and was willing to give evidence if the case were to go to trial. Mendès formally apologized and the charges were dropped. Curiously, however, the accusation of plagiarism is not unfounded. Frank Sedwich, in his article "Spanish Origin of Pagliacci?" (Opera News, December 29, 1958, 8 - 9) points out enough instances of uncomfortable similarity between Leoncavallo's libretto and Manuel Tamayo y Baus' play Un Drama nuevo, written in 1867, to cause doubts about the composer's claim of originality.

14

Henry E. Krehbiel, A Book of Operas (1909; rpt. New York: MacMillan, 1937), pp. 117 - 128.

15

Hippolyte Taine, A History of English Literature, translated from the French by H. Van Laun (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1873), pp. 1 - 36.

16

Cavalleria and Pagliacci were paired at the Metropolitan Opera House for the first time on January 22, 1893, several weeks after Pagliacci's North American premiere. Curiously, the custom failed to take hold immediately, and the mad scene from Lucia di Lammermoor was frequently presented with one or the other of these two early verismo operas for nearly fifty years! By the 1940s, however, Cavalleria and Pagliacci had entered the Metropolitan repertory as a double bill (and into New York opera slang as "ham and eggs").

CHAPTER III: The Legend of Bohemia: A Literary Intermezzo

The success of Cavalleria and Pagliacci invited imitation. In Germany musical competitions à la Sonzogno became very popular, in the hope of discovering a German Mascagni. Established composer and struggling novice alike adopted what was generally accepted as the verismo "formulae" of poverty and passion among the lower classes to meet the expectations of audiences avid for "modern opera." Spinelli's A Basso porto, Tasca's A Santa Lucia, and Mascagni's Silvano, which were set in southern Italy, and which portrayed obsessed lovers driven to murder and/or madness by their passions, met with a surprising degree of success. Between the years 1890 and 1895, ten new verismo operas had their premieres in leading opera houses all over Europe.¹

The year 1896, however, saw the premiere of an opera which changed the direction of verismo by modifying these formulae. Giacomo Puccini's La Bohème introduced a non-violent form of lyric reality, less harsh and therefore closer to the realism of Balzac than the naturalism of Zola and Verga.

La Bohème is also the first opera to portray Bohemian life in Paris, although the theme of the artist as hero is one of the most popular in nineteenth-century French literature. Nodier's Le Peintre di Saltzbourg (1803) is the first example of the type. Balzac's La Bourse, Flaubert's L'Éducation sentimentale, and Champfleury's Les Aventures de Mademoiselle Mariette also contributed to the tradition.² But the man who most thoroughly established the legend of Bohemian life in the Latin

Quarter was Henri Murger, whose autobiographical Scènes de la vie de Bohème, published in 1851, is considered one of the earliest examples of nineteenth-century literary realism. Murger's novel of youthful love among impoverished artists also inspired Puccini's Bohème. Nearly forty years later, at the time that Naturalism had established itself as a legitimate literary movement, Zola also wrote an autobiographical novel about a group of young artists trying to conquer the Establishment. L'Oeuvre, like Murger's earlier novel, is set in Paris, describes the love affair between an artist and a working-class girl, and contains a group of minor characters who represent unconventional and, hence, "Bohemian" attitudes towards life and art.

Murger's Scènes, and Zola's L'Oeuvre, share similarities of plot, character, milieu, and theme. Together they present an unusual opportunity to compare two expressions of realism, for each uses similar material to produce vastly different effects.

Scènes de la vie de Bohème began as a series of brief sketches by Murger of himself and his fellow Bohemians. The first, Un Envoyé de la Providence, was published in the March 1845 issue of the Parisian magazine Le Corsaire and others appeared intermittently over the next three years. In 1849, Murger met Théodore Barrière, who helped him turn his sketches into a play, La Vie de Bohème, produced at the Théâtre des Variétés that same year. The huge success of the dramatized version of Murger's work encouraged a publisher, Michel Levy, to issue a revised edition of Scènes de la vie de Bohème, which appeared in book form in 1851, when realism was establishing itself in the European imagination as

romanticism's successor.

Murger has come to be considered one of the transitional authors of this period because his work, like Balzac's, bridges the gap between realism and romanticism by combining features from both literary styles. He entitled his novel Scènes de la vie de Bohème, a title which recalls Balzac's division of La Comédie humaine into five sections which he also called scenes from life (private, provincial, Parisian, political, and peasant). Both authors, therefore, thought of themselves as writing fictionalized studies of actual, identifiable groups found in French society, indicating the shift from romantic fantasy to contemporary reality.

As its title implies, the structure of Scènes is episodic. Its twenty-three chapters alternate amusing, romantic, and pathetic events in the lives of four young men living in mid-nineteenth century Paris during the reign of Louis Philippe (1830 - 1848).

Rodolphe, a poet; Schaunard, a composer; Marcel, a painter; and Colline, a student of philosophy, live in the Latin Quarter. Each dreams of producing a masterpiece that will bring him both artistic recognition and enough financial reward to end a life of abysmal poverty. Rodolphe writes and rewrites his play, The Avenger, (in its twelfth draft as Scènes begins) while Schaunard polishes his Symphony on the Influence of Blue in Art on a tuneless piano. Marcel's painting, The Passage of the Red Sea, undergoes successive metamorphoses (Niobe and her children slain by the arrows of Apollo and Diana, The Port of Marseille in a Storm) which correspond to the number of times it is presented to and rejected by the Salon, the influential annual art exhibition sponsored by the French

government. Colline, in his capacious overcoat, haunts the book stalls in search of the philosophical treatises which he buys instead of food.

Scènes opens on April 8, 1840, the day when Providence causes the four Bohemians to meet at the Café Momus, an establishment appropriately named after the god of play and pleasure. Their ambition to succeed as artists, and the poverty they are willing to endure for this ambition, unite them. They become inseparable, frequently living together (when one or the other is evicted from his rooms for failing to pay the rent), eating (or fasting) together, depending on the vagaries of fortune, and sharing each other's artistic and sentimental disappointments. Together they parry discomforts with humor, and suffer deprivations with courage. The Italian translation of Scènes is justly sub-titled "Gli eroi della miseria" (heroes of poverty), a description which captures these characters' most admirable quality: grace under pressure.

The women in Scènes are all of the working class. Called "grisettes" (working girls) because of the inexpensive gray fabric from which they make their simple dresses, they are seamstresses, milliners, and factory workers who owe their jobs to the commerce generated by the new Industrial Revolution sweeping through Europe. Phémie, Schaunard's mistress, is called "La Teinturière" because her hands are permanently colored from her occupation as a dyer's assistant. Mimi, Rodolphe's love, makes artificial flowers, and Musette, Marcel's sweetheart, is an artist's model. They are self-supporting, extremely independent free spirits who have no parents, relatives, or a past of any sort. Occasionally they leave their ill-paid jobs and their impoverished lovers to live a life of silk

dresses and theater parties with wealthier young men, but these liaisons never last for more than a few weeks or months. Inevitably they are forced to return to their gray dresses and cold garrets. They are working-class Manon Lescauts, presented by Murger without moral judgment, and with a good deal of sympathy for their difficult lives and wasted youth.

In his first chapter, Murger rejects the literary term "novel," preferring to call Scènes "a series of social studies, the heroes of which belong to a class badly-judged until now. . ."3 His disclaimer that Scènes is a novel echoes a remark that Balzac makes four pages into Le Père Goriot, a remark intended to defend himself against possible criticism for artistic exaggeration in telling Goriot's story. "O you may be sure that this drama is no work of fiction, no mere novel! It is all true. . ." The "truth," therefore, supplies both Murger and Balzac not only with their subject matter (real life), but establishes their artistic intention to depict the subject as realistically as possible. To this end, Murger refers to himself, the narrator, as "the historian of Bohemian life," recalling Balzac's description of himself as a historian of contemporary manners. The novelist of the romantic school who evoked a distant past is now replaced by realism's chronicler of the present.

Murger's championship of a neglected and misunderstood social class anticipates the interest in forgotten segments of the population that would characterize the novel during the latter part of the century. The Goncourt brothers' Gérminie Lacerteux, which was published in 1865, for example, has as its artistic intention the revelation of the truth about the lives of the working poor. "Ce roman est un roman vrai" they proclaimed

in their famous preface; and while the juxtaposition of "novel" and "true" approaches the oxymoronic, the combination leaves no doubt about the new role the novel assumes as an agent of truth, be it historical, social, or psychological, in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Murger, however, does not share the clinical disinterest in his characters that was to typify later novelists in the genre. In fact, his insistence on the word "heroes" to describe his characters and his use of the term "social studies" in the same breath is an excellent if minor illustration of the blend of realism and romanticism that Murger achieves, for although his choice of subject, an unconventional and hence controversial group of young artists, anticipates the coming literary revolution, he shows neither its scientific detachment toward its subject nor its impatience with the bourgeoisie and their values. Murger, fondly indulgent of his characters, seeks to arouse the Establishment's approval of them rather than its indignation.

To this end, he begins by providing his characters with an illustrious, and hence respectable, descent. Modern Bohemia, he declares in his preface, finds ancestors in every artistic and literary epoch from ancient Greece through the Age of Reason. Homer, Tasso, Molière, Shakespeare, and Rousseau were Bohemians by Murger's definition, as is any person who attempts a career in the arts without a patron or any means of support other than art itself.

This noble descent is supplemented by sterling qualities of character. Murger's young men call themselves "the four Musketeers," a contemporary literary reference, for Alexandre Dumas' romantic novel

Les Trois Mousquetaires was published in 1844, only one year before Murger's first sketch appeared. All four friends are united by similar traits and qualities: a sense of humor that unmasks foibles but does not seek to wound or offend, a profound affinity for anything noble, and an almost exaggerated degree of generosity, gallantry, loyalty, and fortitude. They are all at the beginning of their careers when they meet, and they share the same goals: financial as well as artistic success. They think that Providence has caused them to meet "and whispered in their ears the evangelic motto which would be the sole charter of humanity: 'Love one another'."

The "threat" of Bohemia is further defused and rendered safe for middle class consideration by Murger's declaration that it is not a way of life (and, therefore, a desirable and even preferable alternative to the established social order), but rather "a necessary stage in the development of the artist." In fact, Bohemia is so far from desirable that Murger calls it ". . . the preface to the Academy, the Hospital, or the Morgue."

Murger's desire for respectability and approval, the virtues he gives his characters, and his ambivalence toward Bohemia itself make him a much more conservative artist and hence a different sort of realist from the Goncourts or Zola. Henri Murger is far more tolerant than they of bourgeois values, government policies, current economic practices, and the social ills resulting from the interaction of these forces in French society. Despite the hardships and the threat of death that accompany life in Murger's Latin Quarter, there is no criticism of the contemporary economic and political conditions, such as the limited franchise and the

laissez-faire economics of Louis Philippe, which allowed commerce and industry freedom to exploit the working class by enacting no labor legislation - practices which, in part, were responsible for the suffering of Murger's characters. In 1848 the Communist Manifesto appeared, but there is no evidence in Scènes that these Socialist principles made any serious impression on Murger. Like Puccini, he was bored with politics and showed faint interest in the intellectual currents of his time.

Honoré de Balzac, writing at the same time as Murger, is less tender in his regard for the feelings of his middle-class audience. The first collected edition of his Comédie humaine, which appeared in 1842, three years before Murger's first sketch was published, presented a panorama of contemporary French society which took special aim at the foibles and weaknesses of the bourgeoisie. Balzac's fiction is more firmly rooted in the issues of his age, a time which saw the rapid spread of the Industrial Revolution and the concomitant growth of technology, high finance, urbanization, and liberalism. Balzac's realism shows the profound effects these new forces had on public and private lives.

Scènes de la vie de Bohème, on the contrary, rarely touches upon social issues more specific than the older generation's lack of generosity toward the younger. Fathers, uncles, and art dealers are consistently unwilling to supply the necessary funds that would pay for food, fuel, and, in some cases, desperately needed medicine. Murger, however, refrains from overtly criticizing the status quo. The following episode is a case in point. Schaunard is trying to persuade Marcel not to dine at a politician's home one evening. "Your principles will not permit you to partake of the

bread which has been watered by the tears of the people," he protests. Marcel replies: "My deputy is a moderate radical; he voted against the government the other day. Besides, he is going to get me an order, and he has promised to introduce me into society. Moreover . . . I am as famished as Ugolino and I mean to dine today!"⁴

The enlightened self-interest which Marcel displays in this vignette is shared by all the Bohemians, and characterizes their attitude toward the Establishment. These young men do not tilt at windmills. Although they meet frequently at the Café Momus to discuss art, politics, and philosophy, Murger never tells us precisely what their new theories are.

The vagueness of their intellectual beliefs is accompanied by a casual attitude toward art. They are not presented as possessing unusual talent, nor have they a dedication to any particular school. Although each may involuntarily fast several days a week for art, none would consider dying for it. Art, for Murger's young men, means financial reward. It puts bread on their table and also serves as their excuse for being together, for belonging to a brotherhood. They consider themselves a tiny society of literary men and artists. "Some day we are going to be four cardinal points of contemporary art," Colline boasts, but despite such ambition, art serves life rather than abstract ideals. When Marcel sells a painting on which he has worked for many months, he uses the money to provide his friends with a feast that lasts a week; Rudolphe burns his play to heat his attic and Schounard plays his symphony to annoy his neighbors.

Art serves practical ends in Murger's world. It is a tool.

Financial success more than artistic recognition is each Bohemian's immediate goal. Such practicality tempers the idealism and the eccentricities found in Murger's description of his four young men and contributes to the peculiar authenticity that is one of Scènes' most attractive qualities.

Murger's chronicle of life in the Latin Quarter is believable because most of the episodes he describes really happened to characters who were drawn from life - from Murger's own circle of friends, which included Jules Champfleury, Charles-Pierre Baudelaire, Gustave Courbet, Gérard de Nerval, and Théophile Gautier.

Rodolphe is an unflattering, but comic portrait of Murger himself, who, like the author, supports himself by editing a fashion magazine, Le Castor, a millinery trade paper. Rodolphe writes poetry and plays, falls in love several times, and is the only Bohemian in the group who is an incurable romantic, carrying mementos from his past love affairs in his pockets. Schaunard is Alexandre Schanne. A printer's error, which Murger never bothered to correct, changed his name from Murger's nickname "Schannard" ("Schanne - savage") to Schaunard. The son of a Parisian toy maker, he dabbled both in music and painting, and dreamed of becoming a second Berlioz. The symphony On the Influence of Blue in Art which Schaunard is writing as the novel opens and which provides an amusing episode in Leoncavallo's version of Bohème, was really composed and frequently performed by Schanne. He claimed to have been inspired to write it because he often painted on the towers of Notre Dame. As a result of being so close to heaven, he said, he began to see and then to

paint blue. His friendship with Murger began in 1841 and lasted to the end of Murger's life in 1861. Eventually he abandoned his artistic career and took over his father's toy factory.

Gustave Colline, "a philosopher by profession who earned his living by giving lessons in rhetoric, mathematics, and several other 'ics'," is a composite of two friends: Jean Wallon, a theological student, and Marc Trapadoux, a huge, mysterious man in an ancient black redingote who never revealed where he lived or what he did. (Colline's hazel-colored coat in Scènes, "known to all the book-sellers on the quay from the Pont de la Concorde to the Pont Saint Michel" is effectively used by Puccini's librettists in Act IV's aria, "Vecchia zimarra.")

Marcel is also a composite of the writer Jules Champfleury and Léopold Tabar, a minor painter who began a huge painting of the passage of the Red Sea which underwent a series of transformations (Caesar crossing the Rubicon, Niobe and her Children slain by the arrows of Apollo and Diana) in his attempts to have it accepted by successive Salons. (He was victorious in the Salon of 1842). Champfleury encouraged Murger to turn from poetry to prose and got him his job as editor of Le Castor. He also discovered the Cafe Momus, where the upstairs room was reserved for "men of the arts" who gathered there to smoke, read the papers, play backgammon, and discuss the latest developments in aesthetics, especially the then-current controversy between romanticism and realism: Hugo versus Balzac. He and Murger shared an apartment while Champfleury worked on a novel, painted, wrote art criticism, and pursued other interests which earned him the title of the Lothario of the Latin Quarter.

In 1852, he published his own account of Bohemian life, Les Aventures de Mademoiselle Mariette, which features Murger himself as a character named "Streich" and whose "Mariette" is none other than Murger's "Musette," who for a time was Champfleury's mistress.

Musette was Marie Roux, an artist's model greatly in demand by both the painters and sculptors of the Latin Quarter, who went on to forge a career similar to that of Zola's Nana. After amassing a considerable fortune she decided to retire to Algiers, where her sister was living. Her ship, The Atlas, sailed from Marseille in 1864 and was never heard from again. In one of those bittersweet ironies that Murger would have appreciated, the doomed ship was also carrying a consignment of toys from Schanne's factory.

Rodolphe's love, "Mimi," is really a composite of several women whom Murger had loved during his youth. Lucille Louvet, his main inspiration, was introduced to him by Marie Roux. She was blond, blue-eyed, and pale, already suffering from the consumption that would kill her while she was still in her early twenties. Undoubtedly, the romantic in Murger led him to idealize her, for Schanne, in his memoirs published in 1887, describes her as a shameless hussy who openly carried on love affairs with other men while living with Murger.

Scènes' places as well as characters are copied from real life. The Café Momus was a real establishment located at number 15 Rue des Pretres, Saint-Germain L'Auxerrois. The Hôtel Merciol, where Rodolphe and Mimi, Marcel and Musette, and Colline and Schaunard live in Scènes, also really existed. It housed hordes of young Bohemians in its unusually

large attic, which the landlord, Monsieur Benoît, had divided into a great many tiny rooms. At one time or another most of Murger's Bohemians stayed at this dingy hotel in the Rue des Canettes just off the Place Saint Sulpice: Baudelaire, Murger himself and Lucille, Champfleury and Marie Roux, whom Murger had nicknamed "Musette" (bagpipe) because of her habit of singing, albeit slightly off-key.⁵

The authenticity of Murger's sketches does not rest entirely on their factual content. Scènes' immediacy and spontaneity are largely due to techniques and conventions borrowed from the theater. The first sketch, "How the Bohemian Club was Formed," contains several illustrations of this feature.

It opens with the crowing of a rooster. Schaunard leaps from his bed, throws on a pink satin petticoat with spangled stars which serves as his dressing gown and, alone in his room, starts a comic monologue:

'Tis the Morn herself! . . . Today is the day after yesterday, certainly, and since yesterday was the seventh, unless old Saturn goes backward, it must be the eighth of April today . . . at 12 precisely I ought to have evacuated the premises and paid into the hands of my landlord, Monsieur Bernard, the sum of seventy-five francs for three quarters' rent due, which he demands of me in very bad handwriting. I had hoped - as I always do - that Providence would take the responsibility of discharging the debt, but it seems it hasn't had time. . ."⁶

Half-dressed, he suddenly begins to dance, becomes inspired, and sits at the piano to compose a ballad.

Dramatic rather than narrative conventions are at work here. The monologue is expository, providing the audience with plot (his eviction), character (his eccentricities), theme (reliance on Providence),

diction (the comic pseudo-literary tone that characterizes these Bohemians' speech), and even stage directions (he leaps from his bed, dances a polka, plays the piano, etc.). Significantly, Murger chooses to provide all this information in a comic monologue by the character rather than in an expository narrative passage.

The introduction of Marcel in this same chapter reinforces the theatrical allusion. He is moving into the apartment that Schaunard must leave. His furniture consists only of a stage back-drop on which is painted the interior of a palace with jasper columns, bas-reliefs, and paintings of old masters. Later sketches will offer props identified with each character: Marcel's painting of the Red Sea, Schaunard's piano with the flat "re," Rodolphe's perennially cold stove, and the large collection of books Colline carries in his pockets, making him "a library on two legs."

Scènes' sketches are punctuated by snatches of dialogue that reveal eccentricities of character. The landlord objects to Marcel's lack of furniture. "You know, I must have security for my rent." "The deuce!" protests Marcel pointing to his stage backdrop, "Is a palace not sufficient security for the rent of a garret?"

"No sir, I want real chairs and tables in solid mahogany."

"Alas," philosophizes Marcel, "neither gold nor mahogany makes us happy, as the ancient poet well says. And I can't bear mahogany: everybody has it."

"But surely you have a bed. What do you sleep on?"

"A clear conscience, sir," triumphs Marcel.⁷

The dialogue, scenery, and props are supplemented by costumes

which represent each Bohemian's outstanding idiosyncrasy. Schaunard, the most eccentric of the four, acquired his "dressing gown" from a young woman "who was fool enough to let herself be entrapped (by him) when, disguised as a marquis, he rattled in his pocket a seducingly sonorous dozen of crowns—theatrical money punched out of a lead plate, and borrowed from a property-man." Colline's hazel-colored overcoat with its large cape and yawning pockets collects books, manuscripts, and pamphlets as well as stray lobsters and loaves of bread - a cornucopia for the mind and the body which suits his characterization, for he is the most intellectual of the four, "whose language is a mosaic of every style and whose fearful puns which embellish his conversations delight the other three." He also wears a broad-brimmed beaver hat which is nicknamed "Mambrino's Helmet of Modern Philosophy" to signify his almost fanatic dedication to the world of ideas.

Rodolphe's faded black frock coat, full of gaping seams, stands for his heroic (and romantic) confrontation with poverty. Marcel's dress coat, called "Methuselah" because it is the oldest garment in his closet, is a hideous green, but Marcel declares that it looks black by candle light. He is the most practical of the four (although that is not saying much). Poverty may make him unable to comply with conventions of dress, but it never prevents him from appearing in society. To a formal dinner party at a deputy's home, he wears clothes borrowed from his friends' closets and appears in plaid trousers, gray hat, red tie, blue vest, one black glove and "one that had been white."

Mimi and Musette, as mentioned earlier, periodically exchange

their gray "grisette" uniforms for silk dresses and flowered bonnets, and then back again - costume changes which reflect their unsuccessful attempts to escape Bohemia's drab poverty.

Murger's work also pulses with music. The characters frequently compose spontaneous songs when Providence smiles on them, or sing lines from operatic arias to underscore an idea or argument. Meyerbeer's spectacular opera, Les Huguenots (1836) is a favorite of theirs, probably for the wildly romantic character of its tenor, the Huguenot Raoul de Nangris, who, despite his love for the Catholic Valentine, refuses to give up his Protestant faith and dies with his best friend, Marcel.

The dramatic potential of Scènes has not gone unrecognized. Murger's narrative has inspired a play, two operas, and no less than five films.⁸ The theatricality found in these sketches serves two purposes. It humorously conveys the improvised quality of the characters' lives, and it supports Scènes' most powerful theme: the conflict of illusion and reality. The illusions of youth, those ideals of love, friendship, fame, and success that the Bohemians believe will bring them happiness, compete in an unfair struggle with the realities of their poverty: rejection, disappointment, compromise, and disenchantment. Despite these realities, of which he is all too painfully aware, Murger sees the humor, the pathos, and the courage of Bohemia rather than the squalor of its poverty. Arthur Moss and Evelyn Marvel, in their biography of Murger, The Legend of the Latin Quarter, describe Scènes as "modern in its keen sense of the ridiculous, and in its grasp of the absurdity of the situation."⁹

However, in the course of his attempt to capture objectively the

foibles and qualities of himself and his companions, Murger's vision, like that of Balzac, was affected by certain romantic excesses of characterization and of events so that out of the drama, comedy, and pathos comes not the social document he intended to write, but a legend. Henri Murger was the first to establish that romantic picture of Bohemian life that persists to this day, a romanticism achieved through Scènes' most telling feature: excess.

Murger's characters go to such extremes of behavior that ordinary events taken from ordinary life become adventures of mock-heroic proportions. An eviction turns into a block party, an infatuation becomes an exalted passion, finding the proper clothes for a formal dinner party becomes an exercise in inventiveness. The Bohemians either have a lot of money or are starving; are either madly in love or done "forever" with women. When they have a windfall from the sale of a painting or an article they dine for a week on oysters, paté, and wine. Suddenly poor again after the last sou is spent, they feast equally boisterously on herring and water. Moderation has no part of their perception of life. Instead, extravagance of feeling and behavior is the attitude consciously, almost self-consciously, adopted by each protagonist in order to make the deprivations of poverty less arduous. Each deliberately takes on the mannerisms of the romantic hero and exaggerates them. In each character, therefore, imagination is valued more than reason, inspiration more than formal rules, and the ideal over the actual and factual. These features make Scènes' characters romantic in their attempted escape from an unpleasant reality.

Yet those harsh realities, the laws of necessity, are never suspended for Murger's Bohemians. The rent falls due and, unable to pay, they are evicted; Rodolphe sleeps in the streets for a month. The body has its needs, too. Hunger, sickness, and, eventually, early death are the consequences of the poverty which few of Murger's characters escape. There are no happy endings in Bohemia.

In essence, Murger's Scènes de la vie de Bohème presents romantic characters in conflict with a realistic world of cold winters and greedy landlords; of poverty, hunger, and fatal illness. Spring alternates with winter, laughter with tears, warmth with cold. All that is desirable is associated with the twin romantic ideals of love and friendship, while whatever is painful and destructive is a consequence of the harsh laws of reality. It soon becomes apparent that Murger's characters pursue these ideals of love and friendship to escape the reality of their poverty.

Of the two, friendship is given greater importance. The women in Scènes come and go: Marcel finally loses Musette to a postal clerk; Mimi dies of consumption; but Marcel and Rodolphe are still together as the novel ends. Although each young man is very attached to his mistress, "not one of them would have hesitated for a moment between the mistress and the friend." Brothers more than friends, they are intensely loyal to each other and "though often placed in rivalry by the necessities of their profession, they have never let go of one another's hands, and have passed over personal questions of self-esteem without heeding them whenever an attempt has been made to raise these between them in order to disunite them."¹⁰

Murger's somewhat idealized portrait of friendship approaches the concept of benevolence, that ability to sympathize with the joys and sorrows of another, which the romantics believed separates man from the animals, and which distinguishes Murger's characters from those of the later realists. The four Bohemians' loyalty to each other contrasts with the selfishness that blemishes and ultimately destroys Zola's protagonists, and makes Scènes' characters un-"realistic" and un-"natural" in the literary sense soon to be established by Flaubert and Zola. Their concern for each other avoids the doting excess of Charles Bovary or the pathological dependency of Gervaise, while it stands in opposition to the materialistic self-interest that industrialization was introducing into mid-nineteenth century French society.

Love of woman, however, figures prominently in the lives of these four young men. Living in extreme poverty, where the pleasures are few compared to the deprivations, they amuse themselves as best they can, and falling in love is one of their most affordable luxuries. Episodes concerned with love affairs constitute ten of the twenty-three chapters, and are concentrated roughly in the second half of the novel (Chapters XII through XXII). Marcel and Rodolphe, in fact, appear to devote more energy to courting Musette and Mimi than they do to pursuing their artistic careers.

Love is given two faces in Scènes. Initially, it is a pretext for jest. Colline calls it a purge "good to take at the beginning of each season in order to get rid of humors." Rodolphe's habit of writing verses that begin "Love! O Love! Fair prince of youth!" has earned him the

nicknames of "the harmonica" and "the bald forget-me-not" from Schaunard and Marcel. Love affairs in Bohemia are often stormy and brief. Schaunard "addresses a few remarks to Phémie with the end of his walking-stick" after he discovers her affair with his landlord; Rodolphe and Mimi throw plates at each other when, exhausted by their arguments, words fail them. Musette frequently leaves Marcel for wealthier lovers, but always returns, for, as she breezily explains, "My life is like a song; each of my loves is a verse, but Marcel is the refrain." Rodolphe himself, despite his love for Mimi, consoles himself with other women during their sporadic separations. These infatuations are a source of humor. For his cousin, Angela, Rodolphe pawns his only coat in mid-winter so she can wear a nosegay of white violets to a ball; he meets Sédonia when he is locked in an attic by his rich industrialist uncle who wants him to finish a promotional pamphlet on "The Perfect Chimney Constructor." He seduces Amélie, Mimi's friend, to make Mimi jealous, and begins a liaison with Juliette to forget Mimi.

Rodolphe is a romantic in love with love. "He was always awaiting a woman who would consent to pose as an idol, an angel in a velvet gown, to whom he could address sonnets written on willow leaves."¹¹ He is the only one of the Bohemians who dares speak reverently of love, and it is through him that the second face of love in Bohemia gradually emerges.

Rodolphe needs love to help him endure his poverty. Mimi's gaiety makes him forget the troubles and hardships of his improvised existence, for she awakens his capacity to feel with that singular intensity

that characterizes very young love. He also idealizes her as his Muse because Rodolphe belongs to that group of artists "who make passion an instrument of art, and whose inspiration is only set in motion by strong sentiments."¹²

Gradually, however, this Bohemian love comes to represent what has irrevocably vanished: past joys and sorrows, lost youth, and missed opportunities. Ultimately, it is associated with death.

The theme of doomed young love is introduced in the saddest episode of the collection, "Francine's Muff," which later inspired Puccini and his librettists. A love story about Jacques, a young sculptor, and his first and only sweetheart, a seamstress named Francine, the sketch contains elements borrowed from a fairy tale: the lovers are young (he, barely twenty-three; she, only twenty); Jacques' father has disowned him and Francine has left her home to escape her cruel step-mother. Jacques possesses a gift that promises to bring him fame and fortune, and Francine is a fair, young virgin, living under an evil curse: she has tuberculosis.

They move into the same boarding house during the first week of spring. The night they meet, Jacques is so depressed that he is contemplating suicide, but Francine's knock at his door saves him. Her candle has gone out and, rather than descend the six flights of steps to re-light it at the concierge's, she asks Jacques for help. Both candles go out, and she loses her key (which she later finds and hides). Conversation leads to confidences in the dark; their hands meet and. . . They live together happily for six months, but love is not enough to save Francine. "She will

go with the autumn leaves" a young doctor tells Jacques. Francine confronts her fate with courage and magical thinking. Seeing Jacques depressed, she tells him: ". . . loving each other as we do, we shall double the time we spend together. And then, if I feel worse when the leaves turn yellow, we will go and live in a pine forest. The leaves are always green there." Despite her optimism, their fairy tale has no "happily ever after" ending. By the fall she is bedridden, obsessed with her cold hands, which presage her death. Jacques buys her a muff which she clutches in her hands as she dies on the morning of All Saints' Day, November first. Jacques follows her to the grave five months later. Poverty hounds him even after his death. "Jacques' family was not a rich one," the sketch concludes, "and he did not have a grave of his own. He is buried somewhere."

"Francine's Muff" marks the turning point in Scènes' presentation of love, which now becomes tragic for Rodolphe as well. After Mimi and Musette have left their artist lovers, images of death frequently occur. Rodolphe, claiming that his heart is singing a "De Profundis," writes a long poem to Mimi which contains the verse:

Between us now, my dear, it is all U.P.
I am a spectre, and a phantom, you.
Our love is dead and buried, and, if you agree,
We'll sing around its tombstone dirges due.¹³

Soon life imitates the romantic hyperbole of Rodolphe's art. On Christmas Eve, Rodolphe and Marcel are again alone. They borrow money to buy food for dinner, "but to the little table at which they were seated. . . came a melancholy guest, the phantom of a vanished past." They are thinking of Musette and Mimi.

The spectre of lost love suddenly assumes a physical presence. Someone knocks at the door. It is Mimi, or rather "her ghost," for she is greatly changed, stricken with the same disease that killed Francine. Schaunard sells his coat, and Colline, his cherished books, to buy her medicine. At Marcel's suggestion, Rodolphe sends for one of his friends who has just finished medical school. It is the same young doctor who had attended Francine, and his prognosis is just as pessimistic for Mimi. She is taken to the charity ward of La Pitié where she dies. Rodolphe arrives too late to claim her body and Mimi, like Jacques, is buried in a pauper's field.

These two faces of love, the humorous and the tragic, reveal the key to Scènes' powerful appeal, for behind the gaiety and spontaneity of these improvised lives are loneliness and disappointment, disease and death.

The freedom from convention, the casual but intense love affairs, and even the brotherhood that the Bohemians value so highly come to be considered meager advantages compared to the deprivations that accompany their lives on the margin of society. Ultimately Bohemia is rejected. "True liberty," says Marcel, "consists in being able to dispense with the aid of others . . . Poetry does not only exist in disorderly living. One can be a real poet or artist while going about well-shod and eating three meals a day."¹⁴

Their resolve to leave Bohemia is strengthened by the spectre of middle-age failure which looms before them. "We shall get to be thirty," continues Marcel, "unknown, isolated, disgusted with all things and with

ourselves; full of envy toward all those whom we see reach their goals . . . while we are obliged to live as shameful parasites." They decide to re-enter "the world."

Eventually, two of Marcel's paintings are accepted by the Salon (one is later bought by a rich Englishman, one of Musette's former lovers). Marcel receives a Government subsidy, pays his debts, and furnishes an apartment with a real studio. At almost the same time, Schœnard publishes a popular collection of songs, and Rodolphe, a book that receives critical acclaim. Colline has inherited money and makes a good marriage.

One year after Mimi's death, Marcel and Rodolphe meet to celebrate their successful entrance into the Establishment. They remember the past, realizing that their youth is now gone, taking with it their capacity for intense feelings. "We are done for, old fellow," says Marcel. "We are dead and buried." To cheer him, Rodolphe suggests that they dine that night at one of their favorite Bohemian cafes. "No," replies Marcel, "I am quite willing to look back at the past, but it must be through the medium of a bottle of good wine, and sitting on a comfortable armchair. What can you do? I am corrupted. I only care for what is good."¹⁵

So ends la vie de Bohème, in middle-class comfort and security, reflecting the ambivalence that Murger himself experiences in his evaluation of Bohemia. Speaking no doubt of himself, he writes in his preface to Scènes that successful artists

recall, perhaps with regret, the time when, climbing the verdant slope of youth, they had no other fortune in the sunshine of their twenty years than courage, which is the virtue of the young, and hope, which is the wealth of the poor.

Murger himself followed the route of his characters. The success of his dramatized version of Scènes, in 1849, brought him financial security. He immediately left the Latin Quarter, although for his later work he continued to draw on the experiences of his youth spent there. He himself did not escape the latent danger of Bohemian life. He died relatively young, at 39, in 1861, his health destroyed by his early privations in the Latin Quarter. His last words were: "Pas de musique. Pas de bruit. Pas de Bohème."

A generation after Henry Murger's novel on Bohemian life was published, Émile Zola chose the same subject for his autobiographical novel, L'Oeuvre.¹⁶ In it he describes his childhood in Provence, his life as an artist, and his struggle to establish his reputation in Paris. With it he hoped to expose the hostility between the art establishment, represented by the Selection Committee of the Salon, and the "angry young men" of the new generation of artists, and to expound his theories about art and scientific progress, the latter being the new god of the late nineteenth century.

L'Oeuvre is much more ambitious than Scènes in its scope and more contemporary in the issues it raises. Claude Lantier, a painter; Pierre Sandoz, a writer; and Louis Dubouche, a student of architecture, inseparable childhood friends in Plassans (Provence), have come to Paris to establish careers. They belong to a "support group" of young artists and sculptors who call themselves "the open-air" school after a controversial painting by Lantier. The novel covers a fourteen-year period in the lives of these young men, their successes, failures, and compromises,

as they move from youth into middle age.

The main plot, Claude's unsuccessful struggle to produce a masterpiece, gives the novel its title, and serves as a vehicle for Zola's theories of psychology and heredity, while the secondary plot, the fortunes of the "open-air" school, describes the Parisian art world of the eighteen sixties and seventies, a period in which realism influenced both literature and the visual arts.

Zola's young artists struggle against a force different from that of economic injustice (Germinal) or social corruption (Nana and L'Assommoir), contemporary issues that had previously interested Zola. They wish to change public taste; to be recognized by a reluctant, conservative Paris; to become wealthy without compromising their artistic ideals. They call themselves the "open-air" school because they intend to portray life as it really is outside the artist's studio.

Their aesthetic philosophy is based on Zola's own theory of naturalism: that art must represent life as it really is rather than as it is idealized by the Romantic authors and the Classicist painters of established tradition. As Claude explains early in the novel: "Life as it is lived in the streets, the life of the rich and the poor, in market places, on race courses, along the boulevards and down the back streets of the slums. . . modern life in all its aspects, that's the subject!"¹⁷

Claude, the central figure of this group, is the gifted son of illiterate parents - Gervaise Macquart and her lover, Auguste Lantier from L'Assommoir. With Claude Zola again records a downfall, but it is not the result of environment and circumstances (*le milieu et le moment*),

but of a genetic defect. Claude diagnoses himself as a "near genius." He falls short by "some maladjustment of the nerve centers or through some hereditary flaw which, because of a gram or two of substance too much or too little, instead of making him a great man was going to make him a madman."¹⁸ His personal tragedy affects those around him, and especially Christine, the woman who loves him and shares his life of poverty and failure, first as his mistress and then as his wife.

Claude, who squanders his talent through lack of discipline, and whose obsession with art causes him to lose his sense of values both human and artistic, possibly represents a certain apprehension on Zola's part that art might assume too dominant a role in his own life. It is therefore significant that Zola sends Claude to his death, and places alongside him the steadier character of Pierre Sandoz, a young writer, who is disciplined (he holds down a job as a clerk, and writes at established hours daily), who takes care of his invalid mother, treats his wife with dignity and respect, and is the only member of the group to place a great value on friendship.

Sandoz holds the group together over the years by having them meet every Thursday at his home for dinner to discuss their artistic theories and works-in-progress. In spite of his efforts to preserve their friendship, the group in time disintegrates. Eventually, success arrives for every one of them but Claude, who still lives in poverty, ridiculed by the Establishment and by his former friends (with the exception of Sandoz). For the last ten years Claude has not been able to complete his masterpiece, and finally hangs himself in front of the unfinished "oeuvre."

The direction of the novel is downward, toward disenchantment and disintegration. Claude, once the admired leader of his friends, by the end of the novel is despised by nearly all of them. His devotion to art brings him only poverty and an early death. Christine's devotion to Claude brings her unhappiness and madness. Their love produces a doomed child whose only value, in Claude's life, is that of being the subject for his painting, Dead Child. L'Oeuvre ends with the sad, symbolic irony of Claude's own funeral. He finally has all of Paris at his feet, but he is in his coffin atop Montmartre. The compromises that the surviving members of the group make to gain material success destroy their friendship and disillusion Sandoz.

Like Murger, Zola introduced thinly-disguised contemporary figures (some composite portraits) into his narrative of Bohemia. However, the identify of those persons who served as his models is only vaguely alluded to in his letters and notes for L'Oeuvre. While this aspect has most fascinated the art historians and literary critics who have examined the novel, it is of only peripheral concern to the present study.¹⁹

Zola's reluctance to be more specific about the identity of his models is understandable, given the novel's unflattering portrait of nearly all its characters. A more interesting question, and one more directly concerned with Naturalism's suitability for operatic interpretation, would be why Zola chose to present his youthful experiences and associates in such an unappealing light.

Zola's refusal to idealize his characters, his often brutal revelation of their artistic and ethical failures, and his pessimistic treatment of

love and friendship are efforts intended to purge his fiction of romantic influences, which he believed distorted reality. Zola himself was steeped in romanticism. As a youth he memorized Hugo's plays and De Musset's poetry, but in his maturity he came to distrust the romantic imagination that had once enchanted him. (Sandoz complains that his own age is "too clogged with lyricism to produce anything sound.")

In fact, the conflict between romanticism and realism is at the heart of Claude's struggle to produce a masterpiece that captures the spirit of his age, modern and progressive in its fascination with science and technology. Ultimately Claude fails because of his unconscious romantic inclinations. His decision to choose a city landscape of machines and workers was modern, but to choose, of all the views of Paris, that of the Île de la Cité, the heart of medieval Paris, was a fatal concession to romanticism, as was his decision to make a surrealistic central female nude a symbol of the soul of Paris.

The malaise that accompanies periods of transition thus creeps into L'Oeuvre's pages. Old and valued friendships crumble as do the ancient monuments and landmarks which were being torn down to make room for the new and the modern. The Latin Quarter itself was being demolished; the familiar dance halls, rooming houses, and cafés populated by Murger's artists and grisettes were being replaced by gambling houses frequented by demi-mondaines and students from wealthy families. Anarchy reigns, as the Darwinian struggle for survival, translated, in L'Oeuvre, into competition for artistic recognition, takes, as one of its victims, the friendship that once united the members of the "open-air"

school.

In the face of the tragedy of Claude's death and of his disillusionment with his ideal of "external friendship," Sandoz draws consolation from science. "We are not an end," he says at Claude's funeral, "we are a transition. . .and it's that which sets my mind at rest and somehow encourages me: to know that we are moving toward the reason and stability that only science can give. . ."20

Truth, science, and nature, the staples of naturalistic fiction, therefore, stand in polar opposition to legend, imagination, and the supernatural, which dominate the romantic view. While the reliance on logic and reason distances L'Oeuvre from the whimsical charm and excess of Murger's Scènes, it also makes for less satisfying characters and situations. The scientific detachment of the narrator is contagious. The reader also becomes a mere observer, not participating in the action or sympathizing with the characters, because they deteriorate rather than develop as personalities.

Murger's Scènes de la vie de Bohème and Zola's L'Oeuvre share the same subject: the attempted conquest of Paris by the younger generation of artists. Both novels are highly autobiographical, containing actual places and events drawn from each author's experiences, and introducing contemporary figures in transparent disguise. These autobiographical elements support the verisimilitude which had become the first commandment of the new realist fiction. The love stories in both novels end tragically. For Murger, death comes as a result of Paris' fatal attraction for the young, while for Zola, it is a consequence of the

"tyrannical sovereignty" of art. Both novels also employ, with different degrees of emphasis, and for different ends, the stock devices of all fiction devoted to Bohemian life: descriptions of milieu (artists' studios, cafes, Parisian street scenes), contact with other artists which generates shop talk in the form of lengthy discussions of aesthetic or technical questions, and unconventional (i.e., pre-marital) love affairs, complicated by the protagonist's devotion to art and/or the poverty to which his devotion consigns him.

Despite these similarities, the two novels differ drastically in tone, intention, and spirit because of the authors' contrasting attitudes toward their subject. The first and greatest difference is in the depiction of Bohemia. Although he does not ignore the trials of such a life, Murger chooses to stress the freedom from convention and the gaiety of an improvised existence that Bohemia offers its inhabitants. Life in the Latin Quarter, as presented in Scènes, is a metaphor for youth with its intense feelings of love and friendship, its exalted dreams of wealth and fame, and its essentially harmless rebellion against social proprieties.

The potential threat that Bohemia's artists pose to "official art" is ignored by Murger, whose characters, in fact, appear to follow established practice rather than to flout it. We never learn the subject of Rodolphe's play, The Avenger, but, to judge from its title, it would seem to be a romantic, "Hugo-esque" melodrama. Marcel's masterpiece, The Crossing of the Red Sea, would have been scorned by Claude Lantier because of its Classicist subject, while Colline's fascination with ancient learning and literature would have been considered slavish devotion to a dead past by

Sandoz. Of the four Bohemians, only Schaunard appears to be attempting to produce a modern work, but we are never informed precisely what (apart from the title) makes his Symphony on the Influence of Blue in Art avant garde.

Murger's young men belong to no school. Art, and the poverty that they endure for it in Bohemia, are mere excuses for their brotherhood. Financial success is their goal and, when at the end of the novel, they decide to enter the real world (and immediately gain recognition), we are led to believe that whatever compromises they have had to make to achieve success have not cost them a night's sleep. The price they pay for leaving Bohemia is the same that everyone pays when he leaves his youth and its freedom behind him.

Zola's Bohemia is a more treacherous place. Here love dies, friendships are destroyed, and artistic principles compromised. Murger called Bohemia "a stage in artistic life: the preface to the Academy, the hospital, or the morgue." His main characters, however, escape relatively unharmed while, curiously, Zola's fulfill Murger's gloomy prophecy: Sandoz achieves recognition, Christine ends her days in a mental ward, and Claude commits suicide.

Zola's distrust of romanticism and his impatience with the academic traditions of Classicism in art shape L'Oeuvre's plot, and contribute to its humorless and argumentative tone. L'Oeuvre's characters do belong to a school. They have clearly (almost too clearly) articulated opinions on the nature and function of art which bring them the disdain of the Salon, or, in Sandoz's case, the vituperation of the reigning literati.

Whatever validity these theories may have as the basis for a new aesthetic doctrine does not compensate for the fact that the shop talk they generate interrupts the flow of the narrative. The large tracts of didactic dialogue devoted to the defense of naturalistic principles which oppose established artistic practice lengthen the novel, slow its action, and divert attention from the central and more interesting subject of Claude and Christine's unhappy world.

Claude's personal struggles, and the fortunes of the "open-air" school do not mesh, and Zola's attempts to integrate the two plots seem contrived. The fellowship that supposedly unites Lantier and his friends, dependent as it is on their common adherence to these theories and practices, is artificial and hence false. Intolerant of each other's failures, jealous of each other's successes, and indifferent to each other's pain, they appear to be such disagreeable company that eventually the reader wonders why Sandoz bothers to hold the group together.

Both novels describe one of the dilemmas of creativity: obsession. Scènes treats this feature of the artistic personality with humor and gentle pathos. Marcel, who has worked on his painting for five or six years, repainting it ten times over, submitting it to the Salon so many times that "if it had wheels it would find its way to the jury committee by itself," finally sells it to a dealer who promises that it will make a tour of European galleries. A week later, Marcel finds his painting hanging over a grocery store.

All Murger's young men have similar obsessions: Rodolphe's play, Colline's mania for ancient texts, and Schaunard's symphony which he

plays at all hours of the day and night, but their artistic compulsions never rob them of their humanity. Rodolphe burns his play to heat his attic, Colline sells his books to buy medicine for Mimi, Marcel paints commercial portraits to feed his friends. The implication is that art is not worth freezing, starving, and, by extension, dying for.

Obsession in L'Oeuvre, however, is the cause of tragedy. An unhealthy desire for material wealth destroys friendship for several members of the group. Christine's obsession for Claude causes her to neglect herself and her child, and Claude's passion for "real" subjects makes for one of the most chilling passages in the novel. His son has just died, and as Christine weeps by his bedside, Claude seizes his brushes and, fascinated by his dead child's waxen features, paints his portrait.

Of the two novels, L'Oeuvre is better organized. It has two specific (if poorly integrated) plots, a detailed description of the milieu, and an orderly succession of characters and events. Such structural principles are disregarded by Murger, whose narrator ignores chronology, skipping ahead of his story and then back-tracking to provide necessary information. He also has a habit of presenting an important character briefly in one sketch, and of elaborating on him three or four sketches later so that the reader is frequently confused about the order of events and the identity of the characters. Mimi, for example, is initially introduced as "Lucille" in the "Lenten Loves" sketch. It is not until Chapter XII that we learn that the Lucille of Chapter III, the unidentified woman in Chapter X, and the Mimi of Chapter XII are the same person.

However, beneath the awkward literary format of a series of

sketches only vaguely connected to each other by the presence of one or more of the main characters lies an incipient operatic structure, because each episode creates a specific mood: gaiety or sadness, tenderness or wit, irony or pity. Marcel and Rodolphe's pursuit of Musette and Mimi, the end of their love affairs with these women, and their eventual disenchantment with Bohemia itself provide brief but moving lyric moments which are easily translated to the medium of opera.

The operatic potential of Scènes is also found in the universality of its themes of love and friendship; in the appealing portrayal of its main characters' strengths and foibles; and in its treatment of life, which skillfully balances comedy and pathos. The situations lend themselves to dramatization. Meetings (and partings) of young lovers, supper scenes of meager fare and witty conversation, and episodes describing each Bohemian's struggle to find food, inspiration, or escape from his creditors provide contrasts of mood and locale while they develop characterization and themes.

Zola is also capable of writing good scenes, which, however, are too few and too far apart in L'Oeuvre. Episodes of Claude and Christine's initially happy love affair, his gradual loss of interest in her, their unhappy home life, and their neglect of their son, Jacques, alternate with chapters in which the group gathers to discuss aesthetics and events in the contemporary Parisian art world.

The novel begins with an episode that has exceptional dramatic and even operatic potential. Christine is lost in Paris during a thunderstorm at two o'clock in the morning. Claude finds her trembling on his

door step and offers her shelter for the night in a garret that resembles the one found in La Bohème's first act. She is nervous, but polite, while Claude hides his shyness by being gruff with her. In spite of the awkwardness of the situation, they are attracted to each other, and as bolts of lightning illuminate his garret they engage in halting conversation that is both appealing and amusing. But the intensity and intimacy of this scene is destroyed by the following chapter, which introduces the other members of the group, offers background information about "the three inseparables," Claude, Sandoz, and Dubouche, their childhood in Plassans, their similar artistic theories, and their professional ambitions. The second chapter is static and flat in comparison to the drama of the first, and together they provide a good example of Zola's unsuccessful attempt to integrate his two plots.

L'Oeuvre's verbal landscapes of Paris, however, give much more of a sense of the city, its vitality and strength, than Scènes does. The novel's descriptive passages, which present the milieu, mirror the impressionistic school of painting that is the novel's aesthetic sub-structure. The colors of Paris, the contrast of its patchwork of brightly colored shutters and doors to the blue of its sky, the green of its huge plane trees, and the darkness of the Seine; its buildings, parks, avenues, and traffic inspire Claude and his friends to dream of conquering the city by capturing its essence in their work.

Ultimately, however, it is precisely this eye for detail that denies L'Oeuvre a universal appeal. The novel is too firmly anchored in time and place, too panoramic in its ambition to capture its own era (its art, its

fascination with science and progress, its hopes and disillusionments) to have significance beyond that of providing an interesting documentary of the time. Not enough attention is given to revealing the inner lives of the characters, whose personalities are drawn in broad, flat strokes which lack subtlety and depth. We are informed, for example, that Claude is genetically destined to fail. His story, therefore, resembles the case history of a disordered psyche, and since the mentally ill cannot be held responsible for their actions, his choices and his subsequent misfortunes lose the dramatic tension essential to good theater and good opera.

The importance that Zola gave to "milieu" and "moment," which initially attracted verismo opera librettists and composers to Naturalism, also diminished the role that the characters ought to play in shaping the action of the plot. Such a reversal is anathema in musical drama. Interesting characters and emotionally charged situations are the staples of opera, be it heroic, romantic, or verismo in genre. These elements, abundantly provided in Scènes, are imperfectly realized in L'Oeuvre. Murger's description of his early struggles made him famous, and inspired an opera that changed the course of lyric verismo. Were Zola's reputation to rest on L'Oeuvre, he would now be remembered merely as a minor late nineteenth century novelist.

Notes

1

Verismo operas premiering between 1890 and 1895:

Gastaldon's Mala Pasqua! 1890, Rome
Bruneau's Le Rêve 1891, Paris
Giordano's Mala Vita 1892, Rome
Cilea's La Tilda 1892, Florence
Tasca's A Santa Lucia 1892, Berlin
Hummel's Mara 1893, Berlin
Bruneau's L'Attaque du moulin 1893, Paris
Spinelli's A Basso porto 1894, Cologne
Massenet's La Navarraise 1894, London
Mascagni's Silvano 1895, Milan

2

For an exhaustive study on this theme see Theodore R. Bowie, The Painter in French Fiction (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1950).

3

Henri Murger, Scènes de la vie de Bohème (Paris: Société des Beaux-Arts, 1912), p. 36. (English translation; translator anonymous.) Murger's choice of the word "heroes" to describe his main characters, indicative of his generally sympathetic attitude toward them, was part of early realism's tendency to endow the lives of the humbler classes of society with nobility and dignity. In 1846, one year after the first Murger sketch appeared, Baudelaire denounced the neglect of contemporary subject matter by the romantic and classicist painters, and, in a review of the Salon of that year, called for painting that would express "the heroism of modern life." Since Baudelaire was a member of the same group of young artists, writers, and philosophers that Murger drew on for his characters and situations, it is possible that certain of Baudelaire's views influenced Murger's own intellectual development.

4

Ibid., pp. 38 - 39.

5

Like the "four Musketeers" of the novel, Murger and three of his friends had formed a society to help each other. Adrien Lélioux, Pierre Tournachon, better known as Nadar, and Leon Noël, together with the author, called themselves "Les Buveurs d'Eau" (the water-drinkers), pooled the funds from their meager earnings, and helped

each other by giving useful criticism to their various works-in-progress. In 1852, Murger wrote another novel about them named after their society.

6

Murger, Scènes de la vie de Bohème, p. 2.

7

Murger, p. 13.

8

La Vie de Bohème, a French film starring Louis Jourdan and Marie Denis.

La Bohème, starring Lillian Gish in 1926.

Mimi, a 1936 film starring Gertrude Lawrence and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.

The Charm of Bohème, a German film in 1936 starring Jan Kiepura and Martha Eggerth.

Her Wonderful Lie, an Italian version made in 1948 and again starring Kiepura and Eggerth.

9

Arthur Moss and Evalyn Marvel, The Legend of the Latin Quarter (New York: The Beechurst Press, 1946).

10

Murger, op.cit., p. 187.

11

Ibid., p. 51.

12

Ibid., p. 245.

13

Ibid., p. 311.

14

Ibid., pp. 319 - 320.

15

Ibid., p. 341.

16

Number fourteen in the Rougon-Macquart series, L'Oeuvre was written during Zola's most productive period, the decade between 1877 and 1887, which saw the publication of L'Assommoir (1877), Nana (1880), Germinal (1885), and La Terre (1887). Like Scènes de la vie de Bohème, L'Oeuvre was first serialized in a Parisian newspaper (Le Gil Blas), and then appeared in book form in April of 1886.

17

Émile Zola, L'Oeuvre. Translated from the French by Thomas Walton (New York: MacMillan Company, n.d.), p. 48.

18

Ibid., p. 248.

19

For details, see Robert J. Niess, Zola, Cézanne, and Manet, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1968).

20

Zola, op.cit., p. 364.

CHAPTER IV: La Bohème and Early Realism

By 1894 the popularity of verismo opera was such that it prompted Giulio Ricordi to commission a libretto from Giovanni Verga himself. Verga adapted La Lupa, a story from Vita dei campi, the same collection of Sicilian short stories that had furnished the inspiration for the first verismo opera. His libretto concerns a woman who is consumed by a passion for her son-in-law, and who is murdered by him during a Good Friday procession.¹

Ricordi gave the completed libretto to Giacomo Puccini, who visited Verga in Catania in the spring of 1894 in order to discuss its details and to familiarize himself with the customs and folk music of Sicily. Puccini took photographs of the towns and countryside, and made notes on traditional Sicilian dress--material which was to be used for designing La Lupa's scenery and costumes. That a composer would go to such lengths to incorporate authentic details of local dress, milieu, and music into his work is a further indication of the growing importance of verisimilitude in late nineteenth-century opera, and recalls the techniques of on-the-spot reportage and observation that Zola employed when gathering material for his naturalistic novels.

Although he had already set part of La Lupa to music, Puccini began to have doubts about his "Sicilian" opera, which he expressed in a letter to Ricordi dated July 13, 1894. He informed Ricordi of his decision to postpone further composition of La Lupa because he found the dialogues lengthy and the characters unattractive "without a single

luminous and appealing figure to stand out from them."

Puccini's criticism of La Lupa's characters isolates one of the features of Naturalism that makes a faithful operatic interpretation of it problematical: its view of man as an animal in the natural world, a pawn of his environment and of instinctual drives over which he has neither control nor awareness. Naturalism's portrayal of biological determinism, which it took from Darwin, and its sense of social and environmental determinism, which it borrowed from Comte, considerably diminish the role that character traditionally assumes in shaping the plot and in deciding the destiny of operatic protagonists, thus damaging the dramatic tension of any given plot. These features of Naturalism had not escaped the librettists of verismo opera's first two successes - jealousy and revenge rather than environment and genetic predisposition complicate the plots and control the characters of both Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci.

Zola and Verga created characters who were the victims rather than the architects of their fate because this kind of protagonist was a perfect medium through which the social themes central to Naturalism could be developed. Implied or explicit in every naturalistic work of fiction is the message that the poor and weak are exploited and that something ought to be done about it. Zola's novels crusade for reform, while Verga's evoke the reader's pity for the downtrodden, but in order for the reader to respond either sympathetically or indignantly to the situations of the naturalistic plot it is necessary for the message contained therein to "seem" a truthful, objective, and hence reliable

source of information. Therefore, each author developed a distinctive detached voice that falls somewhere between traditional narrative and newspaper reporting, and assigned positions of lesser importance to plot and character so that the randomness of the protagonist-victim's actions (and reactions) to his misfortunes would resemble the unpredictability found in "real life."

The enhanced role that chance plays in naturalistic fiction, however, reduces the dramatic tension of its plots. Violence and disaster replace ethical and sentimental conflicts, creating confrontations that are less emotionally and intellectually satisfying. Verga's Malavoglia family are destroyed by chance (a storm sinks their boat) rather than by individual failings in their understandable attempt to escape the crushing poverty of their lives. After sacrificing for three years, Gervaise in Zola's L'Assommoir has finally saved enough money to open her own business, which would guarantee her and her family financial security. On the day she is to put down the security on the shop, her husband, Coupeau, falls from a roof he is repairing. He becomes disabled and turns to drink. The remaining three hundred pages of the novel describe in painful detail the deterioration of Gervaise's life. Françoise in La Terre is raped by her brother-in-law, and deliberately wounded by her own sister, who helps her husband attack the pregnant Françoise. Fatally injured, she refuses to reveal the truth to her husband, Jean, on her deathbed because, irrationally, she considers him an outsider, and prefers to let her sister inherit her share of the land. Such situations do not conform to the most basic requirement of an opera libretto: its potential for exploring a character's

emotional state of mind. Because naturalistic characters do so little to deserve their misfortunes, and are so limited in their abilities to react once disaster strikes, they become mere victims of injustice and fate.

It is precisely this dramatic weakness of Naturalism that caused Puccini's dissatisfaction with La Lupa, because Puccini judged a libretto first on its merits as a drama to which music could give another dimension. The impasse created by Puccini's aversion to "pure" verismo and the public's demand for realistic opera was resolved by his decision to set an earlier realistic novel to music.

Who first suggested Murger's Scènes de la vie de Bohème to Puccini is unclear. Mosco Carner, in his biography of Puccini, believes that it was Luigi Illica, early in 1892.² Puccini's decision to proceed with La Bohème instead of La Lupa became the subject of an exchange of angry announcements in Milan's two most influential newspapers, Il Secolo and Il Corriere della Sera in 1893, for Ruggiero Leoncavallo claimed to have shown Puccini his own libretto drawn from Murger's work that previous winter.³ The ill-feeling generated by Puccini's refusal to abandon this projected opera destroyed the friendship between the two composers.

The libretto for Puccini's opera was commissioned by Ricordi from two figures well-known in Italian cultural life. His choice of "important" librettists is an indication of the importance that had come to be attached to the literary quality of a libretto, perhaps to meet the expectations of opera audiences who were also avid readers of popular fiction. Giuseppe Giacosa, like Murger before him, was a transitional

figure whose short stories and novels helped popularize realism. Although today he is remembered merely as Puccini's librettist, in his own time he was a leading poet, author, and essayist who wrote thirty-two plays, including Tristi Amori (1887), for Eleonora Duse, and La Dame de Challet (1891) for Sarah Bernhardt, which had earned him an international reputation. He was also an early and enthusiastic supporter of Giovanni Verga.⁴

Luigi Illica was already an established librettist who had written the libretti for Franchetti's Cristoforo Colombo, commissioned by the city of Genoa to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America, and Catalani's La Wally (1892). Later, he wrote over thirty libretti, among them Giordano's Andrea Chénier and Mascagni's Iris, Isabeau and Le Maschere. He and Giacosa collaborated with Puccini on Tosca and Madama Butterfly, which together with Bohème constitute Puccini's three most successful operas. (They were also among the seven different men who put together the libretto for Puccini's first commercial success, Manon Lescaut, all of whom chose to remain anonymous when the libretto was published).⁵ Illica drew up the scenario and developed the plot of Bohème in detail, leaving Giacosa to put the prose into verse and to introduce balance and order into the succession of scenes.

Their plan for Bohème's libretto reflects the form of the original novel, which as we have seen is really a collection of loosely connected short stories. Giacosa and Illica sub-titled the opera "Scene da La vie de Bohème" (an Italianized version of Murger's own title) and divided it into four acts which they called "quadri" or scenes whose episodic structure

has more in common with the short story than with the tightly organized, sequentially developed acts of a play. The libretto's rapid succession of seemingly disconnected events remains faithful both to Murger's narrative structure and to the spirit of spontaneity that is one of the novel's most delightful features. The libretto's apparent disorganization also resembles the randomness of "real life," a theme of literary Naturalism that contributed to Bohème's modernity.

The librettists chose roughly half of Murger's original twenty-three sketches, principally those episodes which deal with Rodolphe's and Marcel's love affairs. Chapters containing biographical information about each of the four Bohemians, the story of how they met, and Rodolphe's flirtations with other women were eliminated, along with Schaunard's and Colline's less important romantic liaisons, the four Bohemians' comic encounters with middle class, would-be artists, and a full portrait of Musette who, in the novel, is a much more interesting and appealing character than Mimi.

Despite the large number of chapters devoted to romantic episodes, love, in the novel, is a secondary theme. Growing old is the real tragedy in Murger's Bohemia. Love, friendship, artistic ambition, and the Bohemian way of life itself all support the principal subject of youth and its inevitable passing. If there is an order of importance in the themes in Scènes de la vie de Bohème, it would be youth, friendship, and finally, love. Significantly, both in the sketch, "Francine's Muff," and in the dramatized version of the novel, La vie de Bohème, the distraught lover cries out at his sweetheart's funeral "Ah ma jeunesse, c'est vous qu'on

enterre!"

Giacosa and Illica reversed the order of the original themes, making love the central interest of their libretto, probably because it brought this "modern" opera closer to the mainstream of operatic tradition, and was a theme better suited for dramatic development than youth or friendship. But they drew liberally from episodes devoted to Bohemian life and manners in order to provide their plot with those touches of humor and realistic details of milieu that would balance the potentially cloying sentimentality of Rodolfo's and Mimi's doomed love.

The trick on Benoît, the landlord in Act I, for example, is a composite of events found in Chapters Ten and Nineteen. The comic peregrinations of Marcel's masterpiece, The Crossing of the Red Sea, which he is working on as the opera opens, and which is found hanging over a tavern in Act III, is taken from Chapter Eleven. Rodolfo's sacrifice of his manuscript to warm their studio in Act I is found in Chapter Nine. Schaunard's monologue which introduces him in Act I, a comic touch unfortunately lost in the confusion on stage as the four prepare to dine, is a sixteen-line condensation of the funniest sketch in the novel, The Toilette of the Graces, in which Schaunard is hired by an English lord to play the piano non-stop until a neighbor's parrot dies. Colline's capacious overcoat, a comic prop in the novel, filled with books, food, and other essentials, becomes a tragic symbol of futile sacrifice which inspires Colline's only aria, Vecchia zimarra, in Act IV.

Of equal interest are the episodes which were completely disregarded, because they indicate where Puccini and his librettists "drew the

line" in verismo. The original death of Mimi, alone in a charity hospital ward, her body used for an anatomy class and then buried in a pauper's grave, was rejected and the sentimental portrait of Francine's death in her lover's studio, found in Chapter Eighteen, was used instead. The sketches that show the lovers actually living together were also eliminated, perhaps in deference to the middle class audience whose moral flexibility was not yet ready for explicit scenes of free love's cohabitation. Marcel's denunciation of the Bohemian way of life, and the eventual defection of the four friends to the ranks of the bourgeoisie where they find success and wealth in middle age, were also discarded because they were extraneous to the main theme of tragic love and because they introduced a philosophical comment on the question of artistic commitment and ambition that the opera never raises.

The cast in the novel is large. A plethora of minor characters — grisettes, other Bohemian artists, landlords and shopkeepers, — wander in and out of its pages. The scale of the libretto is more modest, confined to the world of the two lovers and their closest friends.

Three of Bohème's four acts concern the personal drama of Rodolfo and Mimi: Act I, their first meeting; Act III, their quarrel and reconciliation; and Act IV, the death of Mimi. Act II is the only scene which places the lovers in a larger world—that of Bohemian Paris, and, except for its introduction of Musetta, it is entirely extraneous to the plot.

Originally Bohème had a fifth act, "The Courtyard," which was to follow the Café Momus scene. It derives from an incident in Chapter Six

of the novel which introduces Musetta, who discovers that she has been evicted on the day she had planned a party for her Bohemian friends. Her furniture has been moved to the courtyard to be auctioned off for delinquent rent, but she holds the party there anyway. The courtyard act explains Rodolfo and Mimi's estrangement in Act III's *Barrière d'Enfer* scene, for, during the party, Mimi meets a viscount and runs off with him at the end of the act. It also provides an opportunity for those explosions of choreographed dancing and massed choruses that at the slightest excuse were seized upon by composers to satisfy the expectations of their public at the expense of plot and character development. (A good example of extraneous spectacle is the Chorus of Gypsies and the Spanish dancers who interrupt the closing scene of Act II in La Traviata). Despite its usefulness to the plot and its appeal to the eye, the courtyard act was rejected by Puccini because it presented Mimi in an unsympathetic light and, in its spirit of boisterous gaiety, was too similar to Act II's café scene.⁶

The cuts made by Puccini and his librettists in both the original text and in the libretto-in-progress proved to be dramatically and artistically sound. The narrowed perspective of the opera does not destroy the authenticity of Scènes de la vie de Bohème, a noteworthy achievement, for the task of writing a cohesive libretto from Murger's kaleidoscopic novel was difficult. It took Giacosa and Illica two years and nine months to complete the libretto, yet Puccini needed only one year to write the score. (He began the orchestration of Act I on January 21, 1895 and finished Act IV on December 10th.) Why did they choose to work with

the sprawling narrative when a more concise, dramatized version of Scènes already existed?

They must have been aware of the highly successful play written by Murger with the assistance of Théodore Barrière, a leading contemporary playwright.⁷ Produced in 1849, La Vie de Bohème had been given 500 times by 1882, and revivals were staged well into the 1890's. In their play Murger and Barrière had also shifted the emphasis from Bohemian youthful freedom to tragic love, and fashioned Mimi's character after that of the gentle Francine rather than the inconstant Lucille Louvet, who was the real Mimi in the novel. The rest of their version, however, bears no similarity to the plan of Bohème's libretto.

La Vie de Bohème presents Rodolphe as a young man of good family who is living with his wealthy uncle-guardian in the country. He climbs the villa walls to join a picnic with passing Bohemians, runs off to live with them in the Latin Quarter, and falls in love with Mimi, who is eventually persuaded by his uncle to give up Rodolphe "for his own sake." Angry at her betrayal, Rodolphe insults her in an emotional scene played out against the background of a ball. Mimi, who is tubercular, returns to her lover to die. His uncle consents to their marriage, but it is too late, and the curtain falls as Rodolphe mourns the loss of both Mimi and his youth.

Undoubtedly La Vie de Bohème's uncomfortable similarity to La Traviata prompted Giacosa and Illica to return instead to the original source for their libretto, but it is worth noting that in both the play and the opera a love story was added to give the new plots a center, and that

the love story chosen each time was more sentimental than the unconventional, stormy liaison between Rodolphe and his fickle Mimi in the novel.

Apparently Giacosa and Illica admired Murger's novel, and especially his preface, which they quote extensively in their own, itself an unusual, "literary" feature of Bohème's libretto. A description of Bohemia's "vita gaia e terribile" is offered in Murger's own words, along with his description of the four "bold adventurers" whose daily existence is "a work of genius," who spend freely, love easily, suffer their poverty and disappointments stoically, and speak a special language whose vocabulary is "the hell of rhetoric and the paradise of neologism."

Giacosa and Illica's fascination with Murger's own words continues throughout the libretto. Each of the four quadri is preceded by lengthy quotes from Scènes de la vie de Bohème which give the audience an idea both of Murger's casual, frank diction and of the libretto's fidelity to it. These quotations provide further details about the characters: Mimi's delicate physical appearance and white hands; Musetta's flirtatious, generous nature "whose only rule was caprice"; Rodolfo's jealousy, and the friendship that unites the four young men.

Their preface includes a curious apology. In order to remain faithful to the characters, the milieu, and the spirit of "il libro più libero della moderna letteratura," Giacosa and Illica explain that they had to follow Murger's practice of alternating comic and sentimental episodes.

The decision was well-taken, for Bohème's use of comedy gives the opera a believable informality that contributes to its realism and is a source of strikingly effective contrast. The rapid shifts of mood give

Bohème a swift pace, making it difficult for the singers to drop out of character. These qualities in Bohème's libretto help offset the retarding effect that music has on an opera's dramatic action, usually at the expense of the plot. Nevertheless, the boldness of such a plan gave them concern, for it would make Bohème not only the first verismo opera to mix the comic and the tragic modes, but the first opera since Mozart's Don Giovanni (1787) to do so (a fact that has been ignored in studies of the opera).

Acts I and II are largely comic, with only a suggestion of the serious tone to come. The humor is irreverent. Jokes and puns are made about the important subjects of love and art. Marcello, irritated because he must work on his masterpiece in a cold, damp studio, "gets even" by drowning a pharaoh in his painting. Rodolfo and Marcello draw parallels between their cold stove and woman's indifferent heart in an exaggerated metaphor:

Love is a fireplace that burns too quickly
In which man is the wood
And woman the andirons.
One burns up in a second
And the other stands and watches.

When Rodolfo finally burns his play to heat the attic, his friends make puns as they pretend to be critics at the play's premiere.

Rodolfo: My fiery drama will warm us.
Colline: I find it sparkling.
Rodolfo: Lively!
Colline: (As it dies out) But it is too short!
Rodolfo: That was a burning love scene. . .
Brevity is a virtue.
All: Down with the author!

Comedy develops into slapstick: the four Bohemians get their

landlord drunk and toss him out of their studio after tricking him out of his rent. Colline falls down a flight of stairs, Musetta smashes plates and leaves Alcindoro with a huge bill for the Bohemians' Christmas Eve dinner. (Bohème's comic situations that involve an elderly man's libido recall verismo's use of the young-versus-old conflicts of commedia dell'arte explored above in Chapter Two).

Acts III and IV are gradually dominated by pathos through contrast. Rodolfo and Mimi's Addio dolce svegliare duet is interrupted by Marcello and Musetta's comic quarrel—a contrast that presents love's two aspects, its tenderness and its bitterness, as one couple sings of romance and the second shouts insults at each other. As Act IV opens, the four Bohemians again amuse themselves with horseplay. As they dance and duel with each other, they parody the upper class society that has excluded them, and dine "elegantly" on four rolls and a dried herring, but the humor has a desperate quality of forced merriment that presages the tragedy to come.

In presenting their own interpretation of Bohemia, Giacosa and Illica justify any liberties taken with the original source by invoking dramatic and musical necessity. For example, time now marches in an orderly fashion instead of hopping back and forth as it does in the novel. The action takes place over several months, from Christmas, 1830 to the spring of 1831, while Murger's novel begins on April 8, 1840 and covers roughly a six-year period in the lives of his four Bohemians.

The time change from 1840 to 1830 is particularly significant. Murger's novel and play were written as contemporary works in which

many people still living recognized themselves. By moving the clock back ten years Bohème's librettists made Rodolfo and his friends contemporaries of their 1896 opera audience's own grandparents and hence figures from a vanished past. Bohème thus becomes the first "costume opera" of the new verismo movement.

The librettists do not explain which "dramatic or musical necessity" prompted such a considerable departure from the original, but one can speculate why the 1830 world of Bohème would appeal to those who viewed it from the perspective of the closing years of the nineteenth century. July, 1830 saw the establishment of Louis Philippe's bourgeois monarchy, referred to in Bohème's first act. During his eighteen year reign, political and economic power was gradually transferred from the aristocracy to the new middle class, encouraging an industrialization which was to transform both France and the rest of Europe.

The world of machines, accountants, and political unrest that the last generation of the nineteenth century inherited as a result of industrialization could only make them look back nostalgically to what they must have considered to be the simpler lives of their grandparents, much as we in the closing decades of the twentieth century have come to regard the "pre-computerized" nineteen twenties.

Although Bohème capitalizes on the appealing distortion of fact that always accompanies this phenomenon of viewing the immediate past through a haze which blurs its realities, it is a fact that life in the cities had changed so much between 1830 and 1890 that the world of Rodolfo and Mimi must have seemed nearly as picturesque to the audience of 1896

as it does now to us. Two generations of sweeping change separated Bohème's first audience from Rodolfo's Paris of narrow streets, strolling crowds and out-door cafes whose rooms were lit by candles and heated by wood-burning stoves.

The 1836 census of Paris established its population at 868,000 with about 30,000 houses and 1,209 streets, making it a rather crowded beehive of activity.⁸ It was still a walled city. In 1830 Bohème's Barrière d'Enfer (now the avenue d'Orléans) was one of the main southern exits from Paris. It contained municipal toll gates, manned by customs officers who, as they do in Bohème, opened the city gates to the streetcleaners, milk vendors, teamsters, and peasants who came daily to supply the city with its food and necessary services.

Many features of the libretto reinforce the idea of an old-fashioned way of life that has vanished. Mimi and Rodolfo's reliance on candles, for example, is an authentic detail, as is Colline's tumble down the dark stairway that leads from Rodolfo's garret to the courtyard below, for although by 1840 gas was used to light shops, public buildings and several of the main thoroughfares, no private house as yet had it. By the 1890's, Rodolfo's cold stove ("che vive in ozio come un gran signor") had been replaced by efficient coal (and later oil) burning furnaces which were installed in the basements of homes and offices.

Mimi is a seamstress who specializes in hand-embroidery. Skills such as hers were destined to disappear, for in 1889 the electric sewing machine was patented and ready-made clothing became available. Machines began to replace people in other areas as well. Rodolfo writes his

plays and articles with a plumed pen. In 1874, however, Remington and Sons, the New York gun-makers, began to manufacture typewriters which were soon developed in Europe. Bohemian painters like Marcello, who earned a living making portraits and murals for the bourgeoisie, were also affected by technological progress. In 1888 the Eastman Company in the United States marketed the first "Kodak," a small, portable, roll-film camera which enabled amateurs to "take pictures." By 1890 photography had become an industry. Cameras were used for artistic and scientific purposes and for journalistic illustration. The fresh produce and milk brought to Paris daily from the countryside by Bohème's peasants became less essential as canning industries arose and refrigeration was developed in the 1880's. The extension of the railway also helped supply the urban population, now swollen by the influx of peasants who had left farming for the steadier income that industrialization offered in factories.

Technological progress even affected the strolling crowds. Walking became a less frequent means of transportation after electric streetcars became available in most European cities in the 1880's. By the 1890's the bicycle was widely used to help workers go back and forth to the factories, while the automobile and the airplane were already in the early stages of their development.

By the end of the century even the Latin Quarter as Murger had known it no longer existed, for in 1853 Napoleon III, Louis Philippe's successor, appointed the city planner Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann as Prefect of the Seine and the Paris that we know today began to emerge. Over 100,000,000 francs were spent to widen boulevards, develop sewers,

and construct churches, bridges, squares, and public buildings. In the process, many narrow, winding streets and crowded tenements in the Latin Quarter as well as the walls of Paris themselves were thrown down to make room for the city's expansion.

By setting Bohème's subject, the life and death of a seamstress who lives with a Bohemian, in a by-gone era, Giacosa and Illica introduced historical distance and "respectability" into their realistic plot, for the Paris of the 1830's was a place of legendary gaiety and abandon, particularly receptive to the new and unconventional. At that time it was also the home of poets, painters, and musicians who considered themselves the guardians of the Romantic imagination. Alfred de Musset's first volume of poems, the Byronic Contes d'Espagne et d'Italie and Théophile Gautier's first book, Poésie, were published in 1830. Victor Hugo's controversial and romantic melodrama, Hernani, premiered in Paris that same year and Alexandre Dumas père established himself as the leader of French romantic drama with his play, La Tour de Nesle, two years later.

The tendency of the romantics to escape from unpleasant reality by pursuing an elusive ideal (be it love, art, patriotism, beauty, or courage), gently parodied in Murger's novel, becomes the vehicle through which Bohème acquires much of its sentimental and emotional appeal. Rodolfo's aria in Act I, for example, which serves to introduce him to Mimi, is a romantic credo:

In povertà mia lieta
scialo da gran signore
rime ed inni d'amore.
Per sogni, per chimere e

(In my happy poverty
I squander rhymes and
Hymns of love like a rich man.
Through my dreams, chimeras,

per castelli in aria
l'anima ho milionaria.

and castles in air
I have the soul of a millionaire.)

He describes a world in which sentiment and emotion rather than money and social status are prized as guides to what is true and worthy.

Bohème's serious consideration of such romantic ideals, in fact, constitutes the principal difference between the opera and Murger's novel, and obliged the librettists to make startling changes in the two main characters. Murger describes Mimi as a working-class Manon Lescaut. The portrait of her that emerges from his pen is hardly flattering. She is first introduced as "One of those fickle birds of passage who from fancy, and often from necessity, make for a day, or rather a night, their nest in the garrets of the students' quarter and remain there willingly for a few days, if one knows how to retain them by a whim or by some ribbons."⁹ Formerly the mistress of Rodolphe's closest friend, Marcel, she is accepted by the other Bohemians only because of their fondness for Rodolphe, who sees her through the prejudice of a smitten eye. Giacosa and Illica quote part of Murger's description of her in their introduction to Act I: "Il suo volto pareva un abbozzo di figura aristocratica, i suoi lineamenti erano d'una finezza mirabile. . ." (Her face seemed the sketch of an aristocratic person, its lines were of an admirable gentility. . .). Of necessity they delete the rest of the passage, which continues, "Her face, however, at certain moments of weariness or ill-humor, wore an expression of almost savage brutality, in which a physiologist would perhaps have recognized the indication of profound egotism or great insensibility."¹⁰

In Bohème, Mimi divides her time between work and prayer in her

"bianca cameretta," but Murger's Mimi "was a gadabout and spent most of her time among the kept women of the neighborhood" who urged her to leave Rodolphe and find a wealthier lover.¹¹ She takes their advice, abandons Rodolphe, and returns to him only after her rich lover has discarded her.

The transformation of Mimi from flirt into tragic heroine was Murger's own idea, as noted above, when the substitution of Francine's character was made in the dramatization of Scènes. In their preface, Giacosa and Illica enthusiastically if somewhat illogically applauded the change. "Chi può non confondere nel delicato profilo di una sola donna quelli di Mimi e Francine? . . . un solo personaggio cui si potrebbe benissimo . . . dare (il nome) di : Ideale." (Who could help but mistake in the delicate profile of one woman those of Mimi and Francine? One single character to whom one could easily give (the name) of: Ideal.)

As Murger's realistic portrayal of a genuine Parisian coquette is exchanged for a symbol of doomed young love, the character of Mimi approaches the female protagonists of romantic opera. Donizetti's Lucia, Gounod's Marguérite, and Verdi's Luisa Miller, Gilda, and even Violetta were already familiar examples of this ideal victim, and it was after heroines such as these that Mimi's character was fashioned.

Rodolfo's characterization is also necessarily altered. Murger created Rodolphe in the spirit of self-parody. His "bald forget-me-not" is a comic figure whose romantic notions of Ideal Woman and True Love inspire bad poetry and witty barbs from his friends. The illusions he cherishes make him the perfect foil for Mimi-Manon Lescaut, and Murger

himself likens Rodolphe to the *Chévalier Des Grieux*, who "is only saved from being ridiculous by his youth."¹² *Bohème's* Rodolfo is a serious character, resembling the romantic Alfredo of *Traviata* in his jealousy and impulsiveness. He is first presented as a rather worldly young man who jokes about love and is quick to seize the opportunity to detain a pretty young woman who knocks at his door (he blows out the only candle and hides her key), but, by the end of the opera he, too, has become a tragic figure.

The secondary characters Marcel, Musette, Colline, and Schaunard are more accurately represented in the opera. Although Rodolfo and Mimi's love affair dominates the plot, the importance of friendship, evident throughout *Scènes*, is kept intact by Giacosa and Illica. Murger's Bohemians rebelled against the artificial world of the aristocracy and the newer evils of bourgeois materialism in which money and power were exalted at the expense of more enduring values. His young men represent a new generation that triumphs over poverty by means of love, laughter, and a warm friendship. The scenes of the four Bohemians together in Acts I, II, and IV, in which they outwit their landlord, share their meager resources of money and food, and help Rodolfo face Mimi's death, capture the ideals of friendship that permeate Murger's novel.

The libretto also reproduces Murger's language: "the hell of rhetoric and the paradise of neologism." Puccini and his librettists put this new language on the lyric stage. *Bohème's* dialogue, which approaches the simple speech of daily conversation, and the modifications Puccini made in opera conventions to accommodate the libretto's demotic

language, are perhaps the opera's most distinguishing characteristic.

The idea that literary language could achieve legitimate artistic ends by reproducing the spoken word was a contribution of Naturalism that was received at first with considerable hostility. Zola was attacked because he used Parisian argot in L'Assommoir, and Verga's simple sentences and homespun vocabulary were initially disapproved of as too "dialectal."

Apparently Luigi Illica was a disciple of Naturalism's literary theory. His opinions on the essential qualities of a libretto incorporate the tenets of naturalistic theater. One year after Giacosa's death in 1906, Illica wrote a letter to Puccini in which he stressed the importance to a libretto of the treatment of the characters, the structure of the scenes, and the naturalness of the dialogue, situations, and passions, and de-emphasized the importance of the poetry. "The verse in a libretto is nothing but a prevalent custom. . .that which has real value in a libretto is the word. The words should correspond to the truth of the moment (the situation) and of the passion (the characters)."¹³ He urged Puccini to let truth and logic be his guide when he composed. Such attention to the text of a libretto is reminiscent of Mascagni's "sacrosanto ideale," that music must be the expression of the word, and that "the word" must be as close as possible to the diction of daily speech - a tenet of naturalistic fiction.

The lively banter and witty puns of Bohème's recitatives, and the direct language of its arias, give the libretto a prose-like quality closer to the spoken dialogues of drama than to the syntactical complexity and archaic forms which libretti had traditionally borrowed from poetry.

Compare, for example, Elvira's description of herself in rhyming couplets in Bellini's romantic opera I Puritani (1835):

Son vergin vezzosa in veste di sposa. Son bianca e umile qual giglio d'april. Ho chiome odorose cui cinser tue rose. Ho il seno gentile del bel del tuo monil.	(I'm a fair maiden adorned as a bride. I'm as white and modest as the April lily. My locks are fragrant with the chaplet of your rose. My modest breast is graced by your necklace.)
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Mimi's presentation of herself to Rodolfo in Act I of Bohème is in prose. The simple, short sentences can be followed by even a first-year student of Italian:

Mi chiamano Mimi,
ma il mio nome è Lucia.
La storia mia è breve.
A tela o a seta ricamo in casa e fuori.
Sono tranquilla e lieta
ed è il mio svago far gigli e rose. . .

(They call me Mimi,
but my name is Lucia.
My story is short.
I embroider on linen or silk
at home or in shops.
I'm quiet and cheerful
and I like to sew lilies and roses. . .)

Bohème's dialogue consistently avoids the Latinate Italian of grand opera. Gone are the standard exclamations of characters in moments of distress: "Numi, pietà!," "Ahimé, O Ciel! Me Lassa!," "Infido cor! Che favelli!" Although nearly one hundred years old, Bohème's language is fresh and modern in its use of expressions that are still heard on the streets of Rome. Complaining of the cold, Marcel shouts "Ho un freddo canel," and later threatens Musetta, "T'acconcio per le feste." (I'll beat you black and blue). Colline's tumble down the stairs is followed by

"Accidenti!" Rodolfo and Mimi address each other with the polite "Lei" and use the familiar "tu" only after they have fallen in love. (Earlier operas insist on using the literary "voi," which stands half-way between "Lei" and "tu," but which is never used in the singular in standard spoken Italian.)

The score's seeming lack of complexity and sophistication supports the simple language of the dialogue, for Puccini, in his adherence to the inner pulse of the libretto, took great liberties with several traditional opera conventions. Arias, duets, and choruses occur only when the action requires them and do not stand out as separate entities in the manner of earlier Italian composers. The implausible drinking songs, frequently preposterous dying scenes, and elaborately choreographed "folk" dances which had become staples of French and Italian opera by the nineteenth century have disappeared from Bohème. Puccini's rejection of the courtyard act, for example, reflects his tendency to limit the role of the chorus, but his novel approach to operatic conventions is even more striking in his use of recitative and aria.

Recitative - short vocal passages on the same musical note - are the lyric equivalent of dramatic dialogue, which advances the action of the plot. Earlier Italian composers such as Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti had treated recitative largely as a link between their more expressive (and more effective) vocal numbers. Puccini, like Wagner before him, rejected the formal division of opera into expository recitative and florid vocal passages in favor of continuous music that follows the action without interruption.

Puccini's arias grow almost imperceptively out of "simulated speech" recitatives. "Che gelida manina," for example, begins on a conversational note by repeating the same tone nine times and only gradually soars into a passionate melody as Rodolfo describes his life and dreams to Mimi. Her first aria opens with a phrase more spoken than sung: "La storia mia è breve. A seta o a lana ricamo in casa e fuori," and ends with another phrase that is also nearly a monotone: "Altro di me non saprei narrare. Sono la sua vicina che la vien fuori d'ora a importunare." Colline's "coat song" in Act IV is only 27 measures long and contains 97 syllables, fully 40 of them on the same G sharp! The "naturalness" of these arias is enhanced by the fact that each is a narrative which helps develop characterization rather than serving as an opportunity for the singer to illustrate his vocal abilities. (For examples of this standard "aria di bravura" one recalls Costanza's aria in "Märtern Aller Arten," Die Entführung aus dem Serail, or Abigail's "Prode Guerrier!" in Nabucco).

The musical innovations Puccini made to support the simple language and situations of Bohème were largely responsible for the cool reception of its premiere in Turin on February 1, 1896 under the baton of Arturo Toscanini, who had also conducted Pagliacci's premiere in Milan four years earlier. Carlo Bersezio, the eminent music critic of Milan's influential La Stampa, found the score "empty and downright infantile." He advised Puccini that "originality can be obtained perfectly well with the old, established means, and without recourse to consecutive fifths and a disregard for good harmonic rules," and concluded, "Bohème has not made a profound impression on the listeners and will not leave much of a

trace in the history of the lyric stage. The composer will do well if he writes it off as a momentary mistake. Let him consider Bohème an error in his artistic career."

Puccini's opera was initially a failure because it broke the rules of musical composition, but another possible cause for the work's disappointing premiere was that, for the first time, an opera audience was presented with essentially romantic characters in a context of ordinary reality. Bohème's young lovers come from the working class; they eat simple food, wear second-hand clothes, live in cold, sparsely furnished rooms, and frequent the neighborhood café. They hunt for the rent money, lose their keys, have petty lovers' quarrels, and succumb to tuberculosis, the disease of poverty. Bohème presents life as it is really lived by unimportant people whose insignificant lives lack glamour and adventure. They are never called upon to make a noble sacrifice of their love because it conflicts with a public duty or a code of honor. Instead, the opera explores the private world of simple pleasures and sorrows. It probes its characters' feelings, their hopes and dreams, their amusements and disappointments. The picture of reality that emerges is lyric and non-violent and would seem to place the opera outside the mainstream of verismo, for Puccini's realism was not naturalistic but poetic—an innovation that was to influence the development of the new trend in "realistic" opera.

Bohème offers humor as well as pathos, makes lack of money rather than of self-control the source of dramatic tension, and presents love and friendship as ideals. The sordid violence of earlier verismo

operas is replaced by the pathos of doomed "true love," a substitution which moved the new genre closer to the mainstream of opera tradition, which had always doted on star-crossed lovers. Rodolfo and Mimi join Orfeo and Euridice, Lucia and Edgardo, Aida and Radames, and a host of lyric examples of fate's cruelty to young love.

If Puccini's treatment of love was traditional, his choice of lovers and setting was thoroughly modern. By picking two unremarkable characters who live in a metropolis, and by giving their love for each other serious and even tragic treatment, Puccini and his librettists created an operatic metaphor of nineteenth-century realism's fascination with the ordinary people and events of daily life in the big cities of Europe which recalls Verga's sympathy for the down-trodden. Rodolfo, the poet, is inspired by Mimi, the seamstress, just as Balzac, the novelist, or Renoir, the painter, was drawn to depicting the social realities of contemporary Parisian life. Introducing Mimi to his artist friends in Bohème's second act, Rodolfo says "Il suo venir completa/ la bella compagnia/perchè son io il poeta/ essa, la poesia" (Her arrival completes our group because I am the poet; she, poetry). In effect he is saying that ordinary life (and love) inspires art.

The limitations and mediocrity of Flaubert's Emma Bovary, Verga's Malavoglia clan, or the members of Zola's Rougon-Macquart family correspond to the realist painters' graphic images of contemporary society's lower depths: Millet's graceless peasants tilling the soil, Courbet's faceless laborers breaking stones, or Monet's ant-like stevedores unloading coal. Puccini's Bohème gave this heretofore impersonal por-

trayal of ordinary lives a sentimental cast and set a vogue in verismo opera. In addition to Leoncavallo's La Bohème, Charpentier's Louise (1900), his later less successful Julien (1913), and Mascagni's Lodoletta (1917) deal with similar characters and situations.

On May 6, 1897, fifteen months after the premiere of Puccini's opera, Ruggiero Leoncavallo presented his interpretation of Murger's novel, also entitled La Bohème, at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice. It was warmly received by the critics and public interest was aroused by comparison between the two operas, which were later performed at the same time in Milan at the Teatro Lirico and the Dal Verme. After a while, however, interest in Leoncavallo's opera waned and it was not revived even after it had been rewritten with the title Mimi Pinson in 1913.

Unlike Puccini, who created his Latin Quarter without ever having seen Paris, Leoncavallo had lived and worked in the French capital as a young man. Much of his music for Bohème evokes the spirit of Parisian music halls, a feature that probably contributed both to the initial success and the eventual eclipse of his version, for his waltzing melodies use conventional harmonies and show little variety.

The libretto, which he wrote himself, is ambitious in its attempt to recreate the teeming world of Scènes on the opera stage, but a lack of discrimination gradually undermines the work, as a brief resume of its plot reveals.

Act I takes place in the upstairs dining room of the Café Momus on Christmas Eve, 1837, three years earlier than in the novel, and exactly

sixty years before the opera's premiere. The four Bohemians and their eccentricities dominate the first half of the act as Gaudenzio, the proprietor, complains that they are ruining his business. Marcello brings his canvas, paints, and nude models to the cafe, scandalizing the other patrons. Schaunard gives music lessons there and practices his Symphony on the Influence of Blue in Art. All four spend as little as possible, even making their own coffee at the table. The second half of the act introduces Musetta, a friend of Rodolfo's mistress, Mimi. She immediately attracts the attention of Marcello (who, in this version, is the tenor). After the four Bohemians and their companions have enjoyed an expensive dinner a game of billiards is played to settle their bill, and the act ends as the Christmas bells chime.

Act II is prefaced by an unidentified quotation in French which established the main theme of the act: "O jeunesse, printemps de la vie! O printemps, jeunesse de l'année!" Set in Musetta's courtyard the following April, this act resembles Puccini's omitted courtyard scene in its portrayal of Musetta's eviction and the party she holds outdoors. In its profusion of choruses (to the Bohemian life), drinking songs (to youth), and arias, duets, and quartets to love and art, the act does not deviate from established opera convention in its use of ensembles to create a spectacular effect. Schaunard plays his symphony, Marcello and Musetta decide to live together, Mimi runs off with a wealthy viscount, and the party ends in a riot as the neighbors call the police.

Act III, set in Marcello's studio in October of the same year, is prefaced by a quotation from de Musset's La Nuit d'Octobre: "Va-t'en,

retire-toi, spectre de ma maîtresse!" Rodolfo and Mimi have separated and Musetta is about to leave Marcello because she can no longer bear their life of poverty. The conflict between her love for Marcello and her need for security is described in her "letter aria" in which she tries to explain to him the reasons for her departure:

. . . se il merletto non costasse tanto!
se certo almeno il pan fosse ogni di,
or non ti scriverei con questo pianto
che t'amo eppure l'addio ti do cosi!

(. . . if lace didn't cost so much
if at least there was bread every day,
I wouldn't be writing to you now with such sorrow
that I love you and yet I'm saying goodbye like
this!)¹⁴

Mimi suddenly appears, having decided to leave her wealthy lover to return to Rodolfo, whom, she discovers, she really loves. The duet between Mimi and Musetta which follows develops the main theme of the opera: the conflict between financial security and freedom, of necessity and love. Musetta tries to persuade Mimi to reconsider, explaining that she herself is leaving Marcello because although she loves him, she realizes that she is a burden to her lover, who can barely take care of himself. Marcello returns unexpectedly and assumes that Musetta is leaving because Mimi has helped her find a rich lover. Rodolfo, called from his studio across the hall, coldly rejects Mimi's attempts at a reconciliation, sarcastically calling her "Viscountess" and informing her that their love is dead. After a violent quarrel in which Marcello threatens Musetta's life, he orders her to leave and then sings the opera's most famous aria, Testa adorata, in which he mourns her loss.

Act IV takes place three months later on Christmas Eve in

Rodolfo's garret. Rodolfo reads a melancholy poem he has just completed in which the artist rejects fame and fortune to welcome death, which alone can bring him peace. Schaunard, freezing in summer clothes, brings food, but his feeble attempts at gaiety are ignored by Rodolfo and Marcello who can think only of their mistresses who have left them. Mimi suddenly appears, having quarreled with her lover, and is soon followed by Musetta, who has decided to pay a nostalgic visit to Marcello. It soon becomes apparent that Mimi is very ill. Attempts to save her fail and she dies while deliriously recalling the previous Christmas Eve at the Café Momus.

The main defect of Leoncavallo's libretto is lack of focus. Each act presents an important subject from Murger's novel: the eccentric friendship that unites "the four Musketeers" dominates the first act; gay and unconventional Bohemian life, the second; and the terrible consequences of this improvised way of life, the third and fourth. Although Puccini's opera follows the same general design (a similarity that supports Leoncavallo's accusation of plagiarism) Puccini's version has a cohesive center. Leoncavallo's does not.

Both composers interpret the main theme of Scènes, the pain of growing old, as a love story in which the condemned sweetheart stands as a metaphor for youth and its inevitable passing. The problem facing both composers was that Mimi, the sweetheart who dies in Murger's novel, is not as sympathetic a character as Musetta, the sweetheart who survives. Giacosa and Illica resolved this dilemma with a substitution. Leoncavallo, reluctant to sacrifice the more interesting character of Musetta, chose a

different solution.

Murger describes Musetta as intelligent, but uneducated; instinctively elegant yet passionate. Although she enjoys luxury, she believes in love and has refused the attentions of an extremely rich old man because "she would never consent to be the mistress of any man who was not like herself young and handsome."¹⁵ Her love affair with Marcel has a bittersweet ending, for when he leaves Bohemia, achieves financial success, and is finally able to offer her the life of ease she requires, the two lovers meet again only to discover that their passion for each other has died with their youth.

Leoncavallo captures Musetta's qualities in his characterization, which presents her as gay, generous, and sincere. Gently discouraging Marcello's advances soon after they meet in Act I, she says: "... mi piacete ma per evitarvi pene meglio restare amici : io mi conosco. Sono civettuola e matta." (I like you but to spare you sadness it would be better if we were only friends. I know myself well. I'm a flirt and a madcap.) Her decision to leave Marcello for his own good in Act III, however, is sensible and even noble, recalling Violetta's sacrifice of her love for Alfredo in Traviata. In fact, allusions to Verdi's heroine are found throughout Leoncavallo's Bohème. Like Violetta, Musetta is a minor celebrity in her circle. Formerly the mistress of a banker, she abandons him to live in reduced circumstances with a younger, poorer lover. She too longs for "true love" and believes she has found it with Marcello. He, like Alfredo, mistakenly believes that Musetta is leaving him for a richer man and insults her in words that echo Alfredo's

humiliation of Violetta in the closing scene of Traviata's second act.

Giuro a Dio
Che impreco a la miseria in tale istante
Sol perchè mentre a un altro apri le braccia
Non ho una borsa da gittarti in faccia!

(I swear to God
That I only curse my poverty right now
Because I do not have a purse to fling in your face
As you open your arms to another man.)

Musetta's dignity during this painful scene gives her considerable dramatic stature, but her robust health and the ironic end to her love affair in the novel left Leoncavallo without a tragic ending to his opera. He solved the problem by abruptly shifting attention from Marcello and Musetta, whose love story gradually unfolds in the first three acts, to Rodolfo and Mimi in Act IV. The awkward transition makes involvement with these heretofore secondary characters difficult. Worse, the emotional portrayal of Mimi's death appears manipulative and leaves the more interesting story of Marcello and Musetta unresolved.

Puccini's librettists avoided this structural weakness by diminishing Musetta's role and by emphasizing the differences between the two pairs of lovers. They elected to make one couple amusing and unsentimental and the other poignant and romantic, a wise choice which allows Rodolfo and Mimi's affecting love story to dominate the plot without letting the opera become mawkish.

The second flaw in Leoncavallo's libretto was its introduction of raw passion into Murger's novel. Both operas attempt to capture the "grim realism" that lies just below the surface of Murger's sketches, which showed how deprivations destroy love and youth. Puccini's librettists,

however, recognized that the love affairs in Scènes are too casual to support the weight of passion. Their young lovers are crushed by the subtle intervention of fate (Mimi's fatal disease), while Leoncavallo injected the more powerful emotions of jealousy and anger and their tragic consequences into his story. Such intense feeling is alien to Murger's carefree Bohemians and damages the creditability of the characters and the integrity of the plot.

Curiously, Leoncavallo was more cautious than Puccini in his approach to opera conventions, a regrettable conservatism in a composer who was among the first to experiment with verismo. Perhaps he believed that his realistic subject would be more acceptable if it were presented in the protective armour of custom, but the compromise robs his opera of originality. Leoncavallo's arias to identify characters and to establish important themes are awkwardly expository and repetitive. In Act I, for example, Schaunard introduces the four Bohemians in a lengthy arioso passage, immediately followed by Mimi's first aria, which presents Musetta who, in turn, sings an aria describing Mimi!¹⁶ Useful as these arias are in presenting the main characters, the repetition is mechanical and forced. Later, another replication of arias occurs as Act III closes with Marcello's aria of despair at losing Musetta, and Act IV opens with Rodolfo's poem on the vanity of life, inspired by his separation from Mimi. These duplications were inevitable, for once Leoncavallo decided to present two pairs of unhappy lovers, he was obliged to give each "equal time."

The action of the first two acts, that of the public world of

Bohemia, is frequently interrupted by choruses of students and shopgirls singing hymns and toasts to love and youth which are infectiously gay, but which retard plot and character development and, in their spirit of choreographed merriment, contribute little to the illusion of reality. The second half of Bohème is intimate in setting and action, developing the personal concerns of the lovers and their problems. However, Leoncavallo underestimated the dramatic potential of this private world, and used the orchestra to underscore events and episodes during his last two acts in a manner that is intrusive and heavy-handed.

Oboes moan ominously, violins nervously run up and down scales while cymbals crash. Recitatives are punctuated by pregnant pauses, trembling strings, and angry horns. An admirer of Wagner, whom he met early in his career, Leoncavallo copied the German composer's use of the orchestra which allowed the voice to ride on a wave of music. The result overpowers the plot's intimate subject.

Puccini used the orchestra much as the naturalistic writer used his narrative voice—as an observer revealing the thoughts and feelings of his characters without seeming to intrude. Musical phrases, assigned to certain moods early in the opera, later guide the listener's reactions. Themes from Act I, the Bohemian life, and the love duet, for example, are played by the orchestra during recitatives in Act IV as Mimi is dying. These "souvenirs" played by the orchestra evoke the memory of a happier time that gives a nostalgic intensity to the death scene.

Despite the structural imperfections of Leoncavallo's libretto, his characters are even better and more faithfully drawn from Murger's

original than are Puccini's. Schaunard's comic eccentricities, Colline's playful pedantry, and Mimi's vacillating personality are musically brought to life in dialogue that is often witty, rapid, and rich in allusions to the original text. The more successful scenes and the most beautiful arias, in fact, contain nearly literal translations of Murger's own words.

In Chapter Six, for example, Marcel offers Musetta flowers and invites her to live with him after her eviction, saying: "Take them and, in return for my hospitality, sing me one of your songs, the echo of my garret may perhaps retain something of your voice and I shall still hear you after you have left me."¹⁷ Marcello, in Act II, woos Musetta with the same words in his lovely aria, Io non ho che una povera stanzetta:

I nostri baci ed il giulivo canto
L'eco della stanzetta riterrà.
Nei dì che più non mi sarete accanto
Ivi l'anima mia sempre vi vedrà.

(Our kisses and your gay song
will remain in this little room.
In the days in which you will no longer be with me
My soul will always see you here.)

His later aria Testa adorata also takes its text and dramatic cue directly from the novel. Tired of Mimi's frequent betrayals, Rodolphe sends her away. One night, returning to his empty room and seeing her nightcap "peeping out" from under one of the pillows of their bed, he cries out:

O Mimi! Is it really true that you are gone? That I have driven you away and shall never see you again? O pretty curly head that used to sleep here, will you never come back to sleep here again? O capricious voice whose caress made me delirious, shall I never hear you again? O little white hands. . .which I loved, have you too received my last kiss?¹⁸

The language that marks this paragraph as a rather embarrassing lapse into adolescent sentiment by Murger works better as an unabashedly romantic aria—a good illustration of opera's facility for capturing feelings that, in their intensity, might be objectionable in prose.

Musetta. . . .E dunque ver che t'ho scacciata or ora?
E che sul cor non ti terrò mai più?

Testa adorata, più non tornerai
Lieta sul mio guanciaie a riposar.
Bianche manine ch'io sul cor scaldai
Più il labbro mio non vi potrà bacciar!

(Musetta, is it really true that I have driven you away?
And that I will never hold you again to my heart?)

Beloved head, you will never come back
to rest happily on my pillow.
Little white hands that I warmed near my heart,
my lips will never be able to kiss you again!)

In other parts of the opera, portions of Murger's own poetry are set to music. Act II's choral Hymn to Bohemia is taken from Murger's Ronde de la vie de Bohème, found in his collection of poems, Via dolorosa, which also contains La Ballade du Désespéré with its macabre picture of death knocking at the door, used by Rodolfo in his Act IV aria. Similarly, Rodolfo's rejection of Mimi in Act III is a transcription of a poem Marcel writes to Musette at the end of Scènes after they discover that their passion for each other has died.

Leoncavallo is so faithful to Murger's original that one reads his libretto with pleasure and yet cannot escape a sense of disappointment upon hearing the opera. His Bohème is a curious case of a libretto distinguished by strong characters and novel situations that is marred by its composer's attempt to make his realistic subject fit the dictates of

established convention. Irrelevant choruses, uninspired arias, and a ponderous orchestration condemn the opera to the fate of a musical oddity: "the other," forgotten Bohème. However, Leoncavallo's instincts about Murger's subject were sound. Puccini's version is the second most performed opera in the history of the lyric stage.¹⁹

Notes

1

As he had done earlier with the short story, Cavalleria rusticana, Verga turned La Lupa into a play which was produced in 1886 in Turin.

2

Mosco Carner, Puccini: A Critical Biography, p. 74.

3

Leoncavallo's opera, also entitled La Bohème, premiered in Venice on May 5, 1897, fifteen months after Puccini's opera.

4

On January 13, 1884, the day before the Turin premiere of Verga's play, Cavalleria rusticana, Giacosa wrote an article for La Gazzetta Piemontese, a leading daily newspaper, in which he attempted to prepare the public for Verga's experimental drama, and invited them to consider the play objectively. It will be remembered, also, that Verga dedicated his play to Giacosa.

5

The seven librettists of Manon Lescaut were Giovanni Giacosa, Luigi Illica, Ruggiero Leoncavallo, Marco Praga, Domenico Oliva, Giulio Ricordi, and Puccini himself.

6

For the full text of this discarded act, translated into English for the first time, see "The Act Puccini Never Wrote," by Rudolphe Fellner, Opera News, February 4, 1967, 24-25.

7

A prolific and important writer of his time, Barrière was born in 1821 and grew up in the Latin Quarter. He wrote over twenty plays, among them a dramatization of Prévost's Manon Lescaut. In 1858 he was awarded the ribbon of the Legion of Honor. At his funeral, in 1877, Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, Carmen's librettists, were among the pallbearers.

8

See "Traveller's Guide to La Boheme" by Max De Schauensee, Opera News, March 21, 1955, 6-9 for a detailed description of Paris in the 1830s.

9

Henri Murger, Scenes de la vie de Boheme, p. 52.

10

Ibid., p. 166.

11

Ibid., p. 167.

12

Ibid., p. 321.

13

For the full text of this letter see Carner, op.cit., p. 81.

14

In its poignancy, Musetta's letter scene resembles Massenet's "Adieu, notre petit table" in Manon.

15

Murger, op.cit., p. 75.

16

Text for this aria was taken from de Musset's poem Mimi Pinson est une blonde.

17

Murger, op.cit., p. 80.

18

Ibid., p. 176.

19

The first is Aida; the third, Carmen.

CHAPTER V: FRENCH VERISMO OPERA

The end of the nineteenth century confirmed the success of verismo's experiment in lyric drama at important opera houses in Europe and abroad. Hamburg's Staatsoper, which presented Cavalleria rusticana for the first time in 1891, had offered it one hundred times by 1897. Pagliacci's premiere at the same opera house in 1893 was followed by seventy-two performances within the next four years. By comparison, between the years 1875 and 1897, the Staatsoper gave Aida fifty times, Das Rheingold, twenty-eight; La Traviata, twenty-three; and Lucia, only nineteen performances.

La Bohème was seen in London for the first time at Covent Garden on October 2, 1897. By 1914 the English opera house had given it one hundred and seventeen times, more often than Don Giovanni (37), Il Barbiere di Siviglia (32). Der fliegende Holländer (10), Otello (11), and Norma (2) combined. Within seven years of its New York premiere at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1900, Puccini's opera was presented thirty-three times, and is today the second most popular opera in the history of the Metropolitan (572 performances as of the 1982 - 83 season.)

In fact, these seminal verismo works placed consistently among the first twenty operas in the repertoires of theaters all over the world as the twentieth century began.¹ Curiously, the new genre was considered largely an Italian phenomenon, despite the fact that impressive contributions to literary realism were made by French authors, that Naturalism itself was a product of French fascination with the sciences, and that the

first "protoveristic" opera, Carmen, premiered in France fifteen years before Cavalleria rusticana was written.

The identification of Italian composers with verismo opera continues into the present. Puccini, Mascagni, Leoncavallo and their librettists have given the genre its most enduring successes, which have completely overshadowed the work of a small but significant group of composers and librettists in France whose experiments with realism produced operas of a pronounced social conscience and philosophical content.

Early efforts to introduce French audiences to lyric realism were met with resistance. The French did not evince any enthusiasm comparable to that of the Italians, whose appetite for verismo established the careers of Mascagni and Leoncavallo practically overnight. Georges Bizet, the first composer to attempt the genre, is a case in point. His Carmen was initially a disaster.² Its libretto presented the first verismo protagonist whose sensuality dominates the action and placed alongside her a peasant-soldier who becomes a deserter, smuggler, and murderer. With Carmen and José, Bizet created archetypes for the new verismo genre whose protagonists are often outcasts, living on the fringe of society. Manon and Des Grieux, Nedda and Canio, Santuzza, Butterfly, and even Rodolfo and Mimi are later developments of the type.

Although Bizet's arias, duets, choruses, and spoken recitatives leave French lyric conventions intact, the violence and eroticism of the libretto, and the authentic milieu created by the score's use of flamenco themes and Spanish folksongs (the Habane~ra, the Toréador Song, and the

Seguidilla, "Près des ramparts de Séville")) attracted considerable censure.

French critics attending the Opera-Comique premiere on March 3, 1875, condemned the libretto as obscene, found the characters repulsive, and described the music as unoriginal, undramatic and devoid of color.³ Nor were these opinions hastily formed in the heat of the moment. Although a Vienna production in October, 1875 led to a world-wide triumph, the opera was not revived in Paris until 1883.

In spite of Carmen's offense to Gallic standards of decency, morality, and good taste, by the eighteen-nineties the tide of verismo was running so high in Europe that one of France's most respected composers decided to set a realistic subject to music. Jules Massenet's La Navarraise, which premiered at Covent Garden in 1894, and at the Opéra-Comique the following year, contained all the elements of verismo that ran counter to the tastes of a French opera public brought up on the romantic spirit of Meyerbeer and the refined passion of Gounod.

The images of war, assassination, and madness that are presented in La Navarraise were also considerably removed from Massenet's own preference for sentimental dramas of love in exotic settings. Inspiration for his eleven operas to date had come from sources as varied as Indian legend (Le Roi de Lahore, 1877), the Bible (Hérodiade, 1881), Spanish epic (Le Cid, 1885) and German romanticism (Werther, 1892). However, Massenet thoughtfully noted the success of Cavalleria rusticana's Paris premiere in 1892, and decided to attempt verismo himself.

The libretto was a collaboration between Jules Claretie and Henri

Cain, both of whom later worked with Massenet on several other operas.⁴ (The dual-librettist form is characteristic of verismo opera - Meilhac and Halévy, Giacosa and Illica, Menasci and Targioni-Tozzetti come to mind. In most cases, one librettist contributed the verses while the other developed the characters and the arrangement of scenes, a collaboration which suggests the importance of dramatic structure to a verismo opera plot.) La Navarraise is based on a short story, La Cigarette, by Claretie himself who, in addition to being a prolific writer of novels, plays, and drama criticism, also pursued a career as a painter and as manager of the Comédie-Française for nearly thirty years.

The action takes place during the Spanish Civil War of the eighteen-seventies in a war-torn village on the outskirts of Bilbao in the Basque country. The rural setting recalls Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci while the protagonist is a woman of Carmen-like intensity. She is Anita, the girl from Navarre, who is in love with Araquil, a young sargeant belonging to the Republican army now being forced to retreat by the Monarchists. His father, Remigio, a rich farmer, will not permit the marriage because Anita is of a lower class, and has no dowry. ("Le fils de Remigio, le fermier respecté, ne peut pas épouser une fille de rien"). When the troop commander offers a reward of two thousand "douros" to the person who assassinates the reactionary leader Zuccaraga, ("Lui mort, Bilbao tombe et c'est la paix."), Anita volunteers, although she is a devout Catholic and carries with her a tiny statue of the Virgin ("de plomb plus précieuse que l'or"). Unmoved by patriotism, but obsessed by her passion to marry Araquil, she secretly crosses the enemy lines, kills Zuccaraga,

and returns to collect the blood money "qui m'assure le bonheur et l'amour." However, Araquil, puzzled by her absence, and believing she is meeting a secret lover, jealously pursues her and is brought back mortally wounded. Repelled by her deed, he dies without forgiving her and she goes mad.

La Navarraise was Massenet's first opera with a modern setting and a contemporary social message. The reactionary forces represented by Zuccaraga's ultra-conservative army supported "the good old days" of absolute monarchy with its stratification of society, while the Republican Army in which Araquil fought, championed "progress" in the form of a democracy which would bring a leveling of the social classes.

Anita's personal drama of a woman who would marry above her station is, therefore, connected to the social issues of the war being fought in the background. The set, dominated by a barracks and a shrine to the Madonna, is a visual representation of her moral struggle between violence and religious commitment. Her simple faith, however, is not as strong as her passion. Like the devout but ardent Tosca, she commits murder in the name of love and becomes the unwitting instrument of her lover's death as well.

La Navarraise follows the same structure as Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci: two short scenes separated by an intermezzo. (Wits soon dubbed the opera "Cavalleria española" or, in honor of its first star, Emma Calve, "Calvélleria rusticana.") The action moves with typical verismo rapidity through a number of episodes that allow the protagonist to portray intense emotions (anxiety, relief, joy, despair, terror, and, finally,

madness) which were, by now, expected of early verismo characters.

Massenet introduced certain verismo touches into his score. Church bells chime, and, during the overture, pistols are fired and trumpet charges explode. He also provided local color by incorporating melodies from Spanish folk dances. Castanets and tambourines play as Anita and Araquil recall the Easter Sunday on which they met and fell in love while dancing a "Jota."

However, Massenet tampered little with opera conventions. Despite its brevity (forty-five minutes), La Navarraise has the requisite hymn (to the Virgin), drinking chorus (to the life and loves of a soldier), and melodic but fairly conventional love duet ("Dans un long baiser"), found in lengthier romantic operas. The prose libretto was a concession to the trend away from verse developing in verismo, but the language is literary and makes no attempt to introduce dialect or argot into the dialogue.

Although its music and characters make no remarkable contributions to the development of verismo opera, La Navarraise is not devoid of interest. Its best feature is a devastating irony that grows more powerful as the ethical and spiritual anchors that should offer Anita stability fail her. Her devotion to the Virgin goes unrewarded, her courage causes her sweetheart's death, and her love is ultimately rejected by him. Madness is the only "reasonable" response to a world itself gone mad. (The opera ends with an obvious but effective irony as she mistakenly thinks that the bells that toll for Zuccaraga's funeral are ringing for her own wedding.)

Anita is a victim of a materialistic society that knows the price

of everything and the value of nothing, but like one of Verga's "vinti," she is also destroyed by her own passion, which has become a consuming obsession. The harsh, gloomy view of life that emerges from this blurring of established principles of right and wrong identifies the opera as naturalistic in intent. (Zola and Verga, it will be recalled, also considered materialism to be the source of their society's moral decay because of its tendency both to exploit and corrupt its victims.)

These literary allusions were not lost on one critic who attended the opera's Covent Garden premiere. George Bernard Shaw noted that "Massenet. . .has not composed an opera: he has made up a prescription." However, Shaw found the formula "perfectly efficacious. The drama is simple and powerful. The events actually represented (are) credible and touching, and the assumptions. . .on which they are brought about so simple and convenient that nobody minds their being impossible."⁵

No one else at the opera's London premiere seemed to mind Massenet's lack of originality. The opera was well received; Queen Victoria commanded a special performance at Windsor Castle and later presented Calvé with a brooch.⁶

Its reception in France was, expectedly, less enthusiastic. Croce notes that Italian aversion to Naturalism was caused in part by its being considered a French literary import.⁷ The same prejudice in reverse seems to have been directed against La Navarraise when the opera was first performed in Paris in 1895. Critics remarked that its violence was not part of French lyric tradition. They found it "a theater of fists and blows that is better left to the mediocre musicians of Italy." Neverthe-

less, the work was quickly taken up by leading opera houses throughout the world.⁸

Three years later Massenet again entered the ranks of verismo composers with an opera based on a popular novel written by his friend Alphonse Daudet. Like his contemporary and fellow Provençal, Émile Zola, Daudet had written a series of realistic novels depicting French society under the Second Empire: Fromont jeune et Risler aîné (1874), Le Nabab (1877), Les Rois en exil (1879), Sapho (1884), and L'Immortel (1888). Massenet chose the fourth novel of the collection as the subject for his second verismo opera. Sapho's libretto was written by Henry Cain, the author of innumerable plays who had collaborated with Massenet on La Navarraise.

Set in late nineteenth century Bohemian Paris, it tells the story of a young man whose passion for an artist's model destroys him. The plot recalls La Bohème in its setting, and Carmen in its portrayal of a weak man who becomes the victim of a sensuous women. Sapho premiered at the Opéra-Comique on November 27, 1897 to an enthusiastic public already under the spell of the original story's bitterweet charm. ("Do you know of any novel that causes a more incurable wound than Sapho?" asks Marcel Proust.)⁹ During its first twenty performances the opera took in nearly 150,000 francs - more than such popular verismo operas as Madama Butterfly or La Bohème in similar circumstances, indicating that the French were more susceptible to verismo when its libretti were drawn from the work of established (and preferably French) authors.¹⁰

In fact, verismo opera was slowly gaining a French following,

principally through the efforts of a young composer, Alfred Bruneau, who had managed to interest Émile Zola himself in the lyric stage. Bruneau and Zola met in March, 1888, when the composer presented himself to the famous novelist in order to obtain permission to turn La Faute de l'abbé Mouret, the fifth novel in the Rougon-Macquart series, into an opera. Zola had already promised this work to Bruneau's own teacher, Massenet (whose version was never staged), and offered Bruneau instead the novel he was currently writing, Le Rêve.¹¹ Bruneau's acceptance signaled the beginning of a collaboration that lasted fourteen years (until Zola's accidental death from carbon monoxide poisoning in 1902) and produced a total of eleven operas.

The first two, Le Rêve (1891) and L'Attaque du moulin (1893) were based on Zola's prose works with libretti by Louis Gallet, a poet who had worked with Bizet, Sain-Saëns, and Massenet. (Letters found among Zola's correspondence reveal that he collaborated anonymously in the production of these operas, revising dialogue, making sketches of the scenery for the set designers, and attending the rehearsals.)¹² The warm reception accorded these two operas encouraged Zola to write six original libretti, of which only three have ever been produced. (After Zola's death, Bruneau wrote three more libretti based on Zola's works: Nais Micoulin (1907), La Faute de l'abbé Mouret (produced in 1907, after Massenet abandoned his rights to the novel), and Les Quatre Journées in 1916.)

Curiously, none of the better known novels of the Rougon-Macquart series was ever considered for operatic interpretation, although

between the years 1879 and 1902 Zola collaborated with William Busnach in recasting L'Assommoir, Nana, Germinal, and three other Rougon-Macquart novels into five-act plays. The neglect of these seminal naturalistic works by a composer who was a sincere admirer of Zola betrays the limited lyric appeal of "undiluted" Naturalism. Zola's literary reduction of social Darwinism, which applied evolutionary formulae to characters and their motivation, was too violent for even the unrestrained passions of lyric drama. In fact, Naturalism's denial of idealism, while always controversial, was attracting considerable censure as the nineteenth century drew to its close.

Zola's collaboration with Bruneau occurred at the same time that a general weakening of faith in "progress" began to develop in France. Science and technology had not only failed to fulfill their promise to eliminate hunger, poverty, and disease, but had also created several new social problems (modern warfare, overcrowded cities and the phenomenon of chronic unemployment). Disillusionment with science brought with it an aversion for its literary counterpart, Naturalism.

Seven months before Zola and Bruneau met, a group of Zola's former disciples had denounced his latest novel, La Terre, in "Le Manifest des Cinq," an article which appeared in Le Figaro on August 18, 1887.¹³ Prompted by their "supreme respect for art," they protested against "a literature devoid of all nobility." Their complaint reveals a general dissatisfaction with the significance Naturalism gives to naked self-interest and uncontrolled instincts in deciding the course of human affairs.

Four years later, in 1891, Jules Huret published his famous Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire in which he interviewed sixty-four writers, identifying them with eight modern literary movements. Huret's study was another indication of Naturalism's fading prestige for it gave "official" recognition to Symbolism, a more subjective and private literary expression, which was to supplant Zola's objective narrative style by the end of the century.¹⁴

Although in his interview with Huret, Zola defended Naturalism as "ce besoin de rechercher la vérité où qu'elle soit,"¹⁵ and reaffirmed his belief that science was a legitimate source of artistic inspiration, he was himself putting naturalistic techniques aside and experimenting with a subjective symbolism in his own writing during the last decade of his life.¹⁶

The six libretti that he wrote for Bruneau reveal this new development of his imagination. Following the London production of Le Réve in 1891, Zola wrote a letter to Arthur Hervey (who later wrote a biography of Bruneau) in which he elaborates his theory of lyric drama:

Je suis pour l'union aussi intime possible
de la musique et les paroles, et voudrais faire
du théâtre vivant, humain, et bref.
J'aurais aussi l'ambition de traiter une suite
de sujets essentiellement français et modernes
d'action comme de sentiments.¹⁷

(I am for as close a union as possible between
the music and the words, and would like to
create theater that is alive, human, and short.
I would also like to write about a group of
subjects that are essentially French and modern
in their action as well as in their feelings.)

The subjects that Zola chose for his new theater demonstrate the

range of his interests. They include a one-act opera based on the biblical story of Lazarus, Lazare; a fairy-tale, Violaine la chevelue, and Silvanire or Paris en amour, a Bohemian love story similar to La Boheme, Sapho and Louise. These operas have never been set.

The remaining three, Messidor, L'Ouragan, and L'Enfant-roi, were produced in Paris between 1897 and 1905. Étienne Destranges, a contemporary critic, praised these works as "the most original and remarkable examples of the new French school (verismo)."¹⁸ Their originality lies in Zola's libretti which, like his novels, are strongly marked by an interest in French society and its problems, but which avoid the graphic description of social and moral abuses found in the Rougon-Macquart series.

Zola liked to think of himself as a mere observer of human nature, with a detachment that ill-conceals the reformer who, at the beginning of his artistic career, was preoccupied with the causes of misery and, near the end of his life, searched instead for its remedies. These he no longer found in scientific progress. The reason and stability that he once believed only science could offer society are reached through a simple, personal code of ethics in his opera libretti.

The first, Messidor (1897), for example, has as its theme the conflict between honest labor and the unscrupulous pursuit of gold. The opera's title is the name of the month meaning "harvest" in the revolutionary calendar that was used by the First Republic in 1793, and alludes to the opera's central message of fertility and natural harmony.

A village in the Pyrenees is slowly dying because one of the villagers has built a gold refinery at the top of a mountain to trap the gold

in a river that irrigates the valley. Since the river has been diverted, the village has no water for its crops. An avalanche eventually destroys the refinery, allowing the water to return to the fields and the opera closes with a choral paean (in Latin) to wheat, the fruitful "gold" that sustains life.

The second opera, L'Ouragan, produced four years later in 1901, is a more intimate drama of two sisters' love for the same man. In his program notes, Zola explained the symbolic meaning of the title:

C'est l'ouragan de nos passions qui, tout d'un coup,
sans raison, souffle dans notre ciel bleu, dans le
train ordinaire de notre vie, qui saccage et
emporte tout, jusqu'au retour du joyeux soleil,
nous laissant dévastés, saignants, devant
l'existence qui recommence.

(It is the hurricane of our passions which, suddenly
and senselessly, blows across our blue skies and
through our ordinary way of life, which plays
havoc with and carries off everything, until the
sun shines again, leaving us ruined and bleeding,
as life resumes.)

Such strong passion would seem to parallel the destructive eroticism of Nana, La Terre, and Germinal, but the characters in L'Ouragan prove to be capable of self-denial and even remorse. Marianne, the rejected sister, saves Richard's life, and he ultimately decides to give up the woman he loves in order to embark on "l'éternel voyage par l'infini des mers" that will lead to greater self-knowledge.

In L'Enfant-roi (1905) the two ethical themes of honest work and unselfish love are joined in a realistic story of a working-class family set in Paris "à nos jours" and told with uncharacteristic warmth. François and Madeleine Delagrangé, the owners of a small bakery, have a good

marriage and a prosperous business, but are childless. ("...il n'est pas de ménage plus unis, plus heureux. . .hélas! pourtant l'enfant n'est pas venu.") Two years before their marriage, Madeleine had given birth to an illegitimate son whose father died in combat before the child was born. Georget (now sixteen) has been raised by his grandmother and visited weekly by Madeleine in secret. When François learns of his wife's past, he places her in an impossible situation. ("Tu choisiras entre ton fils et moi et si tu me choisis, je te pardonnerai.") Torn between her love for her husband and her son, Madeleine is finally spared making a decision by her husband's generosity. He adopts the child as his own and the opera ends with the family at last united and productive.

The contemporary vogue for realism notwithstanding, L'Enfant-roi's milieu of Parisian shopkeepers seems a rather prosaic setting for lyric drama. The atmosphere of daily reality is established by a set which meticulously reproduces the boulangerie-pâtisserie, down to its electric light fixtures (a modern novelty), its cash register set on a marble counter top, and the pastries in the display cases ("croissants, brioches, gâteaux secs et à la crème"). Act II has an even more unlikely setting for a verismo opera - a toy shop, and Act III takes place in an outdoor flower market near a church which has the same name as one of the main characters, La Madeleine.

However, the symbolic potential of this ordinary setting is skillfully exploited. L'Enfant-roi's main theme of fertility is linked to the bakery itself, which supplies Paris with "the staff of life" and contrasts to the childless state of its owners. The symbolism is further developed in

the third act's market scene with its profusion of flowers and a baptismal procession which slowly crosses the stage. The second act in the toy shop has an obvious association with childhood, further emphasized by a chorus of children who open and close the act by singing nursery rhymes.

Patrick J. Smith, in his comprehensive study of the opera libretto, The Tenth Muse, remarks that Zola is the most underrated French librettist and compares him favorably with Hugo von Hofmannsthal for his ability to focus on a meaning of love deeper than the romantic passion found in most opera libretti.¹⁹

The originality of Zola's approach to lyric romance is particularly striking in L'Enfant-roi. The love story of a middle-aged baker and his wife is an unusual subject for opera not only because of the age and social condition of the couple, but because their love is born of the spirit. Although she was forced by her father to marry François, Madeleine has come to love him for his steady, honest character. Her aria in Act I, scene 5, describes a mature love based on mutual respect.

Tu m'as conquisé bien vite par ta bonté, par
ta santé et ton courage au travail. . .notre amour
si calme et si fort n'a fait que grander. Nous
nous aimons comme on doit s'aimer dans un
ménage de braves gens, de toute notre raison,
de toute notre chair, de tout notre coeur
pour toujours.

(You soon won me over by your goodness, your
strength, and your courage in your work. . .our
love so calm and so strong has only grown. We
love each other as people ought to in a house-
hold of good people, with our reason, our bodies
and all our heart, forever.)

Earlier, in La Terre, Zola had exploded the myth of the simple goodness of French peasants. Now, in his maturity, he explores the world

of the French petty bourgeoisie, and finds in it values that are sound and enduring. Madeleine's simple aria, in direct prose, is followed by a duet with François that elaborates these principles.

Madeleine: Travailler, faire de bonnes affaires, puis se retrouver, le soir contents de l'argent gagné en s'embrassant de toute sa tendresse!

François: Et n'être que des petites gens, de commerçants bien simples, et s'aimer comme je t'aime!

Madeleine: Et mettre honnêtement quelques sous de côté pour vieillir plus tard dans la paix. . .

(Madeleine: To work, to prosper, then to find ourselves at night happy about the money we have earned as we embrace tenderly!

François: And to be just ordinary people, simple shopkeepers and to love each other as I love you!

Madeleine: And to put something away for a peaceful old age. . .)

The benefits of a love based on hard work, frugality, and devotion have social ramifications. As François and Madeleine's business prospers, they share their wealth. Kind to their dependents, they give bread to the poor and money to a homeless mother for her children.

Zola emphasizes his main characters' qualities by contrasting them with another pair of lovers, Auguste and Pauline, who are employed by the Delagranges and who have destroyed François' happiness by revealing Madeleine's secret past. Through them, Zola shows his contempt for a younger generation that attaches a price tag to love. When Auguste tries to seduce her, Pauline informs him ". . .moi, j'attends le

patron qui me fera trôner au comptoir. . .Soyez le patron et je veux bien."
(I'm waiting for the owner who will place me on the throne of a
counter. . .Be the owner and I'll be willing.)

But François' poor judgment in forcing his wife to make an impossible decision betrays his values. His world slowly disintegrates, his business begins to fail, and Pauline and August plot to gain control of the bakery. The vulnerability of François' household lies in its childlessness as Auguste himself observes: "Une maison sans enfant, ce n'est ni gardé ni défendu, c'est au monsieur qui veut bien la prendre." (A home without children is neither protected nor defended, it's there for anyone willing to take it.)

Ironically, the immortality that a child confers on its father prevents François from accepting the son he desires. When his wife tries to reason with him, explaining that the love she has for him and for Georget are not the same, he protests, "l'autre revit dans son fils!" François' jealousy appears at first to be Zola's nod to convention. Opera plots, be they romantic or veristic, recognize the exclusivity of love and the possessiveness that develops alongside strong passion. Few are the tragic operas written in the last one hundred and fifty years that do not give jealousy a prominent role. L'Enfant-roi is no exception, but it is the very first opera to question the rationality of this powerful emotion.

Unable to reconcile himself to his wife's past, François nevertheless is ashamed of the baseless rivalry and the inconsistency that lie at the heart of his dilemma:

Jaloux d'un enfant, je suis jaloux d'un enfant!
Est-ce possible d'être tombe a cette misère?

Moi qui en souhaitais un de tout mon desir éperdu,
moi qui l'aurais adoré de tout mon coeur attendri!
L'enfant c'est la joie et le bonheur nécessaire, c'est
l'âme sans laquelle la maison ne peut vivre!

(Jealous of a child, I am jealous of a child!
Is it possible for me to have fallen so low?
I who used to wish for one with all the force of my
desire, I who would have loved him with all my
heart! A child is necessary to joy and happiness,
it is the soul a home cannot live without!)

Georget, who does not want to destroy his mother's happiness, decides to emigrate ("L'enfant de hasard ne compte pas."), but François' desire for a child gives him the strength to rise above jealousy and to reaffirm the opera's central theme: "Non! Il n'y a pas d'enfant de hasard. L'enfant n'est pas l'accident, il est tout, . . . la vie elle-même. . . qu'il reste et qu'il nous réunisse!" (No! There is no such thing as a child of chance. A child is no accident. He is everything. . . life itself. . . let him stay and reunite us!)

Zola's portrayal of a marital crisis was not entirely the product of his imagination. The devotion Madeleine and François offer each other recalls that of the childless Sandoz and Henriette in L'Oeuvre, a thinly-veiled reference to Zola's own happy marriage, which was also marred by an unfulfilled longing for paternity. In writing L'Enfant-roi Zola once again delved into his personal experience. Several years before its composition, as he was nearing fifty, he had begun a liaison with a young seamstress in his employ and the two children that she bore him were later adopted by his wife.²⁰

However, Zola's choice of subject was not merely an attempt to absolve himself of whatever guilt he might have felt about his past. With

L'Enfant-roi he was attempting to bring a greater degree of reality to the opera stage by presenting ordinary people, expressing themselves in the language of ordinary life. The libretto is entirely in prose that is as simple and direct as the characters themselves.

A letter to Bruneau in 1899 reveals that Zola's first intention was to place L'Enfant-roi in "le monde légendaire."²¹ All trace of legend disappear, however, in the writing and the work emerges, firmly grounded in the reality of late nineteenth century Paris. The city is given a prominent role in the story because Zola never neglects the social dimension of his characters and their actions. Each act opens and closes with a reference to Paris and its many faces. In Act I's presentation of the busy, prosperous bakery, Paris is seen by François as "las de sa journée de travail, fiévreux de sa soirée de plaisir et d'amour." The image of the city as a beehive of work and pleasure continues in Georget's aria in which he describes the city as a huge flower garden "ou les rues finiront par charrier des oeillets et des roses!"

Later, as François' depression deepens at the loss of his happiness, he sees the darker side of the metropolis, the misery and suffering that haunt its streets and its people, who must work night and day "pour la faim du monstre." The happy resolution of his marital crisis, however, restores his optimism and the opera closes with the image of the city as a fertile mother: "Paris s'éveille, il faut que Paris ait du pain, pour la besogne géante de son enfantement!" (Paris is waking up and must have bread for its enormous task of childbirth!)

Unfortunately, Bruneau's music was inferior to Zola's libretti.

Their operas never gained an international audience, but the favorable reviews that they received in France helped create a musical climate that was more receptive to verismo.

A fuller measure of success was given to a contemporary of Bruneau's, Gustave Charpentier, whose first opera, Louise, is the only late nineteenth century French verismo work to hold a place in the modern repertory. Louise, like Puccini's Bohème, tells the love story of an artist and a seamstress, but Charpentier's lovers are not surrounded by wistful nostalgia. His characters are thoroughly "modern" because Charpentier shared Zola's enthusiasm for lyric subjects which gave thoughtful treatment to the problems of contemporary life.

Charpentier was an early supporter of French verismo. On April 30, 1901, Le Figaro published his review of Zola's second opera, L'Ouralgan, a work in which Charpentier found much to applaud: "L'école française (i.e., French verismo), l'école du bon sens, de la vérité, et de la vie. . .qui n'exclut pas la pensée, ni le symbole - a triomphé une fois de plus sous ses auspices." (The French school, the school of common sense, of truth, and of life. . .which does not exclude thought or symbols - has once again triumphed under its own auspices.)

Charpentier was attracted to contemporary literary and intellectual currents as well. He composed a symphonic poem, Impressions Fausses, which sets poetry by Baudelaire and Verlaine to music, and wrote popular songs with a Socialist theme. (He also founded the Syndicate of Musical Artists, and helped establish the Conservatoire Populaire de Mimi Pinson, where working girls received free musical instruction. At one

time, he himself taught there.)²²

Like Murger and Zola, Charpentier had known poverty early in his career, and later turned his Bohemian struggles into art. Louise is the story of his own youth, and in telling it he sums up the main literary and social movements of his age in a strange but effective blending of realism and symbolism.

In plot, setting, and characters, Louise is realistic. Its libretto, sub-titled "un roman musical" and written by the composer himself, is about a young woman, employed in a dress factory, and condemned to a life of drudgery by her stern, working-class parents. She falls in love with a young poet, Julien, whose unstable life causes Louise's parents to reject his proposal of marriage. Since at that time the laws of France did not permit the marriage of young people (of either sex) without the consent of their parents, Louise decides to run away, and becomes Julien's mistress.²³

Charpentier set his story in the present rather than the picturesque past of Puccini's and Leoncavallo's Paris because Louise raises the then-revolutionary question of a woman's right to live her life without interference from her parents or society.²⁴ The protagonist is opera's first example of the "new woman," already familiar to late nineteenth century audiences in Ibsen's *Nora* and Shaw's *Candida*.

She is first presented as a dreamy child who longs for "le prince charmant qui réveilla la Belle au Coeur Dormant." He appears in the form of a Bohemian poet who urges her to rebel against her parents and to assume responsibility for her own life: "Les parents voudraient qu'on

restât le marmot dont la pensée sommeille à l'ombre de leur volonté!" (Parents would like it if their child's thoughts slept forever in the shadow of their own will!) Her love for Julien gives Louise the courage to defy convention, and to become, in Julien's own words, "la femme nouvelle."

The opera's central theme of feminism is therefore closely tied to personal freedom. These ideas are developed in Act III, which takes place in a small garden at the top of Montmartre, overlooking a panorama of Paris. The act opens with Louise's famous aria "Depuis le jour" in which she describes her new life as Julien's mistress. ("...je tremble délicieusement au sourire charmant du premier jour d'amour!") She is living with him in Bohemia and, as the scene progresses, it becomes clear that her lover is introducing her not only to passion, but to a new attitude toward life itself.

As a poet, Julien embodies that freedom from convention established by Murger fifty years earlier with his own Bohemian artists. Charpentier's Julien, however, is not as romantic a figure as Rodolphe or Marcel. He is instead a catalyst for Louise, who calls him "mon maître," a play on words that underscores Julien's role as both her lover and teacher. The didactic quality of his character recalls Zola's Bohemians who attacked the bourgeoisie for misunderstanding them and their art. Julien is not as virulent toward the Establishment as Zola's Claude Lantier and his friends, but it is through him that Louise comes to see her parents as narrow and limited people.

In a passionate aria that is a youthful manifesto of freedom protesting the constraints of an older generation, Julien describes Louise's

parents as "la mère, la Routine, le père, Préjugé," and dismisses their experience of life as "l'oppression des préjugés stupides! . . . la lâche et tyrannique servante de l'Envie, qui se dresse a l'entrée de la vie! . . . Tout être a le droit d'être libre!" (The oppression of stupid prejudice. . . the cowardly and tyrannical servant of Envy, which stands on the portals of life. . . Every person has the right to be free!)

Julien's diatribe against conventional morality develops into a sensuous love duet that is a hymn to Paris. It begins with an invocation to the city to protect them ("Paris, Ville de force et de lumière. . . Cité de joie! . . . Protège tes enfants!"), and ends with the lovers' declaration of independence, "Libres! Soyons libres selon notre conscience!" (Free! Let's be free (to live) according to our own conscience!) During this passionate duet the word "libres" is repeated nine times, underscoring the central theme of Julien's Bohemian philosophy, and associating it with the city of Paris. The freedom that the lovers enjoy is owed to the immensity of the metropolis, which gives them the anonymity to live as they wish. (We are a long way from the narrow confines of Cavalleria's village mores.)

Despite Julien's harsh assessment of Louise's parents, there is much to value in their world. Their rejection of Julien is reasonable since he offers Louise no stability and has no prospects for the future. Louise's father knows that love alone will not guarantee his daughter's happiness. His advice to her, in Act I, as he rejects Julien's proposal, is gentle and affectionate.

O mon enfant, ma Louise, tu sais combien nous t'aimons!
Si nous sommes prudents vis à vis de ceux que te

remarquent, c'est qu'arrivés au bout du chemin que tu vas gravir, nous en connaissons toutes les miseres!

(Oh my child, my Louise. You know how much we love you. If we are wary about those who take an interest in you, it is because, having come to the end of the road that you are only beginning, we know all its hardships.)

Louise's mother, who is stern and even bitter (perhaps because of the hardships of a lifetime of frugality), is tender toward her husband. As a couple, they resemble François and Madeleine Delagrangé, whose simple values of work and love are portrayed in L'Enfant-roi. In fact, the picture of domestic harmony described by Louise's father as the opera begins could easily be mistaken for a passage in Zola's opera.

Le bonheur, vois-tu, c'est d'être comme nous sommes,
nous aimant bien, nous portant bien; ce bonheur-là,
nul ne peut nous le prendre!

Le bonheur, c'est le foyer où l'on se repose,
où on oublie près de ceux qu'on aime, les
malheurs de la vie!

Ceux qui ont des rentes aujourd'hui
n'en auront peut-être plus demain. . . nous, toujours
nous serons heureux!

(Happiness, you see, is to be just as we are,
loving each other, in good health. That kind of
happiness no one can take away from us.)

Happiness is the fireside where you rest,
where, close to the ones you love,
you forget life's disappointments.

Those who have money today, might not have
any tomorrow. As for us, we'll always be happy.)

The contrast between this conservative wisdom and Julien's "liberated" views is represented in the closing scene of Act III in which Louise is crowned the Muse of Montmartre. As a group of Bohemian

artists and grisettes praise their unconventional life ("Vivent les artistes! Gloire aux anarchistes!"), their revelry attracts a crowd of working-class people who deplore such attitudes. ("Ils sont fous! Ils sont saouls! Ils mett'nt tout sens dessus d'ssous!" They're crazy! They're drunk! They're putting everything upside down!") Louise is singled out for special reproach: "Voyez, quelle effrontée! Dans son immoralité. . .elle oublie qu' ses parents, la-bas, s'tourment!" (Look at that hussy! In her immorality. . .she forgets that her parents are suffering!)

The act ends as Louise's mother suddenly appears, begging her daughter to come home because her father is dying. His illness, however, is only a ruse. The fourth and final act takes place once again in her parents' tenement where Louise is being kept under lock and key "for her own good." But the harmony of the household has been destroyed. Louise is no longer a docile child, and the family crisis leads her father to question the sacrifices he has made for his family ("les pauvres gens, peuvent-ils être heureux?"). Following a bitter argument, Louise runs away again, and the curtain falls as her father calls after her, shaking his fist at Paris.

Louise is ambiguous in the questions it raises about responsibility and freedom. The protagonist shows no remorse about the grief she is causing her parents; they, in turn, ignore her need for independence and treat her like a wayward child. Since we never learn what happens to Louise after she runs away for the second time, the open ending of the opera makes it difficult to determine precisely where the composer's sympathies lie.

Each main character is granted a portion of truth: Louise's desire to lead her own life is reasonable; her parents' concern for her future is well-founded; and Julien's criticism of stifling parental authority is justified. Charpentier does not take a moral position, but, as the Naturalists did in their fiction, objectively portrays the conflicting interests of real people in a real life situation. There is no reconciliation; no tragic death, or contrived happy-ever-after ending; just life as it is lived by simple people, with its discoveries and disappointments, its losses and gains.

The opera has many realistic details. A little orchestral interlude accompanies Louise and her parents as they drink their soup. Act I closes with Louise's mother ironing as Louise reads the evening paper aloud to her father. A scene in the following act begins with the hum of sewing machines (notated in 6/8 time), recalling the spinning wheel tattoo of Wagner's Der fliegende Hollander. In its evocation of popular life, Louise is realistic, but beneath the surface of its commonplace reality lies a symbolist representation of Paris as a seductive, mysterious city, "la fête éternelle du plaisir."

The action moves from a working-class home to a factory to the heights of Montmartre, with a cast that is unusually large for verismo. In addition to the main characters of Julien, Louise, and her parents, the stage plays host to Parisian street vendors, rag pickers, and scavengers who sing in Parisian argot about their joyless lives. In its presentation of these minor characters drawn from life, Louise recalls the Barrière d'Enfers Act of Puccini's Bohème. Charpentier, however, gives his minor

characters a larger and more symbolic role than Puccini does his. They appear twice - during the first scene of Act II, which takes place in a Parisian street at dawn, and in the Montmartre festival scene that closes Act III. Their conversation is a tissue of allegorical leitmotifs that refer to the theme of the lure of Paris as it develops in the love story.

A seller of sweet biscuits called plaisirs hawks his wares, but his customers are warned: "N'en mangez pas, jeun's fill's, ça fait grossir!" (Don't eat any (pleasure), girls, it'll make you "grow.") A rag picker searches for his only daughter, who ran away to Paris years earlier, lured by the attractions of the city, and a street sweeper boasts of the time, twenty years ago, when she was "la reine de Paris" ("Moi, j'ai eu ch'veaux et voitures. . . Ah, la belle vie! Le joyeux, le tendre, l'inoubliable paradis!" Me, I had horses and carriages. . . What a life! . The joyous, sweet, unforgettable paradise!).

The fatal charm of the city takes physical form in the character of a Noctambulist who appears in full evening dress at the beginning of Act II (Paris Awakens). He interrupts the realistic conversation of the poor working people with a symbolist poem:

Malice du destin
qui revêt de satin
et de robes d'aurore
les guetteuses de nuit
aux rides inclémentes
et cache au libertin
sous des voiles de nuit,
les fillettes d'aurore
que le désir tourment!

(Act II, scene 1.)

(Malice of fate,
that in satin, clothes

with robes of the dawn,
the watchers of night,
wrinkled and pale,
and hides from the libertine
under cover of night,
the children of dawn
whom desire torments!

In his role as the spirit of Paris ("Je suis le Plaisir de Paris"), he brings pleasure to those whose lives are drab and unexciting, and stands symbolically to the poor of the city as Julien stands to Louise, opening new vistas of freedom and delight.

It is through the Noctambulist, however, that the city's insatiable appetite is first expressed. Seductively approaching a young newspaper vendor, he tells her "sans ta jeune chair, il me semblerait choir au seuil du plus sombre enfer où le Dante écrivit 'Ici point d'espérance'." (Without your young flesh, I would feel as if I were on the brink of darkest hell where Dante wrote "Abandon all hope.")

All the characters in these street scenes contribute to the picture of Paris as the place where dreams are born and die, as a huge city that feeds on the hopes of its young people. In fact, its teeming street life, its soft, sensuous nights, its Bohemian quarter and working-class tenements are the backdrop against which Charpentier's modern love story unfolds, and the vivid evocation of Paris that emerges has led many critics to argue that the protagonist of Charpentier's opera is not the girl Louise, but the city of Paris itself.

Charpentier apparently would agree. He described his work as "far more than a merely realistic picture. Louise is not Paris as it was; it is what Paris meant to me - Paris as she looked to the young provincial

who had come from the grimy manufacturing town to find the things for which he had starved, and of which, for so long, he had dreamed."²⁵ His fascination with city life was perhaps due to the influence of Baudelaire, who brought to the Symbolist movement a mythical vision of the great modern city and of modern man - "l'heroisme de la vie moderne" - that had so impressed Murger.

Louise was the Opéra-Comique's first production of the twentieth century, a further indication of the esteem verismo opera had finally come to enjoy among the more conservative elements of the French musical establishment. The opera was very well-received. One year after its premiere on February 2, 1900, Louise had been performed one hundred times; by January, 1921, five hundred times, and, in 1956, a few months after the death of its composer (at age 96), its one thousandth performance at the Opéra-Comique was recorded.

Zola's and Charpentier's curious blend of symbolism and realism gives French verismo opera its own unique voice, distinguishing it from Italian interpretations of the genre in its preference for socially relevant plots supported by an obvious but powerful symbolism.

Notes

1

See George Martin, The Opera Companion to Twentieth Century Opera (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1979). This interesting essay on modern opera ends with a sixty-page appendix of twenty-three opera houses and a table of their most frequently performed works over a long period of time, often the life of the institution.

2

The fact that Carmen was performed forty-eight times during its first season at the Opera-Comique has led modern critics to deny the opera's original failure, but The New Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians states that according to the house receipts, Carmen rarely filled the theater. Toward the end of the 1875 season, the management gave away tickets wholesale. Carmen's temporary recovery that summer was almost certainly due to publicity generated by the sudden death of its composer on June 30, 1875 at the age of 36.

3

"Georges Bizet," The New Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 1980, II, p. 760.

4

Claretie wrote the libretti for Thérèse, and Amadis; Cain collaborated with Massenet on Sapho, Cendrillon, Cherubin, and Don Quichotte.

5

James Harding, Massenet (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1970), p. 210.

6

Ibid., p. 211.

7

Benedetto Croce, "Giovanni Verga," in La Letteratura della nuova Italia, Vol. III of Scritti di storia letteraria e politica (Bari: La Terza, 1929), p. 14.

8

It was paired with Orfeo ed Euridice, Pagliacci, and the first two acts of Les Pêcheurs de perles. Once its novelty waned, however, La

Navarraise proved to be a puzzling and ultimately dispensable property.

9

As quoted by Andrew Porter in his review of a City Opera production of Louise, The New Yorker, 21 March, 1977, p. 63.

10

This was not the first time that Daudet's fiction inspired a musical interpretation. In 1872, Bizet wrote incidental music for Daudet's play, L'Arlésienne (adapted from an 1869 collection of stories, Lettres de mon moulin). Bizet's interpretation was a failure, but Francesco Cilea's version, in 1897, was a great success. It was in this verismo opera that a young Neapolitan tenor named Caruso made his debut. Its rural setting in Provence, and its subject of jealousy and betrayal leading to the suicide of its main character guaranteed the opera's favorable reception. Today L'Arlesiana's fame rests on its famous tenor aria, "Federigo's Lament."

11

Zola's Le Rêve was begun in August, 1887 and completed in August of the following year. It was serialized in the popular journal La Revue illustrée from April to October, 1889.

12

Lawson A. Carter, Zola and the Theater (1963; rpt. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977), p. 185.

13

The article was signed by Paul Bonnetain, J. H. Rosny, Lucien Descaves, Paul Margueritte, and Gustave Guiches.

14

Jules Huret, Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1894).

15

Ibid., p. 169.

16

Zola's last novels, Les Trois villes, and Les Quatre évangiles are novels of religious propaganda and faith.

- 17 Arthur Hervey, Alfred Bruneau (London: J. Lane, 1907), p. 17.
- 18 Étienne Destranges, L'Enfant Roi: Étude analytique et thématique (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1906), p. 10.
- 19 Patrick J. Smith, The Tenth Muse (New York: Knopf, 1970), pp. 319 - 320.
- 20 See Ernest Vizetelly, op.cit., pp. 400 ff.
- 21 See Lawson A. Carter, Zola and the Theater, p. 196, for text of this letter.
- 22 At one of the early performances of Louise four hundred seats were set aside for free distribution to the seamstresses of Paris. Later, Charpentier helped raise funds to send working girls to the opera.
- 23 Although Charpentier took credit for both the words and the music of Louise, the published annals of the Opéra-Comique name a second librettist. He was Paul Roux, a minor Symbolist poet who wrote under the pseudonym of Saint-Pol-Roux. It is believed that he helped Charpentier with the plot because he received performing night fees regularly from the Society of Dramatic Authors and Composers. Charpentier's obituary in the New York Times, which appeared on February 20, 1956, states that Louise's libretto "was based on a book by Saint-Pol-Roux."
- 24 Léon Carvalho, a former director of the Opéra-Comique, had pleaded with the composer to transfer the action to the eighteenth century, but Charpentier resisted the suggestion which would have turned his opera into a rehash of Massenet's Manon.
- 25 As quoted in the New York Times February 20, 1956 obituary of Charpentier.

CHAPTER VI: Conclusion

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, there has never been an opera more admired than Mascagni's Cavalleria rusticana. Between 1890 and 1924, more than fifty operas that, like Cavalleria, gave the "prose" of life serious consideration were written and performed all over Europe.¹

Critics approached the new genre warily. In Italy, the pioneers, who ventured into the unfamiliar territory of realistic opera were dubbed "la giovane scuola milanese," which was useful only in distinguishing them from an older generation of composers such as Verdi and Ponchielli. Similarly, in France, the operas of Bruneau and Charpentier belonged to a "nouvelle école française," presumably because they departed from the French lyric traditions of Gounod, Meyerbeer, and Thomas.

Critics at Cavalleria's 1890 premiere, however, had noted the source of Mascagni's libretto, a play by Italy's leading Naturalist author, and had used the Italian literary expression for Naturalism, "verismo," to describe Mascagni's opera. The term gained currency and, by the beginning of the twentieth century, it was attached to any expression of lyric realism. As the number of such operas increased, however, two interpretations of verismo emerged. One was naturalistic and contemporary in its setting and characters, while the other found its dramatic situations in a realistic historical context.

The first presented the more irrational features of Naturalism -its nightmare of real poverty and misery in large cities or rural villages.

Zola and Verga had chosen these locales in their fiction because they wanted to reveal "the truth" about human nature: that we are all governed by a trinity of forces (heredity, environment, and history) over which we have little control. They set their stories in humble milieux because these three forces of natural necessity seemed to be most compelling in the lives of the poor. A Zola novel or a Verga short story became a "laboratory" in which these forces were free to act on plot and character with predictably disastrous results. The opera house is an odd place for such tests of reality; fantasy is its forte. But by setting their operas in the present, and by presenting ordinary people and their passions in a raw, unembellished state, the first verismo librettists hoped to make the "laboratory conditions" of Naturalism work convincingly on the lyric stage.

The characters in these operas do not develop and grow. Each is already fully formed, a chemical agent whose properties are revealed by his interaction with other "agents." The manner in which they react to each other creates the chain of events that becomes the plot. In Cavalleria rusticana, for example, Turiddu responds to Lola, whose actions provoke Santuzza. She, in turn, incites Alfio, who kills Turiddu. The action of Cavalleria is a circular chain reaction set off by the passions of the characters.

Operas fashioned after the early verismo works of Mascagni and Leoncavallo gave jealousy, violence, and crime prominent roles in shaping plot and character, often with little regard for the serious social themes of naturalistic fiction. Franco Leoni's L'Oracolo (1905), perhaps the most

lurid verismo opera in the genre, presents Chim-Fem, the owner of an opium den, who kidnaps a child, commits a hatchet murder, and drives a young woman into insanity before he is finally strangled on stage.

Eugen D'Albert's 1903 Die Tiefland (The Low Lands), however, uses violence to create a naturalistic parable that resembles Zola's Messidor in its theme of simple rural ethics and the corruption of materialism. Sebastiano, a rich, unscrupulous landlord, wishes to marry a wealthy heiress without giving up his mistress, Marta. He forces her to marry one of his dependents so that she will remain easily available to him, but when the shepherd-bridegroom, Pedro, learns the truth, he kills Sebastiano, and returns with Marta to his home in the mountains where, presumably, they live out their days without fear of retribution.²

Cilea's L'Arlesiana, Wolf-Ferrari's I Gioielli della Madonna, and Mascagni's Silvano also feature a grim lovers' triangle told in Naturalism's stark new language, but the most brilliant expression of this naturalistic trend in verismo opera is Puccini's Il Tabarro (The Cloak), the first of three one-act operas intended as a triple bill entitled Il Trittico (1918). Its libretto, by Giuseppe Adami, is based on the eponymous French one-act play, La Houppelande, by Didier Gold, a comparatively late naturalistic work written in 1910.

Set in modern day Paris, on a barge anchored in the Siene, Il Tabarro tells the story of Michele, the fifty-year old skipper of the barge, married to a woman half his age, Giorgetta, who has fallen in love with Luigi, a young stevedore. When Michele learns the truth, he strangles Luigi, hides his body under his cloak, and forces his horrified wife to

embrace her dead lover.

Il Tabarro recalls Zola's L'Assommoir, and Le Ventre de Paris in its portrayal of violence and crime as consequences of the inhuman living conditions imposed on the Parisian working class, and, in its social implications, is the most faithful realization of undiluted Naturalism in opera. Its three main characters and their drama are supported by a small cast of stevedores and beggars, the refuse of Paris, whose nicknames ("Tinca," mud-fish; "Talpa," mole, "Frugola," scavenger) indicate their diminished humanity. They are beasts of burden whose lives are as limited as the cramped quarters of the barge which dominates the stage.

Each seeks to escape his narrow existence in ways that are all too human if ineffectual. Tinca loses himself in drink. ("Fa bene il vino! Si affogano i pensieri di rivolta." Wine is good for me! It drowns my rebellious thoughts.) Talpa, an old stevedore, and his wife, La Frugola, a ragpicker, dream of one day owning a cottage in the country where they could "wait for death, the remedy of all ills." Michele lives in the past, recalling the happier days of his marriage to Giorgetta, but it is through the young lovers that the theme of wasted lives is most affecting.

Luigi sees himself trapped in an existence that denies him dignity and hope. In his arioso "Hai ben ragione," he expresses his despair: "Per noi la vita non ha più valore ed ogni gioia si converte in pena. . .la giornata è già buia alla mattina." (For us life has no value and every joy becomes a sorrow. . .the day is already dark by the morning.)

Giorgetta relieves the drabness of her life through romance. She and Luigi were raised in the same town near Paris, and both are

fascinated by the big city, although it excludes them from its pleasures. Like Nedda, she dreams of running away with her lover ("Ah, se fossimo soli, lontani...e sempre innamorati!" If only we were alone, far away...and always in love!). But she and Luigi were born into a world in which happiness is measured in brief, stolen moments.

Early in the opera, and long before the audience is even aware of the love triangle and its fatal outcome, the theme of doomed love is introduced by a Street-Vendor's song. His arietta contains the line "Chi ha vissuto per amore, per amore si morì," (Whoever has lived for love, died for love), the fundamental theme of every Puccini opera, which is underscored here by the orchestra's "quotation" of the opening bars of Mimi's theme from La Bohème. The motivation for the adulterous love affair between Giorgetta and Luigi resides, therefore, in Puccini's favorite subject of youthful love, with the Street-Vendor's song establishing the first hint of its indispensable tragic ending.

Misery rather than love is the opera's main theme, however, which acquires levels of meaning through the central symbol of Michele's cloak. Like most laborers of his time, Michele wears a cloak because it allows him the freedom of movement needed for heavy manual work. The cloak indicates his low origins, but it also implies an erotic element. Early in their marriage, Michele used to wrap Giorgetta in his cloak "as though in an embrace," and his despair is caused by her present indifference to him and the "warmth" his cloak offers her.

Contemporary psychological theories about the subconscious are also suggested by the garment. "Tutti quanti portiamo un tabarro,"

Michele tells his wife, "che asconde qualche volta una gioia, qualche volta un dolore." (We all wear a cloak that sometimes hides a pleasure and sometimes a sorrow.) Ultimately, the cloak becomes an instrument of revenge. Under it, Michele hides his wife's murdered lover, and the opera ends in darkness as the black cloak of death dominates the stage.

The picture of Paris as a city of light presented in Charpentier's Louise, with its pulsing life and seductive charm, is only vaguely alluded to in Il Tabarro. Nor does the city bear any resemblance to the colorful French capital of young artists and lovers that Puccini himself had idealized more than twenty years earlier in La Bohème. Instead, Il Tabarro's milieu reflects the dreariness of lives that know few pleasures and many deprivations. The action moves from sunset into night, a realistic touch of scenic symbolism that supports the shadow world of the plot.

The music contributes to the somber reality of the time and setting in its main melody, the River theme, which captures both the sluggish lapping of the Seine and the monotonous labor of its river people. This theme gradually invades the score, creating a mood of suspense that is only occasionally lifted by wisps of melody evoking the hopes and dreams of the characters. (An interesting stylistic detail of the score is the fact that if Puccini's instructions are followed, the opera proceeds at a pace only fractionally slower than real life.)

Although the story of adultery and its revenge is hardly new, and the opera's gruesome conclusion descends into Grand Guignol, Il Tabarro is a complex work that presents the frustrations and despair of hard-working

people with a certain poetry and even beauty rarely found in verismo. Milieu and music, plot and characters establish and strengthen an atmosphere of hopelessness that makes Il Tabarro a flawless lyric interpretation of Naturalism.

Sensationalism, however, had a limited lyric appeal. Leoncavallo's Gli Zingari, Massenet's La Navarraise, and virtually all the lesser verismo works which mined this vein of realism have disappeared into opera history after enraging the critics and engaging, albeit briefly, the public.

The second interpretation of lyric realism began with an earlier Puccini opera which brought verismo out of the Italian provinces and into a glittering French city. La Bohème was the first realistic opera to give the passions of the poor a sentimental cast. More idealistic in its treatment of love, Bohème reconciled the popular demand for realistic plots and characters with opera's preference for moving love stories.

Puccini's opera encouraged a new trend in realistic opera - historical verismo, which derived many of its conventions from the "well-made" plays of Scribe, light, historical, bourgeois comedies, and the modifications made by Scribe's disciple, Victorien Sardou. Eleven of Sardou's dramas were turned into operas; the most well-known among them Puccini's Tosca, and Giordano's Fedora and Madame Sans-Gêne.³ These are works of sentimental suspense in which frankly romantic love rather than erotic passion plays a dominant role. Many operas found their social realism in an historical milieu, placing this expression of verismo well within established operatic tradition. The first historical opera was

Monteverdi's L'Incoronazione di Poppea in 1642, and the genre was further refined by Verdi, who used historical situations such as those found in Nabucco, I Lombardi, I Vespri siciliani, and La Battaglia di Legnano to champion the liberation and reunification of Italy.

With verismo opera, however, history serves melodramatic rather than ethical purposes. The settings and characters are often historically accurate, but the central story is purely imaginary. The effect is a recreation of a period's emotional rather than its intellectual climate. The French Revolution, with its mixture of brutality and idealism in which blood and tears were shed with equal facility, became a favorite subject.⁴

The first successful verismo opera of this kind was Umberto Giordano's Andrea Chénier, which premiered at La Scala in March of 1896, several weeks after Puccini's La Bohème was seen for the first time in Turin. Its libretto, by Luigi Illica, is subtitled "dramma in ambiente storico" (a drama in an historical setting), and in writing it Illica drew on a wealth of factual sources for his personalities and details.⁵

The action takes place in France between the years 1789 and 1794, and describes the last years in the life of the poet Andrea Chénier, who was executed during the Reign of Terror that followed the Revolution. Illica based his protagonist on the historical figure of a poet who is today regarded as the French Keats.⁶ The opera's portrayal of events leading to his death, however, was Illica's own invention.

The operatic Chénier is an ardent patriot whose idealism causes a young noblewoman, Maddalena de Coigny, who dislikes the artificialities of her life, to fall in love with him. The lovers are destroyed by Carlo

Gérard, originally a servant of Maddalena's family, whose egalitarian principles turn him into a prominent revolutionary. In love with Maddalena himself, he arranges the arrest of Chénier on false charges of treason in order to force her to submit to him in return for saving her lover. Eventually he realizes that his desire for Maddalena has let him to betray his convictions; he tries to save Chénier, but only succeeds in helping Maddalena to substitute herself for another prisoner so that the lovers can die together.⁷

By applying the techniques of verismo not to a violent peasant drama but to a turbulent period in history, Giordano and Illica were cultivating new ground. A powerful sense of a particular time and place is created in Chénier. Its first act, for example, suggests the luxury of an effete society, presenting the decaying French aristocracy with a realism that is tempered by nostalgia. Preparations are underway for a ball to be held that evening in the Château de Coigny. The reordering of the ballroom foreshadows the recording of society that will take place in the following acts. This ball, given on the eve of the Revolution, is attended by members of the ancien régime, draped in elegant fabrics, whose powdered wigs cover heads that contain idle thoughts and artificial conversation. The act closes with an unruly crowd of beggars invading the Château, another symbolic reference to the chaos that the Revolution is about to unleash.

In fact, the remaining three acts reveal the Terror at its most horrifying through a cast of minor characters that include historical personages (Roucher, Robespierre, Fouquier-Tinville), and a sprinkling of

period stereotypes - "sans-coulottes," L'Incredibile, a spy for the revolutionary government, and a "watcher of the public conduct," Old Madelon, who sacrifices her last grandson to the cause of the Revolution, and the angry servant-judges who condemn their former masters to death. Popular songs of the period such as "Ça ira," "the Carmagnole" and "the Marseillaise" are woven into the score for musical verisimilitude.

The love affair between Maddalena and Chénier is dramatically the opera's weakest point, perhaps because it seems so improbable. (They fall in love through an exchange of letters.) Their only love duet does not occur until the last act, and celebrates their impending death ("la nostra morte è il trionfo dell'amore!"). Illica's protagonist is more a product of nineteenth century romanticism than of the French Enlightenment. The passionate nationalism and love of nature that Chénier espouses hardly existed in the eighteenth century. His love for Maddalena was Illica's invention as well, based on the real poet's association in the prison of Saint Lazare with a young French noblewoman to whom he dedicated one of his most famous poems, "La Jeune Captive." The real Mlle. de Coigny, the Duchess of Fleury, who was the prototype of Maddalena did not die on the scaffold, but survived Andrea Chénier by more than twenty years, writing novels and dying in 1820 after achieving some fame. Illica transforms Maddalena into a variant of Dickens's Sidney Carton to give her tragic stature.

Both his lovers are romantic figures sacrificed in a world of realistic horror. Chénier's first aria, "Un dì all'azzurro spazio" in Act I, establishes their love as idealistic, patriotic, and ultimately sacrificial -

all the qualities of the spirit that the romantics considered ennobling. But the broad characterization of Illica's lovers along these idealistic lines denies them complexity and dimension.

A more interesting character is Carlo Gérard. It is believed that Illica drew his portrait from the historical figure of Jean Tallien, a Jacobin radical who, prior to the Revolution, served as a valet in a noble household.⁸ Illica presents him as a man consumed with the ideal of a new society based on the principles of fraternity, equality, and liberty. Instead he discovers the violent and corrupt forces in his own nature, and in the revolution he has encouraged. In his aria, "Nemico della patria" (Act III), Gerard grows painfully aware that he has betrayed his own convictions by abusing his power in order to satisfy mere lust. "Son sempre servo! Il servo obbediente di violenta passion. Ho mutato padrone! Peggio. . .uccido e piango!" (I'm still a servant! The obedient servant of violent passion. I've changed masters! And worse. . .I kill and weep!)

Gerard's crise de conscience represents the main theme of Chénier, the fragility of noble ideals which are soon corrupted and ultimately destroyed. Society is the real protagonist of this drama, and perhaps herein lies its dramatic weakness for the main characters are less important than the society they represent. Significantly, the most life-like character is Gérard, who struggles to establish a new society and eventually betrays its principles.

Chénier's tableaux of revolutionary excess recall a fundamental theme of Balzac's realism. Conservative and aristocratic, Balzac also

viewed the French Revolution as a moral and social catastrophe that threw society off-balance. The protagonist of Le Père Goriot, for example, is a man suddenly enriched by the Revolution, who remains disoriented by it for the rest of his life. The novel describes his deterioration, and the gradual moral seduction of a young provincial who succumbs to the allure of a new middle class that has supplanted the ancien régime and that is now frantic for wealth, recognition, and pleasure.

In spite of its unlikely love story, Andrea Chénier remains a unique opera which combines highly romantic main characters with a large cast of vividly drawn minor roles and places them both in an authentic historical milieu. In this respect it is the first opera to apply techniques of verisimilitude to history. Unlike most historical operas of lyric tradition, Chénier is not merely a concert in costume, but offers the music, history, and thought of a period in which a decadent aristocracy was destroyed by ungovernable forces of reform.

Chénier was a huge success. Its premiere was attended by an audience only one generation removed from the Italian Risorgimento, who found Giordano's blend of idealism and violence an exciting evocation of their own recent past. Critical opinion was undivided and overwhelmingly enthusiastic - Andrea Chénier received not one unfavorable review. By the end of 1897, one year after its La Scala premiere, it had been performed in all the major opera houses of Europe, and in New York and Moscow as well.

Giordano's opera established history as a suitable subject for the

verismo experiment. Cilea's Adriana Lecouvreur (1902), Zandonai's Franческа da Rimini (1914), Mascagni's Il Piccolo Marat (1921), and Giordano's own Madame Sans-Gêne (1915) and La Cena della Beffe (1924) passed historical characters and events through the prism of verismo's passions with varying degrees of success.

Giordano's protagonist also inspired Puccini's Mario Cavaradossi, himself an artist with revolutionary leanings, who dies because of another man's desire for the woman he loves. In Tosca's libretto, which he wrote with Giacosa, Illica omitted elaborate historical explanations, and by focusing on the three principal characters, helped create an opera which surpasses Andrea Chénier in its emotional appeal.

"Verismo opera," therefore, refers to both these interpretations of lyric realism - one, contemporary and the other, historical, but the expression is misleading in its implication that there was a recognizable verismo "school" of composers with a common musical style. Each composer who attempted the genre interpreted it differently. Mascagni's musical idiom is elementary and sparse; Puccini's is brooding and sensual, while Charpentier's is exuberant and direct. But from the literary point of view, the point of view of the libretto, verismo's differences are less significant than its similarities. No generalization about verismo will be true of every libretto in the genre, but certain features were common to most, and all contributed to broadening the range of opera.

Essentially the verismo libretto substituted the antithesis between love and honor in romantic opera with a serious conflict between a man and a woman, framing the situation in a humble social milieu (working-

class Paris, a poor Italian village, the Neapolitan underworld), or in an historical period characterized by powerfully dramatic events. The tendency was first evident in Carmen, but Bizet's characters and setting were exotic, whereas those of Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci portrayed a new kind of documentary realism never before tried in opera. It is in this difference that verismo's lyric theater was born.

The audience was no longer transported to the moors of Scotland, to the banks of the Nile, or to the distant past. Contemporary life as it was really lived by the young and the poor was the subject. Verismo compensated for the loss in glamour and adventure that opera had previously found in aristocratic characters and heroic dilemmas by exploring the immediate realm of feeling. The polarities of pleasure and pain provided verismo composers and librettists with characters and situations from which a maximum of dramatic expression could be extracted. The simple drama which resulted was emotional rather than intellectual. Verismo opera was not a forum for ideas as German opera has been since Wagner. Instead, it was the first "school of psychology" in lyric history.

The plot was characterized by its plausibility, which stressed the relationship between cause and effect, eliminating the traditional dependency on coincidence which mars many Romantic opera libretti.⁹ (Among the better known operas (La Forza del destino is the most extreme example of this vein of improbability.) To causation was added swiftness of action, which resulted in a much smaller cast of characters than tradition required in order to maintain the rapid pace. Cavalleria

rusticana, Butterfly, and Louise have four principal characters; Pagliacci, Il Tabarro, Tosca, and La Navarraise, only three. Double sets of characters, subplots, and incidental satire would have distracted from the intensity of the "slice of life," which was the real point. Many verismo plots have an almost reportorial brevity (hence the popularity of the one-act form), and it is significant that several of the most important librettists in the genre, such as Zola, Giacosa, and Menasci, were journalists as well as authors.

Verismo acquired its more sensational dramatic features from Naturalism. The impersonality of Naturalism's narrative, which removed authorial comment in a bid for scientific objectivity, made for a lack of rhetoric that threw the dramatic situation into high relief. The plot was structured around a single idea, which permitted a great variety of perspectives - the passion for land in Zola's La Terre, an act of adultery in Verga's Cavalleria rusticana - to which the characters could react with strong feeling. It was this feature of Naturalism's fiction that attracted verismo librettists because it suited opera's world of hyperbole and emotional escalation.

These explosive ideas in Naturalism were rooted in larger social and political issues. Opera and sermons, however, do not mix well. Opera, especially nineteenth century opera, finds its eloquence in a love story. Verismo librettists did not break with this tradition, but told their stories in new ways that ran a realistic spectrum from "true love" to lust. La Bohème, Andrea Chénier and Louise describe romantic love; Tosca and L'Enfant-roi, possessiveness, while the main characters of Madama But-

terly and La Navarraise are driven, one to suicide, and the other into madness, by obsessive love.

The different expressions of love found in verismo opera contrast with the essentially pure sentiment that is romantic opera's most identifiable dramatic convention. Eclectic in its choice of setting, romantic opera develops its love stories in ancient Egypt, Puritan England, Gallic forests, or on the Scottish moors. Although the protagonists of these operas are vastly separated from each other by time and space, they share a proclivity for falling in love the same way. Often stricken by love at first sight, they all conceive the same idealized passion that is born of the union of kindred spirits rather than of the flesh.

If romantic opera portrays only "true love," however, the conflicts that this emotion generates always vary: love versus religion, love versus country, love versus family, etc. The choruses of English Puritans, Hebrew slaves, and Egyptian soldiers that populate these operas represent the protagonist's responsibilities which conflict with his secret desires. Public versus private life, as in pre-Enlightenment conventional morality, becomes the central conflict of the romantic plot, which usually presents two lovers from opposing warring factions, who can resolve the clash of their public and private lives only by killing themselves. Their love leads to self-sacrifice rather than to erotic fulfillment. Norma and Aida choose to die with their condemned lovers; Louisa Miller and Rodolfo, Ernani and Elvira, and Tristan and Isolde would rather die together than live apart.¹⁰

Love is less refined but more complex in verismo opera. Since the

characters are usually outcasts, living on the margin of society, the public factor in their lives is of little consideration, and the private world of desire gains center stage. These characters are never torn between love and duty because they have no social rank to defend and no personal reputation to protect.¹¹ Their isolation is so great that often they do not even have families. Nedda, Mimi, Maddalena, and Anita, the Navarraise, are orphans, while those few verismo protagonists who do have relatives receive no support from them. Santuzza and Butterfly are disowned, and Louise is estranged from her parents.

The private world of love causes emotional rather than ethical crises. Since it is all that the verismo protagonist has, it often becomes an obsession that leads to violence if thwarted. The conflict that ensues results from impersonal social forces (a peasant code of honor, an uncontrollable revolution, or simply poverty and disease), reflecting the kind of situations considered important by Naturalism, whose characters are also victims of circumstances beyond their control.

Naturalism denies any form of idealization. Love in Zola's novels and in Verga's fiction does not lead to exalted states of consciousness and spiritual renewal; it is irrational and potentially violent. Bizet's Carmen is the earliest lyric interpretation of the naturalistic eroticism to which Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci gave even greater authenticity. Later verismo librettists introduced romantic love into their plots, but the passion is usually tinged with an almost neurotic quality. Tosca's jealousy, or Butterfly's renunciation of her own world for Pinkerton have disastrous consequences.

The "love-death" motif runs through romantic opera as well, and since death often assumes the importance of a moral imperative, it is dignified by ritual. Aida and Radames sing to each other of heaven ("O terra, addio") while the priestesses in the Temple of Vulcan chant a death hymn. The stage directions at the close of their duet instruct Aida "to fall gently into Radames' arms and die." Verdi's Nabucco closes with a chorus of Hebrews, Assyrian soldiers and guards intoning a hymn to the power of an "Immenso Jeova" as the wicked, but repentant Abigaille dies by her own hand after prudently confessing her crimes and asking God's forgiveness. Norma's Druid Chorus is equally stoic in condemning their high priestess and her Roman lover to the stake. They remove her sacred wreath, cover her with a black veil, and dispassionately pass the death sentence: ". . .ed il tuo scempio/purghi l'ara e lavi il tempio,/maladetta estinta ancor. . ." (let your death purge the altar and cleanse the temple, you are cursed, even after death.)

The high mortality rate of verismo characters is usually caused by murder rather than by suicide or ritual execution. Dignified death scenes are replaced with heavily ironic ones. Both Carmen and Nedda die at the hands of their lovers, only steps from a crowd that might have saved them. Their deaths seem even more horrible because of the background of laughter, in Pagliacci, and cheers from the bull ring in Carmen. Verismo characters rarely die in the presence of a chorus of spectators, but if they do, the chorus offers no four-part harmony to speed the victim on his way.

Most verismo characters die alone or in the company of only a

few people. Adriana Lecouvreur breathes her last in the presence of the two men who loved her. Mimi and Butterfly die with their lovers calling their names. Il Tabarro and Cavalleria rusticana end with a woman's scream, and Pagliacci's catastrophe concludes with perhaps the most famous spoken line in opera: "la commedia è finita."

The triumph of the verismo libretto lies, therefore, in its art of seeming life-like in an art form that is highly stylized. It proposed to tell the truth about life, to represent people and their feelings as they really were. And the truth that it revealed was that we are all guided by our emotions. The exclusive concern with a character's subjective interests put the verismo libretto in a position to explore the newest scientific discovery of the nineteenth century - the subconscious - which Freud has asserted to be the true source of human motivation. The old idea of behavior regulated solely by reason was discredited. If Romantic opera had portrayed the ego and superego, verismo love stories now explored the id.

Verismo composers searched for realistic musical effects that would support the dramatic truth and plausibility of these powerful libretti. The difficulties they faced were considerable. The fundamental musical conventions - recitative, aria, chorus, and orchestra - present no problem when the libretto deals with myth, legend, and the fantastic. The Rhine maidens' ability to sing while swimming underwater is never questioned, but when a battleship swings at anchor, and when Pinkerton produces a decanter and syphon to mix a whisky and soda, these conventions prove troublesome.

The changes made by verismo composers were in the direction of a less formal style of composition. The overture was shortened, the role of the chorus diminished, and the ballet eliminated. Ensembles and duets virtually disappeared, replaced by long stretches of dialogue in an arioso form that fell somewhere between aria and recitative. Sounds from daily reality - fog horns, automobile klaxons, and sewing machines - were introduced into the score, which often included the music characteristic of a certain locale. (There are no bagpipes in Lucia, but there are castanets in Carinen.)

The verismo librettists had replaced the formal verse patterns of romantic opera with a new style of blank verse that was almost indistinguishable from prose in order to make their characters' diction approach that of real speech. As a result, the distinction between recitative and aria gradually blurred. A scene became a "seamless web" of sung dialogue rather than a contrasting series of discrete blocks of declamatory recitative, which advanced the plot, and florid arias, which reflected a character's state of mind.

Romantic operas carefully prepare their audience for an aria. After a few hurried lines of recitative which "cock the gun," the action on stage freezes; a hush descends on the opera house; the orchestra whispers a few introductory bars of the main theme as the character involved moves stage center to sing.

Verismo arias grow imperceptibly out of the immediate situation on stage. They often begin and end conversationally, in an almost hesitant manner. "E lucevan le stelle" starts in the middle of a sentence

(and the stars were shining). It appears to be improvised, with the words revealing seemingly random thoughts that come to Cavaradossi's mind as he thinks about his life. There is no foreshadowing by the orchestra; the aria is sung as he writes at a small table and, without the music, Cavaradossi's lament could easily be a brief dramatic monologue.

The life-like situations of verismo arias created a new style of singing, which placed a premium on the size of the voice and its ability to project the drama of the words. Quantity rather than flexibility, forceful attacks, and an exaggerated vibrato to simulate intensity of passion became the hallmarks of a new "verismo" style of singing.¹²

The acting abilities of the singer became as important as his vocal gifts; the scenery and costumes were made as authentic as possible so that, together with the music, the singing, and the acting they would have convincing dramatic (rather than purely musical or "operatic") effects. These innovations contributed to the realization of verismo's essential aesthetic goal: to create musical drama. But the drama that resulted avoids the altitudes of tragedy and heroism.

Verismo prefers the smaller over the larger-than-life, the real over the ideal, and the non-hero over the hero or even the villain.¹³ Its essence is tinged with the obscure, vaguely acknowledged awareness of the end of an era. As Verdi's romantic operas prefigured the Italian Risorgimento, verismo's violent emotions prefigured the first World War, when the reason and stability that Zola believed scientific progress had given his age ended suddenly in the most destructive military conflict the world had ever known.

Verismo was also the last expression of opera as an art form with a living musical tradition. Until the first World War, the major opera houses around the world presented works that were, broadly speaking, contemporary. Few were the operas that were more than fifty or sixty years old. Verismo was a generous source for "modern" operas that enriched the international repertory of the time.

Verismo composers were celebrities whose latest works were eagerly awaited by the general public. The premieres of their operas were cultural events, held at important opera houses under the baton of famous "maestri." Toscanini alone conducted the world premieres of Pagliacci, La Bohème, La Fanciulla del West, Zazà, and Madame Sans-Gêne; the La Scala premieres of Louise and Tosca, and the New York debut of I Gioielli della Madonna. Today, opera, like Olympia's clock, has run down. A glance at the contemporary repertories of the most famous opera houses around the world reveals that opera is a locked-up art form, which honors the past but takes few risks with the future.¹⁴

Verismo has become part of that past. Those verismo operas which have survived the natural winnowing process of time have assumed the status of "classics" without which an opera management can hardly hope to plan a profitable season. They have established themselves in the face of considerable critical scorn,¹⁵ but if the critical response to verismo has often been hesitant, its emotional hold over audiences has proved irresistible.

And it is by appealing to the emotions that opera, that most irrational of the arts, has always found its true voice.

Notes

1

The beginning of verismo opera, the premiere of Cavalleria rusticana in 1890, is easier to locate chronologically than its end, which I have arbitrarily equated with the death of its consummate interpreter, Giacomo Puccini, on November 29, 1924. The genre, however, still appears capable of attracting young composers. Opera News reported in its October, 1982 issue that Federico Fellini's neo-realistic screenplay, La Strada, is to be made into an opera by the young American composer, Michael Valenti. And on January 1, 1983, the New York Times reported that an opera based on the life and work of Ernest Hemingway will be given its premiere next year in Havana. Written in Russian by the author Grigori Chiginor, and set to music by the composer Yuri Kazarin, it will be translated into Spanish and incorporate Cuban music into its score.

2

After Tosca's premiere in 1900, Puccini was again casting about for a libretto and inquired about the Spanish playwright Angel Guimerá's Catalan drama, Tierra Baixa. Guimerá had already promised it to D'Albert whose Tiefland, which premiered in 1903, represents the most successful expression of verismo opera in Germany. In the 1908 - 09 German opera season it was performed more often than Carmen.

3

During nearly sixty years of productivity, from 1851 to his death in 1908, Victorien Sardou created over 1,100 characters in thirty-seven plays.

4

Mascagni's penultimate opera, Il Piccolo Marat (1921), and Giordano's Madame Sans-Gêne (1915) are also set during the Revolution and include historical figures such as Mlle. de Fleury, the prototype for Giordano's Maddalena, and Napoleon himself.

5

In a note which appears in the original libretto, Illica cites the works of de Latouche, Arsene Houssaye, Méry, Gauthier, and the Brothers Goncourt's History of French Society during the Revolution.

6

Andrea Chénier was, first of all, a journalist who fought with his pen to bring France back to sanity during the Terror. Although he was a

moderate reformer, he was arrested and spent 139 days in the prison of Saint Lazare before being executed. His imprisonment brought out a vein of poetry that has made him one of the great lyric poets of France. Sainte-Beuve called him one of the great masters of eighteenth-century French poetry and "our greatest classic in verse since Boileau and Racine."

7

Chénier's real death was just as ironic. Had he survived three more days of prison, he would have escaped death for on July 28, 1794, Maximilien Robespierre himself was executed. The day after his death, twenty-one of his chief supporters were also killed. The Committee of Public Safety was stripped of its power and the Reign of Terror was ended.

8

Gérard's character also suggests Jacques Danton, a man consumed by political passion, who was brought to power by the Revolution, and later disowned its excesses.

9

In recognizing the importance of a dramatically sound libretto, the verismo composers and their librettists joined the ranks of earlier reformers such as Gluck and his librettist, Calzabigi, who emphasized the naturalness and humanity of their characters in order to bring Baroque opera closer to stage drama.

10

Spontini's La Vestale (1807) is one of the earliest examples of this romantic dilemma. Its plot prefigures Norma in its presentation of a Vestal, who breaks her vow of chastity for love. But in Spontini's drama, Vesta forgives her erring handmaiden, and the opera ends with the marriage of the lovers.

11

Perhaps it is for this reason that verismo draws so many of its characters from "the arts," which, at the turn of the century, were far more socially suspect than they are now. Pagliacci was the first verismo opera to draw its characters from the world of art. Floria Tosca, Mario Cavaradossi, Adriana Lecouvreur, Andrea Chénier, Louise's Julien, the artists and poets of La Bohème, and Leoncavallo's music hall singer, Zazà soon followed Canio's troupe onto the lyric stage.

12

Michael Scott, in his history of opera, The Record of Singing (New York: Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1977), colorfully describes the change in singing style as "B.C." and "A.C.," before and after Cavalleria.

13

There are few villains in verismo operas. Scarpia and Tonio are its two outstanding examples of "mindless malignity," but the type is rare. Verismo characters do not fall to the forces of evil, any more than they struggle to establish the forces of "good."

14

Nearly twenty years have elapsed since the last world premiere of an original work at the Metropolitan Opera. It was Marvin David Lévy's Mourning Becomes Electra with a libretto by Henry Butler (based, of course, on Eugene O'Neill's eponymous play), first performed at the Metropolitan on March 17, 1967.

15

Lately verismo appears to be re-establishing its credentials in opera circles. New recordings of Leoni's L'Oracolo, Massenet's La Navarraise, and Giordano's Andrea Chenier have recently been made, and the Puccini repertory is being re-evaluated. Manon Lescaut and Il Trittico were lately given new productions at the Metropolitan after years of neglect.

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